

CHRISTIAN FICTION AND
RELIGIOUS REALISM IN THE
NOVELS OF DOSTOEVSKY

CHRISTIAN FICTION AND RELIGIOUS REALISM IN THE NOVELS OF DOSTOEVSKY

Wil van den Bercken



ANTHEM PRESS
LONDON • NEW YORK • DELHI

Anthem Press
An imprint of Wimbledon Publishing Company
www.anthempress.com

This edition first published in UK and USA 2011
by ANTHEM PRESS
75-76 Blackfriars Road, London SE1 8HA, UK
or PO Box 9779, London SW19 7ZG, UK
and
244 Madison Ave. #116, New York, NY 10016, USA

Copyright © Wil van den Bercken 2011

The author asserts the moral right to be identified as the author of this work.

Cover image 'What is Truth? Christ before Pilate'
by Russian painter Nikolay Ge, 1890 (Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow)

All rights reserved. Without limiting the rights under copyright reserved above,
no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored or introduced into
a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means
(electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise),
without the prior written permission of both the copyright
owner and the above publisher of this book.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data
A catalog record for this book has been requested.

ISBN-13: 978 0 85728 976 6 (Hbk)
ISBN-10: 0 85728 976 4 (Hbk)

This title is also available as an eBook.

For Iris and Livia

CONTENTS

<i>Introduction</i>	ix
Chapter 1 Religious Interpretations of Dostoevsky	1
Chapter 2 The Realism of Dostoevsky's Fictional Christianity	11
Chapter 3 Christian Themes in <i>Crime and Punishment</i>	23
Chapter 4 Religious Discussions in <i>The Idiot</i> and <i>The Adolescent</i>	33
Chapter 5 Christian Voices in <i>The Devils</i>	49
Chapter 6 The Spirituality of the Monk Zosima in <i>The Brothers Karamazov</i>	63
Chapter 7 The Legend of the Grand Inquisitor: Literary Irony and Theological Seriousness	83
Chapter 8 Dostoevsky's 'Grand Inquisitor' and Vladimir Solovyov's 'Antichrist'	97
Chapter 9 Physical and Divine Beauty: The Aesthetical-Ethical Dilemma in Dostoevsky's Novels	107

Chapter 10

Conclusion	123
<i>Notes</i>	131
<i>References</i>	141
<i>Index of Names</i>	147

INTRODUCTION

This study is an analysis and interpretation of Dostoevsky's literary presentation of Christianity. It revises the image of Fyodor Dostoevsky as a novelist with a Russian Orthodox world view. On the basis of textual analysis of his five great novels, I argue that Dostoevsky not only remains aloof from traditional Orthodoxy but is also not an 'alternative' Orthodox. The writer Dostoevsky gives expression to a biblical and ethical Christianity, not connected with institutional forms of religion. The study is based on a balanced method of literary analysis and theological evaluation of the texts, avoiding the free theological association and the hermeneutical mixing with the non-literary writings of Dostoevsky, that characterize many studies of religious themes in Dostoevsky's novels.

By free theological association I mean that, often subconsciously, Dostoevsky is placed within the researcher's religious line of thought or, more consciously, interpreted from a denominational viewpoint. Christian terminology and scenes from the novels are then often used to lead to further religious reflections, or theological evaluations of Dostoevsky's non-conformist views on the official church doctrine. In such cases, the researcher's religious interest over-rules a business-like literary analysis. In my case, an implicit view of religion unavoidably plays a role, of course, but I have not used it in a normative way and have limited myself to a literal analysis of texts, not giving symbolic interpretations or unveiling 'hidden' iconic images.

Hermeneutical mixing is a question of principle, with which one fundamentally agrees or disagrees, dependent on the various streams in Dostoevsky studies. Dostoevsky wrote a great deal on religious questions in journalistic articles and quoted Russian orthodox viewpoints, even including the preaching of a national religious ideology. These writings, however, have a different semantic status from the literary works, the author approaching reality in a different way from that of a writer of novels. I look at the literary Christianity of Dostoevsky's novels, not the ideological one of *Diary of a Writer*. Concerning the short fiction in the *Diary* ('The Meek One' and 'The Dream of a Ridiculous Man'), this falls outside the scope of my choice for the great novels.

Since I have limited myself to Dostoevsky as the writer of fiction, this study does not answer the often asked question: what does the writer, Fyodor Dostoevsky, believe personally; what is his stance in the conflicts between belief and disbelief that he describes? It is possible to clarify the status of Dostoevsky's own personal faith on the basis of his letters (especially the famous letter to Natalya Fonvizina) and formative life experiences, but it is difficult to state unambiguously what the writer Dostoevsky really thinks. That is the literary strength of his narrative technique, which is distinct from the direct way of expression in so-called ego-documents.

