

My Reply to the Synod's Edict of Excommunication and to Letters
Concerning It

By Leo Tolstoy

Translated by V. T. and A. C. F.

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The Free Age Press, Christchurch, Hants, 1901

"He who begins by loving Christianity better than Truth will proceed by loving his own sect or Church better than Christianity, and end by loving himself better than all." – Coleridge

I did not at first intend answering the Edict of the Synod concerning me, but it has called forth many letters from unknown correspondents. Some abuse me for denying what I do not deny; others exhort me to believe in what I have never ceased to believe; and others again express a fellowship with me that can hardly really exist, and a sympathy to which I hardly have a right. Therefore, I have decided to answer both the Edict itself—showing what is unjust in it—and the letters from these unknown correspondents.

I

The Edict, in general, has many faults. It is either illegal or intentionally ambiguous; it is arbitrary, groundless, and untruthful; and, besides, contains libels and incitements to evil feelings and actions.

It is either illegal or intentionally ambiguous because, if intended to be an excommunication from the Church, it does not fulfil those Church regulations according to which such excommunications can alone be pronounced. If, on the other hand, it is a declaration that he who does not believe in the Church and its dogmas does not belong to it, the statement goes without saying. Such a declaration can have no other object than to appear as an excommunication without in reality being such; and this, as a matter of fact, is what has happened, the Edict having been understood in this light.

It is arbitrary because it accuses me alone of unbelief in all the enumerated points, whereas not only many, but almost all educated people share this unbelief and have constantly expressed, and do express it in conversation, in letters, in pamphlets, and in books.

It is groundless because the chief reason put forward for its announcement is the great circulation of my "seductive false teachings," whereas I am well aware that in Russia there are hardly a hundred individuals who share my views. The circulation of my writings about religion is so insignificant, owing to the censorship, that the majority of those who have read the Synod's Edict have not the slightest idea of what I have written about religion, as is evident from the letters I have received.

It contains glaring untruth in its statement that the Church has made unsuccessful efforts to convince me of my errors. Nothing of the kind has ever been done.

It constitutes what in legal terminology is called a libel, as it contains intentionally unjust assertions tending to cause me injury. Lastly, it is an incitement to evil feelings and actions. It has called forth, as was to be expected, in unenlightened and unreasoning people spite and hatred towards me, even threats of

assassination, as expressed in letters I have received:

"Now thou art given up to an anathema, and wilt after death go to eternal suffering, and wilt die like a dog... anathema, thou old devil... be cursed."

Another rebukes the Government for not having yet incarcerated me in a monastery. A third writes:

"If the Government will not remove thee, we will ourselves render thee silent."

This letter concludes with maledictions:

"I will find means to destroy thee, thou villain..."

Then follow indecent abuses. I also observed similar spitefulness in person after the Edict. On the very day it was published, while walking in the streets, I heard:

"Here is the devil in man's image."

Had the crowd been differently composed, it is very possible that I should have been beaten, as a man was beaten a few years ago in front of the Panteleymon Chapel.

Thus, the Synod's Edict, in general, is very wicked; and the fact that it concludes with the statement that those who have signed it pray God that I should become like them does not make it better.

In detail, the Edict is incorrect in the following:

It states that "the well-known writer, Russian by birth, Orthodox by baptism and education, Count Tolstoy, seduced by the pride of his intellect, has audaciously revolted against the Lord and His Christ and against His holy household, and has openly and publicly renounced the Orthodox Mother Church which has reared and educated him."

That I have renounced the Church which calls itself Orthodox is quite correct. But I have renounced it not because I have revolted against the Lord; on the contrary, only because I desired to serve Him with all the powers of my soul.

Before renouncing the Church and that unity with the people which was unspeakably dear to me, I devoted several years to the study of its doctrine, both theoretical and practical. I read all that I could on its teaching and critically analysed its dogmatic theology. Practically, I strictly followed, for more than a year, all the prescriptions of the Church—keeping its fasts and attending all its services.

Then I became convinced that the teaching of the Church is theoretically a crafty and pernicious deceit, and practically a collection of the coarsest superstitions and sorcery, which completely conceals the whole meaning of Christian teaching.

(It is sufficient to read the Prayer Book and observe the ceremonies constantly carried on by the Orthodox priesthood—regarded as Christian worship—to see that these rites are nothing but methods of sorcery adapted to all occasions in life. To ensure a child's salvation, certain rites must be performed; for success in business, recovery from illness, or other purposes, prescribed enchantments must be pronounced by a priest for a fee.)

I did indeed renounce the Church and ceased to fulfil its ceremonies. I also expressed in my will that no servants of the Church should approach me when I am dying, and that my body should be removed without ritual.

The Edict further states that I have devoted my literary activity to propagating teachings contrary to Christ and the Church. This is incorrect. I have never troubled myself with propagating my teaching. I have simply expressed my understanding of Christ's teaching in my writings and shared it when asked.

It is said that I repudiate God, Christ, and various doctrines. This is partly true and partly false. I do reject certain doctrines, but I do not reject God. On the contrary, I recognise God as Spirit, as Love, as the Source of all—and I see the meaning of life in fulfilling His will.

It is also said that I do not recognise future life. If future life is understood as hell with eternal torments or paradise with eternal bliss, then I do not recognise such a conception. But eternal life and moral consequence I recognise deeply.

It is further said that I repudiate the Sacraments. This is true. I regard them as coarse superstition and contrary to the spirit of the Gospel.

Finally, I am accused of blasphemy for describing religious rites plainly. But blasphemy does not consist in calling things by their names. The real blasphemy lies in deceiving people into believing in magical rituals instead of truth.

What I do believe is this:

I believe in God as Spirit, Love, and the Source of all. I believe that His will is expressed in the teaching of Christ. I believe that the true welfare of man lies in love—loving others as oneself. I believe that the meaning of life is the growth of this love within us.

I believe that prayer is not public ritual, but an inner, personal turning toward God.

Whether these beliefs offend or please anyone, I cannot change them. I must live and die according to what I believe to be true.

I began by loving my orthodox faith more than my peace; then I loved Christianity more than the Church; and now I love Truth above all. And so far, Truth coincides for me with Christianity as I understand it. In that faith, I live peacefully and approach death peacefully.

Leo Tolstoy

Moscow, April 4, 1901

From Tolstoy's Diary (October 31, 1889)

In reflecting on the diminishing importance of external welfare, I see that man passes through three phases.

First, he lives for pleasure and desire. Then he turns toward the welfare of humanity. Finally, a deeper stage emerges—the service of God and the purification of the soul.

This last stage is not self-perfection in a selfish sense, but the preservation of the divine essence within oneself. It is preparation for a higher life.

As this aspiration grows, it replaces earlier motivations and brings a fuller, more peaceful satisfaction.
Striving toward God, toward divine purity, I find that I more surely achieve both personal and universal welfare—not directly, but as a natural result.
And help me, God.