

ON RELIGIOUS TOLERATION

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In Russia there exist missionaries whose duty it is to convert all the non-Orthodox to Orthodoxy.

Toward the end of 1901 a congress of these missionaries assembled in the city of Orel, and at the end of this congress the government marshal of nobility, Mr. Stakhovich, delivered a speech in which he proposed to the congress to recognize full liberty of conscience, meaning by these words, as he expressed it, not only liberty of belief, but also liberty of profession of faith, which includes the liberty of defection from Orthodoxy and even converting people to faiths not in agreement with Orthodoxy. Mr. Stakhovich assumed that such a liberty could only contribute to the triumph and dissemination of Orthodoxy, of which he recognized himself as being a believing professor.

The members of the congress did not agree to Mr. Stakhovich's proposition and did not even discuss it. Later on there began a lively exchange of ideas and a discussion as to whether the Christian church should be tolerant or not : some, the majority of the Orthodox, both clerical and lay, expressed themselves in newspapers and periodicals against toleration, and, for one reason or another, recognized the impossibility of stopping the persecutions against the dissenting members of the church ; others, the minority, agreed with Stakhovich's opinion, approved of it, and argued the desirability and even the necessity for the church of recognizing liberty of conscience.

Those who dissented from Mr. Stakhovich's opinion said that the church, which gave the everlasting good to men, could not fail to use all the means at its command for the salvation of its unreasoning members from eternal perdition, and that one of these means were the barriers set by the temporal power against defection from the true church and the conversion of its members. Above all things, they said, the church, which received from God the power to bind and loose, always knows what it is doing whenever it uses violence against its enemies.

But the discussions of laymen about the regularity or irregularity of its measures only show the delusions of laymen who permit themselves to discuss the actions of the infallible church.

Thus spoke and always speak the opponents of toleration.

But its advocates assert that it is unjust by force to prevent the profession of faiths which dissent from Orthodoxy, and that the subdivision made by the adversaries of toleration between belief and external profession of faith was without foundation, since every belief inevitably finds an expression in external actions.

Besides, they said, for the true church, which has Christ at its head, and His promise that no one shall overcome His church, there can be no danger from the profession of the lie by a small number of heretics or dissenters, the more so, since the persecutions themselves do not attain their end, for the reason that martyrdom only weakens the moral authority of the persecuting church, and increases the power of the persecuted.

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The advocates of toleration say that the church must in no case use violence against its dissenting members and against those who profess different faiths. The church must not use violence! But here involuntarily arises the question : How can the church use violence?

The Christian church, by the definition which it gives itself, is a society of men, established by God, which has for its aim the transmission to men of the true faith, which saves them in this world and in the world to come.

How, then, can such a society of men, who have for their instruments grace and the sermon, wish for violence and actually exert it against people who do not accept their belief ?

To advise the church not to persecute men who dissent from it or convert its members, is the same as advising an academy of learned men not to persecute, punish, deport, and so forth, those people who do not agree with their opinions. An academy of learned men cannot wish for such things, and if it did, it cannot do so, because it has no instruments with which to do it.

What, then, signify those persecutions which since the time of Constantine have been employed by the Christian church and which the advocates of religious toleration advise the church to put a stop to ?

Mr. Stakhovich, quoting in his speech Guizot's words about the necessity for liberty of conscience for the Christian religion, after these good and clear words of Guizot adduces the bad and confused words of Aksakov, who substitutes the concept of " church " for that of " Christian religion," and, having made this substitution, tries to prove the possibility and necessity of religious toleration for the Christian church. But Christian religion and Christian church are not one and the same thing, and we have no right whatever to assume that what is proper for the Christian religion is also proper for the Christian church.

The Christian religion is that higher consciousness of man's relation to God, which, ascending from a lower to a higher degree of religious consciousness, has been attained by humanity. And so the Christian religion and all men who profess the true Christian religion, knowing that they have reached a certain degree of clearness and a certain height of the religious consciousness only thanks to humanity's constant motion from darkness to light, cannot help but be tolerant. By recognizing themselves as in possession of but a certain degree of the truth, which is made clearer and clearer and rises higher and higher only through the united efforts of humanity, they, in meeting new beliefs which differ from their own, not only do not reject them, but joyfully welcome them, study them, verify their own beliefs according to them, reject what is not in agreement with reason, accept what elucidates and advances the truth professed by them, and still more become confirmed in what is the same in all beliefs.

