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Leo Tolstoy

Patriotism or Peace?

Letter to Manson

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Patriotism or Peace?

Letter to Manson

Leo Tolstoy

Originally published in 1896. This version was
translated in 1904.

Dear Sir:—You write to me asking me to express myself in respect to the United States of North America “in the interests of Christian consistency and true peace,” and express the hope that “the nations will soon awaken to the one means of securing national peace.”

I harbour the same hope. I harbour the same hope, because the blindness in our time of the nations that extol patriotism, bring up their young generations in the superstition of patriotism, and, at the same time, do not wish for the inevitable consequences of patriotism,—war,—has, it seems to me, reached such a last stage that the simplest reflection, which begs for utterance in the mouth of every unprejudiced man, is sufficient, in order that men may see the crying contradiction in which they are.

Frequently, when you ask children which they will choose of two things which are incompatible, but which they want alike, they answer, “Both.”

“Which do you want,—to go out driving or to stay at home?”—“Both,—go out driving and stay at home.”

Just so the Christian nations answer the question which life puts to them, as to which they will choose, patriotism or peace, they answer "Both patriotism and peace," though it is as impossible to unite patriotism with peace, as at the same time to go out driving and stay at home.

The other day there arose a difference between the United States and England concerning the borders of Venezuela. Salisbury for some reason did not agree to something; Cleveland wrote a message to the Senate; from either side were raised patriotic warlike cries; a panic ensued upon 'Change; people lost millions of pounds and of dollars; Edison announced that he would invent engines with which it would be possible to kill more men in an hour than Attila had killed in all his wars, and both nations began energetically to arm themselves for war. But because, simultaneously with these preparations for war, both in England and in America, all kinds of literary men, princes, and statesmen began to admonish their respective governments to abstain from war, saying that the subject under discussion was not sufficiently important to begin a war for, especially between two related Anglo-Saxon nations, speaking the same language, who ought not to war among themselves, but ought calmly to govern others; or because all kinds of bishops, archdeacons, canons prayed and preached concerning the matter in all the churches; or because neither side considered itself sufficiently prepared,—it happened that there was no war just then. And people calmed down.

But a person has to have too little perspicacity not to see that the causes which now are leading to a conflict between England and America have remained the same, and that, if even the present conflict shall be settled without a war, there will inevitably to-morrow or the day after appear other conflicts, between England and Russia, between England and Turkey, in all possible permutations, as they arise every day, and one of these will lead to war.

Thus taught Confucius, whom we are advised to fear. But we, having forgotten Christ's teaching, having renounced it, wish to vanquish the nations by force, and thus are only preparing for ourselves new and stronger enemies than our neighbours. A friend of mine, who saw William's picture, said: "The picture is beautiful, only it does not at all represent what the legend says. It means that Archangel Michael shows to all the governments of Europe, which are represented as robbers bedecked with arms, what it is that will cause their ruin and annihilation, namely, the meekness of Buddha and the wisdom of Confucius." He might have added, "And the humility of Lao-tse."

Indeed, we, thanks to our hypocrisy, have forgotten Christ to such an extent, have so squeezed out of our life everything Christian, that the teachings of Buddha and Confucius stand incomparably higher than that beastly patriotism, by which our so-called Christian nations are guided. And so the salvation of Europe and of the Christian world at large does not consist in this, that, bedecking themselves with swords, as William has represented them, they should, like robbers, cast themselves upon their brothers beyond the sea, in order to kill them, but, on the contrary, they should renounce the survival of barbarous times,—patriotism,—and, having renounced it, should take off their arms and show the Eastern nations, not an example of savage patriotism and beastliness, but an example of brotherly love, which Christ has taught us.

Moscow, January 2, 1896.

If two armed men live side by side, having been impressed from childhood with the idea that power, wealth, and glory are the highest virtues, and that, therefore, to acquire power, wealth, and glory by means of arms, to the detriment of other neighbouring possessors, is a very praiseworthy matter, and if at the same time there is no moral, religious, or political restraint for these men, is it not evident that such people will always fight, that the normal relation between them will be war? and that, if such people, having clutched one another, have separated for awhile, they have done so only, as the French proverb says, "pour mieux sauter," that is, they have separated to take a better run, to throw themselves with greater fury upon one another?

Strange is the egotism of private individuals, but the egoists of private life are not armed, do not consider it right either to prepare or use arms against their adversaries; the egotism of private individuals is under the control of the political power and of public opinion. A private person who with gun in his hand takes away his neighbour's cow, or a desyatina of his crop, will immediately be seized by a policeman and put into prison. Besides, such a man will be condemned by public opinion,—he will be called a thief and robber. It is quite different with the states: they are all armed,—there is no power over them, except the comical attempts at catching a bird by pouring some salt on its tail,—attempts at establishing international congresses, which, apparently, will never be accepted by the powerful states (who are armed for the very purpose that they may not pay any attention to any one), and, above all, public opinion, which rebukes every act of violence in a private individual, extols, raises to the virtue of patriotism every appropriation of what belong to others, for the increase of the power of the country.

