

Letter to A Non-Comissioned Officer

By Leo Tolstoy

You are surprised that soldiers are taught that it is right to kill people in certain cases and in war, while in the books admitted to be holy by those who so teach. there is nothing like such a permission, but, on the contrary, not only is all murder forbidden but all insulting of others is forbidden also, and we are told not to do to others what we do not wish done to us. And you ask, Is there not some fraud in all this? And if so, then for whose sake is it committed?

Yes, there is a fraud, committed for the sake of those accustomed to live on the sweat and blood of other men, and who therefore have perverted, and still pervert, Christ's teaching, given to man for his good, but which has now, in its perverted form, become a chief source of human misery.

The thing has come about in this way:

The Government and all those of the upper classes near the Government who live by other people's work, need some means of dominating the workers, and find this means in the control of the army. Defence against foreign enemies is only an excuse. The German Government frightens its subjects about the Russians and the French; the French Government, frightens its people about the Germane; the Russian Government frightens its people about the French and the Germans; and that is the way with all Governments. But neither Germans nor Russians nor Frenchmen desire to fight their neighbours or other people; but, living in peace, they dread war more than anything else in the world. The Government and the upper, governing classes, to excuse their domination of the labourers, behave like a gipsy who whips his horse before he turns a corner and then pretends he cannot hold it in. They stir up their own people and some foreign Government, and then pretend that for the well-being, or the defence, of their people they must declare war: which again brings profit only to generals, officers, officials, merchants, and., in general, to the rich. In reality war is an inevitable result of the existence of armies; and armies are only needed by Governments to dominate their own working classes.

The thing is a crime, but the worst of it is that the Government, in order to have a plausible basis for its domination of the people, has to pretend that it holds the highest religious teaching known to man (the Christian), and that it brings up its subjects in this teaching. That teaching, however, is in its very nature opposed not only to murder but to all violence, and therefore the Governments, in order to dominate the people and to be considered Christian, had to pervert Christianity and to hide its true meaning from the people, and thus deprive men of the well-being Christ offered them.

This perversion was accomplished long ago, in the time of that scoundrel the Emperor Constantine, who for doing it was enrolled among the saints. All subsequent Governments, especially our Russian Government, do their utmost to preserve this perverted understanding, and to prevent people from seeing the real meaning of Christianity; because having once seen the real meaning of Christianity, the people

would perceive that the Governments, with their taxes, soldiers, prisons, gallows, and false priests, are not only not the pillars of Christianity they profess to be, but are its greatest enemies.

In consequence of this perversion, those frauds which have surprised you are possible, and all those terrible misfortunes occur from which men suffer.

The people are oppressed and robbed, and are poor, ignorant, dying of hunger. Why? Because the land is in the hands of the rich; and the people are enslaved in mills and in factories, obliged to earn money because taxes are demanded from them, and the price of their labour is diminished while the price of things they need is increased.

How are they to escape? By taking the land from the rich? But if this is done., soldiers will come, and will kill the rebels or put them in prison. Seize the mills and factories? The same will happen. Organize and maintain a strike? It is sure to fail. The rich will hold out longer than the workers, and the armies are always on the side of the capitalists. The people will never extricate themselves from the want in which they are kept as long as the army is in the hands of the governing classes.

But who compose these armies that keep the people in this state of slavery? Who are these soldiers that will fire at peasants who take the land, or at strikers who will not disperse, or at smugglers who bring in goods without paying taxes? Who put in prison and guard there those who refuse to pay taxes ? The soldiers are these same peasants who are deprived of land, these same strikers who want better wages, these same taxpayers who want to be rid of these taxes.

And why do these people shoot at their brothers ? Because it has been instilled into them that the oath they were obliged to take on entering the service is binding, and that though it is generally wrong to kill people, it is right to do so at the command of one's superiors. That is to say, the same fraud is played off upon them which has struck you. But here we meet the question, How is it that sensible people often people who can read, and even educated people believe such an evident lie ? However little education a man may have, he cannot but know that Christ did not sanction murder, but taught kindness, meekness, forgiveness of injuries, love of one's enemies; and therefore he cannot help seeing that on the basis of Christian teaching he cannot pledge himself in advance to kill all whom lie may be ordered to kill.

The question is, how can sensible people believe- as all now serving in the army have believed and still believe such an evident falsehood? The answer is that it is not this one fraud by itself that takes people in, but they have from childhood been deprived of the proper use of their reason by a whole series of deceptions, a whole system of frauds, called the Orthodox Faith, which is nothing but the grossest idolatry. In this faith people are taught: that God is triple, that besides this triple God there is a Queen of Heaven, and besides this Queen there are various saints whose corpses have not decayed, and besides these saints there are icons of the Gods and of the Queen of Heaven, to which one should offer candles and pray with one's hands; and that the most important and holy thing on earth is the pap which the priest makes of wine and white bread on Sundays, behind a partition; and that after the priest has whispered over it, the wine is no longer wine, and the white bread is not bread, but they are the blood and flesh of one of the triple Gods, etc. All this is so stupid and senseless that it

