

LETTER TO N. N.
(To Engelhard)

by Leo Tolstoy

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

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My dear N. N. : – I write to you " dear," not because people usually write this way, but because since the receipt of your first, but especially of your second, letter, I feel that you are very near to me, and I love you very much.

In the sentiment which I experience there is much which is egoistical. You probably do not think so, but you cannot imagine to what extent I am lonely, to what extent that which is my real ego is despised by all who surround me.

I know that he who suffers until the end shall be saved ; I know that it is only in trifles that a man is given the right to enjoy the fruits of his labour, or at least to see this fruit, but that in matters of divine truth, which is eternal, it cannot be given to man to see the fruit of his work, especially in the short period of his brief life ; I know all that, and yet frequently lose courage, and so the meeting with you and the hope, almost the assurance, of finding in you a man who is sincerely walking with me on the road and tending toward the same goal is a great joy to me.

Well, now I will answer everything in order.

Your letters to Aksàkov have pleased me, especially the last. Your proofs are incontestable, but they do not

exist for him. Everything he says has long been known to me. It is all repeated in life, in literature, in conversations: it is all one and the same. It is this: " I see that this is true, and this false, for such and such reasons ; that this is good, and this bad, because it is so and so."

Aksàkov and his like see that it is true ; even before you have told it to them, they know that it is true. But they abide in the lie, and in order that a man, like any other with a heart which loves the good and despises the evil, and with a reason which has this one purpose of distinguishing the lie from the truth, may be able to live in the lie and the evil, and serve them, he had to close his eyes against the truth even before this, and to continue to do the favourite evil.

They have all the same shield : the historical conception, the objective view, the care for others, and the removal of the question as to their relation to the good and to truth.

Aksakov does this, and so does Solovév, and so have done all the theologians, and all the statesmen, the political economists, and all who live contrary to the truth and to goodness, and who have to justify themselves before themselves.

This cannot be said any more clearly than it has been said in John hi. 19-21.

From this I draw the conclusion that in relation to these people one must not cast the pearls, but must work out a certain relation to them, so as not to waste strength. Disputing with them is not only an idle matter, but even harmful for our purpose. They irritate us with provocations to something superfluous and inexact, and, forgetting all the chief things which you have said, will harass you only about that one thing.

The relation which I am trying to work out in myself toward them, and which I advise others, too, to work out, is like my relation to a debauched, drunken bully who is trying to draw my sixteen-year-old son into debauch. I am sorry for this debauchee, but I will not try to mend him, for I know that it is impossible: he is beyond any hope, and will only ridicule me in the eyes of my son. Nor will I by force remove my son from him, for my son will inevitably meet him or his like, to-morrow, if not to-day; I will even not try to disclose his baseness to my son. My son has to find it out for himself. I will try to fill my son's soul with such contents that the temptations of the bully will not corrupt him, or else I shall lose all my strength, of which there is none too much, in casting the pearls, and they will, if not trample upon you and me, and crush us, put out the little flickering light amidst the darkness.

And with this excursus I have accidentally approached directly the second point in your letter.

" How are men's eyes to be opened? How are they to be saved from the temptations of the debauchees, when violence is in the way? "

" How is the evangelical teaching to be realized? "

" Must I not take the part of men if they ask my aid even though I should have to free them by force, when before my eyes others kill and torture them? "

It is not right to free and defend men by force, and it is not right, because it is impossible and also because it is foolish, to attempt doing good by means of violence.

My dearest, please, for the sake of the God of truth, which you serve, be in no hurry, do not get excited, do not invent proofs of the justice of your opinion before you have thought deeply, not of what I am writing you, but of the Gospel, and not of the Gospel as the word of Christ, or God, and so forth, but of the Gospel as the clearest, simplest, most comprehensible, and practical teaching of

how each of us and all men are to live.

If a mother in my presence thrashes her child, what shall I do ?

