
Dostoevsky's Religion

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| For Patrice, Mike, and Eva

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Preface

To judge from the past, there is a natural and powerful impulse to characterize the “religion” in Dostoevsky’s writings as a set of beliefs (which we may list and describe) and then to attribute them all to the author, or to identify a subset that we may attribute to the author, or to state that the author repudiated all the beliefs we’ve listed. In any case, it always seems to boil down to the question, “What did Dostoevsky himself really believe?”

That’s where the trouble begins. People who pose this question don’t expect an answer like “Dostoevsky believed that all religion is essentially a product of our tendency to produce myths” or “Dostoevsky believed that religion serves a socializing function in human civilization.” They expect an answer like “Dostoevsky was a devout Christian and believed in personal immortality,” or the opposite, “Dostoevsky was a tried-and-true atheist and did not believe in much of anything at all.” If they decide that he was a religious (specifically Christian) person and not an atheist, they expect further details about what, in his view, good Christians should believe and how they should behave. They expect, in short, a kind of theology and corresponding guide to living that represents “what Dostoevsky believed.”

There are two problems with this approach. The first is that even if we do wish to know (and think it’s important to know) what Dostoevsky believed when it came to religion, we’ll quickly be disappointed to find he “believed” a welter of diverse ideas that, taken as a whole, are shot through with flagrant contradictions and inconsistencies. Readers of Dostoevsky who declare, for example, that their novelist embraced and promoted a kind of nationalist Russian Orthodox Christianity are telling the truth—it’s easy to find passages to support this claim—but they’re overlooking the passages where he *ridicules* this type of belief. Those who declare that Dostoevsky was a sworn enemy of socialism, seen as the antithesis of “his” Christianity, are telling the truth, too—it’s easy to find passages to support *this* claim—but they forget the

occasions when he passionately defended individual proponents of this ideology. Those who declare that, underneath it all, Dostoevsky was a deeply religious man are ignoring the power with which he was able to endow counterarguments to religious beliefs of various sorts. In fact, when it comes right down to it, those who name almost any issue, religious or not, and firmly declare that Dostoevsky held a certain position on it are failing to take into account that he almost certainly took an opposite position in some other place.

The second problem is that the question “What did Dostoevsky himself really believe?” is not the only one to ask if we’re talking about religion in his works. Here are some others:

- When Dostoevsky talked about religion or dramatized it in his fiction, what exactly was his understanding of what he was talking about or dramatizing?
- How did he dramatize religious issues in his fiction, and what may we infer from his dramatization of those issues?
- To what extent was his understanding of religion determined by contemporary thought, Russian and non-Russian?
- To what extent was his understanding of religion determined by the Russian Orthodox tradition in which he was raised?
- If, for the purpose of understanding “Dostoevsky’s religion,” we seek a conception of Russian Orthodox Christianity, are our sources reliable?
- To what extent was his understanding of religion the product of his own idiosyncratic mind?
- What, in his view, was the nature of belief itself?

After all, here are the simple facts: Dostoevsky explicitly said and wrote some things about religious issues, he invented fictional characters that he caused to express some views on religious issues, and he created fictional situations that bore an association with some religious issues. Since (as I see it) he’s made it impossible for us to state what his personal religious beliefs are in the sense I have mentioned, then all we can talk about is what he *does* when the topic of religion comes up in his writing. So it’s fine if we make statements like “He frames religious issues as antinomies” or “He invents situations that test his characters’ religious beliefs.” But if we really want to make a statement about what Dostoevsky *believed*, the most we’ll be able to

say is probably something like “He believed that when we think about religion we become involved in antinomies” or “He believed that belief itself is the principal issue in any discussion of religion.” But these statements are completely different from a statement about whether or not Dostoevsky embraced certain religious beliefs and practices. So in the end, it seems to me, what we’re left with is the speculations and reflections on religion to which Dostoevsky has led us.

What to say about them?

