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Church and State

Leo Tolstoy

1882

WHAT an extraordinary thing it is ! There are people who seem ready to climb out of their skins for the sake of making others accept this, and not that, form of revelation. They cannot rest till others have accepted their form of revelation, and no other. They anathematize, persecute, and kill whom they can of the dissentients. Other groups of people do the same anathematize, persecute, and kill whom they can of the dissentients. And others again do the same. So that they are all anathematizing, persecuting, and killing demanding that every one should believe as they do. And it results that there are hundreds of sects all anathematizing, persecuting, and killing one another.

At first I was astonished that such an obvious absurdity such an evident contradiction did not destroy religion itself. How can religious people remain so deluded ? And really, viewed from the general, external point of view it is incomprehensible, and proves irrefragably that every religion is a fraud, and that the whole thing is superstition, as the dominant philosophy of today declares. And looking at things from this general point of view, I inevitably came to acknowledge that all religion is a human fraud. But I could not help pausing at the reflection that the very absurdity and obviousness of the fraud, and the fact

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Translated by Nathan Haskell Dole

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that nevertheless all humanity yields to it, indicates that this fraud must rest on some basis that is not fraudulent. Otherwise we could not let it deceive us it is too stupid. The very fact that all of mankind that really lives a human life yields to this fraud, obliged me to acknowledge the importance of the phenomena on which the fraud is based. And in consequence of this reflection, I began to analyze the Christian teaching, which, for all Christendom, supplies the basis of this fraud.

That is what was apparent from the general point of view. But from the individual point of view which shows us that each man (and I myself) must, in order to live, always have a religion show him the meaning of life the fact that violence is employed in questions of religion is yet more amazing in its absurdity.

Indeed how can it, and why should it, concern any one to make somebody else, not merely have the same religion as himself, but also profess it in the same way as he does ? A man lives, and must, therefore, know why he lives. He has established his relation to God ; he knows the very truth of truths, and I know the very truth of truths. Our expression may differ; the essence must be the same we are both of us men.

Then why should I what can induce me to oblige any one or demand of any one absolutely to express his truth as I express it ?

I cannot compel a man to alter his religion either by violence or by cunning or by fraud false miracles.

His religion is his life. How can I take from him his religion and give him another ? It is like taking out his heart and putting another in its place. I can only do that if his religion and mine are words, and are not what gives him life ; if it is a wart and not a heart. Such a thing is impossible also, because no man can deceive or compel another to believe what he does not believe ; for if a man has adjusted his relation toward God and knows that religion is the relation in which man stands toward God he cannot desire to define another man's relation to God by means of force or fraud. That is impossible, but yet it is being done,

planned but had not brought into satisfactory shape. After it had been put aside for some time, in favor of other work, a friend borrowed it and took a copy, and it began to circulate from hand to hand in written or hectographed form. Tolstoi does not regret the publicity thus obtained for the article, as it expresses something which he feels to be true and important.

A translation, made probably from an incorrect copy, or from the French, has already appeared in English, but a retranslation is not the less wanted on that account. A little book, professing to be by Count L. Tolstoi, and entitled “ Vicious Pleasures “ (a title Tolstoi never used) was published in London some years ago. It consisted of translations, or perhaps I should rather say parodies, of five essays by Tolstoi. But, to borrow from Macaulay, they were translated much as Bottom was in “ Midsummer Night’s Dream “ when he had an ass’s head on. In many places it is impossible to make out what the essays mean. One does not even know whether it is the Church or the State, or both, that are “ Vicious Pleasures.”

The translator evidently had some qualms of conscience, for he concludes his preface with the words : “ If fault be found with the present translator for the manner in which he has reproduced Count Tolstoi’s work in English, he would ask his critics to remember that he too, like Kant, dearly loves his pipe.”

If that be really the explanation of the quality of the work, “ Vicious Pleasures “ should be of value to the anti-tobacco league as a fearful warning. Excepting for that purpose I doubt whether it can be of use to any one.

The present version will, I hope, be found intelligible by those who approach it with an open mind.

and has been done everywhere and always. That is to say, it can never really be done, because it is in itself impossible ; but something has been done, and is being done, that looks very much like it. What has been, and is being done, is that some people impose on others a counterfeit of religion and others accept this counterfeit this sham religion.

