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Essay

Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, and Bahá'u'lláh: Three Responses to the Crisis of Modernity

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Abstract

This article examines the intellectual and spiritual crisis of the nineteenth century associated with the gradual erosion of the Enlightenment project, which had been grounded in confidence in the autonomy of human reason, the inevitability of historical progress, and the possibility of organizing society on rational principles. By the second half of the century, this optimism encountered profound philosophical and religious tensions.

The study approaches this crisis from a comparative perspective by examining three distinct responses. The first is articulated in the literary philosophy of Fyodor Dostoevsky, whose works confront the problem of human freedom in its most radical form, ultimately leading to the tragic possibility of rejecting God. The second response is exemplified by Leo Tolstoy's spiritual quest, who sought a rational and ethical reinterpretation of Christianity and the moral foundations of human life. The third emerges in the religious teachings of Bahá'u'lláh, the founder of the Bahá'í Faith, which propose a new vision of spiritual and social renewal for humanity.

By situating these three lines of thought within the broader intellectual history of the nineteenth century, the article argues that the crisis of modernity was not merely a philosophical problem but a profound spiritual drama centered on the question of human freedom, the nature of faith, and the moral foundations of society.

Introduction

One of the central intellectual developments of the nineteenth century was the gradual crisis of the Enlightenment project, founded on confidence in the autonomy of human reason, the inevitability of historical progress, and the possibility of organizing society on rational principles. In the present article, modernity is understood not simply as a historical period, but as a broader intellectual and spiritual transformation characterized by the growing autonomy of the individual, the weakening of traditional religious authority, the expansion of scientific and rational forms of thought, and the increasing tendency to seek the foundations of meaning within human consciousness itself rather than in a transcendent order.

By the second half of the nineteenth century, however, this optimism encountered profound spiritual, social, and philosophical tensions. Revolutionary upheavals, the secularization of culture, growing social conflicts, and the spread of atheism compelled European thought to confront with renewed urgency the questions of human freedom, the fate of religious faith, and the moral foundations of social life.

The lives of Bahá'u'lláh (1817–1892), Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821–1881), and Leo Tolstoy (1828–1910) overlap within a single historical generation. Although they belonged to different cultural and religious worlds, all three responded to the same fundamental challenge: the crisis of meaning that emerged when traditional religious certainties began to lose their authority and the modern individual increasingly became the primary source of reason, judgment, and moral choice.

Among the many voices that addressed this crisis, few exercised greater influence than Dostoevsky and Tolstoy. Their works profoundly shaped not only Russian literature but also the wider intellectual history of the modern world. Dostoevsky's exploration of freedom, evil, faith, and moral responsibility influenced generations of existentialist, religious, and psychological thinkers, while Tolstoy's ethical universalism and radical critique of violence inspired major social and spiritual movements far beyond Russia.

The responses of these three figures emerged through different forms of expression. Dostoevsky articulated the crisis of modernity primarily through literature, using fictional characters and dramatic situations to explore the limits of freedom, reason, and faith. Tolstoy expressed his views both through his literary works and through the spiritual self-examination of his later religious writings, most notably "A Confession." Bahá'u'lláh, by contrast, addressed the same questions through a body of revelatory writings that presented a new vision of humanity's spiritual and historical development.

Viewed together, these three perspectives reveal not merely different answers to the crisis of modernity, but three distinct ways of understanding the relationship between freedom, morality, faith, and the future of human civilization.

Dostoevsky and the Crisis of the Enlightenment Project

Notes from Underground and the Critique of Enlightenment Rationalism

One of the earliest and most radical literary critiques of the rationalist project of modernity in Dostoevsky's work appears in the novella *Notes from Underground* (1864).[1] In this work, the writer introduces, for the first time, a figure that might be described as a "hero of his time," yet who in fact turns out to be an anti-hero of modernity. Presented as the memoirs of a retired civil servant living in St. Petersburg, this unnamed 'Underground Man' is characterized by an extreme degree of self-reflection. He constantly analyzes his own motives and states of mind, pushing self-consciousness to an almost pathological intensity. At the very beginning of the text, he confesses: "I am a sick man… I am a spiteful man. I am an unattractive man."[2] The Underground Man does not embody the ideals of progress, rationality, or social usefulness widely proclaimed in nineteenth-century intellectual culture. On the contrary, he becomes the embodiment of a profound inner fracture emerging within the consciousness of modern man.

