

RUSSIAN—MUSLIM
CONFRONTATION IN THE
CAUCASUS

*Alternative visions of the conflict between Imam Shamil
and the Russians, 1830–1859*

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With an extended commentary ‘War of Worlds’
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the reading of the Gospel, by candle light.”²⁰¹ It is worth noting that Odoevskii was a remarkable figure—a cousin of Griboedov, the author of the Decembrists’ “*Nash otvet*” [“Our Response”] to Pushkin, the hero of Lermontov’s poem “*Pamiati A.I.O-go*” (“To the Memory of A.I.O[doevskii]”). He was also a deeply committed Christian, described by contemporaries as “a Christian without the sanctimoniousness, a lover of suffering.” Originally sent to hard labor in Siberia, Odoevskii pleaded to be sent to the Caucasus. Griboedov asked General Paskiewicz to arrange the transfer in December 1828. The government refused to consider the transfer until ten years later when Nicholas I personally decided to post Odoevskii to the Caucasus as an infantryman.²⁰² Thus, in selecting Odoevskii as a possible hero of his planned novel on the Decembrists, Tolstoi picked the emblematic figure whose life brought together Russia, political dissent, the Caucasus, and “Christianity without sanctimoniousness.”

The second project through which Tolstoi sought to resolve the tensions in his views of Islam was an investigation of Islamic religious teaching. The object of the investigation was to discover whether Islam, properly understood, was a militant religion inconsistent with Christianity or whether its teachings, fully consistent with Tolstoi’s ethical Christianity, had been deliberately distorted by Muslim clerics seeking to exercise state power. Tolstoi launched this research project only after he had worked out his interpretation of Christianity and Judaism—that is, only in the mid-1890s. The focus of Tolstoi’s interest was the nineteenth-century Persian religious teacher Sayyid Ali-Muhammad Shirazi (1235/1819–1266/1850).

Born into a Shi’ite merchant family, Sayyid Ali-Muhammad fell under the influence of the Shaykhis, a religious group awaiting the appearance of a new prophet, or *mahdi*, who would reinvigorate the faithful by perfecting the teachings of Muhammad. In 1260/1844, the Shaykhis recognized Sayyid Ali-Muhammad as *Bab*, the “gateway to truth,” the initiator of a new prophetic cycle. Followers of the Bab, nicknamed Babis, proclaimed him “the mirror of the breath of God.”

Sayyid Ali-Muhammad taught that, at the end of each prophetic cycle, God destroys the old material world and rebuilds it in closer conformity to the spiritual truth. Accordingly, each prophetic cycle must commence with a new set of rules matching the newly-expressed will of God. This meant that the Quran and *sharia*, which had constituted the prophetic book and spiritual law during Muhammad’s prophetic cycle, were now superseded by a new prophetic book, the *Bayan*, and by a new moral code. Sayyid ‘Ali Muhammad did not see this teaching as a religious revolution, because it treated Islam as a noble stage in the elaboration of God’s will, just as Muhammad had regarded Judaism and Christianity as noble, but superseded prophetic cycles. From the perspective of the Persian crown and Shi’ite religious authorities, however, the Babis were dangerous revolutionaries set on the abolition of *shari’a* and the destruction of Islam.

Soon after Sayyid Ali-Muhammad’s execution in 1850, the Babis split into two groups. The majority, the Baha’is, developed Babism in a new direction. They taught that prophetic truths could be found in a variety of religious confessions. For them Adam, Abraham, Jesus, Zoroaster, Muhammad, and the *Bab* were all “mirrors of God’s breath,” while Confucius and the Buddha were recognized as “spiritual masters” falling just short of prophetic status. They taught that heaven and hell do not actually exist, being instead symbols of believers’ destination at the end of the path to knowing God. They rejected

killing of infidels, for they thought it pointless to murder the spiritually unenlightened. These doctrines translated into a conviction that the human race is one, that all religions are essentially identical, and that no prejudice of any sort should be permitted, given the essential unity of humanity and the identity of all religions. The Baha'is called for the abolition of wealth and poverty in all nations so that all believers might approach God on equal terms.²⁰³

Tolstoi became interested in the Baha'is teaching on the unity and equality of human beings sometime in summer 1894. The trigger for this interest was a series of letters from Ol'ga Sergeevna Lebedeva, Tolstoi's translator into Turkish language. On August 1 Lebedeva described the Ottoman authorities as despots who "smother every idea in infancy," while the Turkish people were "gentle, magnanimous, faithful believers who look tolerantly on Christians." Lebedeva promised to send Tolstoi her book "finding the point in common between Christianity and Islam in the hope of somehow uniting these two religions, something that would be most helpful for Russia which has so many millions of Muslim subjects. I intend to extract lines from the Quran and gospel that resemble one another, to comment on them, and compile the book."²⁰⁴ In a follow-up letter on August 18, Lebedeva told Tolstoi: "I have even found a Muslim sect very close to Christianity, by means of which it might be possible to effect the unification of Muslims with Orthodoxy. This is the sect of Babids or Babis. Perhaps you have heard of it?"²⁰⁵ Two weeks later, in a letter dated September 3, 1894, Lebedeva summarized the Babis' theology, listed their sacred books, and described their current situation in the Ottoman empire.

