

DOSTOEVSKY
AND THE CHRISTIAN
TRADITION

EDITED BY
GEORGE PATTISON
AND
DIANE OENNING THOMPSON



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CHAPTER I

Dostoevsky and the kenotic tradition

Margaret Ziolkowski

In an often cited letter that he wrote in August 1879 to the editor Nikolai Lyubimov, Dostoevsky declared about the character of Zosima in *The Brothers Karamazov*:

He could not express himself in other language or in another spirit than that which I gave him < . . . > I took his person and figure from the Old Russian monks and prelates: together with deep humility [they had] limitless naive hopes for the future of Russia, about its moral and even political predestination. Didn't St Sergy and the metropolitans Pyotr and Aleksy really always, in this sense, have Russia in mind? (30,i,102)

Dostoevsky's remarks to a large extent echo, both in general and in particular, comments made a decade earlier by the renowned nineteenth-century historian Vasily Klyuchevsky in a review of a new edition of saints' Lives. Klyuchevsky was convinced that such writings demonstrated the tremendous role played by holy personalities in Russian history:

not only the notorious Moscow Ivans gave the state such vitality < . . . > their material creation was also served by the best moral forces of the people, in the form of Pyotr and Aleksy, Sergy, and many others. Perhaps we would look more seriously at ourselves and at our future, if we knew and appreciated better these moral forces that laboured for us in the past.¹

Dostoevsky and Klyuchevsky regarded the symbiosis between medieval Orthodoxy and princely circles bent on the unification of the Russian lands in a decidedly romantic light. The saints they both adduce in support of their rose-tinted view of the growth of Muscovite power – Pyotr, Aleksy and Sergy – were united in their commitment to the struggle waged by fourteenth-century Russian princes against Mongol occupiers, but from a purely religious standpoint they represent a curious triumvirate. The nature of this paradox and its implications for an appreciation of Dostoevsky's fictional creations Zosima and Tikhon of *The Possessed* are the major

subject of this discussion. Both characters are in many ways products of an enthusiasm for longstanding Russian monastic traditions, but their precise contours have been influenced by late nineteenth-century concerns about Russia's future shared by Dostoevsky and others.

Pyotr and Aleksy were both metropolitans of Russia and saints of the Russian Church. Pyotr died in 1326, Aleksy in 1378. During Pyotr's tenure as head of the church, the metropolitan's see was moved from the ancient city of Vladimir to nearby Moscow. The union between Pyotr and the Muscovite princes was to their mutual advantage. Both gained materially and in influence. Aleksy, too, helped to further the cause of Muscovite power, consistently supporting the princes of Moscow against their political rivals. At the same time he consolidated the ecclesiastical authority of the metropolitanate. While both Pyotr and Aleksy were recognised for their piety, their major achievements reflect a canny political sense and administrative talent. By no stretch of the imagination can either serve as a fitting symbol of Old Russian spirituality, unless that spirituality is construed in a narrowly nationalistic manner.

The best known of the trio of ecclesiastical figures mentioned by Klyuchevsky and Dostoevsky is Sergy of Radonezh, who died in 1392 and has arguably remained Russia's most popular saint. The Holy Trinity Monastery he founded in the wilderness north of Moscow is still a major site of pilgrimage. Dostoevsky himself frequently travelled to the monastery as a child, and when he returned from exile in 1859 he visited it again. The appeal exerted by Sergy for innumerable generations of Russian believers has very different roots from the admiration sometimes elicited by Metropolitans Pyotr and Aleksy. Sergy was a friend of Aleksy, but unlike his contemporary, he spent his entire life, at least according to hagiographical accounts, resisting or refusing ecclesiastical honours. Aleksy hoped Sergy would succeed him as metropolitan, but the saint declined. To accept would have meant violating the deeply held spiritual beliefs of a lifetime.

In contrast to Aleksy and Pyotr, Sergy is an outstanding representative of a dominant trend in Russian monasticism and Russian spirituality in general. In his book *The Russian Religious Mind*, George Fedotov defines this trend as kenotic, that is, imitative of Christ's extraordinary humility. The notion of kenosis is based on a statement made about the incarnation of Christ by Paul in Philippians

