On Religious Toleration

by Leo Tolstoy

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In Russia there exist missionaries whose duty it is to convert all the non-Orthodox to Orthodoxy.

A congress of these missionaries assembled in the city of Orél toward the end of 1901. At the end of this congress the government marshal of nobility, Mr. Stakhóvich, delivered a speech in which he proposed to the congress to recognize full liberty of conscience. He meant by these words, as he expressed it, not only liberty of belief, but also liberty of profession of faith, which includes the liberty of defection from Orthodoxy and even converting people to faiths not in agreement with Orthodoxy. Mr. Stakhóvich assumed that such a liberty could only contribute to the triumph and dissemination of Orthodoxy, of which he recognized himself as being a believing professor.

The members of the congress did not agree to Mr. Stakhóvich’s proposition and did not even discuss it. Later on there began a lively exchange of ideas and a discussion as to whether the Christian church should be tolerant or not. Some, the majority of the Orthodox, both clerical and lay, expressed themselves in newspapers and periodicals against toleration, and, for one reason or another, recognized the impossibility of stopping the persecutions against the dissenting members of the church. Others, the minority, agreed with Stakhóvich’s opinion, approved of it, and argued the desirability and even the necessity for the church of recognizing liberty of conscience.

Those who dissented from Mr. Stakhóvich’s opinion said that the church, which gave everlasting good to men, could not fail to use all the means at its command for the salvation of its unreasoning members from eternal perdition, and that one of these means were the barriers set by the temporal power against defection from the true church and the conversion of its members. Above all things, they said, the church, which received from God the power to bind and loose, always knows what it is doing whenever it uses violence against its enemies. But, they claimed, the discussions of laymen about the regularity or irregularity of its measures only show the delusions of laymen who permit themselves to discuss the actions of the infallible church.

Thus spoke and always speak the opponents of toleration.

The advocates of toleration assert that it is unjust to prevent by force the profession of faiths that dissent from Orthodoxy, and that the subdivision made by the adversaries of toleration between belief and external profession of faith was without foundation, since every belief inevitably finds an expression in external actions.

Besides, they said, the true church, which has Christ at its head and His promise that no one shall overcome it, can be in no danger from the profession of a lie by a small number of heretics or dissenters. Moreover, the persecutions themselves do not achieve their purpose, for the reason that martyrdom only weakens the moral authority of the persecuting church and increases the power of the persecuted.
The advocates of toleration say that the church must in no case use violence against its dissenting members and against those who profess different faiths. The church must not use violence! But here the question involuntarily arises: how can the church use violence?

The Christian church, by the definition that it gives itself, is a society of men, established by God, which has for its aim the transmission to men of the true faith, which saves them in this world and in the world to come. How, then, can such a society of men, who have grace and the sermon for their instruments, wish for violence and actually exert it against people who do not accept their belief?

To advise the church not to persecute men who dissent from it, or convert its members, is the same as advising an academy of learned men not to persecute, punish, and deport those people who do not agree with their opinions. An academy of learned men cannot wish for such things, and if it did, it could not do so, because it has no instruments with which to accomplish such a deed.

What, then, is the significance of those persecutions which, since the time of Constantine, have been employed by the Christian church and which the advocates of religious toleration advise the church to put a stop to?

Mr. Stakhóvich, quoting in his speech Guizot’s words about the necessity for liberty of conscience for the Christian religion, cited after these good and clear words of Guizot the bad and confused words of Aksákov, who substitutes the concept of “church” for that of “Christian religion.” Having made this substitution, Aksákov tries to prove the possibility and necessity of religious toleration for the Christian church. But Christian religion and the Christian church are not one and the same thing, and we have no right whatever to assume that what is proper for the Christian religion is also proper for the Christian church.

Christian religion is that higher consciousness of man’s relation to God, which, ascending from a lower to a higher degree of religious consciousness, has been attained by humanity. And so Christian religion and all men who profess true Christian religion, knowing that they have reached a certain degree of clarity and a certain height of the religious consciousness thanks only to humanity’s constant motion from darkness to light, cannot help but be tolerant. Such men recognize themselves as in possession of a certain degree of the truth, which is made clearer and clearer and rises higher and higher only through the united efforts of humanity. When they meet new beliefs which differ from their own, not only do they not reject them, but they joyfully welcome them, study them, verify their own beliefs according to them, reject what is not in agreement with reason, accept what elucidates and advances the truth professed by them, and still more become confirmed in what is the same in all beliefs.

