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REFLECTIONS ON ERRORS IN SOME WESTERN
INTERPRETATIONS OF FYODOR DOSTOEVSKY'S
THE BROTHERS KARAMAZOV

This paper responds to a book on Fyodor Dostoevsky written by an eminent American professor of political science Ellis Sandoz.¹ In its general outline the author's thesis seems reasonable: Dostoevsky fleshes out the dilemma of God versus self, the search for transcendent values on the one hand and the attraction of lawless freedom on the other. The most vivid presentation of this dilemma occurs in the conversation between Ivan and Alyosha in *The Brothers Karamazov* when Ivan narrates the story of the Grand Inquisitor.

The author contends that the temptation the Grand Inquisitor offers is essentially that of "messianic socialism" and "atheistic humanism," and that "totalitarianism" is bound to follow both options. The Grand Inquisitor rejects free submission to God, choosing instead his own grief, resentment, and a sense of bitter righteousness. Ivan's story is compelling and it leaves a lasting impression. This is what novels do: they suggest motivations and solutions, but in such a way as to invite interpretations that are never complete and always in need of another commentary or clarification. This is why writers are usually reluctant to answer questions about the meaning of their works. When Leo Tolstoy was asked about the meaning of *Anna Karenina*, he answered curtly that the meaning is contained in the totality of words in the text, no more and no less.

But Sandoz, a political scientist, makes the mistake of treating Dostoevsky's novel as if it were a combination of expository writing and Holy Scripture. He suggests that the Grand Inquisitor episode conveys a mystical insight into the nature of the political order, and this insight is somehow connected to Dostoevsky's profession of Russian Christianity. Yet literary texts cannot be approached as if they were voices from heaven conveying Christian eschatology. Sandoz treats *The Brothers Karamazov* as if it were written by someone so pure of heart and so enlightened by the Holy

¹ E. Sandoz, *Political Apocalypse: A Study of Dostoevsky's the Grand Inquisitor*, ISI Books, Wilmington, DE 2001.

Spirit that the reader could approach him with total trust, the way Holy Scriptures are treated by believers. No work of fiction can ever be so treated. In Dostoevsky's narrative the choice of characters and the emplotment of their fates were inspired by a talent at the service of many causes, of which Christianity was not the only and sometimes not even the principal one. In other words, the Christian inspiration of *The Brothers Karamazov* goes hand in hand with other inspirations whose foundation bears scrutiny. This novel was written by an individual who in his artistic intuitions was only "human, all too human" – in Dostoevsky's case, ideological to the core, resentful and not infrequently slanderous. To treat this magnificent work of art on par with theological works by those who penned their desert agonies for the benefit of future generations is a pernicious mistake. Works of art are just that, works of art: they can suggest attitudes and adumbrate insights, but they cannot be treated as holy texts written under divine inspiration. Zosima's teachings are among the most beautiful literary passages ever written, but even Zosima's gentle exhortations are contaminated by Dostoevsky's insistence that he was a *Russian* monk. Have you ever seen a Catholic text insisting that St. Francis was an *Italian* monk? Both Italians and non-Italians have had the good sense to avoid mentioning nationality in St. Francis's case, as well as in the case of numerous other Christian saints whom we remember as individuals but not as members of a particular nation. In this context, Dostoevsky's insistence that Zosima was a Russian is an instance of the ideologizing that is subtly and poisonously embedded in the novel.

Sandoz is not an exception. It is a common mistake of American interpreters of Dostoevsky to treat his novels as if they were theological texts rather than contingent products of talent and circumstance. Sandoz credits Dostoevsky with a unique understanding of politics and with purity of thought and design, but there is a difference between works of fiction and texts that make a claim to being divinely inspired and are treated by believers as such. The difference may seem small to those who do not share these beliefs, but it exists nevertheless.²

At the time Sandoz wrote his book, i.e., toward the end of the twentieth century, it was already impossible to not take into account what Paul Ricoeur calls "the school of suspicion."³ The art of *secular* interpretation had been established a long time ago, and there is no way back to the innocence of medieval hermeneutics that is appropriate for the Holy Scriptures but not for secular texts. Literary works contain illusions that disintegrate when "the philosophers of suspicion" are brought into action. If we do not take this into account we are in danger of treating novels, poems, and plays as God's revelations to humanity, rather than as works in which their authors' talent obscures the resentments and worldly loves concealed in the text.

