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READING MY FAVORITE ATHEISTS: Ivan, Raskolnikov, and Kirilov

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The dialectical principle in the humanities suggests that we need a strong opposite against which to test our ideas. Socrates looked for people who had thought carefully about a position that contradicted his own and who lived according to their beliefs. Because I think the same dialectical principle can sharpen my faith, I read the novels of Fyodor Dostoevsky, whose atheists are eloquent enough to convince and consistent enough to warn me that sometimes the most meticulous reason begets the most maniacal madness. They put their fingers so precisely on problems of justice, morality, and freedom that neither believers nor unbelievers can step around them. Instead, both characters and readers have to face them and respond.

IVAN KARAMAZOV: THE HUMANE MURDERER

The Brothers Karamazov is Dostoevsky's story of four brothers—Dmitri, Ivan, Alyosha, and Smerdyakov. At the instigation of Ivan, Smerdyakov kills his debauched father. When Ivan learns that Smerdyakov commits the murder because he believes Ivan's claim that if there is no God, everything is lawful, Ivan is furious.¹ Mostly, he is angry because Smerdyakov demonstrates the sordid actions to which Ivan's theories lead. Nevertheless, since he rejects God precisely because people in this world get murdered, it is odd that Ivan condones murder. But once he does reject Him, he cannot escape the consequences of his ideas.

Before the murder Ivan and Alyosha (a Christian) meet at their father's kitchen table. In this meeting, Ivan opens his heart to Alyosha, and we learn the reason for his atheism. Incredibly, we discover that Ivan is not really an atheist. Instead, he refuses to accept God. More precisely he refuses to "accept this world of God's, and, although I know it exists, I don't accept it all."² He sees too much suffering in this world to accept any good that might come from it. No world in which innocent children suffer is worth the cost. Out of justice, Ivan rejects God. "It's not God that I don't accept," says Ivan, "only I most respectfully return Him the ticket."³ A peasant boy torn to shreds by dogs at the command of a vicious land owner; soldiers who blow out the brains of babies still laughing in their mothers' arms; a little girl beaten with a birch rod by her parents; a

child of five smeared with her own feces, forced by her mother to eat it because she had an accident; these are torments so sadistic we can only reject them. Any attempt to make them part of a cosmic plan seems perverse. So Ivan rejects the God he believes has planned and permitted them.

Ivan then challenges Alyosha: "Imagine that you are creating a fabric of human destiny with the object of making men happy in the end, giving them peace and rest at last, but that it was essential and inevitable to torture to death only one tiny creature...and to found that edifice on its unavenged tears, would you consent to be the architect on those conditions?'... 'No, I wouldn't consent,' said Alyosha softly."⁴ With that soft "no," Alyosha joins Ivan to protest the injustice of this world and of the God who would make injustice part of His plan.

Decades later Camus, writing in *The Rebel*, shows that Ivan's condemnation of God leads finally to full-fledged atheism. "Even if God existed, Ivan would never surrender to Him in the face of the injustice done to man. But a longer contemplation of this injustice, a more bitter approach, transformed the 'even if you exist' into 'you do not deserve to exist,' therefore 'you do not exist.'"⁵ Both Ivan and Camus miss, however, what theologian Richard Bauckham has noticed, namely that Ivan is rejecting a particular theodicy (an attempt to justify God in the face of evil). He is rejecting a specific portrait of God, one that portrays him planning evil in order to accomplish a greater good. Furthermore, this portrait suggests that even the most heinous suffering is always more or less deserved, the sufferer needing either punitive or corrective discipline. It is a portrait of God not necessarily orthodox.⁶ This challenge to reconcile suffering with divine love and justice makes *The Brothers Karamazov* valuable for Christians because Ivan's critique sends us back to our theology to see if we have not spoken ill of God.

THEOLOGIAN BEGET ATHEISTS

In his masterful work, *At the Origins of Modern Atheism*, theologian Michael J. Buckley attempts a genealogy of atheism. Seeking the roots of its modern expression, he begins by showing how fluid the word *atheist* is, having named men as diverse as Socrates, Justin Martyr, Anaxagoras, and Epicurus. Buckley contends that we can only understand an atheist by the terms of the God he denies. "Men were called atheists dependent upon a limited number of variables: whom they identified as gods; the understanding they gave to the term; the activities they defined as divine; the kind of denial attributed to them....The use of the epithet is dictated by the definition of the gods denied."⁷ Later Buckley argues that by shifting the burden to describe God and prove his existence from theology (which knows God through Christ) to philosophy (which knows God through reason), Christian theologians became the intellectual (the dialectical) fathers of modern atheists.⁸ If Buckley is right, then Ivan should compel us to examine the God of our beliefs.

Aware that God's omnipotence and omniscience are causing Ivan trouble, Alyosha points him to Christ as the one who can resolve the conflict, the most innocent victim on whose death all of human hope rests. But Ivan rejects Christ too. He begins a

story called “The Grand Inquisitor” about a bishop who faces off with Jesus when He reappears for a single night in Seville, Spain. Jesus, the Inquisitor accuses, granted men freedom of will; and thereby virtually guaranteed their perpetual suffering. In fury, he asks Jesus, “And if for the sake of the bread of Heaven thousands and tens of thousands shall follow Thee, what is to become of then millions and tens of millions of creatures who will not have the strength to forego the earthly bread for the sake of the heavenly?”⁹ Yet the Inquisitor’s love for weak humanity makes him a tyrant over weak humans. He expresses Ivan’s profound moral dilemma. Believing that God planned evil as a means to accomplish good, Ivan has already refused his place in the divine plan. Thus he cannot accept that free will is worth the cost, either. The free assent of the heart may be noble, but it leaves most of mankind out. It is for those left out that Ivan grieves. Though he talks as if he hates the Inquisitor, the force of his ideas bends Ivan toward a similar tyranny, a tyranny in the name of love. It is a worldview that justifies the murder of his father even though he hates the murderer.

