OmegAlpha II:1 Spring 2026, 7–23
ISSN 3067-1329 (Print), ISSN 3067-1337 (Online)
https://doi.org/10.63394/xwbgxv46
Theological Heritage

Dostoevsky on Man and Freedom

John D. Zizioulas

Editor's Note: The following text presents a previously unpublished lecture manuscript by Metropolitan of Pergamon John D. Zizioulas (1931–2023). The manuscript appears to date from the early period of Zizioulas' academic career at New College in Edinburgh (1971–1973) and reflects his engagement with the theological anthropology of Fyodor Dostoevsky, particularly the relationship between freedom, suffering, and the possibility of resurrection. While the text was prepared in the form of lecture notes, it already displays themes that would later become central to Zizioulas' mature theology—especially the connection between freedom, personal existence, and the overcoming of death. The text has been lightly edited for clarity and readability by Bishop Maxim Vasiljević, while preserving the structure, terminology, and rhetorical character of the original lecture. Minor grammatical adjustments and punctuation corrections have been introduced where necessary. Titles of Fyodor Dostoevsky's works have been standardized, and a small number of unclear references have been clarified. Quotations have been retained substantially as they appear in the manuscript. The editor believes that this lecture is of particular interest not only for students of Dostoevsky but also for scholars of modern Orthodox theology, as it offers a rare glimpse into Zizioulas' early reflections on human freedom, suffering, and resurrection—themes that would later find systematic expression in his well-known theological works.

Abstract
This previously unpublished lecture manuscript by John D. Zizioulas examines Fyodor Dostoevsky as a theological thinker whose reflections on freedom, suffering, and death raise fundamental questions for Christian anthropology. Rather than approaching Dostoevsky primarily as a literary figure, Zizioulas interprets his novels as explorations of the existential limits of human freedom. Dostoevsky's characters reveal a paradox at the heart of human existence: the human longing for absolute freedom confronts the reality of suffering and death. According to Zizioulas, Dostoevsky's anthropology challenges both Western humanistic optimism and modern ideological projects that seek to eliminate suffering while preserving freedom. The lecture further explores Dostoevsky's eschatological vision, especially as articulated in *The Brothers Karamazov*, where the problem of death becomes central to the future of humanity. The text offers a rare glimpse into Zizioulas' early engagement with themes that would later become central to his theology of personhood, freedom, and resurrection.

Keywords: Dostoevsky, freedom, theological anthropology, suffering, resurrection, Christian eschatology

Preface

The purpose of this talk is to discuss Dostoevsky as a theologian. No attempt will be made to judge him as a writer of literature (for I make no claim to competence in his own field), but simply to point to certain themes that emerge from his work and that are of particular interest for theological reflection.

Dostoevsky has often perplexed those who have attempted to write about him. Many books have been written, yet no consensus has emerged. The most incompatible things have been said about him: Christian—or atheist (or are these necessarily incompatible?); a pathological type—or the most lucid mind capable of distinguishing good from evil; a representative of the decay of Christianity—or an example of its rebirth.

Yet this perplexity is not accidental; it is itself theologically meaningful. For is it really possible to draw the lines between these interpretations as sharply as we tend to do? Dostoevsky's works and overall message seem precisely to question such neat distinctions. It is therefore not surprising that he cannot easily be placed within clearly defined categories.

Dostoevsky's primary concern is *man*. He seeks to penetrate as deeply as possible into the mysteries of human existence (in this sense he may even be regarded as a forerunner of depth psychology). Only through such exploration can he speak—if he speaks at all—about God.

In this presentation we shall attempt to follow Dostoevsky's own method and avoid imposing upon him a ready-made theological system. It is true that Dostoevsky himself avoids systematizing. Yet in a certain sense it becomes our task to do systematically what he expresses through images and narratives. We shall try to do this, however, without distorting his vision of man. Indeed, if we follow this vision faithfully, we may discover that it itself calls into question the adequacy of purely logical structures when applied to human existence.

