PAUL J. CONTINO,
Dostoevsky's Incarnational Realism: Finding Christ among the Karamazovs
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In Dostoevsky's notebooks for *Demons*, Stavrogin (referred to throughout as "the Prince") distinguishes between Christ's moral teaching and belief in his divine incarnation. "Many people think it is enough to believe in Christ's moral teaching to be a Christian. It's not Christ's morality, or his teaching, that will save the world, but faith in the fact that the word was made flesh. [. . .] What one must believe is precisely the notion that this is the ultimate ideal of man, that the word is incarnate, that God has become incarnate" (*Псс* 11; 187-188). For Paul Contino, the idea of the incarnation is crucial not only to the Christological themes of Dostoevsky's final novel, but to its methodology, which he labels as "incarnational realism".

To understand what he means by incarnational realism, we have to start with the idea of "analogical imagination": the ability to discern both likeness and unlikeness, but to do so from both an 'either/or' and a 'both/and' perspective. Reality rarely presents itself as either wholly evil or wholly good (thus, 'both/and') but at the same time people are free to choose to do good or to do evil ('either/or'). The incarnation affirms humankind's divinity (its likeness to God) but God incarnate as Christ is also a constant reminder of our own sinfulness and imperfections, that is, our distance from God (our unlikeness). This, Contino asserts, is what is at the heart of Dostoevsky's messy realism: "Dostoevsky's novel represents reality as *both* graced gift *and* arduous task; the world as *both* sacramentally charged *and* sinfully fallen; paradise as *both* here *and* yet to come; persons as *both* open in their freedom to change *and* closed given the realities of time, interpersonal commitment, consequences of past actions, and even genetic inheritance". (p. 8). Dostoevsky's incarnational realism recognizes that "quotidian life" offers both "limits and graces" and the ability to "discern glimpses of transcendent beauty" by practicing prudence and active love (p. 15). The habits of humility, prudence and self-emptying (kenosis) are developed in real life and "small time" to prepare us for eternal life in "great time" (pp. 60, 64). These concepts are essential parts of Dostoevsky's incarnational realism and are explicated at length by Contino in the first of two theoretical chapters, both drawing from a wide range of mostly Western Christian thinkers, from Augustine, Aquinas and Dante to Rowan Williams and Hans Urs von Balthasar.

Chapter two connects the novel's concept of beauty with icons, which provide the means for persons to "recover their divine likeness" by following Christ (p. 29). Like God, Dostoevsky grants his characters internal freedom: they are unfinalizable, "finite yet always free to receive this infinite freedom of divine grace". This balance between "the open" and "the closed" is integral to Dostoevsky's incarnational realism and is "especially embodied" in "dramatic scenes of confessional dialogue" (pp. 36-37), which help characters move "from willful assertion to willing receptivity" and fully realize their personhood, dying to themselves to emerge more fully as their true selves (p. 45). Zosima, of course, is the novel's model of the confessional life and chapter three explicates the poetics of confession that he exemplifies. His journey of confession and conversion prefigures that of the central characters in the novel, each of whom "recovers his own voice only after he has passed through a crucible of transgression, remorse, and – with the necessary mediation of another – confession and atonement" (p. 52).

The remaining chapters of the book are devoted to Alyosha, Dmitrii and Ivan. Alyosha figures in chapters four and seven, each addressing three of the six days over which the events of the novel transpire. Alyosha's first three days (chapter 4 of Contino's study) depict Alyosha's movement from fragmentation to wholeness, during which his attempts at practicing active love and confessional dialogue initially backfire in the face of *nadryv* or laceration in his encounters with Captain Snegiryov, Katerina and even Ivan (p. 139). When Alyosha himself, however, engages in *nadryv* in his encounter with Grushenka – hurting himself "so that he can hurt God" (p. 105) – he is transformed by "the incarnational pattern of descent and ascent" (p. 103). His attempt at a self-inflicted fall is countered by Grushenka's raising of his soul "from the depths", as Alyosha puts it. He returns to the monastery and repeats this descent and ascent pattern after his vision of Zosima and Christ at the heavenly wedding at Cana, when Alyosha falls to the earth in ecstatic embrace and rises a new man. This vision and its aftermath is Alyosha's ultimate "both/and" moment, "marked by both joy and pain, wholeness and self-emptying" (p. 114). It is also a highpoint of the novel's incarnational realism.

