

A Reply to Critics and Criticisms

Leo Tolstoy

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To Critics

A LETTER ADDRESSED TO "THE DAILY CHRONICLE"

SINCE the appearance of my book, "The Kingdom of God is within Us," and my article on "Patriotism and Christianity," I often hear and read in articles and letters addressed to me, arguments against, I will not say the ideas expressed in those books, but against such misconstructions as are put upon them. This is done sometimes consciously, but very often unwittingly, and is wholly due to a want of understanding of the spirit of the Christian religion.

"It is all very well," they say ; "despotism, capital punishments, wars, the arming of all Europe, the precarious state of the working-classes, are indeed great evils, and you are right in condemning all this ; but how can we do without government ? What will you give instead of it ? Being ourselves men, with a limited knowledge and intellect, have we the right, just because it seems best to us, to destroy that order of things which has helped our forefathers to attain the present state of civilization and its advantages ? If you destroy the State, you must put something in its place. How can we run the risk of all the calamities which might ensue if government was abolished ?"

But the fact is that the Christian doctrine, in its true sense, never proposed to abolish anything, nor to change any human organization. The very thing which distinguishes Christian religion from all other religions and social doctrines is that it gives men the possibilities of a real and good life, not by means of general laws regulating the lives of all men, but by enlightening each individual man with regard to the sense of his own life, by showing him wherein consists the evil and the real good of his life. And the sense of life thus imparted to man by the Christian doctrine is so simple, so convincing, and leaves so little room for doubt, that if once man understands it, and, therefore, conceives wherein is the real good and the real evil of his life, he can never again consciously do what he considers to be the evil of his life, nor abstain from doing what he considers to be the real good of it, as surely as a plant cannot help turning toward light, and water cannot help running downward.

The sense of life, as shown by the Christian religion, consists in living so as to do the will of Him who sent us into life, from whom we are come, and to whom we shall return. The evil of our life consists in acting against this will, and the good in fulfilling it. And the rule given to us for the fulfillment of this will is so very plain and simple that it is impossible not to understand, or to misunderstand it.

If you cannot do unto others what you would that they should do to you, at least do not unto them what you would not that they should do unto you.

If you would not be made to work ten hours at a stretch in factories or in mines, if you would not have your children hungry, cold, and ignorant, if you would not be robbed of the land that feeds you, if you would not be shut up in prisons and sent to the gallows or hanged for committing an unlawful deed through passion or ignorance, if you would not suffer wounds nor be killed in war, do not do this to others. All this is so simple and straightforward, and admits of so little doubt, that it is impossible for the simplest child not to understand, nor for the cleverest man to refute it. It is impossible to refute this law, especially because this law is given to us, not only by all the wisest men of the world, not only by the Man who is considered to be God by the majority of Christians, but because it is written in our minds and hearts.

Let us imagine a servant in his lord's power, appointed by his master to a task he loves and understands. If this man were to be addressed by men whom he knows to be dependent on his

master in the same way as he is, to whom similar tasks are set at which they will not work, and who would entreat him for his own good and for the good of other men to do what is directly opposed to his lord's plain commandments, what answer can any reasonable servant give to such entreaties ? But this simile is far from fully expressing what a Christian must feel when he is called upon to take an active part in oppressing, robbing people of their land, in executing them, in waging war, and so on, all things which governments call upon us to do ; for, however binding the commands of that master may have been to his servant, they can never be compared to that unquestionable knowledge which every man, as long as he is not corrupted by false doctrines, does possess, that he cannot and must not do unto others what he does not wish to be done unto him, and therefore cannot and must not take part in all things opposed to the rule of his Master, which are imposed upon him by governments.