Religion cannot be forced and cannot be accepted for the sake of anything, force, fraud, or profit. Therefore what is so accepted is not religion but a fraud. And this religious fraud is a long-established condition of man’s life.

In what does this fraud consist, and on what is it based ? What induces the deceivers to produce it ? and what makes it plausible to the deceived ? I will not discuss the same phenomena in Brahminism, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Mohammedanism, though any one who has read about those religions may see that the case has been the same in them as in Christianity ; but I will speak only of the latter it being the religion known, necessary, and dear to us. In Christianity, the whole fraud is built up on the fantastic conception of a Church ; a conception founded on nothing, and which as soon as we begin to study Christianity amazes us by its unexpected and useless absurdity.

Of all the godless ideas and words there is none more godless than that of a Church. There is no idea which has produced more evil, none more inimical to Christ’s teaching, than the idea of a Church.

In reality the word ekklesia means an assembly and nothing more, and it is so used in the Gospels. In the language of all modern nations the word ekklesia (or the equivalent word “ church “) means a house for prayer. Beyond that, the word has not progressed in any language, notwithstanding the fifteen hundred years’ existence of the Church-fraud. According to the definition given to the word by priests (to whom the Church-fraud is necessary) it amounts to nothing else than a preface which says : “ All that I am going to say is true, and if

you disbelieve I shall burn you, or denounce you, and do you all manner of harm." This conception is a sophistry, needed for certain dialectical purposes, and it has remained the possession of those to whom it is necessary. Among the people, and not only among common people, but also in society, among educated people, no such conception is held at all, even though it is taught in the catechisms. Strange as it seems to examine this definition, one has to do so because so many people proclaim it seriously as something important, though it is absolutely false. When people say that the Church is an assembly of the true believers, nothing is really said (leaving aside the fantastic inclusion of the dead); for if I assert that the choir is an assembly of all true musicians, I have elucidated nothing unless I say what I mean by true musicians. In theology we learn that true believers are those who follow the teaching of the Church, i.e. belong to the Church.

Not to dwell on the fact that there are hundreds of such true Churches, this definition tells us nothing, and at first seems as useless as the definition of "choir" as the assembly of true musicians. But then we catch sight of the fox's tail. The Church is true, and it is one, and in it are pastors and flocks, and the pastors, ordained by God, teach this true and only religion. So that it amounts to saying: "By God, all that we are going to say, is all real truth." That is all. The whole fraud lies in that, in the word and idea of a Church. And the meaning of the fraud is merely that there are people who are beside themselves with desire to teach their religion to other people.

And why are they so anxious to teach their religion to other people? If they had a real religion they would know that religion is the understanding of life, the relation each man establishes to God, and that consequently you cannot teach a religion, but only a counterfeit of religion. But they want to teach. What for? The simplest reply would be that the priest wants rolls and eggs, and the archbishop wants a palace, fish-pies, and a silk cassock. But this reply is insufficient. Such is

misled. History is for us a means even a mechanical means of verifying the teaching.

Is the dogma of the Immaculate Conception necessary or not? What has come of it? Hatred, abuse, irony. And did it bring any benefit? None at all.

Was the teaching that the adulteress should not be sentenced necessary or not? What has come of it? Thousands and thousands of times people have been softened by that recollection.

Again, does everybody agree about any one of the dogmas? No. Do people agree that it is good to give to him that has need? Yes, all agree.

But the one side, the dogmas about which every one disagrees, and which no one requires is what the priesthood gave out, and still gives out, under the name of religion; while the other side, about which all can agree, and which is necessary to all, and which saves people, is the side which the priesthood, though they have not dared to reject it, have also not dared to set forth as a teaching, for that teaching repudiates them.

Religion is the meaning we give to our lives, it is that which gives strength and direction to our life. Every one that lives finds such a meaning, and lives on the basis of that meaning. If man finds no meaning in life, he dies. In this search man uses all that the previous efforts of humanity have supplied. And what humanity has reached we call revelation. Revelation is what helps man to understand the meaning of life.

Such is the relation in which man stands toward religion.

Note by the translator:

This article is prohibited in Russia, and, though written several years ago, has never been printed in Russian.

