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Letter to Dr. Eugen Heinrich Schmitt

On Serving Governments

Leo Tolstoy

You write to me that people seem quite unable to understand that to serve the government is incompatible with Christianity.

In just the same way people were long unable to see that indulgences, inquisitions, slavery, and tortures were incompatible with Christianity. But a time came when it was comprehensible ; and a time will come when men will understand the incompatibility with Christianity, first of war service (that already is beginning to be felt), and then of service to government in general.

It is now fifty years since a not widely known, but very remarkable, American writer Thoreau not only clearly expressed that incompatibility in his admirable essay on "Civil Disobedience," but gave a practical example of such disobedience. Not wishing to be an accomplice or supporter of a government which legalized slavery, he declined to pay a tax demanded of him, and went to prison for it.

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Thoreau refused to pay taxes to government, and evidently the same motives as actuated him would prevent men from serving a government. As, in your letter to the minister, you have admirably expressed it : you do not consider it compatible with your moral dignity to work for an institution which represents legalized murder and robbery.

Thoreau was, I think, the first to express this view. People paid scant attention to either his refusal or his article fifty years ago the thing seemed so strange.

It was put down to his eccentricity. To-day your refusal attracts some attention, and, as is always the case when new truth is clearly expressed, it evokes a double surprise first, surprise that a man should say such queer things, and then, surprise that I had not myself discovered what this man is saying; it is so certain and so obvious.

Such a truth as that a Christian must not be a soldier i.e. a murderer and must not be the servant of an institution maintained by violence and murder, is so certain, so clear and irrefutable, that to enable people to grasp it, discussion, proof, or eloquence are not necessary. For the majority of men to hear and understand this truth, it is only needful that it should be constantly repeated.

The truth that a Christian should not take part in murdering, or serve the chiefs of the murderers for a salary collected from the poor by force, is so plain and indisputable that those who hear it cannot but agree with it. And if a man continues to act contrary to these truths after hearing them, it is only because he is accustomed to act contrary to them, and it is difficult to break the habit. Moreover, as long as most people act as he does, he will not, by acting contrary to the truth, lose the regard of the majority of those who are most respected.

The case is the same as it is with the question of vegetarianism. " A man can live and be healthy without killing animals for food ; therefore, if he eats meat, he participates in taking animal life merely for the sake of his appetite. And to act so

is immoral.” It is so simple and indubitable that it is impossible not to agree with it. But because most people do eat meat, people, on hearing the case stated, admit its justice, and then, laughing, say : ” But a good beefsteak is a good thing all the same ; and I shall eat one at dinner to-day with pleasure.”

Just in the same way officers in the army, and officials employed in the civil service, treat statements of the incompatibility of Christianity and humanitarianism with military and civil service. ” Yes, of course, it ’s true,” says such a man, ” but, all the same, it is nice to wear a uniform and epaulets, which serve as an introduction anywhere, and which people respect ; and it is still better to know that, whatever happens, your salary will be paid punctually and accurately on the first of each month. So that though your statement of the case is correct, I am nevertheless bent on getting a rise of salary and securing a pension.”

The position is admitted to be indubitable ; but, in the first place, one need not oneself kill an ox to get beef-steaks. It has already been killed. And one need not oneself collect taxes or murder. The taxes are already collected, and the army already exists. And, secondly, most people have not yet heard this view of things, and do not know that it is wrong to do these things. So that, for the present, one need not refuse a well-cooked beefsteak, or a uniform, and all its advantages, or medals and orders ; or, above all, a secure monthly salary ; ” and as for the future, we shall see when the time comes.”

At the root of the matter lies the fact that people have not yet heard the injustice and wickedness of such a way of life stated. And, therefore, it is necessary continually to repeat ” Carthago delenda est,”¹ and Carthage will certainly fall.

I do not say that government and its power will be destroyed. It will not fall to pieces quickly ; there are still too many gross elements among the people to support it. But the Christian support of government will be destroyed i.e.

¹ Published as ”A Letter to the Liberals” (p. 197 supra).

those who do violence will cease to find support for their authority in the sanctity of Christianity. Those who employ violence will be simply violators, and nothing else. And when that is so when they can no longer cloak themselves with pseudo-Christianity then the end of all violence will be near.

1 Cato the Elder was so impressed with the necessity of refusing all compromise with the Carthaginians, that for many years he ended every speech he made in the Senate with the words, "Carthage must be destroyed."

Let us seek to hasten that end. "Carthago delenda est." Government is violence, Christianity is meekness, nonresistance, love. And, therefore, government cannot be Christian, and a man who wishes to be a Christian must not serve government. Government cannot be Christian. A Christian cannot serve government. Government cannot ... and so on.

It is curious that just when you wrote to me about the incapability of governmental activity with Christianity, I was writing a long letter¹ on the same theme to a lady acquaintance. I send you a copy of that letter. You are at liberty to publish it if you wish to do so.²

² Writing to a man who shared his views on no-government and non-resistance, Tolstoy, in this letter to Dr. Schmitt, expresses himself briefly, without reiterating arguments already familiar to his correspondent. ED.