2:6–8: ‘His state was divine, yet he did not cling to his equality with God but emptied himself (*ekenosen*) to assume the condition of a slave, and became as men are; and being as all men are, he was humbler yet, even to accepting death, death on a cross’ (Jerusalem Bible). In speaking of the influence of the act described by Paul on the Russian monastic tradition, it is important to distinguish between the concerns of modern kenosis theology and the kenotic stance embraced by many Russian monks from the eleventh to the nineteenth century. Especially in the nineteenth century a number of European theologians sought to define the extent to which Paul’s statement may suggest Christ’s renunciation of his divine nature. In contrast to traditional patristic exegesis, which viewed this text as ‘a scriptural proof of the divinity of Christ, of his real and complete humanity, and of the unity of His Person’, kenotic theories of the incarnation question the simultaneity of Christ’s divinity and humanity.² Such concerns play no role in the medieval Russian kenotic tradition, perhaps – at the risk of sounding condescending – because of what the theologian Georges Florovsky called ‘Russia’s ancient, enduring, and centuries long intellectual silence’, by which he meant in part its often superficial attention to exegetical questions.³ The theological issues that might be raised by the second Letter to the Philippians seem to have eluded Russian monks. Instead, they were attracted to the potential model for spiritual behaviour that Paul suggested, namely, unceasing self-humiliation as a means of transcendence, and they took to heart the apostle’s directive in Philippians 2:3–5:

There must be no competition among you, no conceit; but everybody is to be self-effacing. Always consider the other person to be better than yourself, so that nobody thinks of his own interests first but everybody thinks of other people’s interests instead. In your minds you must be the same as Christ Jesus.

The earliest monastic exemplar of the Russian kenotic tradition was the eleventh-century abbot of the Kievan Cave Monastery, Feodosy of Pechersk, whose popular *Life* was one of the seminal works of Russian hagiography. In his *Life*, the kenotic ideal finds full expression both ideologically and pragmatically. The author of the *Life* declares of his subject: ‘he possessed true humility and great meekness, for in this he imitated Christ, the true God, who said: “Learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart” (Matthew 11:29). Contemplating such humility, he therefore humbled himself and considered himself the last of all.’⁴ As represented in the *Life*,

Feodosy's quest for humility is all-encompassing, affecting his dress (his ragged clothing causes him on occasion to be mistaken for a beggar), his activities (even as a child, he enjoys menial tasks inappropriate to his social background) and his attitudes (he happily endures ridicule and resists honourific recognition).

In the context of previous hagiographical tradition, neither Feodosy's humility nor its often stereotyped expression is original. What distinguishes Feodosy's saintly persona and becomes the hallmark of many later accounts of Russian monks is the centrality of the kenotic ideal. This is very apparent, for example, in the *Life of Sergy*, in which the saint, dressed once again in tattered clothing, performing chores others disdain, repeatedly tries to subordinate all other considerations to a vision of self-humiliation. He at first refuses to become abbot of the monastery he has founded, inviting the reproach by his bishop that he has acquired all virtues except obedience. As I have mentioned, however, in a typically kenotic act of renunciation Sergy does succeed in avoiding the honour of being installed as metropolitan.

The kenotic model by no means dominated medieval Russian monasticism. From the earliest period of Russian Christianity, and especially from the fifteenth century on, an alternative approach existed that tended to privilege ascetic demonstrations over idiosyncratic expressions of self-effacement, and ritualistic subordination to communal rule over individualised commitment to humility. A devotion to kenoticism persisted, however, and in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was exhibited in both the statements and actions of monks like Tikhon of Zadonsk, a contemporary of Catherine the Great and the primary model for Dostoevsky's Tikhon, as well as one of the models for his Zosima, and the three great elders of the monastery of Optina Pustyn', the last of whom, Amvrosy, was visited by Dostoevsky and had a profound impact on the genesis of Zosima's character. Tikhon's famous response to the nobleman who angrily slapped him when the retired bishop dared to remonstrate with him about his mistreatment of his serfs is a classic demonstration of extraordinary humility; Tikhon fell at the nobleman's feet and begged his forgiveness for 'having led him into such a temptation'.⁵ Tikhon's writings too are filled with an emphasis on humility, as, for example, in his request in one of the short prayers he produced, 'Give me eyes to see thy humility and to imitate it.'⁶ Similarly, the elder Amvrosy's contention that 'we must humble

ourselves before everyone considering ourselves the worst of all' is a quintessentially self-deprecating remark.⁷

The kenotic model available to Dostoevsky had, in the course of several centuries, acquired a number of reasonably well defined traits, some of which developed logically from the notion of self-humiliation, like the avoidance of ecclesiastical honours and a reluctance to flaunt one's spiritual authority. Other qualities, although not inherently related to kenosis, had often come to be associated with kenotic saints. Unlike Feodosy of Pechersk, Sergy of Radonezh appears to have enjoyed a number of mystical experiences, and from Sergy on, a mystical bent often characterised Russian kenotics; this is certainly true of his nineteenth-century spiritual descendants. Perhaps related to this mystical tendency is a phenomenal insight into human psychology that may border on clairvoyance. Such understanding also does not stem organically from an emphasis on humility, but seems implicitly to derive from the spiritual awareness attained through adherence to kenotic thinking. A number of these conventional qualities are exploited by Dostoevsky in his portraits of Tikhon and Zosima.

