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Patriotism, or Peace?

Leo Tolstoy

1896

[The following letter, called forth by the dispute about Venezuela between the United States and England, was written by Count Tolstoy to an English correspondent in the early part of the present year (1896), and first appeared in The Daily Chronicle of 17th March.]

You write asking me to state my opinion on the case between the United States and England, "in the cause of Christian consistency and true peace," and you express the hope "that the nations may soon be awakened to the only means of ensuring international peace."

I entertain the same hope; and for this reason. The complication which, in our time, involves the nations: exalting patriotism as they do, educating the young generation in that superstition, and at the same time shirking that inevitable consequence of patriotism,—war: has, it seems to me, reached that last degree at which the very simplest consideration, such as suggests itself to every unbiassed person, may suffice to show to men the extreme contradiction in which they are placed.

Often, when one asks children which they choose of two incompatible but eagerly desired things, they will answer, "Both."

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”Which do you wish—to go for a drive, or to play at home?” ”To go for a drive and to play at home.”

Exactly so with the Christian nations, when life itself puts the question to them, ”Which do you choose—patriotism or peace?” They answer, ”Patriotism and peace.” Although to combine patriotism and peace is just as impossible as to go for a drive and to stay at home at one and the same time.

The other day a conflict arose between the United States and England over the frontier of Venezuela. Salisbury did not agree to something; Cleveland wrote a message to the Senate; patriotic, warlike cries were raised on both sides; a panic occurred on ’Change; people lost millions of pounds and dollars; Edison said he was devising machines to kill more men in an hour than were killed by Attila in all his wars: and both nations began to make energetic preparations for war. But, together with these preparations for war, alike in England and America, various writers, princes, and statesmen began to counsel the governments of both nations to keep from war, insisting that the matter in dispute was not sufficiently serious for war, especially as between two Anglo-Saxon nations, peoples of one language, who ought not to go to war with each other, but rather in amity together domineer over others. Whether because of this, or because all kinds of bishops, clergymen, and ministers prayed and preached over the matter in their churches, or because both sides considered they were not yet ready; for one cause or another, it has turned out there is to be no war this time. And people have calmed down.

But one would have too little penetration not to see that the causes which have thus led to dispute between England and the States still remain the same; that if the present difficulty is settled without war, yet, inevitably, to-morrow or next day, disputes must arise between England and the States, between England and Germany, England and Russia, England and Turkey, disputes in all possible combinations. Such arise daily; and one or other of them will surely bring war.

is Christian, that the teachings of Buddha and Confucius rise incomparably higher than that bestial patriotism which guides our pseudo-Christian nations.

The salvation of Europe, of the whole Christian world, comes not by being girt with swords, like brigands, as in William's picture; not by rushing across seas to kill our brethren: but, oppositely, by casting off that survival of barbarism, patriotism; and having renounced it, by disarming; showing the oriental nations an example, not of savage patriotism and ferocity, but that one of brotherly life which has been taught to us by Christ.

For, if there live side-by-side two armed men, who have from childhood been taught that power, riches, and glory are highest goods, and that to obtain these by arms, to the loss of one's neighbors, is a most praiseworthy thing; and if, further, there is for these men no moral, religious, or political bound; then is it not clear that they will always seek war, that their normal relations will be warlike, and that, having once caught each other by the throat, they separate again only, as the French proverb has it, *pour mieux sauter*,—they draw back to take a better spring, to rush upon each other with more ferocity?

The egoism of the individual is terrible. But the egoists of private life are not armed; they do not count it good to prepare, or to use, arms against their competitors; their egoism is controlled by the powers of the State and of public opinion. A private person who should, arms in hand, deprive his neighbor of a cow or an acre of field, would be at once seized by the police, and imprisoned. Moreover, he would be condemned by public opinion; called a thief and a robber. Quite otherwise with states. All are armed. Influence over them there is none; more than those absurd attempts to catch a bird by sprinkling salt on its tail, such as are the efforts to establish international congresses, which armed states (armed, forsooth, that they may be above taking advice) will clearly never accept. And above all, the public opinion which punishes every violent act of the private individual, praises, exalts as the virtue of patriotism, every appropriation of other people's property made with a view of increasing the power of one's own country.

Open the newspapers on any day you like, and you will always see, every moment, some black spot, a possible cause for war. Now, it is Korea; again, the Pamirs, Africa, Abyssinia, Armenia, Turkey, Venezuela, or the Transvaal. The work of robbery ceases not for an instant; now here, now there, some small war is going on incessantly, like the exchange of shots in the first line; and a great real war may, must, begin at some moment.

If the American desires the greatness and prosperity of the States before all nations, and the Englishman desires the same for his nation, and the Russian, Turk, Dutchman, Abyssinian, Venezuelan, Boer, Armenian, Pole, Czech, each have a similar desire; if all are convinced that these desires ought not to be concealed and suppressed, but, on the contrary, are something to be proud of, and to be encouraged in oneself and in others; and if one country's greatness and prosperity can only be obtained at the expense of another, or at times of many other countries and nations; then how can war not be?

