

P. Travis Kroeker & Bruce K. Ward, *Remembering the End. Dostoevsky as Prophet to Modernity* (London: SCM Press, 2002), viii + 280p.

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Reviewing a book on Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky may seem to be odd to some readers of this journal for history of religions. And yet, our choice is not arbitrary, given the scope of the analysis mounted up by Kroeker and Ward in this fine study published by SCM Press in the new series 'Radical Traditions'. The two Canadian professors from Ontario, well known for their research on the Russian novelist (see in particular B. K. Ward, *Dostoyevsky's Critique of the West: The Quest for Earthly Paradise*, 1986), have attempted a systematic study of Dostoevsky's vision about Christianity, as it emerges especially from *Bratya Karamazovy* (1879–80).

Obviously, this is not an easy task, given the perpetual ambiguity of Dostoevsky's authorial voice in his polyphonic novels (which, as M. Bakhtin convincingly argued, mark him as a great artist, and not as a religious ideologist). Kroeker and Ward are of the same opinion: 'the biblical sonority is not strident or doctrinaire; if it were, Dostoevsky's art would not have been so frequently hailed as a harbinger of postmodern indeterminacy. Although Dostoevsky's allusions to particular biblical passages are myriad – the Bible serves primarily to anchor the overall vision' (*op. cit.*, 3). Especially the novel 'The Brothers Karamazov' proves to be the matrix for the poetics of Christ, and Dostoevsky's literary testament, which addresses in the legend of the Grand Inquisitor all the fundamental questions simultaneously or only later on reconsidered by Western minds, such as F. Nietzsche, Karl Barth, J.-P. Sartre, or M. Foucault. F. M. Dostoevsky contributed so much to our contemporary understanding of the problem of evil, suffering, individual freedom, religion and power, that one cannot ignore his sharp criticism, sketched with subtlety and astute irony, of the Western distortion of Christianity. This criticism does not automatically unveil Fyodor Mikhailovich's dreams about the pious role Russia had to play in the political design of Europe. Despite the appalling failure of the Slavophile ideal, one still needs to give heed to Dostoevsky's extraordinary insights with respect to the equally depressing fate of the western forms of Christianity. Anybody who is willing to understand today the origins of modern atheism, the genealogy of nihilism and the logic of secularisation, cannot ignore Dostoevsky's 'apocalyptic poetics'. The same judgement goes for theodicy, which modern philosophers have debated mostly in the wrong terms.

Dostoevsky is the representative of the ancient wisdom which affirms that narrative knowledge (rather than dialectical examination) and pictorial language (rather than abstraction) provide not only the best tools for articulating a theodicy, but also the firm ground for an efficient therapy against evil. Why so? Simply because Dostoevsky aptly understood that one's life must be depicted not as an algebraic equation, but as a poetic tale, or story. Hence, *mysterium iniquitatis* is not a problem, but a riddle, concealed in the lines of broken continuity of one's life. For that reason, such a riddle or 'mystery of iniquity' (to put it in St Paul's terms) needs to be literarily accounted, in order to be understood, and not a scholastically expounded, in order to provide a compact explanation. That is why Dostoevsky decided that the most befitting way to explore the mystery of evil was to write parallel but interwoven biographies. He showed in his way that the mystery of evil could be better captured by reading the cardiogram of his common characters, instead of perusing tomes of systematic theology or philosophy. One should remember here that the Russian novelist was a passionate reader of the early Christian *apophthegmata* of the Greek Church fathers, of the Russian version of *Philokalia* compiled in five volumes (*Dobrotoliubie*, 1877) by Theophan Zatvornik (or 'the Recluse'), particularly appreciating of the writings of St Isaac of Nineveh. These spiritual writings taught Dostoevsky not only the content of the radical Christianity he embraced in the teaching and the lives of the Russian *startsy* from Optina Pustyn, who also inspired other intellectuals such as Nikolay Gogol, Aleksey Stepanovich Khomyakov, Vladimir Sergeevich Solovyov, and Leo Tolstoy. He also paid attention to the literary style and dramatic conventions of this hagiographical literature: elliptic speech, which did not necessarily contradict rhetoric, would teach people more than the Cartesian reasoning on the meaning of 'justice', 'goodness' or 'happiness'. In fact, the biblical parables and the monastic sayings are an organic part of Dostoevsky's literary device, which eschews the temptation of bringing forth clear and distinct ideas about the ultimate solution of the riddle. That is how the character of Father Zosima is introduced, and