As a character, Tikhon is much less fully developed than Zosima and plays a less central role in the novel in which he figures. Zosima comes equipped with an entire biography and philosophy of existence, both of which exhibit many kenotic features. Tikhon appears in only one episode in *The Possessed* and we gain an impression of his character largely through his reactions to Stavrogin and this moral monster's ugly confession; the systematic delineation found with Zosima is lacking here. Yet Dostoevsky clearly viewed Tikhon as no less an exemplar of a specific spiritual type than he later did Zosima. While working on *The Possessed*, he wrote to the publicist Mikhail Katkov: 'For the first time < . . . > I want to touch upon one category of characters, still little touched by literature. As the ideal of such a character I am taking Tikhon of Zadonsk' (29,i,142).

Dostoevsky's Tikhon has many points of similarity with his historical model. Both are retired bishops who do not enjoy the confidence and support of their abbots and some of their fellow monks because of what is perceived as their spiritual laxity. Both Tikhons are noteworthy for the comparative intellectual broadmindedness that distinguishes them from their conservative fellows. For example, Tikhon of Zadonsk occasionally engaged in discussions of military operations with the noblemen who visited him, while

Dostoevsky's Tikhon is even more unconventional, having in his possession a book on the last war and a map on which he traces its major campaigns.

In his encounter with Stavrogin, Tikhon's essentially kenotic spirit is communicated through occasional explicit remarks, certain oddities in his behaviour, and his awesome insight into Stavrogin's twisted motivations. When Stavrogin demands to know whether Tikhon's faith is capable of moving mountains, the prelate replies, lowering his eyes: 'God will command, and I will move it' (11,10). Such insistence on the total dependence of one's own spiritual achievements on God is typical of kenotics. Later Tikhon unintentionally provokes Stavrogin's irritation by telling him that he will forgive Stavrogin if Stavrogin forgives him: 'For what? What have you done to me? Ah, yes, that's a monastic formula, isn't it?' (11,26). Stavrogin errs in condemning Tikhon's request as empty rhetoric; the spirit of humility evidenced by these words is the wellspring of Tikhon's existence. Ironically, this is borne out by the ways in which Dostoevsky's Tikhon most departs from his historical model, namely, in touches of eccentric behaviour that underscore his kenoticism – odd smiles, bashful looks and an occasional halting manner of speech. Such peculiarities recall the type of the holy fool, which in its radical emphasis on self-humiliation as the path to spiritual salvation overlaps to a great extent with the type of the kenotic monk; historically many kenotic monks did exhibit patterns of behaviour also associated with holy fools. In the case of Dostoevsky's Tikhon, his slight air of mental incompetence throws into relief his startling insight, the insight that so angers and frightens Stavrogin and elicits his bitter but astute parting comment: 'Damned psychologist' (11,30).

With Zosima, we are permitted a glimpse into the character's spiritual development, as well as extended exposure to his theology and ethics. Unlike the traditional account of a saint's life, Zosima's story is not presented in strict chronological order in *The Brothers Karamazov*. However, the elder's autobiographical reminiscences contain a number of realisations of hagiographical topoi, some of which are connected with pivotal moments in his biography. One of these involves his brother Markel, a sometime agnostic who immediately before his premature death is transformed into an iconic embodiment of exultant religiosity, the tenor of which is profoundly kenotic. Markel's transformation prefigures that of Zosima. His acceptance of God is accompanied by constant joyful reiterations of

his own inconsequentiality. To the family servants he declares: 'Dear, darling people, why are you waiting on me, and do I deserve to be waited on? If God had mercy and left me among the living, I myself would begin to wait on you, for all should wait on one another' (14,262). He assures his mother that 'everyone of us is guilty of everything before everyone, and I more than everyone', and he explains his begging forgiveness from the birds by saying: 'I feel like being guilty before them < . . . > for I don't know how to love them. Though I am culpable before everyone, yet everyone will forgive even me, and that's paradise' (14,262,263). It is not difficult to see why many Orthodox readers found Dostoevsky's Christianity suspect, and yet Markel's attitudes are profoundly, if idiosyncratically, kenotic. Moreover, the insistence on his own insignificance and his concomitant achievement of spiritual happiness validate the link between humility and righteousness.