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Consider that the question is what I must do, that is, what is good and rational, and not what my first impulse will be. The first impulse in the case of a personal insult is revenge; but the question is whether this is rational

Precisely such is the question as to whether it is rational to use violence against the mother who is whipping her child. If a mother is whipping her child, what is it that pains me, and that I consider evil ? Is it that the child is suffering pain, or that the mother, instead of the joy of love, is experiencing the agony of malice ? I think that in either there is evil.

One man can do no evil. Evil is the disunion between men. And so, if I want to act, I can do so only for the purpose of destroying the disunion and establishing the union between the mother and the child. What, then, shall I do ? Shall I use violence on the mother ? I shall not destroy her disunion (sin) with the child, but shall only introduce a new sin, – the disunion between her and me. What, then, shall I do? It is this: take the child's place, and this will not be irrational.

To what Dostoévski writes, – which has always disgusted me, – and what the monks and the metropolitans have told me, – that it is lawful to wage war, for it is a defence (“ to lay down one's life for one's brothers”), I have always replied: “ To defend with one's breast, to substitute oneself, yes, – but to shoot people with guns, – that is not defending, but killing.”

Ponder on the teaching of the Gospel, and you will see that the very short fourth commandment, liesist not evil with evil, reply not to evil, is, I shall not say, the main, but the binding link of the whole teaching, the one which all the pseudo-Christian teachings have most carefully circumvented, and that proposition the non-recognition of which has served as the foundation of everything which you so justly hate.

To say nothing of the Nicene Council, which has created so much evil, and which is based on this same lack of comprehension of Christ's teaching, that is, on violence in the name of the good and of Christ, this violence in the name of the good is to be found in its germ in apostolic times, even in the Acts of Paul, and vitiates the meaning of the teaching.

How often I have felt sad in my conversations with priests and revolutionists, who look upon the evangelical teaching as upon a weapon for obtaining external aims. The men of either extreme poles

have with equal virulence denied this fundamental proposition of Christ's teaching. The first must not persecute and crush the heterodox, and bless battles and executions; the second must not by force destroy the existing monstrous disorder, which is called order.

Apparently the priests and the authorities cannot even imagine human life without violence. The same is true of the revolutionists. By their fruits do you tell the tree: a good tree cannot bring forth fruits of violence. Christ's teaching can neither serve for killing, nor for temporizing ; and so the men of either class, by perverting the teaching, deprive themselves of the one force which is given by the faith in the truth, in the whole truth, and not in a particle of it.

"They that take up the sword shall perish by the sword," is not a prediction, but a confirmation of a fact well known to all.

" If thy light is darkness," if that which thou regard-est as good is not good, but evil, what will the evil of thy life and of thy works be ?

It is impossible to serve God a little and the devil a little, and the gospel is not such a stupid book as the priests have made it out for us. Every proposition is not given there to the winds, but is organically connected with the whole teaching. Even so the commandment about the non-resistance to evil by means of violence goes through the whole Gospel, and without it the teaching of the Gospel falls to pieces, at least it does so to me. Not only is it many times expressed clearly and directly, so that it cannot be concealed ; not only is all the description of life and of Christ's works an application of this commandment; but Evangelist John presents Caiaphas as not understanding this truth, and, in consequence of the lack of comprehension, as ruining Christ's life in the name of the people's good ; the Gospel shows directly that resistance to evil by means of violence is the most terrible and dangerous offence into which Christ's disciples fall, and He Himself comes very near falling into it.

More than this : it now seems to me that if Christ and His teaching did not exist, I should myself have discovered this truth, - so simple and clear does it appear to me now, and I am convinced it will appear such to you also.

It is now so clear to me that if I were to admit the slightest violence in the name of correcting a most terrible evil, another, on the basis of this, would permit himself a small act of violence, and a third, a fourth, and millions of small acts of violence will combine into one terrible evil, which exists even now and crushes us.