² A similar mistake was made by Edward Wasiolek in his *Dostoevsky: The Major Fiction* (The MIT Press, Cambridge 1964), the standard textbook of university courses on Dostoevsky in the 1970s.

³ P. Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay in Interpretation*, transl. D. Savage (Yale Univ. Press, New Haven, CT 1970), p. 28.

I do not presume to suggest that Professor Sandoz was ignorant of these caveats. Rather, I think that for reasons best known to himself he chose to ignore them, opting rather for the kind of trust that should be reserved for the writings of the saints. Most likely he was influenced by the many laudatory works on Russian culture and on Dostoevsky himself that imperial culture invariably generates. These works treat Russian society as if it consisted of gentle peasants and highly civilized educated classes with a solid admixture of world-class mystics, rather than being a society hospitable to the Gulag and to land kleptomania that the Russian empire has displayed over the centuries.

Sandoz seems to be influenced by New Criticism, or the school of literary analysis that proclaimed the autonomy of the literary work and placed that work beyond the confines of time, space, and the historical process from which it sprang. The New Critics were also inclined to believe that literature contains the kind of knowledge that is otherwise inexpressible, neither rational nor scientific nor emotive, a knowledge *sui generis*. This last tenet, expressed among others by John Crowe Ransom, helps Sandoz credit Dostoevsky with a profoundly Christian understanding of human existence and world politics. According to this interpretation, Dostoevsky structured his novels in such a way as to invite the reader to partake of a knowledge (generated in the Russian Orthodox context) of how to organize societies and how *not* to organize them.

Sandoz excessively enlarges the New Critical assumption that literature brings knowledge – knowledge about the human condition, yes, but purely religious and eschatological knowledge, no. On p. 108 of his book Sandoz compares Ivan's story to the experience of mystics. However, in literature what matters is the artistic effect, whereas in spiritual writings, if they are rightly motivated, what matters is truth. To achieve artistic effects, an admixture of falsehood may be useful. In Dostoevsky's *The Possessed*, Stepan Trofimovich states that truth is always improbable, and to make it probable one has to add to it a bit of the lie. As an artist, Dostoevsky availed himself amply of this insight. In other words, an orthodox Christian mystic is one thing, and a work of a genius seeking to influence people and make a certain kind of impression on society is another.

While Sandoz thus stretches the New Critical tenets about literature providing knowledge, he follows to a tee the New Critical precepts concerning the autonomy of the work of art. Dostoevsky's own idiosyncrasies, the tangled history of his family, economic and ideological insecurities of his father, the mysterious rape of an underage girl that stubbornly recurs in his life and novels, psychological problems of coping with the humiliation and injustice of slave labor in Siberia are all disregarded by Professor Sandoz in the name of the "autonomy of the literary work." Nor is Sandoz interested in another historical issue within which Dostoevsky's Christianity has to

be placed: the sorry theological state of the Russian Orthodox Church at that time.⁴ I am not bringing this up to badmouth Russian Orthodoxy: all Christian denominations have ugly stories in their closets. But because of that, one should be a bit more cautious in proclaiming full sympathy, as Professor Sandoz does, with Dostoevsky's assertion that showing an attachment to Russianness and to Russian Orthodoxy is the best way to live a Christian life. Sandoz suggests that Dostoevsky was right in maintaining that "the Russian people" and "the [Russian] people's truth" are closest to a true realization of the Gospel spirit (pp. 261–62). This is the core of Dostoevsky's message; his powerful literary imagination served that message. But this kind of chauvinistic message diverges from the Christian message of the saints.