Before we even try to say something about them, we need to realize that, to a considerable extent and especially in the West, we’re prisoners of the interpretations that some of Dostoevsky’s better-known readers have served up since his works were published. The explanations of Dostoevsky’s religious thought, both in Russia and in the West, make up a remarkable—and often truly funny—story. Dostoevsky, very much like his admirer Nietzsche, is one of those writers in whom many readers see reflections of themselves and then mistake those reflections for the writers—and this is only one part of the story. I’ve attempted a short version of it in Chapter One.

If someone in Dostoevsky’s milieu, a member of the educated Russian class of the midnineteenth century, had turned his or her attention to the subject of religion, what issues would have been likely to come to mind simply in virtue of the intellectual climate? An educated American of almost any religious persuasion in the late 1960s, for example, on thinking about religion in general, could not avoid thinking about the famous “Is God Dead?” cover of *Time* magazine in April 1966, or the naughty “God is dead” T-shirts a few years later. An educated Protestant living in Geneva in 1600 could hardly avoid thinking about the issue of predestination, owing to the power of the Calvinist tradition in that city. Educated Russians living in Moscow or Saint Petersburg in the 1840s would perhaps think of their own Russian Orthodox upbringing, if in fact they had one (as Dostoevsky did, while many of his contemporaries did not), they might think of the movement of religious nationalism called Slavophilism, and they might think of certain indigenous sectarian movements. But they would also be conditioned to bring to a discussion of religious issues a host of romantic and secularizing concepts that writers in Western Europe were busy introducing (and that Russian university students were busy snapping up). In this environment, “Christ was an eternal ideal toward which man strives and, by a law of nature, must strive” is not an innocent statement. All this is the subject of Chapter Two.

But inevitably we are brought back to the peculiarity of our author and the impossibility of answering a question that proves so much less complicated for so many other writers: What did he believe? It turns out that the nature of belief itself was a central preoccupation for Dostoevsky, and that the content of religious belief for him often takes second place to the odd ways in which belief functions. We can certainly say with confidence that even when Dostoevsky was not consciously speculating about belief, his conduct showed that it was a central issue in his character; he was incapable of sustaining the same position on an issue, religious or not, for any significant length of time, and yet he was capable of expressing views with what seems for all the world to be the utmost conviction and sincerity. This is what Chapter Three is about.

If Dostoevsky always found himself torn between opposing beliefs, it's no doubt because he viewed belief—especially religious belief—as something essentially contradictory, paradoxical, and antinomic. No one will be surprised to hear that Dostoevsky was fascinated with contradictions and conflicting points of view. But I'm not persuaded that he ever truly resolved many of the contradictions that fascinated him, and many of these contradictions end up specifically as antinomies, that is, pairs of mutually contradictory and equally compelling claims. I don't see, for example, how the conflict in *The Brothers Karamazov* between the views of Ivan and those of Father Zosima is definitively resolved in favor of the former (as so many readers claimed in the early decades after Dostoevsky's death) or in favor of the latter (as so many readers have claimed for the last few decades). Instead I see in Dostoevsky the real possibility of sincerely asserting one thing today and sincerely asserting its opposite tomorrow. This binds the expression of a conviction to the situation in which we express it and suggests a curiously modernist view of language and belief. That's Chapter Four.

When it came to metaphysical questions, Dostoevsky betrayed a turn of thought that renders his conception of belief yet more complicated. He seems early on to have become fascinated with the idealist notion of infinite progress toward an unattainable goal. The perfectly selfless Christian love whose practical unrealizability was the subject of more than one remarkable text is a good example. Reaching such a goal brings about the destruction of the self. Another example is perfect belief, or perfect faith. Like perfectly selfless love, perfect faith stands at the end of a path that comes ever closer to this end but never reaches it. The same applies to perfect lack of faith. Faith

and faithlessness, good and evil are pairs of opposing ideals, all of them unattainable by finite beings living in a finite world.

