

Novelist, journalist, and short story writer, Fyodor Mikhaylovich Dostoyevsky is considered one of the world's great writers. Using great skill, he conveyed the range of human emotions in novels such as *Crime and Punishment*, *The Idiot*, *The Possessed*, and *The Brothers Karamazov*. The souls of his powerful characters often serve as the locus of the struggle between good and evil. They reach salvation only after undergoing purifying suffering. In many ways, this struggle and suffering reflect Dostoyevsky's own experience.



A Turbulent Life

Born in Moscow on November 11, 1821, Dostoyevsky was raised in a middle-class home. At 16, he enrolled in the military engineering school at St. Petersburg, where he

Dostoyevsky:

A Writer Struggles With Faith

by
Victor
Lyakhu

devoted his spare time to reading Russian and European literature. By the time he graduated, his mother had died and his father had been murdered by serfs, leaving him little money. Nevertheless, Dostoyevsky resigned his commission to become a full-time writer.

The positive response his short novel, *Poor Folk*, received from the renowned literary critic Vissarion Belinsky served to introduce the young man into the literary and social circles of St. Petersburg. With his nervous mannerisms, short stature, small gray eyes and sickly complexion he was not considered an asset to the salons,

despite his literary promise.

Several sketches and two short novels did little to win him a wider audience. During this time, Dostoyevsky began attending a radical discussion group at the home of Mikhail Petrashevsky, where participants debated political and economic books banned by the government of Czar Nicholas I. In April 1849 members of the Petrashevsky Circle were arrested for planning to print illegal pamphlets. The fledgling writer and 20 other members of the circle were sentenced to be shot.

Moments before the execution, the Czar's commutation of the sentence was announced. Dostoyevsky was condemned to four years of hard labor in Siberia, followed by four years as a common soldier. The writer considered his sentence to be just punishment for a serious crime. His prison experience marked an important stage in his life. He gained inner strength from frequent readings of the Bible and from the ample time he had to think and to observe the suffering of his fellow prisoners. His attacks of epilepsy date from this period.

After his release, Dostoyevsky served as a soldier and began what was to be an unhappy marriage with a consumptive widow. He began writing again, but his initial efforts gained little attention. Upon his return to St. Petersburg 10 years after leaving, radicals attempted to enlist his support by hailing him as a former political prisoner, but he rejected their advances. Their ridicule of religion was especially distasteful to him.

Together with his brother, Dostoyevsky began publishing the magazine *Vremya* ("Time"), which combined journalism and fiction. The magazine's success allowed him to fulfill his dream of traveling to Europe. Two years later, *Vremya* was banned after an article it published was deemed unpatriotic. Again, Dostoyevsky went abroad.

Upon his return, he began a second magazine, but it collapsed due to financial difficulties. His wife and brother died in the same year and Dostoyevsky once again fled to Europe where he soon spent his remaining funds. Loans from friends and publishers' advances allowed him to return to Russia. He hired a young stenographer, Anna Snitkina, to assist him in the writing process, and married her the following year. To escape creditors and Anna's

greedy parents, the couple went abroad, living in extreme poverty for four years. The death of their first child added to their misery.

Having begun a major novel, *The Possessed*, Dostoyevsky became very sick and insisted on returning to St. Petersburg. Once there, his health improved, the novel became a success, and he was again in demand at social and literary gatherings. His wife, who had supported him unflinchingly during their time abroad, capably managed his publishing affairs. Life became stable for the Dostoyevsky family, which now included two boys.

By the time he had begun his final novel, Dostoyevsky was recognized as one of the great writers of his country. *The Brothers Karamazov* illustrates the enduring themes in his oeuvre: the problem of sin and suffering and their relation to God, faith, and the search for God. Dostoyevsky died in St. Petersburg on February 9, 1881.

Defeat or Revival?

