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Formation and Influences

1. *IMAGO CHRISTI-IMITATIO CHRISTI*

A hallmark of Dostoevsky's struggle with faith, and the promise of protection for some of the characters in his novels, is the *imago Christi* (the image of Christ). Dostoevsky approaches the *imago Christi* apophatically—it is un-named. The characters and events in his novels are realistic. Many, indeed, were based on actual people and events that he was aware of. But his gift for portraying the human condition was more than mere borrowing from life. Often he was so successful in his characterizations that, however implausible a character's beliefs and actions might appear to be, real people and events could be found to correspond to them in the immediate years after the publication of the novel. For example, Dostoevsky was something of a prophet in the crime/trespass of Raskolnikov (*Crime and Punishment*, 1866). In November 1869, three years after the book was published, a young student at the Petrovsky Agricultural Academy in Moscow was murdered by a revolutionary group headed by Sergei Nechaev¹ for the supposedly humanitarian aims of radical ideology, or what Dostoevsky would have described as rational egoism: just like the character of Raskolnikov—killing for anarchic reasons. The characters in Dostoevsky's novels are ever moving towards the reigniting and fulfillment of the *imago Christi*, or they are moving away from the *imago Christi*.

1 Sergei Nechaev (1847–82), a Russian revolutionary nihilist who advocated the single-minded pursuit of revolution by any means necessary, including violence: the end justified the means.

If the *imago Christi* (essentially issuing from the cross and the resurrection) is, at its simplest level, the imprint of the true humanity that was masked and nearly obliterated by the *fall* into original sin, then humanity's appropriation, for Dostoevsky, of the cross and resurrection brings this image back. The restoration is gradual, its pace varies from person to person, and such a re-establishment might occur at different points in the human life, and at times may appear to be destructive more than restorative, but it is—through sanctification—the goal of each human life: failure (according to an traditional/orthodox reading of Scripture) leads to hell. Dostoevsky knew this. The *imago Christi*, for Dostoevsky, was not about being super-religious, or developing a career as a religious professional. In this he is both orthodox (traditional) and Orthodox (Russian). If the characters—based on Dostoevsky's observations of those around him—allow the Holy Spirit to work in them, they will be brought back to this true image, they will become more and more Christ-like, whatever the cost, whatever it takes.

If we speak of “image” we must avoid the contemporary Western obsession with personal appearance, with projecting a lifestyle image. The *imago Christi*—this is clear from Dostoevsky's novels—is not an affectation we project for the benefit of others, it does not issue from our vanity, it is the essential nature and character that is deep within us, it is the ground from which everything that constitutes us emerges. From a general Christian perspective, implicit to read from Dostoevsky's novels, and codified to a degree in Russian Orthodoxy, we can note that prior to the *fall* this image was complete and untainted: we were as God intended. After the *fall* it becomes corrupted, tarnished, prey to evil, self-justifying in its corruption. But it is not lost completely. Christlikeness, issuing from the atonement wrought for us by the blood of Jesus, will gradually restore us by drawing out the *imago Christi*, buried deep beneath the evils of the person, the self-justifying willful egotism of the postlapsarian human.

Christlikeness is not about mimicry: only Christ can be truly Christ. Dostoevsky's characters who try, *through pietism*, to be Christ-like simply end up as laughable, pretentious, and judgmental (for example, Madame Yepanchina, in *The Idiot*). It is clear from Dostoevsky's character portraits that we cannot achieve Christlikeness for ourselves by our own efforts: for example, Prince Myshkin, in *The Idiot*. However, people can in a haltingly limited way, through being in Christ, begin to be drawn into Christlikeness: beauty of character, graceful compassion, self-

denying altruistic love, joyous yet suffering, they may radiate an inner Christlikeness despite manifold difficulties and oppression. In his mature writings, Dostoevsky focuses at length on the *imago Christi*—but does not name or mention this Christlikeness explicitly. We are left to discriminate, to discern, to identify and admire, if admiration leads us to seek the re-igniting of the *image* in us. In Dostoevsky's world it is the broken and damaged, the willful and bad, it is the murderer and the prostitute who can see, perceive, and recognize, but that recognition does not make them good, though in humility it may be the beginning of sanctification.