The idealism that characterizes Dostoevsky's conception of religion leads to an odd paradox about the nature of the individual, one particularly evident in the pair of novels *The Idiot* and *The Devils*. In those works, reflections about ideal love and faith—but also about ideal evil—lead to the conclusion that the “perfect” state for the individual (whether the individual seeks absolute good or absolute evil) is a state of complete dissolution. Perfect Christian love, as *The Idiot* illustrates, necessitates the evaporation of the ego, and perfect evil, as *The Devils* illustrates, leads to personal destruction. Dostoevsky's understanding of freedom, however, leads to the conclusion that the individual must remain whole and that a breakdown of the individual arises from moral and personal failures. The ideality of belief and the paradox of the individual are what I discuss in Chapter Five.

So belief is contextual, antinomic, and ideal. The status of the individual is deeply paradoxical. All this suggests more than ever that the topic of Dostoevsky's religion does not mean simply a list of the author's personal beliefs. But surely Dostoevsky must at least have conceived of some religious worldview with a content that's independent of the question of whether he or anyone else can fully believe any or all of its constituent parts. The closest thing to such a worldview in a work of fiction is the one we find in Father Zosima (and Zosima's disciple Alesha) in *The Brothers Karamazov*. But there's not much about this worldview that's Christian, or even for that matter consistent. It represents a strange blend of almost pagan earth worship and religious nationalism, as Zosima makes the slippery transition from asking us to adore the earth generally to asking us to adore the *Russian* earth specifically. This leads to asserting a special status for Russians in the divine scheme and consequently to endorsing a view that contradicts some of the historically fundamental aspects of Christianity. This is the focus of attention in Chapter Six.

Dostoevsky is a little like Nietzsche in this respect (among so many others); he's left us a large body of thought on religion, one that probes the foundations of religion in general and Christianity in particular but without offering a plausible worldview of its own. Like Nietzsche's, this is a highly critical body of thought that can point us toward the reevaluation of our most basic conceptions about religion. A key difference between the two is that Nietzsche didn't think he was proposing the content of a positive religion, while Dostoevsky apparently did.

This book is not meant to be a systematic study of Dostoevsky's fiction, focusing on the religious content of each work. Nor, for the reasons I've just given, is it a systematic study of his nonfiction, focusing on the things he said in his "own" voice (and therefore truly *thought*). It's meant to expose the body of thought on religion that emerges both from the actual content of his writing and from how he presented religious issues in works of various sorts.

I've written this book not just for specialists but also for general readers who are interested in Dostoevsky. I've assumed familiarity with four of Dostoevsky's works: *Crime and Punishment*, *The Idiot*, *The Devils*, and *The Brothers Karamazov*. When I mention a character or a scene from those books, I generally don't take the time to explain who the character is or to set the scene.

I've used the Library of Congress system for transliterating Cyrillic, though I've generally used the commonly recognized spellings of names (*Dostoevsky*, not *Dostoevskii*) in the text. All translations in the book, unless I've indicated otherwise, are my own.

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My most heartfelt thanks go to the man who introduced me to the works of Dostoevsky almost thirty years ago. Joseph Frank has been for me the model of the American intellectual in its consummate form: multilingual so as to be the envy of any European scholar, steeped broadly in the intellectual history of the West, firmly rooted in the concrete and empirical, skeptical of fashionable trends that divert attention from what's truly important, synoptic (a word that Frank himself admiringly applied long ago to Erich Kahler) in approach, and always sensitive to the political dimension of culture. Like so many others of his generation, he never doubted that his calling was a noble one, that to have attained the status of "an Intellectual" was to have earned a privilege to be taken very seriously. It's no wonder he was drawn to Dostoevsky. It would be hard to find an author—a human being, for that matter—for whom the world of *ideas* was filled with such tumultuous passion and dramatic excitement. Joseph Frank taught all his students what it is to live in such a world.

Dostoevsky's Religion

Historical Problems of Understanding

History has played an odd little trick with the topic of “Dostoevsky’s religion,” as it has with almost everything that happened in Russia before the October Revolution. Dostoevsky died in 1881, at the pinnacle of fame in his own country but much less well known outside. After his death, almost two generations of Russians came to love or hate as much of his work as was available, while the West was slowly discovering him. Many of his best-known Russian readers in those days were religious thinkers who made a name for themselves partly by writing about the religious ideas they saw in Dostoevsky’s works.

