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Confession and Theodicy in Dostoevsky's Oeuvre

(The Reception of St. Augustine)

The author analyzes Dostoevsky's ideas about confession and theodicy and shows how they were influenced by Vladimir Solov'ev and St. Augustine.

Two classical problems of Christian philosophy—theodicy and confession—were developed by Fyodor Dostoevsky into a new literary-philosophical system unprecedented in nineteenth-century European culture. Theodicy and confession are the first manifestation of the personality in European thought. In the biblical world, theodicy acquires a tragic meaning. Job says of God: “He has betrayed the earth into the hands of the wicked, / He has covered the faces of its judges; / And if not He, then who else?” (Job 9:24). It is no coincidence that the Book of Job has been the favorite book of St. Augustine (he wrote *Notes on Job*) and of Dostoevsky, who made frequent references to Job. Let me remark, incidentally, that St. Augustine has been equally revered by the Western and Eastern churches.

At the time when Dostoevsky was embarking on his literary career,

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extraordinarily heated disputes were raging in Russian thought concerning the development of Christian culture in Russia and in the West. The motifs of Catholicism, Lutheranism, and Orthodoxy were played out. It was discussed whether the Russian people were capable of Christianity. Did they have faith or nothing but superstition? The Holy Fathers, monks, and priests of East and West had created a great theology.

Russia lacked such experience. As Stepun observes, “the Orthodox church has neither its own Thomas Aquinas nor its own Luther. While strong in its mystical tradition and in the symbolic depth of its rites, the Eastern church as early as the seventh century began to lose the tension and distinctness of its theological-speculative thought” (Stepun 2000, p. 404). A religious philosophy had to be created. Dostoevsky was no academic scholar, although it is well known that he read Hegel and Kant. But as Lev Shestov remarked, “As for dialectics, even Hegel would admit himself outdone by the underground philosopher Dostoevsky.” In his terrifying, dialectically written confession, the underground philosopher poses the problem of theodicy in terms much more frightening than those in which the problem is posed by, let us say, the German philosopher Leibnitz. Kant too, like Voltaire, does not accept Leibnitz’s optimism. But while Voltaire indulges in mockery, Kant says that it is impossible in principle for human reason to solve the problem of theodicy: “[T]his still remains undecided; if we do not have successes in establishing with certainty that our reason is absolutely incapable of insight into *the relationship in which any world as we may ever become acquainted with through experience stands with respect to the highest wisdom*, then all further attempts by a putative human wisdom to gain insight into the ways of the divine wisdom are fully dismissed. Hence, in order to bring this trial to an end *once and for all*, it must yet be proven that at least a negative wisdom is within our reach—namely, insight into the necessary limitation of what we may presume with respect to that which is too high for us—and this may very well be done (Kant 1980, pp. 68–69*). Referring to the story of Job, Kant demands of man humility and patience.

The nameless character of Dostoevsky’s *Notes from Underground* [Zapiski iz podpol’ia] gives the problem a twist: he simply finds no way of vindicating God. And it is characteristic that the character does not

*Quoted from the George di Giovanni translation of “On the Miscarriage of All Philosophical Trials in Theodicy,” in Immanuel Kant, *Religion and Rational Theology* (Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 30.—Ed.

have a name: it is as though man as such speaks through his voice. The character threatens to destroy not only the Good of the Fourierists and socialists, but also Good in general, Good as such. The hero of the story, poor and humiliated, does not believe that once aware of his normal interests “a person would immediately stop playing dirty tricks, immediately become good, noble, and kind” (Dostoevskii 1973, p. 110). And therefore, he exclaims, he will act on the principle of opposition and do Evil.¹ And so he does, by mocking the human dignity of the prostitute Liza. “Oh tell me,” he says, “who was the first to declare, who was the first to proclaim that a person plays dirty tricks only because he does not know his real interests? And what if he were to be enlightened? What if his eyes were to be opened to his real, normal interests? Would he immediately stop playing dirty tricks, immediately become good, noble, and kind because—being enlightened and understanding his true advantage—he would see his own advantage in good? It is well known that no one can act deliberately against his own advantage. Consequently, so to say, he would of necessity start to do good. Right? Oh my baby! Oh my pure, innocent child! First of all, when has it been the situation, in all these millennia, that people act only for the sake of their own advantage? What are we to do with the millions of cases in which people have *deliberately*—that is, fully understanding their own advantage—ignored it and plunged down a different path?” (ibid.).