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his seminal words are in the honourable companion of the Desert Fathers. They all know how to encapsulate their understanding into concise and memorable adages, who become truly the 'rule of faith' (*kanon tēs pisteōs*) for those who, like Alyosha (the brother of Ivan and Dmitry) follow Christ. In this way, Dostoevsky's poetics intends to be therapeutic and cathartic. Easy questions and ready-made answers are both unwelcome in a genuine approach to Christian theodicy. With Alyosha and Zosima, as with Anthony the Great in the famous *Apophthegmata*, one discovers the importance of inhibiting the intellectual curiosity (in Augustine's terms: *concupiscentia oculorum*) of the haughty and 'enlightened' members of intelligentsia. These are unable to grasp correctly the vast criteria of rationality, to see that 'the Word revealed in Christ is tied to the cosmic causality of all creation. The poetry of the divine Word holds together the cosmic causal structure, not Euclidean geometry or any other purely immanent principle of interpretation. Yet what is unveiled continues to be a mystery' (*op. cit.*, p. 19). Dostoevsky's poetics reminds us, together with the Cappadocian theologians (Gregory of Nyssa, Basil the Great and Gregory of Nazianzen), that man cannot possibly acquire an essential knowledge of the created beings, and that the ultimate rationality of the cosmos has a spiritual, and not scientific grammar, and that the spiritual is the true universal. Along with the Greek poets, Dostoevsky is ready to acknowledge the tragic conflict raised by the apparent existence of evil within a human community. We say 'apparent' since Fyodor Mikhailovich is also ready to defend the characteristically Platonic and Christian view that evil is not substantial, and should be described in terms of an absence, or of deformation of good, just as illness must be understood as lack of health. Evil is not an abstraction, but is always embodied by human forces or invisible agents of temptation, and hence, it can only be healed personally, through the incarnation of the ultimate love and goodness of God, in Christ Jesus. And let us remember once again that Dostoevsky does not achieve this realistic approach to theodicy by restoring the 'meta-narrative' of an arrogant theology, which would leave no question without answer, and which would have no room for the apophatic discipline of silence. On the contrary, Dostoevsky tackles theodicy by recounting and witnessing to the biblical narrative, without any Faustian ambition to untangle the whole mystery of iniquity.

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The first chapter of *Remembering the End* deals with Dostoevsky's prophetic vision of Christ, as the source and the content of the eschatological revelation, in which the promise of an answer to the cosmic drama of suffering is fulfilled. The vision of *this* cosmic, silent and revelatory Christ is contrasted by the figure of the Grand Inquisitor in chapter two (where the legend told by Ivan Karamazov is quoted at length). A striking feature of the theological vision shared by the Cardinal of Seville lies in his willingness not to authorise the open character of Christ's revelation: 'you have no right to add anything to what you already said once'. This statement represents the premises under which a legislative system of repression can be established, ruthlessly regulating the life of the human communities, dictating the rules for general happiness. Against this forensic account of religion (enthusiastically held by both the arrogant Cardinal, of Roman-Catholic confession, and the abstemious hermit Ferapont, of Eastern-Orthodox extraction), Alyosha brings the vision of his 'Pater Seraphicus', namely Zosima. As it is well known, Dostoevsky shaped the literary character of this Russian monk by following the real contours of Father Amvrosy, who was, *à l'époque*, the abbot of Optina Monastery. Bruce Ward remarks that 'although freedom and equality in Zosima's Christian understanding might find their initial realization in the monastic community, he does not envisage this community as a spiritual elite separate from hopelessly corrupt world; monasticism is to function, rather, as a leavening force within the world, working toward the latter's transformation' (*op. cit.*, 82).

Chapter four ("Dostoevsky, Revelation and Justice") deals with the question of righteousness in the same context of the Karamazov's family drama. Travis Kroecker, author of this section, takes on board R. Girard's exegesis of Dostoevsky's novels and analyses the way the economy of desire is mutually trespassed along the relationships between the father Fyodor Pavlovich (the prototype of the bourgeois buffoon), and his eldest son Dmitry (who, like a 'Schiller-spouting lover of beauty', can worship in chorus 'both Sodom and Madonna'). They both suffer the erotic attraction for the same demonic Grushenka, and the demonic atmosphere of rivalry, depravity and suspicion between the two Karamazovs (which secretly contaminated Alyosha's soul) isn't brought to an end not even by Grigory's innocent death (stabbed by Smerdyakov while defending his cynic master). Before the

results of the trial are known, Alyosha prays to God ‘for the whole world’, leaving to the secular power the norms of retributive justice, guilt and partial truth. It should be noticed, in passing, that Dostoevsky’s critique of Nemesis in the name of Christ, deeply influenced Karl Barth’s reading of *The Epistle to the Romans* (1918), which had, in its turn, an influential bearing on the development of Christian theology in the 20th century.

