

Title: The Scientific Roots of Tolstoy's Religious Thought
Author: Anna Berman, McGill University
Email: anna.berman@mcgill.ca

Tolstoy was an avid reader and critic of contemporary scientific thought. Although he expressed hostility toward many scientific thinkers in his diaries and non-fiction writing, Tolstoy was, nonetheless, deeply influenced by their theories. This paper will explore the unacknowledged ways Tolstoy incorporated the ideas of two scientists he regularly ridiculed— Charles Darwin (1809-1882) and Ilya Mechnikov (1845-1916)—into his religious thought.

Although Tolstoy was initially impressed with Darwin's evolutionary theory, he quickly began to critique Darwin for ignoring the spiritual side of life, and ultimately criticized even the substance of Darwin's theory of evolution. Yet despite this well documented skepticism, I will argue that Darwin's description of the "social instincts" in *The Descent of Man* (1871) provided Tolstoy with his model for explaining how man became a social being in *The Kingdom of God is Within You* (1894). While not fully accepting Darwin's argument, Tolstoy built on it in his description of the stages of man (itself an evolutionary idea) and the way people were, he believed, coming to embrace harmony and brotherhood.

The zoologist/pathologist Ilya Ilyich Mechnikov, brother of Ivan Ilyich (model for Tolstoy's hero in *The Death of —*) drew on Darwin's idea of the "struggle for existence" in creating his own Nobel Prize winning phagocytic theory, and, like Darwin he received ridicule from Tolstoy in his diaries. While Tolstoy mocked Mechnikov's scientific ideas about combatting suffering and death, I will suggest that in *Resurrection* (1899) Tolstoy based Simonson's idealistic religion—viewing himself as a human phagocyte—on Mechnikov's theory. Through acknowledging the contemporary scientific thought that Tolstoy drew on to create his theology, my paper will provide a corrective to the traditional one-sided view of Tolstoy's skepticism about these scientific theories; instead it will show the place of Darwinian thought in Tolstoy's religious ideas.