

Nietzsche and Tolstoy on Authentic Christianity

MARC LUCHT

At first glance, the philosophical stances of Friedrich Nietzsche and Lev Tolstoy could not seem to be more sharply opposed. Tolstoy is the consummate Christian moralist, indicting modern culture for its corrupted inversion of the norms articulated by Christ. For Tolstoy, the life committed to Jesus' authentic message is the life of truth. Nietzsche inveighs against moralizers, diagnosing the hypocrisy and danger connected with the commitment to traditional conceptions of the good. For him, Christian values all too often are motivated by resentment and the desire for revenge, and threaten to result in herd-like conformity and pessimism. Nietzsche rejects the dogmatic adherence to Christian morality most typically in favor of an aesthetic individualism and retrieval of ancient pagan values. Tolstoy is the champion of universal brotherhood, unconditional love, anarchic pacifism, and kindness to all, including to all humanity and non-human animals. Nietzsche is well aware of the various ways in which suffering can strengthen and enhance an individual or a community, and he does not shrink from claiming that such suffering at times may be necessary. He shows very little interest in the material conditions of the poor and, as he regards contest and strife as conditions for growth, sees great benefit in hierarchical and exploitive social orders. Tolstoy's Christianity commits him to the idea that the best manner of life for humanity is to be found in participation or communion with the source of life, God the Father, and in the attempt to realize the kingdom of God by promoting loving harmony among all living human beings and animals. Tolstoy advocates political equality and the abolition of private property, and

excoriates the military, the wealthy, and the state for fostering conditions of strife, inequality, and suffering. Spiritual maturity is to be found within a life of simple piety and manual labor, and he urges upon us a patient endurance of life's sufferings oriented by the recognition that our lives do not belong to us, but to God. Nietzsche argues that the Christian churches' belief in an immortal, non-material soul and their pursuit of a transcendent ideal (such as God or an eternal, non-earthly afterlife), are motivated by a poisonous need to devalue the body and our earthly existence, and thus contribute to a life-denying nihilism. For him, something like redemption is to be found instead in the recognition of the tragic nature of life while at the same time committing oneself affirmatively to earthly existence with the exuberance of self-assertion, aesthetic creativity, and world-historical mission. Nietzsche would have indicted Tolstoy's late commitment to absolute chastity as symptomatic of precisely the kind of perverse hostility to the body and its drives that motivates religion's nihilistic stance against reality and nature and leads to a decadent morality of "un-selfing."¹

Indeed, Tolstoy and Nietzsche, to the extent that each was aware of the other, were mutually quite hostile. Tolstoy found Nietzsche's works to be depraved nonsense. He judged *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* to be the work of someone "completely insane," and took Nietzsche's thought to endorse "egoism, evil and hatred."² The aestheticist indifference to morality that Tolstoy regarded as the degradation of art and a contributing factor in the corruption of especially the upper social classes, and that is the primary concern of his book *What is Art?*, he attributes to "Nietzsche and his adherents, and with the decadents, and aesthetes of the type at one time represented by Oscar Wilde, select as a theme for their production the denial of morality and the laudation of vice."³ In a short discussion of what he understood to be Nietzsche's doctrine of the "overman," namely, that "a man truly free is under no obligation to obey any injunction, human or divine," Tolstoy writes,

Expressed in the form of a doctrine these positions startle us. In reality they are implied in the ideal of art serving beauty[...]. It is this supplanting of the ideal of what is right by the ideal of what is beautiful, i.e., of what is pleasant, that is the fourth consequence, and a terrible one, of the perversion of art in our society. It is fearful to think of what would befall humanity were such art to spread among the masses of the people.⁴

For his part, though never engaging with Tolstoy's works in any detail, Nietzsche expresses no admiration for Tolstoy. He found in Tolstoy a representative of the "morality of pity" arising out of a pathological hostility to life and characterizing "our entire literary and artistic decadence from St. Petersburg to Paris, from Tolstoi to Wagner[...]."⁵ In an unpublished note from

1887, Nietzsche associates Tolstoy with “Russian pessimism,”⁶ and in 1888 mocks Tolstoy’s admiration for the “goodness” of “his muzhiks.”⁷

Nevertheless, there are striking and important similarities between Nietzsche and Tolstoy. Some are stylistic: often each is uncompromising in his pronouncements, for instance, and each uses caustic irony to great effect. Each has left to posterity masterpieces of literary style and psychological acumen. Each expresses an unfortunate disdain for women. Especially important is each thinker’s diagnosis of the prevailing spirit of European Christianity as an inauthentic perversion and reversal of Jesus’ true teaching, and the nearly identical way in which each characterizes that original teaching. Considering Nietzsche’s and Tolstoy’s retrieval of what they take to be authentic Christianity will shed light on what may be some surprising substantive similarities between the two thinkers, and also will provide a hint of what a non-nihilistic religion might be like.

