The Golden Rule on the green stick: Leo Tolstoy’s ‘postsecular’ international thought

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The Golden Rule on the Green Stick: 
Leo Tolstoy’s International Thought for a “Postsecular” Age

Abstract:
Tolstoy argued that the core moral teaching of all religious and secular traditions is similar; that this rational core preaches love and a variant of the Golden Rule; that international peace can only be achieved by refusing to concede to the adoption of violent means to resist injustice; and that therefore we all need to strive, by personal example, towards a nonviolent, stateless but peaceful and just utopia. Tolstoy’s thought thus provides a potential bridge between secular and religious ideologies (by adopting a language that speaks to and is rooted in both); recalls the simple yet shared moral teaching which could revolutionize the current foundation of the international order; and articulates a critique of political institutions that resonates with and complements recent scholarship.

Scholars recently drawn to the notion of the “postsecular” have sought to contribute to political and international thought by considering how best to think about, respond to, and live with the revitalized role of religion alongside secular values in the globalized political arena. The challenge and its ramifications are considerable, if only because one is quickly confronted with thorny questions concerning, for instance: the legitimacy of political violence and of current (and alternative) political and international arrangements; the tension between “universalizing” claims and calls for respectful tolerance when arbitrating between a plurality of radically different worldviews (e.g., the cosmopolitanism-communitarian debate); and the pressing need to collaborate despite our differences so as to build a political order that is just, ideally peaceful, but also able to solve the environmental, economic and security hazards facing humanity. Discussions of secularism and religion thus quickly lead to complex philosophical and political debates.

The term “postsecular” is convenient in this context for a number of reasons. First, in line with one of Habermas’s intentions in coining the term, it implies a recognition that religion is here to stay and must be worked with. Any analysis of the postsecular world must therefore remain sensitive to the considerable variety and subtle differences in religious and secular thought and practice. Second, the term implicitly captures a critical perspective on Western neocolonial tendencies, whether in the philosophical realm (even in the very discussions of “postsecularity”) or in the geopolitical economy, in the evolution of global norms and culture, and so on. The term therefore implicitly
invites a critical reassessment of founding myths and assumptions about the Western-led international order, including the Westphalian origins of the modern state. Yet because it questions so many foundations, one of the first challenges of the literature on postsecularity is to work out a way of interacting and dialoguing through which radically different worldviews can nonetheless feel accommodated and heard.

This readiness to challenge orthodoxies paves the way for an engagement with other unorthodox perspectives in political thought, such as the emerging scholarship on anarchism and IR, or pacifist, nonviolent and other antiwar thought, which has otherwise tended to be subsumed into the utopian fringes of liberal IR, as if the questions it raises are simply too unrealistic to even contemplate until the liberal program has been more widely adopted in the international arena. Anarchist and pacifist perspectives indeed raise important questions about current (national and) international procedures and institutions, about prevailing orthodoxies and rationalizations of the status quo, and about who these benefit and who they inflict unjustifiable suffering upon.

One notable thinker in this area is Leo Tolstoy. Even if he is today remembered mostly for his world-renowned fictional writings, towards the end of his life he was just as famous for his relentless critique of political and religious institutions, of economic and social arrangements, as well as of reformers and revolutionaries for the way they proposed to improve these. The aim of the chapter is to peek into the Christian anarcho-pacifist thought of this literary giant and explore some of its pertinence for today’s postsecular international world.

The limited scope of this chapter means that only a selection of his arguments can be highlighted here, even if this presents difficulties in that much of his thought is so original, broad, and understudied that a fair treatment of it would require more careful and detailed exposition. Such fuller expositions can be found elsewhere. This chapter’s discussion of Tolstoy’s thought will be guided and restricted by one particular theme: his reflections on what is often called the Golden Rule and related topics in his writings, with a particular view to apply these reflections to today’s world arena.

The first section in this chapter provides a brief account of Tolstoy’s intellectual trajectory to contextualize his reflections on the Golden Rule. The second discusses the extent to which the Golden Rule can be seen as a basis for a shared postsecular morality. The third and fourth elaborate on Tolstoy’s thoughts on violence and reciprocity, and on the violence of the global political economy – each time pointing to similarities and differences with other strands of international thought. The fifth highlights the importance Tolstoy ascribes to change and leadership by example rather than coercion.
Tolstoy’s Quest for the Green Stick

At the age of five, Tolstoy’s brother Nikolai told him “that he possessed a secret by means of which ... all men would become happy: there would be no more disease, no trouble, no one would be angry with anybody, [and] all would love one another”.

Nikolai had written that secret “on a green stick buried by the road at the edge of a certain ravine”. The search for that secret would drive Tolstoy’s life. When he died in 1910, he was buried at the place where that green stick was thought to have been hidden.

Quite like several famous protagonists in his fiction, Tolstoy felt recurrently confronted by social and existential questions, seeking and eventually finding the refuge of either a grand theory of life or at least a way of living that could bring that questioning to a rest. Following a particularly restless summer night in 1869, his inner torment intensified into a deep, decade-long existential crisis driven by one question: what is the meaning of life if death is to follow? What troubled Tolstoy was not death itself, but the apparent meaninglessness of any accomplishment in life given that death is to inevitably follow. Tolstoy claims he sought the answer to these questions in “all the branches of knowledge” and “found nothing”.