But Dostoevsky's incarnational realism is more than just a literary method. It also enables the practice of active love in readers by exemplifying and enacting it textually. It thus shows how a work of literature can make one a "better" person, which is the departing point of Contino's study (p. 1). The focus of the second chapter on Alyosha – chapter seven, arguably the best in the book – explicates this property of the novel by providing close readings of Alyosha's "generative" and "parental" engagement with two "troubled youths, each about

fourteen years old" (p. 177): Kolya Krasotkin and Lise Khokhlakova. Each embodies different kinds of "demonic possession" brought on by the secular rationalism practiced by the novel's chief tempters of unbelief, Ivan (Lise's demon) and Rakitin (Kolya's). Contino carefully lays out how Alyosha's "available and attentive" (p. 155) confessant relationship with both of them counters the "unsuitable" reading that has caused "self-division and destruction" in Lise (p. 180) and "willful atheism" in Kolya (p. 160), ultimately producing a conversion in Kolya and the beginnings of confession and atonement in Lise.

Contino explicates Alyosha's role as confessant in the lives of his two brothers Dmitrii and Ivan as well, in chapters five and six respectively. Indeed, confession is central to understanding Mitya, who has other confessants, too: the peasant coachman Andrei, who drives him to Mokroe the night of the murder and with whom Mitya conducts a theological conversation; Grushenka, who becomes "a Christ-bearing image (*obraz*) that reflects and mediates divine love and, like the Orthodox icon, is vital to the re-formation of Mitya's own image as a person" (p. 135); and, of course, his police interrogators – the least effective confessants as "their strictly empirical realism leaves no room for spiritual reality" (p. 123). It is Alyosha, however, who is Mitya's most important confessant, both at the beginning of the novel as he listens to his brother's three confessions (in verse, in anecdote, heels up) and at the end, when he blesses Mitya's plan to escape to America instead of serving a sentence of hard labor in Siberia: an ending Contino defends as in keeping with the novel's incarnational realism, which does not demand heroic virtue but rather the practicing of active love. "You are innocent," Alyosha tells Mitya, "and such a cross is not for you".

Contino's examination of Ivan in chapter six focuses on the latter's difficulty in perceiving his own part in the murder of his father. Ivan would rather, as Contino perceptively argues, "hold up the bold, dialectical extremities of 'either/or' than discern within more messy 'both/and' territory" (p. 143). Ivan's thinking is Euclidean: one is either guilty or not guilty. One cannot be both innocent and guilty at the same time. Moreover, Ivan is vain: he "would rather go to court and be perceived by the spectators as a daring nihilist father-slayer, than admit the more 'modest' degree of his guilt in all its shabbiness" (p. 144) and thus, by extension, acknowledge his likeness to the shabby demon who visits him in his delirium. Alyosha's "It was not you who killed father" serves "as an invitation to Ivan to discern and humbly accept his *partial* guilt" (p. 149) but Ivan suffers from an inability to accept his "non-self-sufficiency" (p. 146); in turning away from Alyosha as confessant, he shuns the humility incarnational realism reveals to be at the heart of the redemptive movement of Dostoevsky's novel.

In his study's closing pages, Contino marvels at how the novel's final chapter so "symphonically" "recapitulates every tone in the novel: grief, anger, rebellion, yearning, acceptance, hope, humor, joy, love" – "all of the novel's major themes and events" (p. 184). It is the great accomplishment of Contino's close reading of the novel that we better understand this dense network of associations and their basis in the author's Christian poetics, his "incarnational realism". Contino has created a practical handbook of sorts for those of us wishing to understand how, indeed, the novel makes us better human beings for having read it.

John Givens