Such is the property of the Christian religion in general, and thus act the men who profess Christianity. Not thus the church. The church, by recognizing itself as the one guardian of the full, divine, eternal, for ever unchangeable truth, which God Himself has revealed to men, cannot help but look upon every religious teaching that differs from that which is expressed in its own dogmas as upon a lying, harmful, and even ill-intentioned teaching (if it proceeds from those who know the condition of the church), which is drawing people to everlasting perdition. And so, by its own definition, the church cannot be tolerant and cannot help using against all the faiths, as also against the professors of faiths which dissent from its own, all those means which it considers in keeping with its own doctrine. Thus the Christian religion and the Christian church are two totally different conceptions.

It is true, every church asserts that it is the only representative of Christianity, but the Christian religion, that is, the professors of the free Christian religion, in no way considers the church to be the representative of Christianity. The professors of the Christian religion could not do so, since there are many churches, and each regards itself as the bearer of all the divine truth.

It is this confusion of two different conceptions, which is constantly used by the churchmen for various purposes, that is the cause why all their discussions about the desirability of religious toleration for the church suffer from a common obscurity, inflatedness, indefiniteness, and so complete inconclusiveness.

Such are in Russia all the discussions of a Khomyakov, Samarin, Aksakov, and so forth, and from this also suffers Mr. Stakhovich's speech. They are all not only empty, but even harmful babbling, which again drives incense smoke into the eyes of those who are beginning to be freed from the deception.

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Thus the answer to the question as to how the church, which is

defined as a society of men having for their purpose the preaching of the truth, and which has no instruments of violence and can have none, can none the less exert violence against the dissenting faiths, is only this, that the establishment which calls itself the Christian church is not a Christian, but a worldly institution which is different from Christianity and is rather hostile to it.

When this idea first came to me, I did not believe it, so firmly have we been impressed from childhood with awe for the sacredness of the church. At first I thought that it was a paradox, that in such a definition of the church there was some mistake. But the farther I proceeded in viewing this question from all sides, the more indubitable it became to me that the definition of the church as a non-Christian institution, hostile to Christianity, was precise, and that without it we could not explain all those contradictions which are contained in the past and the present activity of the church.

Indeed, what is the church? The professors of the church say that it is a society, established by Christ, which has been entrusted with the exclusive care and propaganda of the unquestionable divine truth, which was testified to by the descent of the Holy Ghost upon the members of the church, and that this testimony of the Holy Ghost is transmitted from generation to generation by the putting on of hands, as established by Christ.

But we need only analyze the data by which this is proved, to become convinced that all these assertions are quite arbitrary. The two texts (of the Scripture, which the church considers sacred), on which the arguments about the establishment of the church by Christ Himself are based, do not have at all the significance ascribed to them and in no case can they signify the establishment of a church, since the very concept of the church did not at all exist in the time when the Gospel was written, much less in the time of Christ. But the third text on which they base their exclusive right to teach the divine truth, the final verses of Mark and Matthew, is by all the investigators of Holy Scripture recognized as forged. Still less can it be proved that the descent of tongues of fire upon the heads of the disciples, which was seen only by the disciples, signifies that everything which shall be said, not only by these disciples, but also by all those upon whom the disciples have laid their hands, will be said by God, that is, by the Holy Ghost, and so is always unquestionably true.

The main thing is this, that, even if this were proved (which is quite impossible), there is no possibility of proving that this gift of infallibility abides precisely in the church which asserts this of itself. The chief, insolvable difficulty is this, that the church is not one and that every church asserts concerning itself that it alone has the truth, while all the others are wrong. Thus the assertion of every church that it alone has the truth has really as much weight as the assertion of a man who says, "Upon my word, I am right, and all those who disagree with me are wrong."

" Upon my word, we alone constitute the true church,"
– in this alone are all the proofs of the infallibility of every church to be found. Such a basis, in itself very shaky and very false, has also this other fault, that, by excluding every verification of what the church, which considers itself infallible, preaches, it opens an unlimited field for all kinds of most confused fancies, which are given out as the truth. When senseless and fantastic assertions are given out as the truth, there naturally appear men who protest against such assertions. But to compel people to believe in senseless and fantastic assertions, there exists but one means, – violence.

