Letter to a Corporal
by Leo Tolstoy

You wonder how it is soldiers are taught that it is right to kill men in certain cases and in war, whereas in the Scripture, which is acknowledged to be sacred by those who teach this, there is nothing resembling such a permission. In fact, there is the very opposite: a prohibition against committing murder and even any insult against men, a prohibition against doing to others what one does not wish to have done to oneself. You ask me whether this is not a deception, and if so, for whose advantage it is practiced.

Yes, it is a deception, which is practiced in favor of those who are accustomed to live by the sweat and blood of other people. They have been distorting Christ’s teaching for this purpose, a teaching which was given to men for their good, but which now, in its distorted form, has become the chief source of all the calamities of men.

This happened in the following way:

The government and all those men of the upper classes who are attached to the government and live by the labors of others have to have means for controlling the laboring masses. The army is such a means and the defense against foreign enemies is only an excuse. The German government frightens its nation with the Russians and the French; the French government frightens its nation with the Germans; the Russian government frightens its nation with the Germans and the French, and so it is with all the nations. But neither the Germans, nor the Russians, nor the French wish to fight with their neighbors and with other nations. They prefer to live in peace with them and are afraid of war more than of anything in the world. But, to have an excuse in their control of the laboring masses, the governments and the idle upper classes act like a gipsy, who whips his horse around the corner and then pretends that he is not able to hold it back. They stir up their people and another government, and then pretend that for the good or for the defense of their nation they cannot help but declare war, which again is profitable for the generals, officers, officials, merchants, and, in general, for the wealthy classes. In reality, war is only an inevitable consequence of the existence of the armies, but the governments merely need their armies for the purpose of controlling their own laboring masses.

It is a criminal business, but the worst thing about it is that the governments, to have a rational foundation for their control of the masses, are obliged to pretend that they are professing the highest religious teaching known to men – Christianity – and educating their subjects in this teaching. This teaching is in its essence opposed, not only to every murder, but even to every violence, and so, to be able to control the masses and be considered Christian, the governments had to distort Christianity and to conceal its true meaning from the masses and thus deprive men of the good that Christ brought to them.

This distortion of Christianity took place long ago, in the time of the malefactor, Emperor Constantine, who was canonized as a saint for this. All the subsequent governments, especially our own Russian government, have tried with all their strength to maintain this distortion and not to allow the masses to see the true meaning of Christianity, because. If the masses did see it, they would come to understand that the governments, with their taxes, soldiers, prisons, gallows, and cheating priests, are not only no pillars of Christianity, such as they pretend to be, but its greatest enemies.
Those deceptions which startled you so much are a consequence of this distortion, and all those terrible calamities from which the masses suffer are the result.

The masses are crushed, robbed, impoverished, and ignorant. They are dying out. Why? Because the land is in the hands of the rich, because the masses are enslaved in factories and plants in their daily occupations, because they are fleeced for the taxes, because the price for their labor is lowered, and because the price for what they need is raised. How can they be freed? Shall they take the land away from the rich? But if that is done, the soldiers will come, kill off the rioters, and lock up the rest in prisons. Shall they take the factories and plants away? The same will happen. Shall they walk out in a strike? That will never happen. The rich can endure longer than the laborers, and the armies will always be on the side of the capitalists. The masses will never get away from that want in which they are held, so long as the armies shall be in the power of the ruling classes.

But who are the armies, which hold the masses in this slavery? Who are those soldiers who will shoot at the peasants who have taken possession of the land, and at the strikers, if they do not disperse, and at the smugglers, who import wares without paying the revenue? Who are those soldiers who will put those who refuse to pay the taxes into prisons and keep them there? These soldiers are the same peasants whose land has been taken away, the same strikers who want to raise their wages, and the same payers of the taxes who want to be freed from these payments.

Why do these men shoot at their brothers? Because it has been impressed upon them that the oath that they are compelled to take upon entering military service is obligatory for them, and that they may not kill men in general, but may kill them by command of the authorities. The same deception that startled you so much is practiced upon them. But here arises the question: how can people of sound mind, who frequently know the rudiments and are even educated, believe in such a palpable lie? No matter how little educated a man may be, he nonetheless cannot help knowing that Christ did not permit any murder, but instead taught meekness, humility, forgiveness of offences, and love of enemies. He cannot help but see that, on the basis of the Christian teaching, he cannot make a promise in advance that he will kill all those whom he is commanded to kill.

The question is, how can people of sound mind believe, as all those who are now doing military service have believed, in such an obvious deception? The answer to the question is that people are not deceived by this one deception alone, but have been prepared for it from childhood by a whole series of deceptions – a whole system of deceptions, which is called the Orthodox Church, and which is nothing but the coarsest kind of idolatry. According to this faith men are taught that God is triune; that besides this triune God there is also a heavenly queen; that in addition to this queen there are also all kinds of saints, whose bodies have not decayed; that in addition to the saints there are also the images of the Gods and of the queen of heaven, before which candles have to be placed and prayers made with the hands; that the most important and holy thing on earth is the pap which the priest makes on Sundays behind the partition out of wine and bread; that after the priest has whispered something over this, the wine will not be wine and the bread will not be bread, but the blood and body of one of the triune Gods; and so forth. All that is so stupid and senseless that it is absolutely impossible to understand what it all means. Indeed, those who teach this faith command us not to understand, but to believe it, and the people, who have been trained from childhood to believe this, believe any senseless thing that they may be told. First, men are so stultified that they believe that God is hanging in the corner or is sitting in the piece of pap which the priest is giving them in a spoon, and that it is useful for this life and for the life to come to kiss a board or relics and to place candles before them. Then, they are called upon to do military service, and there they are deceived in every way, by being
compelled first of all to swear on the Gospel (which prohibits swearing) that they will do what is prohibited in this Gospel, and then, by teaching them that it is not a sin to kill men by the command of the authorities, but that it is a sin not to obey the authorities, and so forth.