Who then is to blame for the fact that the world and man are arranged in this way?

In Dostoevsky’s last novel,* this position receives a splendid formulation uttered by Ivan Karamazov: “It’s not God I don’t accept, understand this, I do not accept the world that He created, this world of God’s, and cannot agree with it.”** The Russian philosopher E. Golosovker asserts that *The Brothers Karamazov* is a polemic against Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*. “Not only was Dostoevsky acquainted with the *Critique of Pure Reason*; he had also thought it through. What is more, partly conforming with it, he developed his arguments in the dramatic situations [pictured] in the novel” (Golosovker 2010, p. 336). An interesting

*A reference to Dostoevsky’s novel *The Brothers Karamazov* [Brat’ia Karamazovy] completed in November 1880. The writer died four months after its publication.—Ed.

**Quoted from the Pevear and Volokhonsky translation of Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002), bk. 5, ch. 3. (Below cited as *The Brothers Karamazov*).—Ed.

yet controversial view. One thing is clear: Dostoevsky took Kant's point of view into account. But he gave much more serious consideration to the thinker who laid the foundations of European Christian thought—St. Augustine. Indeed, it is now clear that Dostoevsky cannot be explained solely by reference to contemporary disputes: although he worried about facts reported in the newspapers, behind them he discerned the basic myths of Christian culture. It is said that Dostoevsky created Russian profundity. Not coincidentally, one of the Russian thinkers of the early twentieth century “proclaimed Dostoevsky a national Russian thinker. . . . When I pondered whether there had really not been a single outstanding philosopher of European stature in Russia over the last century, I was unable to think of anyone apart from Dostoevsky. . . . Tolstoy was accepted in the West as a thinker. But Tolstoy as a thinker is unoriginal. We are all aware . . . of the influence of Schopenhauer's philosophy. In no way can I agree that Lev Tolstoy is a national Russian philosopher. . . . Well, a sage! . . . But Dostoevsky . . . wanted to understand everything as a single whole” (Steinberg 2009, p. 89). And precisely for this reason he descended to the source of spiritual personality, saw where and how the spirit first stirred in Christianity, and grasped the importance of the confessional appeal to God for penetrating the essence of the human soul. Contemporary life did not provide such experience. In the words of the German cultural philosopher Karl Wittfogel: “Dostoevsky is not Russian routine, not Russian daily life!” [this and subsequent quotations translated from the Russian] (Wittfogel 1921, p. 43). As the Russian Silver Age metaphysical poet Viacheslav Ivanov wrote: “He is alive among us, because all the things by which we live—both our light and our underground—come from him or through him. He is the great initiator and predeterminer of our cultural complexity. Before him, everything in Russian life and thought was simple. He made our soul, our faith, our art complex. . . . He brought us, who had yet to experience that revelation of the personality which the West had already been outliving for centuries, one of the last and final such revelations, hitherto unknown to the world” (Ivanov 1916, p. 7).

Dostoevsky was probably familiar with St. Augustine, for the blessed Augustine was recognized by Orthodoxy and Orthodox writers referred to him. As the illustrious Orthodox thinker L.P. Karsavin wrote: “St. Augustine was one of the most contemporary of authors, and so he has remained throughout European history. It was precisely he who discovered that individuality which was known neither to Plato nor to

Plotin” (Karsavin 1992, p. 235). Also important is the fact that Dostoevsky posed the very problems with which philosophical Christianity began. Tertullian still counterposed Philosophy to Faith, Athens to Jerusalem. St. Augustine was a pupil of the ancient philosophers. Étienne Gilson writes: “We know how greatly St. Augustine admired the philosophers and how grateful he was to them; he considered that they had led him to the Christian faith and that in their books he had found the most essential content of Christianity” (Zhil’son 1984, p. 85). Dostoevsky remarked of himself that he loved philosophy even though he was rather weak at it.