Tolstoi welcomed Lebedeva's attempt to find common ground between Islam and Christianity. In a letter on September 4 1894 he warned that a mechanical juxtaposition of similar passages from the Quran and the gospels would do little to further the unity of religions: He contended it would be better to gather the passages expressing the "fundamental vital experiential-moral religious truths, which are...identical in all religions, and second [to show] that Christianity and Islam have the same sources and they differ only in their deviations from these sources, and that it will only require Christians from their perspective and Muslims from theirs to abandon these deviations and both religious will then inevitably coincide."²⁰⁶ On September 22 Tolstoi invited Lebedeva to send him "extracts" from the writings of Sayyid Ali-Muhammad Shirazi illuminating the basic "moral and social" teachings of the Babis. However, he found the Babis' theology impenetrable: "I think that in the *Bab's* own books this teaching is lost in Oriental effusiveness and in strained efforts to show [Babism's] proximity to the Quran."²⁰⁷

Four years later, in September 1898, Tolstoi received from the German poet Rainer-Marie Rilke a book by the Orientalist F.C.Andreas on the Persian Babis.²⁰⁸ Prompted by this gift, he renewed his research on the Babis. In 1903 he told the Russia poet Isabella Arkad'evna Grinevskaja that the Baha'is "have a great future."

I know about the Babis and have been studying their teaching for a long time. It seems to me that this is a doctrine, like all the other rationalist social, religious doctrines that have recently appeared from those maimed by the priestly devotees of the original religions: Brahminism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam. [These doctrines] have a great future

because they all, having rejected the monstrous accretions common to the original religions, will coalesce into a single religion of humanity. Therefore the teachings of the Babis, to the degree it has cast out the old Muslim superstitions (unfortunately, something like these superstitions can be found in the teachings of the *Bab* himself), and to the degree that it holds to the basic ideas of brotherhood, equality and love—also has a great future.²⁰⁹

By 1904, however, Tolstoi had decided he could no longer find in the Baha'is an analog to his own ethical Christianity. In a letter to the French attorney Hippolyte Dreyfus in April 1904, Tolstoi excoriated the Baha'ullah's *Book of Certitude*: "I regret to inform you that reading this book has completely disenchanted me with the Baha'ullah's teaching. The book contains nothing but insignificant and pretentious phrases that simply confirm old superstitious and are completely empty of genuine moral or religious content."²¹⁰

Neither Tolstoi's historical research into the Decembrist movement and Russo-Turkish war of 1828–1829 nor his investigation of the Baha'i movement led to a resolution of his own contradictory views toward Islam. He never finished the novel on the Decembrists and the Caucasus, perhaps because their own understanding of Islam was as flawed as his own. For a time, both before and during the writing of *Hadji Murat*, he had tried to imagine Baha'ism as a gentler, more authentic form of Islam. But the teachings of the Baha'i masters, however attractive they seemed in the social and moral sense, were shot through with "superstitions." And, in any case, the Baha'is were a sect persecuted by Muslim authorities in the Ottoman empire and Persia. They had no influence in the Caucasus of the 1850s when Tolstoi served as soldier, and no impact on the Russo-Turkish war of 1877–1878. If Tolstoi wanted to resolve his own love—hate relationship with Islam, if he wanted to lay the ghosts of the mountain war, he would have to trust his own crooked eye.

XII

On July 18, 1896 Tolstoi visited his brother Sergei Nikolaevich at the Pirogovo estate 35 kilometers from Iasnaia Poliana. While walking on the estate's periphery, Tolstoi saw a raspberry thistle or Tatar bush, with three stalks: "one broken, its dirt-covered white flower hanging to the side; another broken and trampled into the mud, its stem run over and blackened by dirt; the third stalk protruding to the side, also covered with dust, but alive and in its middle portion still flowering." The trampled but resilient thistle reminded Tolstoi immediately of Hadji Murat, perhaps because he had come to associate an invincible life force with the Caucasus mountaineers.