Therefore the question for a Christian does not lie in this : whether or no a man has the right to destroy the existing order of things, and to establish another in its stead, or to decide which kind of government will be the best, as the question is sometimes purposely and very often unintentionally put by the enemies of Christianity (the Christian does not think about the general order of things, but leaves the guidance of them to God, for he firmly believes God has implanted His law in our minds and hearts, that there may be order, not disorder, and that nothing but good can arise from our following the unquestionable law of God, which has been so plainly manifested to us); but the question, the decision of which is not optional, but unavoidable, and which daily presents itself for a Christian to decide, is : How am I to act in the dilemma which is constantly before me ? Shall I form part of a government which recognizes the right to own landed property by men who never work on it, which levies taxes on the poor in order to give them to the rich, which condemns erring men to gallows and death, which sends out soldiers to commit murder, which depraves whole races of men by means of opium and brandy, etc., or shall I refuse to take a share in a government, the doings of which are contrary to my conscience ? But what will come of it, what sort of State will there be, if I act in this way, is a thing I do not know and which I shall not say I do not wish to know, but which I cannot know.

The main strength of Christ's teaching consists especially in this : that He brought the question of conduct from a world of conjecture and eternal doubt, down to a firm and indisputable ground. Some people say, " But we also do not deny the evils of the existing order and the necessity of changing it, but we wish to change it, not suddenly, by means of refusing to take any part in the government, but, on the contrary, by participating in the government, by gaining more and more freedom, political rights, and obtaining the election of the true friends of the people and the enemies of all violence."

This would be very well, if taking part in one's government and trying to improve it, could coincide with the aim of human life. But, unfortunately, it not only does not coincide, but is quite opposed to it.

Supposing human life to be limited to this world, its aim can consist only in man's individual happiness ; if, on the other hand, life does not end in this world, its aim can consist only in doing the will of God. In both cases it does not coincide with the progress of governments. If it lies here, in man's personal happiness, and if life ends here, what should I care about the future prosperity of a government which will come about when, in all probability, I shall be there no more ? But if my life is immortal, then the prosperity of the English, the Russian, the German, or any other state, which is to come in the twentieth century, is too paltry an aim for me, and can never satisfy the cravings of my immortal soul. A sufficient aim for my life is either my immediate

personal good, which does not coincide with the government measures and improvements, or the fulfillment of the will of God, which also not only cannot be conciliated with the requirements of government, but is quite opposed to them. The vital question not only for a Christian, but, I think, for any reasonable being, when he is summoned to take part in governmental acts, lies not in the prosperity of his state or government, but in this question :

”Wilt thou, a being of reason and- goodness, who comes to-day and may vanish to-morrow, wilt thou, if thou believest in the existence of God, act against His law and His will, knowing that any moment thou canst return to Him ; or, if thou dost not believe in Him, wilt thou, knowing that if thou errest thou shalt never be able to redeem thy error, wilt thou, nevertheless, act in opposition to the principles of reason and love, by which alone thou canst be guided in life ? Wilt thou, at the request of thy government, take oaths, defend, by compulsion, the owner of land or capital, wilt thou pay taxes for keeping policemen, soldiers, warships, wilt thou take part in parliaments, law courts, condemnations, and wars ? ”

And to all this I will not say for a Christian, but for a reasonable being there can be but one answer : ”No, I cannot, and will not.” But they say, ”This will destroy the State and the existing order.” If the fulfillment of the will of God is destroying the existing order, is it not a proof that this existing order is contrary to the will of God, and ought to be destroyed?

January, 1895.

To Criticisms

The following letter was addressed by Count Tolstoy to a Polish journalist, in September, 1895.

I RECEIVED your letter, and hastened to read your article in The Northern Messenger. I am much obliged to you for drawing my attention to this. The article is excellent, and I have learned from it much that was new and joyful to me. I knew about Miczkiewicz and Tovianski. But I ascribed their religious direction to the exceptional dispositions of these two individuals. From your article I learn that they are only the forerunners of a Christian movement, deeply touching in its nobility and sincerity, which has been called forth by patriotism, and which still endures.

