THE MYSTICAL ORTHODOX EXPERIENCE AND THE BROTHERS KARAMAZOV

The works of Fyodor Dostoevsky and Tolstoy have as their most prominent influence the esoteric teachings and philosophies of the Russian Orthodox tradition. Very few people schooled in the Western tradition can appreciate the depth and meaning of experience that is taught in the mystical tradition of the Russian faith. The fundamental teachings of the traditional mystical orthodoxy are very different from the traditional biblical teachings of the Western cultures. This difference between the cultures is a result of a long and tortured history.

Early Christianity divided itself into two main theologies, the Roman or Western tradition and the Orthodox or Eastern tradition. While the Roman version of Christianity evolved into an official state religion, the eastern tradition maintained the central tenet that, "God became human so that we might be made God".[i] The orthodox tradition teaches a form of self-deification, a process of spiritual development through prayer as opposed to the Western belief that one may only come to God's grace through the church itself.

During the fourteenth century, the center of the Orthodox faith, the city of Constantinople fell to the Muslim based Ottoman Empire. It was during this period that Russia believed itself to be the "New Rome" and the

defender of the "True Faith". Russians and all Orthodox believers viewed the Roman version of Christianity as heretical.

Dostoevsky made several references to the Orthodox dislike of the Roman version of Christianity in the book *The Brothers Karamazov.* The story of *The Grand Inquisitor* was based upon the inquisitions of the sixteenth century. The Roman Church sought to purge all beliefs that did not conform to their views. There were several religious groups that fled the inquisitions in Europe and were given refuge in Russia where their views were accepted in the Orthodox traditions.

In the chapter *The Grand Inquisitor,* the inquisitor states to the incarnation of the Second Coming of Christ that, "for a long time now-eight centuries already- we have not been with you, but with *him.*".[ii] This refers to an event in 755 A.D. when Pepin, the father of Charlemange, took the Byzantine exarchate of Ravenna and the Pentapolis (the five citiesof Rimini, Pesar, Fano, Sinnigaglia, and Ancona) from the Lombards and turned the territories over to Pope Stephan II, thus initiating the secular power of the Vatican over the orthodox center of Constantinople. The Orthodox does not accept the authority of the Pope or the teachings of Roman Christianity.

During the fourteenth century a tradition known as Hesychasm developed in the monasteries of the Orthodox Church. Hesychasm, from the Greek word *hesychia,* meaning inner silence,[iii] was spread from Greece to

Russia by a monk named Gregory, who later became the Metropolitan of Kiev in 1415.

The Hesychast movement founded several prominent monasteries in Russia. A monk named Zosima founded the Solovetsky monastery in 1429. Dostoevsky named his character in the Brothers Karamazov after this monk. However, the character was actually based upon a starets (elder) of the Optina monastery known as Ambrose.[iv] The monastic tradition was fueled by a new resurgence of Hesychasm in the early nineteenth century. It was this time period that influenced the culture and the writings of Dostoevsky and Tolstoy. The Optina Monastery and St. Paissy are very famous in the Orthodox Russian history and had a great influence upon Russian writers of the time. They are both referred to in Chapter 5,*The Elders*, in *The Brothers Karamazov.*[v]

A popular book that influenced both Dostoevsky and Tolstoy was "The Way of the Pilgrim". An unnamed monk at the Optina monastery where Dostoevsky and Tolstoy were both frequent visitors of the starets, Ambrose, wrote this novel. The story is a gripping and moving account of a Russian who wanders the countryside with a copy of the *Philokalia* and the "Jesus prayer" engraved in his heart.

The "Jesus prayer" is one of the most important and fundamental disciplines that is taught in the Hesychast tradition. The Jesus prayer is a psychosomatic technique involving three features: first, a particular bodily posture, with the chin resting on the chest, and the gaze directed inward

towards the navel, secondly, control over the breathing so that it is slowed, and third, an inner introspection of the intellect, which searches for the heart or the seat of the soul.[vi] This technique is very similar to mystical teachings in the traditions of Bhuddism and Suffism.

The most holy of books in the Orthodox tradition is not the Bible but a book called the *Philokalia.* Saint Paissy Velichkovsky translated the original Greek into the Slavic language. The *Philokalia* is a collection of texts on prayer and the spiritual life, written between the fourth and fifteenth centuries by spiritual masters of the Orthodox Christian tradition. The Russian monasteries were closely connected to the prominent Greek monastery known as Mount Athos. There is very little difference between the teachings of the Russian and Greek Orthodox traditions. Most prominent Russian religious figures received their early training in the Greek tradition at the Mount Athos monastery.

