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Letter to Ernest Crosby on Non-Resistance

Leo Tolstoy

1896, January 12

My Dear Crosby: – I am very glad to hear of your activity and that it is beginning to attract attention. Fifty years ago Garrison's proclamation of nonresistance only cooled people toward him, and the whole fifty years' activity of Ballou in this direction was met with stubborn silence. I read with great pleasure in Peace the beautiful ideas of the American authors in regard to nonresistance. I make an exception only in the case of Mr. Bemis's old, unfounded opinion, which calumniates Christ in assuming that Christ's expulsion of the cattle from the temple means that he struck the men with a whip, and commanded his disciples to do likewise.

The ideas expressed by these writers, especially by H. Newton and G. Herron, are beautiful, but it is to be regretted that they do not answer the question which Christ put before men, but answer the question which the so-called orthodox teachers of the churches, the chief and most dangerous enemies of Christianity, have put in its place.

Mr. Higginson says that the law of nonresistance is not admissible as a general rule. H. Newton says that the practical

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results of the application of Christ's teaching will depend on the degree of faith which men will have in this teaching. Mr. C. Martyn assumes that the stage at which we are is not yet suited for the application of the teaching about nonresistance. G. Herron says that in order to fulfill the law of nonresistance, it is necessary to learn to apply it to life. Mrs. Livermore says the same, thinking that the fulfillment of the law of nonresistance is possible only in the future.

All these opinions treat only the question as to what would happen to people if all were put to the necessity of fulfilling the law of nonresistance; but, in the first place, it is quite impossible to compel all men to accept the law of nonresistance, and, in the second, if this were possible, it would be a most glaring negation of the very principle which is being established. To compel all men not to practice violence against others! Who is going to compel men?

In the third place, and above all else, the question, as put by Christ, does not consist in this, whether nonresistance may become a universal law for all humanity, but what each man must do in order to fulfill his destiny, to save his soul, and do God's work, which reduces itself to the same.

The Christian teaching does not prescribe any laws for all men; it does not say, "follow such and such rules under fear of punishment, and you will all be happy," but explains to each separate man his position in the world and shows him what for him personally results from this position. The Christian teaching says to each individual man that his life, if he recognizes his life to be his, and its aim, the worldly good of his personality or of the personalities of other men, can have no rational meaning, because this good, posited as the end of life, can never be attained, because, in the first place, all beings strive after the goods of the worldly life, and these goods are always attained by one set of beings to the detriment of others, so that every separate man cannot receive the desired good, but, in all probability, must even endure many unnecessary sufferings in his

struggle for these unattained goods; in the second place, because if a man even attains the worldly goods, these, the more of them he attains, satisfy him less and less, and he wishes for more and more new ones; in the third place, mainly because the longer a man lives, the more inevitably do old age, diseases, and finally death, which destroys the possibility of any worldly good, come to him.

Thus, if a man considers his life to be his, and its end to be the worldly good, for himself or for other men, this life can have for him no rational meaning. Life receives a rational meaning only when a man understands that the recognition of his life as his own, and the good of personality, of his own or of that of others, as its end, is an error, and that the human life does not belong to him, who has received this life from some one, but to Him who produced this life, and so its end must not consist in the attainment of his own good or of the good of others, but only in the fulfillment of the will of Him who produced it. Only with such a comprehension of life does it receive a rational meaning, and its end, which consists in the fulfillment of God's will, become attainable, and, above all, only with such a comprehension does man's activity become clearly defined, and he no longer is subject to despair and suffering, which were inevitable with his former comprehension.

"The world and I in it," such a man says to himself, "exist by the will of God. I cannot know the whole world and my relation to it, but I can know what is wanted of me by God, who sent men into this world, endless in time and space, and therefore inaccessible to my understanding, because this is revealed to me in the tradition, that is, in the aggregate reason of the best people in the world, who lived before me, and in my reason, and in my heart, that is, in the striving of my whole being.

"In the tradition, the aggregate of the wisdom of all the best men, who lived before me, I am told that I must act toward others as I wish that others would act toward me; my reason

tells me that the greatest good of men is possible only when all men will act likewise.

