

'Thou Shalt Not Kill'

By Leo Tolstoy

'Thou shalt not kill.' -EXOD. xx. 13.

'The disciple is not above his master: but every one when he is perfected shall be as his master.' -LUKE vi. 40

'For all they that take the sword shall perish with the sword.' -MATT xxvi. 52.

'Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them.' - MATT. vii. 12.

When Kings are executed after trial, as in the case of Charles I., Louis XVI., and Maximilian of Mexico; or when they are killed in Court conspiracies, like Peter III., Paul, and various Sultans, Shahs, and Khans-little is said about it; but when they are killed without a trial and without a Court conspiracy- as in the case of Henry IV. of France, Alexander II., the Empress of Austria, the late Shah of Persia, and, recently, Humbert- such murders excite the greatest surprise and indignation among Kings and Emperors and their adherents, just as if they themselves never took part in murders, nor profited by them, nor instigated them. But, in fact, the mildest of the murdered Kings (Alexander II. or Humbert, for instance), not to speak of executions in their own countries, were instigators of, and accomplices and partakers in, the murder of tens of thousands of men who perished on the field of battle ; while more cruel Kings and Emperors have been guilty of hundreds of thousands, and even millions, of murders.

The teaching of Christ repeals the law, 'An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth'; but those who have always clung to that law, and still cling to it, and who apply it to a terrible degree-not only claiming 'an eye for an eye,' but without provocation decreeing the slaughter of thousands, as they do when they declare war- have no right to be indignant at the application of that same law to themselves in so small and insignificant a degree that hardly one King or Emperor is killed for each hundred thousand, or perhaps even for each million, who are killed by the order and with the consent of Kings and Emperors. Kings and Emperors not only should not be indignant at such murders as those of Alexander II. and Humbert, but they should be surprised that such murders are so rare, considering the continual and universal example of murder that they give to mankind.

The crowd are so hypnotized that they see what is going on before their eyes, but do not understand its meaning. They see what constant care Kings, Emperors, and Presidents devote to their disciplined armies; they see the reviews, parades, and manoeuvres the rulers hold, about which they boast to one another; and the people crowd to see their own brothers, brightly dressed up in fools' clothes, turned into machines to the sound of drum and trumpet, all, at the shout of one man, making one and the same movement at one and the same moment-but they do not understand what it all means. Yet the meaning of this drilling is very clear and simple: it is nothing but a preparation for killing.

It is stupefying men in order to make them fit instruments for murder. And those who do this, who chiefly direct this and are proud of it, are the Kings, Emperors and Presidents. And it is just these men- who are specially occupied in organizing murder and who have made murder their profession, who wear military uniforms and carry murderous weapons (swords) at their sides-that are horrified and indignant when one of themselves is murdered.

The murder of Kings- the murder of Humbert- is terrible. but not on account of its cruelty. The things done by command of Kings and Emperors-not only past events such as the massacre of St.. Bartholomew religious butcheries, the terrible repressions of peasant' rebellions, and Paris coups d' etat, but the present-day Government executions, the doing-to-death of prisoners in solitary confinement, the Disciplinary Battallions, the hangings, the beheadings, the shootings and slaughter in wars-are incomparably more cruel than the murders committed by Anarchists. Nor are these murders terrible because undeserved. If Alexander II. and Humbert did not deserve death, still less did the thousands of Russians who perished at Plevna, or of Italians who perished in Abyssinia. Such murders are terrible, not because they are cruel or unmerited, but because of the unreasonableness of those who commit them.

If the regicides act under the influence of personal feelings of indignation evoked by the sufferings of an oppressed people, for which they hold Alexander or Carnot or Humbert responsible ; or if they act from personal feelings of revenge, then-however immoral their conduct may be-it is at least intelligible; but how is it that a body of men (Anarchists, we are told) such as those by whom Bresci was sent., and who are now threatening another Emperor-how is that they cannot devise any better means of improving the condition of humanity than by killing people whose destruction can no more be of use than the decapitation of that mythical monster on whose neck a new head appeared as soon as one was cut of? Kings and Emperors have long ago arranged for themselves a system like that of a magazine-rifle : as soon as one bullet has been discharged another takes its place. *Le roi est mort, vive le roi!* So what is the use of killing them?

Only on a most superficial view, can the killing of these men seem a means of saving the nations from opp- resion and from wars destructive of human life.

One only need remember that similar oppression and similar war went on, no matter who was at the head of the Government- Nicholas or Alexander, Frederick or Wilhelm, Napoleon or Louis, Palmerston or Gladstone, McKinley or anyone else-in order to understand that it is not any particular person who causes these oppressions and these wars from which the nations suffer. The misery of nations is caused not by particular persons, but by the particular order of Society under which the people are so tied up together that they find themselves all in the power of a few men, or more often in the power of one single man: a man so perverted by his unnatural position as arbiter of the fate and lives of millions, that he is always in an unhealthy state, and always suffers more or less from a mania of self-aggrandizement. which only his exceptional position conceals from general notice.

