Letter to
Eugen Heinrich Schmitt
by Leo Tolstoy

You write that people absolutely fail to see that the fulfillment of any service to the state is incompatible with Christianity. Even so, people failed for a long time to see that indulgencies, the Inquisition, slavery, and torture were incompatible with Christianity; but the time came when this was evident, as the time will come when it will be plain, at first, that Christianity is incompatible with military service (this is beginning even now), and later, that it is incompatible with any service to the state.

As far back as fifty years ago a little-known, but very remarkable American author, Thoreau, not only clearly enunciated this incompatibility in his beautiful article on the duty of a man not to obey the government, but also in practice showed an example of this disobedience. He refused to pay the taxes demanded of him, as he did not wish to be an abettor and accomplice of a state that legalized slavery, and was put in prison for it.

Thoreau refused to pay the taxes to the state. Naturally, a man may on the same ground refuse to serve the state, as you beautifully expressed it in your letter to the minister, when you said that you did not consider it compatible with moral dignity to give your labor to an institution that serves as the representative of legalized murder and rapine.

Thoreau, I think, was the first to say so fifty years ago. At that time no one paid any attention to this his refusal and article. They seemed so strange. The refusal was explained on the ground of eccentricity. Your refusal already provokes discussion and, as always at the enunciation of new truths, double amazement – wonderment at hearing a man say such strange things, and, after that, wonderment at this: “Why didn’t I come to think of what this man speaks? It is so plain and unquestionable!”

Truths like these, that a Christian cannot be a military man – that is, a murderer – and that he cannot be the servant of an institution that maintains itself by violence and murder, are so unquestionable, simple, and incontestable that, for people to make them their own, there is no need of reflections, or proof, or eloquence, but only of repetition without cessation so that the majority of men may hear and understand them.

The truths that a Christian cannot be a participant in murder or serve and receive a salary, which is forcibly collected from the poor by the leaders in murder, are so simple and so incontestable that anyone who hears them cannot help but agree with them. If, having heard them, he continues to act contrary to these truths, he does so only because he is in the habit of acting contrary to them, because it is hard for him to break himself of the habit, and because the majority act just like him, so that a failure to carry out the truth does not deprive him of the respect of the majority of most respected men.

The same thing happens with regard to vegetarianism. “A man can be well and healthy without killing animals for his food. Consequently, if he eats meat, he contributes to the slaughter of animals only for the gratification of his taste. It is immoral to act thus.” This is so
simple and so incontestable that it is impossible not to agree to it. But because the majority still continue to eat meat, people, upon hearing that reflection, recognize it as just and immediately add, smiling, “A piece of good beefsteak is a good thing, all the same, and it will give me pleasure to eat it today at dinner.”

In precisely the same way, the officers and officials bear themselves in relation to the proofs as to the incompatibility of Christianity and humanitarianism with military and civil service. “Of course that is true,” such an official will say, “but it is all the same a pleasure to wear a uniform and epaulets, which will give us admission anywhere and will gain respect for us. It is still more agreeable, independent of any chance, with certainty and precision to get your salary on the first of the month. Your reflection is, indeed, correct, but I shall nonetheless try to get an increase in my salary and pension.” The reflection is admittedly incontestable but, in the first place, a man does not himself have to kill an ox – it is killed already. And a man does not himself have to collect the taxes and kill people – the taxes are already collected and there is an army. In the second place, most men have not yet heard this reflection and do not know that it is not right to act thus. And so it is permissible as yet not to refuse a savory beefsteak, a uniform, decorations that afford so many pleasant things, and, above all, a regular monthly salary. “As for the rest, we will see.”

The whole matter rests only on this: that men have not yet heard the discussion that shows them the injustice and criminality of their lives. And so we must keep up the cry, “Carthago delenda est,” and Carthage will certainly fall.

I do not say that the state and its power will fall, or that it will not happen so soon, for there are in the crowd still too many coarse elements that support it. What will be destroyed is the Christian support of the state – that is, the violators will cease to maintain their authority by the sacredness of Christianity. The violators will be violators, and nothing else. And when this shall happen, when they shall not be able to cloak themselves with the pretense of Christianity, the end of violence will be at hand.

Let us try to hasten this end. “Carthago delenda est.” The state is violence. Christianity is humility, nonresistance, and love. And so the state cannot be Christian, and a man who wants to be a Christian cannot serve the state.

Strange to say, just as you wrote me that letter about the incompatibility of political activity with Christianity, I wrote a long letter to a lady acquaintance on almost the same theme. I send you this letter. If you deem it necessary, print it.

October 12, 1896

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1 See Tolstoy’s Letter to the Liberals.