

Feature Article: JAF3366

ALEXANDER SOLZHENITSYN CONFRONTS THE GRAND INQUISITOR

by Stephen Mitchell

This article first appeared in *Christian Research Journal*, volume 36, number 06 (2013). For further information or to subscribe to the *Christian Research Journal* go to: <http://www.equip.org/christian-research-journal/>

The ways to challenge religious belief are many and varied. One can begin with a direct challenge to belief in God, or one can challenge certain beliefs about humanity that are foundational to the structures of particular religions. One famous literary character—Dostoevsky’s Grand Inquisitor (GI)—takes the latter approach by denying that humans are strong enough to bear the burden of free will. In an earlier article, I outlined this claim and suggested that the Inquisitor’s protest is profound enough to merit examining our own theology.¹ If, however, we wish to retain our belief in free will (and I do) along with the attendant belief in human moral responsibility, both of which are necessary for belief in the Christian God, then we must find some response to the arguments against it. Since literature is concerned with truth, most pointedly with dramatic truth, a literary argument is best answered with another literary argument. A character who misrepresents humanity is best answered by one who represents it more truthfully. Fortunately another Russian novelist, Alexander Solzhenitsyn, has met the GI’s challenge.

Although Solzhenitsyn’s narratives, from *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* and *The Gulag Archipelago* to *In the First Circle* and *Cancer Ward*, are each concerned with the moral life of humans and the choices they make while under duress, his first novel (*One Day...*) provides the most precise and powerful answer to the GI’s accusations. To understand this answer, though, we must understand the GI’s view of humanity.

In a bizarre encounter, the GI rebukes Jesus and asks,

“Didst Thou forget that man prefers peace, and even death, to freedom of choice in the knowledge of good and evil?...Thou didst think too highly of men therein, for they are slaves, of course, though rebellious by nature....I swear, man is weaker and baser by nature than Thou hast believed him! Respecting him less Thou wouldst have asked less of him...What though he is everywhere now rebelling [via the Enlightenment] against our power, and proud of his rebellion? It is the pride of a child and a schoolboy. They are little children rioting and barring out the teacher.”²

These words express no orthodox view of human sinfulness. Instead, they effectively deny that man bears the image of God. It is not just that human will is in bondage to sin but that humanity is, in its very essence, a pathetic caricature of a moral being, one who “will recognize at last that He who created them rebels must have meant to mock at them.”³ A God who creates creatures such as these, the GI implies, is a fool worth no one’s love or faith.

The GI recognizes that there are some few who can handle the burden of free will. But they are rare. In fact, “they must have been not men but gods...and Thou mayest indeed point with pride at those children of freedom, of free love, of free and splendid sacrifice for Thy name....[But] how are the other weak ones to blame...How is the weak soul to blame that it is unable to receive such terrible gifts?”⁴ Here is the central question: is the world, indeed, divisible into the strong (few) and the weak (masses)? Are the strong ones a rare group of spiritual virtuosos with special genius for moral decisions and the masses a weak and slavish lot? If the GI points to the masses for proof of his claims, how does one answer him?

By pointing, too, as Solzhenitsyn does to Ivan Denisovich. Thus he brings to the world’s attention a man who is neither spiritual virtuoso nor moral failure. In him, readers see an ordinary man capable of unyielding moral fortitude. In the Soviet prison camps (the Gulag), prisoners endured brutal treatment. Former prisoner Jacques Rossi describes conditions there: “The Gulag was conceived in order to transform human matter into a docile, exhausted, ill-smelling mass of individuals living only for themselves and thinking of nothing else but how to appease the constant torture of hunger, living in the instant, concerned with nothing apart from evading kicks, cold and ill treatment.”⁵

Sustaining this assault on his moral sensibilities, Ivan manages to protect his capacity for moral choice by protecting his dignity. Concern for his dignity appears most clearly in an encounter he has with two other prisoners, Caesar and Fetyukov. Caesar is relatively well off for a prisoner, mostly because his family is also well off and supplies him with packages loaded with food. Ivan and Fetyukov, by contrast, have nothing. Both exist at or near the bottom of the prison hierarchy. When they notice that Caesar is nearing the end of a cigarette, each wants it. “But Shukhov [another name for Ivan] didn’t ask him outright. He stopped just next to Caesar, turned halfway toward him, and then looked past him. He looked as if he didn’t care... [though] right now he thought he’d rather have this butt than his freedom. But he wouldn’t stoop as low as Fetyukov and look straight at the guy’s mouth.”⁶

Here is a line, however minimal, that Ivan will not cross. He almost never gets a cigarette and has no access to luxuries. Furthermore, he exists on a starvation diet while working long hours in subfreezing temperatures. A man like the GI would expect Ivan to beg for this cigarette, to get into direct conflict or confrontation with Fetyukov over it, both men fighting like animals for this tiny bit of tobacco. But Ivan refuses, even though Fetyukov relinquishes his own dignity: “‘Caesar Markovich.’ Fetyukov drooled at him—he couldn’t stand it any longer—‘please give me one little drag!’ He wanted it so badly his face was twitching all over.”⁷ Solzhenitsyn is astute enough to know that

people such as the GI describes do exist. There *are* humans who relinquish all dignity, all self-government, all spiritual and moral responsibility if only someone else will assume that responsibility for them. Fetyukov, the story shows, is (or has become) such a person.

The decision to beg or not beg for a cigarette may seem insignificant, but it marks the line between the man who still has control of his will and the man who does not. In other words, this one scene shows us two very different human beings, one who is still capable of moral choice and one who has given that power up. Our response as readers is significant, for it is hardly possible to feel respect for Fetyukov. We may pity him; we may commiserate. We may wonder what our own response would be in the same situation. But once we see how Ivan acts, we know that a man does not have to give in. And if a man does not have to give in, then the argument of the GI is weakened.

