The Evolution of Fedor Dostoevsky's Protagonists as Carriers of Religious Ideas

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Fedor Dostoevsky's works show a steady increase in the significance which the writer attributed to religion and religious philosophy. A prominent Russian philosopher, Lev Shestov, explained this trend by saying that at a certain point Dostoevsky began to despise the basic ideals of humanism that he had formerly worshipped (146). Rather than suffer together with his characters, as he did while writing *Poor Folks*, the writer eventually found a soul kinship with his Underground Man. Shestov argues that Dostoevsky was frightened by the notion that his cynical and godless protagonist was his double. The writer had to protect himself with invented religious ideals, although he did not believe his own words (144). Therefore, Dostoevsky was not a loving man who spread the message of Christ, but a cruel hypocrite, filled with hate and contempt for the world.

The idea of dualism, which proclaims that an individual is simultaneously the carrier of both good and evil, is a prominent fixture in Dostoevsky's ouevre. However, contrary to Shestov's opinion, neither Dostoevsky himself, nor his positive protagonists, allow evil to dominate their lives and actions. Dostoevsky never completely rejected humanism, except for its proclivity toward atheism, and never failed to condemn the sorry state of the human condition. The description of the Marmeladov family's fate in *Crime and Punishment*, or that of the Snegiryov family in *Brothers Karamazov* in spirit is no different from the one expressed, for instance, in *The Insulted and Injured*. What is different is that in his later works, the writer had realized that in a spiritually imperfect and uncaring world, human suffering cannot be eliminated even if material conditions have been ameliorated. Therefore, what actually happened to Dostoevsky is that in the course of his literary career, he underwent a transformation from being a pure humanist into an investigator of the human psyche and matters of spirit. It became clear to him that the creation of a loving world is extremely difficult due to the duality of man's nature. Yet, he never abandoned his conviction that it was both possible and absolutely essential to make such a world a reality.

Shestov's mistake in his attitude toward Dostoevsky originates in a misunderstanding of the very concept of dualism. Since this word specifies the presence of two sides to every phenomenon or person, then Dostoevsky could not possibly be, as Shestov perceives him, all cruelty and no faith. On the contrary, the fact that Dostoevsky fought his own demons makes it absolutely essential and unavoidable that he had to have faith in goodness as the other part of his dual nature. Commenting on Dostoevsky's search for God, René Fueloep-Miller noted: "Unable to bear the forlornness of being orphaned and abandoned, Dostoevsky looked for something to replace atheism, something that would restore to life purpose and meaning" (48).

The greater his doubts were, the greater was his faith. The greater were his problems while trying to abate the sufferings of a single man, the greater was his propensity to strive for spiritual rehabilitation of the entire world. Dostoevsky and his protagonists struggled on the road to their ideals through personal trials and errors.

Dostoevsky believed that without faith in immortality, life becomes meaningless and there is no restraining factor which would prevent mankind from self-destruction. In his books, religion offers the protagonists a way of dealing with adverse circumstances or is used to fight evil in their souls not in the afterlife, but right on this Earth. Nicholas Berdiaev defined the essence of the religious aspects of Dostoevsky's works as follows: "Dostoevsky .... was much less concerned with God than with man and his destiny, with the riddle of the spirit; he was not haunted by theology but by anthropology; he did not have to solve the divine problem as does the pagan, but the problem of mankind, which is the problem of the spiritual man, the Christian" (24).

The search for a proper relationship between man and God goes through several stages. In Dostoevsky's earlier works, religious values are taken straight from the scripture, with no attempt made to question or doubt them. These values can be traced in such characters as Lisa, heroine of *Notes from Underground*, or Sonya, in *Crime and Punishment*. Like all the other of Dostoevsky's favorite protagonists, they possess an instinctive and unshakeable faith in God, upon which they rely in order to survive through the terrible reality of everyday existence. As one might expect, they are ready to come to the rescue of those who are lacking spiritual strength and conviction. However, these two women do not actively disseminate God's truth and hope among people. They step forward only when the suffering souls turn to them for help. Clearly, at this point in his literary career, Dostoevsky thought that the individual is primarily responsible for his own actions and destiny. Only later did he begin to pursue the notion that every person is responsible not only for himself but for everyone else as well.