It is within this framework of asceticism and mysticism that Dostoevsky and Tolstoy tempered their conception of the spiritual nature of man. It was Dostoevsky who was known as the "Dark Mystic". Dostoevsky alluded to this characterization in *The Brothers Karamazov* during the Prosecutor's speech.[vii]

Dostoevsky's characterization as a mystic is a result of the influence of Hesychastic teachings and most notably *The Ascetic Homilies of Saint Isaac the Syrian*[viii]. Dostoevsky owned a copy of the 1854 edition of the translation and the book is mentioned twice in *The Brothers Karamazov.* The teachings of Saint Isaac are based upon mysticism and the opening of the heart as is taught in

the Jesus prayer. The most notable quality of this virtue is forgiveness. Even the name Isaac means forgiveness. St Isaac was given this name to reflect the essence of his teachings.[ix] St. Isaac is heavily quoted in the *Philokalia* and in one section of Volume Three he is cited 34 times.[x]

It was this virtue of forgiveness that underscored the characterizations in *The Brothers Karamazov.* This concept was best exemplified by the teachings of the elder Zosima. The concept was repeated throughout *The Brothers Karamazov* as a liturgical formula, *"on behalf of all and for all"*. The reader is first introduced to this concept by the character, Father Perapont.[xi]

The elder Zosima is first introduced to this concept as a young man by his brother Markel, who said,

> "Heart of my heart, my joyful one, you must know that verily each of us is guilty before everyone, for everyone and everything."[xii]

Zosima came to this understanding of forgiveness during the intended duel with the character of Afansy. Zosima reneged upon his intended duel with Afansy out of his feeling of compassion and love. Zosima became filled with rapture and prostrated himself before Afansy pleading, "Forgive me".[xiii]

Zosima explained this spiritual principle of forgiveness to the central character Alyosha and repeated that each man is "guilty before all and for all". Part of that teaching explained that every action has its law and that "until one has indeed become brother of all, there will be no brotherhood".[xiv] This concept was used by Dostoevsky to connect the events and actions of each character. Dostoevsky used the characters of the book to weave a fabric of causality. Each

act has a consequence. But if we lived by the teachings of forgiveness, then our own lives and the lives of those around us would be enriched and full of love.

The concept of forgiveness was again proposed in the chapter on *Talks and Homilies*. In this chapter, the elder Zosima instructed Alyosha on the art of prayer. The most important quality of prayer was about feeling and forgiveness. Again Zosima referred to his brother and his request for forgiveness.[xv]

In the chapter, *Cana of Galilee*, Father Paissy is reading and Alyosha is reflecting on the meaning of the scripture and his discussion with Mitya,

> "He who loves men, loves their joy... the dead man used to repeat it all the time, it was one of his main thoughts...one cannot live without joy, says Mitya...yes Mitya...All that is true and beautiful is always full of all-forgiveness."[xvi]

Alyosha was again reflecting upon the teachings of Zosima.

The character of Grushenka transforms when she allows herself to forgive her former lover. In the chapter *Delirium*, Grushenka comes to realize that she has been living with spite in her heart for the last five years. Grushenka confesses,

> "Mitya, Mitya, how could I be such a fool to think I could love another after you! Do you forgive me Mitya? Do you forgive me or not? Do you love me? Do you?...Will you forgive me for tormenting you? I tormented all of you from spite. I drove that old man out of his mind on purpose, just from spite."[xvii]

In this passage Dostoevsky connects the actions of Grushenka for the last five years with the events that contributed to the death of Fyodor and the ultimate demise of her newfound love Dimitri. However, in this moment of self-discovery Grushenka is freed from her spite by seeking forgiveness and in that moment she becomes able to recognize the love that she had had for Dimitri. The character, Grushenka, came to underscore the concept of guilty for all and before all, in the chapter, *The First Torment.* When Dimitri admitted to wanting to kill Fyodor, but that he was not guilty, Grushenka burst into the room and exclaimed,

> "It's me, me, the cursed one, I am guilty!" She cried in a heartrending howl, all in tears, stretching her arms to everyone, "it's because of me that he killed him...! I tormented him and drove him to it! I tormented that poor old dead man too, out of spite and drove things to this! I am the guilty one, first and most of all, I am the guilty one!"

In this moment Grushenka has cemented the transformation of her soul and has accepted the responsibility of her life's actions and their consequence.

Forgiveness is a part of every characters development throughout the book including many of the minor characters. Kolya, the young boy who is mentored by Alyosha, is troubled because he did not forgive his young friend Ilyusha. Ilyusha stabbed Kolya with a penknife. Later Kolya came to realize that Ilyusha was driven to a rage because of the ridicule of his father, which

had been caused by Alyosha's brother, Dimitri. It was because of this that Kolya came to realize the foolishness of his own inability to forgive.