Open the newspapers for any period you may wish, and at any moment you will see the black spot,—the cause of every possible war: now it is Korea, now the Pamir, now the lands in

Africa, now Abyssinia, now Turkey, now Venezuela, now the Transvaal. The work of the robbers does not stop for a moment, and here and there a small war, like an exchange of shots in the cordon, is going on all the time, and the real war can and will begin at any moment.

If an American wishes the preferential grandeur and well-being of America above all other nations, and the same is desired for his state by an Englishman, and a Russian, and a Turk, and a Dutchman, and an Abyssinian, and a citizen of Venezuela and of the Transvaal, and an Armenian, and a Pole, and a Bohemian, and all of them are convinced that these desires need not only not be concealed or repressed, but should be a matter of pride and be developed in themselves and in others; and if the greatness and well-being of one country or nation cannot be obtained except to the detriment of another nation, frequently of many countries and nations,—how can war be avoided?

And so, not to have any war, it is not necessary to preach and pray to God about peace, to persuade the English-speaking nations that they ought to be friendly toward one another, in order to be able to rule over other nations; to form double and triple alliances against one another; to marry princes to princesses of other nations,—but to destroy what produces war. But what produces war is the desire for an exclusive good for one's own nation,—what is called patriotism. And so to abolish war, it is necessary to abolish patriotism, and to abolish patriotism, it is necessary first to become convinced that it is an evil, and that it is hard to do. Tell people that war is bad, and they will laugh at you: who does not know that? Tell them that patriotism is bad, and the majority of people will agree with you, but with a small proviso. "Yes, bad patriotism is bad, but there is also another patriotism, the one we adhere to." But wherein this good patriotism consists no one can explain. If good patriotism consists in not being acquisitive, as many say, it is none the less retentive; that is, men want to retain what was formerly

wars, terrible, horrible wars, like those for which we are preparing ourselves, and into the circle of which we are introducing, corrupting them with our patriotism, the new, terrible fighters of the distant East.

Emperor William, one of the most comical persons of our time, orator, poet, musician, dramatic writer, and artist, and, above all, patriot, has lately painted a picture representing all the nations of Europe with swords, standing at the seashore and, at the indication of Archangel Michael, looking at the sitting figures of Buddha and Confucius in the distance. According to William's intention, this should mean that the nations of Europe ought to unite in order to defend themselves against the peril which is proceeding from there. He is quite right from his coarse, pagan, patriotic point of view, which is eighteen hundred years behind the times. The European nations, forgetting Christ, have in the name of their patriotism more and more irritated these peaceful nations, and have taught them patriotism and war, and have now irritated them so much that, indeed, if Japan and China will as fully forget the teachings of Buddha and of Confucius as we have forgotten the teaching of Christ, they will soon learn the art of killing people (they learn these things quickly, as Japan has proved), and, being fearless, agile, strong, and populous, they will inevitably very soon make of the countries of Europe, if Europe does not invent something stronger than guns and Edison's inventions, what the countries of Europe are making of Africa. "The disciple is not above his master: but every one that is perfect shall be as his master" (Luke vi. 40).

In reply to a prince's question how to increase his army, in order to conquer a southern tribe which did not submit to him, Confucius replied: "Destroy all thy army, and use the money, which thou art wasting now on the army, on the enlightenment of thy people and on the improvement of agriculture, and the southern tribe will drive away its prince and will submit to thy rule without war."

C'est à prendre ou à laisser, as the French say. If patriotism is good, then Christianity, which gives peace, is an idle dream, and the sooner this teaching is eradicated, the better. But if Christianity really gives peace, and we really want peace, patriotism is a survival from barbarous times, which must not only not be evoked and educated, as we now do, but which must be eradicated by all means, by means of preaching, persuasion, contempt, and ridicule. If Christianity is the truth, and we wish to live in peace, we must not only have no sympathy for the power of our country, but must even rejoice in its weakening, and contribute to it. A Russian must rejoice when Poland, the Baltic provinces, Finland, Armenia, are separated from Russia and made free; and an Englishman must similarly rejoice in relation to Ireland, Australia, India, and the other colonies, and coöperate in it, because, the greater the country, the more evil and cruel is its patriotism, and the greater is the amount of the suffering on which its power is based. And so, if we actually want to be what we profess, we must not, as we do now, wish for the increase of our country, but wish for its diminution and weakening, and contribute to it with all our means. And thus must we educate the younger generations: we must bring up the younger generations in such a way that, as it is now disgraceful for a young man to manifest his coarse egotism, for example, by eating everything up, without leaving anything for others, to push a weaker person down from the road, in order to pass by himself, to take away by force what another needs, it should be just as disgraceful to wish for the increase of his country's power; and, as it now is considered stupid and ridiculous for a person to praise himself, it should be considered stupid to extol one's nation, as is now done in various lying patriotic histories, pictures, monuments, text-books, articles, sermons, and stupid national hymns. But it must be understood that so long as we are going to extol patriotism and educate the younger generations in it, we shall have armaments, which ruin the physical and spiritual life of the nations, and

acquired, since there is no country which was not based on conquest, and it is impossible to retain what is conquered by any other means than those by which it was acquired, that is, by violence and murder. But even if patriotism is not retentive, it is restorative,—the patriotism of the vanquished and oppressed nations, the Armenians, Poles, Bohemians, Irish, and so forth. This patriotism is almost the very worst, because it is the most enraged and demands the greatest degree of violence.