Obviously, to avoid war, it is necessary, not to preach sermons and pray God for peace, not to adjure the English-speaking nations to live in peace together in order to domineer over other nations, not to make double and triple counter-alliances, not to intermarry princes and princesses, but to destroy the root of war. And that is, the exclusive desire for the well-being of one's own people; it is patriotism. Therefore, to destroy war, destroy patriotism. But to destroy patriotism, it is first necessary to produce conviction that it is an evil; and that is difficult to do. Tell people that war is an evil, and they will laugh; for who does not know it? Tell them that patriotism is an evil, and most will agree; but with a reservation. "Yes," they will say, "wrong patriotism is an evil; but there is another kind, the kind we hold." But just what this good patriotism is, no one explains. If good patriotism consists in inaggressiveness, as many say, still, all patriotism, even if not aggressive, is necessarily retentive; that is, people wish to keep what they have previously conquered. The nation does not exist which was founded without conquest; and conquest can only be retained by the means which achieved it—namely, violence, murder. But if patriotism be not even retentive, it is then the restoring patriotism of conquered and oppressed nations; of Armenians, Poles, Czechs, Irish, and so on. And this patriotism is about the very worst; for it is the most embittered and the most provocative of violence.

gan, gross, patriotic point of view, obsolete these eighteen hundred years.

The European nations, forgetful of Christ for the sake of patriotism, have ever more and more excited and incited these peaceful peoples to patriotism; and now have roused them to such a degree that really, if only Japan and China as completely forget the teaching of Buddha and Confucius as we have forgotten the teaching of Christ, they would soon master the art of killing (soon learned, as Japan has shown); and being brave, skillful, strong, and numerous, they would inevitably do with Europe what the European countries are doing with Africa; unless Europe can oppose to them something stronger than armaments and Edisonian devices. "The disciple is not above his master: but every one that is perfect shall be as his master."

To the question of a petty king, as to how many men, and in what way, he should add to his troops, in order to conquer a southern tribe which refused submission to him, Confucius replied, "Disband all your army, use what you now spend on troops for the education of your people, and for the improvement of agriculture; and the southern tribe will expel its king, and, without war, submit to thy authority."

Thus taught Confucius, whom we are counseled to fear.

And we, having forgotten the teaching of Christ, having renounced him, wish to subdue nations by violence; thereby only to prepare for ourselves new enemies, yet more powerful than our present neighbors.

A friend of mine, having seen William's picture, said, "The picture is excellent, only it does not at all signify what is written below. It really shows the Archangel Michael pointing out to all the governments of Europe, represented as brigands hung round with arms, that which is to destroy, annihilate them—namely, the meekness of Buddha and the reasonableness of Confucius." He might have added, "and the humility of Lao-Tse." And indeed we, in our hypocrisy, have so far forgotten Christ, and corroded out of our lives all that

Provinces, Finland, Armenia, should be separated, freed, from Russia; so with an Englishman, in regard to Ireland, India, and other possessions; and each should help to this, because, the greater the state, the more wrong and cruel is its patriotism, and the greater is the sum of suffering upon which its power is founded. Therefore, if we really wish to be what we profess to be, we must not only cease our present desire for the growth of our state, but we must desire its decrease, its weakening, and help this forward with all our might. And in this way we must train the rising generation; we must educate them so that, just as now a young man is ashamed to show his rude egoism by eating everything and leaving nothing for others, by pushing the weak out of the way that he may pass himself, by forcibly taking that which another needs: so he may then be equally ashamed of desiring increased power for his own country; and so that, just as it is now considered stupid, foolish, to praise oneself, it shall then be seen to be equally foolish to praise one's own nation, as is now done in divers of the best national histories, pictures, monuments, text-books, articles, verses, sermons, and silly national hymns. It must be understood that, so long as we praise patriotism, and cultivate it in the young, so long will there be armaments to destroy the physical and spiritual life of nations; and wars, vast, awful wars, such as we are preparing for, and into the circle of which we are drawing, debauching them in our patriotism, the new and to be dreaded combatants of the far East.

The Emperor William, one of the most absurd personages of our time,—orator, poet, musician, dramatist and painter, chief of all, patriot,—lately had made a sketch representing all the nations of Europe, standing, with drawn swords, on the seashore; there, under direction of the Archangel Michael, gazing at figures of Buddha and Confucius, seated in the distance. In William's intention, this denotes that the nations of Europe must unite, to oppose the danger moving upon them from the quarter shown. And he is perfectly right; that is, from his pa-

Patriotism cannot be good. Why do not people say that egoism may be good? For this might more easily be maintained as to egoism, which is a natural and inborn feeling, than as to patriotism, which is an unnatural feeling, artificially grafted on man.

