

SINFUL SAINTS AND SAINTLY SINNERS: PARADIGMS AND THE PRIORITY OF BEING IN THE DOSTOYEVSKYAD

SOLOMON TRIMBLE, *UNIVERSITY OF ST ANDREWS*

<https://doi.org/10.15664/th.v2023i1.2615>

Then turning towards the woman, he said to Simon, ‘Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little.’ (Luke 7:44-47, NRSV)

The writings of Fyodor Dostoyevsky represent a passionate struggle to display Christian holiness. As an icon in the Orthodox tradition communicates something of the beauty of the Christ, so too are each of Dostoyevsky’s characters an icon, a sacred receptacle by which the grace of God might be displayed. No figure is immune from such a representation, indeed, often it is those who are most sinful and depraved through whom God’s grace shines brightest in the Dostoyevskyad, and merely those who are indifferent to such a grace that repel it. Holiness, for Dostoyevsky, relates to being and intentionality. Those who relate to being with a passionate intensity and commitment, are those who know God, whereas those who are completely indifferent to being, are merely stooges of the devil.

All of Dostoyevsky’s work from *Crime and Punishment* onwards, is an attempt to portray holiness in the form of a commitment to being; he does this by depicting deliberately sinful and depraved characters, who yet commit to God with the same intensity as they commit to their sin, demonstrating a love for the creator far more radical than any traditional form of piety. Love itself, whether it is directed to its proper end or not, is for Dostoyevsky, divine. Beginning with Sonya, the righteous prostitute, continuing with Natasha Filipovna, she who loves the Prince so much she refuses to burden him with her sinful self, and culminating with Mitya Karamazov, he who will love Christ into the chasms of hell, the Dostoyevskyad is a shelf of icons designed to pull the reader onto their knees before Christ, that they might kiss his feet, break all their perfume over him, and wet him with their tears. The foundations for such a project can be seen in *Demons*, Dostoyevsky’s penultimate masterpiece, which serves as the inverse of his other great novels, displaying not the sanctity of love but the insanity of indifference. *Demons* is essential for understanding Dostoyevsky’s aim in his other works, and in this regard, it could be regarded as his most important work.

Nikolay Vsevolodovich Stavrogin, a key character in the work, is the single figure furthest from God in the Dostoyevskyad, on account of his sheer indifference to the world. He marries Marya Timofeyevna Lebyadkina not out of love, but on a whim, “On one occasion, as I was

looking at the lame Marya Timofeyevna Lebyadkina, who occasionally came in to tidy the rooms, and was not yet insane but merely an ecstatic idiot, and madly and secretly in love with me (our people had found that out), I suddenly resolved to marry her.”¹ He stops committing a particular sin, not because of remorse or the pursuit of will, but as an exercise in will, “Until the age of sixteen I gave myself over, with extraordinary abandon, to the vice that Jean-Jacques Rousseau confessed to. I stopped the moment I decided I wanted to, in my seventeenth year. I have always been master of myself when I have wanted to be. And so let it be known that I do not want to look at environment or illnesses for the causes of my irresponsibility when I commit crimes.”² At his lowest moment, as the child Matryosha sings softly to herself in her room, he pursues unnatural relations with her not because of the strength of his desire, but merely because he knows he has the power to say no, and yet wills not to, “My heart began to pound. But then I suddenly asked myself again: can I stop? And I immediately answered myself: I can. I stood up and began creeping towards her.”³ Stavrogin is the embodiment of evil with the Dostoyevskyad. He is demonic. But he is utterly essential for understanding the portrayal of holiness in the wider corpus. As Dostoyevsky wrote in his notebooks, “Everything turns on Stavrogin’s character. Stavrogin is *everything*.”⁴

Bishop Tikhon’s words to Stavrogin, after their reading together the letter to the church of Laodicea in the book of Revelation, opens up the heart of holiness within all Dostoyevskyanalia, “You were struck by the fact that the Lamb has greater love for the cold man than for one who is merely lukewarm...and you don’t want to be *merely* lukewarm.”⁵ Stepan Trofimovich, on his deathbed discovering this passage for the first time, says something similar, “Just listen: better to be cold, cold, than lukewarm, than *only* lukewarm. Oh I’ll prove it.”⁶ This, for Stepan Trofimovich, serves as a preamble towards his great profession of faith before he dies, “And what is more precious than love? Love is higher than existence, love is the crown of being, and how is it possible that existence is not subordinate to it? If I have come to love him and have taken joy in my love, is it possible that he should extinguish both me and my joy and turn us into nothing?”⁷ This is a wonderful succinct expression of the faith expressed within Dostoyevsky’s novels.

In other words, for Dostoyevsky, it is better to have a misdirected love than none at all, and one might even say, that it is only those who passionately direct love with all the strength of their being into any direction, though it be misplaced, who can understand the passionate love of God for the world. One must love being itself, in order to love the being of beings. Cue Ivan Karamazov. Ivan’s character amongst the brothers is absolutely fascinating, representing the most atheistical person in the Dostoyevskyad. He must be understood in the light of Bishop Tikhon’s words to Stavrogin, that “the complete atheist stands on the next-to-last highest rung

¹ Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *Demons*, tr. Robert A. Maguire and ed. Ronald Meyer (London: Penguin, 2008) 773.