If you have fulfilled my request and have calmly read to the end, refraining from arguments in confirmation of your opinion, and have followed my exposition, then I hope that you will agree with me that

there are also strong arguments for the contrary opinion, and I hope that you will still more agree with me when you have read the exposition which I am sending you.

So far as I can guess, you are now in this position : your reason tells you that I am right, but your heart revolts against such a proposition concerning the non-resistance to evil.

You say to yourself: "Something is wrong here; there is here some error of judgment, and I will find it and will prove that it is impossible that Christ's teaching, the teaching of love for my brother, should lead me to sit with folded arms looking at the evil which is being committed in the world. It is all very well," you say, " for an old man who has lived his day to talk idly and assure all men that we must not resist evil. He does not suffer : he has enough to eat, is satisfied, has everything he wants, and has but a short time left to live. The whole fire of life has been used up by him, but I feel without reflection that in me is stored love for what is good and true, and hatred for what is evil and untrue, and not vainly so. I cannot help but express it and live in its name, and every step of my life is a struggle with evil. I am obliged to struggle, and I will struggle with them, using all the means which have already become clear to me and which will become clear to me in the future. What is needed is a propaganda among the people, a closer union with the sectarians, the exertion of an influence on the government, and so forth."

The feeling which prompts this is good, and I love you for this, but it is the feeling which prompted Peter to provide himself with a knife and cut off the slave's ear.

Imagine what would have happened if Jesus had not repressed those feelings : there would have been a fight ; let us suppose that Jesus' men would have been victorious and would have conquered the whole of Jerusalem. They would have struck down men, and others would have struck down them. What would have become of the Christian teaching?

It would not exist now, and we should have nothing to lean on. We should be worse than an Aksakov or Solovév.

In order completely to express to you my idea, I will tell you what I take to be the meaning of Christ, a meaning which is not hazy and mystical, but clear and vital.

All say that the meaning of Christianity lies in loving God and our neighbour as ourselves. But what is God ?

What is meant by loving something incomprehensible, – God ? What is a neighbour ? What am I ?

These words have for me this meaning : To love God means to love truth.

To love my neighbour as myself means to recognize the unity of my essence, soul, and life with every other human life, with eternal truth, – God. So it is for me. But it is clear to me that these words, which define nothing, may be understood differently, and that the majority of men are even unable to understand it as I do. The main thing is that these words put no obligations on me, or on any one else, and define nothing.

How is this ? I am to love God, whom each under-derstands in his own way, and others do not recognize at all ; and I am to love my neighbour as myself, whereas there is implanted in me the love of self, which does not leave me for a moment, and very frequently just as constant a hatred of others.

This is so obscure and impracticable that it remains an empty phrase. It is my opinion that it is a metaphysical proposition, which is important in itself, but when it is understood as a rule of life, as a law, it is simply stupid. Unfortunately it is frequently understood as such.

All this I say in order to make clear that the meaning of Christianity, as of any other faith, does not lie in metaphysical principles, – these will always be the same with all humanity (Buddha, Confucius, Socrates), – but in their application to life, in the living representation of that good of every man and of all humanity which is obtained in their application, and in the determination of the rules by means of which they are obtained.

Even in Deuteronomy it says, " Love God and thy neighbour as thyself;" but the application of this rule according to Deuteronomy consisted in circumcision, in the Sabbath, and in the criminal law.

The significance of Christianity consists in the indication of the possibility and the happiness of the execution of the law of love. Christ very clearly defined in the sermon on the mount how this law must and can be carried out for His own happiness and for that of all men. In the sermon on the mount, without which there would be no teaching of Christ, – in this all agree, – and in which Christ does not address the sages, but the illiterate and the tawny-handed, and which is hedged in with the introduction, " Whosoever shall break one of these least commandments," and with the conclusion that we must not speak, but fulfil, – in this sermon everything is said, and five commandments are given as to how to fulfil the teaching.