Tolstoy was then drawn to reconsider the Bible. Initially, he struggled with it. He says he remained open minded, but, for the rationalist which he was, too much of it was wacky and nonsensical. Then, one day, as he was reading Jesus’s Sermon on the Mount, “at once”, he says, “the truth itself arose before me in its full meaning”. That truth, for Tolstoy, was the moral teaching of Jesus, which he now thought gave meaning and purpose to life.

Tolstoy’s detailed interpretation of the gospels cannot be analyzed here, nor is there space to discuss the (not always convincing) precise logical reasoning according to which he appeased his existential questioning by this particular discovery. Tolstoy’s discovery nonetheless did bring this existential angst to rest, and importantly became the foundation of his Christian anarchist thought – that is, the foundation of Tolstoy’s moral, religious, and political worldview; the truth that for him unlocked the secret of happiness and the meaning of life, the basis of Tolstoy’s writing and campaigning for the last 30 years of his life.

According to Tolstoy, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus articulates several “moral, clear, and comprehensible rules” that appeal “straight to the heart of every man”. Tolstoy summarizes these as follows:

(1) Do not be angry, but live at peace with all men. (2) Do not indulge yourself in sexual gratification. (3) Do not promise
anything on oath to anyone. (4) Do not resist evil, do not judge and do not go to law. (5) Make no distinction of nationality, but love foreigners as your own people.9

Furthermore, “All these commandments are contained in one: All that you wish men to do to you, do you to them”10. The essence of Jesus’s teaching, Tolstoy concluded, is what is often described as “the Golden Rule”: the simple benchmark, founded on reciprocity, which tests one’s actions by asking to reflect on whether one would welcome such actions from others. As will be elaborated later on, in different forms but with the same essential logic, this simple rule is fairly widely recognized and present in most religions as well as secular humanist traditions. It provides a simple guideline to evaluate human interactions, and for Tolstoy (among others) it provides a key to happiness or at least to improved human relations.

Moreover, according to Tolstoy, the broader political implications of this teaching are truly revolutionary. Tolstoy spent the rest of his life articulating these implications and therefrom criticizing numerous aspects of modern society. This chapter cannot flesh out in detail the intricacies of Tolstoy’s new understanding of life, but aims to reflect on the extent to which some of his arguments based on his reading of Jesus might be relevant to today’s postsecular international politics. To this end, it is necessary to first explain why, for Tolstoy, the morality embedded in Jesus’s sermon is not just Christian and hence religious, but also rational and therefore arguably “universal”.

The Golden Rule: A Basis for Postsecular Morality?
The thought Tolstoy articulated based on his reading of Jesus speaks potentially as much to the Christian tradition as to that of secular European thought. Tolstoy’s take on Christianity resembles that of deists. He was not interested in miracles or the resurrection, but in what seemed rational in the moral teaching of Jesus. The cosmology of the Bible only interested him to the extent to which it could be illuminated by the torch of reason. Tolstoy even wrote a harmonized version of the Gospel, which focuses on Jesus’s teaching and example and deliberately ignores the passages that he deemed irrational or unintelligible.11 What interested Tolstoy in Jesus was not who he was but what he said – the morality he taught and exemplified.

Although this means that not all Christians will agree with Tolstoy’s Christology or theology, there does remain the important common ground of what Jesus taught – which Tolstoy expects followers of Jesus to seek to follow. Hence even if many variations of Christianity will dispute Tolstoy’s broader
cosmology, his interpretation of the teachings of the one who they call the Messiah remains pertinent to all Christians.

Like some of his contemporaries, Tolstoy also drew parallels between the moral teaching of Jesus and that of other religious prophets and traditions. He studied these other traditions in some depth and concluded that they did indeed teach roughly the same moral code, but that (in his view) Jesus’s version remains the most beautiful and elaborate to date. For him, “religions differ in their external forms but they are all alike in their fundamental principles”, especially the Golden Rule.12

In stressing the similar morality of different traditions, of course, Tolstoy is not alone. Other thinkers and ecumenical movements have highlighted the commonalities in the moral teaching of different religious traditions – with something akin to the Golden Rule, in letter or spirit, being an essential part of this common morality. Theologian Hans Küng in particular has been making this argument for years, and the declaration produced by the 1993 Parliament of the World’s Religions, which he helped draft, reflects this thought. Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Confucianism, and several other religious traditions all counsel some variant of the Golden Rule.13 The hope harbored by Tolstoy, Küng and others is that it might provide a basis for a common global morality.

Such syncretistic reading into a variety of religious traditions is admittedly not unproblematic. Even if the argument is won on the similarity of the moral teaching, theological, metaphysical, liturgical, and other differences can be very significant, and should not be ignored. Religious traditions are too diverse and complex to be flattened into a single overarching “religion”. But the similarity in the moral code does appear strong, at least as concerns the reciprocity of the Golden Rule. Even if other moral demands can diverge, some variation of the Golden Rule is often present and fairly prominent.