The very term "underground" [подполье/ podpol′ia] in Russian carries several layers of meaning. It may refer to the hidden depths of human consciousness, to a dark inner space of

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1 Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Zapiski iz podpol'ia* [Notes from Underground] (1864) https://archive.org/details/zapiski-iz-podpolya [accessed 7 August 2026].

2 Dostoevsky, *Zapiski iz podpol'ia*, p. 1.

psychological reflection. It may also have a political meaning, referring to the world of revolutionary conspiracies and clandestine movements that Dostoevsky would later portray in his novel *Demons*.[3] Yet in *Notes from Underground,* the concept acquires, above all, an existential meaning.

The underground represents the condition of a human being completely detached from any sustaining tradition, whether religious or social. The Underground Man exists outside the stable forms of life that historically shaped human culture. In this sense, he may be understood as a literary embodiment of "pure" rationalism, the Enlightenment project carried to its extreme.

Dostoevsky shows how a person who has severed all connections to traditional moral or religious frameworks and relies solely on rational self-analysis ultimately arrives at a deeply self-destructive form of consciousness. Here freedom reveals itself in its most unsettling form—not as rational autonomy, but as the capacity to will against reason, against utility, and even against oneself. This protest finds its most concentrated expression in the well-known formula: "Two times two equals four is already not life, gentlemen, but the beginning of death."[4]

In this way, Dostoevsky brings rationalism to its breaking point. A world governed entirely by reason does not secure human freedom; it provokes rebellion. At its limit, rational necessity gives rise to its opposite: a revolt of freedom that cannot be absorbed into any system, reduced to any calculation, or reconciled with any law of nature.

Ivan Karamazov and the Tragedy of the Rebellious Mind

In Fyodor Dostoevsky's novel *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880), the theme of human liberty or freedom is explored in an intensified, genuinely tragic form. At the centre stands the Karamazov family: the father, Fyodor Pavlovich, and his three sons—Dmitry, Ivan, and Alexei (Alyosha)—as well as the illegitimate son Smerdyakov, who lives in the household as a servant. The murder of the father becomes the central event of the novel, initiating an investigation and judicial proceedings. All the brothers fall under suspicion; however, it is ultimately revealed that the murder is committed by Smerdyakov. Nevertheless, Dmitry is convicted and sentenced, while Ivan undergoes a profound inner crisis, recognizing his indirect complicity in the crime: it is his ideas and worldview that provide Smerdyakov with a moral justification for the act.

The philosophical core of the novel is concentrated in Ivan's conversation with Alyosha, particularly in the chapters "Rebellion" and "The Grand Inquisitor." This dialogue takes the form of a kind of confession in which reason again speaks to its ultimate conclusion, no longer restrained by tradition or faith.

Ivan does not deny the existence of God. On the contrary, he explicitly affirms that he is willing to accept God's existence. However, he cannot accept the world God created. His rejection is not metaphysical but moral. His central argument concerns the problem of suffering, above all, the suffering of innocent children. He recounts numerous examples of cruelty and meaningless suffering that cannot be justified by any future harmony.

The culmination of his reasoning is expressed in his famous formula of refusal: "It is not God that I do not accept… I only most respectfully return Him the ticket."[5]

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[3] Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Besy* [Demons] (1872) https://azbyka.ru/fiction/besy/ [accessed 7 August 2026].

[4] Dostoevsky, *Zapiski iz podpol'ia,* p.13.

[5] Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Brat'ia Karamazovy*, pt. 2, bk.. 5, ch. IV "Rebellion", https://azbyka.ru/fiction/bratya-karamazovy/ [accessed 7 August 2026].

Ivan rejects harmony not for personal gain and not out of a thirst for knowledge, but on moral grounds. His protest is directed against the very structure of the world. In this sense, his refusal is not only intellectual but ethical. This is precisely what makes his position genuinely tragic: he can accept neither the world nor God, yet he cannot abandon the demand for moral justice.

It is here that Ivan Karamazov's tragedy reaches its ultimate intensity. His choice is not the result of temptation or weakness. On the contrary, it proceeds from the utmost honesty of reason, which cannot accept a world that contradicts moral consciousness. Yet this very honesty leads him to a rupture with the foundations of religious existence.

The Grand Inquisitor: Freedom as a Burden

In the chapter "The Grand Inquisitor", Ivan, having presented his religious and philosophical position to Alyosha, proposes that his brother listen to a short poem, a "legend," which he himself has composed. Formally, this is a text within the text, an imagined narrative; yet in its philosophical significance, it becomes one of the central passages of the entire novel.