It will be said, "Patriotism has welded mankind into states, and maintains the unity of states." But men are now united in states; that work is done; why now maintain exclusive devotion to one's own state, when this produces terrible evils for all states and nations? For this same patriotism which welded mankind into states is now destroying those same states. If there were but one patriotism—say of the English only—then it were possible to regard that as conciliatory, or beneficent. But when, as now, there is American patriotism, English, German, French, Russian, all opposed one to another, in this event, patriotism no longer unites, but disunites. To say that patriotism was beneficent, unifying the states, when it flourished in Greece and Rome, and that it is also similarly and equally beneficent now, after eighteen centuries of life under Christianity, is as much as to say that, because plowing was useful and good for the field before the sowing, it is equally so now, when the crop has come up.

It might, indeed, be well to let patriotism survive, in memory of the benefits it once brought, in the way we preserved ancient monuments, like temples, tombs, and so on. But temples and tombs endure without causing any harm; while patriotism ceases not to inflict incalculable woes.

Why are Armenians and Turks now agitated, being massacred, becoming like wild beasts? Why are England and Russia, each anxious for its own share of the inheritance from Turkey, waiting upon, and not ending, these butchereries of Armenians? Why are Abyssinians and Italians being massacred? Why was a terrible war within an ace of outbreak over Venezuela; and since, another over the Transvaal? And the Chino-Japanese war, the Russo-Turkish, the Franco-German? And the bitter-

ness of conquered nations: Armenians, Poles, Irish? And the preparations for a war of all nations? All this is the fruit of patriotism. Seas of blood have been shed over this passion; and will yet be shed for it, unless people free themselves of this obsolete relic of antiquity.

Several times now I have had occasion to write about patriotism; about its entire incompatibility, not only with the truly understood teaching of Christ, but with the very lowest demands of morality in a Christian society. Each time my arguments have been met either with silence, or with a lofty suggestion that my ideas, as expressed, are Utopian utterances of mysticism, anarchism, and cosmopolitanism. Often my ideas are summed up, and then, instead of counter-arguments, the remark only is added, that "this is nothing else than cosmopolitanism!" As if this word, cosmopolitanism, had indisputably refuted all my arguments.

Men who are serious, mature, clever, kind, and who—this is the most important matter—stand like a city on a mountain-top: men who by their example involuntarily lead the masses; such men assume that the legitimacy and beneficence of patriotism are so far evident and certain, that it is not worth while answering the frivolous and foolish attacks on the sacred feeling. And the majority of people, misled from childhood, and infected with patriotism, accept this lofty silence as the most convincing argument; and they continue to walk in the darkness of ignorance.

Those who, from their position, can help to free the masses from their sufferings, and do not do so, commit a vast sin.

The most fearful evil in the world is, hypocrisy. Not in vain did Christ, once only, show anger; and that against the hypocrisy of the Pharisees.

But what was Pharisaic hypocrisy compared with the hypocrisy of our own time? In comparison with our hypocrites, those among the Pharisees were the justest of men; and their art of hypocrisy was child's play, beside ours. It

cannot be otherwise. All our lives, with their profession of Christianity, of the doctrine of humility and love, lived in an armed robber camp, cannot be other than one unbroken, frightful hypocrisy. It is very convenient to profess a doctrine which has, at one end, Christian holiness and consequent infallibility, and at the other end, the heathen sword and gallows; so that, when it is possible to deceive and impose by holiness, holiness is brought in play, while, when the deceit fails, the sword and gallows are set to work. Such a doctrine is very convenient. But a time comes when the cobweb of lies gives way, and it is no longer possible to keep up both ends; one or other has to go. This is about to happen with the doctrine of patriotism.

Whether people wish it or do not wish it, the question stands clear to mankind, *How can this patriotism, whence come human sufferings incalculable, sufferings both physical and moral, be necessary, and be a virtue?* This question, of compulsion, must be answered.

It is needful, either to show that patriotism is so beneficent that it redeems all those terrible sufferings which it causes to mankind; or else, to acknowledge that patriotism is an evil, which, instead of being grafted upon and suggested to people, should be struggled against with all one's might, to escape from it.

C'est à prendre ou à laisser, as the French say. If patriotism be good, then Christianity, as giving peace, is an idle dream, and the sooner we root it out, the better. But if Christianity really gives peace, and if we really want peace, then patriotism is a survival of barbarism, and it is not only wrong to excite and develop it, as we do now, but it ought to be rooted out by every means, by preaching, persuasion, contempt, ridicule. If Christianity be truth, and we wish to live in peace, then must we more than cease to take pleasure in the power of our country; we must rejoice in the weakening of that power, and help thereto. A Russian should rejoice if Poland, the Baltic