In the context of Zosima's existence, Markel serves as a hagiographical model. Many years later, when the future elder is a self-centred young officer, the pitiful reactions of his orderly Afanasy to Zosima's savage blows force him to confront the evil of his present existence. Markel is directly implicated in this spiritual resurrection, for Zosima suddenly remembers his brother's questions to his servants and assertions of communal responsibility; he concludes: 'In truth, perhaps, I am more responsible than everyone for everyone, yes and am worse than all people in the world' (14,270). This epiphany marks the beginning of the kenotic way adopted by Zosima. When he meets Afanasy in the course of his later wanderings, he responds to his former orderly's request for a blessing for his children by saying: 'Is it for me to bless them < . . . > I am a simple and humble monk, I will pray to God about them' (14,287). This refusal to take spiritual credit, which, as I mentioned above, also finds expression in the remarks of Dostoevsky's Tikhon, is a familiar topos. Zosima remains committed to this idea throughout his monastic career. When a visiting monk asks him about his possible healing of a young woman, the elder replies: 'if there has been something, it is by no one's power except God's will. Everything is from God' (14,51).

Like Tikhon and many monks of the kenotic tradition, Zosima is distinguished and revered for his remarkable insight. Just as Tikhon has an acute understanding of Stavrogin's complex motives, so Zosima easily divines the psychological make-up of the various

Karamazovs, from Fyodor's shame and buffoonery to Ivan's tormented quest for faith. In the case of Dmitry, Zosima's famous bow, which he later tells Alyosha was meant to recognise the eldest brother's 'great future suffering' (14,258), reflects a combination of perception, humility and compassion typical of kenotically inclined monks. Alyosha's friend, the seminarist Rakitin, scoffs at Zosima's act, telling Alyosha: 'With holy fools it's always like that: they cross themselves at the tavern and throw stones at the temple. Like your elder: [he drives] away a just man with a stick, and [makes] a bow at the feet of a murderer' (14,73). While Zosima's behaviour generally does not exhibit the particular traces of eccentricity typical of holy fools, Rakitin's comment is significant, for it points once again to the fluid boundary between holy foolishness and kenotic humility, a boundary that Dostoevsky certainly seems to have crossed easily and repeatedly in his fictional creations.

Unlike Tikhon, Zosima is given extended opportunities to discourse upon his beliefs. The importance of humility, although not expressed with specific reference to the New Testament, occupies a central position in his remarks. In Zosima's conception, humility is the guiding force of the monastic way: 'When [a monk] realises that he is not only worse than others, but that he is responsible to all men for all and everything, for all human sins, general and individual, only then the aim of our seclusion is attained' (14,149). Indeed, in Zosima's conception, humility is a powerful transformative force: 'Loving humility is marvellously strong, the strongest of all things and there is nothing else like it' (14,298). The saints' Lives which the elder suggests as being especially suitable for reading aloud to the peasants are those of Mary of Egypt and Alexis, the Man of God, a figure repeatedly evoked in *The Brothers Karamazov*. Both of these Lives are noteworthy for their endorsement of unceasing humility. No Russian saints are named by Zosima, but Sergy of Radonezh is recalled through the elder's reference to a well-known episode from his Life involving feeding a bear.

Where Zosima departs most dramatically from the kenotic tradition narrowly defined is in his overtly nationalistic interests. Kenoticism is inherently apolitical, supposedly concerned with its practitioner's spiritual perfectibility and not with participation in worldly activities. Yet Sergy of Radonezh – and such actions in a sense provide the ideological bridge between Sergy and the Metropolitans Pyotr and Aleksy – gave his blessing to Prince Dmitry

Donskoy of Moscow in his successful confrontation with the Mongols at the Battle of Kulikovo in 1380 and even sent two monks, both former boyars and skilled warriors, to aid the prince. Pierre Kovalevsky observes that the author of *Sergy's Life* 'brings out the humility, mercy and monastic poverty of [Sergy], but he is markedly reserved in speaking about his national actions'.⁸ In the case of the Kulikovo episode, this means that the blessing is described, but not the mission of the two monks. Yet it was precisely this kind of partisan involvement in Russian political events that contributed to Sergy's recognition not only as an exemplar of kenoticism, but as a kind of patron saint of Russia. Hence his linking, by both Dostoevsky and Klyuchevsky, with Pyotr and Aleksy, an association founded upon extra-kenotic factors and one essentially contrary to a focus on self-humiliation.