Ivan describes an event that belongs neither to the historical past nor to a determinate future but rather takes the form of a symbolic vision: the Second Coming of Christ. Christ returns to earth—in sixteenth-century Seville, at the height of the Inquisition, amid public executions.

He appears quietly, without grandeur, and is immediately recognized by the people: "He passes silently among them with a gentle smile of infinite compassion. The sun of love burns in his heart; rays of Light, Enlightenment, and Power flow from his eyes and, pouring out upon the people, stir their hearts to a responding love."[6] Yet this recognition does not lead to triumph. Christ is at once arrested by order of the Grand Inquisitor—a ninety-year-old cardinal who embodies both spiritual and political authority.

A striking feature of the scene is that only the Inquisitor speaks. Christ remains silent. The entire episode unfolds as a monologue—an address of power to silent truth.

The central theme of this monologue is freedom. The Inquisitor formulates his accusation against Christ with clarity: "You desired the free love of man, that he might follow you freely… You longed for a free faith, not one compelled by miracles."[7] Here lies the core of the charge: Christ gave humanity freedom, yet this freedom, in the Inquisitor's view, proves to be an unbearable gift.

He continues: "There is no care more constant and more tormenting for man than, once he is free, to find as quickly as possible someone before whom he can bow down."[8] Freedom does not bring happiness. On the contrary, it generates anxiety, uncertainty, and an intolerable burden. Once liberated from external authority, the human being proves incapable of bearing responsibility for his own choices.

From this follows the Inquisitor's central thesis: man does not need freedom—he seeks security. This security, he argues, is provided by the three forces Christ rejected in the wilderness: miracle, mystery, and authority: "But You did not wish to deprive man of freedom, and You rejected the offer; for what kind of freedom is it, You reasoned, if obedience is bought with bread?"[9] For the Inquisitor, this refusal was a mistake. Christ overestimated human nature. Human beings

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6 Ibid. ch. V "The Great Inquisitor".

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.

cannot live in freedom; they require guidance and control. Hence, the alternative program he proclaims: "We have corrected your work and have founded it upon *miracle*, *mystery*, and *authority*."[10]

Religion, in this vision, becomes an instrument of governance. It ceases to be a path to God and becomes a mechanism for securing obedience and social stability instead. Man is relieved of the burden of freedom—but at the cost of his spiritual autonomy.

Tolstoy: The Religion of Moral Radicalism

Tolstoy's Life and Spiritual Crisis

Tolstoy's life up to the age of fifty may be seen as a kind of positive alternative to the negative choice embodied in the figure of the "underground man" in Dostoevsky. Tolstoy was raised within the Christian tradition, but in his youth, he distanced himself from the Church and led an entirely secular life.

He consistently pursued the ideals of secular life—and, in this pursuit, achieved almost phenomenal success. He was wealthy, noble, happily married, and the father of a large family. His literary career brought him not only the joy of creation but also worldwide fame. And yet it was precisely at this moment that the same "accursed question" descended upon him—only from the opposite direction: if there is no God and no faith, then what is the meaning of all this? And this question—"What is the meaning of all this?"[11]—gave Tolstoy no peace.

Within the framework of his own phenomenally successful life, he encountered the dead end to which worldly desires, aspirations, and even achievements ultimately lead. It became clear that a rational faith in progress does not save a person but, on the contrary, brings him to the brink of an abyss. In this sense, the tormented "underground man" of Fyodor Dostoevsky and the world-famous writer Tolstoy find themselves in the same boat, haunted by the same question: if there is no God and life has no meaning, why live at all?

It is precisely at this extreme point that a decisive turning occurs. Tolstoy comes to recognize that alongside rational knowledge there exists something else—"irrational knowledge," faith, which "makes life possible." He realizes that "every answer of faith gives to life a meaning that is not destroyed by death," and formulates it almost aphoristically: "Faith is the power of life… without faith one cannot live."[12]

The Essence of Faith and Rationalist Morality

Having overcome the crisis of unbelief, Leo Tolstoy turned to the religion of his childhood. This return was neither gradual nor partial; it took the form of an inner turning, through which he sought to recover the lost meaning of life.

Yet even after embracing faith, Tolstoy remained, at his core, a rationalist. His task was not merely to believe, but to understand belief, to bring it to clarity and internal coherence.