I once asked Tolstoi about this article, in which it seemed to me that the truth was told somewhat roughly and even harshly. He explained that it was a rough draft of an article he had

the life of men, and by these fruits can conclude which side is the more important, and (if one may use the comparative form) more true. One looks at the history of Christendom from this aspect, and one is horror-struck. Without exception, from the very beginning and to the very end, till to-day, look where one will, examine what dogma you like, from the dogma of the divinity of Christ, to the manner of making the sign of the cross,⁵ and to the question of serving the communion with or without wine, the fruit of mental labors to explain the dogmas has always been envy, hatred, executions, banishments, slaughter of women and children, burnings and tortures. Look on the other side, the moral teaching from the going into the wilderness to commune with God, to the practice of supplying food to those who are in prison ; the fruits of it are all our conceptions of goodness, all that is joyful, comforting, and that serves as a beacon to us in history

People before whose eyes the fruits of the one and other side of Christianity were not yet evident, might be misled and could hardly help being misled. And people might be misled who were sincerely drawn into disputes about dogmas, not noticing that by such disputes they were serving not God but the devil, not noticing that Christ said plainly that He came to destroy all dogmas ; those also might be led astray who had inherited a traditional belief in the importance of these dogmas, and had received such a perverse mental training that they could not see their mistake ; and again, those ignorant people might be led astray to whom these dogmas seemed nothing but words or fantastic notions. But we to whom the simple meaning of the Gospels repudiating all dogmas is evident, we before whose eyes are the fruits of these dogmas in history, cannot be so

⁵ One of the main points of divergence between the “ Old-believers” and the “ Orthodox” Russian church was whether in making the sign of the cross two fingers or three should be extended. TR.

no doubt the inner, psychological motive for the deception, that which maintains the fraud. But as it would be insufficient, when asking why one man (an executioner) consents to kill another against whom he feels no anger, to say that the executioner kills because he thereby gets bread and brandy and a red shirt, so it is insufficient to say that the metropolitan of Kief with his monks stuffs sacks with straw¹ and calls them relics of the saints, merely to get thirty thousand rubles a year income. The one act and the other is too terrible and too revolting to human nature for so simple and rude an explanation to be sufficient. Both the executioner and the metropolitan explaining their actions would have a whole series of arguments based chiefly on historical tradition. Men must be executed; executions have gone on since the world commenced. If I don't do it another will. I hope, by God's grace, to do it better than another would. So also the metropolitan would say : External worship is necessary ; since the commencement of the world the relics of the saints have been worshiped. People respect the relics in the Kief Catacombs and pilgrims come here ; I, by God's grace, hope to make the most pious use of the money thus blasphemously obtained.

To understand the religious fraud it is necessary to go to its source and origin.

We are speaking about what we know of Christianity. Turn to the commencement of Christian doctrine in the Gospels and we find a teaching which plainly excludes the external worship of God, condemning it ; and which, with special clearness, positively repudiates mastership. But from the time of Christ onward we find a deviation from these principles laid down by

¹ The celebrated Catacombs of the Kief Monastery draw crowds of pilgrims to worship the relics of the saints. It is said that a fire once broke out in one of the chapels, and that those who hastened to save the “ incorruptible body “ of one of the saints discovered that the precious relic was merely a bag stuffed with straw. This is only a specimen of many similar tales, some of which are true and others invented. TR.

Christ. This deviation begins from the times of the Apostles and especially from that hankerer after mastership Paul. And the farther Christianity goes the more it deviates, and the more it adopts the methods of external worship and mastership which Christ had so definitely condemned. But in the early times of Christianity the conception of a Church was only employed to refer to all those who shared the beliefs which I consider true.

That conception of the Church is quite correct if it does not include those that make a verbal expression of religion instead of its expression in the whole of life for religion cannot be expressed in words.

The idea of a true Church was also used as an argument against dissenters. But till the time of the Emperor Constantine and the Council of Nicaea, the Church was only an idea.

