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The Miracle of Belief in Dostoevsky's Братья Карамазовы

In Братья Карамазовы (The Brothers Karamazov) Dostoevsky chooses an unlikely hero in Alyosha Karamazov, whose quiet faith and ready ear lend him a much more benign presence than the rest of the characters in the work. Alyosha's belief is necessarily tested throughout the novel so that it may emerge with more strength, with a more outwardly focused direction and a newly configured view on the nature of the miraculous. Through Ivan and his tale of the Grand Inquisitor, Alyosha's belief in miracles is questioned; and through the death of elder Zosima and Alyosha's reevaluation of Grushenka, his belief is reconfigured and extended beyond his personal faith to a broadened tie with humanity. In the grounding of Alyosha's faith through his experiences in life, the truly miraculous is shown as stemming from the whole of creation, rather than as direct inspiration for personal faith; and a warning is raised against the role of mysticism in creating false edifices within constructed religious institutions.

Alyosha is a novice, not only as a monk, but also in life. Beginning with a preface “от автора”¹ (“From the Author”), Alyosha's heroism and faith are established and questioned. The narrator asserts, “что человек он отнюдь не великий” (“that he is by no means a great man”) and yet as “человек странный” (“an odd man”) he “носит в себе иной раз сердцевину целого, а остальные люди его эпохи - все, каким-нибудь наплывным ветром, на время почему-то от него оторвались” (“bears within himself the heart of the whole, while the other people of his epoch have all for some reason been torn away from it for a time by some kind of flooding wind”) (Dostoevsky 3). He simultaneously lacks maturation or greatness and embodies a purity from which others have been wrested by their reliance upon an institutional church built upon false mysticism.

¹ Russian citations are taken from the online version of Братья Карамазовы at http://az.lib.ru/d/dostoevskij_f_m/.

Alyosha's believes in miracles based upon his natural predisposition to faith; he does not question the miraculous because he does not question his faith. Thus, “точно так же, если б он порешил, что бессмертия и бога нет, то сейчас бы пошел в атеисты и в социалисты” [“in just the same way, if he had decided that immortality and God do not exist, he would immediately have joined the atheists...” (26)]. Thus, the narrator's criticism of Alyosha consists of the narrowness of his faith. His faith is personal and unquestioned; it does not, for the time being, extend from his self to the whole of society, nor does he understand the dangers of that mysticism which influences the weak masses.

Alyosha's convictions are shaken by Ivan's critiques and his unwritten poem about the Grand Inquisitor. Ivan serves as a mirror of the cardinal, testing the faith of the young monk. Born from the same woman, the two sons represent two very different faiths. While Ivan asserts that he does not believe in either God, immortality or the devil, he is plagued with doubts, beset by visions and is in constant turmoil over his convictions. Alyosha believes in all three with his previously mentioned natural and unquestioned confidence. His naïve assertion that one should, “жизнь полюбить больше, чем смысл ее” [“love life more than its meaning” (231)] is contested by Ivan, whose “ум эвклидовский” [“Euclidian mind” (235)] is unable to reach beyond the earth, indeed cannot even accept this created earth, and asserts, “Пусть даже параллельные линии сойдутся и я это сам увижу: увижу и скажу, что сошлись, а все-таки не приму.” [“Let the parallel lines even meet before my own eyes: I shall look and say, yes, they meet, and still I will not accept it” (236).] Alyosha's natural belief in God and thus miracles as an outpouring of his faith is seen reversed in Ivan, for whom the impossibility of finding a concrete meaning in life snuffs out belief or pure love, invalidating the miraculous.

In the chapter entitled “Rebellion” Ivan uses the pleas of children to challenge Alyosha’s beliefs. He evokes the suffering of innocents as an unnecessary evil in delineating for humanity what is good and what is sin. Alyosha is unable to answer why his belief holds firm despite such demonic occurrences which test his faith in a loving God. Ivan will not let this lofty complacency rest; an ignorance of worldly evils is impossible. Ivan is tormented by these evils and sees them as the manifestations of the God he cannot accept. It is Ivan’s very questioning that draws Alyosha outside the confines of the monastic walls and into the brutal realities of the masses. It is in this teeming mass of humanity that Alyosha must ground his faith if it is to be viable: for them the miraculous is not a progression from the divine, but a necessitating proof of the divine. It is for them his heroism is being developed, as the next prophet of the true faith, following the Elder Zosima. Like Christ, he must become a prophet for the masses without utilizing the yolk of miracle, mystery and authority.