There is more. Dostoevsky's brilliant assault on the reputation of Catholicism not only in Russia but also beyond its borders has to be described as sinister. The blow is directed at the very core of Catholic identity: its claim that it follows the teachings of Christ. I am speaking of the character of the Grand Inquisitor, of Prince Myshkin's outburst at the end of *The Idiot* (true, Myshkin is mentally unbalanced, but in Dostoevsky's novels idiots express the most profound insights), of Alyosha Karamazov condemning Catholicism with faint praise, and of virulent denunciations of both Catholicism and Protestantism in *Winter Notes on Summer Impressions*. Such outbursts of hatred make Dostoevsky's novels unreliably Christian. I do not know of any Catholic writer of fiction who has ever deliberately tried to discredit Eastern Orthodoxy at its core by suggesting total corruption of its doctrine and practice. It takes resentment beyond measure to try to do this and if that resentment is accompanied by unmatched talent, the results are devastating. Perhaps this is why Dostoevsky has never been able to create a truly virtuous character: his evil heroes are engaging but his saccharine-sweet Alyosha and personality-free Myshkin are too passive to enthrall. Dostoevsky was too concerned with dealing a blow to Russia's real or imagined competitors; he wanted to obscure the indescribably destructive role Russia has played in inhibiting normalcy in societies in Europe and Asia. In his efforts to give a positive spin to Russianness he forfeited the possibility of creating truly intriguing characters. Alyosha with his *Russian* boys was rightly caricatured in Witold Gombrowicz's *Ferdydurke*, whereas Myshkin's love affair with Russia further weakened this already artistically unconvincing character.

In my own practice of teaching Dostoevsky I have never learned to approach the Grand Inquisitor scene from a unified point of view. One part of me rolls her eyes in delight and tries to explain to students the intricacies of the speech: Ivan's seemingly incontestable accusations hurled against God (Ivan is a believer, of course, atheism is for the small fry like Smerdyakov), while the other part continues to marvel at the perversion of the writer who not-so-subtly suggests that during the period of the Inquisition "almost a hundred heretics" were burned daily, *ad majorem Dei gloriam*.

⁴ In *Sobranie tserkovno-istoricheskikh sochinenii* [1898], A. P. Lebedev complained bitterly of the lack of elementary theological knowledge among village priests.

In thus presenting Catholicism, Dostoevsky was fully aware that the Russian reading public would take his statements to be historical truth, and that this would further complicate the status of both Roman and Eastern Rite Catholics in his country. The sorry record of Russian Orthodoxy in forcing the conversions of the Ukrainian and Belarusian Uniates – hundreds and thousands of people executed for refusing to convert from Eastern Catholicism to Russian Orthodoxy found its justification partly through Dostoevsky's novels which persuaded readers that Orthodoxy mass-produced saints such as Zosima and Alyosha, while Catholicism equaled hypocrisy and totalitarianism. The Inquisitor episode in *The Brothers Karamazov* is strongly reminiscent of hate literature vilifying Catholicism that most Americans occasionally find in their mailboxes. If Dostoevsky were a lesser writer, William Donaghue of the Catholic League would probably have penned a letter to the publisher demanding a retraction of slander. But Dostoevsky's perverse imagery was put at the service of one of the most powerful literary visions ever created, and backed up by an ever-expanding empire. Dostoevsky assigned to the most evil hero of *The Brothers Karamazov* an all-powerful place in the Catholic hierarchy. A more effective anti-Catholic propaganda piece can hardly be conceived.

