

Appeal to the Clergy by Leo Tolstoy

Transcriber's note – This is Tolstoy's most biting and inflammatory criticism of the Church and its clergy. While I do not agree completely with his evaluation of Christianity (although I do agree with much of it), and while this piece refers to nonviolence only tangentially, I have included it in this collection because it gives unique insight into his philosophy. I would ask those of you who would strongly disagree with Tolstoy's claims: how would you systematically, logically, and respectfully refute those claims? Old Leo is not the only one with ideas such as these. How would you win over those who feel the same way? – Tom Lock

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Whoever you may be – popes, cardinals, bishops, superintendents, priests, or pastors, of whatever Church – forego for a while your assurance that you in particular are the only true disciples of the God Christ, appointed to preach his only true teaching. Remember that before being popes, cardinals, bishops, or superintendents, etc., you are first of all men. According to your own teaching, you are beings sent into this world by God to fulfill His will. Remember this, and ask yourselves what you are doing. Your whole lives are devoted to preaching, maintaining, and spreading among men a teaching which you say was revealed to you by God Himself, and is, therefore, the only one that is true and brings redemption. In what, then, does this one true and redeeming doctrine that you preach, consist? To whichever one of the so-called Christian Churches – Roman Catholic, Russo-Greek, Lutheran, or Anglican – you may belong, you acknowledge that your teaching is quite accurately expressed in the articles of belief formulated at the Council of Nicaea sixteen hundred years ago. Those articles of belief are as follows:

First: There is a God the father (the first person of a Trinity), who has created the sky and the earth, and all the angels who live in the sky.

Second: There is an only son of God the father, not created, but born (the second person of the Trinity). Through this son the world was made.

Third: This son, to save people from sin and death (by which they were all punished for the disobedience of their forefather Adam), came down to the earth, was made flesh by the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary, and became a man.

Fourth: This son was crucified for the sins of men.

Fifth: He suffered and was buried, and rose on the third day, as had been foretold in Hebrew books.

Sixth: Having gone up into the sky, this son seated himself at his father's right side. Seventh: This son of God will, in due time, come again to the earth to judge the living and the dead.

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Eighth: There is a Holy Spirit (the third person of the Trinity),

who is equal to the father, and who spoke through the prophets.

Ninth: There is one holy, infallible Church (or, more exactly, the Church to which he who makes the confession belongs is held to be unique, holy, and infallible). This Church consists of all who believe in it, living or dead.

Tenth: There exists a Sacrament of Baptism, by means of which the power of the Holy Spirit is communicated to those who are baptized.

Eleventh: At the second coming of Christ, the souls of the dead will re-enter their bodies, and these bodies will be immortal; and

Twelfth: After the second coming, the just will have eternal life in paradise on a new earth under a new sky, and sinners will have eternal life in the torments of hell.

Not to speak of things taught by some of your largest churches (the Roman Catholic and Russo-Greek Orthodox) such as belief in saints, and in the good effects of bowing to their bodily remains, and to representations of them as well as of Jesus and the mother of God, the above twelve points embrace the fundamental positions of that truth which you say has been revealed to you by God Himself for the redemption of man. Some of you preach these doctrines simply as they are expressed. Others try to give them an allegorical meaning more or less in accord with present-day knowledge and common sense. But you all alike are bound to confess, and do confess, these statements to be the exact expression of that unique truth which God Himself has revealed to you, and which you preach to men for their salvation.

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Very well. You have had the one truth capable of saving mankind revealed to you by God Himself. It is natural for men to strive towards truth, and they are always glad to accept it, and to be guided by it when it is clearly presented to them. And, therefore, to impart this saving truth revealed to you by God Himself, it would seem sufficient, plainly and simply, verbally and through the press, to communicate it with reasonable persuasion to those capable of receiving it.

But how have you preached this truth?

From the time a society calling itself the Church was formed, your predecessors taught this truth chiefly by violence. They laid down the truth, and punished those who did not accept it. (Millions and millions of people have been tortured, killed, and burnt for not wishing to accept it.) This method of persecution, which was evidently not suited to its purpose, came to be less and less employed as time went on, and is now, I think, only used in Russia. Another means of teaching this truth was through external action on people's feelings by solemnity of setting, with pictures, statues, singing, music, dramatic performances, and oratorical art. In time this method, also, began to be used less and less. With the exception of the orator's art, external action is now but little used in Protestant countries. (The Salvation Army, which has devised new methods of external action on the feelings, is another exception.)

