

Introduction

The nineteenth-century Russian writer and prophet Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky had no theological or philosophical training as such, and yet his novels exude a profound understanding of the gospel. Is he therefore to be considered a theologian? For many the answer is yes. There is no apparent systematic or structured theology in his works, yet his writings reflect and cohere with a traditional theology.

1. AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

So, can we write a theological reading of Dostoevsky's works? That is the aim of this volume. Essentially what follows is an encounter with his beliefs expressed through his writings. The objective is to critically analyze the theology implicit in Dostoevsky's works—taking into consideration the influence of his life, upbringing, and background on his beliefs—and how his theology evolved.

Initially, in Part One, we will look at Dostoevsky's life, which spanned a tumultuous period in Russian, and European, history. This will involve examining Dostoevsky's career and the factors and events that influenced his faith and beliefs. It will also include the influence that the New Testament exerted over him, that is, the foundation of the biblical world of his novels, which he based explicitly on the Russian New Testament. Importantly this will cause us to consider the role Dostoevsky's epilepsy had in the formulation of his beliefs, in informing and shaping—perhaps subliminally—how different his beliefs were in subtle ways from those of the average academically “impartial” and seemingly neutral theologian whose brain was not epileptic. Was the epilepsy responsible, so to speak, for certain nuanced details in his thought and in generating in him, to a degree, the conditions within his mind that gave him a more dynamic and truer understanding of the eschatological reality that humanity

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occupies, and the judgment that we all will face? More pertinently, did the condition of his brain allow the triune God to impart to him, to generate in his mind, a sounder eschatological understanding than many cossetted Western academics? This inevitably raises questions about Dostoevsky's understanding of the supernatural, and his flirtation with spiritism, which we must consider.

This will be followed in Part Two by an analysis of his theological anthropology—the human condition before God—evident in his novels, in particular *Crime and Punishment*, *The Idiot*, and *The Brothers Karamazov*. This will involve a comparison between the Western—essentially Augustinian—understanding of the human, defined by original sin and the *fall*, as compared to the Russian Orthodox understanding, which excludes, to a degree, a claim for the transmission of original sin. This will lead into an understanding of forgiveness and mercy as evident in the works from Dostoevsky's mature period.

In Part Three we will look at two major subjects: first, an analysis of Dostoevsky's use of dialectic in his theology and novels; second, an analysis of his dialectical criticism of religion in the service of the gospel (seen through a short story entitled *The Dream of a Ridiculous Man*). We will then focus on *The Brothers Karamazov* and in particular on its anti-hero, Ivan Karamazov, and Dostoevsky's prose poem *The Legend of the Grand Inquisitor*, demonstrating how true faith is achieved often through a struggle against dark forces, which may ensnare and destroy the human, but may also be escaped, so that the human may emerge into the true light of heaven, sanctified and saved.

2. EXPLANATIONS, QUALIFICATIONS

A few terms do need to be explained before we proceed. Some readers may not appreciate the full meaning and use of the terms used here; indeed, some terms are used with widely different meanings according to which church denomination uses them, or for that matter, which tribal grouping within a particular church or congregation. It is important to remember that the Russian Orthodox Church did not undergo the fragmentation that was the Reformation in the West. There is a unity of purpose and aim to the religion that Dostoevsky was raised in and to which he returned after his overtly politicized misspent youth. Professionals familiar with

these terms may still gain some understanding of the context in which they are used in this book.

i. o/Orthodox

The term orthodox can have, here, two meanings. When cited with a lower case initial letter—orthodox (originally middle English, from Greek *orthodoxos*, from *orthos* straight or right, with *doxa*, opinion)—this, in essence, defines beliefs as conforming with traditional or generally accepted ideas or doctrine, and thus in accord with what has been established. When cited with an upper-case initial letter, the term Orthodox refers to the Russian Orthodox Church specifically (though may refer to Orthodox Judaism or other Eastern Orthodox Churches).