Ivan continues in other ways to resist moral domination by the Gulag system. He protects and retains the freedom of his will by staying faithful to the practices of a craftsman learned while he was still a free man. In a letter from his wife, Ivan learns that the old village skill of carpentry was passing away. “Now they were on to something new — painting carpets. Someone had got hold of some stencils in the war, and the thing had really caught on. More and more people were doing it and getting good at it....They went all over the country.... They raked in thousands of rubles painting carpets all over the place....any old fool could make them. You just put on the stencil and dabbed paint through the holes.”⁸ But work that any old fool can do holds little interest for Ivan, who was reared and trained to understand himself as a skilled craftsman. Besides, to succeed at painting carpets a man must be willing to pay bribes. Ivan, though, had “never given or taken a bribe from anybody, and he hadn’t learned that trick in the camp either. Easy money doesn’t weigh anything and it doesn’t give you that good feeling you get when you really earn it...what you don’t pay for honestly, you don’t get good value for. Shukhov’s hands were still good for something.”⁹

Shukhov’s hands represent more than a way to make money. They represent a way of life, a set of practices by which he establishes continuity between the man he was outside the prison camps and the man he is while inside. When sent to a construction worksite (in subzero temperatures), Ivan is assigned work as a bricklayer, “a job you could take pride in.”¹⁰ His only external motivation to work is that his food rations are pegged to his work. But these are tied only to the amount of work done, not to its quality. Still Ivan makes sure to do careful, accurate work. He

*never made a mistake. His bricks were always right in line. If one of them was broken or had a fault, Shukhov spotted it right off the bat and found the place on the wall where it would fit....He always put on just enough mortar for each brick. Then he’d pick up a brick out of the pile...level off the mortar with a trowel and drop the brick on top. He had to even it out fast and tap it in place with his trowel...so the outside wall would be straight as a die and the bricks level both crossways and lengthways.*¹¹

This diligence protects Ivan's self-respect, which enables him to resist the other assaults on his will made by the Gulag system — assaults from beatings, starvation rations, freezing temperatures, demeaning searches, and isolation cells.

While seeking to break down his conscience and his resistance so that all he can think of is food, the Gulag unwittingly provides Ivan with the means of resistance by way of the labor they impose on him. At the end of the work- ing day, Ivan “went up and looked over the wall from left to right. His eye was true as a level. The wall was straight as a die. His hands were still good for something!”¹²

The GI rebukes Jesus for resisting the wisdom of the “wise and dread Spirit”¹³ (Satan) during His temptation in the wilderness. Instead of accepting the power of *miracle* (bread), *mystery* (jumping from the temple), and *authority* (both moral and political) offered Him by Satan, Jesus comes “with some promise of freedom which men in their simplicity and their natural unruliness cannot even understand...for nothing has ever been more insupportable for a man and a human society than freedom.”¹⁴

The Gulag, constructed on a similar premise, seeks to remove every possibility of freedom from its prisoners. It seeks moral authority over their consciences by requiring them to write confessions of, and reasons for, their minor misdeeds. It cultivates mystery by keeping the timeline of their prison sentences arbitrary and by declaring, via legislation, how the hours of the day shall be measured. Above all, it apes the miraculous by producing all of the prisoners' bread from its own storehouse.¹⁵ Were men as abject and slavish as the GI claims, this system should reduce them all (or most of them) to moral impotence.¹⁶ But it does no such thing. To the contrary, in “A World Split Apart,” Solzhenitsyn claims that the Gulag experience has been “a spiritual training far in advance of Western experience. Life's complexity and mortal weight have produced stronger, deeper, and more interesting characters than those produced by standardized Western well-being.”¹⁷ As Ivan's day concludes, we see his resolve reflected in another prisoner whom he admires—a man whose face “was dark and looked like it had been hewed out of stone....You could see his mind was set on one thing—never to give in.”¹⁸

Ivan Denisovich shows clearly that a human being *can* bear the moral burden of free will, and that the dignity of a human life depends on this capacity. Thus God shows not hatred but profound and loving respect when He requires that humans follow Him freely in a life filled with difficult moral choices. Ivan's resolve confronts the GI with a powerful counterargument, strengthening thereby the justice of that element in the Christian faith that holds that each human is responsible for his own soul.

Stephen Mitchell teaches English at Covenant Day School in Matthews, North Carolina. He holds an MS in English education and an MA in liberal studies. He is a PhD student in humanities.

NOTES

- 1 See Stephen Mitchell, "Reading My Favorite Atheists: Ivan, Raskolnikov, and Kirilov," *Christian Research Journal* 35, 2 (2012): 46–49.
- 2 Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Constance Garnett (New York: Barnes and Noble Classics, 2004), 236–37.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Ibid., 237–38.
- 5 Jacques Rossi, *The Gulag Handbook*, quoted in "Gulag History," <http://gulaghistory.org/nps/onlineexhibit/stalin/living.php>.
- 6 Alexander Solzhenitsyn, *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, trans. Max Hayward and Ronald Higley (New York: Bantam Classic, 1963), 23.
- 7 Ibid., 24.
- 8 Ibid., 33.
- 9 Ibid., 34.
- 10 Ibid., 51.
- 11 Ibid., 77.
- 12 Ibid., 88.
- 13 *The Brothers Karamazov*, 233.
- 14 Ibid., 234.
- 15 *One Day*, 27, 52, 59.
- 16 *The Brothers Karamazov*, 239.
- 17 Alexander Solzhenitsyn, "A World Split Apart" (Harvard graduate address on June 8, 1978). Accessed online at <https://s3.amazonaws.com/Workplace/Article001WorldSplitApart.pdf>.
- 18 *One Day*, 122.