My article, ” Christianity and Patriotism,” evoked very many objections. I received them from philosophers and journalists, Russian, French, German, and Austrian ; and now from you. All the objections, yours among them, amount to this : That my condemnation of patriotism is justly applied to bad patriotism, but has no foundation as regards good and useful patriotism. But, as to what constitutes this latter, and how it is distinguishable from bad patriotism, no one has yet troubled to explain.

You say in your letter, that ” as well as the militant, inhumane patriotism of strong nations, there is also the opposite patriotism of enslaved nations, who seek only to defend their native faith and language against the enemy.” You thus identify good patriotism as the patriotism of the oppressed. But the oppression or the dominance of nations makes no essential difference in what is called patriotism. Fire is always the same burning and dangerous fire, whether it blaze up in a bonfire or flicker in a match.

By ” patriotism ” is really meant a love for one’s own nation above other nations ; just as by ” egoism ” is meant a love for oneself more than for others. It is hard to imagine how such preference for one nation above others can be deemed a good, and therefore a desirable, disposition. If you say that patriotism is more pardonable in the oppressed than in the oppressor, just as a

manifestation of egoism is more pardonable in a man who is being strangled than in one who is left in peace, then it is impossible to disagree with you ; nevertheless, patriotism cannot change its nature, whether it is displayed in oppressor or oppressed. This disposition of preference for one nation over all others, like egoism, can in nowise be good.

But not only is patriotism a bad disposition, it is unreasonable in principle.

By patriotism is meant, not only spontaneous, instinctive love for one's own nation, and preference for it above all other nations, but also the belief that such love and preference are good and useful. This belief is especially unreasonable in Christian nations.

It is unreasonable, not only because it runs counter to the first principles of Christ's teachings, but also because Christianity gains, by its own method, everything for which patriotism seeks ; thus making patriotism superfluous, unnecessary, and a hindrance, like a lamp by daylight.

A man who, like Krasinski, believes that "the Church of God is not in this or that place, this or that rite, but in the whole planet, and in all the relations which can exist between individuals and nations" such a man can no longer be a patriot ; but he will, in the name of Christianity, do all that patriotism can demand of him. For example, patriotism demands of its votary the devotion of his life for the sake of his fellow-countrymen. But Christianity, demanding the same devotion for the good of all men, demands it all the more forcibly and naturally for those of one's own nation.

You write of the terrible acts of violence perpetrated by the savage, stupid, and cruel Russian authorities, directed against the belief and language of the Poles ; and you exhibit these as providing a motive for patriotic action. But I do not see this. To feel indignation at these deeds, and to oppose them with all one's might, it is not necessary to be either a Pole or a patriot ; to be a Christian is enough.

Upon this point I, for instance, who am not a Pole, will yet vie with any Pole in the degree of my abhorrence of, my indignation at, those savage and stupid measures which Russian government officials direct against the Poles. I will go as far also, in my desire to oppose those measures ; and this, not because I care for Catholicism above other religions, or for the Polish language above other tongues, but because I strive to be a Christian. In like manner, for the abolition of such evils, whether in Poland, or Alsace, or Bohemia, we need the spread, not of patriotism, but of true Christianity.

Some may say, " We do not wish to accept Christianity, and we are therefore free to exalt patriotism." But when once men have acknowledged Christianity, or at least the perception of human equality and respect for human dignity which flow from Christianity, there is then no longer room for patriotism. What, again, most astonishes me in all this is, that the upholders of the patriotism of the oppressed do not see how harmful patriotism, however perfect and refined they may represent it to be, is to their own particular cause.

Those attacks upon language and religion in Poland, the Baltic provinces, Alsace, Bohemia, upon the Jews in Russia, in every place where such acts of violence occur in what name have they been, and are they, perpetrated ? In none other than the name of that patriotism which you defend.

Ask our savage Russifiers of Poland and the Baltic provinces, ask the persecutors of the Jews, why they act thus. They will tell you it is in defense of their native religion and language ; they will tell you that if they do not act thus, their religion and language will suffer the Russians will be Polonized, Teutonized, Judaized.

