6-1-1952

Sin and Forgiveness in Dostoyevsky

Milton L. Rudnick
Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, miltcarl6@gmail.com

SIN AND FORGIVENESS

IN

DOSTOYEVSKY

A Thesis Presented to the Faculty
of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis,
Department of Systematic Theology
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Bachelor of Divinity

---

by

Milton L. Rudnick

June 1952

Approved by: Jaroslav Pelikan
Advisor

Alex Harbsmeier
Reader

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

To read the writings of Fyodor Dostoyevsky[1] is to view a real and startling picture of mankind. In his grotesque characters who move helplessly from one tragedy to another the reader senses a new literary reality, one which has been deepened by the inclusion of the spiritual dimension. Gradually, you discover that the fascinating feature of Dostoyevsky's characters and stories is the fact that in them you see yourself. Here the quirks, the passions, and even the greatness which one scarcely even admits that he owns rise up before him in the person of a murderer, a wild sensualist, or a saintly prostitute.

Our purpose in this paper is to analyze the writings of this penetrating author in order to determine his concept of sin and forgiveness. The sources for this research will be the Constance Garnett translations, the accuracy of which will not be questioned. The thought of Dostoyevsky which we will study is his thought as he expressed it in his major novels, although, by way of introduction, certain aspects of his life and character will also be noted. Reference is

---

[1] Many different spellings of this name occur. The above spelling will be employed hereafter.

frequently made to the opinions of several of Dostoyevsky's principal interpreters. This is usually done by way of illustration, or in substantiation of evidence already derived directly from the writings of Dostoyevsky himself.

Dostoyevsky was not a theologian or even a completely consistent religious thinker.[2] This fact must be kept in mind as we examine his thought for theological concepts such as sin and forgiveness. But a study of sin need not be confined to a theological framework. Sin is a phenomenon that occurs in man, and it was in man that Dostoyevsky observed and analyzed it. For, as Berdyaev says, "Dostoievsky devoted the whole of his creative energy to one single theme, man and man's destiny. He was anthropocentric to an almost inexpressible degree; the problem of man was his absorbing passion."[3] Dostoyevsky must be approached, then, as what he is--a profound observer of human experience, a literary artist who embodies his observations in characters as contradictory and unpredictable as real people. It is from the turbulent lives of these characters and from the strange developments of their lives that we must attempt to determine Dostoyevsky's concept of sin. To look for neatly phrased theological definitions or

---

[2]Nicholas Berdyaev, Dostoievsky: An Interpretation, translated by Donald Attwater (New York: Sheed and Ward Inc., 1934), p. 37.

[3]Ibid., p. 39.

systematic expression of thought is to overlook the fact that the man whose thought we are exploring is a dramatic portrayer of humanity and not a dogmatic theologian.

Furthermore, we are dealing with the thought of a Christian man. "...he (Dostoyevsky) always remained a child of Russian orthodoxy to the marrow of his bones," states Berdyaev.[4] His lifelong association with the Russian Church and his devotion to its teachings have measurably influenced his concept of sin. In considering Dostoyevsky's Orthodox background, however, we should note the fact that he gradually became part of a left wing trend of Russian Christianity, a trend which was characterized by a more optimistic evaluation of man's potentialities, and a preoccupation with the terrifying spiritual conflicts through which man arrives at new heights of faith.[5]

Dostoyevsky's Christianity was Scripturally orientated. During his Siberian exile, which proved to be the turning point of his life and art, the Bible was practically the only available reading material. Driven by literary as well as spiritual hunger, Dostoyevsky immersed himself in the Gospels. Here he began a relationship with the Scriptures which lasted the rest of his life. The extent of his dependence on Scripture for his understanding of man is

---

[4] Ibid., p. 79.

[5] Ibid., pp. 61-3, 208-9.

easily demonstrated by random references to his four major works. In The Brothers Karamazov the key "Grand Inquisitor" chapter is written around the Gospel account of the three-fold temptation of Jesus (Matthew 4:1-11). In Crime and Punishment Raskolnikov[6] came to confess his sin to the prostitute Sonia, and she read to him from St. John 11 the record of Jesus' raising of Lazarus from the dead. After the murderer finally came to repentance, he saw his new life of faith and forgiveness as a resurrection.[7] The Possessed, or Demons as the original is entitled, is a dramatization by Dostoyevsky on his contemporary Russian scene of the struggle and victory of Christ over the Gadarene demons (Luke 8:26-33). According to Troyat, the conclusion and meaning of The Idiot is contained in John 12:24, which is quoted several times in the course of the novel, "And I say to you verily, if the grain of wheat planted in the earth does not die in the earth, it will remain solitary, and if it dies it will bring forth many fruits."[8] Perhaps, in this very fact of Dostoyevsky's

---

[6]Many different spellings of the characters' names occur. Hereafter, the spellings of the Constance Garnett translations will be employed.

[7]Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Crime and Punishment, translated by Constance Garnett (New York: The Modern Library, c.1950), p. 531.

[8]Henry Troyat, Firebrand: The Life of Dostoyevsky, translated by Norbert Guterman (New York: Roy Publishers, c.1946), pp. 323-4.

intimate relationship with Scripture, we can find the source of the many disturbing tensions in his religious thought. Perhaps, Dostoyevsky has translated Scriptural concepts into dramatic life situations with the Scriptural dialectic still intact.

Dostoyevsky's lifelong association with the Russian Church and his profound experiences with Scripture combined with one further major element to form the full picture of his faith. This element was the serious intellectual doubts which repeatedly rose up from within to challenge his faith. These doubts grew out of his impressive intellectual and artistic genius and were aggravated by a pronounced egotism. His was not a carefully sheltered, childlike faith, but one that lived and grew while being subjected to the most devastating intellectual attack. In Dostoyevsky's own words, "It was not as a child that I learnt to believe in Christ and confess his faith. My Hosanna has burst forth from the huge furnace of doubt."[9] Dostoyevsky's personal confession of faith--its form and content--is significant for the present discussion. It reveals a very reverent spirit, caught up in an ecstacy of adoration, yet it is almost totally lacking in traditional theological expression. After referring to his terrible moments of doubt he continues:

---

[9]Berdyaev, op. cit., p. 31.

