

SINS OF THE FATHERS

Dostoevsky: *The Mantle of the Prophet, 1871-1881*, by Joseph Frank.
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READERS OF ALL POLITICAL STRIPES, BUT especially conservatives, admire Fyodor Dostoevsky. The great anti-liberal Friedrich Nietzsche called him a master psychologist. Few writers do a better job of crawling into the soul of modern man; of man as such. Dostoevsky also deserves our respect for his passionate opposition to the extreme tendencies of modern thought — the murderous socialism and nihilistic despair—that were sweeping through Russia in his time and bore such evil fruit in the past century. But can he help us find a way out of the modern trends that he deplors?

The fifth and final volume of Joseph Frank's fine literary biography of Dostoevsky shows the novelist preoccupied with political and social themes in the last decade of his life. *The Mantle of the Prophet* usefully summarizes thousands of pages of Dostoevsky's political journalism, which few of today's readers know anything about. But the best part of the book is Frank's 140-page analysis of *The Brothers Karamazov* (1879), the masterpiece in which the novelist most profoundly engages modern nihilism.

Dostoevsky's *Brothers* tells the story of the rebellion of four sons against their father. Dostoevsky makes clear that each of the sons hated the father and at one time or another wished him dead, because he is evil. He cruelly torments other people. He makes money, greedy capitalist that he is, by taking advantage of people. He is a gross sensualist, seeking pleasure even in the gutter. He fathers a child on "stinking Lizaveta," the town madwoman. Why should one respect the authority of such an unjust father? Would it not be better if he were dead? The sons answer, each in his own way, yes. Frank notes that Dmitry's

defense lawyer, at the trial, almost openly defends patricide. Dostoevsky's novel is meant to prove, however, that father-killing is wrong unconditionally.

Although Smerdyakov is the killer, it is his brother Ivan who teaches him why the murder is justified. Ivan says that if there is no immortality, then "everything is permitted" (Magarshack's translation, Penguin Books, 1958). Not that Ivan is an indifferent relativist; he is deeply, passionately concerned about justice. Indeed, the conflict between his most powerful longings and the conclusions of his intellect drives him mad. Ivan is peculiarly open to patricide because he has already condemned God for being unjust. He has, as it were, sentenced God to death for his crimes against humanity. So the novel is about at least two killings: the murder of father Karamazov, and the murder of God.

Dostoevsky is a political thinker. It is one of the many merits of Frank's biography that he sees clearly that politics is a leading theme—in a sense, the dominant theme—of Dostoevsky's writings. Dostoevsky's deepest concern is the question of authority, who rules, and who should rule. Tentatively, we may say that his answer is that these four fathers should rule unconditionally and absolutely: God the Father; second, the fathers of God's church, such as Father Zossima; third, the Tsar, the father of his people; and fourth, the biological father, Karamazov.

As these answers make clear, Dostoevsky is a traditionalist *par excellence*. In fact, having reflected deeply on his own convictions, he makes the best case for traditionalist patriarchal conservatism that I know of. He is fully aware of certain disturbing, even repulsive, implications of

his position. He knows the sacrifices that must be made in order to embrace it. He is glad to offer up those sacrifices because he sees no alternative. In the end, however, Dostoevsky's example shows us why pure traditionalism is both intellectually untenable and politically dangerous. Wishing with all his heart to oppose the growing relativism and nihilism of his time (still growing today), he instead embraces and radicalizes it.

The Case Against God

READERS AND CRITICS ALIKE ARE DRAWN to the famous story of the Grand Inquisitor, which may well be the key to *The Brothers Karamazov*. In Ivan's story (and in the conversation preceding it) we are shown the ground of the novel's whole plot. Ivan in effect argues that both fathers, Karamazov and God, deserve to die, because although both create life, both also create great suffering. Ivan tells his brother Alyosha, "I do not accept God's world," because it is a world in which innocents must suffer. He then relates the story of a general who uses hounds to hunt down and tear to pieces an innocent boy, a serf. Ivan asks Alyosha what should be done to the man. "Shoot him!" Alyosha said softly, raising his eyes to his brother with a pale, twisted sort of smile.

Ivan and Alyosha agree: a being who knowingly permits the suffering of innocent children deserves to be killed. Yet God is just such a being. Fully aware of this implication, Alyosha whimpers, "This is rebellion." Ivan gets him to agree that he would never consent to the creation of a world in which even one innocent must suffer.