The Church as Corrupt Inversion of Jesus’ Message

Dogmatic, unconditional assertions of “Yes and No” constitute distasteful assaults on “men and things,” Nietzsche suggests, whereas learning the “art of nuances” is the “best gain of life.”⁸ Thus Nietzsche does not shrink from praising Christianity. What “we have to thank them for is inestimable,” he writes, and “who could be rich enough in gratitude not to be impoverished in view of all that the ‘spiritual men’ of Christianity, for example, have so far done for Europe!”⁹ Perhaps in a passage such as this Nietzsche has in mind the great architectural and artistic achievements of Christendom. Already in 1872 Nietzsche praises the “ineffably sublime and sacred music of Palestrina,” a music that, unlike the more decadent pre-Wagnerian opera, is still capable of “devotion.”¹⁰ In 1888 he praises Bach and Handel, Christians both, as rare “Germans of the strong race.”¹¹ Nietzsche recognizes the important roles religions such as Christianity play in consoling those who suffer and helping those who are psychologically and physiologically strong to practice self-discipline, a practice indispensable for “educating and ennobling a race.”¹²

Yet, in general, Nietzsche’s thinking, from beginning to end, is devoted to exposing and combating what he regards as the calamitous influence Christianity has had on world culture:

I raise against the Christian church the most terrible of all accusations that any accuser ever uttered.[...] The Christian church has left nothing untouched by its corruption; it has turned every value into an un-value, every truth into a lie, every integrity into a vileness of the soul.[...] I call Christianity the one great curse, the one great innermost corruption, the one great instinct for revenge.[...] I call it the one immortal blemish of mankind.¹³

In the rhetorical fireworks of his enduring battle against the nihilistic Christian morality that, in its hostility to the body, and in its orientation towards a transcendent “beyond” “invented in order to devaluate the only world there is[...],” celebrates “antinature itself,” an intriguing feature of Nietzsche’s thought often is obscured.¹⁴ His hostility towards Christianity, Christians, and Christian values does not extend to Jesus himself. In fact, in 1878, Nietzsche wrote that Jesus was the “noblest human being.”¹⁵ It seems that the title of Nietzsche’s book *The Antichrist* all too often is thought to refer either to Nietzsche himself or to the “man of the future [...] this Antichrist and anti-nihilist” envisioned in his reflections on the “overman.”¹⁶ Yet the content of the book makes clear that the eponymous antichrist is not Nietzsche, but is actually the Christian church. There has been but “one Christian,” he asserts, “and he died on the cross.”¹⁷ Since the crucifixion, those who have called themselves Christians have been herd-like conformists, resentful weaklings who preach love and compassion all the while hoping for the opportunity to exact revenge and gain power. Such people are hypocrites incapable of or uninterested in living the kind of life Jesus prescribed for them. Indeed, the church “was constructed” out of the very opposite of Jesus’ own teaching: “Mankind lies on its knees before the opposite of that which was the origin, the meaning, the *right* of the evangel[...].”¹⁸ As he puts the point elsewhere, “The church is precisely that against which Jesus preached[...],” for the founder of the church, Paul, “re-erected on a grand scale precisely that which Christ had annulled through his way of living.”¹⁹ Nietzsche’s indictment of Christianity will not extend to the teaching of Jesus himself.

In the next section I shall clarify what precisely Nietzsche and Tolstoy judge the substantive content of Jesus’ message to be as well as the way in which that message came to be distorted in Christianity. Here, the point is that Tolstoy shares Nietzsche’s view that church Christianity constitutes a reversal of Jesus’ own teaching. The goal of any church, Tolstoy writes, is to “conceal the real meaning of Christ’s teaching and to replace it by their own, which lays no obligation on them [...] and what is the chief consideration, justifies the existence of priests supported at the people’s expense.”²⁰ Thus:

Strange as it may seem, the churches as churches have always been, and cannot but be, institutions not only alien in spirit to Christ’s teaching, but even directly antagonistic to it [...] with] good reason is the history of the Church the history of the greatest cruelties and horrors. The churches as churches, as bodies which assert their own infallibility, are institutions opposed to Christianity.²¹

Tolstoy claims that the nature of a church (“not of something fantastic which we would wish it to be, but of what it is and has been in reality”) is a body of people who claim the prerogative of “complete and sole possession of the

truth.”²² If a church is in essence dogmatic, then it must be in tension with Jesus’ true teaching, which, he argues, recognizes human finitude and fallibility. The authentic Christian consciousness recognizes its own perpetual inadequacy, and involves a perpetual striving to ever more adequately understand and embody Jesus’ teaching. In other words, better than resting satisfied that one is sufficiently virtuous (even if one’s conduct already is quite admirable), is the attitude of admitting to one’s own inadequacy and resolutely committing to unceasing efforts to be ever more virtuous.²³ Tolstoy argues that blessedness is nothing but a constant, dynamic progress towards the realization of Jesus’ lesson, whereas the churches betray such consciousness through a dogmatic stasis grounded in theological hubris. As Nietzsche puts the same point, Christianity has perverted the original teaching by focusing on “dogmas instead of a way of life. Utter indifference to dogmas, cults, priests, church, theology is [authentically] Christian.”²⁴ Tolstoy further criticizes the church for its complicity with and theological buttressing of military and state power. Particularly galling is the way in which clerical involvement in the administering of military oaths encourages naïve young men to think it permissible to subordinate their duties as human beings, such as the unconditional duty to refrain from killing, to what they are deluded into thinking of as the more important duties of soldiers. The institution of the church, Tolstoy tells us, is “blasphemous and demoralizing.”²⁵