All the strength of the clergy is now directed to a third and most powerful method, which has always been used, and is now retained by the clergy in their own hands with special jealousy. This method is that of instilling Church doctrine into people who are not in a

position to judge what is given them. Doctrine is instilled into quite uneducated working people who have no time

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for thought, and chiefly into children, who indiscriminately accept what is imparted to them and on whose minds it remains permanently impressed.

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In our day, your chief method of imparting to men the truth God has revealed to you is teaching this truth to uneducated adults, and to children who do not reason and accept everything. This teaching generally begins with what is called Scripture History – that is to say, with selected passages from the Hebrew books of the Old Testament, which according to your teaching are the work of the Holy Spirit and are therefore not only unquestionably true, but also holy. From this history your pupil draws his first notions of the world, of the life of man, of good and evil, and of God.

This Scripture History begins with a description of how God, the ever-living, created the sky and the earth out of nothing 6,000 years ago. It continues with how He afterward created beasts, fishes, plants, and finally man: Adam, and Adam's wife, who was made of one of Adam's ribs. Then it describes how, fearing lest the man and his wife should eat an apple having the magic quality of giving knowledge, He forbade them to eat that apple. Notwithstanding this prohibition, the first people ate the apple, and were therefore expelled from Paradise. All their descendants were therefore cursed, and the earth was also cursed, so that since then it has grown weeds. Then the life of Adam's descendants is described: how they became so perverted that God not only drowned them all, but drowned all the animals with them, and left alive only Noah and his family and the animals he took into the ark. Then it describes how God chose Abraham alone of all people, and made an agreement with him, which was that Abraham was to consider God to be God, and, as a sign of this, was to be circumcised. On His side, God undertook to give Abraham a numerous progeny, and to patronize him and all his offspring. Then it tells how God, patronizing Abraham and his descendants, performed the most unnatural actions (called miracles) and the most terrible cruelties on their behalf. Some of these stories are naive (the visit of God with two angels to Abraham, the marriage of Isaac, and others), and some are innocent, but more often they are immoral (such as the swindles of God's favorite, Jacob, the cruelties of Samson, and the cunning of Joseph). The whole of this history – from the plagues Moses called down upon the Egyptians and the murder of all their firstborn by an angel, to the fire that destroyed 260 conspirators, to the tumbling into the ground of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram, to the destruction of 14,700 men in a few minutes, to the sawing of enemies with saws, to the execution of the priests who did not agree with him by Elijah (who rode up into the sky), and to the story of Elisha, who cursed boys who laughed at him so that they were torn in pieces and eaten by two bears – this entire history is a series of miraculous occurrences and of terrible crimes committed by the Hebrew people, by their leaders, and by God Himself.

But your teaching of the history you call sacred is not limited to that. Besides the history of the Old Testament, you also impart the

New Testament to children and to ignorant people in a way that makes the importance of the New Testament consist not in its moral teaching, and not in the Sermon on the Mount, but in the conformity of the Gospels with the stories of the Old Testament, in the fulfillment of prophecies, and in miracles: the movement of a star, songs from the sky, talks with the devil, the turning of water into wine, walking on the water, healings, calling people back to life, and, finally, the resurrection of Jesus himself and his flying up into the sky.

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If all these stories, both from the Old and New Testaments, were taught as a series of fairy-tales, even then hardly any teacher would decide to tell them to children and adults he desired to enlighten. But these tales are imparted to people who are unable to reason, as though they were the most trustworthy description of the world and its laws, as if they gave the truest information about the lives of those who lived in former times, about what should be considered good and evil, about the existence and nature of God, and about the duties of man.

People talk of harmful books! But is there in Christendom a book that has done more harm to mankind than this terrible book, called Scripture History from the Old and New Testaments? All the men and women of Christendom have to pass through a course of this Scripture History during their childhood, and this same history is also taught to ignorant adults as the first and most essential foundation of knowledge – as the one, eternal truth of God.