Returning to Iasnaia Poliana, Tolstoi spent three weeks re-reading books on the Caucasus war. On August 10 he visited his sister Mariia Nikolaevna at Shamordino, the women's monastery next to Optina Pustyn'—site of the monastery made famous by F.M.Dostoevskii and V.S.Solov'ev as a locus of Orthodox wisdom. There, in the quiet of this rural sanctuary, Tolstoi wrote the first draft of *Hadji Murat*—a story which at this stage confined itself to the narrow biographical theme of Hadji Murat's defection to the Russians and eventual death. On concluding the tale with the dying Hadji Murat's

- 176 Ibid., p. 148.
- 177 “Dnevnik,” *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 46, p. 162, entry of June 23, 1853.
- 178 Stepan Andreevich Bers, *Vospominaniia o grafe L.N.Tolstom*, (Smolensk, 1893), pp. 9–10.
See also V.A.Poltoratskii, “Vospominaniia,” *Istoricheski i vestnik*, 1893, no. 6, pp. 672–678.
- 179 Tolstoi and his brother left the north Caucasus on October 25. After arriving in Tbilisi on November 1, Tolstoi remained in the city until January 7, 1852. See Doroshenko, *L.N.Tolstoi. Voin i patriot*, pp. 64–67.
- 180 Tolstoi, “Pis’mo grafu Sergeiu Nikolaevichu Tolstomu i Mari’e Mikhailovne Shishkinoi,” December 23, 1851, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 59, pp. 132–133.
- 181 See “Dnevnik,” *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 46, p. 96, entry of March 20, 1852.
- 182 “Dnevnik,” *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 46, p. 183, entry of October 23, 1853.
- 183 Ia.I.Kostenetskii, *Zapiski ob Avarskoi ekspeditsii na Kavkaze v 1837 godu*, 3 chasti (St. Petersburg, 1851).
- 184 “Dnevnik,” *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 46, p. 184, entry of October 24, 1853.
- 185 See “Primechaniia k dnevniku,” *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 46, p. 444, n. 1085.
- 186 Layton, *Russian Literature and Empire*, pp. 246–247.
- 187 L.N.Tolstoi, “Iasnopolianskaia shkola za noiabr’ i dekabr’ mesiaty,” *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 8, p. 44.
- 188 L.N.Tolstoi, *Isповed’*, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 23, p. 12.
- 189 L.N.Tolstoi, *Anna Karenina. Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 19, pp. 398–399.
- 190 “Dnevnik,” *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 48, pp. 187–189, entry of June 2, 1878.
- 191 N.N.Gusev, *Lev Nikolaevich Tolstoi. Materialy k biografii s 1870 po 1881 god*. (Moscow: Izdatel’stvo AN SSSR, 1963), p. 436.
- 192 “Pis’mo Nikolaiu Nikolaevichu Strakhovu,” January 27, 1878, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 62, p. 381.
- 193 “Dnevnik,” *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 48, pp. 69–70, entry of May 22, 1878.
- 194 L.N.Tolstoi, *Isповed’*, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 23, pp. 5, 55–56.
- 195 N.N.Gusev, *Lev Nikolaevich Tolstoi. Materialy k biografii s 1870 po 1881 god*, p. 436.
- 196 “Pis’mo N.N.Strakhovu,” October 19, 1877, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 62, pp. 345–346.
- 197 Ibid.
- 198 “Pis’mo A.A.Fetu, November 11/12, 1877, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 62, p. 349.
- 199 See the letter to Strakhov of November 11/12, 1877: “Please, be so kind as to think about and render advice on the first part of Nikolai Pavlovich’s reign and particularly on the war of 1828–1829.” Strakhov sent N.Luk’ianovich’s *Opisanie turetskoi voiny 1828 i 1829 godov*, 4 vols. (St. Petersburg: 1843–1847) and Paul Lacroix, *Histoire de la vie et du règne de Nicolas I, empereur de Russie*. See “Pis’mo N.N.Strakhovu,” *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 62, p. 349.
- 200 “Pis’mo Petru Nikolaevichu Svistunovu,” March 14, 1878,” *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 62, p. 394. Svistunov, himself a Decembrist, was supposed to pass the inquiry to Beliaev, a Decembrist who did twelve years at hard labor in Siberia before being sent to the Caucasus in 1839. P.S.Bobrishchev-Pushkin and A.P.Bariatinskii were also Decembrists. The former had translated Pascal’s *Pensées*; in May 1878 Tolstoi considered finding a publisher for this translation but dropped the plan. Gusev, *Lev Nikolaevich Tolstoi. Materialy po biografii s 1870 po 1881 god*, p. 495.
- 201 Gusev, *Lev Nikolaevich Tolstoi. Materialy po biografii s 1870 po 1881 god*, p. 493.
- 202 On Odoevskii see N.Ia.Eidel’man, *Byt’ mozhet za khrebtom Kavkaza*, pp. 217–278.
- 203 S.v. *Encyclopedia of Islam* (2nd edition), articles “Bab,” “Babis,” “Baha’is.”
- 204 “Pis’mo O.S.Lebedevy Levu Nikolaevichu Tolstomu,” August 1, 1894, in Aleksandr Iosifovich Shifman, *Lev Tolstoi i Vostok* (Moscow: Izdatel’stvo Vostochnoi Literatury, 1960), pp. 405–409.
- 205 “Pis’mo O.S.Lebedevy Levu Nikolaevichu Tolstomu,” August 18, 1894, in Shifman, *Lev Tolstoi i Vostok*, p. 410.