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10 Ibid.

11 Leo Tolstoy, *Ispoved'* [A Confession] (1882), in *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii v 90 tomakh* (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaya literatura, 1957), XXIII, ch. 2. https://tolstoy.ru/online/online-publicism/ispoved/index.xhtml [accessed 7 August 2026].

12 Ibid., ch. 9.

As a result of this effort, he arrived at a radical reinterpretation of Christianity. Rejecting dogma, sacraments, and the authority of the Church as historical accretions, he sought to isolate what he considered the Gospel's essential core.

In his view, this essence was expressed with ultimate clarity in Christ's words: "resist not evil." Tolstoy understood this commandment literally and universally, as an absolute moral law admitting no exceptions: "not to resist evil means never to resist evil…"[13] Thus, Tolstoyanism emerges as a distinct current in which Christianity takes the form of ethical radicalism.

Tolstoy consistently develops this principle, extending it to all spheres of life. He becomes an advocate of pacifism and Christian anarchism, calling for the complete renunciation of violence, property, and state authority. His position inevitably brings him into conflict not only with the Church but also with the state and social institutions, culminating in his excommunication from the Russian Orthodox Church in 1901.

Tolstoy carries the moral content of Christianity to its utmost rigor and clarity, accepting it as a fully realizable demand. Yet it is precisely here that the limit of his position reveals itself: religion, reduced to absolute moral law, imposes demands upon the individual that inevitably come into conflict with the realities of life.

This tension manifests not only in social institutions but also in Tolstoy's personal life. In his later years, his ethical maximalism leads to a deep conflict within his family, particularly over questions of property, authorship, and the very meaning of family life.

This conflict reaches its climax in 1910, when Tolstoy leaves the estate where he was born and spent most of his life, Yasnaya Polyana. His life's journey ends at the station of Astapovo—away from home, outside the familiar order of life, in a state of inner discord that remains unresolved.

Encounter with the Bahá'í Faith and Its Evaluation

It is not surprising that Leo Tolstoy, who closely followed the religious and social movements of his time, became acquainted with the Bahá'í Faith relatively early, around 1894–1895.[14] Initially, Tolstoy did not clearly distinguish between the followers of the Báb and those of Bahá'u'lláh, referring to the movement as "Bábí–Bahá'í." However, as he became more familiar with the sources, he gradually developed a more accurate understanding of the doctrine, particularly its social and ethical dimensions.

In this new religion, Tolstoy recognized much that he himself had arrived at through his own spiritual quest: universalism, the aspiration toward the unity of humankind, the moral core of religion, and the rejection of elaborate ritual and clerical hierarchy. It is therefore not surprising that in one of his letters he observed that such movements strive "to merge into one universal religion of all humanity" and, insofar as they affirm the principles of "brotherhood, equality, and love," possess "a great future."[15]

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[13] Leo Tolstoy, 'V chem moya vera?' [What I Believe] (1884), in *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii v 90 tomakh*, XXIII, ch. 2.

[14] Alla V. Malkina, 'Mistika bakhai i L.N. Tolstoi v svete novykh arkhivnykh materialov: pro et contra' [Bahá'í Mysticism and L.N. Tolstoy in the Light of New Archival Materials: Pro et Contra]. *Obshchestvo: filosofiya, istoriya, kul'tura*, 11 (2025), p. 163. https://doi.org/10.24158/fik.2025.11.20

[15] Leo N. Tolstoy, letter to I. A. Grinevskaya, October 22 1903. *Tolstoi. Literaturnoe nasledie*. https://tolstoy-lit.ru/tolstoy/pisma/1903/278.htm [accessed 7 August 2026]

Yet this initial recognition did not lead to the full acceptance of the new faith. Tolstoy remained a rationalist and approached religion primarily as a moral teaching. For this reason, he reacted with reserve to those aspects of the Bahá'í doctrine that went beyond ethics: the idea of revelation, the status and infallibility of God's messengers, and the mystical dimension of religion.[16] His views of the religion fluctuated, stating in a letter in 1904 the movement "has no future"[17], later returning to a more positive assessment in 1908, describing it as "one of the purest of religious teachings."[18]

For their part, members of the Bahá'í community—and above all Abdu'l-Bahá—regarded Tolstoy with great respect and attention. In 1902, Azizullah Jazzáb visited Tolstoy's estate at Yasnaya Polyana and delivered a personal message from Abdu'l-Bahá, which included the following words: "Act in such a way that your name will leave a good memory in the world of religion. Many philosophers have come, and each has raised the banner to a certain height. You have raised it higher; immerse yourself in the ocean of unity and obtain the eternal assistance of God."[19]

These words express a recognition of Tolstoy's spiritual stature, but at the same time constitute an invitation to a step that he himself never took.