The evolution of this concept begins with *Notes from Underground*. Lisa is introduced only as a contrast to a cynical and godless protagonist. She is never given a chance to make a turnaround in his life. For Raskol'nikov, in *Crime and Punishment*, it is Sonya who helps him in a radical transformation of his view of himself and his place in the world. Still, in the novel Sonya's basic function is to serve as a symbol of goodness and unwavering faith and love of God. *The Idiot* is the first novel where the hero, Prince Myshkin, consciously understands his responsibility towards his fellow man. This Dostoevsky hero incessantly strives to positively affect the spiritual side of the people with whom he happens to come into contact. However, his efforts are severely undercut by the fact that he acts alone, and his successes cannot be anything but few. In addition, this protagonist, like those before him, takes the gospel literally. His doubts do not come from a critical analysis of the philosophy behind God's message. At most, he is unsure of his personal ability to deliver it. For the reading public with a critical mind, neither such a hero nor his preachings can be either convincing, or acceptable. Besides, in the novel, Prince Myshkin's personality and mode of behavior are so odd that they often take people aback and make them reluctant to even consider his message and its ramifications. Therefore, this character cannot be an effective standardbearer for Christ.

From this point of view, *The Brothers Karamazov* is a qualitative leap forward. In this novel, an attempt is made to broaden the scope of religious ideas and to suggest the ways of their advancement into society. In order to achieve his objective, the writer no longer deals with a specific incident or the idiosyncrasies of a particular person. Instead, in such chapters as "The Rebellion" and "The Grand Inquisitor" the argument is conducted on a philosophical level. Yet, it is not a scholastic discourse. The discussion is geared toward the doubts which the faithful have to confront when circumstances put to test their Christian belief. In *The Brothers Karamazov*, Dostoevsky introduces two main protagonists, the brothers Aleksej and Ivan, whose religious values are diametrically opposite. While sharing certain common premises, they come to different conclusions which in turn determine their course of action.

Aleksij and Ivan agree that acknowledgement of God's existence cannot be automatically equated with obedient acceptance of his world and people. Both society and its individual members are imperfect and often evil. The search for perfection is constantly restrained or made impossible by cruel reality. This leads to a recognition that the ideals of Christianity, which are based on free will, clash with pragmatic considerations which the survival instinct imposes on the majority of people.

In order to prevail in an intellectual argument, Ivan and Aleksej Karamazov can no longer rely exclusively on inborn faith and must go beyond

convenient one-dimensional religious dogmas. Rather they have to develop their religious views through a torturous process of self-examination, in which they constantly put to test the most important tenets of their faith. The one who successfully overcomes self-doubt in the validity of the message of Christ ends up with an invigorated belief in the correctness of his initial position and attains the necessary strength of conviction. This strength is then used to contribute to the improvement of the human condition. So important is this concept of following Christ in healing the world's ills that Aleksej's final words in the novel are: "How good life is when you do something good and rightful!" (776). It is in helping others that this man finds the true meaning of faith and a reason for living. Since sacred ideals do not tolerate compromise, the opponent is bound to suffer a shattering defeat.

In *The Brothers Karamazov*, Ivan suggests an interesting observation regarding God and man. Both share, at least in the light of modern moral norms, a duality of nature. This means that not only man, but God as well, has good and bad, perfection and imperfection intertwined in his character. On the one hand Ivan says: "I accept God, not only willingly, but moreover I also accept his wisdom and his purpose, which are completely unknown to us; I believe in order, in the meaning of life, I believe in the eternal harmony . . . I believe in the Word for whom the universe is yearning " (235). On the other hand, Ivan's God is indifferent and cruel by allowing suffering and injustice in the world which he has created. Therefore, depending on the point of view, God and the religious and moral values inspired in man by the acceptance of his existence can be either attractive or repulsive for the believer. In the novel, the difference in approach towards God chosen by each of the heroes results in important consequences. The one with a positive outlook utilizes his life to the utmost by trying to make the world a better place. The other, who has no faith in either God's kindness or in the ability of mankind to improve its ways, is destined to become a bitter and dispirited bystander.