Literary scholars of the former Soviet Union have interpreted Dostoyevsky's religious quest as reactionary and utopian. Many have voiced the suspicion that the great writer himself was not quite firm in his faith in God. This doubting of Dostoyevsky's belief has become a firmly established approach. Some suggest that after his exile, Dostoyevsky "broke down," drifted away from his youthful ideals and embraced erroneous concepts which included religion. The author's turning to Christianity is interpreted in terms of catastrophe and defeat. It is seen as something forced, instead of a natural, positive progression in his life experience.

According to these scholars, Dostoyevsky's spiritual search shows weakness and unreliability. Literary critic Vladimir Kerpoten voices his version of the standard view: "Defeated but striving to live and to hope, Dostoyevsky began to turn to religion, though not without an inner struggle."¹ Because scholars questioning the decisiveness and consistency of Dostoyevsky's religious experience express a variety of opinions, some confusion is evident in their attempts to interpret his creative development.

I believe that what many scholars have interpreted as Dostoyevsky's defeat was in fact his spiritual rebirth. When he joined the radical idealist Petrashevsky's circle, he was already inspired by the

dream of Christian brotherhood. For a time, however, Dostoyevsky's Christianity was only a psychological mood, needing no specific definition, explanation, or outward expression. Yet even during this time in heated discussions with the well-known literary and political critic Vissarion Belinsky, Dostoyevsky rejected the critic's attempts to influence him in favor of atheism.

Experiencing God

In his youth, Dostoyevsky's religious and romantic philosophy was directed toward the "deciphering of God;" however, during the peaks of his creative inspiration in prison, the writer went through a deep spiritual revival. The harsh shocks of the Siberian prison experience served to deepen Dostoyevsky's thoughts and feelings, and again turned his attention to the meaning of existence. He assessed and clarified the ideals and values from the spiritual heritage of his youth.

This process of not just a "deciphering of God," but a profound process of getting to know Him enriched Dostoyevsky's life. We see the effect of this experience on him through one of his letters to Natalia Fonvisina, written four years after his arrest:

I have heard from many people that you are religious, but because I myself have experienced and felt it [emphasis his own] I tell you that in such moments you are longing for faith as dry grass longs for water, and you actually find it, because in misery the truth becomes clearer."²

His correspondence with his brother, Michael, also shows that the conversion was not superficial or accidental, but a deeply considered event. Three months after his arrest, on July 18, 1849, Dostoyevsky asked his brother to send him books that "will be healing to read...in order to read my own ideas in someone else's, or to structure my own anew."³ In August of the same year he asked Michael, "Send me some works of history....But it

would be even better if you sent me the Bible (both Testaments). I need it...it would be absolutely perfect."⁴

Michael immediately fulfilled his brother's request, sending him various books, including Shakespeare and the Bible. While Dostoyevsky considered the French author Balzac to be a writer of tremendous talent and power, and Shakespeare more than a genius ("a prophet sent by God to show us the mystery of man, of the human soul..."), for him the Bible was an exceptional phenomenon.

The Bible was not new to Dostoyevsky; it was the favorite book in the Dostoyevsky household during his childhood. As it does for us today, the Book of books "belonging to the highest inspiration of literature"⁵ gave this great writer something that neither Cervantes, nor Balzac, nor even Shakespeare could provide: a new vision of the world and a revelation of God.

It is significant that Dostoyevsky now began to consciously and persistently cultivate this deepened spirituality which had added a new dimension to his own creative vision of the world. Human beings and the world ceased to interest him of themselves, disconnected from the cosmic world. All the philosophical motifs in Dostoyevsky's work now took on a pronounced religious tone. It seems to be in this sense that Stefan Zweig in his book *Three Masters*, compared Balzac, Dickens, and Dostoyevsky: "Each of these three writers has a realm of his own. For Balzac it is the world of society, for Dickens it is the world of family, for Dostoyevsky it is the world of the individual and the universe."⁷

The Main Problem

Dostoyevsky's intensified religious experience does not mean that he found definite answers to all the questions that disturbed him. The direct appeal to religious and philosophical questions intensified what was an already complicated problem for him. He wrote, "The main problem which has been troubling me both consciously and subconsciously all my life is the existence of God."⁸ After a time, Dostoyevsky concluded that it was impossible to prove the existence of God by rational, self-sufficient logic. This, however, does not mean that he found no means to establish solid faith in the Creator: "I have really known God, and have been filled with Him. Yes, there is a GOD!"⁹ Unfortunately, scholars influenced by traditional atheism have chosen to ignore this reality.

