

# APOLOGY FOR QUIETISM

---

A *Sotto Voce* Symposium

Part 4

Jeffrey M. Perl, W. Caleb McDaniel, Hanne Andrea Kraugerud,  
Bjørn Torgrim Ramberg, Christophe Fricker, Sidney Plotkin,  
Pink Dandelion, Martin Mulrow

## Introduction: *Mezza Voce* Quietism?

A set of questions not posed before in this symposium is raised in the following group of articles. How should we arrive at criteria for application of the terms *quietist* and *quietism* beyond their use in naming Christian mystics and forms of mysticism in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries? To what and whom should these terms be (and not be) applied? W. Caleb McDaniel argues here that John Brown, the abolitionist whom Lincoln called a “misguided fanatic,” should be regarded as a quietist.<sup>1</sup> Brown is said to have met the first criterion of Christian Quietism: he did God’s will against his own. This thought experiment of McDaniel’s is significant, because we all experience the words “John Brown, Quietist” as counterintuitive, which must mean that the kinds of use to which we put the term are seriously at odds. With figures of political history, our tendency is naturally to apply political criteria—the quietist is apolitical, or politically

1. See W. Caleb McDaniel, “John Brown, Quietist,” *Common Knowledge* 16.1 (Winter 2010): 31–47.

*Common Knowledge* 16:1

DOI 10.1215/0961754X-2009-058

© 2010 by Duke University Press

uncommitted, or politically uninvolved, or contemptuous of politics—though in some cases, including Brown’s, we could assess their careers in religious terms as well. And the two assessments might differ radically.

Even if we grant, however, that Brown was “called” to act against his will, there remain questions unaddressed and pressing. Would a quietist agree to be the *wrath* of God? And would a quietist’s God *be* wrathful? Recall the rapture of Simone Weil at what true quietism entails: “To be what the pencil is for me when, blindfold, I feel the table by means of its point—to be that for Christ. . . . If I knew how to withdraw from my own soul, it would be enough to enable this table in front of me to have the incomparable good fortune of being seen by God.”<sup>2</sup> Is this Christ of Weil’s the same as Brown’s? Is there no difference in quality or kind between the instruments that Weil and Brown envisioned being? No difference between a selfless pencil and a selfless sword? Between a pencil called to press a point and a sword called on to kill? If Brown and Weil are both plausibly quietists, then there is a spectrum of quietisms and a midpoint, presumably, between the extremes. Several attempts are made in the articles that follow here to locate forms of activist quietism or quietist activism and to make room for quietists who concern themselves actively with injustice. Each of the cases under discussion is to a degree paradoxical, but the test case I propose is an oxymoron: *passive resistance*. Gandhi’s name has come up several times in the course of this symposium, and it is not difficult to see why. He was the most famous pacifist of the last century and, as McDaniel points out, quietism and pacifism are often identified (or misidentified). Whatever we may conclude, on balance, about the relative weight of pacifism and activism in Gandhi’s career, surely if John Brown may be considered a quietist, then we may rethink Gandhi as well in such terms.

Hyperbolically, it is said that Gandhi brought down an empire; by definition, then, he was an activist politically. But Gandhian activism was not—whatever else it was—normative activism at the time. Gandhi’s protégé Nehru pursued aims, professed ideas, and had a background more typical by far of progressive activists. Educated at Cambridge in the sciences, Nehru was a technocrat, a statist democrat, and a secularist. He favored the “expansion of governmental activities . . . such as planning, industrial development . . . nationalisation of key industries, etc.”<sup>3</sup> An activist of this description was bound to find Gandhi’s irregular kind suspect, and Nehru was at pains to argue that, “while the Indian habit of mind is essentially one of quietism,” his mentor had been “the very antithesis of quietism.” Gandhi had indeed

2. Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, trans. Arthur Wills (1952; Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), 87–88. I discussed this passage also in a previous symposium introduction, “The Need for Repose,” *Common Knowledge* 15.2 (Spring 2009): 157–58.

