

HELP!

Postscript to an Appeal to Help the Dukhobors Persecuted in the Caucasus

by Leo Tolstoy

Translated from the Original Russian and edited by Leo Wiener  
Assistant Professor of Slavic Languages at Harvard University

1896

The facts related in this appeal, composed by three of my friends, have been many times verified, looked over, and sifted ; this appeal has several times been changed and corrected ; everything which might appear as an exaggeration, though it is true, has been rejected ; thus everything which is now told in this appeal is the real, indubitable truth, to the extent to which the truth is accessible to men who are guided by the one religious sentiment of a desire by the publication of this truth to serve God and one's neighbours, both the persecuted and the persecutors.

But no matter how startling the facts here related may be, their significance is determined not by the facts themselves, but by how those who will learn of it will look upon them.

" But they are a kind of mutineers, coarse, illiterate peasants, fanatics, who have come under some evil influence. They are a dangerous, anti-governmental sect, which the government cannot tolerate and must obviously suppress, like any other doctrine which may be harmful to the common good. If children, women, and innocent people shall suffer from this, what is to be done ? " people will say, shrugging their shoulders, without understanding the significance of this event.

In general, to the majority of men this phenomenon will appear interesting, like any phenomenon whose place is firmly and clearly defined : smugglers make their appearance, - they have to be caught; anarchists, terrorists make their appearance, - society has to be made secure against them ; fanatics, the Eunuchs make their appearance, - they have to be locked up and sent into exile; violators of the order of state make their appearance, - they have to be crushed. All that seemed indubitable, simple, decided upon, and, so, uninteresting.

At the same time such a relation to what is told in this appeal is a great error.

As in the life of each individual person, - I know this in my own life, and anybody will find such cases in his own, - so also in the life of the nations and of humanity there appear events which form

the turning-point of a whole existence; and these events – like that faint morning breeze, and not storm, in which Elijah saw God – are never loud, nor startling, nor noticeable, and in your personal life you later on are sorry that you did not at that time know or guess the importance of what was taking place. “ If I had known that this was such an important moment in my life,” you think later, “ I should have acted differently.” The same is true of the life of humanity. A triumpher, some Roman emperor enters Rome with a rattling and a noise, – how important this seems ! And how insignificant it then seemed when a Galilean preached some new kind of a teaching and was executed for it, together with hundreds of others executed for what seemed to be similar crimes ! Even so now, how important it seems to the refined members of the English, French, and Italian parliaments and the Austrian and German diets, with their aggressive parties, and to all the promoters of the City, and to the bankers of the whole world, and to their organs of the press, to solve the questions as to who will occupy the Bosphorus, who will seize a piece of land in Africa or in Asia, who will come out victorious in the question of bimetallism, and so forth ! And not only how important, but also to what a degree insignificant, so as not to be worth while speaking about, seem the stories of how the Russian government has taken measures somewhere in the Caucasus to suppress some half-savage fanatics, who deny the obligation of submitting to the authorities ! And yet, how insignificant and even comical in reality – by the side of the enormously important phenomenon which is now taking place in the Caucasus – are those strange cares of the cultured adults who are enlightened by Christ’s teaching (at least they know this teaching and might be enlightened by it), as to what country will own this or that particle of the earth, and what words will be pronounced by this or that erring, blundering man, who represents only the product of surrounding conditions.

There was some reason why Pilate and Herod should not have understood the significance of that for which the Galilean, who was disturbing the peace of their district, was brought before them for trial ; they did not even deem it necessary to find out in what his teaching consisted ; if they had found it out it would have been excusable for them to think that it would disappear (as Gamaliel said) ; but we cannot help knowing the teaching itself, and that it has not disappeared for the period of eighteen hundred years, and that it will not disappear until it is realized. And if we know this, we cannot, in spite of the unimportance, the illiteracy, the ingloriousness of the Dukhobors, help seeing the importance of what is taking place among them. Christ’s disciples were just such unimportant, unrefined, unknown people. Christ’s disciples could not be anything else. Amidst the Dukho-hors, or rather, the Christian Universal Brotherhood, as they now call themselves, there is not taking place anything new, but only the germination of the seed which Christ sowed eighteen hundred years ago, – the resurrection of Christ Himself.

