

Preface

To judge from the past, there is a natural and powerful impulse to characterize the “religion” in Dostoevsky’s writings as a set of beliefs (which we may list and describe) and then to attribute them all to the author, or to identify a subset that we may attribute to the author, or to state that the author repudiated all the beliefs we’ve listed. In any case, it always seems to boil down to the question, “What did Dostoevsky himself really believe?”

That’s where the trouble begins. People who pose this question don’t expect an answer like “Dostoevsky believed that all religion is essentially a product of our tendency to produce myths” or “Dostoevsky believed that religion serves a socializing function in human civilization.” They expect an answer like “Dostoevsky was a devout Christian and believed in personal immortality,” or the opposite, “Dostoevsky was a tried-and-true atheist and did not believe in much of anything at all.” If they decide that he was a religious (specifically Christian) person and not an atheist, they expect further details about what, in his view, good Christians should believe and how they should behave. They expect, in short, a kind of theology and corresponding guide to living that represents “what Dostoevsky believed.”

There are two problems with this approach. The first is that even if we do wish to know (and think it’s important to know) what Dostoevsky believed when it came to religion, we’ll quickly be disappointed to find he “believed” a welter of diverse ideas that, taken as a whole, are shot through with flagrant contradictions and inconsistencies. Readers of Dostoevsky who declare, for example, that their novelist embraced and promoted a kind of nationalist Russian Orthodox Christianity are telling the truth—it’s easy to find passages to support this claim—but they’re overlooking the passages where he *ridicules* this type of belief. Those who declare that Dostoevsky was a sworn enemy of socialism, seen as the antithesis of “his” Christianity, are telling the truth, too—it’s easy to find passages to support *this* claim—but they forget the

occasions when he passionately defended individual proponents of this ideology. Those who declare that, underneath it all, Dostoevsky was a deeply religious man are ignoring the power with which he was able to endow counterarguments to religious beliefs of various sorts. In fact, when it comes right down to it, those who name almost any issue, religious or not, and firmly declare that Dostoevsky held a certain position on it are failing to take into account that he almost certainly took an opposite position in some other place.

The second problem is that the question “What did Dostoevsky himself really believe?” is not the only one to ask if we’re talking about religion in his works. Here are some others:

- When Dostoevsky talked about religion or dramatized it in his fiction, what exactly was his understanding of what he was talking about or dramatizing?
- How did he dramatize religious issues in his fiction, and what may we infer from his dramatization of those issues?
- To what extent was his understanding of religion determined by contemporary thought, Russian and non-Russian?
- To what extent was his understanding of religion determined by the Russian Orthodox tradition in which he was raised?
- If, for the purpose of understanding “Dostoevsky’s religion,” we seek a conception of Russian Orthodox Christianity, are our sources reliable?
- To what extent was his understanding of religion the product of his own idiosyncratic mind?
- What, in his view, was the nature of belief itself?

After all, here are the simple facts: Dostoevsky explicitly said and wrote some things about religious issues, he invented fictional characters that he caused to express some views on religious issues, and he created fictional situations that bore an association with some religious issues. Since (as I see it) he’s made it impossible for us to state what his personal religious beliefs are in the sense I have mentioned, then all we can talk about is what he *does* when the topic of religion comes up in his writing. So it’s fine if we make statements like “He frames religious issues as antinomies” or “He invents situations that test his characters’ religious beliefs.” But if we really want to make a statement about what Dostoevsky *believed*, the most we’ll be able to

say is probably something like “He believed that when we think about religion we become involved in antinomies” or “He believed that belief itself is the principal issue in any discussion of religion.” But these statements are completely different from a statement about whether or not Dostoevsky embraced certain religious beliefs and practices. So in the end, it seems to me, what we’re left with is the speculations and reflections on religion to which Dostoevsky has led us.

What to say about them?

Before we even try to say something about them, we need to realize that, to a considerable extent and especially in the West, we’re prisoners of the interpretations that some of Dostoevsky’s better-known readers have served up since his works were published. The explanations of Dostoevsky’s religious thought, both in Russia and in the West, make up a remarkable—and often truly funny—story. Dostoevsky, very much like his admirer Nietzsche, is one of those writers in whom many readers see reflections of themselves and then mistake those reflections for the writers—and this is only one part of the story. I’ve attempted a short version of it in Chapter One.

If someone in Dostoevsky’s milieu, a member of the educated Russian class of the midnineteenth century, had turned his or her attention to the subject of religion, what issues would have been likely to come to mind simply in virtue of the intellectual climate? An educated American of almost any religious persuasion in the late 1960s, for example, on thinking about religion in general, could not avoid thinking about the famous “Is God Dead?” cover of *Time* magazine in April 1966, or the naughty “God is dead” T-shirts a few years later. An educated Protestant living in Geneva in 1600 could hardly avoid thinking about the issue of predestination, owing to the power of the Calvinist tradition in that city. Educated Russians living in Moscow or Saint Petersburg in the 1840s would perhaps think of their own Russian Orthodox upbringing, if in fact they had one (as Dostoevsky did, while many of his contemporaries did not), they might think of the movement of religious nationalism called Slavophilism, and they might think of certain indigenous sectarian movements. But they would also be conditioned to bring to a discussion of religious issues a host of romantic and secularizing concepts that writers in Western Europe were busy introducing (and that Russian university students were busy snapping up). In this environment, “Christ was an eternal ideal toward which man strives and, by a law of nature, must strive” is not an innocent statement. All this is the subject of Chapter Two.