Patriotism cannot be good. Why do not people say that egotism can be good, though this may be asserted more easily, because egotism is a natural sentiment, with which a man is born, while patriotism is an unnatural sentiment, which is artificially inoculated in him?

It will be said: "Patriotism has united men in states and keeps up the unity of the states." But the men are already united in states,—the work is all done: why should men now maintain an exclusive loyalty for their state, when this loyalty produces calamities for all states and nations? The same patriotism which produced the unification of men into states is now destroying those states. If there were but one patriotism,—the patriotism of none but the English,—it might be regarded as unificatory or beneficent, but when, as now, there are American, English, German, French, Russian patriotisms, all of them opposed to one another, patriotism no longer unites, but dis-unites. To say that, if patriotism was beneficent, by uniting men into states, as was the case during its highest development in Greece and Rome, patriotism even now, after eighteen hundred years of Christian life, is just as beneficent, is the same as saying that, since the ploughing was useful and beneficent for the field before the sowing, it will be as useful now, after the crop has grown up.

It would be very well to retain patriotism in memory of the use which it once had, as people preserve and retain the ancient monuments of temples, mausoleums, and so forth. But the temples and mausoleums stand, without causing any harm

to men, while patriotism produces without cessation innumerable calamities.

What now causes the Armenians and the Turks to suffer and cut each other's throats and act like wild beasts? Why do England and Russia, each of them concerned about her share of the inheritance from Turkey, lie in wait and do not put a stop to the Armenian atrocities? Why do the Abyssinians and Italians fight one another? Why did a terrible war come very near breaking out on account of Venezuela, and now on account of the Transvaal? And the Chino-Japanese War, and the Turkish, and the German, and the French wars? And the rage of the subdued nations, the Armenians, the Poles, the Irish? And the preparation for war by all the nations? All that is the fruits of patriotism. Seas of blood have been shed for the sake of this sentiment, and more blood will be shed for its sake, if men do not free themselves from this outlived bit of antiquity.

I have several times had occasion to write about patriotism, about its absolute incompatibility, not only with the teaching of Christ in its ideal sense, but even with the lowest demands of the morality of Christian society, and every time my arguments have been met with silence or with the supercilious hint that the ideas expressed by me were Utopian expressions of mysticism, anarchism, and cosmopolitanism. My ideas have frequently been repeated in a compressed form, and, instead of retorting to them, it was added that it was nothing but cosmopolitanism, as though this word "cosmopolitanism" unanswerably overthrew all my arguments. Serious, old, clever, good men, who, above all else, stand like the city on a hill, and who involuntarily guide the masses by their example, make it appear that the legality and beneficence of patriotism are so obvious and incontestable that it is not worth while to answer the frivolous and senseless attacks upon this sentiment, and the majority of men, who have since childhood been deceived and infected by patriotism, take this supercilious silence to be a most convincing proof, and continue to stick fast in their ignorance.

And so those people who from their position can free the masses from their calamities, and do not do so, commit a great sin.

The most terrible thing in the world is hypocrisy. There was good reason why Christ once got angry,—that was against the hypocrisy of the Pharisees.

But what was the hypocrisy of the Pharisees in comparison with the hypocrisy of our time? In comparison with our men, the Pharisees were the most truthful of men, and their art of hypocrisy was as child's play in comparison with the hypocrisy of our time; nor can it be otherwise. Our whole life, with the profession of Christianity, the teaching of humility and love, in connection with the life of an armed den of robbers, can be nothing but one solid, terrible hypocrisy. It is very convenient to profess a teaching at one end of which is Christian sanctity and infallibility, and at the other—the pagan sword and gallows, so that, when it is possible to impose or deceive by means of sanctity, sanctity is put into effect, and when the deception does not work, the sword and the gallows are put into effect. Such a teaching is very convenient, but the time comes when this spider-web of lie is dispersed, and it is no longer possible to continue to keep both, and it is necessary to ally oneself with either one or the other. It is this which is now getting to be the case in relation to the teaching about patriotism.

Whether people want it or not, the question stands clearly before humanity: how can that patriotism, from which result innumerable physical and moral calamities of men, be necessary and a virtue? It is indispensable to give an answer to this question.

It is necessary either to show that patriotism is such a great good that it redeems all those terrible calamities which it produces in humanity; or to recognize that patriotism is an evil, which must not only not be inoculated in men and impressed upon them, but from which also we must try to free ourselves at all cost.