Before turning to this vision, however, it is helpful to look briefly at Dostoevsky's life, for the two are closely connected. In many respects Dostoevsky was an autobiographical writer, and the events of his life illuminate the themes of his work.

I. Biographical Sketch

Dostoevsky was born on October 1821. He came from a family of Lithuanian origin. His grandfather had been a priest, his father was a military doctor, and his mother was known as a simple and deeply pious woman.

His family life was far from happy. His father was oppressive and irritable, and toward the end of his life he took to drink. He was eventually killed by his own serfs when Dostoevsky was seventeen years old. His mother had died earlier. Among his siblings, the one closest to him was his brother Mikhail, who shared much

of his life and work; yet Mikhail too died relatively young, when Dostoevsky was about forty.

Dostoevsky married twice. His first wife died while still young. His second wife, Anna, played a crucial role in stabilizing his life and supporting him financially during difficult periods.

At his father's insistence, Dostoevsky entered the College of Military Engineering. Yet his true interests lay elsewhere. He was passionately drawn to literature and read widely: the Russians Pushkin and Gogol, and among Western writers Dickens, Schiller, Hoffmann, Balzac, and Victor Hugo.

After a brief career in government service, he abandoned this path in order to devote himself entirely to writing—a decision that brought him many hardships.

His life was marked by repeated trials. These included:

- a death sentence, later commuted to four years of exile and hard labor in Siberia, because of his association with intellectual circles influenced by European socialism;
- severe financial difficulties, which often made him dependent upon friends and upon the support of his wife;
- serious ill health, especially epileptic seizures;
- and the fact that his international recognition came largely only after his death.

Works (Chronological Overview)

Poor Folk (his first work, 1845)

The Double

Periodical *Vremya* ("The Time"), edited with his brother (after the exile: 1859–1865)

Notes from the House of the Dead (Siberian memoirs, published in *Vremya*)

Periodical *Epoch* (1864)

His major works were produced within only a few decades.

Crime and Punishment (1866)

The Idiot (1868)

Demons (also known as *The Possessed* or *The Devils*) (1872)

The Adolescent (also translated as *A Raw Youth*) (1875)

*A Writer's Diary (*published periodically between 1873 and 1881; regular issues 1877–1881)

The Brothers Karamazov (1879–1880)

Dostoevsky died in 1881.

II. Dostoevsky's Main Concern and the Historical Explanation of His Work

Dostoevsky's fundamental concern may be summarized in the following way: to enter into the abysmal depths of human existence and uncover its paradoxes, and then to attempt to encounter God through this exploration. Hence the basic theological question raised by Dostoevsky: *What do God and man look like if human existence is pushed to its extreme?*

Many attempts have been made to explain the sources of Dostoevsky's thought, and as always it is difficult to determine precisely where a writer derives his inspiration. Nevertheless, several elements can be identified as particularly significant.

(a) *The Slavophile–Westernizer Debate*. Dostoevsky lived at a time when Russian intellectual life was divided between the *Slavophiles* and the *Westernizers*. Peter the Great's westernizing reforms had provoked a fundamental debate about whether Russia should follow the path of European civilization or preserve its own cultural and spiritual identity. The question was not merely political or cultural—it had profound theological implications.

In this debate many of the central issues separating Eastern and Western theology came to the surface, and a creative polemic emerged concerning the strengths and limitations of each tradition. Important figures in this discussion included Aleksei Khomyakov and Vladimir Soloviev.

(b) *The Emergence of Socialism*. A second factor was the rise of socialist ideology in Europe and its spread into Russia. Dostoevsky proved remarkably perceptive in recognizing the deeper implications of this development. His analysis of emerging socialism and communism is often strikingly prophetic. This is theologically most revealing, but we shall return to it in greater detail later.

These factors became an important stimulus for his thought.