If one is, as Sandoz declares himself to be, attentive and faithful to Dostoevsky's intentions (127), one cannot gloss over – as he does – the issue of Dostoevsky's presenting the Catholic Church as pure evil (not a heresy and not a schism, as Sandoz suggests). There is no escaping the conclusion that the Grand Inquisitor *is* the Catholic Church: the passage in which the Inquisitor speaks of the “800 years” of serving “the wise and dread spirit” (Satan) makes it perfectly clear that Dostoevsky intended this to be a real *j'accuse*, a total condemnation. The 800 years, as Sandoz rightly explains, refers to the period of time that elapsed between the Council of Ephesus (recognized by the Russian Orthodox Church) and the Renaissance with its concomitant Spanish Inquisition (when the action of the story takes place). Dostoevsky builds into *The Brothers Karamazov* a powerful suggestion that “the whore of Babylon” interpretation is correct, and that the Western Church is not in schism but at the service of Satan.

This kind of ideological perversity – for perversity it must be called, since Dostoevsky cannot claim unlettered ignorance – raises interesting questions about the Russian writer's motivation, as well as about the official stance of the Russian Orthodox Church on the issue. Coincidentally, Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum* was published a few years after the publication of *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880 vs. 1891), thus indirectly invalidating Dostoevsky's argument that the Grand Inquisitor (a.k.a. the Catholic Church) led humanity toward socialism and totalitarianism.

Sandoz analyzes the Inquisitor's speech in great detail, but somehow this one issue escapes his attention. The fact that Dostoevsky engaged his tremendous talent in dealing a rhetorical blow to the Catholic Church suggests that the writer's motivation was mixed, to say the least, and what masquerades as defense of Christianity

is sometimes grounded in motives that are inimical to Christianity. Surely a study that politicizes Dostoevsky's novel – as Professor Sandoz's does, and legitimately so – should have grappled with these uncomfortable issues. Skirting them, while overinterpreting some of the novel's statements as if they were words of a divinely inspired prophet rather than a resentment-filled literary genius, is not appropriate.

Let us also consider Sandoz's statement that Russian intellectual life (such as it was at that time) was permeated by Hegelianism. True, Hegel's ideas found sympathetic ground in Russia, but only via osmosis: Dostoevsky did not know German well enough to read Hegel, and Belinsky (that famous "Hegelian" critic) acquired Hegel's ideas secondhand, without ever reading Hegel's texts. Furthermore, Russia's literate society learned about Hegel on an empty stomach, as it were – and just as drinking vodka on an empty stomach has a different effect than consuming it during a meal, so did Hegelian ideas assume different shapes and interpretations in Russia as opposed to Western and Central Europe, where they fell on ground conditioned by centuries of training in syllogistic thinking. Russia did not participate in European intellectual life in the Middle Ages or during the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, and hence did not acquire the habits of mind and training in rational thinking that the rest of Europe assimilated. In *The Russian Idea and the Origin of Russian Communism*, Nikolai Berdyaev remarks that the enthusiasm with which the Russian educated classes accepted the philosophy of Hegel was related to the Russian tradition of perceiving truth and morality as belonging to a level of reality inaccessible to reason. Berdyaev suggests that Russian culture has a propensity toward totalitarianism. In contrast, the admirers of Dostoevsky's politics are generally of the opinion that Russian totalitarianism is a Western European import.

In his search for sources of the Grand Inquisitor figure, Sandoz omits Konstantin Pobedonostsev, mentioning him only as a friend of Dostoevsky. Pobedonostsev was the Procurator of the Holy Synod, a.k.a. the Ministry of Religion appointed by the tsar. He was famous for holding an unfavorable view of the Russian people; Dostoevsky transformed this into contempt for all of humanity. Another source is the Inquisitor in Schiller's *Don Carlos*, a grim and tragic figure. The perfidy of Dostoevsky consists in lifting a gloomy but not criminal character from the famous play, attaching to this character a label lifted from the history of the Spanish Inquisition, using a real Russian character as a model to blend in with Schiller's creation, and blaming Catholicism for the resulting mess. By quoting only those sources that are sympathetic to Dostoevsky's point of view, Sandoz skews his interpretation to favor Russian Orthodoxy and criticize Catholicism, following Dostoevsky's own prejudices.