Nevertheless, there is an important parallel between the two brothers. As Aleksej is the best approximation of Dostoevsky's view of the man of the future, Ivan is the highest achievement in the evolution of negative protagonists. They begin with the Underground Man, who has an uncontrollable rage and almost insane unacceptance of the society at large. Raskol'nikov is the first protagonist who defends his claim of superiority over society on an intellectual rather than an emotional level. Then there is the failure of Versilov, from *A Raw Youth*, to overcome—with the help of his high ideals—his inborn destructive tendencies. Finally, Ivan develops his own set of moral criteria which empower him to judge not just mere mortals but also God. Since both positive and negative protagonists have

been equally affected by the respective evolutionary processes, the argument between the two brothers is conducted on a level plane.

If anything, Ivan surpasses his opponent intellectually. He is also very compassionate, daring, and at first glance convincing in his accusations against God. However, he is the one who is defeated, because in the final analysis it becomes clear that his argument is based on a distorted understanding of Christianity. For Ivan, the injustice and cruelty which he sees everywhere is indisputable proof that God is uncaring and that his law is both hypocritical and meaningless. From this Ivan concludes that God, who allows terrible crimes to happen even against utterly defenseless creatures, can be neither venerated, loved, nor forgiven. God is as guilty as the actual perpetrators of the crimes, who also can be neither forgiven nor loved. Ivan's position is irreconcilable: "I'd rather remain with my . . . unquenched indignation, *even if I am wrong*. Besides, they have put too high a price on harmony; we can't afford the price of admission . . . It's not that I don't accept God, Alyosha, I just most respectfully return him my ticket" (245).

Thus, Ivan makes a seemingly valid point, saying that the message of universal love is erroneous, and claims the right to reject it. As far as people are concerned, Ivan despises them for what he sees as their inability to think for themselves. Instead of making a free choice between right and wrong, and good and evil, the ordinary man by and large concerns himself with material possessions and satisfaction of the most primitive personal needs. No wonder his Great Inquisitor reproaches Christ with the words: "You object that man does not live by bread alone, but do you know that in the name of this very earthly bread, the spirit of the earth will rise against you and fight with you and defeat you?" (252-3).

People sheepishly become slaves to any master who is willing to provide them with a sense of direction and take care of their material well-being. The price of abandonment of freedom is blind obedience and participation in any injustice that such a master, be as it may a tyrant or a vengeful God, deems necessary or desirable. It may be the creation of a harmonious world for some by trampling upon the innocent and meek. Or it may also be the spiritual death of mankind as contemplated by the self-assured Grand Inquisitor, when he threatens Christ by saying: "Tomorrow I shall condemn you and burn you at the stake as the most evil of heretics, and the very people who today kissed your feet, tomorrow, at a nod from me, will rush to heap the coals up around your stake" (250).

It is difficult for any thinking individual, Aleksej included, to dismiss these arguments as simple heresy. An inborn faith in God can no longer shield a positive protagonist from the necessity to struggle in his search for an answer. He tries to find it in the knowledge acquired in the course

of his religious studies. However, like his brother, Aleksej is constantly bothered by and unwilling to accept the huge gap that exists between the ideals of future heavenly happiness and the rude reality which surrounds him. He eventually develops the understanding that to a great extent, life is wrought with problems and sufferings because people fail to come together in a struggle for spiritual perfection. Once such union is achieved, it would positively affect all the aspects of everyday life. However, while in recognition of the problem Aleksej is no less concerned and indignant than Ivan, the conclusions made by Aleksej are quite different. He believes that nobody is beyond salvation and that the world can and should be improved. Aleksej is firm in his conviction that the true meaning of love towards people is more than just the verbal compassion, which is so characteristic of Ivan. Rather it means accepting personal responsibility and taking determined action designed to improve the life of every man. As a result, where Ivan sees the end of the road, Aleksej sees an opportunity. If for Ivan the sufferings of innocent children provide the final proof that mankind has been plunged into an abyss, for his brother the children symbolize the hope and youth of the world. In them Aleksej sees not defenseless creatures, but an uncontaminated purity of soul. They are unaware of greed, corruption, egotism, and cynicism. This should make it possible for Aleksej and other like-minded people to bring the children together and use them as a precursor in the formation of a new generation which would be attuned to the spirit rather than the letter of the word of Christ.