3. Quotation taken from comments of Nehru’s, on November 21, 1945, to Sir Benegal Rau.

been a demon of energy and action, a hustler, a man who not only drove himself but drove others. He had done more than anyone I knew to fight and change the quietism of the Indian people. He sent us to the villages, and the countryside hummed with the activity of innumerable messengers of the new gospel of action. The peasant was shaken up and he began to emerge from his quiescent shell.<sup>4</sup>

In personal correspondence, however, Nehru told Gandhi that his continuing to raise “fundamental questions” in the midst of political upheaval could “produce great confusion in people’s minds resulting in an inability to act in the present” (letter of October 9, 1945). It appears that Gandhi’s “gospel of action” could lead, paradoxically, to inaction. In 1957, many years after Gandhi’s death, Nehru, now prime minister, felt the need to inform a Commonwealth Conference that the Indian government was not “pacifist or Gandhian in international or national affairs.”<sup>5</sup>

*Gandhian* was by midcentury, then, an adjective with established connotations, some of which, notably pacifism, were of a kind with which no nation’s government could afford to be associated. In our own day, historians like Martin Green and especially Lloyd Rudolph have argued that *Gandhian* is or should be interchangeable with adjectives like *postmodern*, *utopian*, and *New Age*.<sup>6</sup> Gandhi’s list of favorite readings (in his early tract *Hind Swaraj*) comprises works that today we would, as Rudolph notes, regard as countercultural. In Gandhi’s words:

Whilst the views expressed in *Hind Swaraj* are held by me, I have but endeavoured humbly to follow Tolstoy, Ruskin, Thoreau, Emerson and other writers besides the masters of Indian philosophy. Tolstoy has been one of my teachers for a number of years. Those who want to see a corroboration of the views submitted in the following chapters, will find it in the works of the above-named masters. For ready reference some of the books are mentioned in the Appendices.<sup>7</sup>

In addition to works of John Ruskin and American Transcendentalist writings, Gandhi’s list of Western influences on his thought includes books by romantic-

4. Jawaharlal Nehru, “Looking Back at the Battle of Freedom,” Indian National Congress, [www.congress.org.in/looking-back-at-the%20battle-of%20freedom.php](http://www.congress.org.in/looking-back-at-the%20battle-of%20freedom.php) (accessed June 9, 2009).

5. Privately, two years earlier, in a conversation that Lester Pearson, then foreign minister of Canada, reports in his memoirs, Nehru described Gandhi—who had been dead for five years—as “an awful old hypocrite.” See S. C. Gangal, “Gandhi and Nehru: A Love-Hate Relationship,” *Hindu*, November 28, 1995.

6. I am grateful to Lloyd Rudolph for his generous help in preparing this essay and for consent to draw liberally on his research, writings, and bibliographies. See Lloyd I. Rudolph, “Postmodern Gandhi,” in *Postmodern Gandhi and Other Essays: Gandhi in the World and at Home*, by Rudolph and Susanne Hoeber Rudolph (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006): 3–59. See also Martin Green, *Gandhi: Voice of a New Age Revolution* (New York: Continuum, 1993).

7. “Appendices” start on p. 120 of Parel’s edition of *Hind Swaraj*, with twenty entries under I (“Some Authorities”).

nationalist, Indian-influenced, and mystical-socialist writers, such as Giuseppe Mazzini, R. C. Dutt, Henry Maine, and Edward Carpenter (plus “Socrates”). Fully six of the approved texts are by Tolstoy, who has been discussed as a quietist in this symposium and who seems to have been the main non-Indian influence on Gandhi’s thinking.<sup>8</sup>

It was on his return trip from England to South Africa in November 1909 that Gandhi translated Tolstoy’s “Letter to a Hindoo” into Gujarati and wrote the initial Gujarati version of *Hind Swaraj*. Gandhi said that the writing of the latter was influenced profoundly by the former. Tolstoy’s “Letter” was addressed nominally to Taraknath Das, a participant in the violent movement against the 1905 partition of Bengal, but Rudolph argues that the genuine addressee of the “Letter” was Gandhi. Just a year separates Tolstoy’s writing of the “Letter” and his recognition of Gandhi as his spiritual heir. Moreover, in the preface to his translation, Gandhi says that the key principle of Tolstoy’s “Letter”—nonviolence—was likewise his own. Gandhi initiated their relationship by writing to Tolstoy in 1908 on the occasion of his eightieth birthday.<sup>9</sup> As Rudolph describes the context, “Letter to a Hindoo” had been circulating in Indian revolutionary circles in Paris; and in 1909 Pranjivan Mehta, who was in Paris, sent a copy to Gandhi in London. On October 1 of that year, before sailing for South Africa from England, Gandhi wrote again to Tolstoy, asking permission to translate and publish the “Letter.” When Tolstoy agreed, Gandhi had 20,000 copies printed, then published Gujarati and English versions in *Indian Opinion*.

