

Help!

Leo Tolstoy

1896

The facts related in this Appeal,¹ composed by three of my friends, have been repeatedly verified, revised, and sifted; the Appeal itself has been several times recast and corrected; everything has been rejected from it which, although true, might seem an exaggeration; so that all that is now stated in this Appeal is the real, indubitable truth, as far as the truth is accessible to men guided only by the religious desire, in this revelation of the truth, to serve God and their neighbor, both the oppressors and the oppressed. But, however striking the facts here related, their importance is determined, not by the facts themselves, but by the way in which they will be regarded by those who learn about them. And I fear that the majority of those who read this Appeal will not understand all its importance.

”Why, these fellows are a set of rioters; coarse, illiterate peasants; fanatics who have fallen under evil influence. They are a noxious, anti-governmental sect, which the Government cannot put up with, but evidently must suppress, as it suppresses every movement injurious to the general welfare. If women and children, innocent people, have to suffer thereby, well, what is to be done?”

This is what, with a shrug of the shoulders, people who have not penetrated the importance of this event will say.

On the whole, this phenomenon will, to most people, seem devoid of interest, like every phenomenon whose place is strongly and clearly defined. Smugglers appear they must be caught; anarchists, terrorists society must get rid of them; fanatics, self-mutilators they must be shut up, transported; infringers of public order appear they must be suppressed. All this seems indisputable, evident, decisive, and therefore uninteresting.

And yet such an attitude toward what is related in this Appeal is a great error.

As in the life of each separate individual (I know this in my own life, and every one will find similar cases in his own), so also in the life of nations and humanity, events occur which constitute turning-points in their whole existence; and these events, like the ”still small voice” (not the ”great and strong wind”) in which Elijah heard God, are always not loud, not striking, hardly remarkable; and in one’s personal life one always afterwards regrets that at the time one did not guess the importance of what was taking place.

¹ Early in 1897, an Appeal on behalf of the Dukhobors was drawn up by three friends of Count Tolstoy’s. The latter added this article to what his friends had written. His three friends were all banished for their offense.

"If I had known it was such an important moment in my life," one afterwards thinks, "I should not have acted in such a way."

It is the same in the life of mankind. A Roman emperor enters Rome in noisy, pompous triumph how important this seems; and how insignificant, it then seemed, that a Galilean was preaching a new doctrine, and was executed therefor, just as hundreds of others were executed for apparently similar crimes.

And so now, too, how important in the eyes of refined members of rival parties of the English, French, and Italian parliaments, or of the Austrian and German diets, and in the eyes of all the business men in the city and of the bankers of the whole world, and their press organs, are the questions as to who shall occupy the Bosphorus, who shall seize some patch of land in Africa or Asia, who shall triumph in the question of bimetallism, and so on; and how, not only unimportant, but even so insignificant that they are not worth speaking about, seem the stories which tell that, somewhere in the Caucasus, the Russian government has taken measures for crushing certain half-savage fanatics, who deny the obligation to submit to the authorities.

And yet, in reality, how not merely insignificant, but comic, beside the phenomena of such immense importance as are now taking place in the Caucasus, is the strange anxiety of full-grown people, educated, and illuminated by the teaching of Christ (or at least acquainted with this teaching, and capable of being illuminated by it), as to which country shall have this or that patch of land, and what words were uttered by this or that erring, stumbling mortal, who is merely a production of surrounding conditions.

Pilate and Herod, indeed, might not understand the importance of that for which the Galilean, who had disturbed their province, was brought before them for judgment; they did not even think it worth while learning wherein consisted His teaching; even had they known it, they might have been excused for thinking that it would disappear (as Gamaliel said); but we cannot but know the teaching itself, as well as the fact that it has not disappeared in the course of eighteen hundred years, and will not disappear until it is realized. And if we know this, then, notwithstanding the insignificance, illiterateness, and obscurity of the Dukhobors, we cannot but see the whole importance of that which is taking place among them. Christ's disciples were just such insignificant, unrefined, unknown people, and other than such the followers of Christ cannot be. Among the Dukhobors, or rather, "Christians of the Universal Brotherhood," as they now call themselves, nothing new is taking place, but merely the germinating of that seed which was sown by Christ eighteen hundred years ago, the resurrection of Christ Himself.