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You cannot introduce a foreign substance into a living organism without the organism suffering, and sometimes perishing, from its efforts to rid itself of this foreign substance. What terrible evil to a man's mind must result from this rendering of the Old and New Testaments – foreign alike to present-day knowledge, to common-sense, and to moral feeling – which is instilled into him at a time when he is unable to judge, but accepts all that is given to him! Consider a man into whose mind has been introduced as sacred truths a belief in the creation of the world out of nothing 6,000 years ago, in the flood and an ark that accommodated all the animals, in a Trinity, in Adam's fall, in an immaculate conception, in Christ's miracles, and in salvation for men by the sacrifice of his death. The demands of reason are no longer obligatory for such a man, and such a man cannot be sure of any truth. If the Trinity, an immaculate conception, and the salvation of mankind by the blood of Jesus are all possible, then anything is possible and the demands of reason are not obligatory.

Drive a wedge between the floorboards of a granary, and no matter how much grain you may pour into the granary, it will not stay there. The same is true of a head into which the wedge of a Trinity has been driven, or the wedge of a God who became man and redeemed the human race by his sufferings and then flew up into the sky. Such a man can no longer grasp any reasonable or firm understanding of life.

However much you may put into the granary that has cracks in its floor, all will run out. Whatever you may put into a mind that has accepted nonsense as a matter of faith, nothing will remain in it.

Such a man, if he values his beliefs, will inevitably, all his life long, either be on his guard (as against something harmful) against all that might enlighten him and destroy his superstitions; or, having once and for all assumed (and the preachers of Church doctrine will always encourage him in this) that reason is the source of error, he will repudiate the only light given to man to enable him to find his path in life; or, most terrible of all, he will, by cunning argumentation, try to demonstrate the reasonableness of what is unreasonable, and, worst of all, will discard, together with the superstitions that were instilled into him, all consciousness of the necessity for any faith whatever.

1 Translator's note – The reference here is not to the Old and New Testaments in their entirety (the extreme value of many parts of which Tolstoy does not question), but to a compilation for school use, which is largely used in place of the Bible.

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In any one of these three cases, a man into whom meaningless and contradictory assertions have been instilled during childhood as religious truth is a man mentally diseased – unless he is able to free himself from them with much effort and suffering. Such a man, seeing around him the constantly moving and changing facts of life, cannot watch this movement destroying his conception of life without a feeling of desperation, and cannot but experience (openly or secretly) an unkindly feeling towards those who co-operate in this reasonable progress. Nor can he help being a conscious partisan of obscurity and lies against light and truth.

And such are the majority of people in Christendom, by the inculcation of nonsensical beliefs deprived from childhood of the capacity to think clearly and firmly.

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Such is the evil done to man's mind by having it impregnated with Church doctrines. But much worse than this is the moral perversion that this impregnation produces in man's soul. Every man comes into the world with a consciousness of his dependence on a mysterious, all-powerful Source that has given him life, consciousness of his equality with all men, consciousness of the equality of all men with one another, a desire to love and be loved, and a consciousness of the need of striving towards perfection. But what do you instill into him?

Instead of the mysterious Source of which he thinks with reverence, you tell him of an angry, unjust God, who executes and torments people.

Instead of the equality of all men, which the child and the simple man recognize with all their being, you tell them that not only people, but nations, are unequal; that some of them are loved by God, and that others are not; and that some people are called by God to rule, and others are called to submit

Instead of the wish to love and to be loved, which forms the strongest desire in the soul of every unperverted man, you teach him that the relations between men can only be based on violence, threats, and executions. And you tell him that judicial and military murders are committed not only with the sanction of God, but at His command.

In place of the need of self-improvement, you tell him that man's salvation lies in his belief in Redemption, that man is guilty of sinful pride if he improves himself by his own powers (without the aid of prayers, sacraments, and belief in Redemption), and that man must trust for his salvation, not to his own reason, but to the commands of the Church, and must do what she decrees.

It is terrible to think of the perversion of thought and feeling produced in the soul of a child or an ignorant adult by such teaching.

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Oh, to think of the things I know of that have been done in Russia during the sixty years of my conscious life, and that are still being done!