(c) *Personal Suffering and Monastic Influence*. The deeper sources of Dostoevsky's inspiration are more difficult to determine, yet they may be located primarily in two areas. First, his personal suffering, especially his years of exile and forced labor in Siberia. Second, his encounters with the *starets*—the spiritual elders of Russian monasticism. This monastic tradition played a significant role in Russian religious life at the time, and Dostoevsky's works reveal the deep impression these encounters made upon him.

These elements together help us understand the background of Dostoevsky's theological vision. We may therefore restate once more his central question: What do God and man look like when human existence is pressed to its ultimate limits?

III. Dostoevsky's Heroes

Dostoevsky's heroes are characterized by their inability to fit into any of the existing categories of human beings, particularly those that divide humanity into positive and negative, good and evil. "It is impossible to describe them simply as intelligent or stupid, moral or immoral, good or bad. They are capable of heroism and self-sacrifice, yet at the same time they may commit the most vile and cruel acts."[1] "Their entire existence is a struggle. They are torn between their hopes and their fears. Love and hatred constantly contest in them and none can predict the direction in which they will finally move."[2] Thus, Dostoevsky's characters often appear, at first sight, pathological or abnormal.

And yet no one who reads them carefully can detect any artificiality in them. They all are so *very human*—indeed, strikingly close to what we might call our true selves. The question therefore arises: what makes them appear abnormal and pathological at first glance?

[1] Source unverified.—*Editor's note.*
[2] Source unverified.—*Editor's note.*

IV. Man's Existence Beyond Good and Evil

1. Dostoevsky Against Moralistic Anthropology

We shall never understand Dostoevsky unless we first see what he seeks to refute. His struggle is directed against the idea that man can be understood and classified primarily through moral categories or ethical systems. This idea is closely connected with the humanistic ideals that became dominant in post-Renaissance Europe—the belief that if man becomes sufficiently educated and cultured, he will thereby become good. Culture was seen as the hope of humanity: improved social conditions, the elimination of poverty, the refinement of manners, the ideal of the "gentleman."

Dostoevsky began very early to question this central axiom of European civilization. In *Notes from the House of the Dead*, based on his experiences in Siberia, he writes about the executioners he encountered there:

"Many times I have met executioners. They were all well-developed men with common sense and intelligence, but also with inordinate self-love and even pride..."[3]

He concludes:

"These are people who, like tigers, are greedy for blood. Those who have possessed unlimited power over the flesh, blood, and soul of their fellow creatures—those who have possessed such power and have been able to degrade another human being in the most extreme way—are incapable of restraining their desires. ... *I declare that the best man in the world can become hardened and brutalized to such a point that nothing will distinguish him from a wild beast*."[4]

2. The Rejection of Man as Animal Rationale

The next step in Dostoevsky's thought is the rejection of the classical definition of man as *animal rationale*. The following passage

[3] Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes from the House of the Dead*, trans. David McDuff (London: Penguin Classics, 1985), Part I.—*Editor's note.*

[4] Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes from the House of the Dead*, trans. David McDuff (London: Penguin Classics, 1985), Part I.—*Editor's note.*

from *Notes from Underground* is particularly illuminating. The hero of these letters, after having described the state of perfect harmony and reasonableness supposedly reached by mankind after so much effort and sacrifice, says:

"All human actions will then be tabulated according to these laws, mathematically, like tables of logarithms, up to 108,000, and entered in an index; or, better still, certain edifying works of the present kind will be published ... so that there will be no more actions or adventures in the world. ... And after so many centuries of labor, all this will be so arranged that man will at last know his interests exactly, and there will be no more incidents or adventures."[5]

And later:

"I should not be surprised if, amidst all this order and regularity, sometime in the future there should suddenly arise some curmudgeon—or rather some cynical and sneering gentleman—who, with his arms akimbo, will say to us: 'Now then, you fellows, what about smashing all this order to bits, sending these logarithms to the devil, and living according to your own silly will?' That might not be much, but the annoying thing is that he would immediately get plenty of followers."[6]

Later the following passage comes:

"Where then have all these wiseacres found that man's will should primarily be governed by reason? Why have they imagined that man needs a will directed toward reason and his own benefit? All he needs is an independent will, whatever it may cost him and wherever it may lead him. And why are you gentlemen so firmly convinced that only that which is normal and positive—in a word, his well-being—is good for man? Is reason never deceived about what is beneficial? Is it not possible that, besides loving his own welfare, man may also love suffering—indeed, may be passionately fond of it?"[7]

[5] Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground*, Part I, §§8–9.—*Editor's note.*

[6] Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Vintage Classics, 1994), Part I, chap. 7.—*Editor's note.*

[7] Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground*, Part I, chap. 7.—*Editor's note.*

3. Freedom as the Key to Man

This leads Dostoevsky to his central anthropological insight: *man can be understood only in the light of freedom*. This is both his greatness and his weakness, his capacity and his incapacity.

But how does freedom manifest itself in human existence? Dostoevsky pushes this question to its extreme—for example in *Demons* (*The Possessed*). He is not interested in conventional discussions of freedom as the ability to choose between trivial alternatives. Instead he raises the ultimate existential question: Is man free to affirm himself as the lord of creation?

It is this question that reveals whether freedom can be real, ultimate freedom. The answer is that man certainly does feel deep within himself this desire, but it is precisely here that he is confronted with God. God appears in Dostoevsky's works *not as a presupposed and pre-existing entity*, but as a *postulate of existence itself*, and this is tested in the realm of *freedom*.

As Ivan Karamazov says, man is free to "respectfully return the ticket"[8] to God and to disagree utterly with the actual existence of the world. Man is free to think that he could manage the world better if it were left to himself. Yet the existential implications of denying God amount to man's self-destruction. Kirillov in *Demons* expresses this radical logic:

"God is nothing else than pain and fear of death. He who conquers suffering and fear of death will become God himself. Then there will be new life, a new man. ... Everything will be renewed. The whole of history is divided into two parts: the first from the gorilla to the destruction of God; the second from the destruction of God to the transformation of the earth and man. Everyone who wants to attain complete freedom must be daring enough to kill himself. ... This is the final limit of freedom; that is all, there is nothing beyond it. Whoever dares to kill himself becomes God. Everyone can do this and thus cause God to cease to

[8] Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1990), Book V, chap. 4 ("Rebellion").—*Editor's note.*

exist, and then nothing will exist at all. But this has never yet been done, and therefore the world continues to be…"[9]

Kirillov is firmly convinced that if God and eternal life are only the fruits of man's imagination, then by committing suicide man achieves not only his own final self-annihilation but also destroys the whole universe. Thus, the same man who proudly claims that he can shape a better creation than God ends with the desire to smash up everything; his desire for self-sufficiency ultimately leads him to self-destruction.

Thus, the ultimate dilemma that freedom poses for man is this: either self-annihilation or the acceptance of the suffering that exists in this world.

4. Freedom and the Acceptance of Suffering

Now we may well dismiss this in a pathological way: we would say that we would never speak in such terms. Why should we go that far? The scandal that Dostoevsky poses for our Western minds is this: why should we accept suffering in order to be free? Why cannot we maintain both freedom and the elimination of suffering?

This question seems, in my view, to underlie the well-known scene of the Grand Inquisitor in *The Brothers Karamazov*. What is this scene about? In that scene Christ appears before the Inquisitor and faces perhaps the most profound criticism ever directed against Christianity. The accusation is simple: What have you done to the world with this idea of freedom? The only thing you have achieved, the Inquisitor argues, is to make people unhappy, for they simply cannot be free, because they are men and not gods. We—the Church—had to correct you on this point and try to preserve at least some followers for you. For who would remain your follower if your idea of freedom had prevailed? And the method we used? Simply by eliminating—or by trying to eliminate—suffering. Now Dostoevsky is convinced that what is usually said about

