

# Tolstoy and the Bahá'í Faith



These are some quotes I have collected from [soc.religion.bahai](http://soc.religion.bahai). They are my own effort at compiling them and should not be seen as authoritative in any way. They are in no particular order either (yet).

Take the correctness of the footnotes with a grain of salt. I have to verify them. If someone else catches mistakes, please inform me, and I will correct them.

On 10 / 22 / 1903 Lev Nikolayevich Tolstoy wrote,

"I have known about the Babis for a long time and have always been interested in their teachings. It seems to me that these teachings. . . have a great future for this very reason that these teachings, discarding all these distorting incrustations that cause division, aspire to unite into one common religion all mankind. Therefore the teachings of the Babis, inasmuch as they have rejected the old [edited] superstitions and have not established new superstitions which would divide them from other new superstitions . . . and inasmuch as they keep to the principal fundamental ideas of

brotherhood, equality and love, have a great future before them . . . I therefore sympathise with Babism with all my heart inasmuch as it teaches people brotherhood and equality and sacrifice of material life for service to God."

Again, in 1908, Tolstoy wrote,

"The teachings of the Babis which come to us out of Islam have through Baha'u'llah's teachings been gradually developed and now present us with the highest and purest form of religious teaching. "

Source: The Promise of All Ages, by Christophil (aka) George Townshend, p. 26

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Provisional translation from Russian:

from "The Bahá'í Faith in Russia" by Nancy Ackerman & Graham Hassall, (Appendix II in the Russian edition of Hatcher & Martin's introductory book about the Bahá'í Faith) excerpt from pp. 259-262 :

"The Faith also attracted the attention of Russia's great thinker, L. N. Tolstoy, who first heard about the Babis in 1884 from O. S. Lebedev. Over the course of 16 [?] years (until his death in 1910) the writer wrote several times about the Babi and Bahá'í teachings in his correspondence and diaries. Nor did he not overlook Grinevskaya's play. [Isabella Grinevskaya, a playwright of the time, wrote a play about the Bab which had two very successful runs in St. Petersburg. Grinevskaya became a Bahá'í, and later met both `Abdu'l-Baha and Shoghi Effendi.] Tolstoy wrote her a letter in which he spoke warmly about her work and noted that "...the teachings of the Babis... since they uphold the fundamental, underlying ideas of brotherhood, equality and love, have a great future."<sup>1</sup> Tolstoy's letter was published, and public interest in the Faith in Russia grew significantly.

Tolstoy was a champion of true religion, and his spiritual search and important ideas - such as the crucial need for a universal religion, independent investigation of truth, the harmony of faith and reason, the simplification of religious ritual, and universal education - were in agreement with Bahá'í principles. True, the writers's relationship with the Faith was complex and, at times, uneven: periods in which he put the highest possible value on it alternated with periods of coolness and criticism. Without access to reliable sources, Tolstoy naturally was unable to get a clear picture of the Bahá'í teachings. This limited knowledge, together with internal conflicts in his own philosophical outlook, at times prompted him to reject the Faith, since it seemed to him that its postulates did not coincide with his own views and and aspirations. However, in his correspondence with Bahá'ís and those researching the Faith Tolstoy never stopped exploring those questions which troubled him: the nature of God, patriotism, the station of the great Prophets, the oneness of religions, and the link between mind and soul.

... It is known from Tolstoy's letters that he received a number of books about the Faith, sent by correspondents who were interested in religious questions. The brief references to Babis and Bahá'ís in his diaries are unclear, but they affirm that an interest in the Faith never left him.

`Abdu'l-Baha knew that Tolstoy was interested in the Faith, and he advised Bahá'ís living in Russian-controlled territories (including Ali-Akbar Nakhjavani from Baku) to keep in contact with him and provide Tolstoy with reliable information about the Faith. In a letter to Nakhjavani Tolstoy mentioned that he intended to write a book about the Babi and Bahá'í religions.<sup>2</sup>

In 1901 in a letter to the Persian ambassador to Russia, who had sent his poem "Peace" to Tolstoy, Lev Nikolaevich [Tolstoy] wrote: "I believe that there are people everywhere, like the Babis in your homeland, who profess the true religion, and despite the persecution which they have always suffered everywhere, their ideas will spread increasingly rapidly and in the end will triumph over barbarism..."<sup>3</sup>