Despite the undeniable significance of his religious and ethical teaching—which influenced twentieth-century social thought and inspired figures such as Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr.—Tolstoy, in his spiritual quest, ultimately reached a point beyond which his rationalist framework could no longer provide further answers.

For this reason, his encounter with the Bahá'í Faith remains an important yet unfinished episode in his spiritual biography—a moment of recognition without transition, of proximity without full acceptance.

Bahá'u'lláh: A New Religious Revelation

Bahá'u'lláh: Revelation as a Response to the Crisis of Modernity

In the life of the founder of the Bahá'í Faith, Bahá'u'lláh (1817–1892), the two paths that diverged in Russian culture between Fyodor Dostoevsky and Leo Tolstoy unexpectedly converge. Like Tolstoy, He was born into an aristocratic family and from an early age was destined for a state career, yet consciously renounced it in favour of another path. Like Dostoevsky, He passed through imprisonment, exile, and years of uncertainty, experiencing that extreme condition in which human life confronts suffering deprived of external justification.

Yet here the similarity ends. Where, for Dostoevsky, suffering reveals the tragedy of human existence, and for Tolstoy leads to the search for a moral law, something fundamentally different

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16 Malkina, 'Mistika bakhai i L.N. Tolstoi v svete novykh arkhivnykh materialov: pro et contra' [Bahá'í Mysticism and L.N. Tolstoy in the Light of New Archival Materials: Pro et Contra], p. 163.

17 Leo N. Tolstoy, letter to E. Crosby, July 31 1904. in *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii v 90 tomakh* (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaya literatura, 1928–64), LXXV: *Pis'ma 1904–1905*, p. 151.

18 Leo N. Tolstoy, letter to F. Kh. Badalbekov, December 28 1908. Ibid., vol. 78: Letters, 1908, in *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii v 90 tomakh*, LXXVIII: *Pis'ma 1908*, p. 306.

19 Stendardo, Luigi. *Leo Tolstoy and the Bahá'í Faith*. Trans. by Jeremy Fox. (Oxford: George Ronald, 1982), p. 30.

occurs in the life of Bahá'u'lláh. His prison experience becomes not merely a trial, but the site of an inner transformation in which the experience of existential extremity passes into revelation.

Within the space of extreme humiliation and deprivation—in the Tehran dungeon of the Síyáh-Chál—a new dimension of experience emerges, one in which the question of the meaning of life receives not a rational answer, but a response from another source altogether. Here, thought yields to testimony, and searching gives way to affirmation.

If Fyodor Dostoevsky formulates the problem, and Leo Tolstoy seeks to resolve it within the framework of moral consciousness, then in the experience of Bahá'u'lláh there emerges another type of response—not as a philosophical conclusion, but as an event of revelation claiming not merely an individual mystical significance, but a universal meaning for humanity and history. As Bahá'u'lláh later wrote: "The well-being of mankind, its peace and security, are unattainable unless and until its unity is firmly established."[20]

After his release from prison, Bahá'u'lláh was expelled from Iran—the first of several exiles that would shape the entire subsequent trajectory of his life. The following decades—Baghdad, Constantinople, Adrianople, and finally Acre—transformed his existence into a continuous movement between political persecution and the expansion of spiritual influence.

The years of exile became a period of intensive development of his teachings. It was during this time that Bahá'u'lláh addressed not only His followers but also the rulers and political leaders of the world. In His writings, He spoke of the need to restrain the extremes of nationalism, prevent wars, establish justice, and recognize the unity of humankind as a new historical reality.[21]

At the same time, this did not represent a simple return to traditional religious consciousness. On the contrary, Bahá'u'lláh's teachings brought together elements of religious revelation with those universalist tendencies generated by modernity itself. This is why themes such as the unity of humanity, the harmony of science and religion, moral progress, and the necessity of a global political order founded not upon domination but upon the principle of justice occupy such an important place in His writings.