Then came the October Revolution, and Dostoevsky became a problem. During the Soviet years, it was dicey to discuss him at all, let alone to attribute religious ideas to him. If the availability of his various works is any indication, the official—but not officially expressed—view seems to have been that he was a dangerously conservative thinker. Editions of *The Devils*, his most clearly political novel, were printed in the Soviet Union and promptly shipped abroad. Officially sanctioned commentary on Dostoevsky in this era tended either to treat him as an outmoded historical phenomenon or to

make of him something more palatable to the Leninist outlook than a reading of, say, *The Devils* might lead one to suppose. The English-speaking world has had a taste of the first approach since 1964, when Norton published its Critical Edition of *Crime and Punishment*. The appendix to that edition included excerpts from the USSR Ministry of Culture's official guide for the teaching of Dostoevsky in Soviet universities. In 1953, the ministry characterizes his works in wholly negative terms as the "expression of reactionary bourgeois-individualistic ideology," while in 1955 it sees them somewhat more favorably as "a critical reflection of the deep inner contradictions which were corroding the Russian aristocratic-bourgeois society in the second stage of the liberating movement."¹ The more enlightened editorial staff of the *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii* (*Complete Works*), published between 1972 and 1990, took the second approach. In the first volume of the projected set, the staff introduced their author with the remarkable claim that "despite numerous historically conditioned errors and delusions" he had advanced essentially the same attitudes as those that the Great October Revolution had brought to life: mistrust of bourgeois civilization and belief in the Russian people.²

As to Dostoevsky's religious ideas, before the collapse of the Soviet Union one tactic was to chalk them up to the author's allegedly reactionary outlook. Another was to pretend they weren't there at all. Nowhere is this more evident than in two classic Soviet-era cinematizations of Dostoevsky's novels. Ivan Pyr'ev's screen version (1968) of *The Brothers Karamazov*, though including scenes in Father Zosima's monastery, an abbreviated version of Ivan's conversation from the "Rebellion" chapter, and other scenes in which Ivan discusses his views on God and immortality, omits "The Grand Inquisitor," the entire section devoted to Father Zosima's life, and even Alesha's funeral speech, concluding instead with an exuberant farewell scene in which Dmitry, after his murder trial, joyfully goes off to Siberia and Grushenka follows him. Lev Kulidzhanov's rendering (1969) of *Crime and Punishment*, though almost four agonizingly tedious hours long and mindlessly faithful to many parts of the novel, omits the Epilogue and, of course, the scene in which Sonia reads the Gospel story of the raising of Lazarus.

So the tale of the open discussion of Dostoevsky's religion in his own country includes a lengthy hiatus, during which not only was the discussion largely suspended but in addition the works of his early religious commentators were banned. Once the discussion resumed in the 1990s, it could not simply pick up where it had left off.

In the West, however, there were few constraints of the sort that the Soviet regime imposed on its people. Starting at the end of the nineteenth century, Dostoevsky's popularity grew in Europe and the United States, and an increasing number of his works became available in translation. During seventy years of virtual silence in Russia on the topic of Dostoevsky's religion, Westerners had plenty to say. Until relatively recently, most Western commentators did not trouble to learn much of anything about Dostoevsky's native religious tradition. When they did, they generally relied, directly or indirectly, on the tradition that Dostoevsky's early Russian commentators initiated after his death. But these commentators had their own peculiar biases.