In fact, Tolstoy claims that one contributing cause of what he understands to be the modern corruption of art is to be found in its being harnessed by the church, which uses art to better obscure Jesus’ true message. He thinks that all art has the capacity to bring together or unite people. Those appreciating a work of art through that appreciation empathetically share impressions, ideas, and feelings with the artist as well as with each other. But inauthentic art unites some people together within a community in such a way that “makes that very union a cause of separation between these united people and others[...]. Such is all patriotic art, with its anthems, poems, and monuments; such is all Church art, i.e., the art of certain cults, with their images, statues, processions, and other local ceremonies.”²⁶ Church art reinforces rather than diminishes the differences among different communities, thus all too often exacerbating or creating hostility. Such enmity, of course, is exactly the opposite of the goal of authentic Christian life, namely, the “establishment of the greatest possible union between all living beings.”²⁷ The best art, on the other hand, should subvert factionalism by being universal, possessed of the capacity to speak to and unite all of humanity. What is more, the churches, which are only “called Christian,” employ art to augment some of their own most pernicious effects. The ways in which church “superstitions are supported and produced by the poetry of prayers, hymns, painting, by

the sculpture of images and of statues, by singing, by organs, by music, by architecture[...],” contribute to a kind of “ecclesiastical intoxication” that frustrates the goal of general enlightenment and hinders the recognition of Jesus’ true teaching.²⁸ Tolstoy’s point seems to be that the aesthetic richness of a person’s experience in church will inspire feelings such as wonder, majesty, and elevation. These feelings constitute an appearance of spiritual growth or moral uplift and therefore make one feel as if one is being appropriately religious, yet finally distract one from remembering that the whole point of religion (as of life) is to cultivate within oneself an ever deeper love for others and to pursue those good works required of us by such love. Again, Nietzsche concurs. He says, “Christians have never put into practice the acts Jesus prescribed for them.[...] The Buddhist acts differently from the non-Buddhist; the Christian acts as all the world does and possesses a Christianity of ceremonies and moods.”²⁹

Authentic Christianity as Practice Not Faith

For Nietzsche and Tolstoy, wherein lies authentic Christianity? What do they take Jesus’ real teaching to have been? Each thinks that the essence of Jesus’ teaching lies in the sermon on the mountain, and most especially in the injunction, “Resist not evil.”³⁰ It is this message that is ignored and perverted by the existing churches.

Nietzsche claims that Jesus

died as he had lived, as he had taught — *not* to “redeem men” but to show how one must live. This practice is his legacy to mankind: his behavior before the judges [...] his behavior on the *cross*. He does not resist, he does not defend his right [...] *Not* to resist, *not* to be angry, not to hold responsible — but to resist not even the evil one — to *love* him.³¹

He lived as he did, and died as he did, in order to demonstrate to us that “neither by deeds nor in your heart should you resist him who harms you. [...] You should be angry with no one, you should show contempt to no one. Give alms in secret. You should not want to become rich,” and that the best life “consists of love and humility; in a fullness of heart that does not exclude even the lowliest; in a formal repudiation of maintaining one’s rights, of self-defense, of victory in the sense of personal triumph; in faith in blessedness here on earth[...].”³² What is more, the primitive Christian message is the “abolition of the state,” for it “forbids oaths, war service, courts of justice, self-defense and the defense of any kind of community, [and] the distinction between fellow countrymen and foreigners[...].”³³ Nietzsche understands the heart of Jesus’ teaching to be the lesson of universal love and total, anarchic pacifism.

Tolstoy, of course, concurs. The moral journey of the character Pierre Bezukhov, in *War and Peace*, culminates in a famous expression of such universal love. After meeting in a camp for prisoners of war the “unfathomable, round, and eternal embodiment of the spirit of simplicity and truth,” Platon Karataev, Pierre comes to recognize the enduring and “unshakeable” beauty of his “previously destroyed world.”³⁴ This insight leads to his “happy insanity” after the war, which “consisted in the fact that he did not wait, as before, for personal reasons, which he called people’s merits, in order to love them, but love overflowed his heart, and, loving people without reason, he discovered the unquestionable reasons for which it was worth loving them.”³⁵ Similarly, the character Iván Ilych finds redemption in the honest and undissimulated love of his son, pity, and an unconditional forgiveness even of those who had shown him no compassion as he succumbed to his agonizing illness. Such love enables him to conquer death.³⁶

The unquestioning and universal love Pierre and Iván discover precludes the possibility of any violence. The “essential positions of true Christianity” include the idea of the “immediate relationship of each man to the Father, the consequent brotherhood and equality of all men, and the substitution of humility and love in place of every kind of violence[...].”³⁷ We are called to feel reverence for the “dignity of every man and for the life of every animal” and ought to learn to be “ashamed of luxury, of violence, of revenge[...].”³⁸ The core of Jesus’ teaching lies in the “principles” of “equality and fraternity,” “suppression of national distinctions,” “community of property, [and] non-resistance of evil by force.”³⁹ Indeed, Tolstoy recognizes the irony of the clerical preoccupation with the command against fornication, which is taken to be absolute and the occasion for incessant admonishment, while, at the same, when it comes to the command of non-resistance, “all church preachers recognize cases in which that command can be broken,” and in fact go so far as to administer the military oath.⁴⁰ In the church’s sanctioning the existence of an institution designed to engage in violent conflict, of course, what Tolstoy takes to be the truth of authentic Christianity is reversed and perverted. What is more, Tolstoy holds that governments are inherently coercive. Because power finally is always supported by violence or the threat of violence (evident, Tolstoy notes, in punishment for crimes, enforcement of rent and tax collection, mandatory military service, and violent suppression of civil disobedience), the state by its very existence always leads to and even magnifies exactly the sort of oppression and violence it was originally created to shield people from. The church’s association with governments is an entanglement fundamentally at odds with Jesus’ requirement of universal love.⁴¹