In general, when thinkers wish to find new principles they seek out the roots of culture. Dostoevsky descended to the depths out of which Christian Europe grew. In Russia, besides Dostoevsky, it was only Fyodor Tyutchev, perhaps, who used St. Augustine’s theological gambit—begging God to overcome the unbelief of the person appealing to Him:

Let me in!—I believe my God!
Come help my unbelief!*

* * *

Dostoevsky, I repeat, was the first in Russia to turn his attention to the problematic of theodicy, which had so agitated Western thought since classical antiquity. He wanted to write “a Russian *Candide*”—that is, his own polemic (like Voltaire’s) against the theodicy of Leibnitz (1710), who in essence accepted St. Augustine’s idea that not God but man himself is to blame for the evil that reigns in the world. Leibnitz and St. Augustine based their conceptions on the supposition that God uses evil for the purposes of good. In his *Confessions*, St. Augustine for the first time poses the problem of theodicy in an appeal to God, vindicating God and accusing himself, man:

“Such was my heart, O God, such was my heart, on which You took pity when it was in that bottomless pit. Let my heart tell You now why it sought to be evil without any purpose. For the sole cause of my depravity was my depravity” (*Confessions*, 2, IV, p. 9). Dostoevsky’s answer is terrifying in its own way: before him philosophy had not posed such an answer or such a question. He accepts God, despite the evil and imperfection of the world. But—

In this “but” lies a great question. Ivan Karamazov says: “And so,

*From Tyutchev’s poem “Our Century” (1851).—Ed.

I accept God, and 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 eternal harmony, in which we are all supposed to merge, I believe in the Word for whom the universe is yearning, and who himself was ‘with God,’ who himself is God, and so on, and so forth, to infinity. Many words have been invented on the subject. It seems I’m already on a good path, eh? And now imagine that in the final outcome I do not accept this world of God’s, created by God, that I do not accept and cannot agree to accept. . . . One reservation: I have a childlike conviction that the sufferings will be healed and smoothed over, that the whole offensive comedy of human contradictions will disappear like a pitiful mirage. . . . Let the parallel lines even meet before my own eyes: I shall look and say, yes, they meet, and still I will not accept it. That is my essence, Alyosha, that is my thesis.”* And further on he explains why. Not because God is to blame; those to blame, probably, are the general who set dogs on a little boy, the parents who locked up their five-year-old daughter in a latrine for the night, and so on. It was not God Who placed this evil in their souls. Here he appears to share the view of St. Augustine. He also believes in a future harmony in which all suffering will be explained and blend into a great harmony. But to *eternity* the writer’s hero counterposes *the present*, unsoothed by harmony. It is not by chance that Dostoevsky called himself a writer “possessed by nostalgia for the present day” (vol. 13, p. 455). He judged the “present day” from the point of view of the harmony promised by God. It was precisely this position that was to lead in the twentieth century both to religious existentialism of Heidegger and to the antireligious existentialism of Dostoevsky’s admirer Camus—the Camus who was not just a writer but the author of a dissertation on St. Augustine, the Camus who, like St. Augustine, was born in North Africa, the Camus who in *The Plague* was to give an extended critique of Augustinianism. Man is incapable of perceiving God’s time, which contains within itself the past, the present, and the future. Therefore God knows everything. Man is incapable of understanding the causes of misfortunes, and especially of disasters in which all perish without discrimination. Despite his faith in God, man lives an earthly life and can live no other. So Dostoevsky vindicates even the Grand Inquisitor, who consoles and looks after the humiliated and insulted. After all, he is trying to correct the Evil of the world.

*Vol. 14, pp. 214–15; Quoted from *The Brothers Karamazov*, bk. 5, ch. 3.—Ed.