The whole X ice ne symbol is a concatenation of senseless and fantastic assertions, which could have arisen only among men who recognized themselves as infallible, and could have been disseminated only through violence.

Before all time God the Father begot God the Son, from whom everything began. This Son was sent into the world to save men and there was born anew of a virgin, and was crucified, and rose from the dead, and ascended into heaven, where he sits on the right side of the Father. At the end of the world this Son will come to judge the living and the dead, – and all that is an indubitable truth, revealed by God Himself.

If we are unable in the twentieth century to accept all these dogmas, which are contrary to common sense and to human knowledge, people were not deprived of common sense even at the time of the Nicene Council and could not have been able to accept all these strange dogmas, and expressed their dissent from them.

But the church, regarding itself as alone in possession of the full truth, could not admit this and used the most effective means against this dissent and its dissemination, – violence.

The church, united with the temporal power, has always made use of violence, – latent violence, – but none the less definite and effective ; it collected taxes from everybody by force, without inquiring after their agreement or disagreement with the state religion, and demanded of them the profession of that religion.

Having collected the money by violence, it in this manner established the most powerful hypnotization for the strengthening of its own faith among children and adults. If this means was not sufficient, it simply employed the violence of the temporal power. Thus there can be no such thing as religious toleration in the church, which is supported by the state. And this cannot be otherwise, so long as the churches are churches.

It will be said : the churches, like those of the Quakers, Wesleyans, Shakers, Mormons, and, especially now, the Catholic congregations, collect money from their members without the exertion of force, and so do not exert violence in supporting themselves. But that is not true : the money which has been collected by rich men,

especially the Catholic congregations, during centuries of hypnotization by means of money, is not a free contribution by the members of the church, but the result of the grossest violence. Money is collected by means of violence and is always an instrument of violence. For the church to be able to consider itself tolerant, it must be free from all monetary influences. " You have received V
it gratis – give it gratis."

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In reality the church has no instruments of violence. If violence is exerted, it is not exerted by the church itself, but by the temporal power with which it is connected, and so there appears the question : why do the government and the ruling classes unite with the church and support it ? It would seem that the beliefs preached by the church ought to be a matter of indifference to the governments and the ruling classes. It would seem that it ought to be a matter of absolute indifference to the governments and the ruling classes what the nations governed by them believe in, – whether they are Protestants, Catholics, Orthodox, or Mohammedans. But that is not so.

At any time the religious beliefs correspond to the social structure, that is, the social structure arranges itself in accordance with the religious beliefs. And thus, as the religious beliefs of the nation are, so is also the social structure. The governments and the ruling classes know that, and, therefore, they always support the religious teaching which corresponds to their advantageous position.

The governments and the ruling classes know that the true Christian religion denies the power which is based on violence, the distinction of classes, the accumulation of wealth, punishments, wars, – everything in consequence of which the government and the ruling classes occupy their advantageous position, and so they consider it necessary to support the faith which justifies their position. This is done by the church-corrupted Christianity, in that, by having distorted the true Christianity, it conceals the access to it from people.

The governments and the ruling classes could not exist without this corruption of Christianity, which is called the church faith. The church with its lie could not exist without any direct or indirect violence of the governments or of the ruling classes. In some states this violence finds its expression in persecutions ; in others, in the exclusive protection granted to the wealthy classes, which are in possession of the wealth. But the possession of wealth is conditioned by violence. Therefore, the church, the government, and the ruling classes mutually support one another. Thus the opponents of religious toleration are quite right when they defend, on the part of the church, the right of violence and persecutions on which its existence is based. The advocates of religious toleration would be right only in case they did not turn to the church, but to the state, and in case they demanded what is incorrectly called the "

separation of church and state," but what in reality is only the cessation of the government's exclusive support by the direct means of violence, or by the indirect means, – the subsidizing of some one faith.

But to demand of the church that it should refrain from violence in any shape whatever is the same as to demand of a man who is besieged on all sides that he shall lay down his arms and surrender himself to the enemy.

Tolerant can be only the true, free Christianity, which is not connected with any worldly institutions, and so is afraid of nothing and of no one, and has for its aim a greater and ever greater recognition of the divine truth and a greater and ever greater realization of the same in life.