> And yet sometimes God gives me moments of complete serenity. In such moments I compose for myself a profession of faith in which everything is clear and sacred. This profession is simple. Here it is: believe that there is nothing more beautiful, more profound, more appealing, more reasonable, more courageous, more perfect than Christ. Not only is there nothing, but--I say to myself with jealous love--there can be nothing. More: if anyone proved to me that Christ is outside the truth, and if it were really established that truth is outside Christ, I would prefer to be with Christ than with truth.[10]

Dostoyevsky was a man of intense Christian faith, but he was also a man who had very real experiences with sin. His own struggle with egotism began in his early days at St. Petersburg after his first novel Poor Folk was received with loud acclaim. During his imprisonment he witnessed the the most unbelievable expressions of primitive passion and degradation on the part of his fellow prisoners. Later on he acquired an uncontrollable addiction to roulette and was involved in a violent extra-marital affair with Polina Suslova. Dostoyevsky has made a revealing comment on his own conflict with evil passion:

> At times I suddenly plunged into sombre, subterranean, despicable debauchery, or semi-debauchery. My squalid passions were keen, glowing with morbid irritability. The outbursts were hysterical, accompanied by tears and convulsions of remorse. Bitterness boiled in me. I felt an unwholesome thirst for violent moral contrasts, and so I demeaned myself to animality. I indulged in it by night, secretly, fearfully, foully, with a shame that never left me, even at the most degrading moments

---

[10] Troyat, op. cit., p. 172.

> I carried in myself the love of secretiveness; I was terribly afraid that I should be seen, met, recognized.[11]

There is one final introductory observation which we should make. That is, Dostoyevsky lived in, conceived of, and wrote about only one kind of people--Christian people. His Russian world was one in which every person was at least a baptized member of the Church. He was quite unfamiliar with the civilized paganism which is common in the modern world. Even his most manifestly sinful characters--the Raskolnikovs and the Stavrogins--were aware of the merciful Heavenly Father to Whom they could return, if they would only repent. Even his confessed atheists were apostate sons of the Church who rejected the Christ whom they had known, people on whom the promise of grace still rested. This fact is most relevant to an understanding of Dostoyevsky's concept of sin. It shows us that sin as Dostoyevsky portrays it is sin as it appears in the Christian man. Because of his peculiar environment in a completely "churched" world, Dostoyevsky did not address himself to the problem of bringing the pagan man into the right relationship with God. Dostoyevsky experimented with and described the phenomena of sin and forgiveness only as they occur in Christian people.

---

[11] J. A. T. Lloyd, A Great Russian Realist (New York: John Lane Company, 1912), p. 257.

CHAPTER II

THE NATURE OF SIN

A consideration of the nature of sin could well begin on a cosmic level, with an attempt to discern the origin and strength of the various powers at work in the universe. From there one could proceed downward to the activity of these forces upon the human creature, some of which work good and others evil. Dostoyevsky's approach is precisely the opposite, for Dostoyevsky begins with man and sees everything else through him. As Berdyaev says:

> For he did not see him (man) just as a natural phenomenon, like any other though rather superior, but as a microcosm, the center of being, the sun around which all else moves: the riddle of the universe is within man, and to solve the question of man is to solve the question of God.[1]

As he peered into the troubled soul of man Dostoyevsky, indeed, saw "the riddle of the universe," and he saw it to be completely religious in nature. Dmitri Karamazov groaned in anguish as he became aware of the nature of the fierce struggle which was raging within him, "God and the devil are fighting there and the battlefield is the heart of

---

[1]Nicholas Berdyaev, Dostoievsky: An Interpretation, translated by Donald Attwater (New York: Sheed and Ward Inc., 1934), p. 39.

man."[2] Dostoyevsky does not overlook the fact that events of real consequence do transpire outside the sphere of man. The case is simply that man is Dostoyevsky's subject, and anything else is of interest to him only as it relates to man.

For an accurate understanding of Dostoyevsky's concept of sin, we must first of all view his demonology with utter seriousness. Devils play as real and active a role in Dostoyevsky's world as they do in the world of the New Testament. Nowhere does he leave the impression that he is merely depicting folk superstition or making allegorical reference to an idealized, impersonal force of evil. Dostoyevsky's characters repeatedly testify to the reality of demons; they bear the torments which demons inflict upon them. A demon confronts Ivan Karamazov face to face in a hallucination. He also haunts him in the person of his "ape," the despicable Smerdyakov. Again and again we see the leering face of Satan, sometimes under the mask of Pyotr Verhovensky, over whom he wields undisputed control, other times in the amazing Grushenka, who is both an angel and a fiend. But wherever and however he appears, we see on him the unmistakable marks of Scripture's "Prince of Darkness."

---

[2]Fyodor Dostoyevsky, The Brothers Karamazov, translated by Constance Garnett (New York: The Modern Library, n.d.), p. 111.