Dostoevsky's hatred of Catholicism had several possible sources. His grandfather was a Uniate Catholic priest with a Lithuanian-Polish connection (the name comes from a family estate in Lithuania named Dostoevo). Dostoevsky's father ran away from home, suggesting that family life was not idyllic, converted to Russian Orthodoxy, and put himself through medical school. Sources indicate that he was

a man with many demons. While Dostoevsky's relation to his father was ambivalent (the older Dostoevsky was killed by his own peasants and the family never pressed charges), he may have shared his father's aversion to what his grandfather represented. Second, during his incarceration in the Siberian gulag Dostoevsky encountered several Polish political convicts who were, like himself, educated but, unlike himself, Catholic. These convicts looked down on the Russians and held themselves aloof. This may have galled Dostoevsky, since he had come to believe that humiliation and mistreatment are to be accepted rather than opposed. The uppity Poles who visibly despised their Russian masters awoke Dostoevsky's deep antipathy, as conveyed in *The House of the Dead*. Finally, as Dostoevsky swallowed up the ideological fiction of Moscow being the third Rome and the center of Christianity on earth, he may have felt a particular aversion to the denomination whose existence undermined such claims.

While Sandoz ignores these historical details, he does posit the existence of a less-compelling intellectual context for the novel. In his opinion, Dostoevsky's early immersion in leftist Hegelianism gave him an insight into the fatal mistakes of nineteenth-century revolutionaries. How this relates to the Inquisition or to the Grand Inquisitor as a literary figure, Sandoz does not say. He also invokes Plato, St. Anselm, pagan religiosity and "King" (Prince, actually) Vladimir, whom the Ukrainians claim as the founder of Ukraine and whom the Muscovites appropriated in the seventeenth century and against historical evidence. Before the partitions of Poland in the eighteenth century, Ukraine was never Moscow's patrimony waiting for "reunification." Sandoz also brings to bear Eric Voegelin's writings on the Gnostic heresy, skillfully pointing out Ivan's (and the other great apostates') Gnostic proclivities. There is hardly a significant nineteenth-century philosopher who is not invoked as a possible source of Dostoevsky's character, but there are too many credits in Sandoz's text, too many mentions of widely disparate philosophers, most of whom Dostoevsky never read in the original. To me, invoking them as sources of Dostoevsky's thought while ignoring the much closer sources and prototypes seems a mistake.

I really do not see how Descartes fits into Sandoz's argument (p. 111). I do not see the Grand Inquisitor's "sin" as having anything to do with "the French sin," to use Jacques Maritain's characterization of Descartes' stance. Nor can Dostoevsky's story be easily equated with the philosophical argument Sandoz presents on p. 112: since human beings are aware of participation "in a reality ontologically superior" to their own, the only way to make them accept absolutely a human leader is to "obliterate the idea of God" in their minds, to commit a "swindle." So far so good. But then Sandoz goes on to say that "the critical task [is] to anesthetize the spiritual consciousness with the propaganda of atheism, scientism, and political activism. Wow! Where does Dostoevsky (or the Grand Inquisitor or Ivan) suggest all this? This sounds more like a right wing talk show rather than a scholarly argument.

I find the Grand Inquisitor to be a magnificent creation, in contrast to Dostoevsky's Christ whom I find to be a rather unsuccessful rendition of the Gospel figure. God's encounters with man are highly individualized, and they occur in that mysterious and secret space called the human soul. The kiss that the Prisoner plants on the lips of the Grand Inquisitor is not a particularly successful metaphor, in my opinion, especially in the twenty-first century. It also brings to mind the Russian habit of men kissing each other on the lips and on the cheeks, e.g., Leonid Brezhnev embracing Erich Honecker and subjecting him to a kiss.