Were there no doctrine that patriotism is beneficial, men of the end of the nineteenth century would never be found sunken so low as to determine upon the abominations they at present enact.

Now, learned men (our most savage religious persecutor is an ex-professor) find standing-ground upon patriotism. They know history, they know of all the fruitless horrors of persecution for the sake of language and religion ; but, thanks to the doctrine of patriotism, they have a justification.

Patriotism gives them a standing-ground, which Christianity takes from under their feet. Therefore it behooves conquered nations, sufferers from oppression, to destroy patriotism, to destroy its doctrinal foundations, to ridicule it, and not to exalt it.

Defending patriotism, people go on to talk of the individuality of nations, of patriotism aiming to save the individuality of a nation ; while the individuality of nations is assumed to be a necessary condition of progress.

But, to begin with, who says that such individuality is necessary to progress ? This is in no way proved, and we have no right to take such an arbitrary assumption as an axiom. In the next place, even if it be accepted, even then, the way for a nation to assert its individuality is, not to struggle to do so, but, on the contrary, to forget about its individuality, and then to accomplish with all its power that which its people feel themselves most able, and therefore most called upon, to do. Just as an individual will most assert his individuality, not when he pays heed to it, but when, having forgotten about it, he, to the limit of his strength and capacity, does that to which his nature attracts him. So matters would be arranged among a people who, working for their support as a community, must choose different kinds of work and different places. Only let each one follow his strength and capacity in doing what is most necessary to the community, and do this as well as he can, and all will inevitably work differently, with different tools and in different places.

One of the commonest sophisms used in defending immorality consists in willfully confusing what is with what should be, and, having begun to speak of one thing, substituting another. This very sophism is employed above all in relation to patriotism. It is a fact, that to every Pole, the Pole is nearest and dearest ; to the German, the German ; to the Jew, the Jew ; to the Russian, the Russian. It is even true that, through historical causes and bad education, the people of one nation instinctively feel aversion and ill-will to those of another. All this is so ; but to admit it, like admitting the fact that each man loves himself more than he loves others, can in no way prove that it ought so to be. On the contrary, the whole concern of all humanity, and of every individual, lies in suppressing these preferences and aversions, in battling with them, and in deliberately behaving toward other nations and toward individual foreigners, exactly as toward one's own nation and fellow-countrymen.

To care for patriotism as an emotion worthy to be cultivated in every man is wholly superfluous. God, or nature, has already, without our care, so provided for this feeling that every man has it, leaving us no cause to trouble about cultivating it in ourselves and others. We must concern ourselves, not about patriotism, but to bring into life that light which is within us ; to change the character of life, and approach it to the ideal which stands before us. That ideal, presented in our time before every man, and illumined with the true light from Christ, has not to do with the resuscitation of Poland, Bohemia, Ireland, Armenia ; has not to do with the preservation of the unity and greatness of Russia, England, Germany, Austria ; but, on the contrary, is concerned to destroy this unity and greatness of Russia, England, Germany, Austria, by the destruction of

those force-maintained anti-Christian ' combinations called states, which stand in the way of all true progress, and occasion the sufferings of oppressed and conquered nations ; occasion all those evils from which contemporary humanity suffers. Such destruction is only possible through true enlightenment, resulting in the avowal that we, before being Russians, Poles, Germans, are men, the followers of one teacher, the children of one Father, brothers ; and this the best representatives of the Polish nation understand, as you have so excellently shown in your article. Day by day this is understood by a greater and greater number of people throughout the whole world. So that the days of State violence are already numbered, and the liberation, not only of conquered nations, but of the crushed working-people, is by this time near, if only we ourselves will not delay the time of liberation, by sharing with deed and word in the violent measures of governments. The approval of patriotism of any kind as a good quality, and the incitement of the people to patriotism, are chief hindrances to the attainment of those ideals which rise before us.

Once more, I thank you very much for your letter, for the excellent article, and for the opportunity you have given me of again reconsidering, verifying, and expressing my ideas on patriotism.

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