In his story of the Grand Inquisitor, Ivan pro-

ceeds to show that God the Father is not so different from the general who allows his hounds to tear the peasant boy to pieces. For Christ himself appears on earth in the midst of the Inquisition, and he has nothing to offer but "a gentle smile of infinite compassion." The Cardinal arrests Christ, who does not resist. He kisses the Inquisitor. In other words, he forgives him. But Christ does not even ask for repentance, let alone get it, from the evil old prelate. God the father sends his Son into the world as a powerless innocent. God and Christ do nothing to stop the suffering in the Inquisition, or in men's lives in general. Christ does not even attempt to stop the Church from opposing him. God does not solve the problem of human life, human suffering and the longing for release from suffering. That is why the Inquisitor, speaking for the Church, believes he must correct God's creation. Christ simply offers unconditional love to saints and sinners alike (including the Cardinal) and disappears.

The Inquisitor "glories in the fact that he and his followers [in the Roman Catholic Church] have at last vanquished freedom and have done so in order to make men happy." The Church will take away the freedom that Christ offered to men, because men cannot endure it and do not want it. Instead, the Church will supply men with "miracle, mystery, and authority" along with "bread." By "bread" the Cardinal means the material prosperity created by modern science, strikingly represented by Dostoevsky's recurring image of the modern Tower of Babel, which aims to create heaven on earth. The key to the Cardinal's plan is this combination of modern science, born of the atheistic desire to get rid of God, with the authority of the old Roman Catholic Church, which will rule men for their good, dictating every detail of their lives and making them happy.

For the Cardinal, and Ivan, the fundamental error of God the Father—an error repeated by Christ's message of freedom—was to create men free, free to sin, free to despair, free to turn against God. The Cardinal proposes to correct that error by denying men freedom and giving them what they desire. The Church, in this view, means to correct God's botched creation by enslaving men and conquering nature.

Frank sees clearly that the novel equates the murder of Fyodor Karamazov and Ivan's revolt against God. Frank believes that this equation is a weakness in Dostoevsky's plot, and that it is not quite plausible, given the fundamental goodness of God's creation. But Frank fails to notice that the key to Dostoevsky's case for authority is that it is made in the teeth of what his own characters, and perhaps Dostoevsky himself, see as a serious question about God's justice. Anticipating Frank's analysis, and stating it more forcefully,

Czeslaw Milosz observed (in his excellent essay "Dostoevsky and Western Intellectuals") that *The Brothers* is, at its heart, a meditation on the Russian intelligentsia's act of abolishing simultaneously the authority of God, the Tsar, and the *paterfamilias*.

Smerdyakov, the actual murderer, the illegitimate brother whose passions and countenance are altogether ugly, simply presents the true face of the intellectual Ivan, who is outwardly cultured, suave, and good-looking. Ivan is horrified as he discerns his own character with growing clarity. By the end of the novel, he goes insane. The crude and smirking Smerdyakov, consumed by hate, is the genuine expression of the liberal intelligentsia's revolt against the authority of the biological father, the father Tsar, the fathers of the Church, and God the Father. In this paternal foursome, the death of the authority of God the Father is the key to the deaths of the other three. For God the Father legitimizes all authority, according to Dostoevsky. When God's government is thrown into question, all government—that of the family, church, and state—is similarly upset.

In *The Devils*, Dostoevsky shows us the political future of Russia without the fatherhood of God and Tsar. In that novel, we see through the microcosm of a small provincial town what will happen when the leftist intellectuals take over in the name of socialism and communism. They are ruthless, they kill without a thought, they are willing to commit mass murder to realize their dreams. Their souls are at the farthest remove from the equality they preach. They are hateful tyrants.

Milosz noted that Dostoevsky's concern for the political future of Russia was something that was understood both by his conservative Russian admirers, such as Nicholas Berdiaev in 1918, and his Marxist admirers, such as Lunacharsky, the Commissar of Education under Lenin after the 1917 Revolution. *The Devils* was extolled in the communist press "as a novel which had become a reality." Dostoevsky's Western interpreters generally have very little concern with this theme (Frank is a laudable exception). Milosz, a Polish poet who hated what communism had done to his country, saw this political core of Dostoevsky's teaching with great clarity.

