The Persecution of the Dukhobors

by Leo Tolstoy

In the world you shall have tribulation, but be of good cheer. I have overcome the world. (John 16:33)

The Dukhobors settled in the Caucasus have been subjected to cruel persecutions by the Russian authorities, and these persecutions, as described in a note written by a man who went to the spot, have been continued until the present time.

The Dukhobors have been beaten, flogged, and trampled underfoot by horses. The Cossacks were quartered upon the Dukhobor settlements, and with permission of the authorities they permitted themselves all kinds of acts of violence against the inhabitants. Those who refused to do military service were tortured physically and morally, and settlers, who by the labor of decades had established their prosperity, were driven from their homes and settled without allotment of land and without means of subsistence in Georgian villages.

The cause of these persecutions is that, through various causes, three-fourths of all the Dukhobors – about fifteen thousand men – recently returned with new vigor and conscious effort to their former Christian beliefs, and decided this summer to carry out Christ’s law of not resisting evil with violence. On the one hand, this decision caused them to destroy their weapons, which in the Caucasus are considered to be a necessity. Thus, by renouncing every possibility of resisting by means of violence, they have given themselves into the power of every violator. On the other hand, it led them to refuse under all conditions to take part in any acts of violence, as demanded of them by the government. Consequently, they also refuse military or other service that would demand the use of violence. The government could not allow such a departure of tens of thousands from the demands established by law, and a struggle ensued. Their government demands the fulfillment of its demands. The Dukhobors do not submit.

The government cannot yield. From the worldly point of view, this refusal of the Dukhobors to fulfill the demands of the government has no legal foundation and is contrary to all the existing and time-honored social norms. If for no other reason, it is impossible for the government to allow these refusals because, if they were allowed in the case of ten, there will tomorrow be one thousand or one hundred thousand who will similarly refuse to bear the burdens of taxes and service. People in government must reason that, if they allow this, instead of order and protection of life there will ensue arbitrary rule and chaos, and nobody’s property and life will be protected. They cannot reason otherwise, and are not at all to blame for this reasoning. Aside from any egotistical concern that such refusals must deprive him of his means of existence, which are collected from the masses by force, and aside from every egotistical concern about himself, every man connected with the government, from the Czar down to the rural chief, must be provoked to the bottom of his heart by the refusal of some uncultured, semi-illiterate people to fulfill the demands of the government, which are obligatory for all men. “By
what right,” he thinks, “do these insignificant people allow themselves to deny what is recognized by all, is sanctified by law, and is done everywhere?”

People in government cannot be blamed for acting as they do. They employ violence, rude violence, but they cannot do otherwise. Indeed, is it possible, by rational and humane means, to compel people who profess the Christian faith to enter into the class of men who teach murder and prepare themselves for it? It is possible to sustain people in deception by means of all sorts of stultification, oaths, and theological, philosophical, and juridical sophisms. But the moment the deception is in some way destroyed, and people, like the Dukhobors, call things by their name, saying, “We are Christians and so cannot kill,” the lie is revealed, and it becomes impossible to convince such people by means of rational proofs. The only possibility of compelling such people to obey consists in blows, executions, confiscation of their homes, and hunger and cold for the members of their families. And this they do. So long as the men of the government have not come to see their delusion, they can do nothing else and so are not to blame. Still less to blame are the Christians who refuse to take part in the study of murder and who refuse to enter into a class of men who are educated to kill all those whom the government commands them to kill. They, too, cannot act otherwise. A so-called Christian, who is baptized and brought up in Orthodoxy, Catholicism, or Protestantism, can continue to serve violence and murder so long as he does not understand the deception to which he was subjected. But the moment he comes to understand that every man is responsible to God for his acts, and that this responsibility cannot be shifted, nor removed from him by an oath, and that he must not kill nor prepare himself for murder, his participation in the army becomes morally as impossible as it is physically impossible for him to lift a weight of one hundred poods.¹

The terrible tragedy of the relation of Christianity to government consists in the fact that governments have to rule over Christian nations that are not yet entirely enlightened, but are becoming from day to day more enlightened by Christ’s teaching. All the governments since the time of Constantine have known and felt this, and have instinctively done everything they could for their self-preservation, shrouding the true meaning of Christianity and crushing its spirit. They have known that, if this spirit is acquired by men, violence will come to an end and government will naturally destroy itself. And so, the governments have done their work, building up governmental establishments, heaping laws and institutions one upon another, and hoping to bury underneath it the undying spirit of Christ, which is implanted in the hearts of men.