But the power of Satan does not make itself felt only occasionally, in certain people. Ivan Karamazov says, "In every man, of course, a demon lies hidden..."[3] Within each person there exists a veritable volcano of evil, and those who have subdued it most successfully are most ready to acknowledge its terrible power (e.g., Zossima and Alyosha). Yarmolinsky sees this realization of "man's extraordinary capacity for evil" as one of Dostoyevsky's main contributions to our understanding of human nature.[4] This capacity for evil stems directly from indwelling demons. Illustrative of this is Raskolnikov's weird dream in the prison hospital, which haunted his memory for weeks and finally revealed to him the demonic source of his own morbid condition. He dreamed that a plague of willful, intelligent microbes had swept over the entire world. When these fantastic microbes invaded a man they rendered him completely mad and evil. Everyone was overtaken by these little demons and the human race proceeded to destroy itself. Dostoyevsky's characters consistently attribute their sins to the working of the devil. Even before his dream Raskolnikov insisted before Sonia, "Don't interrupt me, Sonia. I want to prove one thing only, that the devil led me on then... But it was

---

[3] Ibid., p. 250.

[4] Avrahm Yarmolinsky, A Review of The Idiot in the New Republic, CVII (December 14, 1942), 797-8.

the devil killed that old woman, not I..."[5] Dmitri explains that the reason he did not kill his father as he had planned was that the devil had been conquered within him.

On the other hand Dostoyevsky also sees in man an immanent source of good. Often his characters are directed within themselves in their search for God. His most violently sinful people (e.g., Raskolnikov) are at the same time capable of expressing genuine kindness. Dmitri Karamazov, although almost completely captured by the demon of sensuality, tearfully acknowledges his Heavenly Father, "Though I may be following the devil, I am Thy son, O Lord, and I love Thee."[6] On this account most interpreters of Dostoyevsky claim that he denies the total depravity of man and that he entertains a very optimistic view of man's innate spiritual powers.[7] However, as we noticed in our introductory observation, Dostoyevsky is not dealing with natural, unconverted man, but with baptized children of God, who have been endowed by Him with new spiritual powers. When his characters are told to look within for the Divine, they are not to look for that which belongs to them by

---

[5]Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Crime and Punishment, translated by Constance Garnett (New York: The Modern Library, c.1950), p. 407.

[6]Dostoyevsky, The Brothers Karamazov, p. 110.

[7]Francis C. Rossow, The Concept of Suffering in the Philosophy of Dostoyevsky (Concordia Seminary, St. Louis: unpublished Bachelor's Thesis, 1948), p. 69.

nature. They are directed to the Christ Who dwells in their hearts by virtue of their baptism, who continually works to perfect His own pure image within them.

With both God and demons inhabiting his soul, exerting their opposite influences upon him, man is involved in a fearful struggle. He is a dual personality, tugged first toward good and then toward evil as the tide of the universal conflict ebbs and flows within him. This picture of man's inner struggle finds its closest parallel--indeed, its original--in St. Paul's description of the spirit--flesh battle. Human duality is one of the most unique and prominent themes of Dostoyevsky's writing. Referring to The Possessed Lloyd comments:

> The book from first to last is permeated by that sense of duality which is so persistently found in the world of the great Russian realist. It is here that Dostoieffsky has specifically indicated the conflict between the truths, that of the God-man and that of man-God. The conflict is fought out in the souls of the possessed who deny and believe in the same breath.[8]

Yet man is not merely an impotent, non-partisan object of the divine-demoniac conflict. Man himself enters into the struggle. He becomes a contestant as well as the prize, because man, by nature, is endowed with a certain freedom. It is not within the scope of this paper to discuss the entire question of human freedom as Dostoyevsky conceived of

---

[8] J. A. T. Lloyd, A Great Russian Realist (New York: John Lane Company, 1912), p. 257.

it.[9] Here, we shall consider human freedom only in its immediate relationship to sin. This freedom, as it enters into the problem of sin, manifests itself in these two situations. In the first place, man willingly participates in evil as he is tempted by Satan and is therefore fully responsible for his sin. Dmitri confesses to Alyosha:

> You know me now, a scoundrel, an avowed scoundrel, but let me tell you that I've never done anything before and never shall again, anything that can compare in baseness with the dishonor which I bear now at this very minute on my breast, here, here, which will come to pass though I'm perfectly free to stop it. I can stop it or carry it through, note that. Well, let me tell you, I shall carry it through. I shan't stop it.[10]

Secondly, man also, as a child of God, willingly participates in good. Although man may be an instrument of God, he is not a cold and lifeless one. He is not forced by God into doing good against his will. This "willing participation" in both good and evil is about as far as one can legitimately define Dostoyevsky's portrayal of human freedom. This

---

[9]Berdyaev takes up the question rather extensively. His conclusion is, "The dignity of man and the dignity of faith require the recognition of two freedoms, freedom to choose the truth (Christ) and freedom in the truth." Op. cit., p. 69. Dostoyevsky's writings leave room for this conclusion, except for the fact that Dostoyevsky is always treating Christian people, who are, in fact, already in the truth. In addition to this, although the Grand Inquisitor talks of Christ's wanting man's free choice for Him, he also quotes Christ's words, "I will make you free." What Dostoyevsky actually does is to erect the two poles of the tension--man's freedom (or rather, the fact that grace is not irresistible), and the necessity for God's liberating, redemptive activity.

[10]Dostoyevsky, The Brothers Karamazov, p. 163.

concept of freedom is best understood in the light of Dostoyevsky's concept of both God's and the devil's method of operating in man. Their influences are not forced upon man from the outside. Both enter into man and convert his will. Since man, then, is doing what he wills to do, man's freedom is not destroyed.