The Golden Rule also informs significant arguments and theories in nonreligious philosophy and popular morality. Parallels are often drawn especially with the thought of Kant, but also Rawls, Mill, and others. Puka nevertheless argues that “despite the rule’s prominence in commonsense ethics,” moral philosophy “has barely taken notice” of it: systematic, thorough, and exhaustive treatments of it in moral philosophy are rare.14 This lacuna cannot be redressed here, but it is worth noting the Golden Rule’s presence in secular philosophy and intuitive popular morality – in addition to its prevalence across religious traditions.

Tolstoy’s preference for Jesus’s formulation of the Golden Rule derives from the particular stress Jesus lays on love and forgiveness. What seems to have struck Tolstoy when reading the Sermon on the Mount was the idea that turning the other cheek to evil, going the extra mile, forgiving, and treating
even those committing injustice against you with patience and love not only breaks the cycle of violence, revenge, and resentment, but invites wrongdoers to repent and reciprocate this time not the violence but the love that they have unexpectedly received. For Tolstoy, Jesus implicitly acknowledges the reciprocal cycle of violence and coercion and calls his followers to respond in a way that might instigate a more positive cycle of love.15

A renowned historian of pacifism remarked that perhaps Tolstoy’s most important contribution was to take Jesus’s teaching on non-violence out of its Christian “cultural milieu” and couch it in “a common language with the rest of mankind”, as this in turn paved the way for non-Christians to develop a Jesus-inspired position on violence and nonviolence.16 Many pacifists, conscientious objectors and non-violent activists have indeed been inspired by Tolstoy’s interpretation of Jesus. The most prominent is Gandhi, whose emphasis on nonviolence, by his own admission, owed much to reading Tolstoy.

One could therefore argue that both Tolstoy’s approach to Jesus’s teaching as a whole and his advocacy of the Golden Rule more specifically have the potential to speak to both a secular and a religious audience. That is, Tolstoy’s thought bridges the religious-secular divide. It takes Jesus as a starting point and is therefore “Christian” and its emphasis on a principle evoked in other religious traditions makes it more broadly “religious”, but the arguments he then develops are framed in the language of reason, as a result of which Tolstoy’s thought is therefore also “universal”, “non-Christian” or “pan-human”. Tolstoy’s thought, in other words, is in a sense both secular and religious – a potentially fruitful characteristic in a “postsecular” age.

There has of course been much criticism, including in the literature on “postsecularity”, of the claim that the language of reason is somehow “universal”. One justifiable accusation is that such a claim betrays an a priori preference for the language of “reason” over “revelation”, for instance. Dallmayr offers an excellent analysis of these difficulties in the context of postsecular politics, so this discussion needs no repeating here.17 This chapter does not intend to resolve this debate, but one of the potential appeals of the Golden Rule is that whether its articulation is rooted in contrasting ontologies (or fundamentally different religious and philosophical traditions) is arguably irrelevant. That these different traditions meet on the Golden Rule (whatever the language in which they couch their trajectory to it) is what provides an opportunity for dialogue and a shared (and only in that sense “universal”) moral perspective.

It is perhaps helpful here to digress briefly to note that when Tolstoy appeals to his readers, he is appealing primarily to the individual conscience of the person reading his words. In a sense, therefore, he is addressing us as
individuals, as agents. That does not preclude him, however, from considering structures and human institutions. After all, as social constructivists (among others) have stressed, structures and agents coconstitute each other. Political institutions (including states) thus both “constitute” (define, delimit, influence) and are “constituted” (defined, shaped, staffed) by us as political agents. Moreover, when Tolstoy appeals to our conscience, he is appealing to our conscience both as individual agents and as constituent parts of social and political bodies. Therefore, when he elaborates his ethical reflections around the Golden Rule, Tolstoy is speaking to both individuals and collectives, first perhaps to individual human beings but also to the social bodies that they in turn help co-constitute. It is helpful to remember that in the reflections that follow.

**Violence and Reciprocity**

What, then, would a postsecular morality founded on the Golden Rule as interpreted by Tolstoy imply, and who should it concern? Tolstoy prefers Jesus’s formulation of the Golden Rule partly because it exposes the cycle of violence and proposes a cycle of love to overcome it. For Tolstoy, to do violence is “to do what he to whom violence is done does not will”.\(^\text{18}\) Armed with his understanding of the Golden Rule and the Sermon on the Mount, Tolstoy therefore develops a categorical critique of violence that sees it as wrong, irrational, counter-productive, and actually legitimizing retaliatory violence. Tolstoy sees human history as littered with stories of heroes and villains adopting coercion and violence to settle injustices, but for him, this hardly ever conclusively resolved problems.

One reason, he says, is that “one wrong added to another wrong does not make a right, it merely extends the area of wrong”.\(^\text{19}\) Violence in response to violence is not a solution to what caused the initial violence. What acts of violence do achieve with much more certainty, however, is to aggrieve and antagonize those who are targeted as well as their families and friends – feeding further anger and desires for punishment or revenge. If the victim does not recognize the justness of that violence – as indeed they rarely do – then instead of vindicating the perpetrator, the infliction of violence only breeds resentment at yet another perceived injustice. In terms of international affairs, think, for instance, of Alsace-Lorraine after 1871, the Great War, Israel-Palestine since the 1940s, or indeed the “War on Terror”: whatever other impact it might also have, violence embitters and often ends up fanning the flames of more violence.