² Dostoyevsky, *Demons*, 765.

³ Dostoyevsky, *Demons*, 766.

⁴ Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *Notebook Entry 16 August 1870*, quoted in Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *Demons*, tr. Robert A. Maguire and ed. Ronald Meyer (London: Penguin, 2008), xxxiii.

⁵ Dostoyevsky, *Demons*, 760.

⁶ Dostoyevsky, *Demons*, 722.

⁷ Dostoyevsky, *Demons*, 732–33.

leading to the fullest and most complete faith (he may take that step, or he may not), but the indifferent man has no faith at all, except an ugly fear.”⁸

Ivan Karamazov stands proudly upon that ‘next-to-last highest rung’. “What harmony can there be when there is hell,” Ivan declares, boldly asserting the logic of goodness which proceeds from God using it to energise his rebellion against him. Writing about Ivan’s infamous formulation of the problem of evil, Hart writes,

That, at base, Ivan’s is a profoundly and almost prophetically Christian argument. In part, this is true because, even in the way Ivan frames his arraignment of the divine purpose in history, there are already foreshadowings of a deeper Christian riposte to the argument. Ivan’s ability to imagine a genuinely moral revolt against God’s creative and redemptive order has a kind of nocturnal grandeur about it, a Promethean or Romantic or Gnostic audacity that dares to imagine some spark dwelling in the human soul that is higher and purer than the God who governs this world; and, in that very way, his argument carries within itself an echo of the gospel’s vertiginous annunciation of our freedom from the “elements” of the world and from the power of the law.¹⁰

Ivan, therefore, almost knows God. He loves being. As he says, “If I am indeed capable of loving the sticky leaf buds, then I shall love them at the mere memory of you. It is enough for me that you are somewhere here, and I shan’t yet lose my will to live...If you like, you may take it as a confession of love.”¹¹ A fragile, perhaps, but undoubtedly genuine confession of the priority of being, rooted in love for another self.

This leads us to Mitya and Alyosha, who in differing intensities, do know God and know him truly. Mitya, after his confession to Alyosha regarding his sinfulness, precipitates the response, “I blushed not because of the things you were saying, the things you said you’d done, but because I am the same as you are...They are the rungs of the same ladder. I’m on the very lowest rung, and you’re somewhere up at the top, on the thirteenth. That’s the way I see this matter, but it’s all the same thing, it’s absolutely one and the same story.”¹² Mitya and Alyosha live out the same life, merely in vastly different intensities. The shocking implication here, is that Mitya not only stands above Alyosha upon the ladder of vice, but also upon the ladder of virtue.

Hear Mitya’s words as he speeds upon the troika towards the love of his life, “O Lord, take me in all my lawlessness, but do not judge me. Let me pass without your judgment... Do not judge, for I myself have condemned myself; do not judge, for I love you, Lord! I myself am loathsome, but I love you: if you send me to hell, even there I will love you and will cry from there that I love you until the end of the ages... But let me love to the end.”¹³ Mitya loves God

⁸ Dostoyevsky, *Demons*, 758–59

⁹ Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, tr. David McDuff (London: Penguin, 2003), 320.

¹⁰ David Bentley Hart, *The Doors of the Sea*, (Eerdmans, Michigan; 2005) 42–43.

¹¹ Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, 343.

¹² Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, 146–47.

¹³ Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, 532.

purely for who he is; God. Where Mitya's final end is, does not matter nor change his profession of faith. The very fact that God is, and Mitya is, is enough that God should be praised, even from the depths of hell. The very same movement within Mitya's soul that energises such devotion and love to God, is the same that animates his illicit love for Grushenka. He continues, "For I love the empress of my soul. I love and I cannot but love. You yourself see the whole of me."¹⁴ It is perhaps Dostoyevsky's peculiar gift that a crazed man on his way towards a night of carousing and drunkenness with his illegitimate mistress and who hopes to kill himself immediately henceforth can become an icon of the most high God.

The sacred aspect of the love between Mitya and Grushenka is expressed in her words to Mitya in the moments before Mitya's arrest, "I want to scrape the earth with these hands of mine. We must work, do you hear? Alyosha has commanded it. I shall not be your lover, I shall be faithful to you, I shall be your slave, I shall work for you."¹⁵ Here, the love for being itself associated with love for God is associated with a love for the earth that God has made itself. This passage provides a parallel to Alyosha's earlier exclamation of love for the earth after the death of Zossima,