This raises important questions about the *imitatio Christi* (the imitation of Christ), which relates closely to the *imago Christi*, though the two are not synonymous. Often the *imitatio Christi* issues from the *imago Christi*; however, any imitation of Christ must be unselfconscious, or it is likely to be feigned. How does the Holy Spirit recover the *image of Christ* buried deep within us? Our feeble halting imitation, if it is conscious, can only, perhaps, be Christlike when it involves self-denial, and leads us to self-sacrifice, which every fiber of our being rebels against, yet we must submit gracefully. The *imago Christi*, is therefore part of the *imago Dei* (the image of God), as Christ is the second person of the Trinity. The *imago Dei*, a fundamental concept in a doctrine of creation (Gen 1:26–27; 5:1–3; 9:6²), asserts that human beings are created in the image of God and have intrinsic worth, importance, and significance, *in addition* to their purpose or meaning, which distinguishes them from the other animals in creation. If the human is created in the image of God, then the debased and depraved behavior that Dostoevsky identifies and presents so accurately is a denial of what we are and should be. This all concurs with Russian Orthodox theology.

As Dostoevsky demonstrated in *The Idiot*, epileptic seizures may wipe the mind, damage the brain, only for the person to recover. In a moment faith will go, belief will be annihilated . . . only to return. But if what is left of the mind in and after a seizure fails to perceive God or believe in God, this does not deny God's "existence." The moments of apophatic nihilism, of apparent loss of faith, immediately after a seizure may help by clearing out false ideas about God. Such a denial may refute, to a degree, the depraved egocentricity of the *fallen* human and in the shriven humility of recovering from the seizure, the re-igniting of the *imago Christi* may or

2 For a Christian perception about the *imago Dei* see, Heb 1:3; Col 1:13–15; 1 Cor 11:7; Rom 8:29; 2 Cor 3:18; 4:4–7.

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might—indeed *should*—take up the space, the emptiness. Such nihilism simply points to the human condition, but because of Christ’s sacrifice such nihilism may serve Christ’s purposes.

2. ATONEMENT

Dostoevsky is no theologian, yet his works are theological. As his faith—post Siberia—developed he found himself drawn more and more into the Russian Orthodox Church. He absorbed and drew on an Orthodox doctrine of atonement, which—having its formulation and roots in the early and patristic church—reflects a consistency that the atonement theories of the Western church have lacked over the last one thousand years.

The early church in the years after the resurrection developed theories as to *how* Christ’s sacrifice saved us (to be ordered and codified by subsequent generations into a doctrine of atonement or salvation) and the resulting model of atonement has been adopted consistently in the Russian Orthodox Church. This early-church model has remained at the core of salvation theory in Russian Orthodoxy. The church, as it developed into the patristic church, formulated the “classic atonement model,” often referred to as the “ransom theory.”³ This model is heavily eschatological, it is reflective, and is existential in that it lays emphasis on the crisis in which humanity finds itself since the *fall* into original sin (though it is important to note that an acceptance of the essentially Western doctrine of original sin in Russian Orthodoxy is not universal, often outright rejected or acknowledged with some limited reluctance, and not as systematically expounded as compared with Augustine’s exposition). The *fall* enslaved the first humans and their progeny, indeed all of humanity, to the devil, to personified evil through rebellion. In order to *redeem* humanity, God descends in Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ, as a “ransom” or “bait.”⁴ As such the devil brings about Jesus Christ’s death, unaware that the righteous innocent one could not be destroyed perpetually; through Christ’s resurrection the devil loses the *right* to

3 Aulén, *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of the Atonement*, chs. II and III, 16–60.

4 Ransom, from the Latin, *redemptio*; redemption, to redeem. See, Aulén, *Christus Victor*, 20f.

humanity: Christ is the victor! This is a monumental spiritual battle acted out in time, and outside of time (Rev 12:7).

Gustav Aulén argues that some theologians lay too great an emphasis on the “ransom” motif as a payment, ransom, or debt: “The work of Christ is first and foremost a victory over the powers which hold mankind in bondage: sin, death, and the devil . . . the victory of Christ creates a new situation, bringing their rule to an end, and setting men free from their dominion.”⁵ What could be seen as a financial transaction becomes a liberation: the motif of *Christus Victor* eases an overemphasis on the financial model by uniting the human Jesus with God (reuniting the incarnate Christ into the triune Godhead) through the cross; in so doing the devil is subverted.⁶ The liberation component, over the financial, makes sense in a modern concept where a child has been kidnapped and held hostage, and the mother offers herself in place of the child, or more pertinently an older sibling offers itself in place of the younger children, with the parents agreement and anguish: Jesus offers himself to the powers of darkness in the place of fallen humanity; he is a part of humanity though the incarnation. Entering into humanity is crucial. This is a story more than a philosophical, rational account of atonement.