In Dostoevsky, the *human present* engages in a dispute with the time of God, which is not, strictly speaking, exactly eternity, but rather an *enduring present that encompasses all time, past and future*. To God all is clear. St. Augustine addresses Him as follows: “Nor dost thou precede any given period of time by another period of time. Else thou wouldst not precede all periods of time. In the eminence of thy ever-present eternity, thou precedes all times past, and extends beyond all future times, for they are still to come—and when they have come, they will be past. . . . Thy years neither go nor come; but ours both go and come in order that all separate moments may come to pass. All thy years stand together as one, since they are abiding. Nor do thy years past exclude the years to come because thy years do not pass away. All these years of ours shall be with thee, when all of them shall have ceased to be. Thy years are but a day, and thy day is not recurrent, but always today. Thy “today” yields not to tomorrow and does not follow yesterday” (*Confessions*, 11, XIII, p. 16). Such knowledge is not given to man. He is able only to ask God. However, in this asking he is able to manifest freedom of spirit, also given him by God; yet this freedom, on the moral plane, may propose its own ethical norms, without rejecting the Divine harmony. And *this dualism is Dostoevsky’s discovery*.

Ivan Karamazov speaks of this: “I don’t want harmony. From love for humanity I don’t want it. I would rather be left with the unavenged suffering. I would rather remain with my unavenged suffering and unsatisfied indignation, *even if I were wrong*. Besides, too high a price is asked for harmony; it’s beyond our means to pay so much to enter on it. And so I hasten to give back my entrance ticket. . . . It’s not God that I don’t accept, Alyosha, only I most respectfully return him the ticket.” (vol. 14, p. 223, *The Brothers Karamazov*, bk. 5, ch. 4). The first proto-theodicy, as it were, in the Bible is the Book of Job. However, Job wants to argue with God: “But I would wish to speak to the Almighty and argue my case with God” (Job 13:3). Unlike the many researchers who consider that Ivan is polemicizing with God in the same way as Job (I myself also once wrote thus), I hold that Dostoevsky’s hero is retreating into *religious autism*. That is why the devil thinks that it will be easy to defeat him. But it becomes clear that despite his voluptuous nature Ivan is a righteous man rather than a sinner. And the devil does not get his soul. Just as he does not get Job’s soul. God does not prevent the devil from mocking and humiliating the chosen Sons of this world. Ivan passes this test. In other words, the Supreme Power values religious autism.

If Rozanov is right and the image of the Grand Inquisitor represents a variant of Job arguing with God (the Inquisitor is an image generated by the mind of Ivan or, more precisely, of Dostoevsky himself), then this exacerbates the problem.

The Lord is unable to answer the new Job through the voice of Christ. It turns out that this time Job's position is not denied but recognized. But the possibility of such recognition of his position arises only as a result of *absolute revelation in the face of God, in the Confession*.

* * *

Dostoevsky created religious philosophy in Russia. And he did so by means of the collaterally subordinated system of diverse confessions in his novels. The highest level in this system is the direct appeal to God. He is ironic when he describes Raskol'nikov's repentance before the people. And he is very serious when in Mitya's confession to the lay brother Alyosha he speaks of the sinfulness of the human heart, and when in Ivan's confession to this same Alyosha he asserts over and over again that the problem of theodicy is in practice insoluble to the human ("Euclidean") mind. Through Alyosha the brothers converse with God. As L.M. Batkin notes: "Insofar as Christian personalism consists in the idea of a direct link of the soul with Providence, the self-observations of St. Augustine are not psychological: they are ontological" (Batkin 1993, p. 6). Dostoevsky too is ontological. It is no coincidence that he renounced the title of psychologist, calling himself a realist in the highest sense of the word, who depicts the human soul to its furthest depths. The soul is connected with Providence, with God, so that for Dostoevsky the highest essences of being are real: they are already contained in the mind of God (recall the scholastic dispute between the nominalists and the realists). Hence the celebrated motto of the great realist Anselm of Canterbury (1033–1109), repeated by him following St. Augustine: "I believe in order to understand!" It is precisely on faith that the whole of Dostoevsky's philosophizing is based—but a faith that leads toward understanding. In this, of course, he is thoroughly European.

