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Edited by George Pattison and Diane Oenning Thompson

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Introduction: Reading Dostoevsky religiously

George Pattison and Diane Oenning Thompson

Dostoevsky has emerged as the most provocative writer in Russian literature, the one who speaks most to the modern human condition. His influence on world literature has been immense. Artists working in other media have found inspiration in Dostoevsky for their own translations of his works into opera, drama, film and the graphic arts. He has stimulated writers and thinkers of the most diverse persuasions and callings (philosophers, theologians, marxists, conservatives, psychologists, literary critics). Books, articles, critical debates, comments, allusions abound. His themes of crime, urban alienation, family breakdown, psychic derangement, the decline of religious faith, as well as his penetrating psychological insight and prophetic grasp of the murderous potential of modern totalitarian ideologies and of the social and spiritual chaos spawned by unrestrained capitalism, profoundly resonate with the twentieth century. Other nineteenth-century writers took up these themes; few matched Dostoevsky's psychological acumen, none his ideological prescience.

But what is above all peculiar to Dostoevsky is his genius for eliciting strong pro or contra responses, for tempting us to make global, essentially religious statements. Dostoevsky had a gift, virtually unique among modern writers, for making Christianity dynamic, for subtly forcing the ideological challenges of the modern age to interact dialogically with his Christian vision and for embodying this vision in psychologically compelling characters. To 'read Dostoevsky religiously', then, would mean to engage with this dialogue which runs through his entire post-Siberian oeuvre. This makes those who would rather bypass the religious issues uneasy; they are more comfortable discussing the psychology of his characters and the ideas debated in his fiction. But, given the prominence of biblical motifs and of references to doctrinal, liturgical and devotional elements in

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the Christian tradition, it is almost impossible *not* to read Dostoevsky religiously. His treatment of the human personality is at once modern – he was a master at conveying the very feel of consciousness, with its acute self-awareness, its tensions between conflicting thoughts, impulses and desires – and biblical, in that he translated psychological complexity into a struggle between good and evil in the human soul. Eric Auerbach attributed Dostoevsky's powerful impact in Europe to the peculiar nature of Russian realism which was based on old Christian realism, complicated by the Russians' 'coming to terms with European civilization', ever vacillating between categorical acceptance and rejection.¹ A brief historical survey may clarify the peculiar concatenation of social and cultural forces which engendered these extreme oscillations and nurtured and stimulated Dostoevsky's singular artistic vision.

THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Until the eighteenth century, Russian literature was almost exclusively Christian in form and content (hagiographies, sermons, liturgical works, spiritual verses, religious folk verse). Even the chronicles, heroic folk songs and patriotic epics (*byliny*), though not sacred genres *per se*, served to promote the pre-eminence of Christianity. For example, *The Lay of Igor's Campaign*, the literary masterpiece of medieval Russia, ends with a paen to the princes 'who fight for the Christians against the infidel hosts'. The *byliny* on *Il'ya of Murom* typically extol those 'mighty heroes in Holy Russia' who 'defend the Christian faith'. However, Peter the Great (1672–1725) saw his princely role in quite a different light. His aim was to turn Russia into a great power on an equal footing with the major powers of Western Europe. In pursuance of this goal, Peter adopted the ideology of enlightened absolutism and by sheer force of will drove Russia on a course of rapid modernisation. All institutions were absorbed into the bureaucratic machinery and routine of the state. The Church was deprived of its autonomy and made subordinate to the state, the clergy became, in Georges Florovsky's words 'state servitors'. As Florovsky says, what was most revolutionary in Peter's reforms was not the Westernisation or modernisation of Russia but its secularisation.² For along with the modernisation of the state according to Western models, came a massive influx of Western ideas which at that time were steeped in the values of the Enlight-

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enment. The Enlighteners, inspired by the growth in scientific knowledge, placed their faith in reason, rejected traditional authority and revelation, and were largely anti-religious, empiricist, naturalist and materialist. The impact of these ideas in Russia resulted in the bifurcation of Russian society into two different, mutually uncomprehending nations: a small, educated, Westernised elite and the enormous mass of peasant believers who – at least until the mid-eighteenth century – resided in a patriarchal world, shaped by centuries of Orthodoxy and serfdom and scarcely touched by Western influences.