Chapter five brings Dostoevsky into polemical conversation with the philosophical principles of secular humanism, and this illuminates once again the prophetic convergence between the Russian novelist and the German visionary Friedrich Nietzsche. Their common target is the suffocating morality, which came to suppress the freedom from the bondage of sins, which once was pledged by the Gospel. ‘Ivan’s disciple, lackey, and bastard half-brother, Smerdyakov, parrots a shallow version of Voltairian scepticism, allied with Jesuitical casuistry, in his ‘theological disputation’ with the old Orthodox servant, Grigory’ (*op. cit.*, 160). By denouncing the medieval Church establishment as an institution of power and tyranny, Dostoevsky would have certainly met Nietzsche’s expectations, whose horror against the Catholic casuistry lasted forever. (In *On the Genealogy of Morals* he quotes Aquinas for having said: ‘The blessed in the Kingdom of Heaven will see the punishment of the damned, *in order that their bliss be more delightful for them*’.) But Dostoevsky makes a further step. By affirming the power of life in the Spirit and denouncing the weakness of every system of morality, he calls into question the theological propositions, which secure the whole political reasoning of Western thinking (and especially the non-therapeutic system of retaliatory justice). Chapter six shows at length the implications of this causal, atomistic and external dominion. Western Christianity (which goes beyond its geographic extension) failed to resist the third temptation of the devil, converting thus the Gospel into an instrument of social discipline. The problem of *krisis* (or judgement) is central, and through the voice of Alyosha we learn that the one who is unable to forgive cannot discern truth. Again, the reference is here, unmistakably, to Christ. ‘iJesus’s scandalous practice of forgiving sins exemplifies a way of life that is to be imitated and a consciousness of ‘mind’ that is to be cultivated in and by the church, as the earthly enactment of eternal truth. Those attached politically to the body of Christ are therefore participants in a drama that is both human and divine, earthly and heavenly, bodily and spiritual, individual and social. This drama is a source of possible offence in its prophetic witness to the God-man who remains the slain Lamb: it is witness to a truth that, even as it is publicly enacted on the earth, cannot be communicated directly (not even in miracles). It can be seen only by the free and obedient decision of the heart.’ (*op. cit.*, 226).

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In the last chapter, Kroeker and Ward submit an important analysis of the two portraits of Christ that we come across in *The Brothers Karamazov*. On the one hand, we have the Jesus told in Ivan’s legend of the Inquisitor. ‘Ivan’s Jesus is heavily determined by Dostoevsky’s encounter with Renan’s *Life of Jesus*’ (*ibid.*, 246), which portrays Christ as an idealist hero, but certainly not as a divine Saviour. Contrarily, the image of Jesus emerging in Alyosha’s account ‘reflects the thinking of Irenaeus and the Greek East’ (*ibid.*, 253), with its emphasis on Christ’s *kenosis* (self-abasement), which paradoxically displays his divinity. We could also say that in Dostoevsky’s novel two radically different accounts meet: the semi-divine Christ of the Arians (Ivan’s hero), and the Saviour of the Nicene Creed (Alyosha’s Redeemer). This is probably the perennial issue at stake in all the major clashes between different cultural and religious movements in the European history. Dostoevsky had both the literary and the theological genius to reveal the importance of this matter for the understanding of our fate at the dawn of modern age, and the studies collected by Kroeker and Ward deserve congratulations for calling back our attention to one of the greatest novels ever written by a Russian writer, i.e. *The Brothers Karamazov*.

Remembering the End is an excellent book, nourished by profound reflection and much reading. There are a few repetitions in the text, which a future edition could get rid of. But perhaps the reiteration of the same underlining ideas, here and there, is intentional. A note on Dostoevsky’s theological resources in the Eastern Orthodox tradition (as I have already suggested) could assist our understanding of the contrast between Zosima and the Grand Inquisitor, and, in fact, between two forms of thinking and living the Gospel. This is a top quality book, from which students in theology,

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literature, political theory, philosophy and religious studies can all only benefit. I strongly recommend it to our readers.

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