Moreover, the very adoption of violence as a method legitimizes the adversary’s adoption of violence too. Once you consent to the use of violence
as a legitimate means to pursue good ends, you consent to others using violence for the same reasons. “American citizens are legitimate targets of terrorism because the governments they elect are guilty of violence against Muslims” (for instance) is almost inevitably followed by (for example) “violent methods are legitimate to pursue Muslim fundamentalists in light of the acts of violence they perpetrate against US citizens”. Replace these interlocutors with other violent antagonists, and you rarely fail to hear a similar reciprocal logic of justification of violence. Once somebody (individual or collective) uses violence, there can be no surprise if others feel legitimized in the adoption of violent methods too.

Besides, Tolstoy predicts, although one might submit to a violent bully as long as one is weaker, the day the rapport de force changes, newly empowered former weaklings will use coercion to impose their own vision on the old bully. The more violent episodes of postwar decolonization provide ample examples of this. Use violence while you are stronger and you can expect violence back when your strength has diminished – which history suggests it inevitably will. Many regional and global powers are ignoring this at their peril.

Furthermore, as other Christian anarchists have argued, the adoption of violent means has a tendency to eclipse the (possibly very worthy) ends they are supposed to be used for. Those who have waged war in order to achieve peace, justice, or stability have indeed often found these aims obscured and compromised in the tit-for-tat violence and brutality of the day-to-day reality of war.

In any case, for Tolstoy and to quote Jesus again, those who are so ready to adopt violence would be better advised to “consider the beam in their eye” before lecturing others “about the mote in their own eye”. As we might be misjudging a problem or person, we ought to be more hesitant in jumping to violent means, however well-intended our intervention may seem to us.

Violence, Tolstoy insists, does not settle disputes. It might generate a temporary balance of power, but fed by envy, resentment, and insecurity that balance inevitably remains unstable. Conflict and war, under this realist logic, do indeed appear inevitable. But violence, for Tolstoy, is no inherent characteristic of human nature – as classical realists claim. Human beings have undeniably demonstrated a propensity to adopt violence in the past, but we should not confuse a frequent condition for an iron law of nature. Tolstoy does recognize the ubiquity of violence in human history, but he thinks we can do better.

Left to their own, most soldiers will realize the futility of war and their similarities with enemy soldiers. They might play football with enemy troops on Christmas day between the trenches, they might desert, or they might
deliberately shoot in the air rather than on their human targets. If they kill, they will grasp every argument they are offered to justify it, and even then the horrors they committed often pursue them into post-traumatic stress disorders. Surely, Tolstoy suggests, any closer look at soldiers would confirm that if anything, humans naturally abhor violence. That does not mean that violence cannot erupt in some situations, that some human beings do not have a sadistic fascination for it, or that some cannot be molded into killing machines by indoctrination or by a violent context (all are true), but on the human nature argument, Tolstoy sides with Rousseau (who he greatly admired) rather than Hobbes.20 That is, human beings are driven at least in part by an impulse towards self-preservation (as both Hobbes and Rousseau observe), but equally can also be driven by feelings of pity or compassion (as Rousseau adds). There is a tension between the two poles, but crucially if you follow Tolstoy and Rousseau, compassion is as much part of human nature as is a tendency for violence. The possibility is then open to nurture the conditions that encourage the former and minimize the latter.

As to the neorealist attribution of the inevitability of conflict to uncertainty derived from an “anarchical” international system, Tolstoy would not disagree. All states justify their defense spending by pointing to the defense spending of some threatening enemy, “but this is what all governments say of one another” 21. Instability and conflict do indeed derive from systematic uncertainty and suspicion. But the problem is no more the “anarchical” structure of the international system than the assumption that the only safe response to this threat is to meet it with a readiness to use violence in (alleged) defense. What is clear from human experience is that matching a perceived roar with a roar too often fails to prevent the increasingly industrial shedding of blood.

If you do not want others to amass weapons against you (again whether as an individual or a collective), perhaps you should not amass weapons against them. To avoid suffering violence, avoid (in full sincerity) inflicting it yourself. Reciprocity is key both in the Golden Rule and in the cycle of violence: it explains much of the violence of international history but also points to ways to try to overcome it. Behave aggressively or selfishly as a collective and others will do so too. If you prefer others to be peaceful, collaborative, and perhaps even caring, then start by being so yourself.

The West’s talk of peace and collective security, international law, liberal democratic values, aid and development is overshadowed by its prioritization of its own interests (or those of its elites), its selective (but not infrequent) disregard for the very institutions it claims to have set up to promote these, and indeed its readiness to resort to violence in order to achieve its (realist) objectives. From Wallerstein to Chomsky, IR scholars have produced enough
evidence to at least query the West’s track record in genuinely promoting and supporting the values it expects others to treat it by.

To take just one example, the lofty spending target that the richest nations with the biggest armies continue to struggle to reach on development and international aid is 0.7 percent of GDP, compared to at least four times that on “defense” (institutionalized preparation for, and infliction of, violence). If this was reversed and the billions spend on guns were instead spent on genuinely peaceful intentions and perhaps even on feeding and clothing our enemies (leaving aside for now the fundamental injustices of the global economy, the arms trade, the strings attached to so much “aid”, or the imperialistic undertones in the way this aid is planned and administered), an improvement in reciprocal international sentiments and interstate relations would not be implausible.

