

“Sinful Saints and Saintly Sinners” - *Article Review*

In ‘Sinful Saints and Saintly Sinners,’ the author succeeds in three ways: first, he presents a compelling summary analysis of holiness in Fyodor Dostoyevsky’s novels; second, the author asserts the importance of theology in literary studies; and third, he implicitly contends – like Flannery O’Connor, C.S. Lewis, and many others – that literature is not the homebound escapist’s opioid but a shot of adrenaline to the self. Rather than forgetting oneself in the turning pages of another life, reading is the act of injecting your life into the mind of another; it is sitting at the author’s table and charitably receiving whatever he or she serves, understanding the following narrative could take you anywhere. Reading good literature, then, is no safe endeavor. It is an exploration into virtue and vice, holiness and depravity, the divine and the mortal, and the relation of that exploration to yourself. ‘Sinful Saints and Saintly Sinners’ hinges upon this classical understanding of reading.

The author sets out to prove that Dostoyevsky’s fiction represents the passion-infused struggle to attain Christian holiness. He does this through examination of how multiple characters in the ‘Dostoyevskyad’ relate to virtue and vice. This only makes sense; the pursuit of virtue, within orthodox Christianity, is the pursuit of holiness. Individuals whose lives are characterized by passion, for good or ill, are presented as icons of holiness in Dostoyevsky’s novels. In contrast, characters who live lives of casual indifference to virtue and vice alike are shown to be icons of negative virtue. Here passion is virtuous and apathy vice. The author links holiness to intentional being, while depravity is characterized by apathy and indifference. It is far better, he claims, to be a passionate sinner than an apathetic one. The author’s argumentative structure serves the article well; by examining multiple characters across multiple of Dostoyevsky’s works and epistles, the author presents a thoroughly convincing analysis of holiness in the ‘Dostoyevskyad’.

However, the way passion for both virtue and vice lead to holiness could have been fleshed out more. Traditionally, virtue and vice have existed as in opposition to one another. Is Dostoyevsky arguing that it would be better to be a passionate sinner than an apathetic saint? Or is he simply rejecting apathy in general while still maintaining the benefits of traditional virtue? If the author believes Dostoyevsky shifted the axis of holiness from traditional virtue-vice to passion-indifference, that’s fine. But more space on this point would have strengthened the argument by clarifying what is meant by virtue and vice in relation to passion and indifference.

Ultimately, this article makes a case for the synthesis between literary studies and theology. It is an example of strong analysis grounded in historical documentation and outside scholarship, yes, but it also merges those things with theology to create a meaningful close reading oriented towards the pursuit of truth. Fyodor Dostoyevsky’s works represent such a struggle towards truth. By merging these two fields of study, the author not only creates an article worth reading but continues in a deeper inheritance of thought oft neglected by mainstream scholarship today.