In the theological colleges and among the bishops, learned monks, and missionaries, hair-splitting discussions of intricate theological problems are carried on. They talk of reconciling moral and dogmatic teaching, dispute about the development or immutability of dogmas, and discuss similar religious subtleties. But all that is preached to the hundred million common folk

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is a belief in Iberian or Kazan icons of the Mother of God, a belief in relics and devils, a belief in the redemptive efficacy of having bread blessed and placing candles, and a belief in having prayers said for the dead. Not only is this all preached and practiced, but the inviolability of these popular superstitions is also guarded from any infringement with particular jealousy. A peasant has but to forget to observe the feast day of the local saint, or to forget to invite a wonder-working icon to his house when it makes the round of his village, or to work on the Friday before St. Bliss's day, and he will be denounced, prosecuted, and exiled. Not to speak of sectarians being punished for not observing the ceremonies of the Church, they are tried and punished for even meeting together to read the Gospels.

And the result of all this activity is that tens of millions of people, including nearly all the peasant women, are not only ignorant of Jesus, but have never even heard who he was, or that he existed. This is hard to believe, but it is a fact that anyone can easily verify for himself.

Listen to what is said by the bishops and academicians at their conferences, read their magazines, and you would think that the Russian priesthood preaches a faith, even if it is backward, that is still a Christian faith in which the Gospel truths find a place and are taught to the people. But watch the activity of the clergy among the people, and you will see that what is preached and energetically inculcated is simply idolatry: the elevation of icons, the blessing of water, the carrying from house to house of miracle-working icons, the glorification of relics, the wearing of crosses, and so forth. And all the while, every attempt to understand the real meaning of Christianity is energetically persecuted.

Within my recollection the Russian laboring classes have, in a great measure, lost the traits of true Christianity they formerly possessed, but which are now carefully banished by the clergy. Among the people there formerly existed (but now only in out-of-the-way districts) Christian legends and proverbs, verbally handed down from

generation to generation. Among these are the legend of Christ wandering in the guise of a beggar, the legend of the angel who doubted God's mercy, and the legend of the crazy man who danced at a drum-shop. The proverbs include sayings such as, "Without God one can't reach the threshold," "God is not in might, but in right," and "Live till eve, live forever." These legends and proverbs formed the spiritual food of the people.

Besides these, there were Christian customs: to have pity on a criminal or a wanderer, to give of one's last resources to a beggar, and to ask forgiveness of a man one has offended. All this is now forgotten and discarded. It is now all replaced by learning the Catechism by rote, the triune composition of the Trinity, prayers before lessons, and prayers for teachers and for Czar. So, within my recollection, the people have grown ever coarser religiously.

One part – most of the women – remain as superstitions as they were 600 years ago, but without that Christian spirit which formerly permeated their lives. Those of other part, who know the Catechism by heart, are absolute atheists. And the clergy consciously brings all this about.

"But that applies to Russia," is what Western European Catholics and Protestants will say. But I think that the same, if not worse, is happening in Catholicism, with its prohibition of the Gospels and its Notre-Dames. The same is happening in Protestantism with its holy idleness on the Sabbath day and its bibliolatry – that is, its blind belief in the literal truth of the Bible. I think, in one form or another, it is the same throughout the quasi-Christian world. In proof of this, it is sufficient to remember the age-old fraud of the flame that kindles in Jerusalem on the

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day of the Resurrection, and which no one of the Church people exposes; or faith in Redemption, which is preached with peculiar energy in the very latest phases of Christian Protestantism.

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But not only is the Church teaching harmful by its irrationality and immorality, it is specially harmful because people professing this teaching, while living without any moral demands to restrain them, feel quite convinced they are really living a Christian life.

People live in insensate luxury, obtaining their wealth by the labor of the humble poor, and defending themselves and their riches with policemen, law-courts, and executions. You, the clergy, approve, sanctify, and bless this way of life in the name of Christ, merely advising the rich to allot a small part of what they have stolen to the service of those from whom they continue to steal. When slavery existed, you always and everywhere justified it, and did not consider it inconsistent with Christianity.

People strive by force of arms and by murder to attain their covetous aims, personal or public. You, the clergy, approve and bless preparations for war, and war itself, in Christ's name. You not only approve, but often encourage these things, holding war – that is, murder – not to be contrary to Christianity. People who believe in such teaching are not merely led into an evil way of life by it, but are fully persuaded that their evil life is a good one, which there is no need for them to alter.