DOSTOEVSKY'S RELIGION THROUGH RUSSIAN ORTHODOX EYES

If we wanted to know the "truth" about Dostoevsky's religion, we would probably turn first to writers who shared Dostoevsky's nationality and religion—that is, to writers who approached Dostoevsky from the perspective of Russian Orthodox Christianity. Unfortunately there are numerous perils here, for the Russian Orthodox Christianity that so many Russian writers use as a foundation for an understanding of Dostoevsky's religion turns out to be to some extent Dostoevsky's own idiosyncratic creation. There's another fact that complicates matters further. By the turn of the twentieth century, much of Russian intellectual life had been thoroughly infected with the Nietzsche bacillus. After the philosopher died in 1900, his spirit was suddenly everywhere. Of course, no two people could agree on what Nietzsche's views were, but everyone seemed to have a strong opinion (favorable or unfavorable) about him. His early infatuation with Wagner and his promotion of the "Dionysian" spirit in *The Birth of Tragedy* impressed some. His vitriolic comments on religion in general and Christianity in particular impressed or enraged others. His remarks on the will to power intoxicated many. His style—his fondness for aphorism and for the bold, sweeping, and completely unsupported claim—inspired many to follow his example. Much of the commentary on Dostoevsky from this era, in Russia and in Western Europe, bears the heavy imprint of the naughty boy who proclaimed (as many others had already done to much less fanfare) the death of God.

The man who was responsible for reinvigorating (some might say for actually creating) Russian Orthodox theology at the end of the nineteenth

century was also the man who gave the earliest and strongest impetus to the tradition of reading Dostoevsky's works through Orthodox eyes: Vladimir Solov'ev (1853–1900), the dazzlingly precocious philosopher who was a friend and companion to Dostoevsky from 1873 till the end of the novelist's life. Solov'ev was the talk of the town in 1878, when he began delivering his *Lectures on Godmanhood* and transfixing his audience with his vision of a humanity divinized and a deity humanized through the incarnation. His name came to be associated with the concept of the Universal Church, a human brotherhood brought about, once again, by the incarnation. He is also usually credited with inaugurating the Russian "religious renaissance," the movement that produced a flood of important writings on Russian Orthodox Christianity from the end of the nineteenth century till the Revolution. The intellectual relationship between Solov'ev and Dostoevsky was said to be reciprocal, and some have said that Solov'ev was the real-life prototype for both Alesha and Ivan Karamazov.³

After Dostoevsky died, the religious philosopher paid tribute to him in his *Three Discourses in Memory of Dostoevsky*, published between 1881 and 1885. Solov'ev attempts to define what kind of Christianity his late friend represented. There are three possible types of Christianity, Solov'ev explains: what he calls temple (*khramovoe*) Christianity, domestic (*domashnee*) Christianity, and universal (*vselenskoe*) Christianity. For now, we needn't concern ourselves with the meaning of the first two (I'll return to the subject in Chapter Six). Dostoevsky's is of the third type, which is to say "a free, all-humankind [*vsechelovecheskoe*] unity, an all-world [*vsemirnoe*] brotherhood in Christ's name."⁴ Many would recognize this as a classic Lutheran idea, but Solov'ev calls it simply a "Christian idea" and attributes it to Dostoevsky. It makes sense that Dostoevsky should have embraced this version of Christianity, Solov'ev thinks, since at the heart of the novelist's personal and social outlook lay the religious conviction that "separate individuals, even the best people, do not have the right to coerce society in the name of their individual superiority," that "social truth is not made up by separate minds but rooted in collective feeling."⁵ This in turn makes sense because Dostoevsky was able to see the Godly in both man and nature and was thus able to appreciate the truth of the claim that the Universal Church represents the "living body of the God-man."⁶

Naturally these assertions might surprise some readers, since Dostoevsky at least created fictional characters who expressed views very different from the ones that Solov'ev is sure he espoused. In Solov'ev's eyes, Dostoevsky's ironic distance from these characters must have been great indeed—and

must have been beyond all doubt. Many of the ideas Solov'ev mentions may be found in book six of *The Brothers Karamazov*, "The Russian Monk." At one point in that book, in a description of his years of wandering, Father Zosima tells of an encounter with a former servant. Years earlier he beat the servant and then asked the servant's forgiveness, before abandoning his own worldly affairs and beginning his monastic calling. The servant, seeing that his former master is now poor, gives him alms. Here is Zosima's comment: "I had been his master and he my servant, but now, as he and I kissed each other with love and spiritual tenderness, a great human unity arose between us. I've thought about this a great deal, but now here are my thoughts: can it really be inaccessible to the mind that this great, simple-hearted unity might arise, in its own time and universally, among our Russian people?" Father Zosima doesn't use phrases like "free, all-humankind unity," but the collective spirit, the flattening out of social distinctions, the universality are all there in his comment. So the question is whether "temple Christianity" is a preexisting, generically Christian notion that shows up in Dostoevsky or whether Solov'ev derived the notion from Dostoevsky's fiction. If it's true, as some say, that the exchange of ideas between Dostoevsky and his younger friend reached its height of activity when Dostoevsky was working on *The Brothers Karamazov*, then it would not be surprising that Solov'ev and one of Dostoevsky's characters should have similar views about what constitutes a certain type of religion.