Though Christ refused temptation and chose to reaffirm freedom of choice for humankind, the Grand Inquisitor of Ivan’s tale has promised the masses bread, a relief from free consciousness and a universal unity, all three of which are contingent on a subjugation of freedom to the power of the church. In considering the progression of Alyosha’s faith, the second temptation of Christ is most interesting to note. According to Anne Fremantle: “In emphasizing that the second temptation offered Christ by the devil was to do magic, to work miracles, to offer humanity a search for the miraculous instead of for the holy, Dostoevsky laid his finger on one of the perennial dangers to which Christians are always subject” (xii). The danger of the miraculous thus lies in the substitution of miracles for faith. Alyosha’s predisposition towards faith may often subsume the miraculous as natural and discount the dangers of mysticism upon those who are weak and have been torn from the heart of humanity.

Both brothers reject miracles as the pathway to faith. As a Christ-like figure, Alyosha is not subject to any of the temptations or lures used by the church to ensnare or placate foolish humankind. Yet, unlike Christ, as a novice he has not experienced the worldly temptations necessary to strengthen his lasting faith amongst the pitfalls of the human world. The Grand Inquisitor informs Christ, “и понадеялся, что, следуя тебе, и человек останется с богом, не нуждаясь в чуде. Но ты не знал, что чуть лишь человек отвергнет чудо, то тотчас отвергнет и бога, ибо человек ищет не стольк обога, сколько чудес” [“you hoped that, following you, man too, would remain with God, having no need of miracles. But you did not know that as soon as man rejects miracles, he will at once reject God as well, for man seeks not so much God as miracles” (255)]. Ivan is struggling with the very creations of God, the earth and humanity. For him the existence of both calls into question the necessity of, and contradictions involved in, the concept of God. For Alyosha, with his emerging maturity of faith, the contradictions fall away when he perceives in humanity and in the earth true miracles, which stem from the creations of the Divine, and not from a search for the Divine outside of creation. After his time with Ivan, Alyosha attempts to flee back to the monastery: “и ему было почти страшно; что-то нарастало в нем новое, на что он не мог бы дать ответа” [“he felt almost frightened; something new was growing in him, which he would have been unable to explain” (264)]. This fearful consciousness is the awakening of Alyosha’s awareness of his place in the greater whole.

After the challenges presented by Ivan, Alyosha is confronted once again with a powerful challenge to his beliefs through the death of the elder Zosima. Though Father Zosima is a paragon of spiritual purity, his teachings also instruct Alyosha to go forth and reaffirm his faith not only outside the confines of the monastery walls, but also outside of his own internal

isolation. Zosima explains that mankind currently “привык надеяться на себя одного и от целого отделился единицей” [“is accustomed to relying only on himself, he has separated his unit from the whole” (303)]. Though he also advocates a unified Orthodox Russia, his message is different from that of the Grand Inquisitor in its battle cry of “возьми себя и сделай себя же ответчиком за весь грех людской” [“take yourself up, and make yourself responsible for all the sins of men” (320)]. The union presented by Father Zosima is thus a unification of humankind through the sharing of its sin, not through the displacement of this sin onto the church. In this view, miracles should then stem from this mass of humanity and not from the institution of the church. Father Zosima’s earlier healing can be viewed in this light as the extension of shared devotion and an acceptance of universal suffering, not as a miracle, which lies outside the natural laws of the divinely created earth.

The most important event in Alyosha’s development is the expansion of his belief through the trial of what Donna Orwin calls the “reverse miracle:” the corruption of elder Zosimov’s lifeless body (131). Dostoevsky’s narrator quite clearly emphasizes that odor, “повлияло оно сильнейшим и известным образом на душу и сердце главного, хотя и будущего героя рассказа моего, Алеши, составив в душе его как бы перелом и переворот, потрясший, но и укрепивший его разум уже окончательно, на всю жизнь и к известной цели” [“influenced in the strongest and most definite way the soul and heart of the main, though future, hero of my story, Alyosha, causing, as it were, a crisis and upheaval in his soul, which shook his mind but also ultimately strengthened it for the whole of his life, and towards a definite purpose” (329)]. At this crossroads, he must reassess the faith which leads him to a belief in miracles. It was not for a miracle that Alyosha was searching: the narrator asserts he did not need the phenomenon to occur. But, because of the “reverse miracle” of the odor, Alyosha had

to face the fact that “вся любовь, таившаяся в молодом и чистом сердце его ко “всем и вся”... как бы вся временами сосредоточивалась, и может быть даже неправильно, лишь на одном существе преимущественно, - на возлюбленном старце его, теперь почившем” [“the entirety of the love for ‘all and all’ that lay hidden in his young and pure heart... was at times as if wholly concentrated, perhaps even incorrectly, mainly on just one being... on his beloved elder, now deceased” (339)]. And there lies the crux of the matter, the fact that the expected miracle did not occur is not in itself plaguing Alyosha; rather he is plagued by the reversal of the expectation. This reversal has brought shame upon his elder and is highlighted by the loss of faith among the masses, who turn instead to the false prophet Ferapont and his showy mysticism. He must thus face the weak masses, the suffering innocents and the shamed ideal in order to reaffirm his idealized love of God in more universal terms. The death of the elder thus signifies the death of Alyosha’s innocent ideology.