Nor is that all. The chief evil of this teaching is that it is so

skillfully interwoven with the external forms of Christianity, that, while professing it, people think your doctrine is the one true Christianity, and that there is no other! It is not only that you have diverted from men the spring of living water (were that all, people might still find it), but you have poisoned it with your teachings. Now the people cannot find any Christianity but this one poisoned by your interpretations. The Christianity preached by you is an inoculation of false Christianity, resembling the inoculation for smallpox or diphtheria, and has the effect of making those who are inoculated immune to true Christianity.

People feel fully persuaded that they are living Christian lives, having for many generations built their lives on foundations irreconcilable with true Christianity, and thus they are unable to return to true Christianity.

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Thus it is with those who profess your doctrines. But there are others, who have emancipated themselves from those doctrines: the so-called unbelievers. They, as a result of the spiritual taint to which they were exposed in their childhood, have an influence on their neighbors that is worse even than that of those who profess your teachings. (Although, in most cases, they are more moral in their lives than the majority of those who profess Church doctrines.) They are specially harmful because, having in childhood shared the misfortune of the rest of the inhabitants of Christendom and having been trained in the Church frauds, they have so identified Church teachings with Christianity that they now cannot distinguish the one from the other, and in rejecting the false Church teaching they throw away with it that true Christian teaching which it has hidden.

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These people, detesting the fraud that has caused them so much suffering, preach not only the uselessness but also the harmfulness of Christianity, and not of Christianity only, but of any religion whatever. Religion, in their perception, is a remnant of superstition, which may have been of use to people once, but now is simply harmful. Their doctrine is that the quicker and more completely people free themselves from every trace of religious consciousness, the better it will be. They are among the most educated and learned of men, who therefore have the greatest authority with people searching for the truth. And so, preaching this emancipation from all religion, they consciously or unconsciously become most harmful preachers of moral laxity.

Ascertaining one's relation to the Source of all things is the most important mental characteristic of a rational creature, and from it alone can any firm moral laws be deduced. By suggesting that this is something man has outlived, the deniers of religion involuntarily postulate simple self-love and the bodily appetites that flow from it as the sole basis of human activity. Among these authorities a teaching of egotism, evil, and hatred sprang up. It was always present in hidden, latent form in the life-conception of the materialists, and at first it showed itself timidly, but in recent times it has been vividly and deliberately expressed in the doctrines of Nietzsche and is now spreading rapidly, evoking the most coarsely animal and cruel instincts in mankind.

On the one hand, the so-called believers find complete approval of their evil way of life in your teaching, which recognizes those actions and conditions which are most contrary to Christianity as compatible with it. On the other hand, unbelievers, arriving at the denial of all religion as a consequence of your teaching, wipe out all distinction between good and evil, preach a doctrine of inequality, egotism, strife, and the oppression of the weak by the strong, and preach this as the highest truth attainable by man.

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You, and none but you, because of your forcibly instilled teaching, are the cause of this dreadful evil, from which the people suffer so cruelly. Most terrible of all is the fact that, while causing this evil, you do not believe the teaching you preach. Not only do you not believe all the assertions of which it is composed, but often you do not believe a single one of them.

I know that, repeating the celebrated credo quia absurdum², many of you think that you do believe all that you preach, in spite of everything. But the fact that you say you believe that God is a Trinity, or that the heavens opened and the voice of God spoke from up there, or that Jesus rose up into the heavens and will come from there to judge all mankind in their bodies, does not prove that you really believe that the things mentioned have occurred, or will occur. You believe you ought to say that you believe these things happened, but you do not believe them. The assertions that God is One and Three and that Jesus flew up into the sky and will come back from there to judge those who will rise in their bodies have no meaning for you. One may utter words that have no sense, but one cannot believe what has no sense. It is possible to believe that the souls of the dead will pass into other forms of life such as animals, or that the annihilation of the passions is the destiny of man, or that the attainment of love is that destiny. It is possible to believe simply that God has forbidden us to kill men, or even that He forbids us to eat certain things. Many other things may be believed that do not involve self-contradiction, but one cannot

² Transcriber's note – I believe it because it is absurd.

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believe that God is both One and also Three at the same time, or that the sky, which for us is no longer a tangible thing, opened to let Jesus into heaven.