[9] Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Demons*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Vintage Classics, 1994), Part III, chap. 6.—*Editor's note.*

freedom from suffering expresses not the ontological but the merely "normal" side of man.[10]

The mystery of freedom as the acceptance of suffering presents itself to Dostoevsky not as a doctrine but as a basic aspect of human existence. He believes that man is fond of suffering, "*even passionately fond of it.*"

"I am sure that man will never renounce genuine suffering, even if it brings him ruin and chaos. ... Suffering is the one and only source of true knowledge; adversity is the mainspring of self-realization."[11]

Christ, for Dostoevsky, is the man par excellence, because He remains free from every attempt to eliminate suffering; He accepts suffering. This is not a sentimentalism about suffering nor an idealization of it. For Dostoevsky, this link between freedom and suffering is an existential necessity that no one can break. His Grand Inquisitor is not merely a symbol of the Roman Catholic medieval tradition but applies equally well to humanity in every age. Indeed, it fits quite clearly into the picture of socialism as it developed after his death. The axiom that freedom and the elimination of suffering cannot coexist is explained by the Inquisitor when he says:

"No science will give men bread so long as they remain free; they will understand themselves that freedom and bread enough for all are inconceivable together. For never, never will they be able to have both. They will be convinced that they can never be free, for they are weak, vicious, worthless, and rebellious."

In *The Possessed*, Shatov develops the theory that absolute freedom will inevitably lead to absolute despotism. He prophetically describes how every member of a collective society will be ordered to spy on all the others and to denounce the guilty to the government. Then everyone will belong to all, and all to everyone.

Dostoevsky, in inseparably linking freedom and suffering, points to an anthropology that is utterly paradoxical. The paradox

[10] The author refers to pages 296, 297, 298, and 300 of his Dostoevsky source.—*Editor's note.*

[11] Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground*, Part I, chap. 7.—*Editor's note.*

lies in the fact that man's glory, which is his freedom, is revealed in his shame, which is suffering. Dostoevsky does not develop the theological explanations of this paradox, but it certainly reminds us of the glory of the Cross. Here Dostoevsky offers one of the most maximalist anthropologies ever conceived. For he refuses to admit that man is incapable of freedom. The interesting thing is that, in doing so, he shows that both the Nietzschean Superman and the Marxist faith in man strangely share a minimalist anthropology: both ultimately accept man's impotence when it comes to full freedom.

For Dostoevsky, both are based on a fundamental contempt for man. He calls them either naive or liars, for they refuse to acknowledge—and perhaps do not wish to admit—that suffering is so much the substratum of existence, so deeply intrinsic to sin, that it is impossible to eliminate it while preserving freedom. For Dostoevsky there is only one way left open to man, namely, to embrace suffering. Thus, suffering becomes the point of man's glory: freedom to accept suffering, freedom from the fear of suffering—this is the only freedom that truly exists for man.

For theologians this may raise the question of how this is to be explained in terms of Christology, and much could indeed be said about that. But for Dostoevsky there is one method by which a fact is established and demonstrated—what I would call the method of possibility. Dostoevsky does not proceed in such a way that we might ask him, *"But why should it be so?"* His language is not the language of "ought to be," but simply the language of "is." Thus his point about suffering is that man, deep in his existence, loves it. Not only does he like to impose it on others, but he is also willing to undergo it himself. Culture does nothing more than cover this fact up. At the first opportunity, this love of suffering reveals itself.

5. Two Possible Paths

What Dostoevsky seems to imply is that in actual human existence there are simply two possibilities, one of which must be ruled out because it leads nowhere.

(a) Freedom without Suffering. One possibility is that humanity attempts to eliminate suffering while preserving freedom. This possibility must be ruled out unless freedom itself is relativized. Modern societies are facing precisely this problem, and the slogan is well known: unless we sacrifice something of our freedom, we can have no freedom at all. But Dostoevsky would not call what we actually possess real freedom, for freedom is not a quantitative reality that can exist partially. It is either all or nothing.

