

TWO LETTERS ON ORTHODOXY

By Count Leo Tolstoy

[Count Leo Tolstoy is frequently addressed by pious Christians to assist them in dispelling their doubts concerning the essential truths of their faith, and we here publish two letters of the great reformer written in answer to such anxious inquiries. The letters have been translated for The Open Court *from the Russian by Nicholas de Raylan, one of the employees of the Russian Consulate at Chicago, and are here published for the first time.—Editor.]*

I

I find that the foundation of your doubts is right, but the means by which you propose to solve them, a Universal Council, will not accomplish your purpose.

All the so-called orthodox churches—including the Greek-Russian, whose doctrines and scriptures are claimed by them to be holy—have long since been known to be, not only unholy, but full of actual nonsense and contradictions which cannot stand criticism.

Therefore, there is only one possibility left for the churches to maintain their position and to hold the people, and also for those who belong to the churches; and their leaders attach much value to this method. It consists in avoiding any discussion of doctrine or of the Scriptures, thus resting their faith on tradition alone; and so they have done.

Christians have long ago given up the faith of the Church, which during so many centuries they had qualified as Christian, so that at present any serious investigation as to the foundation of this religion will undoubtedly bring about its utter collapse, just as a rotten tree that has the appearance of a living one, if you but merely touch it, will fall to the ground.

Even a council, if the churches had it convened, would be as tricky and domineering as all so-called oecumenical councils of former times have been. But what may be called the Oecumenical Council of enlightened modern Europe has actually been in existence for a long time. It is working incessantly and with results which are constantly in evidence. This council consists of all men who, in the name of God and the truth, examine the so-called sacred Scriptures and sift out all that is reasonable and good, discarding that which is positively nonsensical and wrong; namely, that which is untrue in Christian doctrine, founded by a few men who call themselves pastors and shepherds, the same as Christ—by which name he forbade them to be called—and thus the members of this council endeavor to render clear the true meaning of Christianity. And this council comprises an ever-increasing number of people, although some of them often remain in ignorance as to the existence of the others.

For the peace of a man like you, who not only doubts the truth of the doctrine as it has been taught him, but who also understands that it is not originally Christian but Hebrew—in my mind it is not even Hebrew but purely pagan—there are but two ways of silencing the voice of his conscience: either to lean only upon tradition, to become assured that the truth is only in that wherein the majority of men believe, to be bent on submitting to the hypnotic Church influence which unbalances the people's judgment, and not to verify with his reason the doctrines that the churches are affirming; or, having recognised that our reason is given us not to throw us into confusion, but to show us the truth, you should yield yourself up to being instructed by reason, not for the sake of satisfying ambition or idle curiosity, but for the salvation of your soul and for the fulfilment of the will of that God who gave us our reason. And then we must not proceed timidly. We must not expect a decision of the questions of our life, which may be ended at any hour, from a council which could not be convened for a year and will define for us our relations with God; but with the help of all men who have gone before and who, like ourselves, have sought the truth; with the help of these men, the foremost and the most important for us being Christ, who left us His doctrine in the Gospel, we must define our relation to God and live accordingly.

So I myself have done, and since I took this step, I have always felt such a great and ever-increasing assurance, as I approach death, that I cannot help advising everyone who lives in this atmosphere in which we and our unhappy people are bred to follow the second alternative, which cannot lead to evil, but can only produce this belief and this happiness, and also a harmonious relation of the people among themselves.

They say that the Scriptures and the traditions of the Church are from God. That may not be true. But that my reason was given me by God, of that there can be no doubt at all. If I agree to accept the Scriptures and the traditions, I should accept them only because my reason recognises the tradition and the Scriptures as being worthy of belief.

Therefore, the authority of reason is stronger than all; and when I believe in reason (I repeat that all writing must be done, not for the sake of personal interest, but simply for seeking the truth and for the salvation of our soul), I cannot be mistaken.

God has given me from above the instrument for knowing Him, and I have used this instrument with the sole desire to know and to execute His will. I have done everything I could, and for this reason I cannot be at fault, and I feel unconcerned.

II

I do not remember your former letters, but the last one, received

now, is so good, so loving, and so sincere that it has impressed me, and I want to reply to you, if for no other reason than to show you that I esteem your good feeling towards me.

To fulfil your desire is as impossible for me as to be present in two places at the same time, or to fall asleep when I do not want to do so, or to shut out of my mind the thought which comes into it. By this I mean to say that to return to the dogmatic orthodoxy of Christianity is altogether impossible, not because I will not believe in it, but because I have believed in it; and although I myself did not serve the liturgy,* I have experienced the same feelings of emotion which you describe. Having landed on the solid shore from a wrecked boat in which I could hardly hold myself above water, I cannot in any way conscientiously return into that frail vessel.

But the chief thing is that I feel perfect peace in life and death in this my belief. I do not confess it in a conventional way, but have inevitably been brought to it by life, and by reason, and by the traditions, not of the study of one single religion, but by the traditions of all mankind. And, therefore, I have neither need nor right to seek for anything stronger or firmer than that which is given me, not by my own arguments, but by God Himself. But, above all, I cannot return to these beliefs which I have left behind since I became convinced of their untenability.

If I did believe in something invented by me, I would listen to the warning of those who declare that I should not place trust in my own inventions, but I should accept what has been accepted and what the entire world admits. But I believe exactly in what the world believes, and my faith is essentially the same as that which you confess to believe. I believe in God the Father who has sent me into the world with the purpose that I may execute His will, and believing in this, and knowing that God is love, that I came from Him and that I will return to Him, I need have no fear in life or in death.

And I need no other doctrines. I have no place where to put them; and—I cannot help saying so—I look upon all doctrines added to this faith as insults to God and as a sign of distrust toward Him.

Suppose that I, a poor outcast and good for nothing, be received by a good master who promised to feed and support me, if only I would not disturb the regulations of his house. Should I then undertake to seek my sustenance otherwise than by executing my master's will? Would it not be clear that the man who did so is an unbeliever who seeks a way of living without fulfilling his master's will? That is the way I think and feel now.

I believe in God, by whose will I am living and shall die, and I propose to do the will of Him who sent me, according to the commands of the Great Teacher of Life, Christ. I know that God is love, and for this reason I believe that I can receive nothing but good from Him, either in this life or in the hereafter. Therefore, I endeavor

to do His will, which consists in this: that we must love one another and that we do unto others as we would like others to do unto us; not from fear, but because the better I fulfil His will the better it will be for my soul.

To execute His will as much as possible, I must bear in mind not to grow remiss. I should always remember Him, pray to Him every hour, and also remain in connection with the better people of the world, with those who are holy, with both those who are living still, but especially with those who have passed away; and this you do by reading their writings.

I do not intend, nor do I even deem it necessary, to discuss or to condemn your faith. In the first place, because I think, if it is not right to judge the actions, the character, and even the exterior of a man, it should be much worse to judge what is dearest to him—his saint, or saints, or his faith; further, because I am convinced that the faith of a man is developing in his soul in a complicated, secret, hidden way which may not be changed by the desire of men, but only by the will of God.

To your kind letter, for which I thank you very much, I reply only to let you know the foundations of my religious convictions and the reasons why it is impossible for me to confess the faith for which you show so much anxiety. I wish you, from my soul, that this faith of yours may prove to you a good guidance in life and will afford you peace in the hour of death.

* *Serve the liturgy, i.e., take active part in worship.*