Irenaeus (130–202 AD) advanced a theory of “recapitulation” whereby Jesus became what we are so that we could become what he is; this was further developed by Athanasius (c. 297–373 AD) in his *De incarnatione verbi Dei* (*On the Incarnation of the Word of God*),⁷ which advanced atonement through the descend-to-reascend motif: God descends to redeem humanity, in the flesh, dying to be resurrected, then to reascend to heaven with humanity. In the early centuries after Christ’s resurrection this “classic” atonement model was recognized by all the churches; however, the Western (Latin) church developed this theory into recognizably different models. Initially the medieval church developed the “satisfaction/substitutionary/debt model,” as laid out initially by Anselm of Canterbury (1033–1109) in *Cur Deus homo*:⁸ Christ agonized and suffered on the cross as a substitute for humanity, in the place of

5 Ibid., 20.

6 Ibid., 22–28.

7 *St. Athanasius: The Incarnation of the Word. Being the Treatise of St. Athanasius, De incarnatione Verbi Dei*, trans. Sr. Penelope CSMV (1944).

8 Anselm of Canterbury, *cur Deus homo*, (*Why the God Man or Why is God Man?*)

rebellious humanity, as the weight of humanity's sin weighed down and crushed him: Jesus is the innocent substitute for humanity that satisfies God's honor and justice, thereby bringing in a judicial element: hence the language of debt/objectivism and the legal. During the Reformation many Protestants (in particular John Calvin) developed this "satisfaction/substitutionary/debt model" into a "penal substitution" model whereby Christ is a substitute, taking the place of humanity on the cross. As with the Anselmian model, the emphasis is on satisfaction: justice through punishment. The Anselm's model is often seen to be about an offence to God's honor, which does not damage God's honor, but damages us. God can demand either punishment from us (which in this case would be infinite) or satisfaction. But to make satisfaction to the infinite honor we have insulted we must offer a gift of equivalent value (i.e., infinite value). We are not in a position to do that. Christ, however, can and does, thereby setting things right. For Calvin the image is of a legal penalty due that justice demands the payment of. Christ pays it. The difference is that for Anselm Christ is not paying the penalty for our sins—instead, he is offering his life as a freely given gift of satisfaction to undo the insult to God's honor. For Calvin, on the other hand, Christ is paying the infinite legal penalty. Both models can speak of justice and satisfaction but they do not mean exactly the same thing when they use those terms.⁹

Forgiveness flows from this act: the barrier between God and humanity is removed through the cross because it assuages God's need for justice.¹⁰ Elements of "penal substitution" are to be found in some

9 My thanks and acknowledgement are to Dr. Robin Parry for assisting with the subtlety of difference between Anselm and Calvin.

10 We can acknowledge a later Western development, the "subjective theory of atonement," also referred to as "the moral influence model" (see Aulén (*Christus Victor*, 133–42 and 145) whereby the passion of the Christ was an act of exemplary obedience that profoundly alters, changes, and lifts up whoever comes to know about it. Essentially this relates closely to a form of pietistic religion (for example, as practiced by successful Victorians—a few good works of charity, complemented by respectable church attendance), and by, for Aulén, Enlightenment philosophers, and in the nineteenth century, neo-Protestant Liberals. But is this little more than humanity admiring the martyrdom of a "good" person? Therefore, the subjective model marginalizes the incarnation: the emphasis is on the individual's religious response. Being religious develops a new relationship for the individual with God. This is in effect reconciling, but is subjective and moralistic. There are characters in Dostoevsky's novels that admire Jesus and wonder if they might follow him, but this is not seen as an explanation for how the cross works.

patristic writers, but this is not their dominant theory or emphasis. The Russian Orthodox Church has consistently through its history remained wedded to the ransom/recapitulation theory, the “classic” model—Christ as the victor over Satan and death. Hence, Dostoevsky’s characters live on a knife-edge: To whom do they belong? Who do they serve? Certainly not to themselves when their ideas and actions, their beliefs and behavior point to their ownership either by God or by the devil. Their ownership is defined, to a degree, by their service, beliefs, and actions. And a life is eventually defined eschatologically: by death, by culmination and completion.

At any given moment the most depraved and evil of persons in Dostoevsky’s novels can turn and, through personal sacrifice, re-establish allegiance to Christ—God. (Or they may not: perceiving the *potential* for repentance and salvation in a depraved sinner does not guarantee an eventual redemption, but merely the possibility.) As was seen with the two thieves crucified next to Jesus (Luke 23:39–43), one turned, the other did not. Therefore, at any given moment a saint can throw away his or her salvation (though, governed we may argue by the re-development of the *imago Christi*, this is not always probable). Such is the eschatological view that underpins Dostoevsky novels: the reality of the eschaton is being worked out minute-by-minute in the here-and-now; when we die it will be obvious what we have become and where we are bound for. The “classic” model of atonement defines the characters and their relation to God in Christ . . . or to Satan. So, how did this framework in his novels come about? This eschatological and atonement framework defines his middle period and mature works—written after his return from imprisonment and exile in Siberia, convicted for subversion and revolutionary activities.