In this study, I deal with the five classic novels by Dostoevsky from the period 1860–1880. This demarcation means that I leave the works from the writer's first creative period, the 1840s, out of consideration. This is not to say that there are no religious themes in the early works. There are, but they are less detailed than in the later novels. However, I do include the semi-autobiographical novel, *Notes from the House of the Dead*. This is not one of the classical novels but is the first large work of Dostoevsky's after his Siberian imprisonment, bringing him renewed literary acclaim, and it anticipates religious themes from the later novels.

The arrangement of the book is as follows: Chapter 1 describes Dostoevsky's original literary method in dealing with religious issues: his use of paradoxes, contradictions and irony for transferring serious Christian thoughts, thus creating ambiguous attitudes toward faith. This ambivalent presentation of Christianity makes it the more recognizable for the modern critical reader.

In the second part of this chapter, I give a summary and commentary on recent works (from 2000) on religious themes in Dostoevsky's work, providing a general evaluation of them. Although I refer to these studies a few times later in the book, I do not return to them in every detail. This would give my study an unnecessarily polemic tint. In my analysis, I do, however, refer to other articles or monographs, which have a pronounced opinion on the specific novel or issue I am discussing.

Chapter 2 introduces and explains the concept of 'religious realism'. A unique feature of Dostoevsky's literary Christianity is the tension between the fictional nature of the religious characters and the readers' experience of the existential reality of their ethical and religious problems. This results in what I call 'religious realism', which has nothing to do with factual reality in Dostoevsky's time. The realism lies in the general anthropological relevance of the ethical and religious conflicts in Dostoevsky's fiction, and the challenge felt by the individual reader to define one's position in them.

The analysis of the novels is distributed over five chapters, in chronological order of their publication. The combining of two novels in one chapter and the spreading of one novel over two chapters is purely practical and is

dictated by the scale of the religious themes: besides separate passages, *The Brothers Karamazov* contains two large 'texts within texts' with extensive religious thematic material, both well-known but not equally well relevantly reviewed. The combination of *The Idiot* and *The Adolescent* is fitting, since they are both novels in which the title character is central and, in contrast to the other three novels, there is no exciting criminal plot. In the history of the reception of Dostoevsky's work, the novel, *The Idiot*, has been the object of the most controversial interpretations. By contrast, *The Adolescent* has been commented on least often, even Malcolm Jones omitting it in his innovative study. The novel, *The Devils*, is mainly known for its ideological theme, while the religious passages have often been paid less attention. However, basic Christian notions play a role in the intellectual unmasking of the ideological devils.

The first chapter that is devoted to *The Brothers Karamazov* gives an analysis of the Christian teaching of the unconventional monk Zosima. In the person and conversations of Zosima, Dostoevsky has expressed a view on Christianity in the most concrete form, giving it a prominent place in the novel. Although Zosima represents an Orthodox monastic institution, his Christianity differs from standard Orthodoxy in many ways.

In the other chapter I attempt a new interpretation of 'The Legend of the Grand Inquisitor'. I see the legend as a sublime example of Dostoevsky's paradoxical way of presenting Christian themes. In the long monologue against Christ and his demand for individual faith and personal responsibility, the Grand Inquisitor unwittingly expounds the message of the silent Christ. The inquisitor's alternative to Christ's message demonstrates a realistic psychological insight into human nature but is, at the same time, the demasqué of this insight. The legend is not only an attack on Catholicism but also a critique of all forms of religious and ideological collectivism.

A further analysis of the legend is given in the next chapter, which compares form and content of 'The Grand Inquisitor' with that other famous literary product of religious imagination, 'The Short Story of the Antichrist' by Dostoevsky's philosophical friend, Vladimir Solovyov.

The last chapter deals with the most misused quote from Dostoevsky, that 'beauty will save the world'. It explores the use of the term 'beauty' in the novels *The Idiot* as well as in *The Devils* and *The Brothers Karamazov* and concludes that beauty has contradictory forms of manifestation and that female and divine beauty in particular represent an ethical dilemma for man. Dostoevsky does not solve the dilemma and beauty remains an enigma in his literary universe.

Several chapters of this study have been published in a shorter form in Dutch in *Tijdschrift voor Slavische Literatuur*. Chapter 5 was published in Russian in the conference volume *Peterburg na filosofskoy karte mira* (St Petersburg, 2003). Chapter 7 on the Grand Inquisitor was presented as a paper at the conference

of the International Dostoevsky Society in Barcelona in 2006. Chapter 9 was published in *Literature and Beyond* (Amsterdam, 2008) and presented in adapted form at the conference of the International Dostoevsky Society in Naples in 2010.

