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Patriotism or Peace

by Leo Tolstoy

Dear Sir:

You wrote to me asking me to express myself with respect to the United States of 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 harbor the same hope. I harbor 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 consequence of patriotism – war – has, it seems to me, reached such a level 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 that are incompatible, but which they want alike, they answer, “Both.” “Which do you want: to go out driving or to stay at home?” “Both, to go out driving and to stay at home.”

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

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, patriotic warlike cries were raised from either side, and a panic ensued. People lost millions of pounds and 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 to energetically arm themselves for war. But, simultaneously with these preparations for war, all kinds of literary men, princes, and statesmen both in England and in America began to admonish their respective governments to abstain from war, saying that the subject under discussion was not sufficiently important. They stressed that two related Anglo-Saxon nations, speaking the same language, ought not to war among themselves, but ought to calmly govern others. All kinds of bishops, archdeacons, and canons prayed and preached concerning the matter in all the churches. 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 discernment not to see that the causes which almost led to a conflict between England and America have remained the same for a long time. Even though this conflict was settled without a war, tomorrow or the day after there will inevitably appear other conflicts between England and Russia, between England and Turkey, or some other permutation. Such conflicts arise every day, and one of these will lead to war.

Suppose that two armed men live side by side, having been taught from childhood 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 one's neighbors, is a very praiseworthy matter. If there is no moral, religious, or political restraint on these men, is it not evident that such people will always fight, and that the normal relation between them will be war? If such people, having fought one another, separate for a while, they do so only in order to take a better run and throw themselves with greater fury upon one another.

Strange is the egotism of private individuals, but the egotists of private life are not armed and do not consider it right either to prepare or use arms against their adversaries. The egotism of private individuals is under the control of political power and public opinion. A private person who uses a gun to take away his neighbor's cow or a hectare of his crop will immediately be seized by a policeman and put into prison. Besides, such a man will be condemned by public opinion and will be called a thief and a robber. It is quite different with the states. They are all armed and there is no power over them. The attempts at establishing international congresses will never be accepted by the powerful states, and amount to little more than the comical attempts at catching a bird by pouring some salt on its tail. States are armed for the very purpose that they may not pay any attention to anyone. Above all, public opinion, which rebukes every act of violence in a private individual, extols every appropriation of what belongs to others and raises it to the virtue of patriotism – all for the increase of the country's power.

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, and 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

An American wishes the preferential grandeur and well-being of America above all other nations. The same is desired for his state by an Englishman, a Russian, a Turk, a Dutchman, an Abyssinian, a Venezuelan a Transvaaler, an Armenian, a Pole, and a Bohemian. All of them are convinced that these desires should not be concealed or repressed, should be a matter of pride, and should be developed in themselves and in others. 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, in order not to have any war, it is not necessary to preach and pray to God about peace. It is not necessary 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. It is not necessary to form double and triple alliances against one another or to marry princes to princesses of other nations. All that is necessary is to destroy what produces war. But that which produces war is the desire for an exclusive good for one's own nation, and is called patriotism. And so to abolish war, it is necessary to abolish patriotism. 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, for 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 no one can explain what this good patriotism is. If good patriotism consists in not being acquisitive, as many say, it is nonetheless retentive – men want to retain what was formerly acquired. There is no country that 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 – by violence and murder. But even if patriotism is not retentive, it is restorative. It is the patriotism of the vanquished and oppressed nations such as 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 is it that people do not call egotism good? 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 instilled 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 and the work is already 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 that produced the unification of men into states is now destroying those states. If there was only one patriotism – the patriotism of none but the English, for example – it might be regarded as unifying or beneficial. But when, as now, there are American, English, German, French, and Russian patriotisms, with all of them opposed to one another, patriotism no longer unites, but disunites. To say that patriotism was beneficial because it united men into states, as was the case during its highest development in Greece and Rome, and that even now, after eighteen hundred years of Christian life, it is just as beneficial, is the same as saying that, since plowing was useful and beneficial 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 that it once had, just 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 innumerable calamities without cessation.

What now causes the Armenians and the Turks to suffer, 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? What about the Chino-Japanese War, the Turkish, the German, and the French wars? What about the rage of the subdued nations: the Armenians, the Poles, and the Irish? What about the preparation for war by all the nations? All of these are 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 and about its absolute incompatibility, not only with the teaching of Christ in its ideal sense, but even with the lowest demands of morality in a Christian society. Every time, my arguments have been met with silence or with the supercilious hint that my ideas Utopian expressions of mysticism, anarchism, and cosmopolitanism. My ideas have frequently been repeated in an abbreviated form, and, instead of retorting to them, it was added that they were nothing but cosmopolitanism – as though this word “cosmopolitanism” unanswerably overthrew all my arguments. Men who are serious, old, clever, and good, 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 worthwhile to answer the frivolous and senseless attacks upon this sentiment. The majority of men, who have been deceived and infected by patriotism since childhood, take this supercilious silence to be a most convincing proof, and continue to stick fast in their ignorance.

And so, those people who are in a position to 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 a good reason why Christ once got angry, and 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 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, with the teaching of humility and love, and with the life of an armed den of robbers at the same time – 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 the pagan sword and gallows at the other, 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, it is no longer possible to continue to keep both, and it is necessary to ally oneself with either one or the other. This 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 imperative 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 that must not only not be warned and inoculated against in men, but from which we must also try to free ourselves at all cost.

C'est à prendre ou à laisser^[1], 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 if we really want peace, then patriotism is a leftover from barbarous times, which must not only not be evoked and taught, as we now do, but which must be eradicated by all means of preaching, persuasion, contempt, and ridicule. If Christianity is the truth, and if we wish to live in peace, then 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, or Armenia are separated from Russia and made free. An Englishman must similarly rejoice in relation to Ireland, Australia, India, and the other colonies, and cooperate in it. 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. It is now disgraceful for a young man to manifest his coarse egotism, for example, by eating everything up without leaving anything for others. It is disgraceful to push a weaker person down from the road in order to pass by. It is disgraceful to forcibly take away what another needs. Similarly, we must bring up the younger generations in such a way that it is just as disgraceful to wish for the increase of their country's power. Just 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, textbooks, 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 we will have terrible, horrible wars, like those for which we are preparing ourselves, and into the circle of which we are introducing the new, terrible fighters of the distant East, corrupting them with our patriotism.

Emperor William, one of the most comical persons of our time – orator, poet, musician, dramatic writer, artist, and, above all, patriot – has lately painted a picture representing all the nations of Europe with swords, standing at the seashore. At the indication of Archangel Michael, they are 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 that is proceeding from the East. 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 more and more irritated these peaceful nations in the name of their patriotism, have taught them patriotism and war. They 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). 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. "A student is not above his teacher, but everyone who is fully trained will be like his teacher." (Luke 6:40)

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

Thus taught Confucius, whom we are advised to fear. But we, having forgotten Christ's teaching, and having renounced it, wish to vanquish the nations by force, and thus are only preparing for ourselves new and stronger enemies than our neighbors. 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: 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, and 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 arming themselves with swords, as William has represented them, and casting themselves like robbers upon their brothers beyond the sea, in order to kill them. On the contrary, it consists in renouncing the survival mechanism of barbarous times – patriotism – and, having renounced it, throwing down their arms and showing the Eastern nations, not an example of savage patriotism and beastliness, but an example of the brotherly love that Christ has taught us.

Moscow, January 2, 1896

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^[1] Transcriber's note – Take it or leave it.