Curiously enough, Solov'ev would later turn his attention to Nietzsche, though not directly in connection with his understanding of Dostoevsky's religion. But given Solov'ev's formulation of Dostoevsky's fundamental religious conviction ("separate individuals, even the best people, do not have the right to coerce society in the name of their individual superiority"), his interest in the German philosopher is hardly surprising. What catches Solov'ev's attention in Nietzsche is precisely questions of power and will, and his response to Nietzsche's positions on these questions (at least as Solov'ev represents those positions) is invariably constructed from the religious outlook that he regarded himself as sharing with Dostoevsky. Consequently he permitted himself to make such amazing claims as these: Nietzsche erred by celebrating strength and beauty in and for themselves, failing to realize that "there exists a Divinity both strong and beautiful, whose strength does not weaken and whose beauty does not die, because with Him both strength and beauty are inseparable from the good";⁷ and we can reinterpret Nietzsche and conclude that the Superman is simply one who has done what is

natural to all humans—namely, attempt to be higher and better than reality, to conquer death through resurrection in Christ.⁸

The first important book-length study devoted to the subject of Dostoevsky and religion was *Dostoevsky and the Legend of the Grand Inquisitor* (1891), by Vasily Rozanov (1856–1919). Rozanov devoted the bulk of his book to a kind of retelling, with commentary, of two consecutive chapters in *The Brothers Karamazov*: “Rebellion” and “The Grand Inquisitor.” As one who considered debate about Dostoevsky to be debate about where the author stood on issues of great import—in this case, did he side with Ivan, or did he side with Alesha?—Rozanov clearly counted himself among those who believed Dostoevsky sided with the former. The “Legend” is infused with the spirit of death and hopelessness; it is “the lone synthesis in history of the most ardent thirst for the religious together with a complete incapacity for it.”⁹ Rozanov then goes on, however, to propose an historical account of the Russian Orthodox Church, explaining that the “Romance races” showed a predilection for externally imposed universalism, as expressed in the Roman Catholic Church; the Germanic races showed a predilection for subjective individualism, as expressed in Lutheranism; and the Russian race is filled with “clarity, harmony, an attraction to the inward agreement both of ourselves with everything around us and of everything around us with and through itself,” as expressed in Russian Orthodoxy.¹⁰ Of the three spirits, the Orthodox is the one that corresponds most closely to the Gospel and the spirit that shines in it, Rozanov declares, because Orthodox believers are animated simply by *faith*.¹¹

What’s curious about this bit of dialectical analysis, as Rozanov himself points out in an extended note to his discussion, is that it comes from Dostoevsky himself, who devoted a few pages of the January 1877 issue of *Diary of a Writer* to just this subject. To believe the editorial staff of the *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, Dostoevsky himself borrowed the ideas from the religious philosopher Aleksei Stepanovich Khomiakov (1804–60), who had helped create a highly nationalistic vision of Russian Christianity in the first half of the nineteenth century.¹² To Rozanov’s mind, however, the ideas belonged to Dostoevsky, and he makes no effort to ground them in any evidence or authority earlier than the author of *The Brothers Karamazov*.

Rozanov mentions Nietzsche only once in *Dostoevsky and the Legend of the Grand Inquisitor*, in a footnote.¹³ There is no evidence that his approach in this work is dominated by Nietzsche. For other Russian commentators of the Russian religious renaissance, however, the figure of Nietzsche and the question of Dostoevsky’s religion became somehow inseparable, and after Rozanov

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