”My heart is at peace and joyful only when I abandon myself to the feeling of love for men, which demands the same. And then I can not only know what I must do, but also the cause for which my activity is necessary and defined.

”I cannot grasp the whole divine work, for which the world exists and lives, but the divine work which is being accomplished in this world and in which I am taking part with my life is accessible to me. This work is the destruction of the discord and of the struggle among men and other beings, and the establishment among men of the greatest union, concord, and love; this work is the realization of what the Jewish prophets promised, saying that the time will come when all men shall be taught the truth, when the spears shall be forged into pruning-hooks, and the scythes and swords into plowshares, and when the lion shall lie with the lamb.”

Thus, the man of the Christian comprehension of life not only knows how he must act in life, but also what he must do.

He must do what contributes to the establishment of the kingdom of God in the world. To do this, a man must fulfill the inner demands of God’s will, that is, he must act amicably toward others, as he would like others to do to him. Thus the inner demands of a man’s soul coincide with that external end of life which is placed before him.

And here though we have an indication which is so clear to a man of the Christian comprehension, and incontestable from two sides, as to what the meaning and end of human life consists in, and how a man must act, and what he must do, and what not, there appear certain people, who call themselves Christians, who decide that in such and such cases a man must depart from God’s law and the common cause of life, which are given to him, and must act contrary to the law and the common cause of life, because, according to their ratiocination,

non-resistance, but whether you – a being that lives today and is dying by degrees tomorrow and every moment – will now, this very minute, fully do the will of Him who sent you and clearly expressed it in tradition and in your reason and heart, or whether you want to act contrary to this will. As soon as the question is put in this form, there will be but one answer: I want at once, this very minute, without any delay, without waiting for anyone, and without considering the seeming consequences, with all my strength to fulfill what alone I am indubitably commanded to do by Him who sent me into the world, and in no case, under no condition, will I, can I, do what is contrary to it, because in this lies the only possibility of my rational, unwretched life.

the consequences of the acts committed according to God's law may be profitless and disadvantageous for men.

Man, according to the Christian teaching, is God's workman. The workman does not know his master's whole business, but the nearest aim to be attained by his work is revealed to him, and he is given definite indications as to what he should do; especially definite are the indications as to what he must not do, in order that he may not work against the aim for the attainment of which he was sent to work. In everything else he is given complete liberty. And so for a man who has grasped the Christian conception of life the meaning of his life is clear and rational, and he cannot have a moment of wavering as to how he should act in life and what he ought to do, in order to fulfill the destiny of his life.

According to the law given him in the tradition, in his reason, and in his heart, a man must always act toward another as he wishes to have done to him: he must contribute to the establishment of love and union among men; but according to the decision of these far-sighted people, a man must, while the fulfillment of the law, according to their opinion, is still premature, do violence, deprive of liberty, kill people, and with this contribute, not to union of love, but to the irritation and enragement of people. It is as though a mason, who is put to do certain definite work, who knows that he is taking part with others in the building of a house, and who has a clear and indubitable command from the master himself that is to lay a wall, should receive the command from other masons like him, who, like him, do not know the general plan of the structure and what is useful for the common work, to stop laying the wall, and to undo the work of the others.

Wonderful delusion! The being that breathes today and disappears tomorrow, that has one definite, incontestable law given to him, as to how he is to pass his short term of life, imagines that he knows what is necessary and useful and appropriate for all men, for the whole world, for that world

which moves without cessation, and goes on developing, and in the name of this usefulness, which is differently understood by each of them, he prescribes to himself and to others for a time to depart from the unquestionable law, which is given to him and to all men, and not to act toward all men as he wants others to act toward him, not to bring love into the world, but to practice violence, to deprive of freedom, to punish, to kill, to introduce malice into the world, when it is found that this is necessary. And he enjoins us to do so knowing that the most terrible cruelties, tortures, murders of men, from the Inquisitions and punishments and terrors of all the revolutions to the present bestialities of the anarchists and the massacres of them, have all proceeded from this, that men suppose that they know what people and the world need; knowing that at any given moment there are always two opposite parties, each of which asserts that it is necessary to use violence against the opposite party, – the men of state against the anarchists, the anarchists against the men of state; the English against the Americans, the Americans against the English; the English against the Germans; and so forth, in all possible combinations and permutations.