3. DOSTOEVSKY THE REVOLUTIONARY

As a young man at the St. Petersburg Academy Dostoevsky fell in with a revolutionary/socialist group under the aegis of the editor and writer Vissarion Grigorievich Belinsky (1811–48). Belinsky was active and influential in Russia, and then in continental Europe. He was primarily a literary critic, however, he was expelled from the University of Moscow for his revolutionary views, taking up work as a journalist. He is generally considered the father of radical intellectuals in Russia and was highly respected by the Soviets in the twentieth century. Belinsky

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died in 1848, a year before the authorities arrested the members of a crypto-political group—the Petrashevsky circle—named after its founder (Mikhail Butashevich-Petrashevsky, 1821–66), who was a self-confessed atheist, humanist, anti-Czar, proto-socialist. In 1847, through contact with Belinsky, Dostoevsky joined a secret political group headed by Petrashevsky. The group was a forum for political debate characterized by naïve socio-political action, such as attempting to run a printing press; however, more serious aims followed, for example, the founding of a commune in Petrashevsky's own village. The group took inspiration from, and was centered on the writings of, two leading figures in the French revolution: Jean-Baptiste Joseph Fourier (1768–1830) and Auguste Comte (1798–1857). Fourier initially trained for the priesthood, but took no vows. He was torn by an inner conflict, that is, whether he should follow a religious life or one of mathematical research. However, in 1793 he became involved in politics and joined the local Revolutionary Committee. He argued that the natural ideas of equality should be developed so as to conceive the sublime hope of establishing a free government without kings or priests, and to free the people from ancient burdens and yokes. Fourier was unhappy about the terror that resulted from the French Revolution and he attempted to resign from the committee, but fell afoul of the revolutionary authorities and was nearly executed. Comte was an initiator of sociology and scientific ethics (in effect, a representative of French-utopianism) who often referred to the “Great Discovery of 1822”—the plan of *The Scientific Operation Necessary for the Reorganization of Society* as he termed it. Between 1830 and 1842 he worked on the foundation principles of Positive philosophy.¹¹

The Petrashevsky Circle, or group, met between 1845 and 1849 at its namesake's St. Petersburg home. Members included minor officials and junior officers, writers, and students, who were interested in the teachings of the French utopian socialists. Their primarily objective was the future transformation of society into a federation of self-supporting communes in which human labor and other activities were organized in such a way as to allow the free play of human passions and therefore the fulfillment of all. The Petrashevsky group publicly criticized the autocracy of Nicholas I's Russia and called for rights such as free speech along with press and legal reforms. By 1849 Dostoevsky was regarded by the authorities as the leader

11 Comte's political philosophy culminated in a six-volume *Cours de Philosophie Positive*. See also, *The Positive Philosophy of Auguste Comte*, 3 vols.

of the Petrashevsky Circle. Inevitably Dostoevsky was arrested, and with many of the others, convicted of sedition, sentenced to death by firing squad, but was reprieved at the last second just as the firing squad had taken aim and had cocked their rifles. William J. Leatherbarrow notes:

Nicholas I was persuaded to commute the death sentences to imprisonment with hard labor, but he was determined to teach the conspirators an unforgettable lesson: they were kept in ignorance of the judgment of the court until the day of execution. Early in the morning of 22nd December, Dostoevsky and his fellow prisoners were transported to Semyonovsky Square, a regimental parade ground, where they were confronted with solemn priests, a black-draped scaffold, empty coffins, a line of armed soldiers and other signs that they were to be subjected to immediate execution. The original sentences were read and the first three prisoners, including Petrashevsky, were led to the stake. At the last moment, as the order to fire was about to be given, a messenger galloped into the square with news of the Tsar's "gracious" clemency. One of the prisoners lost his mind, and Dostoevsky himself was to be radically altered by this grim charade, which he later described in striking detail in his novel *The Idiot*.¹²