Tikhon and Zosima are not rabid nationalists. In the case of Tikhon, the only hint of secular concerns is provided by the reference to his interest in recent military history; his book and his map symbolise his possible preoccupation with Russia's fortunes. With Zosima, a devotion to Russia is made more explicit. Indeed he suggests that it is kenotic monks who offer some hope of salvation for Russia. While acknowledging the prevalence of monastic corruption, the elder believes that there are many 'humble and meek' monks who may provide 'once again the salvation of the Russian land' (14,284). Undoubtedly with Sergy of Radonezh in mind, he declares: 'from among us in the old days came popular leaders, why can't they now as well? The same humble and meek fasters and monks who have taken the vow of silence will rise up and set out for the great cause' (14,285).⁹ The precise nature of the cause – presumably the resurrection of Orthodoxy's political role and the defence of traditional values against radical assault – is not defined, but the latent political tenor of Zosima's declaration is evident.

The Brothers Karamazov is set in the late 1860s. It was written a little more than a decade later (1878–80), however, near the end of the Russo-Turkish War (1877–78), a war in which Pan-Slav sentiments, with their emphasis on the need for militant preservation of the international Orthodox community, played a significant role. The novel was completed in 1880, the quincentennial of the Battle of Kulikovo. Dostoevsky's conservative political sympathies and endorsement of the Orthodox establishment are well known. In the late 1870s especially he repeatedly expressed chauvinistic sentiments

in *The Diary of a Writer* about the need for Russia to act as an aggressive leader within the Orthodox world; 'sooner or later, Constantinople must be ours', he declared (25,65).

In the context of contemporary events and his own attitudes, Dostoevsky's infusion of the character of Zosima with vaguely nationalistic ambitions is not surprising. The kenotic tradition finds moving expression in Dostoevsky's elder, many of whose actions, reminiscences and observations bespeak the 'deep humility' to which Dostoevsky refers in his letter to Lyubimov. At the same time Zosima expresses the 'limitless naive hopes for the future of Russia' that Dostoevsky claimed were associated with medieval Russian monks and prelates, but which should probably more properly be attributed to the author himself. In capturing the essence of Russian spirituality, Dostoevsky could not ultimately rest content with a purely religious message. In Zosima he embodies, but then transcends, the kenotic tradition, with its numerous adherents who fled secular involvement as if it were the devil's own handiwork.

NOTES

- 1 Vasily Klyuchevsky, 'Velikie minei chetii, sobrannye vserossiiskim Mitropolitom Makariem', *Sbornik statei*, 3 vols. (Petrograd, 1918), III: 10.
- 2 *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 17 vols. (New York, 1967-74), s. v. kenosis.
- 3 Archpriest Georges Florovsky, *Ways of Russian Theology*, Part I, *Collected Works of Georges Florovsky*, vol. 5, ed. Richard S. Haugh, trans. Robert L. Nicholas (Belmont, MA, 1979), 1.
- 4 Dmitrii Tschizewskij, ed., *Das Paterikon des Kiever Hohlenklösters*, 2nd edn (Munich, 1964) (reprint of *Kievo-Pechers'kii paterik*, ed. D. I. Abramovich (Kiev, 1930), 46. On the role played by kenosis in Feodosy's existence, see George Fedotov, *The Collected Works of George Fedotov: The Russian Religious Mind* (I), vol. 3 (Belmont, MA, 1975), especially 128.
- 5 'From the Memoirs of Ivan Yefimov', in *A Treasury of Russian Spirituality*, ed. George Fedotov, *The Collected Works of George Fedotov*, vol. 2 (Belmont, MA, 1975), 211.
- 6 Cited in Nadejda Gorodetzky, *Saint Tikhon of Zadonsk: Inspirer of Dostoevsky* (Crestwood, NY, 1976), 99.
- 7 Cited in Sergius Bolshakoff, *Russian Mystics* (Kalamazoo, MI, 1977), 191.
- 8 Pierre Kovalevsky, *Saint Sergius and Russian Spirituality* (Crestwood, NY, 1976), 62.
- 9 Joseph Frank observes that 'it was certainly of St. Sergey that Dostoevsky was thinking' when Zosima makes these assertions. See Joseph Frank, *Dostoevsky: The Seeds of Revolt, 1821-1849* (Princeton, NJ, 1976), 47.