But inevitably we are brought back to the peculiarity of our author and the impossibility of answering a question that proves so much less complicated for so many other writers: What did he believe? It turns out that the nature of belief itself was a central preoccupation for Dostoevsky, and that the content of religious belief for him often takes second place to the odd ways in which belief functions. We can certainly say with confidence that even when Dostoevsky was not consciously speculating about belief, his conduct showed that it was a central issue in his character; he was incapable of sustaining the same position on an issue, religious or not, for any significant length of time, and yet he was capable of expressing views with what seems for all the world to be the utmost conviction and sincerity. This is what Chapter Three is about.

If Dostoevsky always found himself torn between opposing beliefs, it's no doubt because he viewed belief—especially religious belief—as something essentially contradictory, paradoxical, and antinomic. No one will be surprised to hear that Dostoevsky was fascinated with contradictions and conflicting points of view. But I'm not persuaded that he ever truly resolved many of the contradictions that fascinated him, and many of these contradictions end up specifically as antinomies, that is, pairs of mutually contradictory and equally compelling claims. I don't see, for example, how the conflict in *The Brothers Karamazov* between the views of Ivan and those of Father Zosima is definitively resolved in favor of the former (as so many readers claimed in the early decades after Dostoevsky's death) or in favor of the latter (as so many readers have claimed for the last few decades). Instead I see in Dostoevsky the real possibility of sincerely asserting one thing today and sincerely asserting its opposite tomorrow. This binds the expression of a conviction to the situation in which we express it and suggests a curiously modernist view of language and belief. That's Chapter Four.

When it came to metaphysical questions, Dostoevsky betrayed a turn of thought that renders his conception of belief yet more complicated. He seems early on to have become fascinated with the idealist notion of infinite progress toward an unattainable goal. The perfectly selfless Christian love whose practical unrealizability was the subject of more than one remarkable text is a good example. Reaching such a goal brings about the destruction of the self. Another example is perfect belief, or perfect faith. Like perfectly selfless love, perfect faith stands at the end of a path that comes ever closer to this end but never reaches it. The same applies to perfect lack of faith. Faith

and faithlessness, good and evil are pairs of opposing ideals, all of them unattainable by finite beings living in a finite world.

The idealism that characterizes Dostoevsky's conception of religion leads to an odd paradox about the nature of the individual, one particularly evident in the pair of novels *The Idiot* and *The Devils*. In those works, reflections about ideal love and faith—but also about ideal evil—lead to the conclusion that the “perfect” state for the individual (whether the individual seeks absolute good or absolute evil) is a state of complete dissolution. Perfect Christian love, as *The Idiot* illustrates, necessitates the evaporation of the ego, and perfect evil, as *The Devils* illustrates, leads to personal destruction. Dostoevsky's understanding of freedom, however, leads to the conclusion that the individual must remain whole and that a breakdown of the individual arises from moral and personal failures. The ideality of belief and the paradox of the individual are what I discuss in Chapter Five.

So belief is contextual, antinomic, and ideal. The status of the individual is deeply paradoxical. All this suggests more than ever that the topic of Dostoevsky's religion does not mean simply a list of the author's personal beliefs. But surely Dostoevsky must at least have conceived of some religious worldview with a content that's independent of the question of whether he or anyone else can fully believe any or all of its constituent parts. The closest thing to such a worldview in a work of fiction is the one we find in Father Zosima (and Zosima's disciple Alesha) in *The Brothers Karamazov*. But there's not much about this worldview that's Christian, or even for that matter consistent. It represents a strange blend of almost pagan earth worship and religious nationalism, as Zosima makes the slippery transition from asking us to adore the earth generally to asking us to adore the *Russian* earth specifically. This leads to asserting a special status for Russians in the divine scheme and consequently to endorsing a view that contradicts some of the historically fundamental aspects of Christianity. This is the focus of attention in Chapter Six.

Dostoevsky is a little like Nietzsche in this respect (among so many others); he's left us a large body of thought on religion, one that probes the foundations of religion in general and Christianity in particular but without offering a plausible worldview of its own. Like Nietzsche's, this is a highly critical body of thought that can point us toward the reevaluation of our most basic conceptions about religion. A key difference between the two is that Nietzsche didn't think he was proposing the content of a positive religion, while Dostoevsky apparently did.

This book is not meant to be a systematic study of Dostoevsky's fiction, focusing on the religious content of each work. Nor, for the reasons I've just given, is it a systematic study of his nonfiction, focusing on the things he said in his "own" voice (and therefore truly *thought*). It's meant to expose the body of thought on religion that emerges both from the actual content of his writing and from how he presented religious issues in works of various sorts.

I've written this book not just for specialists but also for general readers who are interested in Dostoevsky. I've assumed familiarity with four of Dostoevsky's works: *Crime and Punishment*, *The Idiot*, *The Devils*, and *The Brothers Karamazov*. When I mention a character or a scene from those books, I generally don't take the time to explain who the character is or to set the scene.

I've used the Library of Congress system for transliterating Cyrillic, though I've generally used the commonly recognized spellings of names (*Dostoevsky*, not *Dostoevskii*) in the text. All translations in the book, unless I've indicated otherwise, are my own.

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