I quote a contemporary Russian author: "In the West, when Russian literature is under discussion, it is precisely Dostoevsky who is mentioned first of all. People are astonished that a writer of such stature could have existed in Russia. But his real roots are overlooked. Could a mind of such stature have existed at the junction of antiquity and the Middle Ages? At

a time when Plato and Aristotle had already receded into the past and the earliest predecessors of the Enlightenment thinkers were not yet even born? No, of course, St. Augustine is not the Dostoevsky of his age. . . . Of course, not all the works of St. Augustine are as significant as *Confessions*, but on the other hand *Confessions* in itself suffices to establish the extraordinary qualities of its author” (Kalomel’skii). The confession is a discovery of St. Augustine; the confession is the chief instrument of Dostoevsky’s prose. But the confession is a basic condition of Christian life. Dostoevsky’s journey to Christianity was an agonizing one; having arrived, however, he said what was most important to say. In a letter sent to N.D. Fonvizina in January or February 1854, he expresses a very complicated thought: “I tell you of myself that I am a child of my age, a child of doubt and unbelief; I remain so to this day and (I know this) shall remain so even to my grave. What terrible torments this craving to believe has cost me, and even now costs me—a craving that grows all the stronger in my soul as I think of more and more contrary arguments. And . . . I have laid in myself a symbol of faith, in which everything is clear and holy to me. This symbol is very simple, it is this: to believe that there is nothing better than Christ—nothing more splendid, profound, pleasing, rational, courageous, or perfect. And not only is there nothing better, but—I say to myself with zealous love—there *can* be nothing better. Moreover, if someone could prove to me that Christ exists outside of truth and that it would be that truth *really* exists outside of Christ, then I would rather want to remain with Christ than with truth” (vol. 28, bk. 1, p. 176). The point is that truth is a phenomenon of “this world,” the human world, where the devil rules. Christ exists outside of earthly truth; therefore it is precisely He who is able to accept the confession of sinning man. And therefore also the prostrate supplication to Christ is to “come to the aid of human unbelief.”

* * *

When we speak of Dostoevsky’s dialogicity, of the innumerable confessions of his heroes, we must not forget that his compass, St. Augustine’s *Confessions*, are not addressed to people: “St. Augustine judges himself *not horizontally*—that is, not by comparing himself (a specific person) with other (also specific) people, but *vertically*: in movement from himself, as one of ‘these little ones,’ toward the Creator” (Batkin 1993, p. 7). So further confessions can be made only to a priest, and through

him to God. Dostoevsky describes various types of confessional language, which, as he shows, is not always confessional. In *Demons* [Besy], for instance, when Bishop Tikhon, to whom Stavrogin is confessing, throws out a remark about his defective “style,” he hints to Stavrogin that he has written not a confession, not an appeal to God, but memoirs that openly excite the erotic imagination.

“And couldn’t you make other corrections to this document?”

“Why? I wrote sincerely,” replied Stavrogin.

“The style needs correcting a little.” (Vol. 11, p. 23)

And, not coincidentally, the bishop’s words acutely irritate Stavrogin: “‘Damned psychologist!’ he burst out in a sudden fury, and left the confessional without a backward glance” (vol. 11, p. 30). Psychology highlights Stavrogin’s falsity.

The most important confessions in Dostoevsky’s novels—those made by the man from the underground, Ivan, and Mitya through the lay brother Alyosha—are addressed directly to God, with God appearing in the role of confessor. Dostoevsky’s prose acquires ontological status. His heroes are not interested in making an impression.

But did Dostoevsky know St. Augustine all that well? The texts of the great theologian were in French, in which Dostoevsky was quite fluent. Of course, his problematic and mental structures constitute a sufficient explanation, but Dostoevsky was familiar with the ideas of St. Augustine—not directly, but through his young friend Vladimir Solov’ev.