Countries might feel more vulnerable as a result of reduced military spending – but then how secure does that spending really make them anyway, especially in the long term and combined with a foreign policy that upsets so many? Rather than all trying to look big and strong, accepting our reciprocal vulnerability might indeed open up avenues for mutual aid. Instead of fostering reciprocal fear and posturing, it fosters a reciprocal recognition of vulnerability and an often concomitant drive to support one another when in need.

Although the process and achievements of European integration have been far from pure, a recognition of reciprocal vulnerability and a genuine desire to foster a culture of mutuality and interdependence did inspire at least some of the movers of this unprecedented experiment. What some Europeans recognized after the World War II was that mutual aid, even if driven by economic incentives and manipulated by political elites for more realist motives, could help prevent another conflagration of violence better than another unstable balance of competing powers.

If our neighbors buy guns and use their military supremacy to try to decide how to dispose of the fruits of our garden, we will seek to match that strength and restore true reciprocity – as the realist balance of power logic predicts and as the economic and military race to catch up with Western powers demonstrates. But if our neighbors respect our autonomy and even provide us with food when we have suffered a poor crop or some other disaster, we might feel moved to reciprocate when the situation is reversed – as illustrated, for instance, by Greek-Turkish “earthquake diplomacy” in 1999.

We humans have an inherent tendency to reciprocate and even to assess justice on the basis of reciprocity. The race for reciprocity feeds a devastating cycle of violence and preparations for it. Tolstoy reckons that only by superimposing upon that vicious cycle a more virtuous one of love and care
for one another can humanity really overcome the dangers that threaten it. To put it in terms familiar to IR theory, Tolstoy’s plea is for the social construction of an international order in which realist discourses and policies are gradually overshadowed by the emerging exemplification of a morality of reciprocity founded on the Golden Rule. In this sense, Tolstoy’s vision is similar to the liberal one in that he believes in the possibility of progress towards more peaceful international relations. For him and to reword Wendt’s famous phrase, the Westphalian international order is what we make of it, and the behavior and identity of its agents and structures can be reconstituted into what Tolstoy would call a more “Christian” order – by which he would mean one founded on the teachings of Jesus on love, violence and reciprocity (and certainly not a return to the Middle Ages).

The international order has evolved significantly since Tolstoy’s years. World wars and violent revolutions have been followed by unprecedented economic, political, and cultural globalization. A considerable body of international law has developed several important principles that many states profess to follow, but one principle that is not spelt out even if it is sometimes implicit and even if it is present in some form in numerous moral codes across the globe is the Golden Rule. Indeed one could argue that it is precisely because it mocks the intended peaceful reciprocity of the United Nations’ Charter that the Security Council’s composition and functioning discredits, in the eyes of many, the UN as an institution. One practical recommendation that emanates from Tolstoy’s thought, then, could be to consider redressing this – to consider not just restoring proper reciprocity but even elevating the Golden Rule as a principle of international law.

Tolstoy, however, would probably not be satisfied with such a recommendation. He would probably feel ambivalent about it, being supportive of any moves to recognize the Golden Rule as a driving principle of human interactions across peoples and continents, but having no confidence in the likelihood of it being respected by the main players of the current international system. Why? Because he distrusted states, he distrusted “international law”, and he distrusted international elites. No pompous statement of intention by any number of state elites to abide by such a principle or even to set up enforcement mechanisms would have appeased Tolstoy. What its genuine international adoption would depend on would rather be its adoption by enough righteous pioneers and followers.

**Violence in the Global Political Economy**

Tolstoy has been classed as a Christian anarchist or anarcho-pacifist. For him, the state is a violent and deceptive institution that humanity needs to
outgrow. It claims for itself the monopoly over the legitimate use of violence, but for Tolstoy that violence is neither appropriate nor legitimate. It is not appropriate because violence is wrong for the reasons outlined earlier, and it is illegitimate because in the end, those truly in control of the state are a relatively small minority – even in formally democratic regimes.

The driving function of the state’s violent apparatus, Tolstoy suspects, is the safeguarding of an unjust distribution of wealth – both nationally and internationally. Because of such an asymmetric distribution, many work a lot and barely survive while some, with far less effort, earn much more. In his critique of the political economy, therefore, Tolstoy largely concurs with Marxist thought.

The problem, Tolstoy argues, derives from private property – or rather the vulgar accumulation of it. For Tolstoy, “Things really produced by a man’s own labour, and that he needs, are always protected by custom, by public opinion, by feelings of justice and reciprocity, and they do not need to be protected by violence;” but “tens of thousands of acres of forest lands belonging to one proprietor, while thousands of people close by have no fuel, need protection by violence”. The same principle works over larger distances in a globalized political economy. Ownership of the products of one’s labor is relatively uncontroversial, but the obnoxious and selfish accumulation of wealth especially when that wealth is actually produced by others is a form of violence, and a recipe for retaliatory violence. Claims of injustice will lead to calls for redistribution (or rather proper attribution), and the more unfair the distribution of the wealth, the more the wealthy classes will turn to the full apparatus of the state and other institutional violence for protection.