His soul, filled with ecstasy, thirsted for freedom, space, latitude. Above him wide and boundless keeled the cupola of the heavens, full of quiet, brilliant stars. Doubled from zenith to horizon ran the Milky Way as yet unclear. The cool night, quiet to the point of fixity, enveloped the earth. The white towers and golden domes of the cathedral sparkled in the sapphire sky. In the flowerbeds luxuriant autumn flowers had fallen asleep until morning. The earth's silence seemed to fuse with the heavens, the earth's mystery came into contact with that of the stars... Alyosha stood, looked and suddenly cast himself upon the earth like one who has had the legs cut from under him. Why he embraced it he did not know, he did not try to explain to himself why he so desperately wanted to kiss it, kiss it, all of it, but weeping he kissed it, sobbing and drenching it with his tears, and frenziedly he swore to love it, love it until the end of the ages.¹⁶

Love for God and love for being are coterminous. This can be contrasted sharply with Lizaveta Nikolayevna's (one of Stavrogin's many love interests) vision of an eternity spent with Stavrogin, "It always seemed to me that you would carry me off to some place where a huge evil spider as big as a man lives, and we would spend our entire lives looking at him and being afraid of him. That's how our mutual love would pass."¹⁷ The indifference of Stavrogin and Liza to the world and to each other, opens up a terrible monstrosity, a grotesqueness enabled to exist merely by indifference to being. Whatever one does, one must commit to one's existence, and only then will one see God.

Thus, it is Mitya Karamazov who consents to a being that torments him, who out of love for

¹⁴ Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, 532.

¹⁵ Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, 568.

¹⁶ Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, 468-69

¹⁷ Dostoyevsky, *Demons*, 581.

another would choose the eternal wrath of God and then praise that God anyway because he is, and rejoice in that praising, who wills to be against any and every torment because to be is to be free to love and to love is as much greater than it is to be, than to be is than not to be. Mitya breaks open hell in the simple claim that God can be rejoiced and praised from within it. What a chorus of praise that would be, from those who love God because of who He is, in spite of the torment he brings them, a praise far deeper and far more sincere than praise from those who had never suffered at His hand. Hell has become a kind of heaven, and Mitya has entered it out of the extravagance of love, love for Grushenka at his own tremendous expense.

George MacDonald captures it well:

And what shall we say of the man Christ Jesus? Who, that loves his brother, would not, upheld by the love of Christ, and with a dim hope that in the far-off time there might be some help for him, arise from the company of the blessed, and walk down into the dismal regions of despair, to sit with the last, the only unredeemed, the Judas of his race, and be himself more blessed in the pains of hell, than in the glories of heaven? Who, in the midst of the golden harps and the white wings, knowing that one of his kind, one miserable brother in the old-world-time when men were taught to love their neighbour as themselves, was howling unheeded far below in the vaults of the creation, who, I say, would not feel that he must arise, that he had no choice, that, awful as it was, he must gird his loins, and go down into the smoke and the darkness and the fire, traveling the weary and fearful road into the far country to find his brother?—who, I mean, that had the mind of Christ, that had the love of the Father?¹⁸

Mitya Karamazov is that man, who is “more blessed in the pains of hell than in the glories of heaven,” who loved his beloved Grushenka into the chasm of hell for her salvation, as is Sonya, who travels into the exile of Siberia out of love for Raskolnikov, and thereby redeems him, for “what had revived them was love, the heart of the one containing an infinite source of life for the heart of the other.”¹⁹ Mitya Karamazov is the man for whom the lizard of lust becomes the stallion of love, riding on into eternity towards the love which moves the sun and other stars. It would perhaps be fitting to end with something from Zossima, the usual font of wisdom amongst Dostoyevsky lovers, however it would not be in keeping with the spirit of the paper. Rather let us end from the words of the truest saint in this book, he who knows the love of Christ more deeply than any other in this novel, Mitya, as he speaks of his impending exile,

Oh yes, we shall be in fetters, and shall have no freedom, but then, in our great misery, we shall again rise up in the joy without which it is impossible for a man to live, or God to exist, for God gives joy, that is his privilege, a great one... O Lord, let man melt away in prayer! How is it possible that I shall be down there under the earth without God?...If God is driven from the face of the earth, we shall meet him under the earth! It is impossible for a convict to be without God, even more impossible than for someone who is not a convict! And then, we, the subterranean folk, will sing out of the bowels of the earth a tragic hymn to God, with whom is joy! All hail to God

¹⁸ George MacDonald, *Unspoken Sermons*. (Whitehorn; Johannesen, 1997) 144.

¹⁹ Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *Crime and Punishment*, tr. David McDuff (London: Penguin, 2003) 655.

and his joy! I love him!²⁰

Amen.

²⁰ Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, 756–57.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Dostoyevsky, Fyodor. *Crime and Punishment*. Translated by David McDuff. London: Penguin, 2003.

Dostoyevsky, Fyodor. *Demons*. Translated by Robert A. Maguire. Edited by Ronald Meyer. London: Penguin, 2008.

Dostoyevsky, Fyodor. *The Brothers Karamazov*. Translated by David McDuff. London: Penguin, 2003.

Hart, David Bentley. *The Doors of the Sea: Where Was God in the Tsunami?*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005.

MacDonald, George. *Unspoken Sermons*. Whitehorn, CA: Johannesen, 1997.