The universal love and non-hierarchical brotherhood exemplified in Jesus’ teaching is not merely a matter of belief, however. It is both an affective

disposition and a practice or way of life. Indeed, Nietzsche and Tolstoy each thinks it is *within or as such a life* that Jesus taught that blessedness is to be found, and each thinks that the emphasis on faith in (inauthentic) Christianity arises primarily as compensation for the inability of Christians to live in this way. As Nietzsche puts it, Jesus' moral message does not "formulate itself: it *lives*, it resists all formulas."⁴² Instead, his "glad tidings" constituted a "genuine evangelical practice," such that

it is not a "faith" that distinguishes the [authentic] Christian: the Christian *acts*, he is distinguished by acting *differently*: by not resisting, either in words or in his heart, those who treat him ill [...] the life of the Redeemer was nothing other than *this* practice — nor was his death anything else. He no longer required any formulas, any rites for his intercourse with God [...] He] knows that it is only in the practice of this life that one feels "divine," "blessed" [...] the "kingdom of heaven" is a state of the heart — not something that is to come "above the earth" or "after death."⁴³

According to Nietzsche, it was the inability of Christians, especially early Christians such as Paul, to practice the rigorous non-violent brotherly love exemplified in Jesus' life and death, that led them to focus instead on faith, especially belief in redemption through faith in the resurrection, as well as on the whole apparatus of ritual and metaphysical dogma. Jesus inspired what Nietzsche takes to be an anarchic peace movement oriented towards a particular kind of earthly existence. But, he says, this message was succeeded immediately by Paul, a "genius in hatred" in whom was "embodied the opposite type" to Jesus.⁴⁴ As Paul was unable to practice the sort of life Jesus lived, and as he needed to compete for adherents with contemporary mystery cults that satisfied a widespread need for violent sacrifice, he refocused the new religion away from exhortations to practice a life of non-resistance, and towards a "blood-drinking" "God on the cross," a new faith "in a miraculous transformation," and the hope for eternal life.⁴⁵ Thus Jesus' discrediting of the need for a priesthood to mediate between human and God is transformed into a "new ruling order and a church," and Jesus' doctrine of universal love and non-violence is "reversed by Paul into a pagan mystery doctrine, which finally learns to treat with the entire state organization — and wages war, condemns, tortures, swears, hates."⁴⁶ Once rejecting the "blessedness" of the way of life Jesus taught, meaning needed to be found elsewhere, and the church turned to "faith in unbelievable things, in the ceremonial of prayers, worship, feasts, etc." and towards faith "in some sort of miraculous subtraction of sins, accomplished not through man but through Christ's deed."⁴⁷

Nietzsche's de-emphasis of dogma, ritual, and belief in the supernatural as key elements of an authentic Christianity is echoed in Tolstoy. Referring to Luke 17: 20–1, Tolstoy too argues that the "kingdom of God" is to be found

precisely within the earthly experience of a certain kind of life, a life oriented by the internal goal of cultivating within oneself the greatest possible love (even towards those who hate one) and external, practical goal of facilitating the greatest possible union and harmony among living creatures. Jesus taught what it is that “man must do to save himself, i.e., how best to live the life he has come into[...].”⁴⁸ Blessedness or salvation is nothing but the life of unconditional and universal love. Jesus’ message of universal brotherhood, non-violence, and mutual service was distorted, however, first, as the wealthy classes realized that a Christian life negated “the privileges on which they lived[...].” As does Nietzsche, Tolstoy points to weakness as the cause for the failure to appropriate Jesus’ message: not “being strong enough to accept true Christianity, men of these rich, governing classes [...] were left without any religion, with but the external forms of one, which they supported as being profitable and even necessary for themselves, since these forms screened a teaching which justified those privileges which they made use of.”⁴⁹ Instead of acknowledging universal brotherhood, the church developed a doctrine more amenable to the justification of social hierarchies, erecting a “heavenly hierarchy” and “having introduced the worship of Christ, of the Virgin, of angels, of apostles, of saints, and of martyrs [...] it made blind faith in the Church and its ordinances the essential point of its teaching.”⁵⁰ Second, as individuals devised idiosyncratic and distorted interpretations of Jesus’ message, they needed to sanction these interpretations and their own authoritative capacity to disclose the truth; they did so by referring to “supernatural occurrences” and the “miraculous manner of [their] transmission” as proof (and as proof one would not be permitted to question) of those interpretations. Indeed

the less the [authentic] doctrine was understood, the more obscure it appeared and the more necessary were external proofs of its truth. The proposition that we ought not to do unto others as we would not they should do unto us, did not need to be proved by miracles and needed no exercise of faith, because this proposition is in itself convincing and in harmony with man’s mind and nature; but the proposition that Christ was God had to be proved by miracles completely beyond our comprehension.⁵¹

Thus Tolstoy, as does Nietzsche, claims that the church theology and ritual arise out of the failure to appropriate authentically the praxis that Jesus himself exemplified for us. The life of authentic piety, such as exemplified by Tolstoy’s character Platon Karataev, includes no theological sophistication, elaborate church rituals, or concern with abstract metaphysical questions or otherworldly arrangements; instead, Karataev speaks in often mutually contradictory clichés (somehow all nevertheless correct), prays his simple folk

prayers, is kind to horses and dogs, and “joyfully” “loved and lived lovingly with everything that life brought his way, especially other people[...].”⁵²

Nietzsche and Tolstoy each claim that the church’s turn away from the requirements of universal brotherhood and non-violence leads to a dark and troubling conception of God. As Nietzsche says that Paul introduced into Christianity a “blood-drinking” God who would only forgive the sins of humanity through receiving a sacrificial payment, Tolstoy argues that the true notion of God as love is inconsistent with the theological view of God as “wicked and senseless” insofar as he “cursed the human race and devoted his own Son to sacrifice, and a part of mankind to eternal torment[...]. The man who believes [...] in a Christ coming again in glory to judge and to punish the quick and the dead, cannot believe in the Christ who bade us turn the left cheek, judge not, forgive those that wrong us, and love our enemies.”⁵³ Nietzsche suggests that with the rise of a putative Christian state even the military comes to be regarded as a Christian institution, and God becomes chief of staff.⁵⁴ Most importantly, however, the failure to appropriate and focus on Jesus’ example leads to an undue preoccupation with ritual and superstition that threatens to obviate the requirement that we strive resolutely to live in a loving way. Tolstoy claims, then, that if a “man can be saved by redemption, by sacraments, and by prayer, then he does not need good works. The Sermon on the Mount, or the Creed. One cannot believe in both. And Churchmen have chosen the latter.”⁵⁵