Man's proper conduct as a child of God is to conform more and more to the divine will and to resist every impulse of the devil. It is Father Zossima who reveals to us most clearly just what the calling of the Christian life is.[11]

---

[11]Zossima's description of the ideal Christian life was given in terms of monasticism. He did this, not to propose monasticism as the only real way to live the Christian life, but in defense of monasticism as a good and useful way of Christian living. He saw in monasticism tremendous potentialities of spiritual service to mankind, indeed, as the hope of Russia's salvation. Withdrawal and solitary contemplation were not an end in themselves to Zossima. He saw them as vital preparation for, and a period of waiting for the opportunity to render active service. "Fathers and teachers, what is the monk? In the cultivated world the word is nowadays pronounced by some people with a jeer, and by others it is used as a term of abuse, and this contempt for the monk is growing. It is true, alas, it is true, that there are many sluggards, gluttons, profligates and insolent beggars among monks. Educated people point to these; 'you are idlers, useless members of society, you live on the labour of others, you are shameless beggars.' And yet how many meek and humble monks there are, yearning for solitude and fervent prayer in peace. These are less noticed or passed over in silence. And how surprised men would be if I were to say that from these meek monks, who yearn for solitary prayer, the salvation of Russia will come perhaps once more. For they are in truth made ready in peace and quiet 'for the day and the hour, the month and the year.' Meanwhile, in their solitude, they keep the image of Christ fair and undefiled, in the purity of God's truth, from the times of the Fathers of old, the Apostles and the Martyrs. And when the time comes they will show it to the tottering creeds of the world." Ibid., pp. 327-8.

With God's help man is to discipline himself, to break the tyranny of fleshly and material desires. By so doing man can draw near to God in faith and relate himself to people in self-sacrificing love. In this obedient, submissive relationship with Christ, man has real, ultimate freedom. He has glorious release from the dominion of Satan, freedom to experience the highest of all creaturely joys, that of loving, willing service to the Creator.

It is just this freedom which Satan endeavors to destroy, for it is freedom from his tyranny. Therefore, he approaches man with the idea that his freedom in Christ is really a bondage and a humiliating restraint. With every subtlety of hell he works dissatisfaction in man. He makes man chafe under the easy yoke of Christ. Freedom, says the devil, is not this union with Christ. Freedom is the ability to cast aside everything which inhibits the expression of one's appetites. Freedom is to "crash through the barriers," to feel that "everything is permissible." The man who can do this is truly a man. In fact, he is more than a man. Before all things can become permissible for a man, he must first get rid of God. Once he has dethroned that God-man, Christ, for the sake of his own passions, a man can rise up himself as the new, strong, and superior Man-god.

This proud assertion of freedom from God is the essence of sin. It is the goal of Satan's work in man. Raskolnikov confesses that this was the essence of his great sin.

Finally, he was not interested in the pawnbroker's money or in the welfare of his mother and sister. "It was not so much the money I wanted, but something else... I wanted to find out then and quickly whether I was a louse like everybody else or a man. Whether I can step over barriers or not..."[12]

For Dostoyevsky sin is something more basic than mere surface immorality. Vice is certainly evil, but it is not identical with sin. Rather, it is an expression of this inner condition of unbelief and rebellion against God. This can be conclusively illustrated. Mitya gives this reason for his constant debauchery, "It's God that's worrying me. That's the only thing that's worrying me."[13] Man either negates God in order to indulge in vice, or he is driven by his fearful doubts about God to look for escape in all kinds of bestiality.

Yet, it is possible for people to be deeply involved in vice without rebelling against God, though such vice can eventually destroy their faith. Zossima cites the Russian peasants as such:

> Though the peasants are corrupted and cannot renounce their filthy sin, yet they know that it is cursed by God and that they do wrong in sinning. So that our

---

[12]Dostoyevsky, Crime and Punishment, p. 406.

[13]Dostoyevsky, The Brothers Karamazov, p. 628.

> people still believe in righteousness, have faith in God and weep tears of devotion.[14]

In this connection there is also the case of Sonia who is caught up in the most vile degradation, but who remains a saint in spite of it. Though she has given her body into prostitution, she has done so in humble self-sacrifice, in the most profound faith and love. Here is not an attempt to cast down God or to overcome all necessity for obeying Him. She does not even attempt to explain away the evil of her prostitution on the grounds that it is an act of self-sacrifice. Gladly she accepts the shame and punishment of this degradation in order that she might keep her family from starvation. Her involvement with vice is sin only accidentally, not essentially, because in doing so she does not deny God.

Dostoyevsky points out that man can commit this basic sin of proudly rejecting God even from very lofty motives. For example, the Grand Inquisitor, as a symbol of a powerful tendency in organized religion, rejects Christ for the love of man. Feeling that Christ had been cruel in asking for free faith and obedience, which most people are unable to render, the Grand Inquisitor joined with Satan and created an easy slavery which kept simple people happily deluded, though severed from Christ and on the way to damnation.

---

[14] Ibid., p. 330.

Ivan Karamazov, who told this legend, was himself sorely tempted to commit this same sin. The great offense to him was the suffering of the world, especially that of innocent children. Such a God, Who would find it necessary or even desirable to incorporate undeserved pain into his creation--Ivan was tempted to feel--was not a God that he could accept. Ivan was very near to renouncing God for the sake of suffering man. But, in the end, Ivan did not come to this. He side-stepped the offense simply by rejecting the whole insane world, while trying to maintain his hold on God: "It's not that I don't accept God, you must understand, it's the whole world created by Him I don't and cannot accept."[15]

The proud independence from God to which the devil tempts man is, of course, a lie. Christ is true freedom. To break away from Him is to sink into the slavery of demons. Time after time Dostoyevsky drives this lesson home. Fyodor Karamazov, Dmitri, Raskolnikov, Svidrigailov, Stravrogin, Rogozhin--all are grim evidence that to reject Christ and to look for liberty in the unrestrained yielding to one's passions is to condemn one's self to the merciless dominion of Satan. The lives of these characters might well be thought of as dramatic sermons on Jesus' words of John 8:34, "Whosoever committeth sin is the servant of sin." The irony of such slavery is that those who are caught up in

---

[15] Ibid., p. 254.

it suffer the delusion of freedom. When the demonic microbes in Raskolnikov's dream had brought their victims into madness and submission:

> ...men considered themselves so intellectual and so completely in possession of the truth...never had they considered their decisions, their scientific conclusions, their moral convictions so infallible.[16]

The people who have come under the satanically administered religion of the Grand Inquisitor are people who "are more persuaded than ever that they have perfect freedom, yet they have brought their freedom to us and laid it humbly at our feet."[17]

Not only does self-assertion against God result in slavery, eventually it also results in self-destruction. This consequence of forsaking God is also brought out vividly in Dostoyevsky's writings. Kirilov stands out as the extreme example of this. He commits suicide on the theory that by doing so he will "become God," i.e., he will be substituting his own will for the will outside himself in the most complete way possible.[18] Stavrogin broke through all restraints and rejected God. By so doing he became enslaved by hideous apathy and disinterest. Life became completely meaningless and his suicide inevitable. He was

---

[16]Dostoyevsky, Crime and Punishment, p. 528.

