

## **Do you have to be demanding? (Nikolas Berdiaeff)**

[Ξένες γλώσσες / In English](#)



The people today who are not themselves close to Christianity claim vehemently that the Christian Church should consist of perfect and saintly people. They are the same ones who condemn the Church for granting a haven to sinners, imperfect souls and pseudo-Christians. This is one of the commonest arguments against Christianity. But this reasoning does not understand the nature of the Church and, in the end, forgets its whole purpose, because the Church exists, above all, for the sinners, the imperfect and the despicable. It goes out into the world and labours among people who are floundering in sin. Celestial in origin and eternal in its inception, it works in time and space without having recourse to extremes, away from the world of sin or indifferent to its torments. Its fundamental obligation is assistance and the salvation of the world for eternal life, its elevation to the heavens.

The essence of Christianity lies in the encounter of eternity and time, of heaven and earth, of the divine and the human, not from their separation. The human and temporary cannot be disregarded and ignored, but can be illumined and transformed.



In the first Christian centuries, a heretical movement arose which was called "Montanism". This movement taught that the Church ought to consist exclusively of perfect and saintly beings and demanded that sinners and the non-perfect be removed from its bosom. For the Montanists, the Church was a community which received the special gifts of the Holy Spirit. So the greater part of sinful mankind was left languishing a long way outside Christianity. The Church conscience condemned Montanism and confessed faith in the Church of repentant sinners. The saints are the bulwark and buttress of the Church, but the latter does not depend exclusively on them, because the whole of humankind, humankind that is seeking its salvation, belongs to all the levels of perfection. The Church on earth is "militant" and is fighting against evil and sin, but it is not yet "triumphant". Christ Himself was close to the publicans and sinners, even though the Pharisees condemned Him for this. And His Church should be the same; it cannot consist exclusively of pure beings; it always has to be on the side of those who are being lost. A Christianity that recognized only perfect beings would be a Pharisaical Christianity. Fellow-feeling, forgiveness, love for one's neighbours, warts and all, is the task of Christian love and the way towards its perfection. Making Christianity guilty of the darkness which would destroy the Church in the middle of its mission is also Pharisaical. And, in any case, where is the proof that the accusers are themselves so pure and perfect.

Montanism was always an example of deluded megalomania within Christianity. And so it manifested a lack of love, a spiritual arrogance, a false morality. Its

falsehood lies in its demand for the maximum, not from itself, but from other people. You condemn other people because they have not been able to practice purity, perfection and sanctity, but you do not think about applying these things yourselves. Those who actually come close to perfection and sanctity are not in the habit of criticizing others. The holy startsi (elders) are forbearing with people. If you want to avoid hypocrisy and Pharisaism, you have to be demanding of yourself, not of others. Christianity is the religion of love. It combines austerity and harshness towards oneself with leniency, kindness and gentleness towards one's neighbour.

Christianity is distinguished clearly from "Tolstoyism" which is an overweening moralism. Tolstoy was a harsh judge of "Historical Christianity" and his criticism, which was based on actual events, was often just. He claimed that Christianity was often preached as an absolute doctrine, without any application to life, without people following its commandments. For Him, Christianity was restricted to the moral teaching of Christ and to His commandments, while its mystical and sacramental aspect remained hostile and beyond his ken.

Tolstoy believed that everything was linked to the truth of a concept and was overjoyed when his spiritual concepts found practical application. If anyone recognized the true law, the law of the Lord of life, that is God, from then on it would be easy, with His strength, to observe it. At this point, we can see the misconception of an excessively rationalistic cast of mind, for which the mystery of freedom and joy was ever out of reach. This optimism contradicts the tragic meaning of life. Saint Paul tells us: "For I do not do the good I want to, but the evil I do not want to; now if I keep doing what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who does it, but the sin dwelling within me" (*Rom. 7, 19-20*).