Nietzsche and Tolstoy: Towards Convergence

Here it is worth noting one of the most striking features of Nietzsche’s discussion of authentic Christianity. His attitude towards what he understands to be Jesus’ stance is far less hostile than is his attitude towards Christianity. In fact, at times Nietzsche endorses ideas quite similar to those he attributes to Jesus. He writes, “The best way of beginning each day well is to think on awakening whether one cannot this day give pleasure to at any rate *one* person. If this could count as a substitute for the religious practice of prayer, then this substitution would be to the benefit of one’s fellow men.”⁵⁶ Nietzsche frequently praises the virtue of sympathy, and his alter-ego Zarathustra praises kindness and mercy.⁵⁷ Similar to Tolstoy’s indictment of church hypocrisy, Zarathustra is suspicious of the motivations of moralizers who are effusive about justice, people in whom “the impulse to punish is powerful,” for “when they call themselves the good and the just, do not forget that they would be Pharisees, if only they had — power.”⁵⁸ On the other hand, whereas justice often is not what it pretends to be, Nietzsche lauds the “self-overcoming” of justice, which takes the “beautiful name” of mercy, and “it goes without saying

that mercy remains the privilege of the most powerful man[...].”⁵⁹ Nietzsche is deeply suspicious too of the state, which he thinks promotes conformity, suppresses individuality with threats of punishment, and encourages the pursuit of power through the base and undignified pursuit of money, whereas true power is to be found rather in independence and creativity of spirit. And criticizing the state’s maintenance of standing armies, which he believes only increases international distrust and to be a primary cause of warfare, he recommends rejecting reliance on the military as means both of self-defense and conquest. He anticipates a time when a “people, distinguished by wars and victories” will “exclaim of its own free will, ‘We break the sword,’ and will smash its entire military establishment[...]. Rendering oneself unarmed when one had been the best-armed, out of a height of feeling — that is the means to real peace[...].”⁶⁰ Tolstoy endorses exactly the same point about the geopolitical dangers of standing armies and the consequences of their elimination.⁶¹

Of course Nietzsche’s great, enduring opponent is what he thinks of as resentment, or the spirit of revenge. For him, the danger in Christianity is not that it celebrates kindness, but that its commitments to kindness, goodness, and love are really masks, concealing a festering resentment and the desire for revenge. Significantly, Nietzsche suggests that Jesus himself, unlike Christians in general, was not motivated by resentment. While coiled at the heart of the consciousness and values of Christianity, revenge is the most “unevangelical” feeling, and Jesus was in fact “superior” to any “feeling of *ressentiment*.”⁶² Nietzsche’s denunciation of resentment seems little different from Tolstoy’s affirmation of non-resistance. What is more, what Nietzsche and Tolstoy each take to be Jesus’ own emphasis on blessedness as a particular kind of life “here on earth,” blessedness as the earthly practice of loving kindness, helps avoid Nietzsche’s critique of Christianity as life-negating in its emphases on ascetic bodily mortification and sacrificing in this world in the hope of achieving the eternal and transcendent. That blessedness and the kingdom of God are to be achieved here in earthly life by engaging in certain kinds of practices, as Tolstoy and Nietzsche each understand Jesus to have taught, is a message not at all foreign to Zarathustra’s (and Nietzsche’s own) call to remain faithful to the earth rather than squandering our efforts on a fictitious transcendent “beyond.” It may be worth remarking too that, whereas, in his non-fiction works, Tolstoy’s treatment of those whom he judges to be morally inadequate frequently is utterly disdainful, in his fiction matters often are different. In *War and Peace* especially, nearly all the diverse characters (except perhaps Napoleon Bonaparte), are treated with compassionate understanding. The ordinary and the momentous, family life and political maneuvering, battle and carousing, the natural world and the world of the salon, romantic love and intellectual searching, the projects of peasants

and nobility, French and Russians, all are represented as important parts of a whole both beautiful and important. The character Natasha Rostov, after collapsing into despair and alienation following her guilt over her betrayal of her fiancée Nikolai Bolkonsky, her grief over his later death, and her horrified resignation from life after facing up to the inevitability of death, experiences something akin to an “electric shock” when her mother’s need for her becomes clear. Natasha’s unconditional love for her mother as her mother’s grief nearly pushes her into insanity becomes a “summons to life” to her mother, and her mother’s need for her “called Natasha to life[...]. She thought her life was over. But suddenly her love for her mother showed her that the essence of life — love — was still alive in her. Love awoke, and life awoke.”⁶³ Natasha’s affirmation of life, and the connection between that affirmation and love, is almost certainly an expression of Tolstoy’s own stance. In Tolstoy’s literary celebration of all of life is a hint of Nietzsche’s Dionysian notion of *amor fati*, the idea that one ought to affirm existence in its entirety, even those dimensions of existence conventionally (from a human, all too human point of view) condemned as evil or tragic.⁶⁴