[17]Dostoyevsky, The Brothers Karamazov, p. 260.

[18]Eric Siepmann, "On Dostoievski," Nineteenth Century (November 1939), p. 593.

incapable of believing in anything.[19] Almost identical to this was the fate of Svidrigailov. In the last chapter of The Possessed Stepan Trofimovitch traces this inevitable result of denying God back to the very substance of man:

> The one essential condition of human existence is that man should always be able to bow down before something infinitely great. If men are deprived of the infinitely great, they will not go on living and will die of despair.[20]

Since Dostoyevsky describes sin in terms of such unremitting reality, it is understandable that his picture of guilt is also extremely convincing. We see his sinners crushed by the burden of their offenses, buffetted by their tempter, and torn between a longing for forgiveness and their reluctance to confess. When we examine the picture of guilt as Dostoyevsky paints it, we notice, first of all, that the intensity of a sinner's guilt often seems out of proportion to his actual crime. In fact, a man is severely afflicted by guilt for a mere evil intention toward another. Ivan Karamazov explained his tortured conscience thus, "If it's not Dmitri, but Smerdyakov who's the murderer, I share his guilt, for I put him up to it."[21] It is of

---

[19]Henry Troyat, Firebrand: The Life of Dostoyevsky, translated by Norbert Guterman (New York: Roy Publishers, c.1946), pp. 350-2.

[20]Fyodor Dostoyevsky, The Possessed, translated by Constance Garnett (New York: The Modern Library, c.1936), p. 674.

[21]Dostoyevsky, The Brothers Karamazov, p. 655.

interest to note that Dostoyevsky himself experienced this very kind of guilt. At the time when his own father was murdered, young Dostoyevsky was engulfed in an ugly hatred for his father because of the old man's sensuality and miserliness. For the remainder of his life Dostoyevsky felt as responsible for his father's death as if he had personally murdered him, just because of his evil wish. Similar to the case of Ivan Karamazov is that of Stavrogin, who felt guilty for his crippled wife's death, merely because he secretly wished for it to happen.

The explanation for this apparently disproportionate guilt is to be found in the essence of sin, which we have already discussed. Essentially, sin is not an act, but an inward rebellion against God. This rebellious spirit exists before the crime is actually perpetrated, and a person may be counted guilty for it even if it were not carried through. This does not mean, however, that a sinner is eternally haunted for every evil intention that enters his mind. If, like Dmitri, a man conquers the will to sin, he may enjoy full forgiveness.[22] But as long as the sinful intent is tolerated, even if it is not openly manifested, the sinner stands condemned. For the God against Whom the sin is directed is the One Who judges the inmost heart of man.

---

[22]The reference here is to Dmitri's last minute decision not to kill his father, although he was presented with a perfect opportunity to do so.

Alyosha indicates that even an outwardly innocent person experiences real guilt for his secret, unexpressed sinful desires. As Dmitri described some particularly shameful debauchery in which he had indulged, he noticed Alyosha redden. He thought that it was a blush of embarrassment at his lurid tale, but Alyosha said suddenly:

> "I wasn't blushing at what you were saying or at what you've done. I blushed because I am the same as you are."
>
> "You? Come, that's going a little too far!"
>
> "No, it's not too far," said Alyosha warmly (obviously the idea was not a new one). "The ladder's the same. I'm at the bottom step, and you're above, somewhere about the thirteenth. That's how I see it. But it's all the same--absolutely the same in kind."[23]

However, once sin is actually committed against one's fellow the sinner immediately feels guilty toward all men. The man whose rebellion against God has manifested itself toward his fellow is unable to associate with people. All other people are a bitter reproach to him for his crime, even if they are unaware of the crime. We think of Raskolnikov lurking alone through the narrow streets of St. Petersburg, avoiding his friends, disinclined toward any human association. We see him sitting in the gloomy silence of his room, brooding over his dark plans and, afterward, over the unspeakable evil which he had done. In a letter to his publisher regarding the story, Dostoyevsky explained the final result of this isolating guilt:

---

[23]Dostoyevsky, The Brothers Karamazov, p. 113.

> ...in the end he is self-constrained to give himself up, even though he may have to die in a penitentiary, because that is his only hope of again being able to associate with people. For the feeling of exclusion and isolation which followed the crime was the greatest of tortures.[24]

The reason for this feeling of guilt toward all men for a crime against only a few is to be found in Dostoyevsky's corporate view of mankind. To him the human race was not just a collection of individuals. Dostoyevsky saw humanity as one united, living organism. People do not live isolated existances without contact or effect upon their fellows. As Troyat says:

> Nothing begins in ourselves, nothing ends in ourselves. All of us is caught in the same neurotic net, and a simple gesture of anyone of us causes our fellow man to feel a painful twitch.[25]

All men are brothers by the fact of their creation and redemption. It is on the basis of this concept of the united human race that Dostoyevsky's characters from Zossima to Ivan plead for men to live compassionately as brothers toward one another.