> "I acted foolishly: when he got sick, I didn't go to forgive him- that is, to make peace- and now I regret it."[xviii]

Kolya felt responsible for his own actions because he had told Ilyusha that he would no longer speak to him, and thus contributed to the Ilyusha's feelings of rage. Kolya then sought to relieve the guilt of Ilyusha that had been troubling him on his deathbed.

Ilyusha was burdened with guilt and felt that his illness was the result of the cruel death that he had inflicted upon his pet dog, Zhuchka. Smerdyakov, the half brother of Alyosha had shown Ilyusha a cruel trick of putting a pin into a piece of food and feeding it to a dog.[xix] Koyla relieved Ilyusha of his guilt by substituting his own dog for Zhuchka. In this way Koyla shared the guilt of Ilyusha and reflected the homily *guilty for all and before all.*

The major character that most underscores the consequences of forgiveness other than Zosima or Grushenka is Dimitri. Although he is driven to seek joy through happiness by embracing the love that he feels for Grushenka, he does not come to real love until he himself seeks forgiveness for the feelings of hatred that he harbored against his father, Fyodor. At the end of the trial for the murder of his father, Dimitri undergoes his final transformation.

> "He seemed to have experienced something that day for the rest of his life, which had taught and brought home to him

something very important, something he had not understood before. His voice had grown weaker, he no longer shouted as earlier. Something new resigned, defeated, and downcast could be heard in his words."[xx]

The most damning evidence against Dimitri was given by his fiancé Katya. But because of the transformation that took place in Dimitri's soul, he felt forgiveness for her. When the jury delivered it's verdict of guilty, Dimitri exclaimed,

"I swear by God and by his terrible judgment, I am not guilty of my father's blood! Katya, I forgive you! Brothers, friends have pity on the other woman!"

Katya had given her evidence because at that moment in the trial she had felt hatred because Dimitri had fell in love with Grushenka. Katya became tortured by what she had done and in the chapter the Lie Became Truth, Katya sought to punish herself before Dimitri when the other woman Grushenka surprised her.

"Katya stepped swiftly towards the door, but, coming up with Grushenka, she suddenly stopped, turned white as chalk, and softly, almost in a whisper, moaned to her: Forgive me!"[xxi]

Threads of consequence for the purpose of seeking forgiveness connected each character. Each character sought forgiveness according to his or her unique circumstance and according to their own nature. The only characters that did not seek forgiveness were Fyodor and Smerdyakov. The threads of

causation again connected Fyodor's rape of the "holy fool" Lizavita, with his own death by the hand of that progeny, Smerdyakov. For those characters that did not seek forgiveness, their fate was death. In this way Dostoevsky has used the death of Fyodor and Smerdyakov as a metaphor for the death of the soul that does not seek to come to Christ through the virtue of forgiveness.

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[i] Davis,R. H. C., *A History of Medieval Europe: From Constantine to St. Louis*, London 1957, p. 349

[ii] Fyodor Dostoevsky, The Brothers Karamazov, Vintage Classics, New York, 1990, p. 257

[iii] Victoria Clark, *Why Angels Fall*, St Martins Press, New York, 2000 p.35

[iv] Ibid. p.315

[v] Fyodor Dostoevsky, The Brothers Karamazov, Vintage Classics, New York, 1990, p.27

[vi] G.E.H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard and Kallistos Ware, The Philokalia, Faber and Faber, London, 1995, Volume Four p. 65

[vii] Fyodor Dostoevsky, The Brothers Karamazov, Vintage Classics, New York, 1990, p.697

[viii] The Ascetic Homilies of St. Isaac the Syrian, translated from Greek by the monks of the Holy Transfiguration Monastery, the Holy Transfiguration Monastery Press, Boston Ma. 1984

[ix] G.E.H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard and Kallistos Ware, The Philokalia, Faber and Faber, London, 1995, Volume Three p.276

[x] Ibid. p. 71

[xi] Fyodor Dostoevsky, The Brothers Karamazov, Vintage Classics, New York, 1990, p 164

[xii] Ibid., p. 289

[xiii] Ibid., p. 298

[xiv] Ibid., p. 303

[xv] Ibid., p. 319

[xvi] Ibid., p. 360

[xvii] Ibid., p. 439

[xviii] Ibid., p. 536

[xix] Ibid., p. 535

[xx] Ibid., p. 750

[xxi] Ibid., p. 767