Thus there is great overlap between Tolstoyan Christianity and Nietzsche’s own position. Of course, one must not go too far towards assimilating their respective stances, and the question dividing Nietzsche and Tolstoy finally may be that of the precise sorts of “earthly practices” in which one is to engage. In spite of his preference for mercy and kindness, Nietzsche does not endorse Jesus’ message, as Tolstoy does. Nietzsche teaches, as he puts it, not the neighbor but the friend. Tolstoy could not endorse Nietzsche’s admiration for ancient pagan Greece and Rome. Nietzsche praises contest, most especially contests of ideas and systems of value, but even if he gestures towards the elimination of the military in order to facilitate global peace, he also is quite sensitive to the benefits flowing from warfare. (To take just one of many examples, Nietzsche thinks that religious wars indicate and work towards the cultivation of an admirable respect for abstract concepts.) Tolstoy thinks that Christ’s lessons are the truth and the way to achieving blessedness. Zarathustra says he does not want disciples; Nietzsche does not think that there is but a single way to health and authentic living, but celebrates the clearing of a multiplicity of possible paths. He hopes that his writing will provoke people to shake off their unreflective conformity, become individuals, and create new systems of value. Whereas Tolstoy affirms the importance of universal equality and hopes for a classless society, Nietzsche argues for the importance of an order of rank and diagnoses the desire for equality as decadent. He does not admire the meek and the weak, or simple peasants, but celebrates those elevated in creativity, intellect, and strength of will. Indeed, even Nietzsche’s ideas are not suited for everyone: as he tells us, a genuine

philosopher believes that “‘My judgment is *my* judgment’: no one else is easily entitled to it[...]. In the end it must be as it is and always has been: great things remain for the great, abysses for the profound, nuances and shudders for the refined, all that is rare for the rare —”⁶⁵ And at the very least, it is unclear whether Nietzsche’s project of revaluing all values entails merely the rejection of those value systems prevailing in the Western world since Plato, or whether, on the other hand, it is tantamount to the rejection of morality altogether.

But whereas Jesus’ way is not precisely Nietzsche’s, as it is Tolstoy’s, for Nietzsche it nevertheless is a way both noble and legitimate. The way of universal love and non-resistance to evil does not succumb to the major criticisms he levels at Christianity: it does not affirm the herd-like conformity encouraged by church and state, it does not through superstition turn away from the world and towards a fictitious transcendent afterworld, it is not grounded in resentment, and its transcendence of any need or desire to take revenge presupposes admirable strength. We may have here a clue pointing the way to what, for a thinker such as Nietzsche, an authentic religion would be. Certainly it could not consist in a dogmatism that would encourage conformity. Even more importantly, it would need to remain “faithful” to the earth in what Nietzsche characterizes as a Dionysian celebration and embrace of embodiment and all of existence, and its values would need to be expressions of strength sufficient to overcome any resentful desire for revenge or retribution. If any religion could be consistent with these conditions, and perhaps that of Jesus as Nietzsche and Tolstoy retrieve it comes close, then it may well be the case that Nietzsche is not as implacably hostile to all religion as it sometimes appears. Indeed, Nietzsche admires the “religiosity of the ancient Greeks” for the “enormous abundance of gratitude it exudes: it is a very noble type of man that confronts nature and life in this way.”⁶⁶ For someone today who is troubled by the many ways in which the churches historically have been complicit in vast hypocrisies and horrific violence, who finds compelling Nietzsche’s critique of the religious distrust of the body and earthly life as life-denying, and who rejects belief in “unbelievable things” and “supernatural occurrences,” but who nevertheless seeks the kind of existential orientation religion can provide, perhaps Nietzsche’s and Tolstoy’s reflections on authentic Christian practice might provide the signpost towards a more “noble” way.

Notes

1. Nietzsche, *EH*, p.789. All references to Nietzsche are given as section numbers, except those to *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* and *Ecce Homo*.