The Petrine reforms also introduced Western cultural forms (primarily French) into Russia on a large scale so that, by the end of the eighteenth century, Russian literature, which was mainly fashioned on French Neoclassicism and the West European baroque, had become almost totally Europeanised and secularised. New secular forms and themes (nature, love lyrics) appeared, and classical allusions, sometimes implying a humanist ideal, became common. Not that Christian themes had disappeared; we have only to recall the devotional odes of Lomonosov and various lyrics of Derzhavin and Zhukovsky to be reminded that religious faith was still the norm. But by the late eighteenth century expressions of Christian piety were mostly cast in secular, literary forms (the lyric, ode, epic, drama, short story and, in the nineteenth century, the novel), and the sacred genres had virtually disappeared from mainstream literature. When, almost a century later, Dostoevsky wrote a saint's life complete with sermons ('The Russian Monk'), into which he poured his most cherished beliefs, he did not publish it as a separate work but boldly incorporated it into a novel (*The Brothers Karamazov*). This was very risky in that the novel, pre-eminently a secular form, threatens to relativise the religious content. 'The Russian Monk' remains, artistically and ideologically, the most controversial part of the great novel. But then, Dostoevsky himself said he wrote Zosima's discourses only 'for the few' (30,105).

The early nineteenth century saw a religious revival largely stimulated by the new secular conditions and the challenge they posed to the religious heritage. The tension between Western European ideas, from the Enlightenment to utopian socialism, and the native religious tradition gave powerful stimulus to a period of extraordinary creativity in literature. After the Napoleonic invasion of 1812, Russian writers broke with French Neoclassicism, and

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turned for inspiration to the new works of the German and English Romantics as well as to native folklore and the literature of pre-Petrine Russia. The stylistic rules of Neoclassicism had come to seem constraining, artificial, lacking those expressive possibilities which were called for by the new sensibility of Romanticism and, subsequently, realism. The search for new forms and modes of expression became entangled with the question of nationalism as Russian writers sought to discern what was unique about Russia, what was its particular national character. Pushkin entered this debate in an essay of 1822 in which he defined Orthodoxy as the distinctive feature of the Russian national character: ‘the Greek creed, different from all others, gives us our particular national character’.³ However, from the late 1830s, initially under the influence of Russia’s first prominent radical critic, Vissarion Belinsky, Russian literary criticism was dominated by the revolutionary democrats who were atheist, anti-religious and materialist. The intelligentsia became progressively polarised between those who urged the adoption of Western ideas as a solution to Russia’s problems and those who identified with the people’s faith and native traditions, a split which is reflected in Dostoevsky’s depictions of his contemporary society and which is still evident today. Dostoevsky is a pivotal figure who gave his allegiance to Christianity and at the same time registered with acute sensitivity the pressures bearing down on it from the imminent modern age.

Belinsky’s ideological progeny (N. G. Chernyshevsky, N. A. Dobrolyubov, D. I. Pisarev) of the 1860s, the high point of radical criticism, adopted a utilitarian approach according to which works were judged by their usefulness in the political struggle. Art was treated as a social document, its purpose, to portray objective reality from a socially critical perspective. These ideas were later to have a marked influence on Lenin, a lifelong admirer of Chernyshevsky, and in 1934 hardened into the baleful Communist Party dogma of Socialist Realism. Fortunately the great nineteenth-century writers of the post-Pushkin period (Gogol, Tyutchev, Lermontov, Turgenev, Leskov, Tolstoy, Chekhov) went their own way, paying scant heed to the radicals’ call for socio-political relevance, and in the process they created one of the world’s great literatures. But it was Dostoevsky who had the most acute ear for the historical implications of the radicals’ utopian programmes. His remarkable prescience finds, perhaps, its most succinct expression in *The Brothers Karamazov*.

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Towards the end of Ivan Karamazov's nightmare conversation with the devil, the key idea which led to the parricide is finally revealed. Appropriately, it comes from the mouth of the devil, as he taunts Ivan by quoting his most recent work on the imminent advent of a new age which will place its faith in the triumph of science:

The new people [the radicals of Ivan's generation] propose to destroy everything < . . . > Stupid people, they didn't ask me! < . . . > one only needs to destroy in mankind the idea of God < . . . > Once humanity to a man renounces God < . . . > all the former morality will fall away and everything new will begin! < . . . > man will conquer nature without limits by his will and science. (15,83)