Dostoevsky's diatribes against Catholicism are expressions of extreme chauvinism that was the obverse side of Dostoevsky's Christian convictions. The inseparability of Russian chauvinism and Russian Orthodoxy, fostered by the Russian colonial state and resented throughout the Russian empire by non-Russians, has to be kept in mind when studying Dostoevsky or Russian affairs in general. To read Dostoevsky as if he were yet another European influenced by Hegelianism is to make a major, if common, mistake.

It should also be remembered that Dostoevsky's "truth" was anti-Thomistic, in the sense that Dostoevsky rejected the unity of God's creation and chose to believe that while on one level, $2 + 2 = 4$, on another level this is not so. His famous saying that "if Christ proved to be outside the truth [he] would rather go with Christ than with the truth" is an attractive tip of an iceberg of mendacities that this kind of attitude engenders. As St. Thomas pointed out, there is no separation between intuitive truth and rational truth. The end result of a refusal to accept truth's universality is the phenomenon of Grigorii Rasputin, a holy fool and a debauched pseudo-monk who played a large role at the court of the last emperor and empress of Russia. Rasputin was a man capable of utter self-abasement, and yet he also displayed resentful pride.

Some years ago I tried to deal with this baneful paradox of Russian culture – refusing to accept the universality of truth – in a book on the phenomenon of holy foolishness in Russia. While there have been a few holy fools who deserved admiration and praise (at its best, the entire tradition goes back to the early Church and the abnegation practiced by some zealous monks and nuns), a much larger number had little to do with saintliness. For lack of a better methodology, in that book I formulated a set of dichotomies that the holy fool admirers in Russia considered equivalent in some way, such as wisdom-foolishness, purity-impurity, tradition-rootlessness, meekness-aggression, veneration-derision. These dichotomies are the fountainhead of the "higher realism" which Russian thinkers sometimes invoke; they also represent a fundamental denial of the principles of identity and non-contradiction on which Western societies have been built. It is that denial that I find amply present in Dostoevsky, and it is on that basis that I find *The Brothers Karamazov* to be fascinating, instructive and at the same time deeply troubling. The malevolence with regard

to things Western woven into this *programmatically* Russian novel makes me view with skepticism Professor Sandoz's trustful ventures into Dostoevsky's theology.

Eastern Orthodoxy has produced some tremendous saints, but that does not mean that *The Brothers Karamazov* is a perfectly Christian novel. Rather, it is a novel that shows two possible choices, each of them persuasively argued and neither of them unequivocally prevailing. Dmitrii Karamazov remarks that "God and the Devil fight a battle, and the battleground is the heart of men." Both sides are alluringly presented, but the credibility of both is undermined by Dostoevsky's ideological dishonesties that I tried to outline in this paper. The fact that a majority of American interpreters of Dostoevsky remain blind to these dishonesties while at the same time extolling Dostoevsky's superb understanding of Christianity is to be deplored. The novel leaves us impressed and upset, but it does not make us better Christians. In fact, it can – and has – made some readers select the Grand Inquisitor option and eloquently argue in its favor.

While Professor Sandoz does quote from Dostoevsky's translated *Notebooks*, it is clear that he knows little of Russian realities. While I do not maintain that "whoever wants to understand a poet must visit his homeland," I do think that so categorical an interpretation of Dostoevsky and his alleged eschatological insights cannot be offered in separation from a historical knowledge of what Dostoevsky stood for and what fruits have issued from that tree. Somehow the English-speaking admirers of things Russian never ask themselves why this country of alleged saints and mystics produced the Gulag, and why Russians have never staged a major uprising against tsarist or Soviet tyranny. If the cultural codes of totalitarianism are built into the Grand Inquisitor figure as Sandoz suggests, then surely somewhere in *The Brothers Karamazov* the cultural codes of "Russianness" are also present, the codes that in real life have already produced the political apocalypse that Professor Sandoz invokes in his title.