The current distribution of resources does not abide by the Golden Rule. For Tolstoy, it amounts to (wage-, rather than chattel-) slavery:

> If the slave-owner of our time has not slave John, whom he can send to the cess-pool to clear out his excrements, he has five shillings of which hundreds of Johns are in such need that the slave-owner of our times may choose anyone out of hundreds of Johns and be a benefactor to him by giving him the preference, and allowing him, rather than another, to climb down into the cess-pool.

Today’s political economy is more global, complex, and interconnected, but essentially just as asymmetric. Slave John might live in Malaysia or Brazil, and the slave-owner might be a distant impersonal investment fund, a multinational company, or an affluent (or even indebted) consumer, but the same principle applies: the global political economy caters to a comfortable minority by creating and outsourcing underpaid and miserable jobs that
unemployed workers are too grateful for to refuse. Tolstoy would agree with world systems theory.

What Tolstoy’s anarcho-pacifist slant stresses is that the whole apparatus of state violence and coercion exists precisely to protect this system. For Tolstoy, the real purpose of the army is to protect our international loot within our borders, and to provide backup in case domestic unrest becomes too threatening. In calmer times, the conventional arms of domestic state violence – police, prisons, law courts – can be relied upon to suppress dissent, but if tensions escalate, the army is called in. Enough pictures of domestic unrest across continents in recent years provide ample evidence of how those who call for fundamental reform of the global political economy will typically be met by police batons, legal prosecution, and other state-backed tactics, including if necessary by army tanks while every effort is made to protect the shopping patterns of the wealthier classes.

What is lost sight of in all this is the Golden Rule. The “state” is a useful concept and an institutional reality, but it is constituted by people. What “the state” does to “us”, therefore, is really what we do to one another. When police whack truncheons on the skulls of parents who lost their job and are protesting that the richest are hardly touched by austerity measures, are we really doing to one another what we would like to be done to us? When the state deports asylum seekers, imprisons addicts, or evicts tenants in arrears, are we really abiding by the Golden Rule? Have we understood why those people are in their situation? Would we wish to be meted the same treatment had we drawn the same straw from the lot of life? Are we really so sure that these people are such selfish, calculating, wilful deviants that the full force of the law is now the only option? Could we be the selfish, calculating, and wilful ones in our comfortable conformism? Besides, is the violence that the state inflicts on them in our name really “teaching them” or resolving the problem? For Tolstoy, the way we relate to one another through the state is part of the problem, because through it we do not do to others what we would like them to do to us. Hardly anyone likes to be on the receiving end of state power, especially if just calling for a fairer distribution of resources.

How is it, Tolstoy then asks, that human beings can tolerate their tacit or explicit role in the meting out of state violence? Put more bluntly: why can’t we all get along? After all, among the agents of the state or legitimizers of its existence, only a minority would probably disagree with the fundamental principle of reciprocity embedded in the Golden Rule. For Tolstoy, if so many of us are willing accomplices in one another’s suffering through state violence, it is because we do not see, or do not want to see, how we are hurting one another. We refuse to see the links between “our” behavior and “their”
suffering. We hypnotize ourselves with false justifications that prevent us from recognizing our partial responsibility.

One reason for this is that the state machinery results in a division and distribution of tasks that seemingly frees us of moral accountability: those at the bottom feel the responsibility for their actions rests with their superiors; those at the top feel their decrees are expected by society (or by God); and those in between similarly feel a bit of both. Every cog can easily explain away its moral responsibility for the acts perpetrated by the aggregate machine – acts that it therefore need not feel responsible for.

This, for Tolstoy, is compounded by a number of other methods of mass stupefaction and hypnosis. Tolstoy points an accusing finger at two such phenomena in particular: patriotism and the teaching of the church. Patriotism, according to Tolstoy, is not only a dangerous distortion of the natural feeling of love and compassion for fellow human beings (into one of love only for those we understand and fear and suspicion of those we do not), but it is also a powerful galvanizer of mass passions, a neat simplifier of complex issues that threatened or ambitious elites can invoke to divert attention away from the socioeconomic plight of the domestic population. As to the church, Tolstoy accused it of suffocating Jesus’s revolutionary morality under thick layers of irrational creeds, stupefying rituals, and other mental tricks in order to justify its collaboration with, and support of, the very political power that Jesus’s morality subverts. Beyond patriotism and the church, Tolstoy today would probably also apply his critical wrath to the media and other major players in political socialization. Had he been alive when Gramsci articulated it, Tolstoy would have probably agreed with his theory of cultural hegemony to further explain how the oppressed have absorbed the discourses that maintain them in their oppressed condition.

In other words, the point Tolstoy insists on is that most of us have become hypnotized by a number of delusions such that we fail to acknowledge both the violence perpetrated by the global political economy and indeed our complicity in it. To put it in social constructivist terms, we are constituted by, and by our behavior we in turn coconstitute, a set of structures, identities and behaviors that are violent, enslaving, and unjust. They are not immutable, and the Golden Rule provides a simple guideline that is recognized as worthy by many across different religious and secular traditions, and through which we could recast human relation into a very different global society.