It is important to emphasize that the idea that children are the carriers of hope and the best human qualities can be found in other of Dostoevsky's novels. In *The Idiot*, Prince Myshkin also turns to children when he wants to bring forth his message of love. However, in this instance, he is concerned with making life better for only one particular person. As for Aleksej, he calls on children to be his disciples. His objective is to bring about the spiritual conversion of the ever growing number of people, especially the young, until the entire world is set free from vice and the prejudices of previous generations. Thus, Dostoevsky's hero appends a universal significance to a previously narrowly defined idea.

Both brothers freely exercise their right to choose sides in their relationship with God. However, as Dostoevsky makes clear, freedom of choice may or may not lead to the liberation of the human spirit. For instance, Aleksej reaps full advantages from his union with God. For him, freedom is an opportunity to act, help, and make an effort designed to create the world anew. This character is a challenge to Ivan's idea that the birth of man in God's image is nothing more than a physical resemblance between a parent and his offspring. For man, likeness with God presumes also an

ability, need, and duty to become a creator in his own right. Of course, this right is linked with understanding and accepting responsibility for everything that a man-creator does or does not do. Unlike Friedrich Nietzsche, who proclaimed that "God is dead" (6) and resolved all moral dilemmas by putting his Superman beyond the realm of good and evil, Dostoevsky does not believe that God and man are two separate and opposing entities. In Aleksej, Dostoevsky portrays a prototype of a man-creator, who becomes an integral and inseparable part of God. This protagonist is true to the message of Christ and uses it as a practical guide in his work for the people and with the people.

As for Ivan, he sees himself as a rebel who always stands alone and above the crowd. He understands the idea of freedom in its most anarchical and destructive form, when all is permissible. This hero, who is not afraid of challenging God and blames him for the cruelty in the world, refuses to be part of a solution. It never occurs to Ivan that he has the freedom to work towards making life fulfilling. Instead, tortured by his sensitive conscience, he yearns for a divine intervention which would right all wrongs and bring about a world sparkling with love and happiness. This reliance on somebody else to lead and create is equivalent to the deliberate surrender of his own right to be a doer rather than a follower. Such a position makes him no different from the very people whom he contemptuously brands as slaves.

Through his protagonists, Dostoevsky reminds his readers that Christ and his Church are warriors fighting with evil forces for the souls of people. In this struggle they need allies, like Aleksej, who make victories both large and small possible. Of course, the majority of people is simply biding its time, waiting for good to prevail. This passivism is understandable because not everyone knows the road to the Promised Land. Ordinary people just want to follow anyone who can show the way. It is of them the Great Inquisitor says: "They will marvel at us, and look upon us as gods, because we, standing at their head, have agreed to suffer freedom and to rule over them - so terrible will it become for them in the end to be free" (253). From this crowd one could hardly ask for more. But from someone who is endowed with a compassionate heart, great intellectual capacity, and energy, God and men have the right to expect more. Who else will lead and become involved? Aleksej successfully carries out his mission, and his life is a meaningful and joyful experience. Ivan fails to use his potential and is constantly haunted by a sense of guilt.

In Dostoevsky's novels, the idea of freedom is closely connected with the concept of Christian love and forgiveness. This is a litmus test for any man or woman, poor or rich. It puts utmost importance on the personal attitude towards a fellow man. It is this concept which truly separates

Dostoevsky's positive protagonists from the negative ones and determines their mindset and behavior. All those who at one point or another distance themselves from the rest of the people, as for instance, Raskol'nikov and Svidrigailov in *Crime and Punishment*, Stavrogin in *The Possessed*, or Ivan Karamazov, do not comprehend the true meaning of love and assume the right to pronounce their judgement on others and carry it out. All of them would have followed Zarathustra in saying: "Full is the earth of the superfluous; marred is life by the many-too-many" (Nietzsche, 46). This is why Raskol'nikov decides to rid the world of the pawn broker, whom he sees as a "parasite." Lack of love on Ivan Karamazov's part keeps him from preventing the murder of his father. The understanding of love and forgiveness by these personages is handicapped by their tendency to look at the worst in a man and show disbelief in his ability to mend his ways. This allows them to judge him by their own laws. What Dostoevsky is saying through his best protagonists is that one individual must not condemn another for his past sins. This is the domain of God. There are times in the life of every sinner when he looks upon himself with apprehension. As Temira Pachmuss pointed out: "since every man is made in the image of God, the striving for spiritual self-perfection remains his secret ideal, however much he may succumb to vice and depravity" (178). People must seek spiritual kinship with each other and search for the best in the human soul. Forgiveness does not mean absolution of sins. Rather it is a willingness to give the sinner another chance to take the right road in life, to allow him to begin with a clean slate.

