

Lev Tolstoi and the Bábí and Bahá'í Faiths A Bibliography

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Abstract

The great spiritual crisis of Tolstoi's life led him to a rejection of Christian dogma and the search for a pure faith. Late in life, this search led to his examination of the Bábí–Bahá'í religions. A bibliography of material on Tolstoi's association with the religion has been needed for some time. This bibliography sets these sources in context for researchers.

Résumé

La grande crise spirituelle de la vie de Tolstoi le conduisit au rejet des dogmes chrétiens et à la recherche d'une religion pure. Tard dans sa vie, cette recherche l'entraîna à étudier les religions bábí–bahá'íe. Il était grand temps d'avoir une bibliographie des documents émanant etc l'association de Tolstoi avec la religion. Cette bibliographie replace ces éléments dans leur contexte pour l'intérêt des chercheurs.

Resumen

La gran crisis espiritual en la vida de Tolstoi produjo en él un rechazo del dogma cristiano y una búsqueda de una fe pura. Mas tarde en su vida, esta búsqueda resultó en su estudio de la religión Bábí–Bahá'í. Hace tiempo que ha faltado una bibliografía de la materia que se refiera a la asociación de Tolstoi con esta religión. Esta bibliografía pone estas fuentes en contexto apropiado para los investigadores.

Lev Nikolaevich Tolstoi¹ (1828–1910) was an author of such profound talent and perception that none of his contemporaries rival him. While he was certainly the supreme novelist of the nineteenth century, he was also a religious philosopher whose influence on the spiritual life of Europe and Russia brought many disciples of his teachings flocking to his home at Yasnaya Polyana.

Tolstoi was tormented by a spiritual crisis, which culminated in his commitment to the teachings of Christ. But it was a “conversion” that led Tolstoi to what he called “Christian anarchism”—the rejection of the organized church and of all superstitions and forms, added to the original precepts of Christ. He felt that the world needed a pure religion based upon the light of reason. After his rejection of the nonessentials of Christian practice, Tolstoi's spiritual quest brought him to the study of the teachings of other religions. It was this study that led him late in life to an examination of the Bahá'í teachings and into correspondence with a number of Bahá'ís.

A bibliography of the material dealing with Lev Tolstoi's association with the Bábí and Bahá'í Faiths has been needed for some time. Although several authors have dealt with Tolstoi's interest in the Báb's and Bahá'u'lláh's teachings, most have neglected a number of important, even essential, documents. This bibliography is an attempt to compile all known published and cited sources on the subject.

The major part of the bibliography is dedicated to primary sources—the letters and documents written by Tolstoi (items 38–74), References to the Bábí and Bahá'í religions in Tolstoi's correspondence and diaries cover a span of sixteen years from his first contact with the religions in 1894 until shortly before his death in 1910. His correspondents on the subject include such well-known Bahá'ís as Hippolyte Dreyfus (item 53), Izabella Grinevskaja (item 56), Dr. Yúnis Khán-i-Afrúkhtih (item 59), 'Alí-Akbar Nakhjavání (item 62), Gabriel Sacy (item 69), and Mrs. Thornburgh-Cropper (item 71).

Although Bahá'í publications have long quoted the laudatory comments addressed by Tolstoi to Grinevskaja and Badalbekov (item 5), Tolstoi's attitude toward Bahá'í beliefs fluctuated and at times was completely contradictory. Tolstoi's earliest reactions until about 1904 tended to be favorable, but upon receiving Bahá'í books from some of his correspondents, Tolstoi found a few of the Bahá'í tenets to be at odds with his own cherished ideals. In his letter to Dreyfus, Tolstoi remarks that his reading has “made me completely disenchanted with the doctrine of Bahá'u'lláh” and that it “confirms ancient superstitions.” And to Nakhjavání (item 62, 1909.11.28) Tolstoi writes: “The more I become acquainted with the Bahá'í teaching, the less I appreciate it.” Yet little more than a month before, he had extolled the “pure and lofty teachings of the disciple of the Báb—Bahá'u'lláh” in a letter to Zheltov (item 73), and in his letter to Velikova (item 72) earlier in 1909, he had

mentioned that the Bahá'í teachings worked toward the goal of eliminating the incrustations and superstitions added to Islam. The contradiction in Tolstoi's attitudes may have arisen from his inability to distinguish clearly between the Bábí Faith and the Bahá'í Revelation, as evidenced by his usage of Bábí and Bahá'í interchangeably.

Other primary sources include a collection of Tolstoi's letters edited by P. Biriukov (items 8–10); the memoirs of Tolstoi's physician from 1904–1910 (item 20); the diary of Tolstoi's secretary (item 12); the diary of Tolstoi's wife (item 32); the biography by Tolstoi's daughter (item 78); and the record by 'Azízu'lláh Jazáb (Jadhdháh) of his visit to Tolstoi in 1902 (item 18).