The “Letter” in effect told Gandhi that Indians must resist Britain nonviolently, since to resist with violence would be yielding to the conquerors’ worldview. Instead, Tolstoy argued, humanity must move toward a new level of consciousness. Is it not clear—he asked, in words that Gandhi would go on to quote in *Hind Swaraj*—that “it is not the English who have enslaved the Indians, but the Indians who have enslaved themselves?” On November 11, 1909, Gandhi while still in London sent Tolstoy “a copy of a book written by a friend . . . in connection with my life, in so far it has a bearing on the struggle with which I am so connected. . . . As I am very anxious to engage your active interest and sympathy I thought that it would not be considered by you out of the way for me to send you this book.” The book was Joseph Doke’s biography of Gandhi.<sup>10</sup> Tolstoy responded, on September 7, 1910, in what may have been the last letter written before his death on November 20:

8. Caleb Thompson, “Quietism from the Side of Happiness: Tolstoy, Schopenhauer, *War and Peace*,” *Common Knowledge* 15.3 (Fall 2009): 395–411.

9. For this and other exchanges between them, see *Mahatma Gandhi and Leo Tolstoy Letters*, ed. B. Srinivasa

Murthy (Long Beach, CA: Long Beach Publications, 1987).

10. The first version of Doke’s biography was published in the *London Indian Chronicle* in 1909; the first Indian edition appeared in 1919.

Your work in the Transvaal, which seems to be far away from the center of our world, is yet the most fundamental and the most important to us, supplying the most weighty practical proof in which the world can now share and with which we must participate, not only the Christians but all the peoples of the world.

In the context of a symposium on quietism, what matters most in the “Letter to a Hindoo” is that it gives Tolstoy’s blessing to Gandhi’s “work,” to Gandhian activism, as “the most weighty practical proof” of a philosophy that the two believed they shared. What needs further discussion is how Tolstoy’s philosophy, plausibly described as quietistic, could be proven in practice—as Tolstoy told Gandhi that it could—by acts of mass resistance to political injustice.

Gandhi launched his first satyagraha campaign in South Africa from an ashram, newly established, that he had named Tolstoy Farm. There he pledged, “so far as possible, and so far as we understood it, to follow . . . [Tolstoy’s] teaching.” Gandhi was a self-declared karma yogi, which means he believed that, of the disciplines leading toward *moksha* (spiritual or epistemic liberation), the greatest is the “discipline of action”—greater than the paths of knowledge, devotion, and ritual.<sup>11</sup> His reasoning begins, as Rudolph shows, from the premise that “truth is God”: just as seeking God is not the same as knowing God, so pursuing truth is not the same as knowing truth.<sup>12</sup> Gandhi held that the claim, encouraged by Western rationalism and science, to know objective truths and universal laws was tantamount to envying God and pretending to be like him. Gandhi’s understanding of truth precluded certainty; and uncertainty must preclude wholesale efforts to control social change or harness nature. For the work at Tolstoy Farm, Gandhi coined a motto, “the minimum is the maximum,” by which he meant that one must, by definition, act where action is required but never more than is required (and always locally rather than globally). A satyagraha campaign is minimalist in the sense that its aims are focused, and its tactics nonviolent in every circumstance. Yet such campaigns are maximalist in the sense that, unlike violent resistance, they genuinely have the potential to bring injustice to an end. That aggressive resistance meets force with force is obvious; but it is debatable whether meeting unjust force with counterforce would in itself be unjust. Tolstoy’s “teach-

11. See Gandhi, introduction to *The Gospel of Selfless Action, or the Gita According to Gandhi*, ed. Mahadev Desai (Ahmedabad, India: Navajivan Publishing House, 1929), 125–34. For *moksha*, see Jeffrey M. Perl, “Foreign Metaphysics,” in *Skepticism and Modern Enmity: Before and After Eliot* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 55, where *moksha* is defined as “an epistemic revolution that so adjusts [one’s] version of the world as to make it the realized *nirvana*. . . . salvation is the freedom from presuppositions.” This chapter of *Skepticism and Modern Enmity* was published in its first version with Andrew P.