It is well known that Solov’ev was Dostoevsky’s closest friend during the last years of his life, from the mid-1870s onward. The writer went to the Solianoi Borough of St. Petersburg in 1877 to hear his “Readings on Godmanhood” [Chteniia o Bogochelovechestve]. Solov’ev displays traits both of Ivan and of Alyosha.² We may ask, however, how Dostoevsky reconciled in his heart and mind the Catholic predilections of his young friend with his own Orthodoxy. For him the West was not anti-Christian; his response to this view was quite sharp: “Do you say that the image of the Savior has grown dim in the West? No, I don’t say this stupid thing” (vol. 27, p. 56). It is worth noting that the nephew of the great philosopher (S.M. Solov’ev), dividing his life and oeuvre into three periods, remarks: “The division of his life into three periods finds an analogy in the founder of Western theology St. Augustine, who is so close to Solov’ev in his main ideas” (Solov’ev 1997, p. 6). Strictly speaking, Dostoevsky starts his last novel with a purely Augustinian problem: is it possible to

build the City of God, considering that the state is an absolutely pagan phenomenon? It suffices to compare certain texts from the beginning of the Dostoevsky's novel in which monks are discussing an article by Ivan Karamazov with the extract from "Readings on Godmanhood" in which Solov'ev paraphrases St. Augustine.

"It's like this," began the elder. "All these sentences to exile with hard labour, and formerly with flogging also, reform no one, and what's more, deter hardly a single criminal, and the number of crimes does not diminish but is continually on the increase. . . . It is only by recognizing his wrongdoing as a son of a Christian society—that is, of the Church—that he recognizes his sin against society—that is, against the Church. So that it is only against the Church, and not against the State, that the criminal of today can recognize that he has sinned. If society, as a Church, had jurisdiction, then it would know when to bring back from exclusion and to reunite to itself. Now the Church having no real jurisdiction, but only the power of moral condemnation, withdraws of her own accord from punishing the criminal actively." (Vol. 14, pp. 59–60; *The Brothers Karamazov*, bk. 2, ch. 5)

Let us compare the statement of the elder with the position of Solov'ev, which was well known to Dostoevsky: "From the religious point of view, only one general answer is possible to this question: if the church is really God's kingdom on earth, then all other forces and authorities must be subordinated to it and used as its instruments. If the Church represents a divine unconditional principle, then everything else must be conditional, dependent, and auxiliary. There cannot be two supreme principles, equally self-sufficient, in the life of man" (Solov'ev 1911–14, p. 17). This is exactly what is uttered further on by Father Paisii, as though by way of a refrain and supporting voice to the elder Zosima: "'You are completely misunderstanding it,' said Father Paissy sternly. 'Understand, the Church is not to be transformed into the State. . . . On the contrary, the State is transformed into the Church'" (vol. 14, p. 62; *The Brothers Karamazov*, bk. 2, ch. 5). Bearing in mind that the state of St. Augustine's time was known as a "band of robbers," that his whole idea of the City of God was directed against Rome as a state, the closeness of the polemic of the Orthodox monks to this idea is simply astonishing. Yevgenii Trubetskoi wrote of St. Augustine: "Consciously or unconsciously, he participates in the building of a new Christian Rome, in which the old pagan Rome makes itself felt. His ideal of the *eternal City of God* is a direct antithesis to the pagan *eternal city—the ideal anti-Rome*" (Trubetskoi 2004,