In September 1902 an Iranian Bahá'í, Aziz'u'llah Jazab, arrived at Yasnaya Polyana [Tolstoy's home] with a personal message from `Abdu'l-Baha, which said in part: "Act in such wise, that your name will be a memory of the good in the world of religion. Many philosophers have appeared, and each has raised a banner, say, to a height of five metres. You have raised a banner ten metres; immerse yourself in the ocean of oneness and you shall obtain for everlasting the assistance of God."<sup>4</sup>

In response to the messenger's question about Tolstoy's relationship to Baha'u'llah and His

Cause, Tolstoy replied: "How can I reject it? ... Clearly, this cause will win over the whole world." Tolstoy observed that the principles of the Bahá'í Faith were in accordance with the spirit of the age and, in time, would be firmly established in the world, ensuring the well-being of humanity.<sup>5</sup>

Towards the end of his life L. N. Tolstoy came to the conclusion that the teachings of the Bab, as developed in the works of Baha'u'llah, represented that highest and purest form of religion. In 1910, shortly before his death, Tolstoy wrote of the Bahá'í Faith: "It is very profound. I know of no other religion which is so profound."<sup>6</sup>

1. Moojan Momen, *The Babi and Bahá'í Religions*, p. 52
  2. Luigi Stendardo, *Leo Tolstoy and the Bahá'í Faith*, Ch. 3-4
  3. L. N. Tolstoy, *Polnoye sobraniye sochinenii [Complete Works]* v. 80, p. 102
  4. Stendardo, p. 2
  5. Momen, p. 30
  6. Tolstoy, *Complete Works*, v. 78, p. 306
  7. D.P. Makovitskii, *U Tolstogo: 1904-1910 Yasnopolyanskiye zapiski (With Tolstoy: 1904-1910, Notes from Yasnaya Polyana]* Moscow, Nauka 1979, v. 4, p. 255
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Portuguese:

"Passamos nossas vidas nos esforçando para desvendar os mistérios do universo e é um prisioneiro persa, Bahá'u'lláh, em 'Akká, na Terra Santa, quem possui a chave... Os ensinamentos de Bahá'u'lláh nos apresentam agora a forma mais elevada e pura do ensinamento religioso." [Leo Tolstoy, Eescritor e Filósofo Russo]

Rough Translation from Portuguese:

"We spent our lives working hard to discover the mysteries of the universe and it is a persian prisoner, Bahá'u'lláh, in 'Akká, in the Holly Land who has the key... The teachings of Bahá'u'lláh show us, now, the highest and purest form of religious teaching. (Leo Tolstoy, Russian philosopher and writer)."

Another Translation from Portuguese:

"We spend our life taken an effort to reveal the mysteries of the universe, and it is a Persian prisoner, Baha'u'llah, in Akka, on Holly Land, that give to us the key... The knowledge of Baha'u'llah that give us in the shape of the most high and pure religion lesson's."

Leo Tolstoy:

"Baha-Ullah was a genuine prophet, inspired and inspiring. One can feel such a strength of faith. It is incredible that having grown up within the stifling Muslim world of Persia he could teach the unity of religion and preach the unification of all religions and nations." (source?)

I found this quote in two places: The Bahá'í Faith in Russia; Two Early Instances, where it is quoted at the beginning of the article by A.M. Ghadirian (now a member of the Continental Board of Counsellors) and the second is in the Bahá'í World Volume 5, page 644. It is unfortunately reported to Martha Root, the author of the article second-hand, so we're getting it third hand. This tends to lessen the veracity of the quote. However in two letters written by Tolstoy in 1903 and 1908 we have the following:

"I therefore sympathize with Babiism with all my heart inasmuch as it teaches people brotherhood and equality and sacrifice of material life for service to God."

and in 1908:

"The teachings of the Babis which come to us out of Islam have through Baha'u'llah's teachings been gradually developed and now present us with the highest and purest form of religious teaching."

Martha Root's quote is from Tolstoy's secretary Valentin Bulgakov and verified by Tolstoy's daughter as being true.

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"We spend our lives trying to unlock the mystery of the universe, but there was a Turkish prisoner, who had the key." --Tolstoy

The bit explaining it was Baha'u'llah in Akka was in brackets. I am not sure WHERE this is from, but it is quoted in John Huddleston's book The Earth is but one country. (page 27)