Tuck, a specialist in Indian philosophy, as coauthor. As I recall, this definition of *moksha* was Tuck’s.

12. See Anand T. Hingorani, ed., *God Is Truth by M. K. Gandhi*, vol. 1 of *Gandhi for the 21st Century* (Mumbai: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1998), 30, and R. K. Prabhu, ed., *Truth Is God: Gleanings from the Writings of Mahatma Gandhi Bearing on God, God-realization, and the Godly way* (Ahmedabad, India: Navajivan Publishing House, 1955), 165.

ing” to Indians—which Gandhi hoped he had rightly “understood”—was that meeting British violence with Indian violence would be unjust. But why? The Indians had “enslaved themselves.”

It was on this point that George Orwell proposed a useful distinction between Tolstoy’s approach to nonviolence and Gandhi’s. In an essay of 1947 that James Wood calls “nicely pugilistic,” Orwell writes regarding Tolstoy that the “distinction that really matters is not between violence and non-violence but between having and not having an appetite for power. . . . Creeds like pacifism and anarchism, which seem on the surface to imply a complete renunciation of power, rather encourage this habit of mind.”<sup>13</sup> Wood suggests that Orwell identified Tolstoy’s idea of “passive resistance” with “passive aggression” (in the sense made famous by psychoanalysis). Orwell may have thought, in other words, that Gandhi’s was a “manipulative, insidious power” of the kind exercised by a “tyrannical mother who lovingly murmurs at you while rearranging your brain.”<sup>14</sup> In an essay of 1949, Orwell notes that “Gandhi objected to ‘passive resistance’ as a translation of Satyagraha” (in Gujarati, “the word means ‘firmness in the truth’”) and concludes that “Gandhi’s attitude was not that of most Western pacifists,” since “its motive was religious.”<sup>15</sup> The motive of Tolstoy’s pacifism was religious as well, but Gandhi’s religion, though influenced by Sermon on the Mount Christianity, featured no specifically “humanist” element.

“Gandhi’s teachings,” Orwell writes,

cannot be squared with the belief . . . that our job is to make life worth living on this earth. . . . They make sense only on the assumption . . . that the world of solid objects is an illusion to be escaped from. It is worth considering the disciplines which Gandhi imposed on himself and which . . . he considered indispensable if one wanted to serve either God or humanity. . . . in his middle thirties, [Gandhi] took the vow of brahmacharya, which means not only complete chastity but a continuous effort to master sexual desire. . . . [Even] friendships, Gandhi says, are dangerous, because “friends react on one another” . . . [Moreover,] one cannot give one’s preference to any individual person. . . . [Thus] on three occasions he was willing to let his wife or a child die rather than administer animal food prescribed by the doctor. . . . There must, he says, be some limit to what we will do in order to remain alive, and the limit is well on this side of chicken broth.<sup>16</sup>

13. James Wood, “A Fine Rage: George Orwell’s Revolutions,” *New Yorker*, April 13, 2009, 54. The essay that Wood discusses and quotes is Orwell’s “Lear, Tolstoy, and the Fool” (1947), in *The Complete Works of George Orwell*, [www.george-orwell.org/Lear\\_Tolstoy\\_and\\_the\\_Fool/](http://www.george-orwell.org/Lear_Tolstoy_and_the_Fool/) .html (accessed June 10, 2009).

14. Wood, “Fine Rage,” 57.

15. George Orwell, “Reflections on Gandhi,” originally published in *Partisan Review*, January 1949, [www.readprint.com/work-1260/Reflections-On-Gandhi-George-Orwell](http://www.readprint.com/work-1260/Reflections-On-Gandhi-George-Orwell) (accessed June 9, 2009).