ii. Scripture

Following on from his incarceration in a Russian *gulag* in Siberia, Dostoevsky placed a very high value in his mature years on Scripture, specifically the New Testament. What value, what status, indeed what ontology, do we assign to Scripture? Despite a century or more of critically analytic Bible study the truth of much of Scripture still survives, but amidst the hermeneutic of suspicion that has driven this academic venture there is often one major casualty: authority. What authority do we assign to the Bible? True the books that constitute it were written with often differing intentions, and all can be seen as belonging to differing genres, but if the Bible tells us something, what authority can we legitimately give it? Dostoevsky is highly selective. He in effect ignores the Old Testament, and is discriminating as to what he accords value to in the New Testament. For this study I accord a traditional ontological authority to Scripture: the Bible as a whole, and its individual books, have an authority which is God-given and which we ignore at our peril, regardless of how we believe the books may have been composed. If we analyze—archeologically—how a building, say a house, was constructed, how its use has changed over decades or centuries, how it has been extended, or demolished and rebuilt, this does not invalidate the function, purpose, and use of that building today. The same is true of Scripture: let us suppose that several authors over decades or centuries wrote and constructed the Book of Isaiah: it is still the Word of God and has prophetic authority as to God's one true revelation in Jesus Christ. Sometimes the Bible has been

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misused and its authority has been used as a weapon, but this misuse does not invalidate the fundamental ontological authority of the Bible. This study of Dostoevsky's works is grounded in a traditional, orthodox, concept of the Bible. Much of the evidence will be from Dostoevsky's own copy of the Russian New Testament given to him on his way to exile and imprisonment, and annotated by him in the prison camp.

iii. Trinity

Dostoevsky is orthodox (lower case "o") in that he acknowledges the Trinity. Central to the theological framework we can read from his works is the centrality of Jesus Christ the God-man. Using the Gospel of John as evidence of Christ's divinity, he did find difficulty in conceiving or knowing of God outside of Christ. The immanent was all-important to him. As we shall see, at times Dostoevsky so believed in Jesus Christ as God that he lost any understanding or idea of God's transcendence, as in the Father in heaven. Dostoevsky therefore accepted the transcendence of God axiomatically whilst grounding the knowability of God in Christ. Any encounter with the Holy Spirit would then be perturbing, puzzling, and certainly not conforming to the cognitive and epistemological expectations of humanity as demonstrated by the immanent: sacred Scripture was the measure and test of any perception/encounter. In addition, the second person of the Trinity was often perceivable for Dostoevsky through ordinary people, and distinctly through suffering.

iv. The Supernatural: Spiritualism/Spiritism, and Spirits

Establishing Dostoevsky's respect for and understanding of the Trinity as a ground rule for this study leads into a consideration of his stand towards the supernatural and spiritualism/spiritism. Spiritism (a form of religion that grew out of spiritualism) was codified in the nineteenth century by the Hippolyte Léon Denizard Rivail (1804–69, pseudonym Allan Kardec), and religionized into the Kardecist Spiritualism Doctrine, which was based on the study of the origin and nature of spirits, and speculated on the ultimate end of the human, and the relationship between the human as spirit and the physical world. A basic dogmatic premise in this thought system is that humans are in essence immortal spirits that only inhabit physical bodies on a temporary basis. (This reflects a Docetic incarnation, also Hindu avatars are a closely related religious idea.) This

physical *residing* may occur for several “incarnations,” whereby the spirit, to attain moral and intellectual improvement, moves towards perfection; such spirits, through mediumship, may have an influence on the physical world.¹ Spiritism was highly popular in St Petersburg society in the mid-nineteenth century.