Equally, Christian love is not a mindless ritual of embracing and kissing every man in sight, as imagined by Ivan Karamazov. Rather it is an ability to see in man the highest achievement of God in the process of creation. Dostoevsky's positive protagonists experience a sense of joy when someone performs a good deed, and suffer when a man does not live up to his full potential or sinks to the low depths of human behavior. Again and again they ask themselves how they can be of help and express their compassion. As for the negative protagonists, they are preoccupied only with consequences of someone's behavior. They never try to understand the root causes behind the actions of an individual and are not concerned with the perdition of human spirit and soul. Protagonists like Stavrogin, Svidrigailov, or Ivan Karamazov do not have the gift of love and have nothing to offer to their neighbors in need. Likewise, by not believing in love they are incapable of accepting this gift from someone else when they find themselves depressed and helpless in the lonely world in which they live. Without purpose and hope in life, these individuals are doomed to fail and to confirm their moral defeat either by the act of suicide or by falling into deep psychological and intellectual crises.

Of course, the duality of man's nature makes absolute perfection unattainable. The good will always be accompanied by the bad. However, it does not mean that evil must go unchallenged and unpunished. Dostoevsky's best protagonists are actively involved in this never ending struggle. In doing so, they strive for a close spiritual relationship not only with God but also with all other people. Their true calling in life lies in lending a man in need their trust and a helping hand, thus giving tangible meaning to the Christian concepts of brotherly love and forgiveness.

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World War II in the Poetic Works of Aleksandr Tvardovskii

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The Soviet government was especially active and successful in using the arts as an adjunct weapon during World War II. Even after the end of hostilities, the arts continued to be enlisted to foster the image of the war as a noble defense against evil invaders. This policy nurtured xenophobia among the Soviet people and made it possible to reduce foreign contacts during the cold war, while cooperative Soviet artists produced countless war movies, war novels, war monuments, and the like until the end of the era.

One of the most important Soviet wartime literary works is the narrative poem 'Vasilii Terkin," written by the well-known poet Aleksandr Tvardovskii (1910-1971). Tvardovskii was a farm boy from the Smolensk area who with tremendous effort had made a name for himself in literature and moved to Moscow. Until the beginning of the war, his major literary theme had been the events surrounding the collectivization of the countryside. At the beginning of the hostilities, preceding World War II, he was drafted, along with many other writers, as a correspondent. He spent the greater part of six years near the front, first in Poland and Finland, and on the Western front.

During those years Tvardovskii was very productive. In addition to producing patriotic works for the newspapers, he wrote two major verse narratives. He often returned to the theme of the war also in his later writing, but gradually his point of view changed as he came to understand the real nature of his society. Tvardovskii's changing attitude to World War II can be discerned by examining six of his most famous works: the three long verse narratives "*Vasilii Terkin*" ["Vasilii Terkin"] (1942-45), "*Terkin na tom svete*" ["Terkin in the Beyond"] (1954-63), and "*Po pravu pamiati*" ["By Right of Memory"] (1969), and three shorter lyrics, "*Dve strochki*" ["Two Lines"] "*Ia ubit podo Rzhevom*" ["I Was Killed at Rzhev"] (1946) and "*Ia znaiu*" ["I Know"] (1960).

"*Vasilii Terkin*" has an unusual origin. At the beginning of the Finnish Winter War in November, 1939, Tvardovskii joined the staff of the newspaper *Na strazhe rodinv* [Guardina the Fatherland] published for the soldiers on the Karelian front. The staff of writers and artists, led by Nikolai Tik-