In the sermon on the mount are expounded the simplest, easiest, most comprehensible rules of the application of the love of God and of our neighbours to life, without the recognition or fulfilment of which it is impossible to speak of Christianity.

And, no matter how strange this may seem, after eighteen hundred years I had to rediscover these rules as something new. And only when I comprehended these rules did I comprehend the meaning of Christ's teaching.

These rules so marvellously embrace the whole life of each man and of all humanity that a man need but imagine the fulfilment of these rules on earth in order that the kingdom of righteousness may be upon earth.

Then analyze all these rules separately, applying them to yourself, and you will see that this incredibly blessed and enormous result is obtained through the fulfilment of the simplest, most natural rules, which are not only easy, but even pleasurable to execute.

Do you think it is necessary to add anything to these rules in order that the kingdom of righteousness be realized ? It is not.

Do you think that it is possible to reject one of the rules without impairing the kingdom of righteousness ? It is not.

If I did not know anything of Christ's teaching but the five rules, I should still be as good a Christian as I am now.

Be not angry. Commit no debauch. Do not swear. Do not judge. Wage no war. In this does the essence of Christ's teaching consist for me.

This clear expression of Christ's teaching has been concealed from men, and so humanity has always deviated from it in two extreme directions. Some, seeing in Christ's teaching the teaching of the salvation of the soul, have, for the sake of the grossly conceived eternal life, removed themselves from the world, caring only for this, what to do for themselves, how to perfect themselves individually, – which would be ridiculous, if it were not pitiful. Tremendous forces have been wasted by these people, – and there have been many of them, – on what is impossible and foolish, on doing good for themselves individually, without other men.

Others, on the contrary, who did not believe in the future life, have lived, the best of them, only for others, but did not know and did not want to know what was necessary for themselves, and in the name of what they wanted the good for others, or what good they wanted.

It seems to me that one thing is impossible without the other ; a man cannot do any good to himself, to his soul, without acting for others and with others, as did the religious ascetics and others, – the best of them, – and he cannot do good to men if he does not know what he himself needs, and in the name of what he is acting, as in the case of the public workers who have no faith.

I love the men of the first order, but with all the forces of my soul do I despise their teaching, and I love very much the men of the second category, though I despise their teaching. Only that teaching has the truth which points out an activity, – life, – which satisfies the demands of the soul, and which, at the same time, is a constant activity for the good of others.

Such is the teaching of Christ. It is equally distant from religious

quietism, from the care for one's soul, and from the revolutionary zeal (the governmental, the priestly activity is revolutionary) of him who wants to benefit others, though, at the same time, he does not know wherein this true, indubitable good consists.

The Christian life is such that it is impossible to do good to people except by doing good to oneself, to one's rational soul, and impossible to do good to oneself, except by doing good to one's neighbours. The Christian life is equally distant from quietism and from excessive zeal.

Young people, who are of your turn of mind, are inclined to confuse the true Christian teaching with the quietism of the superstitious, and it seems to them that it is very convenient and very easy to reject the resistance to evil through violence, and that this causes the Christian work to weaken and lose force. That is not true. You must understand that a Christian renounces violence, not because he does not love the same which you desire ; not because he does not see that violence is the first thing which begs for recognition at the sight of evil ; but because he sees that violence removes him from his aim, and does not bring him nearer to it, and that it is senseless, as it is senseless for a man who wants to get to the water of a spring with a stick to strike the earth which separates him from the spring. For a man who denies violence it is not easier, – on the contrary : it is more difficult to take a spade and dig, than to strike the earth with a pole. But it is easier for him, because he knows full well that by opposing evil, not with violence, but with goodness and truth, he is doing what he can, fulfilling the will of the Father, according to Christ's expression.

It is impossible to put fire out with fire, to dry up water with water, to destroy evil with evil. They have been doing that ever since the beginning of the world, and have reached the state in which we live.

It is time to give up the old method, and to take hold of the new, the more so since it is more sensible.

If there is a motion forward, it is so only thanks to those who have paid with good for evil.