v. . . and Deliver Us from Evil

Dostoevsky’s novels, his belief system, is centered, in many ways, on deliverance from evil. This raises the question, what concept of evil is Dostoevsky working with? Evil is clearly manifold and present and active in his novels. But is it *real*, and what do we mean by real? For Dostoevsky evil is a spiritual force manifest in the corporeal, but it is not Manichean: it is not equal to God’s goodness, it is goodness turned away from God, it is corrupted good, in many varying degrees, descending deeper and deeper, taking the human ever further from God’s goodness, destroying the human. Evil, like demons, is not an abstract idea, even though such evil is clearly expressed psychologically in Dostoevsky’s most depraved characters. Evil for Dostoevsky is real, but it is a transcendent actuality, the flip side of a coin: good and evil are states each and every human can rise to, or descend into. Dostoevsky’s novels are full of demonic motifs, but does such evil, for him, have a supernatural component, *actual* demonic powers exerting influence? There do appear to be real demons operating behind people, pulling their strings, so to speak, but Dostoevsky is ambiguous, and he falls safely on the line that evil may simply be bad politics, bad human actions within a hermetically sealed, closed-off world. So is evil solely psychological? Whether this transcendent actuality is “real” or not, many of his characters are a reflection of actual people: these characters are possessed by evil and go on to possess and destroy others (unless at the final moment in their lives, they turn!). So in this work references to evil are according to how Dostoevsky saw it: sometimes as a noun, sometimes as subjective verbs or adjectival criticism, though it is important to remember that Dostoevsky does sometimes regard good and evil as simply relative and comparative, subjective, seeking to avoid

¹ See, Alexander Moreira-Almeida, *Allan Kardec and the Development of a Research Program in Psychic Experiences*. Cited on Wikipedia, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spiritism>, accessed Jan. 16, 2016.

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(as with the question of demons) the question of the ontological nature of this transcendent actuality.

vi. The Fall / Original Sin

From an Eastern Orthodox—specifically Russian—standpoint there is no concept of original sin comparable to the Western tradition. This distinguishes the East from the West, in particular with regards to a theological anthropology. In addition, there is no need for a Marian doctrine of immaculate conception, or a doctrine of *total* depravity, penal substitution, and related atonement theories, and so forth; these do not feature in the way they do in the West. Humans are therefore, from an Eastern perspective, not born with Eve and Adam's guilt. Therefore, Eastern Orthodoxy, specifically Russian Orthodoxy, does not comport with Augustine's doctrine of original sin: human nature is *fallen*, humanity is depraved, to a greater or lesser degree, but not *totally* depraved. Ancestral sin is accepted, but not ancestral *guilt*. We are all affected by Eve and Adam's sin: we are all sinners, and exercise little control over our ability to sin, however, from the Orthodox perspective, Eve and Adam's *guilt* is not assigned to humanity. Writing on the doctrine of John Cassian—who influenced both the East and the West on this point—Casidy notes, “[Cassian] boldly asserts that God's grace, not human free will, is responsible for everything which pertains to salvation, even faith.”² Dostoevsky's work reflects this Russian Orthodox tradition on the question of the *fall* and original sin, but is also, albeit implicitly and only to a degree, influenced by the Western tradition. We see this often as some of his most evil characters descend deeper and deeper into total depravity from which there appears to be no return, no redemption: unless they somehow turn at the last minute and repent.

vii. Liberal and Modernism

Dostoevsky's writings are set against the background of cataclysmic political, cultural, and social change in Russia specifically, Europe generally, in the nineteenth century. “Liberalism” is often seen as a contentious and problematic word—often it appears to generate an emotional response, may be considered pejorative, and may also be invoked in an equally subjective manner. Here the words “Liberal” and

2 Casiday, *Tradition and Theology in St John Cassian*, 103.

“Liberalism” with an initial capital letter are used strictly in the context of theological Liberalism in the church: this is a position that more often than not denies (but not always) the incarnation and resurrection, seeking to promote the idea of Jesus of Nazareth as an ordinary human being, furthermore, a Liberal theological position may not believe in God (with a capital “G”) but happily allow people to believe in “gods” of their own making, their own invention (this is a position that can be identified with some l/Liberals in the nineteenth century, as well as in the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries).