This resurrection must take place, cannot but take place, and it is impossible to shut one's eyes to the fact that it is taking place, merely because it is occurring without the firing of guns, parade of troops, planting of flags, illuminated fountains, music, electric lights, bell-ringing, and the solemn speeches and the cries of people decorated with gold lace and ribbons. Only savages judge of the importance of phenomena by the outward splendor with which they are accompanied.

Whether we wish to see this or not, there has now been manifested in the Caucasus, in the life of the "Universal Brotherhood of Christians," especially since their persecution, a demonstration of that Christian life toward which all that is good and reasonable in the world is striving. For all our State institutions, our parliaments, societies, sciences, arts, all this only exists and operates in order to realize that life which all of us, thinking men, see before us as the highest ideal of perfection. And here we have people who have realized this ideal, probably in part, not wholly, but have realized it in a way we did not dream of doing with our complex State institutions.

How, then, can we avoid acknowledging the importance of this phenomenon? For that is being realized toward which we are all striving, toward which all our complex activity is leading us.

It is generally said, that such attempts at the realization of the Christian life have been made more than once already; there have been the Quakers, the Mennonites, and others, all of whom have weakened and degenerated into ordinary people, living the general life under the State. And, therefore, it is said such attempts at the realization of the Christian life are not of importance.

To say so is like saying that the pains of labor which have not yet ended in birth, that the warm rains and the sun-rays which have not as yet brought spring, are of no importance.

What, then, is important for the realization of the Christian life? It is certainly not by diplomatic negotiations about Abyssinia and Constantinople, papal encyclicals, socialistic congresses, and so on, that mankind will approach to that for which the world endures. For, if the kingdom of God, i.e. the kingdom on earth of truth and good, is to be realized, it can be realized only by such attempts as were made by the first disciples of Christ, afterwards by the Paulicans, Albigenses, Quakers, Moravian Brethren, Mennonites, all the true Christians of the world, and now by the "Christians of the Universal Brotherhood."

The fact that these pains of labor continue and increase does not prove that there will be no birth, but, on the contrary, that the birth is near at hand. People say that this will happen, but not in that way, in some other way, by books, newspapers, universities, theaters, speeches, meetings, congresses. But even if it be admitted that all these newspapers and books and meetings and universities help to the realization of the Christian life, yet, after all, the realization must be accomplished by living men, good men, with a Christian spirit, ready for righteous common life. Therefore, the main condition for the realization is the existence and gathering together of such people as shall even now realize that toward which we are all striving. And behold, these people exist!

It may be, although I doubt it, that the movement of the "Christian Universal Brotherhood" will also be stamped out, especially if society itself does not understand all the importance of what is taking place, and does not help them with brotherly aid; but that which this movement represents, that which has been expressed in it, will certainly not die, cannot die, and sooner or later will burst forth to the light, will destroy all that is now crushing it, and will take possession of the world. It is only a question of time.

True, there are people, and, unfortunately, there are many, who hope and say, "But not in our time," and therefore strive to arrest the movement. Yet their efforts are useless, and they do not arrest the movement, but by their efforts only destroy in themselves the life which is given them. For life is life, only when it is the carrying out of God's purpose. But, by opposing Him, people deprive themselves of life, and at the same time, neither for one year, nor for one hour, can they delay the accomplishment of God's purpose.

And it is impossible not to see that, with the outward connection now established among all the inhabitants of the earth, with the awakening of the Christian spirit which is now appearing in all corners of the earth, this accomplishment is near at hand. And that obduracy and blindness of the Russian government, in directing persecution against the "Christians of the Universal Brotherhood," a persecution like those of pagan times, and the wonderful meekness and firmness with which the new Christian martyrs have endured these persecutions, all these facts are undoubted signs of the nearness of this accomplishment.

And therefore, having understood all the importance of the event that is taking place, both for the life of the whole of humanity and for the life of each of us, remembering that the opportunity

to act, which is now presented us, will never return, let us do that which the merchant in the Gospel parable did, selling all he possessed that he might obtain the priceless pearl; let us disdain all mean, selfish considerations, and let each of us, in whatever position he be, do all that is in his power, in order, if not directly to help those through whom the work of God is being done, if not to partake in this work, at least not to be the opponents of the work of God which is being accomplished for our good.

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