Indeed, Dostoevsky's worst forebodings about obliterating 'the idea of God' and constructing society on 'science' were realised in the Soviet period. For the Communist Party went much farther than Peter the Great: its aim was the total obliteration of religion, the total secularisation of Soviet life. The Soviet rulers, determined to impose their militantly atheistic ideology of Marxism–Leninism on the religiously diverse lands over which they ruled, engaged in ruthless, wide-scale attempts to expunge religion (including Judaism, Islam and others) from Soviet life. The Orthodox Church, to which the majority belonged, was (especially after 1929) subjected to wholesale persecution. Many priests were imprisoned, tortured or murdered, numerous churches were looted, closed or razed, religious education was abolished, seminaries were closed, and religious 'propaganda' was prohibited.⁴ Those who openly held to their faith were subjected to ridicule, ostracism or worse. It became totally taboo to discuss religious topics in literature and historiography. At the same time, the State, in promoting its creed of atheism, borrowed the symbols and iconography of Christianity and transformed them into its own image.⁵ The anti-religious campaign extended to a philistine orthographical censorship; initial capitals designating divine persons were reduced to small-case letters in all publications, including reissues of pre-1917 texts. (Unfortunately, some Western critics citing Soviet editions perpetuate this censorship). The Church finally capitulated and agreed to be 'legalised' by the regime. During the Second World War, Stalin, in a cynical effort to drum up patriotism, relented. The Church was allowed to hold services, rebuild its administrative structure and open a few theological schools. During 1959–64, however, these gains were severely curtailed. Khrushchev renewed the persecution of the Church,

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though more covertly by corrupting it from within. KGB operatives were placed to oversee Church affairs and priests were to report any confessions deemed anti-Soviet. Other faiths also suffered suppression. The Brezhnev era was one of stagnation in all areas of national life. The turning point came in 1988 when, for the first time, a Soviet leader of state, Mikhail Gorbachev, shared a national platform with the Patriarch in celebration of the Millennium of Christianity in Russia. Three years later the atheist state collapsed. This historical situation is reflected in the history of Dostoevsky criticism.

THE VICISSITUDES OF DOSTOEVSKY CRITICISM

Dostoevsky lived at a time when the Christian tradition was far more familiar than it is today, and in a society which shared a common Christian culture. But even then he keenly felt its encroaching erosion. In his notebooks for *The Brothers Karamazov*, there is a sketch for a conversation in which Miusov, Ivan and Fyodor Karamazov mangle biblical quotations, after which Dostoevsky laments: 'No one knows the Gospels', and polemically proceeds to correct his fictional characters' errors (15,206). Nevertheless, during the last decade of his life, he was increasingly hailed as a spiritual guide and prophet. Ordinary readers saw him as a 'teacher of life' and turned to him for consolation, advice and solutions to their dilemmas. While Dostoevsky's works attracted considerable favourable attention in his lifetime, negative responses to his Christianity were occasionally voiced and they came from both ends of the ideological spectrum. Shortly after Dostoevsky's death in 1881, the radical atheist critic M. A. Antonovich published an article on *The Brothers Karamazov* with the title 'A Mystic-Ascetic Novel' in which he condemned it as a 'reactionary' work and perversely identified the Grand Inquisitor's views with those of Dostoevsky. Another critic on the left, N. K. Mikhailovsky, in an article of 1883, pronounced Dostoevsky a 'cruel talent'. Maxim Gorky styled him an 'evil genius' and in 1913 opposed the staging of *The Devils* by the Moscow Arts Theatre. On the conservative side, Dostoevsky was upbraided for being insufficiently Orthodox. The writer Konstantin Leontiev, who died a monk in 1891, took strong exception to Dostoevsky's 'made up' depictions of monastic life and 'rosy' Christianity. More pertinently, Leontiev found his Christianity heretical because he never abandoned the socialist utopian promise of paradise on earth rather

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than in heaven. Indeed, many members of the Church hierarchy have, with some reason, regarded his Christianity with uneasiness, if not suspicion. Dostoevsky was a confessed Orthodox Christian, but his relationship with official Orthodoxy remains unclear since, unlike some of his contemporaries, notably Tolstoy and Turgenev, he was very private about his own spiritual experience and not given to public personal confessions. Moreover, although his art was nourished by the Orthodox tradition, it also bears significant traces of German Pietism and Protestantism.⁶ However, Dostoevsky's literary reputation continued to grow. From his death until 1917 a number of prominent writers, among them, D. S. Merezhkovsky, V. V. Rozanov, A. L. Volynsky, V. L. Komarovich, Viacheslav Ivanov and the religious philosopher Vladimir Soloviev illuminatingly explored the Christian themes in his works.