2. Quoted in Riser, pp. 284–5.

3. Tolstoy, *WA*, pp. 160–1.
4. *Ibid.*, pp. 161–2. Later he refers to Nietzsche again, lamenting the “cult of the superior person (overman-ism)” (Tolstoy, *WA*, p.166). In a short essay from 1902 entitled “What Is Religion, and Wherein Lies its Essence?”, Tolstoy refers to Nietzsche as “semi-sane,” and to his “puerile efforts at originality” (*WR*, p.319). Tolstoy understands Nietzsche to be urging us to live as we please, “paying no attention to the lives of others,” and regards the “extraordinary success” of Nietzsche’s “ravings” as symptomatic of the “terrible state of stupefaction and bestiality to which our Christian humanity has descended” (*WR*, p. 320). The majority of educated people, Tolstoy says, have rejected the ascetic self-renunciation and universal love that are so important for virtue, and therefore “gladly welcome a doctrine of egoism and cruelty” that can be used to justify the “system of founding one’s own happiness” upon the misery of others, which is “the system in which they live” (*WR*, p.321).
5. Nietzsche, *A*, 7, cf. Nietzsche, *GM*, III, 26.
6. Nietzsche, *WTP*, 82.
7. *Ibid.*, 434. Riser elaborates some the differences between Nietzsche and Tolstoy more richly in “Modes of Dissent: Nietzsche and Tolstoy.”
8. Nietzsche, *BGE*, 31.
9. *Ibid.*, 62.
10. Nietzsche, *BT*, 19. His admiration for Palestrina continues into 1888, as evident in *The Case of Wagner*.
11. Nietzsche, *EH*, p.707.
12. Nietzsche, *BGE*, 61.
13. Nietzsche, *A*, 62.
14. Nietzsche, *EH*, p. 790, p. 788.
15. Nietzsche, *HH*, 475. Jesus’ nobility is reaffirmed in *Zarathustra*. There, in the section entitled “On Free Death,” Zarathustra suggests that had he lived long enough to mature, Jesus would have learned to love the earth and laughter — as does Zarathustra himself—for, “Noble enough was he to recant” (Nietzsche, *Z*, p.185). Riser misinterprets Nietzsche’s reference in the *Antichrist* to Jesus as an “idiot” as indicative of contempt. Given both his interest in Dostoevsky and the context — in fact, just two sections later Nietzsche draws a parallel between the world of the gospels and the world of the Russian novel in which childlike idiocy plays a central role — it is much more likely that by this term he had in mind something more akin to the character Prince Myshkin, Dostoevsky’s Christ-like holy fool (cf. Nietzsche, *A*, 29, 31).
16. Nietzsche, *GM*, II, 24.
17. Nietzsche, *A*, 39.
18. *Ibid.*, 36.
19. Nietzsche, *WTP*, 168, 167.
20. Tolstoy, *KG*, p.79.
21. *Ibid.*, p.68.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 62.
23. Tolstoy says, “The greater or less blessedness of a man depends, according to this doctrine, not on the degree of perfection to which he has attained, but on the greater or less swiftness with which he is pursuing it. The progress toward perfection of the publican Zaccheus, of the woman that was a sinner, of the robber on the cross, is a greater state of blessedness, according to this doctrine, than the stationary righteousness of the Pharisee. The lost sheep is dearer than ninety-nine that were not lost. [...] Such progress aims] toward establishing more and more firmly an ever greater love within oneself [...]” (Tolstoy, *KG*, pp. 51–2).
24. Nietzsche, *WTP*, 159.
25. Tolstoy, *KG*, p.317, cf. Acts 5.29.
26. Tolstoy, *WA*, pp. 144–5.
27. Tolstoy, *KG*, p.368.
28. Tolstoy, *WA*, p. 165, p.162, cf. Tolstoy, *KG*, pp.82–3. Nietzsche too is interested in the ways in which religious practices anesthetize, intoxicate, and hypnotize. See, for instance, Nietzsche, *GM*, III, sections 15–20.
29. Nietzsche, *WTP*, 191.
30. The Revised Standard Version of the Bible has the passage as “But I say to you, Do not resist one who is evil” (Matthew 5.39). The passage in New American Bible is rendered “But I say to you,

offer no resistance to one who is evil." Nietzsche writes: "'resist not evil' — the most profound word of the gospel, their key in a certain sense[...]" (Nietzsche, A, 29).

31. Nietzsche, A, 35. Jesus of course enjoins us not merely to love the neighbor, but to "love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matthew 5.44).

32. Nietzsche, *WTP*, 163,169.

33. *Ibid.*, 207.

34. Tolstoy, *WP*, p. 974, p. 972.

35. *Ibid.*, p.1124.

36. Tolstoy, *DII*, especially pp. 301–2.

37. Tolstoy, *WA*, p.47.

38. *Ibid.*, p.186.

39. Tolstoy, *KG*, p.112, p.113.

40. *Ibid.*, p. 36.

41. Tolstoy writes, "Only from the time that the heads of government assumed an external and nominal Christianity, men began to invent all the impossible, cunningly devised theories by means of which Christianity can be reconciled with government. But no honest and serious-minded man of our day can help seeing the incompatibility of true Christianity — the doctrine of meekness, forgiveness of injuries, and love — with government, with its pomp, acts of violence, executions, and wars" (Tolstoy, *KG*, p.237, cf. "Letter," pp. 192–6, and Nietzsche, *WTP*, 167). In this connection, one may think of so called just war theory, which arose in a Christian context (especially in Augustine's response to primitive Christian pacifism), and intends to enumerate conditions under which warfare is not only morally justified, but is morally obligatory. Tolstoy holds that someone who believes in the moral legitimacy of warfare "cannot believe in the brotherhood of all men" (*KG*, p. 76).

42. Nietzsche, A, 32.

43. *Ibid.*, 33–4, cf. 35, and Nietzsche, *WTP*, 170 and 212: Authentic "Christianity is a *way of life*, not a system of beliefs. It tells us how to act, not what we ought to believe."

44. Nietzsche, A, 42.

45. Nietzsche, *WTP*, 167, cf. 196. The claim to eternal life constitutes another sort of reversal Jesus' teaching, which, according to both Nietzsche and Tolstoy, in its resistance to selfishness amounts to a de-emphasis of the person. As Nietzsche puts the point, what could count as a more "exaggerated inflation" of the person than the idea of "eternal personal survival" (Nietzsche, *WTP*, 166, cf. Tolstoy, *KG*, p. 100)?

46. Nietzsche, *WTP*, 167.

47. *Ibid.*, 169, 170, cf. 212.

48. Tolstoy, "Letter," p. 196.

49. Tolstoy, *WA*, p.50.

50. *Ibid.*, pp. 47–8, cf. Tolstoy, "Letter," p.194.

51. Tolstoy, *KG*, pp. 53–4. In his contribution to this volume, Tim H. Blessing explores Thomas Jefferson's theological commitments, which turn out to be very similar to Tolstoy's. Just as Tolstoy held that the truth of Christ's message of universal brotherhood is immediately evident, Jefferson held that Christ's message was "plain" to "every understanding," and, as such, was insufficiently obscure to warrant the existence and maintenance of a priestly caste. Thus the "Christian priesthood," Jefferson wrote, "saw in the mysticisms of Plato, materials with which they might build up an artificial system which might ... admit everlasting controversy, given employment to their order, and introduce it to profit, power, and pre-eminence" (as quoted in Blessing, "Revolution by Other Means: Jefferson, the Jefferson Bible, and Jesus"). Jefferson too thought that the Christian churches perverted Jesus' teaching for the purposes of power and wealth. As did Nietzsche two generations later, Jefferson laid the blame for church corruption on Paul's doorstep.