I want to thank Ania Lentz for the translation of the Dutch text into English. I thank Katya Tolstaya and Nel Grillaert for their critical reading of the manuscript, Olga Kondrikova for her contribution to the theme of Chapter 8 and Jonathan Sutton for literature suggestions.

A note on translation and transliteration. The translation of the quotations from Dostoevsky is my own. Unless otherwise mentioned, italics, apostrophes, capitals, parentheses and dots in the quotations are Dostoevsky's, or from the author cited. References to the novels are included within the text. To make it also possible for those who do not read Russian or do not have the complete Russian edition of Dostoevsky's works to check the quotations, I always refer to the novel in question: the first figure indicates the part or 'book', the second the chapter and, where it occurs, the third figure the section in the chapter. Of course, this system does not give a page number, but it is the only way of finding the quotation in various editions. References to non-literary works by Dostoevsky are to the Russian Complete Works in 30 vols, with the Latin figure indicating the volume and the Arabic the page.

Russian names are written in the usual English version. Regarding some special Dostoevskian terms, they have been added in Russian in square brackets after the English translation. Titles of Russian publications in notes and bibliography are also written in Russian, together with the English translation. I have kept these titles and terms in Cyrillic script since non-Russian-reading people are not helped by Russian titles and terms in Latin script. The second reason for this choice was the consideration that transliteration in Latin script dates from the pre-computer epoch, when alternating between two alphabets was a complicated matter.

* * *

This study is the result of a dual interest in Dostoevsky, literary and theological. The literary interest dates from my study of slavistics at the universities of Utrecht and Leningrad/St Petersburg, long ago. The theological one arose thirty years later, after 2000, when I started to reread Dostoevsky in the context of my work at the Institute of Eastern Christian Studies of the Radboud University in Nijmegen. This second time, Dostoevsky struck me far more than the first time; it became a reading experience, which I can characterize with the words of Robin Feuer Miller: 'reading "as if for life"'. Such reading is both a complete immersion in the act itself and a contemplation of it' (in R. Jackson, ed.,

A New Word on The Brothers Karamazov, Evanston IL, 2004, 4). Contemplation gradually got the upper hand but it always remained accompanied by literary enjoyment of reading and the awareness of the hermeneutic difficulty in interpreting Dostoevsky's religious belief. Nevertheless, I have interpreted Dostoevsky and I add the result to the already abundant literature on the theme of Dostoevsky and religion, hoping that the book may be of interest to literary and theological readers of Fyodor Dostoevsky.

Wil van den Bercken, Utrecht/Nijmegen 2010

Chapter 1

RELIGIOUS INTERPRETATIONS OF DOSTOEVSKY

Fyodor Dostoevsky is a Christian novelist in a broad sense of the word. Dostoevsky puts Christian themes in an anthropological perspective: belief and unbelief, good and evil, freedom and determinism, guilt and innocence, love and hate are dealt with as fundamental human problems. Besides this, there are explicitly biblical subjects in the novels, such as spiritual rebirth, forgiveness, love for one's neighbour, joy in the creation, the meaning of suffering, evangelical meekness, and the figure of Christ.

Although God, love and crime are perennial concerns of literature, Dostoevsky was the first writer to approach these themes, so uniquely combined, from a Christian anthropological perspective and he is still the most original. He does not present his Christian themes as a postulation or as a religious matter of fact, but in a non-religious context and, within that, in a 'vulnerable' way, by the use of contradiction and negation, and by incarnating Christian attitudes in characters with whom the reader cannot directly identify. Dostoevsky's method of work is a paradoxical presentation of Christian themes.

The first paradox is precisely this combination of faith and fiction. By using faith in a fictional context, faith becomes a part of the fiction and remains, in the last instance, literary fantasy. Religious themes are used in gripping psychological detective stories, conflicts about female beauties, or in an atmosphere of terrorist conspiracies. In publicistic essays, letters or a diary one can write far more directly about religious-philosophical matters. However, precisely by fictionalizing faith, Dostoevsky is able to show its existential reality. That is what the reader experiences and what the author intended, as he stated in letters and notebooks. Those who have no affinity at all with religion cannot feel the depth of Dostoevsky's dealing with it. It can irritate them and lead to their dismissal of the writer's entire work, or, for them, Dostoevsky's novels are only entertaining stories. But the vast majority of Dostoevsky's readers experience his novels as recognizable intellectual or ethical tragedies, as real-life human dramas, however invented their textual

world is. The religious problems in this literary fiction are nearer to reality and existence than that in specialist theological works.