**Leading by Example**

According to Tolstoy, the solution to an industrial and post-industrial society that is morally corrupt, violent, and forces us into alienating work, lies in a
return to the land, in bread labor, in a more decentralized form of community life. Tolstoy’s thought here resonates with much green thought: both advocate a political economy in harmony with nature; both are critical of violence and war; both highlight the importance of social and economic justice; and both call for more decentralized and participative forms of collective decision-making.26

But such a radical alternative, for Tolstoy, cannot be taught by laws or by coercion – only by example. Instead of compromising with a violent state, Tolstoy favored a bottom-up revolution led by pioneering exemplars. Tolstoy argued that we need to awaken ourselves from our hypnotic acceptance of an unjust economy underwritten by a violent state, desist ourselves from any participation in violence, and seek a healthier, more natural lifestyle built around our local community. This is an individual, personal choice. There is no political program to be imposed top-down. We will only reach the radical alternative when enough of us, inspired by one another’s example, will have constituted that alternative from the grassroots.

Anarchists like to repeat the following quote from Gustav Landauer: “The state is not something which can be destroyed by a revolution, but is a condition, a certain relationship between human beings, a mode of human behaviour; we destroy it by contracting other relationships, by behaving differently”.27 Such a view might seem utopian, but moves can (and continue to) be made towards it: people as well as the official collectives that are states can lead the way. Some states spend more than 0.7 percent of GDP on aid; some genuinely pursue policies of disarmament; and some genuinely invest time and resources in peace-making and conflict resolution. Some citizens take personal risks to remain nonviolent in their protest and resistance (an approach that owes much to Gandhi’s translation of Tolstoy’s arguments into a resistance strategy); some commit their future to intentional communities; some make it their profession despite low and casual wages to provide help and care for the downtrodden. Many devote much time away from work to denounce the manifestations of violence and injustice in today’s world and to campaign for a fairer and less violent global political economy. A peaceful and just world might remain a prospect that is distant at best, but efforts to exemplify such a world in the way we relate to one another are possible. For Tolstoy, the example of courageous pioneers can inspire a broader public to reciprocate and follow that example too.

This relies on us taking such initiatives ourselves rather than entrusting institutions with the guardianship of public morality. Top-down political engineering is not particularly successful at teaching moral behavior (otherwise prisons would surely be feared but empty, to point to merely one argument). If people do behave morally, according to Tolstoy, it is not
necessarily that a specific set of laws guided them to such behavior. Rather, we often behave as the example provided by others has inspired us to behave. In a system in which selfishness and greed seem to drive many of our peers, it is easier to excuse such behavior on our part. But altruistic behavior can be inspiring and similarly mimetic.

The key principle to guide our behavior, following Tolstoy, is the Golden Rule, on the basis of which also follows a renunciation of violence. For Tolstoy, we fail to abide by that simple moral benchmark in the way we interact with one another through institutions such as the state. We look to the state to resolve problems of violence or injustice, but for Tolstoy, “he who would reform society must first reform himself”.28

As today’s world is no level playing field, in calling for his readers to reform themselves first, Tolstoy is addressing first and foremost the political, social, and economic establishment. He is very critical of the violence of contemporary revolutionaries, but he also sympathizes with their plight, recognizing the sacrifices they make and the worthiness of their cause. To them and to the many other have-nots, Tolstoy nevertheless still preaches nonviolence and the Golden Rule. But it is with the wealthiest and most comfortable among his readers that Tolstoy is particularly insistent. The higher on the social pyramid one is, the more intransigent Tolstoy’s gaze becomes.

Tolstoy’s political writings make uncomfortable reading for those who have settled comfortably in a world the violence of which they see themselves as unconnected to. It is easier to blame others or to expect others to do to our neighbors what we, if we were in their place, would like to be done to us. For Tolstoy, however, if the reciprocity of the Golden Rule is acknowledged as a valid moral benchmark, then we ought to strive much harder to desist from our participation in institutional violence. Not only does it follow from a moral precept that is central to most religious and non-religious worldviews, but it might even inspire others to adopt such a reformed morality too.

**Concluding Remarks**

Tolstoy’s thought does not amount to a full theory, but rather to a critical perspective. He is more of a prophet than a philosopher. He invites us to reconsider common orthodoxies about the state, religion, collective morality, the global political economy, and above all our complicity in the violence perpetrated on fellow human beings. Although Tolstoy does not provide a grand theory of international relations in the way classical IR theories do, he voices a critique that sympathizes and can be brought to fruitful dialogue with other critical perspectives in IR – such as those articulated by anarchists,
greens, pacifists, Christian ethicists, as well as alterglobalization thinkers and activists. His thought clearly disagrees with that of realists, yet because of his uncompromising rejection of violence and distrust of the state, he cannot be classified as a liberal or Marxist – despite clear sympathies with both. The family he most closely belongs to is that of Christian anarchists and anarcho-pacifists.

Moreover, the themes evoked by Tolstoy resonate with many of those discussed in the scholarship on postsecular politics. Indeed this chapter’s Tolstoyan analysis arguably articulates precisely the sort of vision that Dallmayr concludes on: a vision of a bottom-up, postsecular “cosmopolis” in which differences between worldviews are not “erased but subordinated to a shared striving for justice and well-being”.29 In other words, Tolstoy’s thought provides a potential solution to the challenge, mentioned in the introduction, of working out a way of interacting between radically different worldviews, but also an analysis that is as critical of Western and state-centric assumptions as the broader scholarship on postsecularity.