The governments have done their work, but the Christian teaching has at the same time done its work, penetrating deeper and deeper into the hearts of men. And the time came when the Christian cause got ahead of the government’s cause. This is as it ought to be, because the Christian cause is God’s cause, while the government’s cause is man’s cause.

In the burning of a pyre there comes a time when the fire, after it has worked within for a long time and has indicated its presence only by an occasional burst of fire and smoke, finally bursts forth on all sides, and it becomes impossible to stop the burning. Even so, in the struggle of the Christian spirit with pagan laws and institutions there comes a time when this Christian spirit bursts forth everywhere, can no longer be subdued, and every moment threatens destruction to those institutions that were heaped upon it.

Indeed, what can and must the government do in respect to these fifteen thousand Dukhobors, who refuse to do military service? What is to be done with them? They cannot be left as they are. Even with the present state of affairs, some Orthodox people have followed the

¹ Transcriber’s note – 1,600 kilograms or 3,600 pounds.
example set by the Dukhobors, and this is only the beginning of the movement. What will happen later? What will happen later if the same shall be done by the Milkers, Stundists, Lashers, and Wanderers? They look upon the government and military service in just the same way but have not taken a stand like the Dukhobors, only because they could not make up their minds to be the first and were afraid of suffering. There are millions of such people, not in Russia alone, but in all Christian countries, and not only in Christian countries, but also in Muslim countries, in Persia and Turkey and Arabia, people like the Harijites and Babists. It is necessary for the sake of others to neutralize these tens of thousands of men who do not recognize governments and do not wish to take part in them. How is this to be done? It is impossible to kill them – there are too many of them. It is awkward to put them all in prison. All that can be done is to ruin and torment them, and it is this that is done with them. But what if these torments shall not have the desired effect, and they shall continue to profess the truth and attract a still greater number of men to follow their example?

The position of the governments is terrible – terrible because they have nothing to fall back upon. It is certainly impossible to recognize as bad the acts of men like Drózhzhin, who was tortured to death in a prison, or like Izyumchénko, who is even now pinning away in Siberia, or like Doctor Shkarvan, who is sentenced to imprisonment in Austria, or like all those who are now in prison. These prisoners are prepared for suffering and for death, if only they do not have to depart from their very simple, all-comprehensible, universally approved religious convictions, which prohibit murder and participation in it. By no intricacy of thought is it possible to call the acts of these men bad or unchristian. It is not only impossible not to approve of them, but even not to be delighted with them, because it is impossible not to recognize that the men who act in this manner do so in the name of the very highest qualities of the human soul. Without these sublime qualities, human life falls down to the level of animal existence. If the government does not persecute men who, like the Dukhobors, Stundists, and Nazarenes, refuse to take part in the acts of the government, the advantage of the Christian peaceable manner of life will attract not only sincerely convinced Christians, but also those who put on the mask of Christianity for the sake of their own advantage, and so the number of men who do not fulfill the demands of the government will grow larger and larger. They are guilty of nothing but leading a more moral and a better life than others, wanting to fulfill in practice the law of the goodness that is recognized by all men. But if the government is cruel to such men, as it is now, this cruelty itself will repel more and more people from the government. And very soon the government will not find any people who are ready to support them by means of violence. The semi-savage Cossacks, who beat the Dukhobors by order of the authorities, very soon “began to pine,” as they expressed themselves, when they were quartered in the Dukhobor settlements. Their consciences began to trouble them, and the authorities, fearing the harmful influence of the Dukhobors upon them, hastened to take them away from there.