16. Orwell, “Reflections on Gandhi.”

Gandhi's commitment to nonviolence, Orwell is saying, was only one among several made on the basis of Hindu belief that the physical world is "an illusion to be escaped from." Given this underlying belief, Gandhi could answer without cavil or inconsistency many "awkward questions" that, according to Orwell, "most Western pacifists specialize in avoiding."

In support of this conclusion, Orwell cites Louis Fischer's record of "Gandhi's view," expressed in 1938, on the fate of "the German Jews":

According to Mr. Fischer, Gandhi's view was that the German Jews ought to commit collective suicide, which "would have aroused the world and the people of Germany to Hitler's violence." After the war he justified himself: the Jews had been killed anyway, and might as well have died significantly. . . . Gandhi was merely being honest. If you are not prepared to take life, you must often be prepared for lives to be lost in some other way. When, in 1942, he urged non-violent resistance against a Japanese invasion [of India], he was ready to admit that it might cost several million [Indian] deaths.<sup>17</sup>

Thus Gandhi followed his convictions—better to suffer than cause suffering (to *any* living thing), better to endure injustice than bring about any, better to overlook aggression than experience aggressive, possessive, or controlling feelings of one's own—with no exceptions made for the rescue of human innocents. The centrality of human beings to Christian pacifists renders armed defense of the innocent a continual temptation.

Even before Gandhi appeared on the scene, at least one acute observer, Max Weber, had concluded that even Tolstoy's commitment to nonaggression was inconsistent and thus insufficiently radical. Like Tolstoy, Weber was convinced that belief in human ability to shape the future was delusional and that belief in the certain, absolute, universal, unconditional, and benignly useful truths of science was disastrous. In his lecture "Science as a Vocation," Weber asked, with regard to ideas of progress, mastery, and human perfection, "Who believes in this?" Since the year was 1918, we may suppose that the force of the question was: Who believes in this *anymore*? For his answer, Weber turned to Tolstoy's "A Confession": "Tolstoi has given the simplest answer, with the words: Science is meaningless because it gives no answer to our question, the only question important to us: 'What shall we do, and how shall we live?'" Weber came to imagine the only alternative to modernization as Tolstoyan in tendency but more radical than Tolstoy himself had (for most of his life) been in practice. Rudolph points us to Paul Honingsheim's memoir "Max Weber in Heidelberg," where Weber is quoted as observing how Tolstoy had "attempted to realize his ideal only in

17. Orwell, "Reflections on Gandhi." Internal quotations from Louis Fischer, *Gandhi and Stalin: Two Signs at the World's Crossroads* (London: Gollancz, 1948).

the last period of his life when he actually left his estate and his family and lived as a wandering beggar. Only the man who lives as Tolstoy did in his last weeks can invoke the Sermon on the Mount and proclaim the merits of pacifism and disarmament.”<sup>18</sup> In this passage, Rudolph concludes, Weber appears to anticipate a figure such as Gandhi on the horizon—a figure more Tolstoyan than Tolstoy. Gandhi’s development of satyagraha in South Africa appears, moreover, to have brought Tolstoy himself new hope for the future.

Whether we consider Gandhi as a quietist—and if so, to what degree or in what way—depends on our interpretation of satyagraha. His campaigns against the status quo, in South Africa and more momentously in India, would seem to disqualify him. No such campaign would be undertaken by a quietist, certainly not if the term is meant as Nehru meant it (with contempt for “the Indian habit of mind”). Gandhi did not live, submissive and cringing, in a “quiescent shell.” On the other hand, the Quit India campaign and others of the type were not aimed at defeating the British empire but, as Gandhi emphasized repeatedly, at converting the British, at enabling them to see the truth, then to act on it and join with the satyagrahis in mutual triumph. “As human beings,” Gandhi said, “our greatness lies not so much in being able to remake the world—that is the myth of the atomic age—as in being able to remake ourselves.” He insisted that satyagrahis must not coerce opponents or take advantage of their disabilities in order to weaken them. Indeed he urged the satyagrahi to feel concern for the opponent’s physical well being and moral welfare. Witnesses report that campaigns were suspended on Christian holidays and often, simply, at midday, when Indians would have an unfair advantage over Europeans less accustomed to the heat. Such gestures of sympathy and patience, even if genuine, were also unnerving, given that they were demonstrations of pity for and superiority to the dominant power.