This resurrection will certainly take place ; it cannot help but take place, and we cannot shut our eyes to the fact that it is

taking place, simply because it is being accomplished without the firing of cannon, without military parades, without fluttering flags, fontaines lumineuses, music, electric light, ringing of bells, solemn addresses, and shouts of people adorned with gold lace and ribbons. It is only savages who judge of the importance of a phenomenon by the external splendour by which it is accompanied.

Whether we wish to see it or not, – now, in the Caucasus, in the life of the Christians of the Universal Brotherhood, especially since the time of their persecution, there has appeared that realization of the Christian life, for which everything good and rational done in the world is taking place. All our structures of state, our parliaments, societies, sciences, arts, – all this exists and lives for the purpose of realizing the life which we all, thinking people, see before us, as the highest ideal of perfection. And there are people who have realized this ideal, in all likelihood in part only, and not in full, but who have realized it in such a way as we did not even dream to materialize with our complicated governmental institutions. How can we help acknowledging the significance of this phenomenon ? What is being realized is what we are all striving after, and what all our complicated activity leads us to.

People generally say : such attempts at realizing the Christian life have existed before: there were the Quakers, the Mennonites, and all of them weakened and degenerated into common people, living the common civil life, consequently the attempts at realizing the Christian life are not important.

But to say this is the same as saying that the labours which have not yet ended in childbirth, and warm rains and sunbeams that have not immediately brought spring, are of no importance.

What is important for the realization of the Christian life ? Certainly not by diplomatic exchanges in regard to Abyssinia and Constantinople, nor by papal encyclicals, nor by socialistic congresses, nor by similar things will men approach that which the world lives for. If there is to be a realization of the kingdom of God, that is, the kingdom of truth and goodness upon earth, it will be only through such endeavours as those which were made by the first disciples of Christ, then by the Paulicians, the Albigenses, Quakers, Moravian brothers, Mennonites, by all the true Christians of the world, and now by the Christians of the Universal Brotherhood. The fact that these labours are lasting long and becoming stronger does not prove that there will be no birth, but, on the contrary, that it is at hand.

They say that this will happen, only not in this way, but in some other way, – through books, newspapers, universities, theatres, speeches, assemblies, congresses. Even if we admit that all these newspapers, and books, and assemblies, and universities are contributing to the realization of the Christian life, the realization will none the less have to be achieved by men, good, Christian men who are prepared for a good, common life ; and so the

chief condition for the realization is the existence and assembly of such men as are already realizing what we are striving after.

May be, though I doubt it, even now they will crush the movement of the Christian Universal Brotherhood, especially if society itself fails to comprehend the whole meaning of what is taking place and will not help them with brotherly cooperation ; but what this movement represents, what is expressed in it, will not die, cannot die, and sooner or later will burst into light, will destroy what crushes it, and will take possession of the world. It is only a question of time.

It is true, there are people, and unfortunately there are many of them, who think and say, " So long as it does not happen in our day," and so try to arrest the movement. But their efforts are useless, and they do not retard the movement, but with their efforts only ruin their own life which is given them. Life is life only when it is a ministration to God's work. In counteracting it men deprive themselves of life, and yet neither for a year, nor for an hour, are able to arrest the accomplishment of God's work.

We cannot help seeing that with that external union which has now established itself between all the inhabitants of the earth, with that awakening of the Christian spirit, which is now manifesting itself on all the sides of the earth, the accomplishment is near. And that malice and blindness of the Russian government, which directs against the Christians of the Universal Brotherhood persecutions that resemble those of pagan times, and that remarkable meekness and firmness, with which the new Christian martyrs are bearing these persecutions, - all that is a certain sign of the nearness of this accomplishment.

And so, having come to understand the whole importance of the event which is taking place, both in the life of the whole humanity, as also in that of each one of us, and remembering that the occasion for action, which is presenting itself to us now, will never return to us, let us do what the merchant of the gospel parable did when he sold everything in order to acquire a priceless gem: let us discard all petty, greedy considerations, and let each one of us, no matter in what position we may be, do everything in our power, in order, if not to help those through whom God's work is being done, if not to take part in this matter, at least not to be opponents of God's work, which is being accomplished for our good.

Moscow, December 14, 1896.