Of particular appeal is his stress on the Golden Rule as a moral ground arguably common to many worldviews in today’s international landscape. Whether or not religions will continue to be increasingly assertive in politics, the twentieth century will be one of competing worldviews – religious and secular. Yet despite fundamentally different cosmologies, many of these traditions invite us to consider whether what we are (directly or indirectly) doing to others is what we would appreciate others doing to us in the same situation. Looking at instances of human suffering through the lens of the Golden Rule could help bring together people from different ideologies and worldviews, thus fostering links that bridge sometimes antagonistic traditions and pooling human resources in the collective search for a more stable and just international order.

This need not prevent there being a number of variations on the “Golden Rule” – there already are. Besides, strict interpreters may argue that intolerant fundamentalists (for instance) may justify violence against (for instance) abortionists or pagans or homosexuals because “that is what they would want from others if they were found to be erring in that way”. Others might therefore prefer a formulation which stresses doing onto others what those concerned want done upon themselves – thus requiring a dialogue, and no presumption of what is good for others. From a Tolstoyan perspective anyway, central to the application of the Golden Rule is the sentiment of love and forgiveness that informs Jesus’s formulation of it. Coupled with other teachings of Jesus such as the call to love one’s enemies (part of the same sermon), to quote Ricoeur, a “logic of superabundance” is introduced, which refuses any strict rigidification of the “logic of equivalence” of the Golden
Rule. In other words, if Tolstoy prefers Jesus’s formulation, it is largely because of the broader discourse of love and forgiveness that he found it couched in.

In any case, a shared postsecular outlook inspired by the Golden Rule could lead to more probing reflections on the violence (physical, institutional, economic, or other) that fellow human beings suffer in the hands of institutions that are often legitimised rather uncritically, because few of us would honestly admit that we would be happy to face such violence in their situation. That, however, means that we should be more concerned not only with international conflict or economic injustice, but also with other aspects of the violence perpetrated on a mechanical scale by the state. Tolstoy’s thought puts the onus of moral responsibility firmly on us, calling us to reconsider every breach of the Golden Rule by the institutions that we tolerate or participate in. For Tolstoy, nothing short of desisting from the institutions and processes that are violent will do, hence we need to strive to embody the Golden Rule in our personal example, both in our immediate surroundings and in our relationship with more distant institutions.

“What a fine place this world would be”, quipped another Christian anarchist, “if Fundamentalist Protestants tried to exemplify the Sermon on the Mount”.

Tolstoy would agree, but for him what Jesus teaches in that sermon is relevant to Christians and non-Christians alike. It is the secret on the green stick, the recipe for improved human relations. Even if a universal adoption of the Golden Rule remains an elusive or naïve prospect, we owe it to each other to consider our complicity in one another’s suffering. What we must confront, therefore, is not so much others, but our roles—both as individuals and collectives. The full exaltation of the Golden Rule might be too revolutionary and distant a prospect, but we still owe it to our neighbors to ask, with Tolstoy, whether any given action abides by that principle. Numerous religious and secular prophets, thinkers, and pioneers have tried to draw attention to the Golden Rule. The future of the global community would feel less threatening if, both as individuals and as collectives, we used it as a guide to probe the direct and indirect impact of all our interactions with one another.

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2 See the “Anarchism and World Politics” forum in Millennium: Journal of International Studies 39/2 (December 2010), the “Anarchism and IR” special issue of Global Discourse 1/2 (2010), as well as individual publication such as: Alex Prichard, "Deepening Anarchism: International Relations and the Anarchist Ideal," Anarchist Studies 18/2 (2010); Alex Prichard, Justice, Order and Anarchy: The International Political Theory of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon (London: Routledge, 2013).

3 For example: McKeogh, Tolstoy’s Pacifism (Amherst, New York: Cambria, 2009).


5 Greenwood, Tolstoy, 9.


8 Tolstoy, What I Believe, 13.


17 Dallmayr, "Post-Secularity and (Global) Politics.”

18 Tolstoy, in A. A. Guseinov, "Faith, God, and Nonviolence in the Teachings of Lev Tolstoy," Russian Studies in Philosophy 38/2 (1999), 100. As with other concepts which he uses, exactly what Tolstoy means by “violence” can vary according to the context of his analysis. This definition is particularly broad but ties neatly to the Golden Rule. Across his corpus, by “violence”, Tolstoy can mean physical injury, coercion, suffering, or even injustice. When it comes to politics, he often denounces the violence of prisons and courts, of the army, but also of contemporary revolutionaries. There is no doubt that exactly what counts as “violence” is a matter for debate, but for Tolstoy (hence this chapter), what is mostly meant is something akin to unwanted physical force, coercion, and suchlike.

19 George Kennan, "A Visit to Count Tolstoi," The Century Magazine 34/2 (1887), 257.


Tolstoy, *The Kingdom of God Is within You*, 141.


Aylmer Maude, *Tolstoy and His Problems* (London: Grand Richards, 1901), 160.

Dallmayr, "Post-Secularity and (Global) Politics," 973.