Apart from the fact that such men are surrounded from earliest childhood to the grave by the most insensate luxury and an atmosphere of falsehood and flattery which always accompanies them, their whole education and all their occupations are centred

on one object: learning about former murders, the best present-day ways of murdering, and the best preparations for future murder. From childhood they learn about killing in all its possible forms. They always carry about with them murderous weapons- swords or sabres; they dress themselves in various uniforms; they attend parades, reviews and manoeuvres ; they visit one another, presenting one another with Orders and nominating one another to the command of regiments- and not only does no one tell them plainly what they are doing or say that to busy one's self with preparations for killing is revolting and criminal, but from all sides they hear nothing but approval and enthusiasm for all this activity of theirs. Every time they go out, and at each parade and review, crowds of people flock to greet them with enthusiasm, and it seems to them as if the whole nation approves of their conduct. The only part of the Press that reaches them, and that seems to them the expression of the feelings of the whole people, or at least of its best representatives, most slavishly extols their every word and action, however silly or wicked they may be. Those around them, men and women., clergy and laity- all people who do not prize human dignity- vying with one another in refined flattery, agree with them, about anything and deceive them about everything making it impossible for them to see life as it is. Such rulers might live a hundred years without ever seeing one single really independent man or ever hearing the truth spoken. One is sometimes appalled to hear of the words and deeds of these men ; but one need only consider their position in order to understand that anyone in their place would act as they do. If a reasonable man found himself in their place, there is only one reasonable action he could perform, and that would be to get away from such a position. Any one remaining in it would behave as they do.

What, indeed, must go on in the head of some Wilhelm of Germany- a narrow-minded, ill- educated, vain man, with the ideals of a German Junker- when there is nothing he can say so stupid or so horrid that it will not be met by an enthusiastic 'Hoch!' and be commented on by the Press of the entire world as though it were something highly important. When he says that, at his word, soldiers should be ready to kill their own fathers, people shout 'Hurrah !' When he says that the Gospel must be introduced with an iron fist- 'Hurrah!' When he says the army is to take no prisoners in China, but to slaughter everybody, he is not put into a lunatic asylum, but people shout 'Hurrah!' and set sail for China to execute his commands. Or Nicholas II. (a man naturally modest) begins his reign by announcing to venerable old men who had expressed a wish to be allowed to discuss their own affairs, that such ideas of self-government were 'insensate dreams,'- and the organs of the Press he sees. and the people he meets, praise him for it. He proposes a childish, silly, and hypocritical project of universal peace, while at the same time ordering an increase in the army- and there are no limits to the laudations of his wisdom and virtue. Without any need, he foolishly and mercilessly insults and oppresses a whole nation, the Finns, and again lie hears nothing but praise. Finally, he arranges the Chinese slaughter- terrible in its injustice, cruelty and incompatibility with his peace projects- and. from all sides, people app laud him, both as a victor and as a continuer of is father's peace policy.

What, indeed, must be going on in the heads and hearts of these men?

So it is not the Alexanders and Humberts, nor the Wilhelms, Nicholases, and Chamberlains- though they decree these oppressions of the nations and these wars- who are really the most guilty of these sins, but it is rather those who place and support them in the position of arbiters over the lives of their fellow-men. And,

therefore, the thing to do is not to kill Alexanders, Nicholases, Wilhelms, and Humberts, but to cease to support the arrangement of society of which they are a result. And what supports the present order of society is the selfishness and stupefaction of the people, who sell their freedom and honour for insignificant material advantages.

People who stand on the lowest rung of the ladder- partly as a result of being stupefied by a patriotic and pseudo-religious education, and partly for the sake of personal advantages- cede their freedom and sense of human dignity at the bidding of these who stand above

In them and offer them material advantages. In the same way-in consequence of stupefaction, and chiefly for the sake of advantages-those who are a little higher up the ladder cede their freedom and manly dignity, and the same thing repeats itself with those standing yet higher, and so on to the to most rung-to those who, or to him who, standing at the apex of the social cone have nothing more to obtain: for whom the only motives of action are love of power and vanity, and who are. generally so perverted and stupefied by the power of life and death which they hold over their fellow-men, and by the consequent servility and flattery of those who surround them, that, without ceasing to do evil, they feel quite assured that they are benefactors to the human race.

It is the people who sacrifice their dignity as men for material profit that produce these men who cannot act otherwise than as they do act, and with whom it is useless to be angry for their stupid and wicked actions. To kill such men is like whipping children whom one has first spoilt.

That nations should not be oppressed, and that there should be none of these useless wars, and that men may not be indignant with those who seem to cause these evils, and may not kill them- it seems that only a very small thing is necessary. It is necessary that men should understand things as they are, should call them by their right names, and should know that an army is an instrument for killing, and that the enrolment and management of an army-the very things which Kings, Emperors, and Presidents occupy themselves with so self-confidently- is a preparation for murder.

If only each King, Emperor, and President understood that his work of directing armies is not an honourable and important duty, as his flatterers persuade him it is, but a bad and shameful act of preparation for murder-and if each private individual understood that the payment of taxes wherewith to hire and equip soldiers, and, above all, army-service itself, are not matters of indifference, but are bad and shameful actions by which he not only permits but participates in murder-then this power of Emperors, Kings, and Presidents, which now arouses our indignation, and which causes them to be murdered, would disappear of itself.

So that the Alexanders, Carnots, Humberts, and others should not be murdered, but it should be explained to them that they are themselves murderers, and, chiefly, they should not be allowed to kill people: men should refuse to murder at their command.

If people do not yet act in this way, it is only because Governments, to maintain themselves, diligently exercise a hypnotic influence upon the people. And, therefore,

we may help to prevent people killing either Kings or one another, not by killing-murder only increases the hypnotism- but by arousing people from their hypnotic condition.

And it is this I have tried to do by these remarks.

[August 8, 1900.]

Published by the Danish Peace Academy, September 2007.