Still, I want to affirm the freedom the Grand Inquisitor rejects. I want to insist that the risk such freedom poses is basic to human dignity. But it is just this dignity that the Inquisitor rejects. So I am pressed backward to my theology, to examine it in the negative light cast by Ivan’s critique. Does love justify the risk that freedom will be used for evil? It may be that we return to Ivan’s story convinced that moral freedom is worth every risk, but we should return with that conviction only after we have let his protest sift us to our roots. Alternately, the questions he raises might push us to find a more compelling theology, might send us seeking the kind of theological response to evil (human or natural) provided by David Bentley Hart in “Tsunami and Theodicy.” Rejecting the idea that the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami was an act of God or that God’s hand could be discerned in it, he argues instead that God, understood in Christ, is the deliverer from such horrors, that evil is purely an intrusion into the work of God, one that his incredible sovereignty will overcome, but not something He planned.¹⁰

RASKOLNIKOV: THE EGOTISTICAL MURDERER

Not all of Dostoevsky’s atheists are altruists, however. As Ivan presses us to the limits of theodicy, Raskolnikov, in *Crime and Punishment*, presses us to the limits of pride. He is the man who becomes a law unto himself. Although his theories never fail to be consistent, they consistently fail to be moral. And they all but force him to murder. Given the premises he accepts, he cannot avoid the conclusion. Raskolnikov believes that certain extraordinary persons have the right to step over moral boundaries, even to take human life. The proof that a man is extraordinary lies in his ability to kill with a clear conscience.¹¹ Since Raskolnikov wants to be extraordinary, he must kill—though afterward his conscience is anything but clear. When his redemption finally comes—as it must if he is to escape depraved madness—it comes not by reason but by a love powerful enough to overcome his reason. He is loved by Sonya, a prostitute who responds to his proud declaration of murder by offering back to him in her own words the truth, “And you killed! Killed!”¹² She condemns his act out of her love for him, a love concerned for his soul. Her love compels his own and forces him to choose

between it and murder. When, in the “Epilogue,” Raskolnikov finds himself flung at Sonya’s feet by a force he does not understand, readers know he is overcome by her sacrificial love. In submission to it, he finds freedom from the coercive power of his theory.¹³

KIRILOV: THE FREEDOM-LOVING SUICIDE

Yet other Dostoevsky characters miss this freedom. In *Demons*, we meet an atheist who follows his logic to its exact conclusion. Kirilov is intoxicated by the negative idea of freedom. To him freedom is found by throwing off all restraint. Unlike Raskolnikov though, Kirilov does not turn against his fellow man. He turns against himself, for he knows that he did not call himself into being. To throw off this last and most powerful restraint upon absolute free choice, he must kill himself, overcoming his own psychological and biological aversion to death. He says “No” to any life not of his own making. “Whoever wants the main freedom must dare to kill himself...There is no further freedom...He who dares to kill himself is God.”¹⁴ Kirilov commits suicide.

A MODERATE RESPONSE

Ivan, Raskolnikov, and Kirilov are each in thrall to an idea. Grappling with more than abstractions, each strains to live his theory and ends either redeemed or destroyed. Their experiences remind us that questions of truth, though they require the sharpest reasoning, are most fully plumbed when we enter with our hearts, our minds, and our bodies into the human situations that birth these questions. Aside from living them ourselves, we enter most fully when reading literature.

After reading these novels, Raskolnikov and Kirilov can be summarily opposed. Ivan, however, roots his protest in his heart more than in his head. In response, we can settle, if we choose, into hardheaded orthodoxy, reminding ourselves that humans are sinners and thus—to continue a common if questionable form of reasoning—deserve whatever they get. But we risk missing that Ivan’s rebellion rises out of love. Instead, we might learn to check our intellects by our hearts. In so doing, we may find that anger and sorrow are pointers to wisdom if not exactly avenues of knowledge. For it is not always necessary that we oppose atheists; sometimes we can listen to them—carefully—to discover if the God they are opposing is worthy of our allegiance.

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NOTES

- 1 Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Constance Garnett (New York: Barnes and Noble Classics, 2004), 568.
- 2 Ibid., 218.
- 3 Ibid., 227.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Albert Camus, *The Rebel: An Essay on Man in Revolt*, trans. Anthony Bower (New York: Vintage Books, 1956), 102.

- 6 Richard Bauckham, "Theodicy from Ivan Karamazov to Moltmann," *Modern Theology* 4:1 (1987): 84–86.
- 7 Michael J. Buckley, S.J., *At the Origins of Modern Atheism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1987), 4–9.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 350–52.
- 9 Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, 235.
- 10 David Bentley Hart, "Theodicy and Tsunami," *First Things*, January 15, 2010.
<http://www.firstthings.com/onthesquare/2010/01/tsunami-and-theodicy>.
- 11 Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 259–61.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 419.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 549.
- 14 Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Demons*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 115–16.