The people of former ages, who framed these dogmas, could believe in them, but you can no longer do so. If you say you have faith in them, you say so only because you use the word "faith" in one sense, while you apply to it another. One meaning of the word "faith" refers to a relation adopted by man towards God, which enables him to define the meaning of his whole life and guides all his conscious actions. Another meaning of the word "faith" is the credulous acceptance of assertions made by a certain person or persons. In the first sense, the objects of faith are verified and accepted by reason, although the definition of man's relation to God and to the world is generally accepted as framed by those who lived previously. But in the second sense, the objects of faith are not only accepted independently of reason, but are accepted on the absolute condition that reason is not to be allowed to question what is asserted.

On this double meaning of the word "faith" is founded that misunderstanding which enables people to say they believe, or have "faith," in propositions devoid of sense or involving a contradiction in terms. And the fact that you are blindly credulous towards your teachers is no proof that you have faith in what cannot be an object of faith, since it is senseless and, therefore, supplies no meaning either to your imagination or your reason. The well-known preacher, Père Didon, in the introduction to his Vie de Jesus-Christ, announces that he believes, not in some allegorical sense but plainly, without explanations, that Christ, having risen, was carried up into the sky and sits there at the right hand of his father.

An illiterate Samara peasant of my acquaintance, in reply to the question whether he believed in God, simply and firmly replied, "No, sinner that I am, I don't believe." The peasant explained his disbelief in God by saying that one could not live as he was living if one believed in God. "A person scolds, withholds help from a beggar, envies, over-eats, and drinks strong drinks. Could one do such things if one believed in God?"

Père Didon affirms that he has faith both in God and in the ascension of Jesus, while the Samara peasant says he does not believe in God, since he does not obey His commandments. Evidently, Père Didon does not even know what faith is, and only says he believes, while the Samara peasant knows what faith is, and though he says he does not believe in God, he really does believe in Him in the very way that is true faith.

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But I know that arguments addressed to the intellect do not persuade. Only feeling persuades, and therefore, leaving arguments aside, I appeal to you, whoever you may be: popes, bishops, archdeacons, priests, or what not. I appeal to your feelings and to your consciences. You know that what you teach about the creation of the world, about the inspiration of the Bible by God, and much else is not true. How then can you teach it to little children and to ignorant adults, who look to you for true enlightenment?

Ask yourself, with your hand on your heart, do you believe what you preach? If you really ask yourself that question, not before men but before God, remembering the approaching hour of death, you cannot but answer, "No, I do not believe it." You do not believe in the God's inspiration of the whole of those writings which you call sacred. You do not believe all the horrors and wonders of the Old Testament. You do not believe in hell, the Immaculate Conception, the resurrection and ascension of Christ, the physical resurrection of the dead, and

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the triune personality of God. Not only do you not believe all the articles of the creed that expresses the essence of your faith, but many of you do not even believe a single one of them.

Disbelief, if but in a single dogma, involves disbelief in the infallibility of the Church, which has set up the dogma you do not believe. But if you do not have faith in the Church, you will not believe in the dogmas she set up.

If you do not believe, if even you have any doubts, think what you are doing in preaching what you do not yourselves believe as divine,

unquestionable truth. And you preach it by methods that are exceptional and unfair. Do not say that you cannot take upon yourselves the responsibility of depriving people of intimate union with the great or small number of your co-religionists. That is not fair. By instilling your special faith into them, you are doing just what you say you do not wish to do: you are depriving people of their natural union with all mankind, and are confining them within the narrow limits of your single sect, thereby involuntarily and inevitably placing them, if not in a hostile, at least in an alien attitude towards everyone else.

I know that you do not consciously do this terrible thing. I know that you yourselves, for the most part, are entangled, hypnotized, and often so situated that for you to confess the truth would mean to condemn all your former activity, the activity sometimes of several decades. Considering the training you have had, and especially with the common assurance among you that you are the infallible successors of the God-Christ, I know how difficult it will be for you to face sober realities and to confess yourselves as wandering sinners, engaged in one of the worst activities a man can possibly pursue.

I know all the difficulties of your position. But remembering the words of the Gospels you acknowledge as divine – that God rejoices more over one sinner who repents than over a hundred righteous persons – I think that for each one of you, whatever his position may be, it should be easier to repent and to cease to take part in what you are doing, than, not believing, to continue to do it. Whoever you may be – popes, cardinals, archbishops, bishops, superintendents, priests, or pastors – think of this. If you belong to those of the clergy (of whom there are unfortunately very many, and continually more and more in our days) who see clearly how obsolete, irrational, and immoral the Church teaching is, but who, without believing in it, still continue to preach it from personal motives (for their salaries as priests or bishops), do not console yourselves with the supposition that your activity is justified by any utility it has for the masses of the people, who do not yet understand what you understand.