Such is the property of Christian religion in general, and this is the way in which men who profess Christianity act. Not so the church. The church recognizes itself as the one guardian of the full, divine, eternal, and forever unchangeable truth, which God Himself has revealed to men. It cannot help but look upon every religious teaching that differs from its own dogmas as a lying, harmful, and even ill-intentioned teaching (if it proceeds from those who know the condition of the church), which is drawing people to everlasting perdition. And so, by its own definition, the church cannot be tolerant and cannot help using against all the faiths, and also against the professors of faiths that dissent from its own, all those means which it considers in keeping with
its own doctrine. Thus Christian religion and the Christian church are two totally different conceptions. It is true, every church asserts that it is the only true representative of Christianity, but Christian religion (the professors of free Christian religion) in no way considers the church to be the representative of Christianity. The professors of Christian religion could not do so, since there are many churches, and each regards itself as the bearer of all the divine truth.

It is this confusion of two different conceptions, which is constantly used by the churchmen for various purposes, that is the reason why all their discussions about the desirability of religious toleration for the church suffer from a common obscurity, inflatedness, indefiniteness, and such a complete inconclusiveness.

Such are all the discussions in Russia of Khomyakó, Samárín, Aksákov, and men like them, and Mr. Stakhóvich’s speech also suffers from this. They are all not only empty, but even harmful babbling, which again drives incense smoke into the eyes of those who are beginning to be freed from the deception.

Thus the answer to the question as to how the church, which is defined as a society of men having for their purpose the preaching of the truth, and which has no instruments of violence and can have none, can nonetheless exert violence against dissenting faiths is only this: that the establishment which calls itself the Christian church is not a Christian, but a worldly institution which is different from Christianity and is rather hostile to it.

When this idea first came to me, I did not believe it, so firmly have we been impressed from childhood with awe for the sacredness of the church. At first I thought that it was a paradox, that in such a definition of the church there was some mistake. But the farther I proceeded in viewing this question from all sides, the more indubitable it became to me that the definition of the church as a non-Christian institution, hostile to Christianity, was precise, and that without it we could not explain all those contradictions which are contained in the past and the present activity of the church.

Indeed, what is the church? The professors of the church say that it is a society, established by Christ, which has been entrusted with the exclusive care and propaganda of the unquestionable divine truth, which was testified to by the descent of the Holy Ghost upon the members of the church, and that this testimony of the Holy Ghost is transmitted from generation to generation by the putting on of hands, as established by Christ.

But we need only analyze the data by which this is proved to become convinced that all these assertions are quite arbitrary. The two texts (of the Scripture, which the church considers sacred), on which the arguments about the establishment of the church by Christ Himself are based, do not at all have the significance ascribed to them. In no case can they signify the establishment of a church, since the very concept of the church did not exist at all in the time when the Gospel was written, much less in the time of Christ. But the third text on which they base their exclusive right to teach the divine truth, the final verses of Mark and Matthew, is recognized by all the investigators of Holy Scripture as forged. Still less can it be proved that the descent of tongues of fire upon the heads of the disciples, which was seen only by the disciples, signifies that everything which shall be said, not only by these disciples but also by all those upon whom the disciples have laid their hands, will be said by God, that is, by the Holy Ghost, and so is always unquestionably true.

The main thing is that, even if this were proved (which is quite impossible), there is no possibility of proving that this gift of infallibility abides precisely in the church that asserts this
of itself. The chief, unsolvable difficulty is that the church is not one and that every church asserts concerning itself that it alone has the truth, while all the others are wrong. Thus the assertion of every church that it alone has the truth has really as much weight as the assertion of a man who says, “Upon my word, I am right, and all those who disagree with me are wrong.”

“Upon my word, we alone constitute the true church.” All the proofs of the infallibility of every church are in this alone. Such a basis, in itself very shaky and very false, also has another fault: by excluding every verification of what the church, which considers itself infallible, preaches, it opens an unlimited field for all kinds of most confused fancies, which are given out as the truth. When senseless and fantastic assertions are given out as the truth, there naturally appear men who protest against such assertions. But to compel people to believe in senseless and fantastic assertions, there exists but one means: violence.