Since men are all bound together into a single organic unity, to injure one man is to sin against all, and to set up a sympathetic reaction in all men. Everyone is aware of this reality, at least remotely. The criminal senses that he has sinned against all men by sinning against only one,

---

[24]Troyat, op. cit., p. 263.

[25]Ibid., p. 37.

and thus he seeks to avoid contact with other people. The people in society indicate that they are aware of this corporateness by rising up against the criminal in outrage when they discover that he has harmed their fellow. In the next chapter we shall see that because the sinner has offended the whole race of men by his sin, it is necessary for him to confess his crime not only to God, but also before men.

There is one final aspect of this concept of corporate mankind which finds expression particularly in the discourses of Zossima. He tells us that each member of the human race must be ready to share the guilt of all sinners. Caught up as we are in the whole body of humanity, we are partners in the guilt of the criminal, though we have no part in his crime. Upon discovering evil in our fellow man we should go out in tears and repentance, as though we ourselves were guilty of the wrong. Every inclination toward self-righteous judgment should be smothered in love for the sinner and genuine sorrow for his sin. The reason why even the innocent must share the guilt of the sinner is this: as brothers of all men we have the obligation to strengthen them in every way. If they fall into sin, it may be because we have failed in our brotherly obligation to strengthen them and make them better men. When we have thus become aware of our responsibility to strengthen all men and to share their

guilt, we have discovered what it really means to be a member of the human family.[26]

As one examines Dostoyevsky's corporate view of mankind, he cannot but note the strong resemblance between it and the New Testament concept of the Body of Christ. The intense sympathy between the members and the obligation to strengthen the brother are the outstanding characteristics of both concepts. If the resemblance is intentional, indeed, if Dostoyevsky has identified the two, we can easily see the reason why. In Dostoyevsky's world the Russian Church and Russian nation had boundaries which were practically identical.

---

[26]Dostoyevsky, The Brothers Karamazov, pp. 336-7.

CHAPTER III

THE FORGIVENESS OF SIN

As we pursue our examination of Dostoyevsky's concept of sin into the area of forgiveness, it is necessary for us to align ourselves once again to his perspective. A theological discussion of sin would focus our attention on the heart of God, attempting to determine what takes place within Him as He extends pardon to fallen mankind. Such a focus is inevitable, since forgiveness is essentially something which God does. However, forgiveness is also a reality which man experiences, and, in his intense preoccupation with man, Dostoyevsky treats forgiveness chiefly from this aspect. In his stories we find little attention devoted to forgiveness as a divine problem, but we see many sinners struggling under the crushing burden of their guilt, striving desperately to atone for their sins, and, in a few cases, actually enjoying the unspeakable relief of forgiveness.

In spite of this strongly anthropological orientation, however, Dostoyevsky does not view forgiveness as something which takes place apart from God. Although his great fascination is man, Dostoyevsky always deals with man in relation to God. As he describes the human experience of forgiveness, he is describing something which God bestows on man through the death of His Son, Jesus Christ. Permeating everything

Dostoyevsky says about the forgiveness of sin is the awareness of the crucified Savior. One needs only to remember the fervent Christian faith of Dostoyevsky himself, and to recall the Christian consciousness of the world about which he writes to realize this. However, the Savior does not always remain in the background of Dostoyevsky's stories. Occasionally the figure of Christ bursts into the foreground, establishing with certainty that He is the Source of forgiveness. There is the remarkable confession of the wretched Marmeladov, who saw the forgiveness of even such degradation as that into which he had sunk in the mercy of Christ.[1] Equally grand is Alyosha's reply to Ivan's relentless questioning about the sufferings of the innocent:

> "You said just now, is there a being in the whole world who would have the right to forgive and could forgive? But there is a being and He can forgive everything, all and for all, because He gave His innocent blood for all and everything. You have forgotten Him, and on Him is built the edifice, and it is to Him they cry aloud, 'Thou art just, O Lord, for Thy ways are revealed!'"
>
> "Oh! the One without sin and His blood! No, I have not forgotten about Him; on the contrary I've been wondering all the time how it was you did not bring Him in before."[2]

Dostoyevsky presupposes this divine forgiveness through the death of Christ as he writes about human beings caught

---

[1]Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Crime and Punishment, translated by Constance Garnett (New York: The Modern Library, c.1950), p. 24.

[2]Fyodor Dostoyevsky, The Brothers Karamazov, translated by Constance Garnett (New York: The Modern Library, n.d.), p. 255.

in the grip of sin and unbelief. The problem which he portrays is the struggle to bring man into the realm of that ever present grace of God. Man is shown as he travels the painful, humbling road back to the God Whom he has rejected by his sin. God is always there ready to forgive. The problem is to overcome the fearful pride of the sinner, which tries to destroy every repentant impulse and to keep man from returning to His forgiving God.

An essential element in man's experience as he moves toward God's forgiving grace is suffering. Dostoyevsky was deeply concerned with human suffering and its relation to the forgiveness of sin. Indeed, this was one of his principal themes.[3] To understand the role suffering plays in the life of a sinner we must first realize what the nature of suffering is. "Man's suffering, then, is not outward but inward, not a body-suffering but a soul-suffering," is the conclusion of Rossow in his thesis.[4] Physical suffering, whenever it is related directly to sin, is a rather unimportant, outward aspect of this more significant inward suffering. Suffering is the dreadful torments of a guilty conscience. It is the horrible realization of one's crime. This inward suffering is the common experience of every

---

[3]This subject is extensively discussed in Francis Rossow, The Concept of Suffering in the Philosophy of Dostoyevsky (Concordia Seminary, St. Louis: unpublished Bachelor's Thesis, 1948).

[4]Ibid., p. 33.

sinner who eventually finds forgiveness. For examples we refer to the mental anguish of Raskolnikov after his crime, to Ivan's terrible suffering, to the brooding Mihail, who carried his suffering with him for fourteen years, and to Zossima, who felt as if a sharp dagger had pierced him when he first realized the great sin he had committed by unjustly striking his servant.