Falsehood cannot be useful to anyone. The common men whom you have indoctrinated could equally know what you know: that falsehoods are falsehoods. If it were not for you, they might free themselves from these falsehoods, and find the truth that Christ has shown. But you have hidden these truths by standing between the common men and their God. What you are doing, you are doing not to serve man, but only from ambition or covetousness.

Therefore, however magnificent the palaces in which you live may be, and the churches in which you officiate and preach, and the vestments in which you adorn yourselves, your occupation is not made better by these things. "That which is highly esteemed among men is an abomination in the sight of God."

So it is with those who, not believing, continue to preach what is false, and continue to strengthen men in it. But there are among you those also (and their number is continually increasing) who, though they see the bankrupt position of the Church creeds in our day, cannot make up their minds to examine them critically. Belief has been so instilled into them in

childhood, and is so strongly supported by their environment and by the influence of the crowd, that they devote all the strength of their minds and education to justify the incompatibilities and contradictions of the creed they profess. They do this through cunning allegories and false and confused reasoning, and do not even try to free themselves from these beliefs. If you belong to this class of clergy, which though less guilty is even more harmful than the class previously mentioned, do not imagine that your reasoning will quiet your conscience or justify you before God. All that you can devise and invent will not make the immoral stories of Scripture history or the archaic affirmations of the Nicene Creed moral, reasonable, clear, or accordant with contemporary knowledge and common sense. In the depth of your souls you cannot but know that they are nowadays in opposition to man's knowledge and understanding.

You know that you cannot convince anyone of the truth of your faith by your arguments. No fresh, grown-up, educated man, not trained from childhood to your belief, can believe you. Such a man will either laugh or will suppose you to be mentally afflicted when he hears your accounts of the creation of the world, of the first man, of Adam's sin, and of the redemption of man by the death of the son of God.

All you can bring about by your false, pseudo-scientific argumentations and by your authority will be to temporarily keep in hypnotic submission those who are awakening from a false faith, even as they are preparing to free themselves from its influence. That is what you are doing, and it is a very evil work. Instead of employing your mental powers to free yourselves and others from the fraud you and they are involved in, and which causes you and them to suffer, you use your powers yet further to entangle yourselves and them. You, the clergy of this class, should not entangle yourselves and others by obscure argumentation. You should not try to demonstrate that truth is what you call truth. On the contrary, you should make every effort to verify the beliefs you have accepted as truth by comparing them with what you and everyone else accept as sure knowledge, and also by the simple demands of common sense. You need only sincerely set yourselves that task, and you will at once awake from the hypnotic sleep in which you now are, and the terrible delusion in which you have lived will become clear to you.

So it is with this second class, the philosophizing clergy, who are very numerous and harmful in our day. But there is also a third class of simple-minded clergy who have never doubted the truth of the faith they profess and preach. These men have never thought about the sense and meaning of the affirmations taught to them in their childhood as sacred divine truth. Or, if they have thought about it, they were so unaccustomed to independent thinking that they did not see the incompatibilities and contradictions involved in those affirmations. Or, seeing them, they were yet so overpowered by the authority of Church tradition that they have not dared to think otherwise than what former and present ecclesiastics have thought. These men generally console themselves with the thought that Church doctrine probably has some satisfactory explanation of what to them only appear to be incompatibilities, owing to their own

deficiency in theological erudition.

Whether you are already an ordained priest or a young man only preparing for the priesthood, if you belong to that class of men, sincerely and naively believing and oblivious of the obstacles to doing so, pause for a while and consider what you are doing or are about to do. You are preaching, or are preparing to preach, a teaching that will define the meaning of men's lives. You will define life's purpose, indicate the features of good and evil, and give direction to all these men's activities. And you will not preach this teaching as any other human doctrine,

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imperfect and open to question, but as a teaching revealed by God Himself, and therefore not to be questioned. You will not preach it in a book or ordinary conversation, but either to children, at an age when they cannot understand the meaning of what is conveyed to them, or to ignorant adults who are unable to weigh the instruction you give to them.