However, his faith does not leave him: it is reasserted and reformed in a much stronger mould. The last part of Alyosha’s transformation occurs when he visits Grushenka, an alluring and wicked Jezebel jilted in her youth by a Polish officer, and rediscovers in her the universal goodness he seeks. Alyosha states, “Я шел сюда злую душу найти - так влекло меня самого к тому, потому что я был подл и зол, а нашел сестру искреннюю, нашел сокровище- душу любящую... Она сейчас пощадила меня... Аграфена Александровна. я про тебя говорю. Ты мою душу сейчас восстановила.” [“I came here looking for a wicked soul – I was drawn to that, because I was low and wicked myself, but I found a true sister, I found a treasure – a loving soul... She spared me just now ... I’m speaking of you, Aграфена Alexandrovna. You restored my soul just now” (351)]. She does not only reinstate, but also develops Alyosha’s faith in humanity. Through her forgiveness of the man who wronged her, she illuminates for Alyosha

the duality of humanity which is capable of both utter good and abject evil. According to Donna Orwin, the fact that Grushenka chooses forgiveness, despite possessing a nature Alyosha had previously thought wicked, reaffirms for him that “the potential for good as well as pure egotism coexist in the soul and that we are free to choose the good even when the laws of nature give us no reason for doing so” (138). In Grushenka, Alyosha discovers a miracle arising out of the humanity created by God, a more tempered one which his faith led him to discover, not the expected miracle of the more shallow faith of the masses.

Returning to his elder’s coffin, Alyosha can only feel elation. He soon falls into a conscious dream in which the elder visits him during the first miracle at Cana of Galilee, the turning of water into wine. The miracle is significant in that it is an unexpected kindness: Christ, at a poor couple’s wedding feast, turns water into wine in a simple act of benevolence. Christ used the wine neither to create faith nor inspire and Alyosha is once again presented with the humanity of miracles, separated from the gross mistreatment and lofty claims of false prophets. He falls to the earth, which God created, with tears of joy, enraptured: “Простить хотелось ему всех и за все, и просить прощения, о! не себе, а за всех, за все и за вся, а "за меня и другие просят", прозвенело опять в душе его” [“He wanted to forgive everyone and for everything, and to ask forgiveness, oh, not for himself! but for all and for everything, ‘as others are asking for me,’ rang again in his soul” (362)]. According to Mark Pomar it is here that Alyosha’s faith is reborn. “The outcome of the epiphany is not passive contemplation but a preparation for future action. After this scene, Alyosha assumes the role of Zosima as a force of good in Dostoevskij’s fictive world” (54). He leaves forever not only the confines of the monastery, but also his previously egotistical faith and moves forward into a universal existence.

That Alyosha spreads his newly expanded faith is imperative in the novel and in his heroic development. The epigraph of John 12:24 states, “Verily, verily, I say unto you, except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone: but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit.” In order to make way for a more expansive and bountiful faith, Alyosha’s old beliefs must perish. Alyosha now harvests the fruits of his labor by a greater connection to the humanity around him. In turn, he also tends the fruits of Zosima’s labor as the new voice of religious faith. The novel ends with a sermon, a sharing of his beliefs with the new generation, “Ах, деточки, ах милые друзья, не бойтесь жизни! Как хороша жизнь, когда что-нибудь сделаешь хорошее и правдивое!” [“Ah, children, ah, dear friends, do not be afraid of life! How good life is when you do something good and rightful” (776)!] A continuum is established: the dead elder Zosima is the inspiration, and Alyosha reworks his doubts through that inspiration, until finally his newly remade religious fervor is presented to the waiting neophytic masses.

From the epigraph to the concluding remarks, the theme of a new universal unity is expounded through faith. There is a rippling circular expansion from inward faith to a worldly faith and finally to enlightenment. The miraculous is shown to be the most affirmative of God’s will when found in his creations and as an outpouring of belief, rather than as the dangerous yolk of mysticism used to inspire devotion through false works. Alyosha is the hero because he changes, while retaining the innocent love which definitively connects him with humanity, so that he may have an impact not only as the hero of the novel, but as an advocate of religious faith.

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