If negative criticism of Dostoevsky's Christianity did not begin with the Soviet period, at least before 1917 it benignly co-existed with sympathetic evaluations. After the Bolshevik Revolution, however, it began to matter that Lenin, who was held up as the infallible judge in all artistic and ideological matters, had called Dostoevsky 'ultra-repulsive'. He was reported to have pronounced Dostoevsky's writings to be 'trash' and singled out *The Devils* and *The Brothers Karamazov* (of which he read no further than the early monastery scenes) as 'putrid works'.⁷ Nevertheless, the 1920s and early 1930s saw the publication of important textological, editorial, biographical and literary studies (L. Grossman, A. S. Dolinin, Iu. N. Tynianov). In 1929 M. M. Bakhtin, Dostoevsky's greatest critic, published his seminal study *Problems of Dostoevsky's Creative Work* (*Problemy tvorchestva Dostoevskogo*).

The 1930s, however, marked a turn for the worse. At the First Congress of Soviet Writers in 1934, Gorky, the keynote speaker, renewed his attack on Dostoevsky, though he allowed that his 'genius was indisputable; perhaps only Shakespeare equals him in power of portrayal'.⁸ The mid 1930s to mid 1950s, was a dismal period for interpretative and speculative studies on Dostoevsky. The Soviet overseers of literature proscribed a sympathetic treatment of Dostoevsky's religious themes; if treated, they had to be accompanied by ritual denigrations of the 'cult' of Christianity, and sprinkled with quotes from Lenin or Stalin.⁹ Two important studies, V. Kirpotkin's (1946) and A. S. Dolinin's (1947), were submitted for publication, but they came under the censure of A. Zhdanov, Stalin's notorious

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spokesman for cultural affairs, and were published only after Stalin's death.

In 1955, thanks to the literary 'thaw', some favourable remarks about Dostoevsky reportedly made by Lenin came to light to the effect that he was a writer of 'true genius' who examined 'some sore spots' in Russian society.¹⁰ An official re-evaluation took place that emphasised and approved Dostoevsky's early involvement with socialist utopian ideals, his humanitarian concerns, his anti-capitalist stance and his realistic representations of the poor and oppressed, but condemned his religious philosophical views and routinely warned readers of the dangers of taking them seriously. *Notes from the House of the Dead* was extolled for its exposure of the brutal tsarist penal system. Yet, Dostoevsky's religious concerns were still taboo, to be mentioned only in the context of vilification. The works that came in for the most vehement criticism were *Notes from the Underground*, *The Devils* and *The Brothers Karamazov*. Among those who periodically attacked Dostoevsky's religious views, V. V. Ermilov was particularly vociferous, going so far as to assert that *The Brothers Karamazov* illustrates the 'amorality' of Christianity in that it shows Christ as having purchased the 'right to torment children' because 'he redeemed all men's sins.'¹¹ Nevertheless, in 1963 Bakhtin's study was reissued in a revised and expanded edition under the title *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. Bakhtin was profoundly aware of the Christian foundation of Dostoevsky's poetics, but, given the constraints of Soviet censorship and his own precarious position, could never treat it openly. Near the end of his life, he poignantly spoke of his deep regret that he was not able to write 'directly about the main questions', to do justice to what had 'tormented Dostoevsky all his life – the existence of God < . . . > I had constantly to prevaricate < . . . > to keep myself in hand. As soon as a thought came, I had to stop it.'¹²

Dostoevsky studies took a more favourable turn in the 1970s. In 1973 the first volume of the Academy Edition of Dostoevsky's complete works appeared. The late Academician G. Fridlender, in a heroic feat of editorship, saw the whole project through to its completion in 1990. This outstanding work of devoted scholarship, to which some of the best scholars in Russia contributed, suffers from one serious flaw which was not the fault of the editor and contributors; namely, they were not allowed to use Dostoevsky's capitals for divine persons. Evidently, this was one factor which