Such is or will be your livelihood. But what if what you teach, or are preparing to teach, is untrue? Is it possible that this cannot or must not be considered? Consider this teaching and compare it with other teachings claiming to be equally unique and infallible. Compare it with what you yourselves know and with common sense. If you consider it freely, and not in a spirit of blind credulity, you cannot fail to see that what has been given to you as sacred truth is not only not sacred truth, but is simply an obsolete and superstitious belief. Like other similar beliefs, it is maintained and preached by men, not for the benefit of their brothers, but for some other reason. And as soon as you have understood that, all those of you who look on life seriously and attend to the voice of conscience will be unable to continue to preach this doctrine.

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But I hear the usual reply, "What will become of men if they cease to believe the Church doctrines? Won't things be worse than they are now?"

What will happen if the people of Christendom cease to believe in Church doctrine? The result will be that not the Hebrew legends alone, but the religious wisdom of the whole world will become accessible and intelligible to them. People will grow up and develop with unperverted understandings and feelings. Having discarded a teaching accepted credulously, people will order their relation towards God reasonably, in conformity with their knowledge; and will recognize the moral obligations flowing from that relation.

"But won't the results be worse?"

If the Church doctrine is not true, how can it be worse for men not to have falsehood preached to them as truth, especially in a way so unfair as is now adopted for the purpose?

But, some people say, "The common folk are coarse and uneducated. What we, the educated people, do not require may yet be useful and even indispensable for the masses.

If all men are made alike, then all must travel one and the same path from darkness to light, from ignorance to knowledge, from falsehood to truth. You have travelled that road and have attained consciousness of the unreliability of the belief in which you were trained. By what right, then, will you prevent others from making

the same advance? You say that, though you do not need such food, it is needed by the masses. But no wise man undertakes to decide the physical food that another must eat. How, then, can it be decided – and who can decide – what spiritual food the masses of the people must have?

The fact that you notice a demand among the people for this doctrine in no way proves that the demand ought to be supplied. There exists a demand for intoxicants, tobacco, and other yet worse demands. And the fact is that you yourselves, by complex methods of hypnotization, evoke this very demand, by the existence of which you try to justify your own occupation. Only cease to evoke the demand, and it will not exist. As it is in your own case, so it is with everyone else. There can be no demand for lies, but all men have moved and still move from darkness to light. And you, who stand nearer to the light, should try to make it accessible to others, and not to hide it from them.

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But I hear a last objection, “Will the result not be worse if we – the educated, moral men, who desire to do good to the people – abandon our posts because of the doubts that have arisen in our souls, and let our places be taken by coarse, immoral men, who are indifferent to the people’s good?”

Undoubtedly, if the best men abandon the clerical profession, then the ecclesiastical business will pass into coarse, immoral hands, causing it to disintegrate more and more and exposing its own falseness and harmfulness. But the result will not be worse, for the disintegration of ecclesiastical establishments is now going on, and is one of the means by which people are being liberated from the fraud in which they have been held. And, therefore, the quicker this emancipation is accomplished, by enlightened and good men abandoning the clerical profession, the better it will be.

And so, the greater the number of enlightened and good men who leave the clerical profession, the better it will be.

So from whichever side you look at your activity, that activity remains harmful. Therefore, all those among you who still fear God, and have not quite stifled the voice of conscience, cannot do otherwise than exert all your strength to release yourselves from the false position in which you are placed. I know that many of you are encumbered with families, or are dependent on parents who require you to follow the course you have begun. I know how difficult it is to abandon a post that brings honor or wealth, or even enables you and your families to continue a life to which you are accustomed, and I know how painful it is to go against relations one loves. But anything is better than to do what destroys your own soul and injures your fellow men. Therefore, the sooner and more definitely you repent of your sin and cease your activity, the better it will be not only for others, but also for yourselves.

That is what I – standing now on the brink of my grave³, and clearly seeing the chief source of human ills – wish to say to you. I say it, not in order to expose or condemn you, for I know how imperceptibly you were yourselves led into the snare that has made you what you are). But I wish to say it in order to co-operate in the emancipation of men from the terrible evil that the preaching of your doctrine produces by obscuring the truth. At the same time, I

wish to help you to rouse yourselves from the hypnotic sleep in which now you often fail to understand all the wickedness of your own actions.

May God, who sees your hearts, help you in that effort.

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3 Transcriber's note -Tolstoy did not, in fact, die for another eight years. 13