Since the Emperor Constantine and the Council of Nicaea the Church becomes a reality, and a fraudulent reality, that fraud of metropolitans with relics, and priests with the eucharist, Iberian Mothers of God,² synods, etc., which so astonish and horrify us, and which are so odious that they cannot be explained merely by the avarice of those that perpetuate them. The fraud is ancient, and was not begun merely for the profit of private individuals. No one would be such a monster of iniquity as to be the first to perpetrate it, if that were the only reason. The reasons which caused the thing to be done were evil : “ By their fruits ye shall know them.” The root was evil hatred, pride, enmity against Arius and others; and another yet greater evil, the alliance of Christianity with power. Power, personified in the Emperor Constantine, who, in the heathen conception of things, stood at the summit of human greatness (he was enrolled among the gods), accepts Christianity, gives an example to all the people, converts the people, lends a helping hand against the heretics, and by

² The Iberian Mother of God is the most celebrated of the miraculous ikons in Moscow. TR.

ing violence. Curiously enough the names “Orthodox-Greek,” “Catholic,” or “Protestant” religion, as those words are commonly used, mean nothing but “religion allied to power,” State religion and therefore false religion.

The idea of a Church as a union of many of the majority in one belief and in nearness to the source of the teaching, was in the first two centuries of Christianity merely one feeble external argument in favor of the correctness of certain views. Paul said, “ I know from Christ Himself.” Another said, “ I know from Luke.” And all said, “ We think rightly, and the proof that we are right is that we are a big assembly, ekklesia, the Church.” But only beginning with the Council of Nicaea, organized by an emperor, does the Church become a plain and tangible fraud practised by some of the people who professed this religion.

They began to say, “ It has pleased us and the Holy Ghost.” The “ Church “ no longer meant merely a part of a weak argument, it meant power in the hands of certain people. It allied itself with the rulers, and began to act like the rulers. And all that united itself with power and submitted to power, ceased to be a religion and became a fraud.

What does Christianity teach, understanding it as the teaching of any or of all the churches ?

Examine it as you will, compound it or divide it, the Christian teaching always falls with two sharply separated parts. There is the teaching of dogmas : from the divine Son, the Holy Ghost, and the relationship of these persons, to the eucharist with or without wine, and with leavened or with unleavened bread ; and there is the moral teaching : of humility, freedom from covetousness, purity of mind and body, forgiveness, freedom from bondage, peacefulness. Much as the doctors of the Church have labored to mix these two sides of the teachings, they have never mingled, but like oil and water have always remained apart in larger or smaller circles.

The difference of the two sides of the teaching is clear to every one, and all can see the fruits of the one and of the other in

had not learned from them to call them as they call each other, by their right names, i.e. robbers and deceivers.

But we have only spoken of the robbers incidentally, because it was they who led the deceivers astray. It is the deceivers, the pseudo-Christians, that we have to consider. They became such by their alliance with the robbers. It could not be otherwise. They turned from the road when they consecrated the first ruler and assured him that he, by his power, could help religion the religion of humility, self-sacrifice, and the endurance of evil. All the history, not of the imaginary, but of the real, Church, i.e. of the priests under the sway of kings, is a series of useless efforts of these unfortunate priests to preserve the truth of the teaching while preaching it by falsehood, and while abandoning it in practice. The importance of the priesthood depends entirely on the teaching it wishes to spread ; that teaching speaks of humility, self-sacrifice, love, poverty ; but it is preached by violence and wrong-doing.

In order that the priesthood should have something to teach and that they should have disciples, they cannot get rid of the teaching. But in order to whitewash themselves and justify their immoral alliance with power, they have, by all the cunningest devices possible, to conceal the essence of the teaching, and for this purpose they have to shift the center of gravity from what is essential in the teaching to what is external. And this is what is done by the priesthood this is the source of the sham religion taught by the Church. The source is the alliance of the priests (calling themselves the Church) with the powers-that-be, i.e. with violence. The source of their desire to teach a religion to others lies in the fact that true religion exposes them, and they want to replace true religion by a fictitious religion arranged to justify their deeds.

True religion may exist anywhere except where it is evidently false, i.e. violent ; it cannot be a State religion.

True religion may exist in all the so-called sects and heresies, only it surely cannot exist where it is joined to a State us-

means of the Ecumenical Council establishes the one true Christian religion.

The Catholic Christian religion was established for all time. It was so natural to yield to this deception that, to the present day, there are people who believe in the saving efficacy of that assembly. Yet that was the moment when a majority of Christians abandoned their religion. At that turning the great majority of Christians entered the heathen path, which they have followed ever since. Charlemagne and Vladimir³ continued in the same direction.