The Autonomous Subject, the Crisis of Meaning, and a New Religious Consciousness

One of the central outcomes of modernity is the emergence of the autonomous individual—a subject who no longer perceives himself as part of a sacred cosmic order, but instead becomes an independent source of reason, will, and moral choice. The liberation of the individual from external religious authority, tradition, and dogmatic control opened vast possibilities for the development of personality, science, and political freedom. At the same time, however, this process generated a new problem: if the human being becomes the sole foundation of himself, where then can one locate a source of meaning that transcends individual will?

In this sense, the crisis of modernity in Dostoevsky is not merely a crisis of faith, but a crisis of the human subject itself. The loss of God signifies not only the disappearance of a religious worldview, but the destruction of the spiritual centre that once gave human existence inner unity and meaning.

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[20] Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*. In *Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*. 3rd ed. (New Delhi: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1998), no. CXXXI.

[21] See, for example, Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, nos. CXVII–CXIX.

It is within this context that one can understand why, in the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh, the problem of the loss of faith acquires not a private but a world-historical significance. For Him, the crisis of religious consciousness represents not simply a change in intellectual convictions, but a profound spiritual rupture affecting the very foundations of human civilization. The issue is not merely the spread of atheism as a philosophical position, but the gradual disappearance of the inner spiritual centre of human existence itself.

In one of His writings, Bahá'u'lláh states: "The vitality of men's belief in God is dying out in every land… The corrosion of ungodliness is eating into the vitals of human society…"[22]

These words reveal that He understood the crisis of the modern world first and foremost as a crisis of the human being's spiritual integrity. Liberated from traditional forms of religious consciousness, humanity acquires an immense degree of external freedom and power over the world, yet simultaneously becomes increasingly incapable of answering the question of the ultimate meaning of existence.

For this reason, the idea of revelation occupies such a central place in Bahá'u'lláh's teachings—not as a return to traditional theocracy or a rejection of reason, but as an attempt to form a new religious consciousness capable of uniting freedom, reason, and spiritual meaning within a more universal understanding of humanity and history. If, in Dostoevsky, the autonomous individual arrives at the tragic limit of his own freedom, then in the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh, the crisis of the autonomous subject becomes the point of departure for a new stage in humanity's spiritual development.

A fruitful idea in Bahá'u'lláh's teachings is the concept of progressive revelation. He presents human history as a continuous process of spiritual development in which each new revelation does not abolish previous ones, but continues and unfolds them in accordance with a new stage of historical consciousness.[23]

Ivan Karamazov and the Limits of Autonomous Reason

If, in the figure of the "Underground Man," Fyodor Dostoevsky reveals the abyss of existential nihilism and the loss of meaning, then Ivan Karamazov represents an autonomous reason seeking to place the very structure of the world under moral judgment—and ultimately collapsing before the tragic nature of being. It is precisely for this reason that Ivan's inner conflict gradually leads him toward spiritual and psychological disintegration.

For certain strands of traditional religious consciousness, truth was largely perceived as something already complete and definitively given in revelation. Reason was accepted only insofar as it remained subordinate to religious authority. Modernity emerged as a radical reaction against such limitations on human reason. The Enlightenment affirmed the individual's right to think independently, question authority, and freely express personal convictions.

This liberation of human reason constituted one of the greatest achievements of modernity. At the same time, it generated a new problem: reason gradually began to claim complete autonomy and self-sufficiency. The world was expected to become rationally transparent, history subject to the logic of progress, and reality itself fully accessible to human understanding. It is at this point that the crisis of modern consciousness reaches its most radical form.

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22 Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 562.

23 See Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, nos XXXIV and LXXXIX.

In Bahá'u'lláh's teachings, the attempt to overcome this crisis takes a unique form. One of the central features of His thought is the idea of the harmony of science and religion.[24] What is involved here is not a simple compromise between faith and scientific knowledge, but an attempt to restore the inner unity of human consciousness fractured by modernity into rational and sacred dimensions.

Bahá'u'lláh does not reject reason, scientific knowledge, or freedom of inquiry. Yet at the same time, reason ceases to be viewed as an absolutely autonomous faculty capable of fully exhausting the mystery of being. In contrast to the radical rationalism of modernity, this perspective acknowledges the inherent limitations of human understanding in the face of reality's depth. Reason retains its value, yet no longer claims ultimate transparency of the cosmos.

This marks one of the fundamental distinctions of the Bahá'í approach from both traditional religious consciousness, which subordinated reason to authority, and from modernity, which sought to liberate reason entirely from the sacred dimension. In the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh, we encounter an attempt to unite intellectual freedom, scientific inquiry, and spiritual meaning within a new model of religious consciousness—one that, without rejecting modernity, seeks to transcend its inner crisis.