is quite impossible to understand what it all means. And the very people who teach this faith do not ask you to understand it, but only tell you to believe it; and people trained to believe these things from childhood can believe any kind of nonsense that is told them. And when men have been so befooled that they believe that God hangs in the corner, or sits in a morsel of pap which the priest gives out in a spoon; that to kiss a board or some relic and put candles in front of them, is useful for life here and hereafter—they are next called on to enter the military service, where they are humbugged to any extent; being first made to swear on the Gospel (in which swearing is prohibited) that they will do just what is forbidden in those Gospels, and then taught that to kill people at the word of those in command is not a sin, but that to refuse to obey those in command is a sin. So that the fraud played off on soldiers when it is instilled into them that they may, without sin, kill people at the wish of those in command, is not an isolated fraud, but is bound up with a whole system of deception without which this one fraud would not deceive them.

Only a man quite befooled by the false faith called Orthodoxy, palmed off upon him for true Christian faith, can believe that it is no sin for a Christian to enter the army, promising blindly to obey any man who ranks above him in the service, and, at the will of others, learning to kill, and committing that most terrible crime forbidden by all moral law.

A man free from the pseudo-Christian faith that is called Orthodoxy, will not believe that.

And that is why the so-called Sectarians-Christians who have repudiated the Orthodox teaching, and acknowledge Christ's teaching as explained in the Gospels, and especially in the Sermon on the Mount are not tricked by this deception, but have frequently refused, and still do refuse, to be soldiers, considering such an occupation incompatible with Christianity, and preferring to bear a kind of persecution, as hundreds and thousands of people are doing: in Russia many of the Doukhobors and Molokans; in Austria the Nazarenes, and in Sweden, Switzerland, and Germany some members of the Evangelical sects. The Government knows this, and is therefore exceedingly anxious that the general Church deception, without which it could not be maintained, should be commenced with every child from early infancy and be continually maintained in such a way that none may escape it. The Government tolerates anything else: drunkenness and vice (and not only tolerates but even organizes drunkenness and vice, they help to stupefy people), but by all means in its power it hinders those who have escaped out of its trap from assisting others to escape.

The Russian Government perpetrates this fraud with special craft and cruelty. It orders all its subjects to baptize their children during infancy into the false faith called Orthodoxy, and it threatens to punish them if they disobey. And when the children are baptized—that is, are reckoned as Orthodox—then, under threats of criminal penalties, they are forbidden to discuss the faith into which, without their wish, they were baptized; and for such discussion of that faith, as well as for renouncing it and changing to another, they are actually punished.. So that it cannot be said of Russians in general that they believe the Orthodox Faith, they do not know whether they believe it or not. They were converted to it during infancy, and kept in it by violence—that is, by the fear of punishment. All Russians were entrapped into Orthodoxy by

cunning fraud, and are kept in it by cruel force.

Using the power it wields, the Government perpetrates and maintains this fraud, and by means of it retains power.

And, therefore, the sole way to free people from their many miseries lies in freeing them from the false faith instilled into them by Government, and in their imbibing the true Christian teaching, which this false teaching hides. The true Christian teaching is very simple, clear, and obvious to all, as Christ said. But it is simple and accessible only when man is freed from that falsehood in which we were all educated., and which is passed off upon us as God's Truth.

Nothing useful can be poured into a vessel that is already full of what is useless. We must first empty out what is useless. So it is with the acquirement of true Christian teaching. We have first to understand that all the stories telling how God made the world 6,000 years ago; how Adam sinned and the human race fell, and how the Son of God (a God born of a virgin) came on earth and redeemed man; and all the fables in the Old Testament and in the Gospels, and all the lives of the saints with their stories of miracles and relics, are all nothing but a gross hash of Jewish superstitions and priestly frauds. Only to a man quite free from this deception can the clear and simple teaching of Christ, which needs no explanation, be accessible and comprehensible. That teaching tells us nothing of the beginning, or of the end, of the world, nor about God and His purpose, nor, in general, about things which we cannot and need not know; but it speaks only of what man must do to save himself-that is, how best to live the life he has come into, in this world, from birth to death. For that purpose it is only necessary to act towards others as we wish them to act towards us. In that is all the law and the prophets, as Christ said. And to act in this way we need neither icons, nor relics, nor church services, nor priests, nor catechisms, nor Governments, but, on the contrary, we need perfect freedom from all that; for to do to others as we wish them to do to us is only possible when a man is free from the fables which the priests give out as the only truth, and when he is not bound by promises to act as other people may order. Only such a man will be capable of fulfilling - not his own will nor that of men, but - the will of God.

And the will of God is not that we should fight and oppress the weak, but that we should acknowledge all men to be our brothers and should serve one another.

These are the thoughts your letter has aroused in me. I shall be very glad if they help to clear up the questions you are thinking about.

[1898.]

Published by the Danish Peace Academy, September 2007.