What would happen if only one-millionth part of those efforts which are employed by people in order to fight evil with violence were employed for the purpose of enduring evil, without taking part in it, and of shedding the light which is given to each ? If it were so simply from the point of view of experiment !

Nothing has been gained by the other way, – so why not try this, the more so since it is clear, obvious, and joyful ?

Here is a special example : let us recall Russia for the last twenty years. How much sincere desire of good and readiness for sacrifice has been wasted by our young intellectual classes in order to establish the truth, to do good to men ! And what has been done ?

Nothing. Worse than nothing. They have wasted enormous spiritual forces. The poles are broken and the earth is beaten down harder than ever, so that the spade does not enter into it.

Instead of those terrible sacrifices which the youths have brought, instead of shooting, causing explosions, running printing offices, these men need but believe in Christ's teaching, that is, consider that the Christian life is the one rational life. What if, instead of that terrible tension of forces, one, two, ten, dozens, hundreds of men should say, in reply to the call to military service, "We cannot serve as murderers, because we believe in Christ's teaching, that teaching which we profess and which forbids it by a special commandment " ? The same they might say in respect to the oath and to the courts ; the same they might say and do in respect to the violence which asserts private possession. What would happen in this case I do not know ; but I know that it would advance matters.

I know that there is one truly fruitful way, and that is not to do what is contrary to Christ's teaching, but outright and openly to profess it, not for the purpose of obtaining any external aims, but for one's own inward satisfaction, which consists in not doing any evil to others, as long as I am not yet able to do them good.

Here is my answer to your questions as to what we should strive after. We should strive to carry out Christ's rules for ourselves and disclose to men the light and the joy of their execution. All this is, however, much better expressed in the Gospel (Matt. v. 13-16).

I foresee another objection. You will say : " It is not clear how to carry out these rules, and what they will bring us to. How are we according to these rules to bear ourselves in relation to property, to the authorities, to international relations ?

Do not think that there is anything obscure with Christ. Everything is as clear as daylight.

The relation to the authorities is expressed in the story of the penny. Money – property – is a non-Christian matter. It comes from the authorities, give it back to the authorities ; but your soul is your own, it is from the God of truth, and so give to no one but God your works, your rational freedom. They can kill you, but they cannot compel you to kill, to do an un-Christian deed.

According to the Gospel there is no property, and woe to those who have it, that is, they fare badly. In relation to property, a Christian can only refuse to take part in acts of violence which are committed in the name of property, and may explain to others that property is a myth, that there is no property, but that there is a habitual act of violence in relation to the use of things, which people call property, and which is bad. There can be no question of property for a man who will give up his cloak when they want to take his coat from him.

Nor can there be any question about international relations. All men are brothers, – all are alike ; and if a Zulu comes and wants to roast my children, there is only one thing which I can do, and that is, to impress upon the Zulu that this is not advantageous and good for him, – to impress this upon him, while submitting to his force, – the more so since there is no profit in struggling with a Zulu : either he will overcome me and will roast more of my children, or I shall overcome him, and my children will get ill to-morrow and die in worse agonies of disease.

There is profit in it, because by submitting I certainly do better, while by resisting I do something doubtful.

So here is my answer : the best that we can do is for us to carry out the whole teaching of Christ. In order to do so, we must be convinced that it is the truth both for humanity at large and for each of us in particular.

Have you that faith ?

There are two more objections, or questions, which, I imagine, you will bring forward. The first is this, that if we shall submit, as I say, to a Zulu or a policeman, and shall give to a bad man everything which he may want to take from me ; if we are not to take part in the governmental institution of the courts, of schools, of universities, and are not to recognize our property, – we shall fall to the lowest round of the social ladder, and shall be trampled upon and crushed: we shall be mendicants, tramps, and the light which is in us will be lost in vain, and no one will see it, and so would it not be better to hold ourselves on a certain level of independence from want, of a possibility of education and of communion with as large a circle of men as possible (the press) ?