Another paradox in Dostoevsky's method is that, within the literary fiction, he uses stylistic means, apparently to contradict or to put the religious themes into perspective. In the first place, the characters that start discussing or promoting such themes are no average citizens, but figures on the outskirts of the social scale or representatives of society who differ from their milieu. The drunk, Marmeladov, and his daughter, Sonya, who has no respectable profession, the unworldly Myshkin, the unconventional bishop, Tikhon, the comic intellectual, Stepan Verkhovensky, the roaming Makar, the atypical monk, Zosima, and the angelic Alyosha are all strange characters, not run-of-the-mill people. This, by the way, is also true of Dostoevsky's philosophical themes, which are propounded by an eccentric 'underground man' or a dreamy 'ridiculous man'.

The reader can hardly identify with these figures but he recognizes the thoughts they pronounce. On the other hand, the characters are not absurdly strange. If one sees them only as 'Christian fools', one has a faulty cliché view of Russia and Dostoevsky, but it is important to know that it is never official representatives of the church who speak of Christian themes. In the novels, the church as an institution is conspicuous by its absence. The church is dealt with only once, in Ivan Karamazov's article on church and state, but this is not about the church as liturgical community.

The opponents of the Christian voices are often people of a certain social standing, people with good material assets or a higher education: Svidrigaylov, Luzhin, Rogozhin, Ippolit, Pyotr Verkhovensky, Stavrogin, Kirillov, Versilov (not entirely an opponent), Rakitin, Ivan Karamazov. The intelligent Porfiry Petrovich is a neutral figure.

That there are so many deviating characters and striking personalities involved in the religious and atheistic context, does not mean that there are no normal people in the novels. There are plenty, but none of them have anything to do with religious themes and often only exist on the sidelines. Normal, spontaneous people, with whom the reader *can* identify, like Dunya Raskolnikova, Dmitry Razumikhin, Dasha Shatova, Vera Lebedeva and Evgeny Radomsky, and the matrons Elizaveta Epanchina, Varvara Stavrogina and Tatyana Prutkova, are able to keep the hectic situations of the others under control by their common sense and practicality.

Another category of characters who take no part in the religious-philosophical confrontations but nevertheless play an important role in the plot of the novel, is that of the beautiful women: Nastasya Filippovna, Aglaya Yepanchina, Katerina Ivanovna, Grusha Svetlova, Katerina Akhmakova, and, in a minor role, Liza Tushina. Added to the above, it is clear that Dostoevsky's

novels are not inhabited solely by social underdogs, making it all the more striking that those who defend Christian values have no high social status or striking physical beauty. The only pretty woman who starts a serious religious discussion, is Mme Khokhlakova, and Grushenka tells a beautiful fable with a religious meaning.

Another way of putting Christian remarks into perspective, is by stylistic means: sometimes by light irony, a smile or inserted funny words. Sometimes there is a deeper irony, as in the poem on the Grand Inquisitor (fiction within fiction), where a Christian message is uttered by someone who negates it, or in the description of Zosima's life (also double fiction), where an unconventional monk and his often unorthodox views are presented in traditional-hagiographic style. It is striking how Dostoevsky manages to combine a light tone with the religious seriousness of the subjects, and in this respect, his humour and irony are underrated style characteristics. Another stylistic means is sometimes presenting an over-excited speaker, so that he does not appear to be serious, as in Myshkin's and Shatov's anti-Catholic tirades. From a paradoxical point of view this could underline the seriousness of the subject, but it could also be explained as Dostoevsky's implicit scepticism. However that may be, Dostoevsky never gives a straight presentation of Christian ideas, never propagating but provoking, making the reader think.

That is Dostoevsky's greatest achievement: he does not force faith on the reader, but presents it in such a way that the reader must make a choice. Christian voices, sometimes naive but always authentic, and the rationally built up, sometimes vociferous arguments of the opposition are convincingly reported. In other words, atheistic temptation is as strong as that of religion. Atheism is not presented as a caricature.

Yet, in all this intellectual activity, there is no 'debate' between believers and unbelievers. Even Zosima does not answer Ivan Karamazov's arguments directly, although Dostoevsky conceived Zosima's story as the refutation of Ivan's solid arguments.

We call Dostoevsky's way of working like this 'paradoxical' because, in spite of his equal treatment of pros and cons, and the fundamental religious ambivalence in the novels, we know Dostoevsky's intentions from his notebooks for the novels and from comments in his letters. Recent literature study has led to more attention being paid to the author's implicit presence in the text, the implied or immanent author. If one pays heed to the hermeneutical discernment for polyphony, one discovers a writer who is both a believer and a doubter, but not a neutral, unfeeling presenter who is superior to his themes. This ambivalence strengthens the ultimate orientation on the reality of faith. Nevertheless, those who wish can opt for the atheistic strength of *The Brothers Karamazov*, as did Vasily Rozanov and Albert Camus, but calling Dostoevsky