The most thorough work to date on Tolstoi's relationship to the Bahá'í Faith is Luigi Stendardo's thesis "Tolstoj et la Foi Bahá'íe" (item 29, later revised and published in English as *Leo Tolstoy and the Bahá'í Faith* (item 30). It provides an excellent analysis of Tolstoi's changing views on the subject. Stendardo shows that although Tolstoi ended life feeling that he could possibly subscribe to the Faith of the Bahá'ís, Tolstoi's major reservations were with regard to the Bahá'í doctrine of Manifestation, which insists that God is knowable only through his Manifestations, that these Manifestations are in essence different from and above other humans and that They are infallible. While Stendardo's analysis is thorough, the focus of his thesis on Tolstoi's view of the Bahá'í Faith did not allow use of the unpublished and untranslated Tablets of 'Abdu'l-Bahá that mention Tolstoi. The Bahá'í World Centre has a compilation of these letters from 'Abdu'l-Bahá to Nakhjavání, Sacy, Thornburgh-Cropper, Dreyfus, and Clifford-Barney in the original text.

A partial study of Tolstoi's attitudes to the Bahá'í Faith is provided by A.M. Ghadirian (items 14–16). Although Ghadirian does not analyze Tolstoi's wavering views on the Bahá'í religion, his essay was the first to trace in a scholarly manner some of the influences leading to Tolstoi's interest in the Bahá'í teachings.

Martha Root's essay (item 25) is of interest primarily as a journalistic record of interviews with people who had first-hand experience of Tolstoi's contact with Bahá'ís. It contains a number of errors of fact, in particular the dating of Tolstoi's introduction to the Bahá'í Faith as 1903.

In *Lev Tolstoj i Vostok* (item 26), Shifman provides the standard Marxist analysis of the transition of the Bábí Faith—in the Marxist view a popular rebellion against government oppression—to the Bahá'í Faith, a "bourgeois movement disdaining revolutionary action." Shifman places particular emphasis on Tolstoi's negative statements on Bahá'í topics, ending his essay with Tolstoi's remark to Crosby (item 52) that "this sect has no future."

Tolstoi is recorded as having received a number of books on the Bahá'í Faith, which he read or sent to his non-Bahá'í correspondents who were interested in the subject. Hippolyte Dreyfus sent him *Kitáb-i-Íqán* in French (Paris). Tolstoi also, received *The Life and Teachings of Abbas Effendi* by Myron H. Phelps (New York, 1903); *Essai sur le Béháisme* by Dreyfus (Paris, 1909); *Die Babis in Persien* by F.C. Andreas (Leipzig, 1896); *The Hidden Words* by Bahá'u'lláh; *A Traveller's Narrative* by 'Abdu'l-Bahá (Cambridge, 1891); *Visiting Tablets for Our Recent Martyrs Who Suffered in Persia in 1901* by 'Abdu'l-Bahá (New York, 1902); *Babizm* by A. Arakelian (Tiflis); *Golos Norodov* by I.F. Nazhivin (Moskva, 1908), (containing the chapter "Babidy"); [*Summons to the Bahá'ís of the East and the West* by 'Abdu'l-Bahá]; Isabella Grinevskaia's *Bab: Dramaticheskaja Poema* (S.-Peterburg, 1903); *Babizm: Istoriia Vosniknoveniia* by Bernasovskii (Tiflis, 1909); Atrpet's *Babizm i Bekhaizm* (Tiflis, 1910) and *Imamat* (Aleksandropol', 1909); and A.G. Tumanskii's translation of *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas* by Bahá'u'lláh (*Kitabe Akdes: Sviashchennaia kniga sovremennykh Babidov*, S.-Peterburg, 1899). Tolstoi also received a number of unpublished essays on the Bábís and Bahá'ís, as well as translations of such Tablets by Bahá'u'lláh as the *Ishráqát* and *Bishráqát*, which 'Abdu'l-Bahá asked 'Alí-Akbar Nakhjavání to send to Tolstoi.

Bahá'ís have tended to view Tolstoi with the idea that he had unqualified admiration for their Faith. The sources show that he was ambivalent in his sentiments, partly through his confusion about the difference between the Bábí and Bahá'í Faiths and partly through disagreement with some Bahá'í tenets. It is more to the point to view the positive statements Tolstoi made on the Bahá'í Faith as testimony to some moments of perspicacity about the future of a religion which was at that time only beginning to make inroads in the West and undeveloped countries. 'Abdu'l-Bahá notes (item 1) that Tolstoi was a well-wisher of humanity but that he was still caught up in politics and opinion. This bibliography on Tolstoi and the Bábí and Bahá'í Faiths provides a glimpse into the deeply human contradiction within a great man who, despite his inability to accept some Bahá'í doctrines, was able to declare that "the teachings of the Bábís which come to us out of Islam have through Bahá'u'lláh's teachings been gradually developed and now present us with the highest and purest form of religious teaching" (item 50).

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Notes

1. Throughout the essay and bibliography, the transliteration from Russian follows the Library of Congress system for Slavic romanization.
2. Item not personally verified by compilers.
3. In some cases incorrectly listed as Wadelbekow.