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prompted V. N. Zakharov to undertake a new complete edition in the old orthography in which Dostoevsky wrote his works.¹³ This is not just nitpicking pedantry. In 1928 Dmitry Likhachev, the distinguished Russian medievalist, in response to the ‘particularly merciless attacks on the Church’ during 1927–28, wrote a paper (‘half in jest, half seriously’) in which he mounted a spirited attack on the alphabet reform imposed by the Bolsheviks in 1918, and defended the old orthography on linguistic, historical, aesthetic and Orthodox grounds.¹⁴ He declared that the imposition of the new orthography was ‘the act of an anti-Christ power’, and a further rupturing of the Russian language from its Church Slavonic roots which, because the abolished letters were spiritually symbolic, drained Russian of some of its most Orthodox features.¹⁵ For example, he decries the loss of the common letter *iat'*, whose shape symbolises the Church with a cross on top. Within days Likhachev was arrested and sent to the notorious camp of Solovki. This paper was used as evidence against him. The loss of the old letters and the abolition of initial capitals for divine persons affect interpretations. The Grand Inquisitor’s speech is replete with capitalised pronouns for his addressee, and *iat's* as well as other old letters abound, a feature totally lost in translation. Here it becomes visible that the Grand Inquisitor is defeated even orthographically by Christ.

Given this situation in their native country, it was left to the Russian emigrés to pursue the religious dimension in Dostoevsky’s writings. Here too his works attracted an outstanding group of literary critics and religious philosophers, among them K. Mochulsky, N. Berdyaev, L. Shestov, M. Slonim, N. Trubetskoy and N. Lossky. Some read Dostoevsky perhaps too religiously, seeing him as a prophet and messenger of God to the exclusion of some of the complexities of his work. Berdyaev concluded his well-known book on Dostoevsky with what may be the most exalted tribute ever paid to a writer of fiction: ‘So great is the worth of Dostoevsky that to have produced him is by itself sufficient justification for the existence of the Russian people in the world; and he will bear witness for his countrymen at the Last Judgment of the nations.’¹⁶ Given that such a vital part of Russian life was under violent attack in their native land, it was understandable that they looked to Dostoevsky as a refuge and repository of Orthodox spirituality, as, in Berdyaev’s words, a ‘spiritual homeland’.

At present we are witnessing in Russia a great upsurge of interest

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in religion and a revival of the Orthodox Church. This has created an atmosphere favourable to religious readings. Held back for decades by Soviet censorship, Russian scholars are freely exploring the religious themes in their literature. Since the collapse of the Soviet regime, Dostoevsky studies in Russia have entered a particularly active phase. Symposia, seminars, exhibits, meetings and studies by young as well as established scholars are proliferating, among them V. E. Vetlovskaya, V. N. Zakharov, B. N. Tikhomirov, I. A. Esaulov, N. Ashimbaeva, L. I. Saraskina, to mention a few.¹⁷ The publication of previously forbidden emigré critics, thinkers and philosophers of religion as well as seminal Western works have greatly enriched debates and scholarly work within Russia.¹⁸ If just occasionally there is an exaggerated emphasis on Russian Orthodox concerns, this is only part of the process of restoring to Russia its cultural memory, of salvaging its best and of coming to terms with its worst, with those events which should be remembered but never repeated. Russia is a traumatised nation, deeply scarred by the horrific events of the twentieth century. This is not always sufficiently appreciated by those who live in stable democratic societies. We have only to imagine St Paul's Cathedral in London being turned into a museum of atheism, Notre Dame de Paris being replaced by a swimming pool, or the Vatican being closed to the public and occupied by an atheist government to gain some idea of what it must have been like for many to witness helplessly (to protest was futile or dangerous) such vandalistic desecration of their religious heritage. As the Russians search for new values, or rediscover old ones to fill the moral vacuum left by the collapse of the Soviet regime, Dostoevsky's works have acquired fresh relevance, as the contributions of Esaulov and Kantor to this volume demonstrate. This gives renewed impetus to the question of what it may mean to read Dostoevsky religiously now.

Two main tendencies can be discerned, each corresponding to the two main senses of 'religiously'. Neither is new. The first adopts a reverential attitude towards Dostoevsky's creative writings, turning them into a springboard for 'co-philosophising' or sermonising. This runs the danger of 'monologising' them, of forgetting that they are works of the imagination subject to aesthetic judgment and rhetorical analysis. However, Dostoevsky's prophetic and spiritual insights resonate beyond the concerns of aesthetics, rhetoric and literary criticism. To read him religiously in the sense of seeking spiritual