This appears to suggest an absolute individualism as the only alternative. It seems to imply that man is called to rebel and never conform to society. It might therefore make Dostoevsky appear an impossible figure for Marxism and communistic socialism. For he seems acceptable when he appeals to freedom that makes people rebel, but he becomes problematic when, by the same appeal, he appears to be anti-social.

Where, then, does Dostoevsky's position truly lie? This question is related to the second possibility, which for Dostoevsky is the only real possibility left open to man.

(b) Freedom through Suffering. The second possibility is that man uses his freedom by eliminating the fear of suffering, by recognizing a blessing in suffering, and by being able to say "yes" to suffering.

This seems to threaten our ideals of civilization, for these ideals are largely based on the effort to eliminate suffering. In this respect Dostoevsky fits neither into Marxism nor into the free Western society. He remains a stranger to both. He claims to have Christ with him—and perhaps a few monks, the starets, whom he used to visit so often. Whether he is right in making this claim or not is something that theology must decide.

And this is certainly the most acute challenge that Dostoevsky presents to theology: Where does Christ stand in this situation? Is He with Dostoevsky—or not?

V. Any Future for Man?

All that we have said so far may seem to suggest that Dostoevsky was concerned simply with a diagnosis of human existence, not

with a solution to the problem it creates. If his idea of absolute freedom so radically denies the titanic efforts of Western civilization—as well as the idea that God is there to assist human efforts toward development—what, then, is the future of man according to him? Is there any future for man?

Is Dostoevsky not a pessimist? Dostoevsky's idea of the human future is as strong and emphatic as his diagnosis of the present problem of man. It is an idea centered around the problem of *death*.

1. This problem held a particular fascination for Dostoevsky's mind. He had the unusual experience of facing it directly when, as a young man, he stood on the scaffold expecting his life to end within a few moments. He also glimpsed several times behind its veil during his attacks of epilepsy. He made many attempts to convey to his readers his vision of death. Yet, as he writes in his last letters—and as he puts into the mouths of many of his heroes—the right words and gestures for expressing this vision were always lacking.

2. Dostoevsky believed deeply that the only way to bring about any kind of future for humanity is to overcome death. He believed that death is bound up with man's sinful self, and that overcoming sin and overcoming death are almost identical realities.

3. Was this utopianism or not? This was the question Dostoevsky wrestled with in all his major novels, but he gave his most definite answer only in his final novel, *The Brothers Karamazov*.

The decisive influence on Dostoevsky's attitude toward death in this novel seems to have been a manuscript sent to him in 1877 by a priest named Peterson,[12] containing ideas written by the famous Russian thinker Nikolai Fedorov (1828–1903). The text to which Dostoevsky enthusiastically subscribed includes the following:

"We ascribe to God's thought the creation of limited beings and in their abandonment forever to the present unsatisfactory

[12] Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Letter to N. P. Peterson*, April 1878, in Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Letters*, ed. and trans. David Lowe (New York: Ardis, 1988).—*Editor's note.*

conditions. The creation of imperfect beings does not require, however, either omnipotence or omniscience, or even absolute love. ... Nothing positive is achieved by the mere removal of mortal beings from this world, which remains mortal. ... *The true task is to transform nature in such a way as to make it instrumental in the general resurrection*. [The Kingdom of God, or Paradise, must be the creation of men themselves. It can only be the fruit of their natural knowledge, of their deep feelings, and of their utmost energy, all directed toward the fulfilment of God's will. They can achieve it not in isolation, but only through their corporate efforts, through the whole of humanity acting together]. *Christianity is the union of the living for the resurrection of the dead*; it is *the fellowship of love of those who eat and drink with the purpose of bringing back to the sacred meal all the departed. We eat and drink in order to be able to restore the dead to life*. Christ, at the time of His departure, linked together remembrance and love for Him (and thus for all the departed) with eating—with the action that gives life and strength for work. He commanded all the living to gather together around the feast of love—of love for Him and for all the departed—a love that directs all its energy toward making it possible to see and hear them again, together with all the other departed."[13]

In response to this, Dostoevsky writes to Peterson:

"It is unquestionably our duty to raise our ancestors to life. The resurrection will be real and personal. The gulf separating us from the souls of our ancestors will be bridged. Those who have been defeated by death will triumph, and they will rise up—not only metaphorically in our consciousness, but actually, individually, in their bodies."