This experience had a profound effect on Dostoevsky—it was the experience of being born again, of resurrection. This theme of resurrection was to dominate his mature novels and he was to project this near-death experience onto his characters on more than one occasion.¹³ With the sentences commuted to transportation and imprisonment, Dostoevsky, along with his co-conspirators, was imprisoned and exiled in Siberia for ten years (1849–59). As convicts they were transported to Omsk in central Asia in shackles (riveted into place before they left Moscow and not removed till they were released four years later) for the journey of over 1,700 miles to the prison camp. For four years they were imprisoned in diabolical conditions with examples of humanity that the cultured classes of St. Petersburg tried their best to forget about. Upon release he completed his sentence by serving in the army in Siberia as a common soldier for a further six years and was banned from returning to European Russia. After much pleading and corresponding with the authorities he was allowed to resign the army and return to Moscow and St. Petersburg

12 Leatherbarrow, "Introduction," in *Crime and Punishment*.

13 See, for example, Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*, Part 1, chapter 2.

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ten years after he had left. The significance of the trial, mock execution, and the ten-year Siberian sentence are of profound importance to anyone who wishes to understand Dostoevsky's theological beliefs.

4. DOSTOEVSKY AND THE NEW TESTAMENT

The New Testament is of crucial importance in Dostoevsky's rediscovery of his Christian faith and as the source and basis for the beliefs underlying his novels.¹⁴ On route to Siberia an elderly woman thrust a copy of the Russian New Testament into his hands, which helped to rekindle his faith and was, arguably, the most precious of possessions to him during his imprisonment.¹⁵ The elderly woman was the widow of one of the Decembrists, an aristocratic uprising (December 14, 1825 old calendar, December 26 post-revolution calendar) in St. Petersburg, which wanted to outlaw serfdom and in some cases the monarchy; she thrust the copy of the New Testament into his hand as the convicts marched in shackles through Tobolsk in Siberia. The widows/wives of the Decembrists often gave copies of the New Testament in Russian to individuals in prisoner convoys. This particular widow would have had no idea who Dostoevsky was, only that he was a convict in exile, and heading for almost certain death in prison or in the cold of the Siberian winter. Dostoevsky's experience in prison and exile would have been very similar to Aleksandr Isayevich Solzhenitsyn, especially as recounted in *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* (1962). Conditions in the prison camps in the 1850s were no different from the 1950s. This copy of the Russian New Testament helped him to reaffirm his commitment to Christian principles, as embodied in the traditions and spirituality of the Russian Orthodox Church (though he was always wary of ecclesial power and authority). He kept this New Testament¹⁶ until his

14 References to the Old Testament are extremely rare in Dostoevsky's notebooks, diaries, journals, and drafts—however, the importance of the Old Testament is seen in the profound impact he says that the book of Job on him in his childhood and youth (see *Diary of a Writer*).

15 See Dostoevsky's *Memoirs from the House of the Dead* (1862).

16 Chisholm, "Dostoevsky as Political Prophet..." Online: www.fyodordostoevsky.com/essays/d-chisholm.html. See, GBL, fond 93/I, K. 5b./1. *Evangelie. Gospoda nashego Iisusa Khrista Novyj Zavet*. Pervym izdaniem. Sanktpeterburg. V tipografii Rossijskogo Biblejskogo Obshchestva 1823.

See: Kjetsaa *Dostoevsky and His New Testament*. The work is dual language: English and Russian text of the marked passages from Dostoevsky's New Testament, with an introduction in English. Dostoevsky's New Testament is in the manuscript division of

death, reading John's Gospel on a daily basis, annotating it and writing his theological thoughts in the margins.¹⁷ From the evidence of the annotations, the following books were of most importance to him: The Gospel according to John, The Epistles of John, then The Revelation to John.¹⁸ Twenty-one of the twenty-seven books of the New Testament are marked—however, The Gospel of Mark is annotated only in two places, Luke in seven; by contrast there are fifty-eight annotations in The Gospel of John. The teachings of Christ and the passion are heavily marked and annotated. The short First Epistle of John is heavily marked and annotated in six places; The Revelation to John sixteen places.¹⁹ By contrast The Sermon on the Mount, respected and used by Lev Nikolayevich (Leo) Tolstoy, is largely ignored. (This may be due, in part, to Dostoevsky's fear of any abstract ideological system resulting from his experiences with the Petrashevsky circle and studying at the feet of Belinsky.²⁰) Even after his return from Siberia he regularly consulted, annotated, and wrestled with what were to him key passages marking in ink, pencil (even finger-nail indentations whilst in prison, when no pen or pencil was available—these marking are forcefully engrained); the practice of wrestling with what he termed "Sacred Scripture" continued even until the day before his death.²¹ Therefore, The Gospel according to John and The First Epistle of John are by far the most important foundational basis for his belief system during the post Siberian period of his life.