Thought, according to Dostoyevsky, even religious thought, does not produce absolute and indisputable knowledge, but is only a flickering spark seeking strength in the bright flame of the Spirit. While not claiming to be a theologian, Dostoyevsky thoroughly comprehended certain basic Christian beliefs. He understood that the efforts of the human mind on its own are not enough to bridge the gap between finite mortal man and the infinite God that was opened by the tragedy of the Fall. That is why God comes to humanity, and with His grace and revelation, fills the gap in the capabilities of the human mind.

Religion and the Mind

In Dostoyevsky's system, the mind is not alone and naked, as some understand him to mean. Never intending to minimize the capacities of the human mind,

Dostoyevsky was speaking only of the lonely and proud mind that has rejected divine inspiration. It was in reliance on the mind alone that he realized the powerlessness of atheism. Dostoyevsky's character Prince Mishkin in *The Idiot* was far more categorical: "Atheism proclaims nothing."¹⁰ At the same time, Dostoyevsky never discredited a mind that allowed faith and the experiences of the heart.

Dostoyevsky's own religious experience was never arbitrary, absurd, or irrational. His experience was based on the "scientific" experiment of a learning heart. Therefore, in a certain sense his faith was "scientific," although only by the reasoning of a special incontrovertible knowledge revealed only to believers.

Thus, Dostoyevsky understood the interrelation of different human cognitive powers in terms of dialectics, the logical testing of ideas to determine their validity. This point has not been adequately appreciated by Soviet scholars. It is no accident that in *The Dialectic of Myth*, Alexei Losev pointed to atheists' inability to think dialectically when faced with the relationship between notions such as faith and mind or knowledge. Losev is sure that "it is not that a believer does not have dialectics, but that he has another object of faith than an atheist." That certainly does not mean that an atheist has refuted belief, but that he has ignored the subject of his faith, and that something other than reasoning or science has made the atheist deny the faith. Thus, approaching the problem from the dialectical standpoint, faith is not only impossible without knowledge, but *faith itself is genuine knowledge*. Conversely, knowledge is not only impossible without faith, but is itself genuine faith.¹¹

Faith and Understanding

For Dostoyevsky, who based his ideas on biblical anthropology, humans are "the image and likeness" of their Creator. Each individual's divine nature is revealed by the fact that a soul open to God and to the universe receives and carries in itself the knowledge of everything it experiences. A believing person who is eager to comprehend divine mysteries, but unable to rationally understand them, is existentially



uneasy. He or she cannot help but be harassed by doubts, as Dostoyevsky himself wrote, "until his last breath." This is humanity's lot, and this is what St. Augustine meant when he wrote: "You created us for yourself, and restless is our heart until it finds peace in you."¹²

Human thought is a complex process produced by the rational working of the mind and also by powerful intuitive insights into the mysteries of the universe. The strength of these insights comes from a saving faith that believes the world is comprehensible and harmonious, not meaningless and absurd. A sense of the bond linking everything in the world, confidence that as one opens his or her heart to God, the world's beauty will pour in, giving meaning to existence—all this helps the believer keep his or her balance, even when doubts arise.

Faith does not ignore doubts; it provides hope to overcome them. Faith is not a magical wand. It does not promise the confused mind escape from anxiety, but it offers illumination of its dark visions. It promises the key to the mysteries of our being and understanding of the questions troubling the soul. This is how Dostoyevsky understood the world, and this is why he could repeat after Augustine, "I believe in order to understand."¹³

Dostoyevsky's Doubts

The doubts expressed by Dostoyevsky are the road to progress, the natural spiritual and intellectual process of knowledge. The writer's doubts do not testify of a religious failure, but of a

process of knowing, and of the triumph of a soul longing for faith.