Both in *The Possessed* and in *The Adolescent*, Dostoevsky's heroes raise the question: Can man overcome the power of sin and death? But it is only in *The Brothers Karamazov* that the answer is given emphatically. Father Zosima says there: "We do not under-

[13] Nikolai Fyodorov, *The Philosophy of the Common Task*, trans. and ed. George M. Young (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).—*Editor's note.*

stand that life is a paradise; it suffices only to wish to understand it, and at once paradise will appear before us in all its beauty."[14] Thus this is significant for Dostoevsky's own development and thought: his greatest and final work ends with a triumphant affirmation of the glory and certainty of the general resurrection:

"Karamazov," cried Kolia, "can it be true what's taught in religion—that we shall all rise again from the dead, and that we shall live and see each other again, all of us—Ilyusha too?"

"Certainly we shall rise again; certainly we shall see each other and shall tell each other with joy and gladness all that has happened," Alyosha answered, half laughing, half with tears.[15]

The meal, as the event which existentially prolongs our life in living communion—according to an old Orthodox custom—follows the funeral and once again gives the impetus and courage for eternal life.

A few concluding reflections and questions may help clarify the implications of what has been said:

How are we to understand and appreciate Dostoevsky? Certainly, in many ways he has proven to be prophetic (communism, world wars, and other upheavals). This is due to his genius for penetrating deeply into human nature.

Was he a naive or even a disturbed visionary? What can account for his faith in the resurrection of the body? How are we to understand his critique of the idea of a human paradise offered by the West, while he himself seems to believe in the possibility of such a paradise and in our task to work toward it? Was he, perhaps, a kind of Christian socialist?

Finally, the overall question arises: Was Dostoevsky drawing his vision from a vision of man as he actually is and becomes, or was he in fact doing the opposite?

This amounts to the question: Was Dostoevsky perhaps a theologian—a theologian in the true sense of the word?

[14] Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, Book VI, chap. 3.—*Editor's note.*
[15] Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, Book XII, chap. 13.—*Editor's note.*

VII. Concluding Remarks

How then are we to understand Dostoevsky? Certainly, in many ways he has proved to be a prophet (communism, world wars, etc.). All this justifies his distrust of the idealistic, culture-centered Western European view of man. This alone would suffice to make us take Dostoevsky seriously in his understanding of human nature.

But how can we fully agree with him? There seem to be at least two main questions that arise and that make it difficult to accept Dostoevsky's position without reservation.

(a) How can we avoid thinking of his heroes—and perhaps of himself as well—as pathological types? How can we recognize ourselves in them? The difficulty is as real as when we try to find meaning in much of modern existentialist art: the appearance sometimes does not resemble what we know to be man. We tend to think primarily in terms of the form we possess through our culture; we are conditioned by it. Is it possible for us to demythologize man from his culture? Only if we do this can we finally decide whether Dostoevsky was right or wrong in his understanding of man.

(b) The second problem: How can we make practical sense of Dostoevsky's view of the future of man? Is the whole thing not merely wishful thinking? Is it not simply the case that his understanding of freedom is mistaken, and that because of this we are forced into a utopian view of the future?

The answer is by no means easy. Yet it is certainly true that there is a profound consistency between Dostoevsky's understanding of freedom and his vision of man's future. Dostoevsky is caught up in a vision of man that calls for extra-human factors in order to be resolved. Dostoevsky's God is a God of existential necessity, and unless he was entirely mistaken about human freedom, Dostoevsky's conception of man becomes inconceivable without Christ.