To understand Dostoevsky's complicated life and beliefs we need to look at his appropriation of The Gospel of John. The greatest number

what used to be the Lenin Library. Kjetsaa writes, "It is also indeed with strange feelings that one sits today in the Manuscript Division of the Lenin Library, leafing through Dostoevsky's dirty copy of the New Testament. Countless fleas and lice have crawled over the dark covers of the book. From the writer's bunk it witnessed din and uproar, the rattling and jangling of shackles, cursing and coarse laughter, shaven heads and branded faces, degradation and misery. But it was precisely in this earthly inferno that the book was to have such importance for the writer's spiritual rebirth. . . . As a guest of the Gor'kij Institute of World Literature (IMLI) I was given the opportunity in the summer of 1982 to study the book, and in this connection I should like to express my sincere thanks to the head of the Manuscript Division, L. V. Tiganova." Kjetsaa, *Dostoevsky and his New Testament*, 6 and 80

17 Kirillova, "Dostoevsky's Markings in the Gospel of St. John," 41–50.

18 Ibid., 43.

19 Ibid., 48.

20 Fears expressed later in life in *The Diary of a Writer*.

21 Anna Grigoryevna Dostoevsky, *Dostoevsky Reminiscences*, 375.

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of markings in John's Gospel relate to the divinity of Christ, and the relationship between the Son and the Father.²² Irina Kirillova notes, "like no other of the Evangelists John sees the miracle embodied in the Christ who preached love in an evil world."²³ This can be seen in the heavily marked passages from both The Gospel according to John and The First Epistle of John, which deal explicitly with love—from the new commandment passages in the Gospel through to the comments in the Epistle dealing with the nature of love between people.²⁴ Irina Kirillova notes that as a religious type, Dostoevsky is a "Thomas the Doubter who needs to confront Christ in his own way."²⁵ A large group of markings relate to resurrection—one of Dostoevsky's central concerns.²⁶ These annotations emphasize that belief and life were inseparable—in Russian *zhivaia zhizn'* (living life). The resurrection of Lazarus was central to his faith—the passage is heavily marked in his New Testament. In addition, it is the central biblical passage in *Crime and Punishment*.²⁷ Overall, Irina Kirillova notes, The Gospel of John was of particular significance to Dostoevsky, more than any other book in the New Testament:

The Gospel of St. John has particular significance for Dostoevsky because, more than any of the other New Testament books, it enables him to affirm his faith in the divine Son of God through the affirmation of Christ's Sonship made manifest in the "theology of love" that is so central to both The Gospel of St. John and the First Epistle of John. Dostoevsky's profession of faith had to overcome not so much the claims of nineteenth-century Natural Science as the tragic, insoluble contradiction between belief in an omnipotent and merciful God and the cruel, bleak reality of innocent suffering. The luminous revelation of love in the person of Christ enables Dostoevsky to believe that it is possible to resolve the terrible antinomy of innocent suffering and divine mercy through faith in Christ, the God-Man, who is both innocent victim and Redeemer.²⁸

22 Kirillova, "Dostoevsky's Markings in the Gospel of St. John," 48–49.

23 Ibid., 49.

24 Dostoevsky's annotations are: John 13:34 and 15:12; and 1 John 2:10; 4:7, 12, 19–20; see also, Kirillova, "Dostoevsky's Markings in the Gospel of St. John," 50.

25 Kjetsaa, Geir, *Dostoevsky and his New Testament*, 45.

26 John 6:54; 8:51–52; 11:26; 12:32.

27 Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment*, Bk 4, ch. 4

28 Kjetsaa, *Dostoevsky and his New Testament*, 50.

This antinomy between divine mercy and apparently innocent suffering presented by the dialectical contradiction between the idea of an omnipotent and merciful God and the reality of suffering and death here on earth is reconciled only in the Lordship of the Son of God. This is the central dialectic in Dostoevsky's beliefs and in the theology presented in his novels. All other examples of Dostoevsky's dialectics flow from this resolution of the contradictions of faith and life in the God-man—hence *zhivaia zhizn'*.

