Foreword

One might suggest that the whole of Dostoevsky's authorship is dedicated to the Psalmist's question, "what is man?"—or, as we would prefer to put it today, "what are human beings?" Dostoevsky believes, of course, that the question cannot be asked except in relation to God. In this study of Dostoevsky's theological anthropology, Paul Brazier takes us into the heart of Dostoevsky's wrestling with the questions posed by human suffering and by human fallenness and he shows us that what matters most for Dostoevsky is whether, in the end, human beings consent to the forgiveness, and thus the fullness of life, that is offered by God.

Among European intellectuals in the West, and to a degree in popular Western culture, the nineteenth century in which Dostoevsky lived was a century of optimism about humanity. Still riding the wave of Enlightenment confidence in the power of human reason to lead us to truth and to virtue, and buoyed by the technological advancements of the age, many in Europe appear to have agreed with Herbert Spencer's confident assertion that "progress is not an accident but a necessity. Surely must evil and immorality disappear; surely must man become perfect."[1] Drawing variously upon Kant and upon Hegel, Christian theologians too developed a vision of the ideal human society established on the basis of human reason and accomplishment. Meanwhile, the critique of religion set forth by Ludwig Feuerbach offered encouragement for the view held by some that progress would be accelerated all the more as the constraints of religious belief were cast off.

There were not many who dissented from this optimistic analysis of humanity's prospects, but among those who did, Dostoevsky, an onlooker from the East, must rank alongside Kierkegaard in the West as one of the most profound. Like Kierkegaard, Dostoevsky was a deeply insightful

1 Spencer, *Social Statics*, 32.

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analyst of the human condition. He recognized the contradictions in humanity, its capacity for evil, its ready capitulation to demonic power, its propensity to self-delusion, and, above all, its defiance of God. Forged on the anvil of his own brutal imprisonment and Siberian exile, and shaped further by the battering he received from his epilepsy, Dostoevsky offers a grim portrait of human existence. When he defined man as "the creature that can get accustomed to anything," he spoke from his own experience of human depravity and of human resilience. He recognized, as well, that the brutal elements of human existence, while often a consequence of our defiance of God, can serve sometimes as a powerful justification for the protest atheism that we find in characters like Ivan Karamazov.

The presentation in Dostoevsky's writing of the grim reality of human suffering and evil challenges the optimistic outlook of the nineteenth century, and leaves in tatters the presumptions and the platitudes of superficial, bourgeois religion. More pertinently still, it challenges the presumption that humanity can get along without God. As Paul Brazier explains, without God, there is no limit to the depravity and the evil that humanity can sink to, and humanity is nothing. With God, humanity still fails, but with God, humanity might be of value. Despite the bleakness of Dostoevsky's portrayal of humanity, despite the almost relentless attention given to suffering and crime and struggle, one finds nevertheless in reading his work, the promise of forgiveness and a mercy without limit. The reality of humanity's creation in the image of God is not finally obscured; nor is the sufficiency of divine grace. As Father Zossima testifies in *The Brothers Karamzov*, "Man cannot commit a sin so great as to exhaust the infinite love of God." (Bk II, ch.3). Or, as Eduard Thurneysen writes, "over the dark abysses of the humanity which [Dostoevsky] depicts there glows from the beyond the light of a great forgiveness."[2]

Helmut Rex once observed that, "in Dostoevsky, life and literary work are intimately related."[3] That is also true of Paul Brazier's work. His account in this book of Dostoevsky's theological anthropology is informed by his own close acquaintance with suffering and by his astute attentiveness to the reality of human fallenness. It is shaped as well by a vision shared with Dostoevsky of divine mercy and grace. It is thus on account of his own

2 Thurneysen, *Dostojewski*, 39.

3 Rex, "Dostoevsky: God-Man or Man-God," 200.

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wrestling with the questions posed by human existence that Paul is able to provide insight into the truth that Dostoevsky tells. I am confident that Paul's book will encourage readers to return with renewed appreciation to the work of Dostoevsky himself, and perhaps also to Dostoevsky's recognition that despite everything there is reason for hope.

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