The whole of Nicene Creed is a concatenation of senseless and fantastic assertions, which could have arisen only among men who recognized themselves as infallible, and could have been disseminated only through violence.

Before all time, God the Father begot God the Son, from whom everything began. This Son was sent into the world to save men and there was born anew of a virgin, was crucified, rose from the dead, and ascended into heaven, where he sits on the right side of the Father. At the end of the world this Son will come to judge the living and the dead – and all that is an indubitable truth, revealed by God Himself.

We are unable in the twentieth century to accept all these dogmas, which are contrary to common sense and to human knowledge. Likewise, people were not deprived of common sense even at the time of the Nicene Council and could not have been able to accept all these strange dogmas, and expressed their dissent from them. But the church, regarding itself as alone in possession of the full truth, could not admit this and used the most effective means against this dissent and its dissemination: violence.

The church, united with temporal power, has always made use of violence – latent violence – but nonetheless definite and effective. It collected taxes from everyone by force, without inquiring about their agreement or disagreement with the state religion, and demanded of them the profession of that religion.

Having collected the money by violence, it established the most powerful hypnotization for the strengthening of its own faith among children and adults. If this means was not sufficient, it simply employed the violence of the temporal power. Thus there can be no such thing as religious toleration in the church, which is supported by the state. And this cannot be otherwise, so long as the churches are churches.

It will be said, “Churches like those of the Quakers, Wesleyans, Shakers, Mormons, and, especially now, the Catholics collect money from their members without the exertion of force, and so do not exert violence in supporting themselves.” But that is not true. The money that has been collected by rich men, especially from the Catholic congregations, during centuries of hypnotization by means of money, is not a free contribution by the members of the church, but the result of the grossest violence. Money is collected by means of violence and is always an instrument of violence. For the church to be able to consider itself tolerant, it must be free from all monetary influences. “You have received it gratis - give it gratis.”

In reality the church has no instruments of violence. If violence is exerted, it is not exerted by the church itself, but by the temporal power with which it is connected, and so there appears
the question: why do the governments and the ruling classes unite with the church and support it? It would seem that the beliefs preached by the church ought to be a matter of indifference to the governments and the ruling classes. It would seem that it ought to be a matter of absolute indifference to the governments and the ruling classes what the nations governed by them believe in – whether they are Protestants, Catholics, Orthodox, or Muslims. But that is not so.

At any time the religious beliefs correspond to the social structure, that is, the social structure arranges itself in accordance with the religious beliefs. And thus, as the religious beliefs of the nation are, so also is the social structure. The governments and the ruling classes know that and, therefore, they always support the religious teaching that corresponds to their advantageous position. The governments and the ruling classes know that true Christian religion denies power that is based on violence, the distinction of classes, the accumulation of wealth, punishments, and wars. The government and the ruling classes occupy their advantageous position as a consequence of all of these things, and so they consider it necessary to support the faith that justifies their position. This is done by church-corrupted Christianity by having distorting true Christianity and making it inaccessible to the people.

The governments and the ruling classes could not exist without this corruption of Christianity, which is called church faith. The church with its lie could not exist without the direct or indirect violence of the governments or of the ruling classes. In some states this violence finds its expression in persecutions. In others, it is expressed in the exclusive protection granted to the wealthy classes. But the possession of wealth is conditioned by violence. Therefore, the church, the government, and the ruling classes mutually support one another. Thus the opponents of religious toleration are quite right when they defend, on the part of the church, the right of violence and persecution on which its existence is based. The advocates of religious toleration would be right only if they did not turn to the church, but to the state, and if they demanded what is incorrectly called the “separation of church and state,” but what in reality is only the cessation of the government’s exclusive support the church by the direct means of violence, or by the indirect means of subsidizing one faith.

But to demand of the church that it should refrain from violence in any shape whatever is the same as to demand of a man who is besieged on all sides that he should lay down his arms and surrender himself to the enemy.

Only the true, free Christianity can be tolerant, since it is not connected with any worldly institutions. Such a Christianity is afraid of nothing and of no one, and has for its aim a greater and ever greater recognition of divine truth and a greater and ever greater realization of the same in life.

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