5. DOSTOEVSKY AND SPIRITUALITY/SPIRITUALISM?

Spiritism was something of a fashionable preoccupation amongst the wealthy and leisured classes in St. Petersburg, particularly in the 1840s and 1850s. Thomas Berry notes, "From the reign of Catherine the Great to the Revolution of 1917, Russian society and literature were affected by the relationship between Western spiritualism with its séances and mediums and an ancient folk tradition with its superstitions and fancifulness. The common Russian belief in spirits, combined with the Western occult science, brought charlatans into the highest court circles throughout the last hundred and fifty years of the Romanov's rule."²⁹ These were people who considered themselves Christian but dabbled with séances and mediums, the occult and psychic phenomena, in particular, what they considered to be communication with the dead, all framed by religious interests and practices that denied fundamental Christian doctrine. Considered an innocent playtime, many were drawn into a much darker world than they expected, becoming infatuated with these gatherings. As a young army officer Dostoevsky was involved in such séances, flirting with the pronouncements of mediums, and so forth. As such Dostoevsky's seduction by spiritists is interlinked with the military society he moved in, then with the fashionable bourgeois world of his early novellas where he is a sceptic but plays with spiritist ideas as an innocent pastime, and then—ironically—with his politicization through revolutionary Franco-ideologues: "Dostoevsky was aware of the literary tastes of the period and his own writing reflected his effort to appeal to the public's taste for the esoteric."³⁰ In *The Landlady* (1847), Dostoevsky flirts with the idea that the

29 Berry, "Dostoevsky and Spiritualism," 43.

30 Ibid.

heroine is possessed by the devil, but narrates that this is psychological imbalance; the early Dostoevsky weaves some ideas from Russian folklore into his short stories and novellas, for example, a violinist possessed by evil powers when he plays the instrument (*Netochka Nezvanova* 1848).

Post-Siberia he embraced Orthodox Christianity and rejected spiritism. Post-Siberia his understanding of the supernatural is related to this rejection of spiritualism/spiritism; this rejection then effects, to a degree, his reading of the New Testament. It also shaped his theology generally, his eschatology specifically, creating apparent anomalies and flaws, contradictions in his otherwise traditional/orthodox theological framework. Fundamental to this question is whether the “other,” the supernatural, exists, and is acknowledged; that is, a spiritual dimension: good and bad, holy and evil, angelic and demonic. Does such a reality exist in a way not reducible to the physical world we occupy? A Naturalistic position considers the material world to be all there is. Spiritualism, specifically spiritism as a form of transdimensionality, was rejected by Dostoevsky post-Siberia, at a time when it was even more highly fashionable amongst the leisured classes in St. Petersburg. Dostoevsky is critical of spiritualism/spiritism as a system of belief or religious practice based on supposed communication with the spirits of the dead, especially through mediums in séances. But does this rejection also involve a denial of the reality of the supernatural as attested to in the Bible?

Implying, in philosophical terms, the doctrine that the spirit exists distinct from matter, or that spirit is the only reality (OED), spiritism can be considered to be, for many, gnostic and heretical, raising serious questions about the incarnation, and the value of the corporeal. Aware of the “tremendous popular regard for the occult science”³¹ during the 1860s and 1870s, Dostoevsky does weave into his major novels some examples, but walks a fine line between belief and skepticism, for example, “the dual nature of Russian spiritualism from the folkloric devils in many of his works to the sophisticated devilish phantom of Ivan’s dream in *The Brothers Karamazov*.”³²

If in his major novels he tries to steer a path between belief and skepticism with regard to the influence the supernatural might exert on us in the here-and-now, he ends up with an hermetic world where any

31 Ibid.

32 Ibid.

sense of the supernatural is to be considered psychological. However, in his personal life he toyed with the idea of a spiritual reality that can exert influence on us.

Although skeptical of demons and spiritism, Dostoevsky was aware of what we may term the action, the enigmatic presence, of the Holy Spirit in his life, of unusual, nigh impossible, coincidences.

In his personal life, Dostoevsky gave evidence of his curiosity about psychic phenomena. Doctor Janovskij, who treated the author, reported that Dostoevsky believed in premonitions and related the following incident. During the second year of their acquaintance, the doctor lived in Pavlovsk, returning to St. Petersburg three times a week for his medical practice. One day a strange urge convinced him of the necessity of returning to the city for an unscheduled visit. In a remote area he accidentally ran into Dostoevsky who had no money to pay a petty debt demanded of him by some military clerk. When the writer saw the doctor, he shouted, "See! See who will save me!" Later Dostoevsky called the incident remarkable and every time he would remember it, he would say, "Well, after that, how could one not believe in premonitions!"³³

Saved from punishment under the law for this debt by this unexpected, unpredictable, encounter, Dostoevsky saw this as a form of divine intervention, though he fails to identify and acknowledge the triune, pneumatological nature of the encounter. Premonitions, for Dostoevsky, equal the enigmatic presence of the Holy Spirit, though he fails to distinguish, or test, the spirits.³⁴

Although there are sometimes references to devils/demons/evil imps in his novels (as distinct from *the* devil as a dark personified evil force),³⁵ he states explicitly that he does not believe in such devils/demons/evil imps: "My whole trouble is that I, too, cannot believe in devils/demons; this is really a pity, since I have conceived a very clear and most remarkable theory of spiritism, but one exclusively based upon the existence of devils: without them, my whole theory comes to naught of its own accord."³⁶

33 Quoted in *ibid.*, 44.

34 "Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God." 1 John 4:1f. See also, Rom 8:16, Acts 10:30–32, 1 Thes 5:21–22.