Having been an avid supporter of Western European Liberalism in his heady youth, Dostoevsky reacted against what he had seen and read of this liberalism, both theological and socio-political. Therefore Dostoevsky reacted against this modernist tendency in his middle and mature years, having been beguiled by the proto-communism of French intellectuals in his youth. Theological Liberalism since the eighteenth century had claimed freedom not only from traditional dogmas and creeds but also in the analysis of and value accorded to Scripture. Such theology was to a large degree formulated in the light of what were considered advances in the natural sciences and philosophy—the spirit of the Age of Reason and the Enlightenment. In this work, when cited with a lower case initial letter (“liberal”), the term refers to liberalism in politics, society, and culture generally, in ethics and morality, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Therefore a distinction needs to be drawn between Liberalism as a theological movement or belief system and what is often euphemistically called a liberal perspective in nineteenth-century Russian society generally. Dostoevsky regarded the term “Modernism”/“Modernist” very much in the same context as Liberalism; he was often scathing about Modernist tendencies associated with the proto-communist anarchistic groups who threatened both Russian society and the Russian Orthodox Church, tendencies that were often essentially grounded in theological Liberalism, and philosophical atheism.

viii. Atheism–Theism

A common misconception with the characters in Dostoevsky’s novels is that there is no actual difference between theists (Christians) and atheists (often anarchists, proto-communists, anti-monarchists of sorts, and so forth). This has led some to argue that all are saved, all are acceptable

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before God: beliefs make no difference to the final outcome of a human life. Dostoevsky posited a paradox, something of a puzzle: at times the person may claim to be atheistic, yet exude a sound understanding of God and eternity; at other times the individual may proudly believe and scorn atheists, but exhibit a religious pride that appears to place him or her far from the love of God. At times the person will claim atheism and die far from God (and from a traditional Western perspective face condemnation and an eternity in hell); at other times the person may exhibit sound faith and be saved. What Dostoevsky posits is the risks of religion: bad religion condemns; good religion saves, proclamations of belief/unbelief may not always point to the final destination of each human. The pertinent question when we come across a declaration of atheism by a character in one of Dostoevsky's novels is, *which* God does the character not believe in? Likewise we may ask, which "god" is it that such-and-such a person claims to believe in, and will swear absolute allegiance to?

ix. Bourgeois/Bourgeoisie

Though normally associated with left-wing revolutionaries, the term bourgeois often crops up in translations of Dostoevsky's works as a criticism of the comfortable indulgence of the wealthy classes in nineteenth-century Russia who claimed—superficially in Dostoevsky's view—to be Christian. Dostoevsky is as scathingly critical of these people as he is of the revolutionaries and the nihilists. (*Bourgeois*, also *bourgeoisie*, is then an adjectival criticism of lifestyle characteristics of the so-called middle classes, especially in having materialistic values or conventional attitudes.) Dostoevsky's life and sufferings set him apart from the comfortable bourgeois classes—as he saw them—particularly in St Petersburg, often considered at the time to be the most European and French of Russian cities.

3. DOSTOEVSKY AS THEOLOGIAN

From the time of his incarceration in a Siberian prison camp, through his exiled years, and into his mature years as a writer and prophet, Dostoevsky was as astute a theologian as the most qualified academic. We will see flaws and holes in his theological scheme, as compared to the Christian theological tradition, but these notwithstanding, he is a light blazing in the firmament of nineteenth-century skepticism. This volume is therefore

intended as a relatively brief study of Dostoevsky's understanding of the eschatological reality that his theology pointed him towards. This reality attests to the truth that every person is, throughout his or her life, ever moving towards judgment and eternity: that is, towards heaven or hell (though a veiled universalism can be read from Dostoevsky's work). With death comes the final judgment on the individual; the resurrected Christ is the arbiter and judge, death merely brings into sharp focus the actual state of the person and what he or she will be for eternity. Therefore, from reading the works of Dostoevsky we can postulate how this dialectic demonstrated the movement of the individual toward salvation . . . or toward damnation. In Dostoevsky's view, every individual human being holds his or her future in his or her hands, the individual person decides: through beliefs and actions. What humanity does in the here-and-now echoes through eternity. I shall argue that it was to this eschatological reality that the works of Dostoevsky consistently attest, even if at times obliquely.

SAMPLE