- 206 “Pis’mo Ol’ge Sergeevne Lebedevoi,” September 4, 1894, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 67, p. 215.
- 207 “Pis’mo Ol’ge Serveevne Lebedevoi,” September 22, 1894, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 67, pp. 223–224.
- 208 Friedrich Carl Andreas, *Die Babi’s in Persien. Ihre Geschichte und Lehre quellen mässig und nach eigener dargestellt* (Leipzig, 1896).
- 209 “Pis’mo Isabelle Arkad’evne Grinevskoi,” October 22, 1903, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 74, 207–208.
- 210 “Pis’mo Ippolitu Dreifusu,” April 18, 1904, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 75, pp. 77–78.
- 211 See “Varianty k ‘Khadzi Muratu,” *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 35, pp. 284–307.
- 212 “Pis’mo Valdimiru Vasil’evich Stasovu,” letter of December 27, 1896, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 69, p. 226.
- 213 See A.L.Zisserman, *Dvadsat’ piat’ let na Kavkaze (1842–1867)*, 3 vols. (St. Petersburg, 1879–1884). V A.Poltoratskii, “Vospominaniia,” serialized in *Istoricheskii vestnik*, 1893.
- 214 “Pis’mo Vladimiru Vasil’evich Stasovu,” January 4, 1897, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 70, p. 11
- 215 *Sbornik materialov dlia opisaniia mestnosti i plemen Kavkaza*, 20 vols. (Tiflis: Tip. Kantseliarii glavnonachal’stvuiushchago grazhdanskoi chasti na Kavkaze, 1893–1895).
- 216 *Akty, sobrannye Kavkazskoiu arkheografeskoiu kommissiei* (Tiflis: 1866–1904), 12 vols.
- 217 “Khadzhi-Murat. “Istoriia pisaniia,” *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 35, pp. 593–594.
- 218 *Ibid.*, pp. 601,608.
- 219 *Arkhiv kniazia Vorontsova*, 40 vols. (Moscow: Tip. A.I.Mamontova, 1870–1895).
- 220 P.A.Bulanzhe, “Kak L.N.Tolstoi pisal ‘Khadzhi-Murata,” *Russkaia mysl’*, 1913, no. 6, pp. 79–80.
- 221 See “Pis’mo Velikomu Kniaziiu Nikolaiu Mikhailovichu,” letter of August 20, 1902, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 73, pp. 281–282.
- 222 “Pis’mo V.V.Stasovu,” August 10, 1902, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 73, p. 276.
- 223 “Pis’mo Velikomu Kniaziiu Nikolaiu Mikhailovichu,” *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 73, p. 282.
- 224 *Khadzhi-Murat*, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 35, p. 79.
- 225 *Ibid.*, p. 81.
- 226 “Pis’mo Ivanu Iosiforichu Korganovu,” letter of December 25, 1903, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 73, p. 353.
- 227 “Pis’mo Anne Avesalomonovne Korganoi,” letter of January 8, 1903, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 74, p. 10.
- 228 Pis’mo Il’iu Petrovichu Nakashidze, letter of December 20, 1902, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 73, pp. 346–347.
- 229 “Pis’mo Vladimiru Vasil’evichu Stasova,” letter of December 20, 1902, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 73, p. 348.
- 230 “Pis’mo Aleksandre Andreevne Tolstoi,” letter of January 26, 1903, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 74, p. 24.
- 231 “Pis’mo Velikomu Kniaziiu Nikolaiu Mikhailovichu,” letter of April 1, 1903, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 74, p. 94.
- 232 “Pis’mo Sergeiu Nikolaevichu Tolstomu,” May 18, 1903, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 74, p. 128.
- 233 “Pis’mo Marii Lvov’ne Obolenskoi,” letter of June 3, 1903, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 74, p. 137.
- 234 “Pis’mo Pavlu Ivanovichu Biriukovu,” letter of June 3, 1903, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 74, p. 140. He made the same point in a letter to Vladimir Grigor’evich Chertkov: “I’m writing something in *H[adji] M[urat]* about Nik[olai] Pavl[ovich], a separate chapter that, even if it will be disproportionately long compared with the whole, fascinates me