More significant than its inward nature is the fact that suffering is caused by the activity of God within the sinner. We recall that sin is essentially a declaration of independence from God--man casting himself loose from divine authority. God counters this rebelliousness by reasserting Himself within man, by refusing to be turned completely out from the sinner's heart. As man attempts to tear himself free, God hangs on. Driven by pride man wants to eliminate from within himself every trace of the divine influence. But after he has sinned he discovers that his sense of guilt--an aspect of the divine influence--remains to haunt him with the memory of his evil. As God struggles to retain his hold on man against the attraction of Satan man suffers terribly. Alyosha finally realized that this was the nature of Ivan's terrific distress:

> As he fell asleep he prayed for Mitya and Ivan. He began to understand Ivan's illness. "The anguish of proud determination. An earnest conscience." God, in Whom he disbelieved and His truth were gaining mastery over his heart, which still refused to submit. "Yes," the thought floated through Alyosha's head as it lay on the pillow, "yes, if Smerdyakov is dead, no one

will believe Ivan's evidence, but he will go and give it." Alyosha smiled softly. "God will conquer," he thought.[5]

The distress of suffering is calculated by God to lead his rebellious children to repentance. The actual nature of repentance will be discussed later. Here it is important merely to note that this is the goal of God's tenacious activity within the sinner, which results in suffering. While he was still planning his crime Raskolnikov had a hideous dream in which a peasant beat his horse to death with a club. Horrified by the dream, Raskolnikov was reminded of the ghastliness of his own intention. "'Lord,' he prayed, 'show me my path--I renounce that...accursed dream of mine.'"[6] This repentance was, of course, short-lived. But, after the murder, Raskolnikov was told by Porfiry that his present suffering might be God's means for bringing him back to faith.[7] Similar were the experiences of both Mihail and Dmitri, to mention only two others.

Dostoyevsky's characters, however, frequently consider suffering to be far more valuable than merely an experience through which the sinner is led to repentance. Typical are the words of Sonia to Raskolnikov, "Suffer and expiate your

---

[5]Dostoyevsky, The Brothers Karamazov, p. 694.

[6]Dostoyevsky, Crime and Punishment, p. 61.

[7]Ibid., p. 445.

sins by it, that's what you must do."[8] Dmitri, Katerina Ivanovna and many others looked to their suffering as having a redemptive, expiatory effect. Even Dostoyevsky himself recalls that he and his fellow exiles believed that their punishment would atone for their many sins. This idea of the redemptive value of suffering is in conflict with Dostoyevsky's fundamentally Christian outlook. For this reason a brief explanatory comment is in order.

Although many of Dostoyevsky's characters considered suffering to be redemptive, there is no situation pictured in which anyone actually receives forgiveness in return for his suffering. The sufferer Mihail lived in hellish torment for fourteen years, but he found no forgiveness until he finally confessed his sin. Nor did Raskolnikov's atonement come from his suffering in prison, but as a result of the repentance which eventually overtook him there. When Dostoyevsky expresses this redemptive idea of suffering through his characters, he is portraying people as they really think. Not only Dostoyevsky, but nearly every observer of human nature sees this tendency within man to look to what he has done or to what he has endured as payment for his sins. People notice that others find forgiveness of sin during an experience of suffering. From this they conclude that suffering, therefore, atones for sin.

---

[8] Ibid., p. 407.

They fail to realize that suffering was merely the divinely wrought opportunity through which God brought the sinner to repentance.

The progress of man from sin back to God proceeds from suffering to repentance. We must also, therefore, examine the nature of repentance. God rises up within His rebellious creature and makes him painfully aware of his sin. The sinner is unable to escape the proddings of his divinely awakened conscience. He struggles to wrest himself from the clinging hand of God, but God will not cease to trouble him. Finally, man must either destroy himself as Stavrogin did, or he must make the humbling pilgrimage of repentance.

The first stage of this journey, as Dostoyevsky's characters experience it, is the confession of their sins before men. This step is unavoidable, because in sinning against any man they have sinned against all. Usually this confession is first made to one special person, after which a public confession of some kind follows. Marmeladov began by approaching a sympathetic appearing stranger in a drinking house and ended by addressing all present. After Raskolnikov confessed his murder to Sonia, he was directed to shout in the town square to every one there, "I am a murderer." Before Ivan or Dmitri made their confessions to the court, they had already confessed in private to their brother, Alyosha.

It is of interest to note that the people to whom sinners are moved to confess are people of great faith and love. Alyosha, Zossima, Myshkin, Sonia and Tihon are the ones to whom guilty consciences are unburdened. For, although these are free from gross outward sin, they forgive freely, exceedingly conscious of their own sinful natures. Grushenka declared as she was moved to momentary repentance and confession by Alyosha:

> I don't know what he said to me, it went straight to my heart... He is the first, the only one who has pitied me, that's what it is... I've been waiting all my life for some one like you, I knew that some one like you would come and forgive me. I believed that, nasty as I am, some one would really love me, not only with a shameful love.[9]

Repentance is a struggle from beginning to end. It is only after a fierce battle with himself that the sinner can bring himself to undergo the humiliation of revealing his sins even to a loving, forgiving confessor. Almost invariably, while this inward fight goes on, the sinner becomes hostile and resentful toward his confessor. He feels as if the confessor is the cause of the pain which his confession is creating. It is as if the confessor is a merciless tyrant who is demanding that the sinner destroy himself. Therefore, the sinner's wounded pride lashes out from time to time at his confessor. We see this attitude in the outbursts of rage which Stavrogin exhibited toward Tihon

---

[9]Dostoyevsky, The Brothers Karamazov, pp. 374-5.

during the interview of his confession. At one point Mihail was about to murder Zossima rather than confess to him as he knew he must. We see Ivan withdrawing from Alyosha and Raskolnikov abusing frail Sonia in the same kind of reaction. Similarly, the sinner feels terribly proud and bitter over against the people to whom he must make his public confession, as if they were the cause of his humiliation.