Indeed, so it seems, but it only seems so. And it seems so because we value highly our comforts of life, our education, and all those imaginary joys which they furnish us, and we temporize when we say so. It is not true, because, no matter on what level a man may stand, he will always be with men, and so able to do good to them. But whether the professors of a university are better, or the inmates of the night lodging-houses are more important for the work of Christianity, – that is a question which no man can decide. In favour of the poor speaks my own sentiment and Christ's example. Only the poor can preach the Gospel, that is, teach the rational life. I can discuss beautifully and be sincere, but no man will ever believe me, so long as he sees that I, living in a mansion, spend with my family in a day the amount of a year's supply for an indigent family. And as regards our vaunted education, it is time to stop speaking of it as of a good. It will easily spoil ninety-nine of every hundred men, and it will certainly not add anything to one man. You no doubt know about Syutaev. Here is an illiterate peasant, but his influence on people, on our intellectual classes, is greater and more important than that of all the Russian savants and writers, with all their Pushkins and Byelinskis taken together, from Tredyakovski until our day. We shall not lose much. And every one

that hath forsaken houses, or brethren, or sisters, or father, or mother, or wife, or children, shall receive a hundred times more houses, and a father here in this world, and also everlasting life. Many that are first shall be last (Matt. xix. 29, 30).

Now another question, which directly, involuntarily results from it : " Well, and you, Lev Nikolaevich ? You preach indeed, but how do you carry it out ? " This is a most natural question which people always put to me and with which they triumphantly close my mouth.

" You preach, but how do you live ? " And I answer that I do not preach and cannot preach, though I passionately wish to do so.

I could preach by my works, but my works are bad. What I speak is not a preaching, but only a rebuttal of the false understanding of the Christian teaching and the explanation of its real meaning. Its meaning does not consist in reorganizing society in its name through the exercise of force ; its meaning consists in finding the meaning of life in this world.

The fulfilment of the five commandments gives this meaning.

If you want to be a Christian, you must fulfil these commandments ; and if you do not want to fulfil them, do not speak to me of Christianity, outside of the fulfilment of these commandments.

" But," people say to me, " if you find that outside of the fulfilment of the Christian teaching there is no rational life, and you love this rational life, why do you not fulfil the commandments ? "

I answer that I am guilty and wretched, and that I deserve contempt for not fulfilling them, but, at the same time, not so much in justification as in explanation of my inconsistency, I say : Look at my former and at my present life, and you will see that I am trying to fulfil. I have not fulfilled one ten-thousandth part, it is true, and I am to blame, but I have not fulfilled it, not because I did not want to, but because I could not. Accuse me, – I do so myself, – but accuse me only, and not the path over which I walk, and which I point out to those who ask me where, in my opinion, the path is.

If I know the way home and walk on it, drunk, tottering from side to side, does it follow from this that the path over which I am travelling is not right ?

If it is not right, – show me another ; but if I have lost my way and am tottering, help me, hold me on the right path, even as I am prepared to hold you up, and do not push me off, do not rejoice because I have lost my way, do not shout in glee :

"There he says that he is going home, and yet he is making for the swamp ! "

Do not rejoice at this, but help me, assist me ! You are not

yourselves wills-o'-the-wisp, but men who are making for home !

I am one, and I certainly do not wish to go into the swamp.

Help me ! My heart bursts from despair, because we have all gone astray ; and when I struggle with all my might and main, you, at every deviation of mine, instead of pitying yourself and me, push me into the swamp and shout in delight :

" See, he is in the swamp with us ! "

Such is my relation to the teaching and its fulfilment. I try with all my power to fulfil it, and on every failure to fulfil it, I not only repent, but implore aid so as to be able to fulfil, and with joy meet every man who like me seeks the path, and obey him.

If you read what I send you, you will also understand the contents of this letter.

Write to me. I am very glad to commune with you, and will in agitation await your answer.

1887.