35 For example, in *Crime and Punishment*, the conversations between Svidrigailov and Raskolnikov about ghosts, and hauntings, often generated by a guilty conscience.

36 Dostoevsky's theory was that the apparent revelations and encounters that

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If we check through Dostoevsky's New Testament, examining the annotations, there are no marks against any passages in the Synoptic Gospels describing demons, demonic encounters, demonic possession, exorcisms, or the supernatural generally. He clearly selects the parts of the New Testament he feels comfortable with. There are likewise no annotations or markings against the episodes of exorcising of humans possessed by demons where the possession appears to be responsible for epileptic seizures.³⁷ Dostoevsky nowhere questions the cause of his epilepsy, or considers the possibility of supernatural interference as a trigger for seizures (whether good or evil—we noted earlier the possibility of pneumatological interference triggering a type of epileptic seizure as part of Saul/Paul's Damascus Road encounter/experience).

Assessing Dostoevsky's annotations to the New Testament, The Gospel according to John and The First Epistle of John, both with the emphasis on the figure of Christ and what is termed in Eastern Orthodoxy the "Theology of Love"³⁸ are by far the most important foundational basis for his belief system during the post-Siberian period of his life. It is pertinent to note that there are no exorcisms in John. There is the devil, but "its" influence is mediated through the darkness of the world. The devil is also mediated through the darkness in and of an individual like Judas Iscariot; indeed, this is the self-destructive darkness that starts initially with ideas, maybe one seemingly innocent idea that progresses through a manifold till the darkness engulfs the individual, condemning him/her. Such darkness ensures the demonic behavior, and the intolerance and persecution, the destruction and chaos, which Dostoevsky saw at its worst in bad politics. Dostoevsky wrote, in 1876, in his mocking criticism of spiritism (and associated demons), of the dangers of a theological debate:

Naturally, I have been jesting and laughing from the first word to the last; yet this is what I wish to express in conclusion: if one were to regard spiritism as something carrying within itself a new creed (and virtually all spiritists, even the sanest among them, are a bit

appeared to happen in séances were demons/evil spirits toying with susceptible people, but he denies the existence of such spiritual phenomena and thus he concludes that what is happening can be explained psychologically. See Dostoevsky, *The Diary of a Writer*, Vol. 1, Ch. 3, §. 2, 'Spiritism. Something about Devils. Extraordinary Craftiness of the Devils, if only these are Devils,' 190–96, quote, 191.

37 For example, Mark 9.

38 See Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*.

inclined toward such a view) . . . [then] for this reason, may God speedily bring success to a free investigation by both sides; this alone will help to eradicate, as quickly as possible, the spreading stench, and this might enrich science with a new discovery. But to shout at each other, to defame and expel each other from society on account of spiritism—this, to my way of thinking, means nothing but consolidating and propagating the idea of spiritism in its worst sense. This is the beginning of intolerance and persecution. And this is precisely what the devils are after!³⁹

So evil/the devil is, under certain qualified conditions, real, but demons may be psychological creations of our imagination, though still result from the action of this dark personal force. Did Dostoevsky, in effect, retain the closed-off world of a Kantian philosophy from his youth, a concept of the world that denied the supernatural and was *de rigueur* amongst the proto-communist revolutionaries and anarchists he scorned, post-Siberia? And it is perhaps important to note that we do not dictate the conditions under which the Holy Spirit acts on us and in us (if we try to, we end up inventing impish demons and spirits, the idea of which is generated by real personified evil). Rhetorically, we may ask, did Dostoevsky, post-Siberia, have, in effect, a phobia about demons and the supernatural, which colored his understanding and acceptance of the real spiritual world of heaven and hell, the triune God and salvation/damnation? Was this how he dealt with the sins of his youth—specifically, his flirtation with spiritism which he had been involved in at the same time as his politicization into Franco-Russian revolutionary ideas and praxis? Dostoevsky noted, “I don’t believe in spiritualism, but besides that, I don’t want to believe.”⁴⁰

39 Dostoevsky, *The Diary of a Writer*, Vol. 1, 196.

40 Ibid., 139–40.