Not one persecution of innocent people ends otherwise than by men’s passing over from among the persecutors to the convictions of the persecuted, as was the case with the warrior Simon, who destroyed the Paulitians and then passed over to their faith. The more lenient the government shall be to the people who profess Christianity, the more quickly will the number of the true Christians be increased. The more cruel the government shall be, the more quickly will the number of people who serve the government be diminished. Thus, whether the government treats people, who in their life profess Christianity, with leniency or cruelty, it will itself in every way contribute to its own destruction. “Now is the judgment of this world: now shall the prince of the world be cast out.” (John 12:31) This judgment was pronounced eighteen hundred years
ago, when the truth of love was put in the place of the truth of external justice. No matter how much brush is thrown on a burning pile for the purpose of putting out the fire, the undying fire, the fire of truth, will be choked for only a little while, but will be fanned more than before and will burn everything that is put on it.

Even if it should happen that a few champions of truth, as has always happened, should weaken in their struggle and fulfill the government’s demands, this would not change the situation one hair’s breadth. Let the Dukhobors of the Caucasus surrender, succumbing to the sufferings to which their grandparents, wives, and children are subjected, and tomorrow new champions will arise, who will be prepared on all sides and will more and more boldly put forth their demands and will less and less be able to surrender. The truth cannot stop being the truth, even if people who bear testimony to it grow faint under the pressure of sufferings. The divine must vanquish the human.

“But what will happen if the government is destroyed?” I hear the question that is always put by the advocates of power, on the assumption that there will be nothing and everything will perish if there shall not be what now is. The answer to this question is always one and the same. There will be what must be, what pleases God, what is in agreement with His law as implanted in our hearts and revealed to our reason. If the government should be destroyed because we should destroy it, as the revolutionists did, then the question of what would happen after such destruction would demand an answer from those who destroy it. But the destruction of the government that is taking place now is not taking place because someone wants to deliberately destroy it. It is being destroyed because it is not in harmony with the will of God, which was revealed to our reason and implanted in our hearts. A man who refuses to put his brothers into prisons and to kill them has no intention of destroying the government. He merely does not want to do what is contrary to the will of God, what not only he, but even all men who have come out of the beastly state, recognize as an unquestionable evil. If by this the government is destroyed, it means only that the government demands what is contrary to God’s will—what is evil—and that, therefore, the government is an evil and must be destroyed. The change that is taking place in the social life of the nations in our time, though we cannot entirely imagine the form that it will assume, cannot be bad, because this change takes place and will take place, not by the arbitrary will of men, but by an internal demand, common to all men, of the divine principle that is implanted in the hearts of men. When childbirth takes place, all our activity should be directed, not to counteracting it, but to aiding it. But this aid is not attained by a departure from the divine truth revealed to us, but, on the contrary, by a public and fearless profession of it. Such a profession of the truth gives, not only full satisfaction to those who profess the truth, but also the greatest good to men, both to the violated and the violators. Salvation is not behind, but before us.

The moment of the crisis in the change of social life and of the substitution of another force that shall bind men together for the violence of government has already come. And the way out of it is no longer in the arrest of the process or in reversing its motion, but only in forward movement along the path in the hearts of men that is pointed out to them by Christ’s law.

One more little effort, and the Galilean will conquer—not in that terrible sense in which the pagan king ascribed victory to Him, but in the true sense in which He said of Himself that He had overcome the world. “In the world you shall have tribulation, but be of good cheer. I have overcome the world.” (John 16:33) He has, indeed, overcome the world, not in a mystical sense of an invisible victory over sin, but in a simple, clear, and comprehensible sense. If we shall

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2 Transcriber’s note – Constantine.
only be of good cheer and boldly profess Him, there will very soon not only be an end to all those terrible persecutions that are committed against all the true disciples of Christ who profess His teaching by their deeds, but there will also be an end to prisons, gallows, wars, debauchery, luxury, idleness, poverty, and the crushing labor under which Christian humanity now groans.

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