And the Church fraud continues till now. The fraud consists in this : that the conversion of the powers-that-be to Christianity is necessary for those that understand the letter, but not the spirit, of Christianity ; but the acceptance of Christianity without the abandonment of power is a satire on, and a perversion of, Christianity.

The sanctification of political power by Christianity is blasphemy ; it is the negation of Christianity.

After fifteen hundred years of this blasphemous alliance of pseudo-Christianity with the State, it needs a strong effort to free oneself from all the complex sophistries by which, always and everywhere (to please the authorities), the sanctity and righteousness of State-power, and the possibility of its being Christian, has been pleaded.

In truth, the words a “ Christian State “ resemble the words “ hot ice.” The thing is either not a State using violence, or it is not Christian.

In order to understand this clearly we must forget all those fantastic notions in which we have been carefully brought up, and must ask plainly, what is the purpose of such historical and

³ Vladimir adopted Christianity A.D. 988. Many inhabitants of his capital city, Kief, were disinclined to follow his example, so he “ acted vigorously” (as a Russian historian remarks), i.e. he had the people driven into the Dniepr to be baptized. In other parts of his dominions Christianity was spread among the unwilling heathen population “ by fire and sword.” TR.

juridical science as has been taught us ? Such sciences have no sound basis ; their purpose is merely to supply a vindication for the use of violence.

Omitting the history of the Persians, the Medes, etc., let us take the history of that government which first formed an alliance with Christianity.

A robbers' nest existed at Rome. It grew by robbery, violence, murders, and it subdued nations. These robbers and their descendants, led by their chieftains (whom they sometimes called Caesar, sometimes Augustus), robbed and tormented nations to satisfy their desires. One of the descendants of these robber-chiefs, Constantine (a reader of books and a man satiated by an evil life), preferred certain Christian dogmas to those of the old creeds : instead of offering human sacrifices he preferred the mass ; instead of the worship of Apollo, Venus, and Zeus, he preferred that of a single God with a son Christ. So he decreed that this religion should be introduced among those that were under his power.

No one said to him : “ The kings exercise authority among the nations, but among you it shall not be so. Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not lay up riches, judge not, condemn not, resist not him that is evil.”

But they said to him : “ You wish to be called a Christian and to continue to be the chieftain of the robbers, to kill, burn, fight, lust, execute, and live in luxury ? That can all be arranged.”

And they arranged a Christianity for him, and arranged it very smoothly, better even than could have been expected. They foresaw that, reading the Gospels, it might occur to him that all this (i.e. a Christian life) is demanded and not the building of temples or worshiping in them. This they foresaw, and they carefully devised such a Christianity for him as would let him continue to live his old heathen life unembarrassed. On the one hand Christ, God's Son, only came to bring salvation to him and to everybody. Christ having died, Constantine can live as he likes. More even than that, one may

repent and swallow a little bit of bread and some wine, and that will bring salvation, and all will be forgiven.

But more even than that : they sanctify his robber-chieftainship, and say that it proceeds from God, and they anoint him with holy oil. And he, on his side, arranges for them the congress of priests that they wish for, and orders them to say what each man's relation to God should be, and orders every one to repeat what they say.

And they all started repeating it, and were contented, and now this same religion has existed for fifteen hundred years, and other robber-chiefs have adopted it, and they have all been lubricated with holy oil, and they were all, all ordained by God. If any scoundrel robs every one and slays many people, they will oil him, and he will then be from God. In Russia, Catharine II., the adulteress who killed her husband, was from God ; so, in France, was Napoleon.

To balance matters the priests are not only from God, but are almost gods, because the Holy Ghost sits inside them as well as inside the Pope, and in our Synod with its commandant-officials.

And as soon as one of the anointed robber-chiefs wishes his own and another folk to begin slaying each other, the priests immediately prepare some holy water, sprinkle a cross (which Christ bore and on which he died because he repudiated such robbers), take the cross and bless the robber-chief in his work of slaughtering, hanging, and destroying.⁴

And it all might have been well if only they had been able to agree about it, and the anointed had not begun to call each other robbers, which is what they really are, and the people had not begun to listen to them and to cease to believe either in anointed people or in depositaries of the Holy Ghost, and

⁴ In England the holy water is not used, but an archbishop draws up a form of prayer for the success of the queen's army, and a chaplain is appointed to each regiment to teach the men Christianity. TR.