52. Tolstoy, *WP*, p.973.

53. Tolstoy, *KG*, pp.75–6. Nietzsche names the idea of the "God on the cross" as "gruesome" and cruel (Nietzsche, *BGE*, 46, 55). And he remarks that the Christian conception of a god whose love is conditional upon being loved and worshipped — "What? A love encapsulated in if-clauses attributed to an almighty god?" — is unworthy of any god worthy of devotion. Any worthy god must have majesty enough to have "mastered the feelings of honor and vindictiveness" and that the Christian god has not is "sufficient critique of the whole of Christianity" (*GS*, 141). It is worth noting that the medieval thinker Peter Abelard anticipates Nietzsche's and Tolstoy's arguments.

Abelard believed that a theology focused on the expiatory dimension of the crucifixion is too easily tied to violence. The meaning of the crucifixion lies not in Jesus' being a sacrifice that would pay a debt to satisfy God's offended honor and thus alter God's attitude towards humanity, but rather in the example of love and non-resistance Jesus in facing death set for us. Authentic Christianity is focused on emulating a way of living, and God is not justice but love. Because of God's infinite mercy and love, there is no hereditary sin, all of humanity is always already redeemed, and the crucifixion is a reminder to us that in a life lived according to love and compassion is the life most responsive to God. Abelard's anti-feudal ideas were seen as a threat to the church, and his works were condemned as heretical. See James Carroll's discussion of Abelard as offering a theological alternative (sadly ignored) to the church's doctrinal anti-Semitism (Carroll, ch. 29). There are also striking similarities between stance taken by Nietzsche and Tolstoy and their contemporary Oscar Wilde's interpretation of Christ's message. Wilde claims that Jesus taught that wealth and private property were obstacles to the pursuit of a more important inner perfection, that he was indifferent to society and the state, and that he enjoined upon his followers the path of non-violence, non-resistance, and non-revenge. However, Wilde departs from Tolstoy, at least, in attributing to the true Christian the path of spiritual growth through self-torture and the worship of pain. Tolstoy thinks that a Christ-like life instead would be joyful. See Wilde, especially pp. 1024–5, pp. 1041–2.

54. Nietzsche, *WTP*, 211.

55. Tolstoy, *KG*, p.75.

56. Nietzsche, *HH*, 589. See also Nietzsche, *HH*, 129: "There is not enough love and goodness in the world for us to be permitted to give any of it away to imaginary things," a statement recalling Tolstoy's view that a person believing in "salvation through faith in the redemption or the sacraments, cannot devote all his powers to realizing Christ's moral teaching in his life" (Tolstoy, *KG*, p.76).

57. See, for instance, Nietzsche, *BGE*, 284, and Nietzsche, *Z*, "On Those Who Are Sublime": Let "your kindness be your final self-conquest./Of all evil I deem you capable: therefore I want the good from you." Nietzsche thinks that motivating commitment to the values of Christianity all too often is the desire for revenge, a desire arising out of weakness and the extinction of which he very much hopes for: "I do not like your cold justice; and out of the eyes of your judges there always looks the executioner and his cold steel. Tell me, where is that justice which is love with open eyes? Would that you might invent for me the love that bears not only all punishment but all guilt! Would that you might invent for me the justice that acquits everyone, except him that judges!" (Nietzsche, *Z*, "On the Adder's Bite"). See also Nietzsche, *Z*, "On Tarantulas," where humanity's deliverance from revenge is the "bridge to the highest hope, and a rainbow after long storms."

58. Nietzsche, *Z*, p.212.

59. Nietzsche, *GM*, II, 10.

60. Nietzsche, *WS*, 284, Nietzsche's emphasis deleted. Nietzsche takes nationalism to be a kind of neurosis, again like Tolstoy, and despises "European particularism," hoping instead for a task "great enough to unite nations again" (Nietzsche, *EH*, p.777). For a sustained discussion of the state, see Nietzsche, *Z*, "On the New Idol."

61. Tolstoy, *KG*, pp.123–4.

62. Nietzsche, *A*, 40. Richard Bernstein offers a striking argument that whereas Nietzsche's critique of priestly slave morality includes a move towards transcending a particular interpretation of good and evil, he nevertheless never rejects the sense or intelligibility of the very notion of evil. Nietzsche believes certain phenomena to be evil indeed, especially the psychological drive of resentment. See Bernstein, ch. 4.

63. Tolstoy, *WP*, pp. 1078–80.

64. Shestov links Nietzsche's *amor fati* to Matthew 5:45, and suggests that in surpassing ordinary moral conventions to celebrate the "fullness and infinite variety of real life," Nietzsche ascends to the sort of height of moral sensibility expressed in the gospels (Shestov, pp. 131–3, p.140). Shestov claims that Tolstoy too had succeeded in appropriating this attitude in *War and Peace*, a book in which "whoever lives, no matter how he lives— even if it be in an immoral or trivial or crude fashion— did not at all provoke Tolstoy's indignation," and in which Tolstoy sought to "acquit all men" (Shestov, p.60, p.138). Tolstoy could not sustain this sort of (Dionysian) elevation after *War and Peace*, and later is reduced to a moralistic judging of Anna in *Anna Karenin*. Shestov focuses primarily on what he takes to be another major similarity connecting Tolstoy and Nietzsche, namely,

each thinker's life-long engagement with the idea that God is the good, and the biographical experiences that inflected those engagements.

65. Nietzsche, *BGE*, 43.

66. *Ibid.*, 49.

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