As the philosopher Sergei Bulgakov wrote: "In Dostoyevsky's soul a perfect faith was always in tragic conflict with tragic unbelief...For him there was only one tragedy, not of religion in general, but a Christian one."¹⁴ Bulgakov's statement reveals Dostoyevsky's sense of the essence of Christian tragedy, and indeed, all human tragedy: that human beings feel their separation from God even while believing in Him. Christians are called to commune with God daily; that their thirst for relationship and harmony with Him is not always satisfied is a tragic experience for believers.

We must correctly understand the nature of the disharmony. Bulgakov's statement can be understood if we recognize that the soul of a Christian is basically turned to God. A Christian's real experience demonstrates that "an earthly law" (as Dostoyevsky called everything worldly) has some power over him or her, very often interfering with the heart's strongest inclination toward the Creator. The soul must resist any intrusions and be continuously purified. The Psalmist expresses his desire for perfect communion: "My soul thirsts for God, for the living God" (Psalm 42:2 NIV).

The "unreliability" of humans before God is also found in the gospel story of John the Baptist who, having baptized Jesus, doubts the Son of God while awaiting death in a dank prison.¹⁵ These living testimonies witness that spiritual and moral struggles are real battles for self-preservation through faith. The soul is strengthened by this continuous struggle and is thus enabled to pass through greater difficulties.

The Survival of Faith

I believe Dostoyevsky's doubts did not destroy his faith in God. On the contrary, they initiated his search for deeper answers to many paradoxes of our being. His doubts were the source of a continuous desire to know God and be in harmony with Him. Dostoyevsky repeatedly returned to this topic throughout his life. During the late 1850s, he wrote:

I am a child of the century, a child of unbelief and doubt up to the present, and even (I know this) till the end of my life.

*This thirst to believe, which has become stronger in my soul the more there are reasons to the contrary, has been and still is the source of the most terrible suffering.*¹⁶

Not long before his death, Dostoyevsky testified again to the firmness of his convictions. Reflecting on his favorite novel, *The Brothers Karamazov*, he wrote: "I believe in Christ, and I confess Him, not as a small boy. Through a great crucible of doubt, my Hosannah has passed! And it stood fast!"¹⁷

Dostoyevsky did boldly ask questions and at times challenged God, like the sufferer Job. But in that challenge natural to the experience of humanity, there was no rejection of God. Like the man in the gospel story, he cried, "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!" (Mark 9:24).

As the Danish critic George Brandes has written, "whether or not he was a believer in Orthodox dogmas, [Dostoyevsky] was in all his life and feelings a typical Christian."¹⁸ Bulgakov emphatically speaks of the writer's agony and suffering on the path of faith:

*The positive nature triumphed in Dostoyevsky's soul. His faith overcame his doubts, though it could not always take away their pain. Though bruised and bleeding, Dostoyevsky always survived and conquered.*¹⁹

Dostoyevsky was not a saint, nor was he always a righteous man. A terrible battle between God and Satan racked his soul, yet he emerged victorious. This great writer saw God as his bulwark, a continuous source of love, goodness, and light. Because in God he found the key to the mystery of mysteries, the meaning of life, he never accepted any other philosophy as his own. All Dostoyevsky's moral quests found their interpretation in God. Divine light revealed the true nature of the evil spirits of power-seeking and pride. In Him, the Absolute, was the solution of the essential problem of immortality. Without this, for Dostoyevsky, the very idea of "human being" had no meaning. □

Notes and References

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15. See Matthew 11:2.
16. Dostoyevsky, *Complete Works*, vol. 28, p. 176.
17. *Ibid.*, vol. 27, p. 86.
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Victor Lyakhu
teaches Russian
language and literature
at Zaokski Adventist
Seminary in Russia.