Tolstoy did not recognize people's freedom, nor the evil there was in human nature. He located the source of evil in the realm of consciousness, not of desire and freedom. So to deal with evil, he had no reason to have recourse to divine assistance and grace; for him a change of consciousness would suffice. For him, Christ was not the Redeemer and Saviour. He was a great educator for life, the giver of laws and moral commandments. And Tolstoy believed that the application of Christianity to life was easy because, as he said, it was pleasanter, more beneficial and politic to live according to the law of love than according to the law of hate, which is what the world accepted. He thought that Christ taught us not to "commit stupidities". He believed that the non-adoption of Christianity in our lives and the non-implementation of Christ's commandments was due to the mistake of a theological teaching which turned all our attention to Christ Himself and linked everything to divine grace and the redemption of humankind from sin through the

sacrifice of Christ. Tolstoy rocked the Christian Church from its foundations.

If people want to take Christianity seriously and wish to observe the commandments of Christ in their lives, then they're within the spirit of truth, but they're making a big mistake if they imagine that an enlightened consciousness is enough for this and that it can be achieved without Christ the Saviour, without the grace of the Holy Spirit. By asking such an effort of people, Tolstoy falls into the deception of the morality of extremes. He considered only his own Christianity to be authentic. He criticized the vast majority of people for not renouncing their property, because they did not do manual labour, or because they smoked and ate meat, but did not have the strength to apply excessive morality to their lives. For him, love was transformed into a law devoid of grace, into a source of blame.

There is, in Tolstoy, a very just spirit of criticism. This spirit uncovers trespasses and analyzes the non-Christian nature of society and culture. But it is unable to discern mystical Christianity, which is beyond the trespasses, the imperfections and the perversities of Christians. The arrogance of his logic prevents him from accepting Christ within himself. Tolstoy was a genius of a man, with blameless intentions in his quest for divine truth. But an awful lot of people, who have neither his genius nor his thirst for truth clash with both Christianity and Christians, without being interested in some internal perfection, without being affected, even a little, by the problem of the meaning and justification of life.

It is a mistake to believe that it is easy to live according to Christ's commandments while condemning His teaching on the grounds that Christians do not apply it. But it is an even greater mistake to imagine that it is not necessary to apply Christianity to the whole of the fullness of life. At every moment of their existence, Christians should seek a perfection analogous to that of their Heavenly Father, and should burn with the desire for the divine Kingdom. "First seek the Kingdom of God and His righteousness and all these things will also be given to you" (Matth. 6, 33).

Merely because human nature is sinful and that the ideal is certainly unattainable on earth is not reason enough to stultify efforts towards perfection, the desire for divine justice and the Kingdom of God. We need to seek the application of divine truth without being concerned over the manner in which this fullness of life will be put into practice. The fact that only a small number of people on earth believe in Christ's truth, that people do not contribute to it for even an hour in the whole of their lives, does not at all lessen our responsibility for its implementation. The only true path lies in a dynamic effort to approach the Truth of Christ, to seek the Kingdom of Heaven, without burdening our neighbour with the difficulties and impediments involved in this.

Christianity is entering a completely new era. From now on it is going to be impossible for people to live their faith "on the outside", to enclose themselves in a kind of formal piety. Christians are going to have to take very seriously the implementation of their faith in the whole of their lives. They will have to defend Christianity personally, with dedication to Christ and His commandments, by counteracting the hatred of the world with love.

In our Orthodox Church, at this time, a choice is being made between, on the one hand the best, the most sincere, the most fervent, the most ready for sacrifice, the most loyal to Christ and, on the other, the desertion of those who were Orthodox out of habit. externally, without understanding the importance of their faith and the deeper meaning of their duties and obligations.

We might say that it is the end of the confusion between Christianity and paganism and that a new era is beginning, of cleansed Christianity. Christianity was degraded by the fact that it was a religion of authority, a state religion, and that the Church was imposed by the sword of Emperors or was favoured at the expense of those who were of a different religion from those in power. And if, for a great many people, Christianity has ceased to be the religion of the Cross, this is because it has adapted to the idea of the persecutor rather than the persecuted, because it has allowed itself to be interpreted as a cleansing of idolatrous customs, without there being any demand for any real enlightenment and transformation.

But the time has come for Christianity to become the persecuted, the time when great heroism will be demanded from Christians, the greatest purifying love, greater integrity and a purer conscience in the confession of their faith. The time has come for Christians to stop being an obstacle on the road to Christianity.

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