For Dostoyevsky the essence of sin is to rise up defiantly before God. Correspondingly, the essence of repentance is to bow down in humble subjection to God. This attitude of penitent self-renunciation finds dramatic expression in the act of kissing the earth and watering it with tears of sorrow for sin, which so many of Dostoyevsky's characters employ. In bowing to the earth one is bowing to God, for as Dmitri says, the earth is "the hem of the veil in which my God is shrouded."[10] This embracing of the earth in repentance must be done by the holy Zossima in his dying moments as well as by the murderous Raskolnikov. It is the renunciation of every proud assertion of freedom from God, the ultimate acknowledgment of one's creaturely dependence upon the Creator.

As such, this passionate kissing of the earth is the meeting point of contrition and faith in the experience of Dostoyevsky's characters. Not only fear and despair, but

---

[10] Ibid., p. 110.

also humble trust in the forgiving love of God must arise in the heart of one who returns to God. Despair alone is not enough. For, as Alyosha says of Ratkin:

> Ratkin has gone off to the back-alley. As long as Ratkin broods over his wrongs, he will always go off to the back-alley... But the high road... The road is wide and straight and bright as crystal, and the sun is at the end of it.[11]

The sinner may receive this forgiving love of God through a person. We find Raskolnikov accepting the forgiving love of Sonia as a token and part of his newly repentant faith. As was mentioned above, Grushenka accepted the forgiveness extended to her by Alyosha. Then there were the many troubled souls who came to Zossima, Tihon, and Myshkin for the assurance of divine pardon. These Christlike bestowers of forgiveness are both symbols and instruments of Christ in Whose name they act.

Through sorrow for sin and trust in divine mercy the sinner is brought back to God against Whom he had rebelled. By this return the problems of his sin are solved. His pride has been vanquished in the very act of repentance. As he draws near to God in humble submission, his demonic masters are overthrown, and the reign of God is restored within him. Divine forgiveness swallows up his burden of guilt. He is at peace with God and can once again associate with his fellow men. A glorious sense of relief comes over

---

[11] Ibid., p. 378.

the forgiven sinner. This appears strikingly in the case of Zossima, in Zossima's strange visitor, Mihail, in Dmitri, Ivan, and finally to Raskolnikov himself:

> He thought of her. He remembered how continually he had tormented her and wounded her heart. He remembered her pale and thin little face. But these recollections scarcely troubled him now; he knew with what infinite love he would now repay all her sufferings. And what were all the agonies of the past! Everything, even his crime, his sentence and imprisonment, seemed to him now in the first rush of feeling an external, strange fact with which he had no concern...[12]

This is the story which Dostoyevsky tells with great depth and power--the story of sin and forgiveness. At this point he reaches what is apparently the limits of his experience and interest. He does not carry his newly restored sinners far into their Christian life. Although he does include saints in his stories, they are "ready-made" and not people whose fall and recovery he has presented to us.[13] After he has brought his murderer, Raskolnikov, from the depths of sin to the verge of the new life, Dostoyevsky has this to say:

> But that is the beginning of a new story--the story of the gradual renewal of a man, the story of his gradual regeneration, of his passing from one world into another, of his initiation into a new unknown life.

---

[12] Dostoyevsky, Crime and Punishment, p. 531.

[13] It is true that Dostoyevsky has Zossima give a brief account of his life of sin before he repented. But that incidental flash back is hardly "the story of the gradual renewal of a man," such as we refer to here.

> That might be the subject of a new story, but our present story is ended.[14]

Such a "new" story Dostoyevsky never succeeded in telling.

---

[14] Ibid., p. 532.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

A. Primary Sources

Dostoyevsky, Fyodor. The Brothers Karamazov. Translated from the Russian by Constance Garnett. New York: The Modern Library, n.d.

-----. Crime and Punishment. Translated from the Russian by Constance Garnett. New York: The Modern Library, c.1950.

-----. The Eternal Husband and Other Stories. Translated from the Russian by Constance Garnett. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1950.

-----. The Idiot. Translated from the Russian by Constance Garnett. New York: The Modern Library, c.1935.

-----. The Possessed. Translated from the Russian by Constance Garnett. New York: The Modern Library, c.1936.

B. Secondary Sources

Baring, Maurice. Landmarks in Russian Literature. London: Methuen and Company, Ltd., 1916.

Berdyaev, Nicholas. Dostoievsky: An Interpretation. Translated from the Russian by Donald Attwater. New York: Sheed and Ward Inc., 1934.

Lavrin, Janko. Dostoevsky: A Study. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1947.

Levin, Harry. Review of "The Short Novels of Dostoyevsky." New Republic, CXIV (January 14, 1946), p. 56.

Lloyd, J. A. T. A Great Russian Realist. New York: John Lane Company, 1912.

Middleton, Murray J. Fyodor Dostoevsky: A Critical Study. New York: Dodd, Mead, and Company, 1916.

Rossow, Francis C. The Concept of Suffering in the Philosophy of Dostoevsky. Unpublished Bachelor's Thesis, Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, 1948.

Siepmann, Eric. "On Dostoevski." Nineteenth Century, November 1939, pp. 592-5.

Troyat, Henry. Firebrand: The Life of Dostoyevsky. Translated by Norbert Guterman. New York: Roy Publishers, c.1946.

Yarmolinsky, Avrahm. Dostoyevsky: A Life. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, c.1934.

------. Review of "The Idiot." New Republic, CVII (December 14, 1942), pp. 797-8.