As a teacher, Gandhi was dedicated to freeing humanity from belief in human mastery; and at the time Britannia ruled the waves and much else, unchallenged.<sup>19</sup> His efforts to free the British from the illusion of their own mastery have been regarded as acts of political resistance, whereas apparently, from Gandhi’s perspective, they comprised a moral education. The basic forms of education that Gandhi undertook and encouraged—work cessation, emigration, sit-in strikes, and hunger strikes—were drawn from Hindu tradition, and he chose each as exemplary of the principle of ahimsa (usually translated as “nonviolence” or, more accurately, “noninjury”).<sup>20</sup> Even then, Gandhi was wary of any action,

18. See Leo Tolstoy, *A Confession and Other Religious Writings*, trans. Jane Kentish (Harmondsworth, U.K.: Penguin, 1987), and Paul Honingsheim, *The Unknown Max Weber*, ed. Alan Sica (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2000), 207.

19. See Martin Green, *The Origins of Nonviolence: Tolstoy and Gandhi in Their Historical Settings* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1986).

20. For more on ahimsa in the context of this symposium, see Andrea R. Jain and Jeffrey J. Kripal, “Quietism and Karma: Non-Action as Non-Ethics in Jain Asceticism,” *Common Knowledge* 15.2 (Spring 2009): 203.



such as a fast of unlimited duration, that would bring pressure on the British to yield without first having changed their minds and acknowledged the moral superiority of ahimsa to their own assertive, aggressive, and intrusive practices. His preferred actions brought to the occupiers' attention that some measure they had taken was rude, intrusive, base, and therefore unacceptable. One might say that he was teaching the occupiers not only morals but manners, along with a humility appropriate to human limits.

Moreover, it is important to recognize, the slogan "Quit India" meant for Gandhi not only that the British were uninvited guests who had overstayed their welcome but also that India would refuse as alien intrusions the modern "gifts," whether material goods or progressive ideas, that the British had brought with them. As Rudolph describes the political situation, Nehru and his allies in the Constituent Assembly wanted a centralized, top-down state capable of planned development, including wholesale urbanization. They regarded rural life in India as "a sink of localism, a den of ignorance, narrow-mindedness, and communalism."<sup>21</sup> Nehru's contingent led the way in marginalizing and, wherever possible, blocking efforts by Gandhians in the Constituent Assembly to add *gram swaraj* institutions to the Union and state governments as a "third autonomous tier" in the 1950 Constitution.<sup>22</sup> As Rudolph makes clear, Gandhi regarded state centralization and the commodifications wrought by market economies as pathological. He preferred institutional arrangements for which precedents could be found in traditional Indian culture, such as individual self-rule, the self-rule of small groups, and the stewardship (rather than ownership) of nature and property. These were ways of rural life that the activists of modern India found intolerably *backward*—in Nehru's vocabulary, an adjective synonymous with *quiescent* and *quietistic*—but of which Gandhi made a public display in the course of his satyagraha campaigns. How many images have we seen of the Mahatma in his loincloth working assiduously (while fasting) at his spinning wheel?

In Gandhian practice, satyagraha was an educational tool directed both externally, toward the British, and internally, toward Indians like Nehru, whom the British had taught to prefer their metropolitan ways. One could say that Gandhi was teaching both sets of pupils quietism. Every teacher is, in a sense, an activist; and yet quietism must be taught if the world is ever to be free of turmoil and clamor. Like most teachers of quietism—beginning with Fr. Miguel de Molinos, who died in prison—Gandhi learned that the response of the vociferous to the teacher of serenity is likely to be unforgiving.

—Jeffrey M. Perl

21. According to Rudolph, these are the words of B. R. Ambedkar, the "father" of the Indian Constitution.

22. "Third . . . tier" is Rudolph's expression; *gram swaraj* was Gandhi's term for village self-government.