Not only does a man of the Christian concept of life see clearly by reflection that there is no ground whatever for his departure from the law of his life, as clearly indicated to him by God, in order to follow the accidental, frail, frequently contradictory demands of men; but if he has been living the Christian life for some time, and has developed in himself the Christian moral sensitiveness, he can positively not act as people demand that he shall, not only as the result of reflection, but also of feeling.

As it is for many men of our world impossible to subject a child to torture and to kill it, though such a torture may save a hundred other people, so a whole series of acts becomes impossible for a man who has developed the Christian sensitiveness of his heart in himself. A Christian, for example, who is

It would seem that men who profess Christianity would have carefully to unveil this deception, because in the unveiling of this deception does one of the chief manifestations of Christianity consist. But the very opposite has happened: men to whom violence was advantageous, and who did not want to give up these advantages, took upon themselves the exclusive propaganda of Christianity, and, preaching it, asserted that, since there are cases in which the non-application of violence produces more evil than its application (the imaginary robber who kills the child), we must not fully accept Christ's teaching about nonresistance to evil, and that we may depart from this teaching in the defense of our lives and of those of other men, in the defense of our country, the protection of society from madmen and malefactors, and in many other cases. But the decision of the question as to when Christ's teaching ought to be set aside was left to those very men who made use of violence. Thus Christ's teaching about nonresistance to evil turned out to be absolutely set aside, and, what is worse than all that, those very men whom Christ arraigned began to consider themselves the exclusive preachers and expounders of His teaching. But the light shineth in the dark, and the false preachers of Christianity are again arraigned by His teaching.

We can think of the structure of the world as we please, we may do what is advantageous and agreeable for us to do, and use violence against people under the pretext of doing good to men, but it is absolutely impossible to assert that, in doing so, we are professing Christ's teaching, because Christ arraigned that very deception. The truth will sooner or later be made manifest, and will arraign the deceivers, even as it does now.

Let only the question of the human life be put correctly, as it was put by Christ, and not as it was corrupted by the churches, and all the deceptions which by the churches have been heaped on Christ's teaching will fall of their own accord.

The question is not whether it will be good or bad for human society to follow the law of love and the resulting law of

brought to the same, not only by this, that we must do what is right, but also by this, that we know what is right, and do not know at all what will come and result from our acts.

The Christian teaching is a teaching as to what a man must do for the fulfillment of the will of Him who sent him into the world. But the reflections as to what consequences we assume to result from such or such acts of men not only have nothing in common with Christianity, but are that very delusion which destroys Christianity.

No one has yet seen the imaginary robber with the imaginary child, and all the horrors, which fill history and contemporary events, have been produced only because men imagine that they can know the consequences of the possible acts.

How is this? Men used to live a beastly life, violating and killing all those whom it was advantageous for them to violate and kill, and even eating one another, thinking that that was right. Then there came a time, when, thousands of years ago, even in the time of Moses, there appeared the consciousness in men that it was bad to violate and kill one another. But there were some men for whom violence was advantageous, and they did not recognize the fact, and assured themselves and others that it was not always bad to violate and kill men, but that there were cases when this was necessary, useful, and even good. And acts of violence and murder, though not as frequent and cruel, were continued, but with this difference, that those who committed them justified them on the ground of usefulness to men. It was this false justification of violence that Christ arraigned. He showed that, since every act of violence could be justified as actually happens, when two enemies do violence to one another and both consider their violence justifiable, and there is no chance of verifying the justice of the determination of either, it is necessary not to believe in any justifications of violence, and under no condition, as at first was thought right by humanity, is it necessary to make use of them.

compelled to take part in court proceedings, where a man may be sentenced to capital punishment, to take part in matters of forcible seizure of other people's property, in discussions about the declaration of war, or in preparations for the same, to say nothing of war itself, finds himself in the same position in which a good man would be, if he were compelled to torture or kill a child. It is not that he decides by reflection what he ought not to do, but that he cannot do what is demanded of him, because for a man there exists the moral impossibility, just as there is a physical impossibility, of committing certain acts. Just as it is impossible for a man to lift up a mountain, as it is impossible for a good man to kill a child, so it is impossible for a man who lives a Christian life to take part in violence. Of what significance for such a man can be the reflections that for some imaginary good he must do what has become morally impossible for him?