p. 138). In the same way, Dostoevsky, who repeatedly proclaimed his love for the tsar and the state, was secretly trying, in essence, to find a place where Russia could take refuge when the state collapsed. And he had a premonition that it would collapse: “Dostoevsky’s heroes cry out, as it were, from the depths of their silence—it is a sort of crying grimace of silence. And this silence is connected with the fact that for such spiritually and morally sensitive people as Dostoevsky or, for instance, Nietzsche, the entire fate of civilization depended on the extent to which our customs, laws, morals, and habits have roots (including that they grow from within each individual) and are not just laws of force, supported by a thin membrane of civilization. They both felt that if civilization is only a thin membrane, then this is not the way, the membrane will burst—as indeed it did. In the depth of their souls Dostoevsky and Nietzsche felt these shifts and tremors in the ground that would inevitably erupt like a volcano and propel all this into the air” (Mamardashvili 1995, p. 173). In Dostoevsky this feeling inspired a passionate search for a refuge (in contrast to Nietzsche, who anticipated and dreamed of the disaster). And it seemed to him that he had found it. “Christianity,” he wrote, “is the sole refuge of the Russian land from all its ills” (vol. 30, bk. 1, p. 68). In Solov’ev’s view, however, it was not simply Christianity that was needed, for like St. Augustine he understood the importance of the church for the structure of society. Therefore, in his speeches in memory of Dostoevsky he defined his position as follows: “If we wish to denote in one word the social ideal at which Dostoevsky arrived, then this word will be not nation but *church*” (Solov’ev 1911–14, p. 197)—or, more exactly, the City of God. It was precisely this idea that he took from St. Augustine and tried to convey to Dostoevsky, for he himself was seized by the Augustinian conception. As his nephew wrote: “In his combination of passionate religious feeling with the iron might of philosophical-historical schemas and constructions, in his understanding of the church as the City of God as it develops in the historical process, Solov’ev is the direct heir of St. Augustine” (Solov’ev 1916, p. 171).

Let me repeat: Dostoevsky did not engage in the philosophy of religion; he *created* religious philosophy, implanted it in Russia. And it is out of this maternal placenta that Russian religious philosophy grows. From his novels he made for Russia that basis through which the philosophy of all European countries once passed. It is no coincidence that many Russian thinkers have called the writer their “child’s guide to Christ.” Dostoevsky relied on Pushkin in his independent approach to

the problems of existence; it was precisely the experience of Pushkin and Dostoevsky that lay at the foundation of Russian philosophizing. And the first to pose independently all the philosophical-Christian problems of European thought (from Confession to Theodicy) was Dostoevsky.

Berdiaev defined the line that goes back to Dostoevsky as central to Russian thought: “When at the beginning of the twentieth century there emerged in Russia new idealist and religious trends that broke with the traditional positivism and materialism of the radical Russian intelligentsia, they assembled under the sign of Dostoevsky. Rozanov, Merezhkovskii, the journal *Novyi put’*, the neo-Christians, Bulgakov, the neo-idealists, Lev Shestov, Andrei Bely, Viacheslav Ivanov—they are all connected with Dostoevsky, all conceived in his spirit, all concerned with the themes posed by him. It is Dostoevsky whom the people of the new spirit discover first. An enormous new world, closed to preceding generations, opens up. There begins the ‘Dostoevsky era’ in Russian thought and Russian literature” (Berdiaev 1993, p. 217). The age of mass catastrophes was coming, and Dostoevsky provides a solution to the problem of theodicy much harsher than that of St. Augustine, for he foresees those times when evil will in all sincerity declare itself good and substitute itself for the divine plan for mankind. St. Augustine says that man is to blame for sin; Dostoevsky shows to what depths of evil man is capable of descending. These depths turn out to have no limits, summoning philosophy to a new test—that of explaining the causes and extent of evil in human nature. At the same time, he also shows the innocence of man, to whom God has given freedom, and therefore the right to vindicate or not vindicate the God Who created this freedom fraught with evil. This is why the spiritual experience of Dostoevsky was in great demand.

Notes

1. His speeches are usually viewed only as a polemic against the socialists, but in a letter to his brother dated 26 March 1864 Dostoevsky himself calls them “blasphemy” (vol. 28, bk. 2, p. 73).

2. Solov’ev’s nephew has already spoken of the place of his uncle in the figurative system of the novel: “*The Brothers Karamazov* was written under the influence of Solov’ev and his ideas. In reading the novel, we sense this at every step. There exists a legend that Dostoevsky depicted Solov’ev in the person of Alyosha Karamazov. . . . Yet Solov’ev was nonetheless above all a philosopher, and not a kind boy living by his heart alone. Ivan’s first article ‘On Church Jurisdiction’ [O tserkovnom sude]. . . is very reminiscent of Solov’ev’s essays” (Solov’ev 1997, p. 180).

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