Nobel’s Bequest

by Leo Tolstoy

I read in some Swedish papers that a certain sum of money is bequeathed by Nobel’s will to him who shall most serve the cause of peace.

I assume that the men who serve the cause of peace do so only because they serve God, and that every monetary reward can only be disagreeable to them, in that it gives a selfish character to their service of God. For this reason it would seem that this condition of Nobel’s will can hardly be executed correctly. Indeed, it cannot be correctly executed in relation to the men themselves who have served the cause of peace all the time. But, I presume, it will be quite correctly executed if the money shall be distributed among the families of those men who have served the cause of peace and are in a most difficult and wretched condition in consequence of this service. I am speaking of the families of the Dukhobors of the Caucasus, who, to the number of four thousand people, have been suffering these three years from the Russian government’s severe treatment of them because their husbands, sons, and fathers refuse to do active or reserve military service.

Thirty-two of those who have refused have, after having stayed in the disciplinary battalion, where two of them died, been sent to the worst parts of Siberia, and about three hundred men are pining away in the prisons of the Caucasus and of Russia.

The incompatibility of military service with the profession of Christianity has always been clear for all true Christians, and has been expressed by them many times. But the church sophists, who are in the service of the authorities, have always known how to drown these voices so that simple people have not seen this incompatibility. Continuing to call themselves Christians, they have entered military service and have obeyed the authorities, which practiced them in acts of murder. But the contradiction between the profession of Christianity and the participation in military matters has become more obvious with every day. Finally, in our day, when the amicable communion and unity of the Christian nations is growing more and more intimate on the one hand, and these same nations are more and more burdened with terrible armaments for mutually hostile purposes on the other, it has reached the utmost degree of tension. Everyone speaks of peace, and peace is preached by the preachers and pastors in their churches, by the peace societies in their gatherings, by writers in newspapers and books, and by representatives of the government. It is heard in their speeches, toasts, and all kinds of demonstrations. Everybody speaks and writes about peace, but nobody believes in it and nobody can believe in it, because these same preachers and pastors, who today preach against war, tomorrow bless the flags and cannon and, extolling the commanders, welcome their armies. The members of the peace societies, their orators, and writers against war calmly enter the military caste and prepare themselves for murder as soon as their turns come. The emperors and kings, who yesterday solemnly assured all men that they are concerned only about peace, the next day exercise their troops for murder and boast to one another of their well-prepared multitudes armed for murder. And so the voices, raised amidst this universal lie by men who actually want peace, and show not only in words, but also in their acts that they really want it, cannot help but be heard. These people say, “We are Christians, and so we cannot agree to being murderers. You
may kill and torture us, but we will still refuse to be murderers, because murder is contrary to the same Christianity that you profess."

These words are very simple and so familiar that it seems strange to repeat them, and yet these words, enunciated in our time and under those conditions in which the Dukhobors are living, have a great significance. These words again point out to the world that simple, indubitable, and only means for the establishment of actual peace which was long ago pointed out by Christ, but which has been so forgotten by men that they search for means for the establishment of peace on all sides. They have no recourse to the one, long familiar method, which is so simple that nothing new has to be undertaken for its application. We need only to stop doing what we always and universally consider to be bad and disgraceful: we must stop being submissive slaves of those who prepare men for murder. Not only is this method simple, it is also indubitable. Any other method for the establishment of peace may be doubtful, but not this one, with which men who profess Christianity recognize what no one has ever doubted: that a Christian cannot be a murderer. And Christians need only recognize what they cannot help recognizing, and there will be eternal inviolable peace among all Christians. Not only is the method simple and indubitable, it is also the only method for the establishment of peace among Christians. It is the only one because the armies will be in the power of the governments so long as Christians recognize the possibility of their taking part in military service. And there will be wars so long as the armies shall be in the power of the governments. I know that this method was employed long ago. It was employed by the ancient Christians, who were executed by the Romans for this, and by the Paulicians, Bogomils, Quakers, Mennonites, and Nazarenes. But never before was this method employed so frequently and, above all else, so consciously, as it is now in Austria, Prussia, Switzerland, and Holland, where even the pastors preach the refusal to do military service. The government in Russia, for a period of three years and in spite of all its cunning, trickery, and cruelty, has been unable to break the determination of a small number of men who are living a Christian life.

Some say that this method is ineffective because, in spite of its having been in use for a long time, wars have been waged at the same time. This is the same as saying that the action of the sun is ineffective in the spring because all the earth has not thawed and the flowers have not yet bloomed.

It is true that Nazarenes sit in prisons in Austria, that separate individuals who have refused to do military service are being tortured to death in disciplinary battalions, that these same Dukhobors are locked up in jails while their families die from want in places of deportation, and that the triumph seems to be on the side of violence. But just as in the spring, when the earth has not yet thawed out and the flowers have not yet bloomed, it is possible to see on whose side the victory is. So it is here.

The Dukhobors look upon their ruin, want, imprisonment, and deportations as the work of serving God, and do this service with pride and joy, concealing nothing and fearing nothing, because nothing worse can be done to them unless they are put to death, which they do not fear.

But such is not the condition of the Russian government. If we, who are deceived by the government, do not see the whole significance of what the Dukhobors are doing, the government does see it. It not only sees the danger, but also the hopelessness of its position. It sees that as soon as people shall be freed from that spell under which they are now, shall understand that a Christian cannot be a soldier (and this they cannot help but understand), and shall hear what the Dukhobors did, the government will inevitably have to renounce either Christianity (and the governments rule in the name of Christianity) or its power. The government is in a desperate...
state in relation to the Dukhobors. They cannot be left alone, for all the rest will do likewise. Nor is it possible to destroy them or to lock them up forever, as is done with individuals who interfere with the government, for there are too many of them. The old men, wives, and children not only do not dissuade their fathers and husbands, but also encourage them in their determination. What is to be done?

And so the government tries secretly, murderously, to destroy these men and to make them harmless by keeping the men in solitary confinement with the greatest secrecy, forbidding outsiders to commune with them, and by sending them to the most remote regions of Siberia, among the Yakuts. It deports their families among the Tartars and Georgians. It does not admit anyone to them, forbids the printing of any information about the Dukhobors, and commands its accomplices to print all kinds of calumnies against them. But all these methods are ineffective. “The light shines in the dark.” It is impossible to at once wipe off from the face of the earth a population of four thousand people who command the respect of all men. If they shall die out under the conditions in which they are placed, this extinction will be slow. Extinction for the profession of the truth amidst other people is a most powerful sermon, and this sermon is being carried farther and farther. The government knows this and yet cannot help doing what it is doing, but we can already see on whose side the victory is.

It is this pointing out of the weakness of violence and of the power of truth that is, in our time, the great contribution of the Dukhobors to the cause of peace. For this reason, I think that no one has served the cause of peace more than they have. (The details of the unfortunate conditions under which their families are living may be learned from an article printed in Humanitas.) The money that Nobel wished should be given to those who, more than anyone else, serve the cause of peace could not be awarded to anyone with greater justice than to these very Dukhobor families.

This ought to be done, and be done as quickly as possible, because the want of the Dukhobor families is growing and growing, and in winter will have reached its utmost limits. If this money should be awarded to the Dukhobors, it can be sent directly to Tiflis or to those persons who will be named by me.

Yásnaya Polyána, August 29, 1897

Transcribed and edited by WWW.NONRESISTANCE.ORG.

This transcription is under no copyright protection. It is our gift to you. You may freely copy, print, and transmit it, but please do not change or sell it. And please bring any mistakes to our attention.