How, then, is a man to act when he sees the obvious harm of following the law of love and the law of nonresistance, which results from it? How is a man to act – this example is always adduced – when a robber in his sight kills or injures a child, and when the child cannot be saved otherwise than by killing the robber?

It is generally assumed that, when they adduce such an example, there can be no other answer to the question than that the robber ought to be killed, in order that the child be saved. But this answer is given so emphatically and so quickly only because we are not only in the habit of acting in this manner in the case of the defense of a child, but also in the case of the expansion of the borders of a neighboring state to the detriment of our own, or in the case of the transportation of lace across the border, or even in the case of the defense of the fruits of our garden against depredations by passersby.

It is assumed that it is necessary to kill the robber in order to save the child, but we need only stop and think on what ground a man should act thus, be he a Christian or a non-Christian, to

convince ourselves that such an act can have no rational foundations, and is considered necessary only because two thousand years ago such a mode of action was considered just and people were in the habit of acting thus. Why should a non-Christian, who does not recognize God and the meaning of life in the fulfillment of His will, kill the robber, in defending the child? To say nothing of this, that in killing the robber he is certainly killing, but does not know for certain until the very last moment whether the robber will kill the child or not, to say nothing of this irregularity: who has decided that the life of the child is more necessary and better than the life of the robber?

If a non-Christian does not recognize God, and does not consider the meaning of life to consist in the fulfillment of God's will, it is only calculation, that is, the consideration as to what is more profitable for him and for all men, the continuation of the robber's life or that of the child, which guides the choice of his acts. But to decide this, he must know what will become of the child which he saves, and what would become of the robber if he did not kill him. But that he cannot know. And so, if he is a non-Christian, he has not rational foundation for saving the child through the death of the robber.

But if the man is a Christian, and so recognizes God and sees the meaning of life in the fulfillment of His will, no matter what terrible robber may attack any innocent and beautiful child, he has still less cause to depart from the law given him by God and to do to the robber what the robber wants to do to the child; he may implore the robber, may place his body between the robber and his victim, but there is one thing he cannot do, – he cannot consciously depart from the law of God, the fulfillment of which forms the meaning of his life. It is very likely that, as the result of his bad bringing up and of his animality, a man, being a pagan or a Christian, will kill the robber, not only in the defense of the child, but also in his own defense or in the defense of his purse, but that will by no means signify that it is

right to do so, that it is right to accustom ourselves and others to think that that ought to be done.

This will only mean that, in spite of the external education and Christianity, the habits of the stone age are still strong in man, that he is capable of committing acts which have long ago been disavowed by his consciousness. A robber in my sight is about to kill a child and I can save it by killing the robber; consequently it is necessary under certain conditions to resist evil with violence.

A man is in danger of his life and can be saved only through my lie; consequently it is necessary in certain cases to lie. A man is starving, and I cannot save him otherwise than by stealing; consequently it is necessary in certain cases to steal.

I lately read a story by Coppee, in which an orderly kills his officer, who has his life insured, and thus saves his honor and the life of his family. Consequently in certain cases it is right to kill.

Such imaginary cases and the conclusions drawn from them prove only this, that there are men who know that it is not right to steal, to lie, to kill, but who are so loathe to stop doing this that they use all the efforts of their mind in order to justify their acts. There does not exist a moral rule for which it would be impossible to invent a situation when it would be hard to decide which is more moral, the departure from the rule or its fulfillment. The same is true of the question of nonresistance to evil: men know that it is bad, but they are so anxious to live by violence, that they use all the efforts of their mind, not for the elucidation of all the evil which is produced by man's recognition of the right to do violence to others, but for the defense of this right. But such invented cases in no way prove that the rules about not lying, stealing, killing are incorrect.

"Fais ce que doit, advienne que pourra, – do what is right, and let come what may," – is an expression of profound wisdom. Each of us knows unquestionably what he ought to do, but none of us knows or can know what will happen. Thus we are