Freedom, Authority, and the Problem of the Grand Inquisitor

Dostoevsky's Grand Inquisitor and his speech before Christ transfer the crisis of modern consciousness into the socio-political sphere and raise the question of the very nature of human freedom. The Grand Inquisitor symbolizes not only historical medieval Christianity but also a broader form of consciousness that seeks to liberate humanity from the tragic burden of freedom through external authority, control, and coercion.

The problem with modernity is that, having rejected religious authority and traditional systems of spiritual guidance, it gradually radicalizes the very idea of freedom itself. Freedom comes to be understood as the absolute autonomy of the individual, recognizing no higher moral or spiritual foundation. If traditional society suppressed freedom to preserve religious order, modernity, by contrast, seeks to liberate the individual as fully as possible from all external constraints.

In Bahá'u'lláh's teachings, the attempt to overcome this contradiction takes a distinctive form. On the one hand, Bahá'u'lláh decisively rejects traditional religious authoritarianism and affirms many of the central achievements of modernity: the limitation of arbitrary power, the principle of consultation, the people's participation in governance, and the necessity of social justice. He also rejects the idea that religion should seize political power. Addressing the rulers of the world, He writes: "It is not Our wish to lay hands on your kingdoms. Our mission is to seize and possess the hearts of men."[25]

On the other hand, however, Bahá'u'lláh does not accept the radically autonomous conception of freedom characteristic of modernity. In the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, he famously proclaims: "Liberty must, in the end, lead to sedition, whose flames none can quench… We approve of liberty in certain

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[24] See Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh Revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1978), especially "Bishárát" and "Tajallíyát," where the acquisition of knowledge, the advancement of learning, and the use of reason are presented as essential elements of human progress.

[25] Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas* (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1992), p. 49.

circumstances and refuse to sanction it in others… Say: True liberty consisteth in man's submission unto My commandments, little as ye know it."[26]

Elsewhere, he warns that freedom without moral limits can lead to disorder and destruction. Such a position differs fundamentally from both the traditional religious suppression of freedom and the modern understanding of freedom as absolute individual self-sufficiency. In the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh, freedom retains a spiritual dimension and presupposes the individual's inner moral responsibility.

Conclusion

Viewed together, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, and Bahá'u'lláh may be understood as offering three distinct responses to the spiritual crisis of modernity. Dostoevsky reveals the crisis in its most radical form. Through the figures of the Underground Man, Ivan Karamazov, and the Grand Inquisitor, he exposes the inner contradictions of autonomous reason, the burden of freedom, and the loss of transcendent meaning that accompany the disintegration of traditional religious consciousness.

Tolstoy accepts many of Dostoevsky's concerns but responds to them differently. Rather than dwelling on the tragic dimensions of human existence, he seeks to preserve the moral foundations of life through a universal ethic of love, nonviolence, simplicity, and personal responsibility. In this sense, Tolstoy represents one of the last great attempts to save the spiritual substance of religion while freeing it from dogma, ecclesiastical authority, and institutional coercion.

Yet it is precisely here that the limits of Tolstoy's approach become apparent. His moral universalism remains predominantly ethical and personal in character. Tolstoy offers a path of inner transformation for the individual, but he does not develop a comprehensive vision of humanity's historical, civilizational, and spiritual development as a unified global community. His thought is directed more toward a critique of modern civilization than toward the search for a new form of spiritual transformation for it.

It is at this point that the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh acquire particular philosophical significance. Unlike both traditional religious consciousness and many anti-modern reactions of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Bahá'u'lláh does not reject modernity as such. On the contrary, His teachings seek to preserve and reinterpret a number of its central achievements: historical consciousness, the idea of progress, universalism, freedom of thought, scientific inquiry, and the vision of the unity of humankind.

At the same time, modernity in Bahá'u'lláh's understanding ceases to be an autonomous and self-sufficient process devoid of higher meaning. History once again acquires a spiritual dimension, while humanity is understood as a single organism passing through successive stages of historical and moral maturation. In this context, religion itself is radically reinterpreted: what is at stake is no longer a return to premodern theocracy or to the domination of religious authority over human reason, but an attempt to form a new model of spiritual consciousness capable of uniting freedom, reason, and universal moral order.

[26] Ibid., p. 63.

Author biography

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