Thus the deception of the soldiers, which consists in them being impressed with the idea that it is possible to kill men by command of the authorities without sinning, does not stand alone, but is connected with a whole system of deceptions, without which this particular deception would be ineffective. Only a man who is completely stupefied by that false faith, called Orthodox, which is given out to him as being Christian, is able to believe that it is no sin for a Christian to enter the army, promising blindly to obey any man who will consider himself higher in rank, and, at the command of another man, to learn to kill and to commit this most terrible crime, which is prohibited by all the laws set forth by Christ. A man who is free from the deception of the so-called Orthodox, pseudo-Christian faith will never believe this.

For this reason the so-called sectarian, that is, the Christians who reject the doctrine of Orthodoxy and acknowledge Christ’s teaching, as it is expounded in the Gospels, and especially in the Sermon on the Mount, never fall a prey to this deception. The sectarians have always refused to do military service, recognizing it as incompatible with Christianity and preferring to suffer all kinds of tortures, as is now done by hundreds and thousands of men: in Russia by the Dukhobors and Milkers, in Austria by the Nazarenes, and in Sweden, Switzerland, and Germany by the Evangelical sects. The government knows this and so follows nothing else with such terror and attention, guaranteeing that the general ecclesiastic deception, without which its power is not possible, shall be practiced on all the children from earliest childhood and shall be constantly maintained in such a way that not one man can escape it. The government permits anything, including drunkenness and debauchery (it not only permits, but even encourages drunkenness and debauchery, because it helps in the stuflification), but it is violently opposed to allowing men to free themselves from the deception and to free others from it.

The Russian government practices this deception with particular cruelty and harshness. It commands all its subjects, threatening them with punishment in case of non-compliance, to have all their children baptized, while they are babes, into the deceptive, so-called Orthodox faith. When the children are baptized, and thus considered Orthodox, they are, under threat of criminal prosecution, prohibited from discussing the faith into which they were baptized without their will, and for such a discussion of the faith, as well as for departing from it and passing over to another faith, they are subject to punishments.

So it cannot be said of all the Russians that they believe in the Orthodox faith. They do not know whether they believe or not, because they were forced into that faith when they were still babes, and because they hold to this enforced faith through fear of punishment. All the Russians are caught into Orthodoxy through savage deception and are kept in it through cruel violence. By making use of the power that it has, the government produces and maintains the deception, and the deception maintains its power.

And so, the only means for freeing men from all the calamities consists in freeing them from that false faith which is inculcated upon them by the government, and in impressing upon them the true Christian teaching, which is concealed from them by this false doctrine. The true Christian teaching is very simple, clear, and accessible, as Christ Himself has said. But it is simple and accessible only when a man is free from that lie in which we are all brought up, and which is given out to us as divine.

It is impossible to fill a vessel with what is important if it is already filled with what is useless. It is necessary first to pour out what is useless. It is the same with the acquisition of the true Christian teaching. We must first understand that all the stories about how God created the world six thousand years ago, how Adam sinned, how the human race fell, how the son of God
and God Himself, born of a virgin, came into the world and redeemed it, all the fables of the
Bible and of the Gospel, all the lives of the saints, and the stories of miracles and relics are
nothing but a coarse mixing up of the superstitions of the Jewish nation with the deceptions of
the clergy. Only for a man who is completely free from these deceptions can the simple and
clear teaching of Christ, which demands no interpretations and is self-comprehensible, be
accessible and comprehensible.

This teaching says nothing about the beginning or the end of the world, nor of God and His
intentions, and in general nothing about what we cannot know and need not know, but speaks
only of what a man has to do in order to be saved: to pass the life into which he has come in this
world in the best manner possible, from his birth to his death. For this purpose we need only
treat others as we wish to be treated. In this alone does the law and the prophets consist, as
Christ has said. To do so, we need no images, no relics, no divine services, no priests, no sacred
histories, no catechisms, and no governments. On the contrary, what we need is liberation from
all that, because only the man who is free from those fables which the priests give out to him as
the only truth, and only the man who is not bound to other people by promises to act as they
want him to act, can treat others as he wishes to be treated by them. Only in that case will a man
be able to do, not his own will, nor that of others, but the will of God.

But the will of God consists, not in fighting and oppressing others, but in recognizing all men
as brothers and serving one another.

Such are the thoughts that your letter evoked in me. I shall be very glad if they shall
contribute to the elucidation of the questions in which you are interested.

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