Rival Prophets

FRANK SUBTITLES HIS FINAL VOLUME ON Dostoevsky, *The Mantle of the Prophet*. Tocqueville, Nietzsche, and Dostoevsky are famous for their prophetic diagnoses of the situation of modern Western man. In this fundamental respect, Tocqueville and Nietzsche agree: man is in danger of becoming too tame, too agreeable, too soft, so devoted to petty pleasures that his spiritedness, his self-contempt,

might altogether disappear. Nietzsche fears that the liberal dream of "one herd and no shepherd" might come true. God's death might lead to the end of human striving. Therefore Nietzsche praises tyranny, cruelty, and suffering in the most extravagant possible terms, hoping to foster those qualities which alone can save us from a degraded democratic liberal future.

Tocqueville had a similar nightmare vision. Man might become so degraded, so satisfied, that he would not think of resisting the soft, bureaucratic despotism that threatened to take over Europe and America. Tocqueville's solution, unlike Nietzsche's, was moderate: American-style democracy, based on Christianity.

Dostoevsky disagreed strongly with both Nietzsche and Tocqueville. He saw, as they did not, that the twentieth century would not be a time when mankind would become too tame. Quite the contrary. Man after the "death of God" would perhaps mouth the slogans of Enlightenment equality, but he would act the part of a tyrant more terrible than any earlier tyrant. Dostoevsky was able to see this because he was not a historicist. Human nature does not change, according to Dostoevsky, and so the evil in man is not about to disappear. It will simply break out in all its cruelty if God and immortality fade from man's conscience. By contrast, Nietzsche thought man's nature changeable, that his hatred and anger might really vanish—a prospect, to be sure, that Nietzsche deplored. In the Nietzschean world of the "last man," there is no government and no punishment. Whoever does not fit in goes voluntarily to a therapist. Dostoevsky scorned that naive view, and he was right. There were over 100 million state-sponsored murders under the tyrants Stalin, Mao, and Hitler. No other major writer of the 19th century saw so clearly into the evil heart of the 20th.

Dostoevsky's Patriarchalism

DOSTOEVSKY DESERVES OUR RESPECT for this insight, against the dominant historicism of his time. But his alternative to this atheistic socialism is far less impressive.

In its simplest terms, his solution to the problem of modern man is submission—submission to the authority of the father. But this authority is based not on reason but on faith. When Dostoevsky describes the "elder" system in the Russian monastery, he defines the elder as "a man who takes your soul and your will into his soul and will." Dostoevsky is of course aware of the possibility of abuse: "this instrument of the moral regeneration of man from slavery to freedom and to moral perfectibility . . . may be turned into a double-edged weapon." But he does not regard

this objection as decisive. Submission to Father Zossima is indispensable for the hero Alyosha, and one can extend this analysis to the other fathers in the novel. One must have absolute faith in God, or else "everything is permitted" and life becomes insane or evil. Dostoevsky knows very well that he is demanding a kind of totalitarianism—total, unquestioning submission to One who is Higher.

What is achieved by submitting to fatherly authority is a community of love. Dostoevsky presents a community constituted by loving kindness as the peak of human life. Alyosha brings twelve of the town boys—his twelve disciples, as Frank observes—together into just such a community in the final pages of the novel. At its best, such a community is like a church, where no coercion is necessary, because all are caught up in its spirit. The community of boys under Alyosha's lead is like Ivan's church of the future described in his article on church and state, praised by Father Zossima: the state becomes a church, and physical punishment is no longer needed.

But can anything bigger than a family, a band of friends, or a small religious community really exist on the basis of love? Larger communities need law and other formal restraints on authority. Aristotle points out, in his usual sober way, that if one tries to extend love to include a whole political community, it becomes weak and "watery." Besides, Dostoevsky knows that his doctrine of submission cannot meet the problem of the tyrannical father. It accepts, with open eyes, the rule of the father, whether good or evil, as the price to be paid for a world that makes sense, a world where love can grow and flourish.

I mentioned earlier that Frank is made uneasy by Dostoevsky's surprising suggestion that killing the father Karamazov is like killing God. Let me state more precisely the alternative to Dostoevsky's view. John Locke, for example, who unlike Dostoevsky distinguishes God from an evil father, argues that God puts us into the world unprovided for, because He is good. If God had handed men the things they need on a silver platter, if He had arranged life such that no innocent would ever have to suffer, we would have had no incentive to cultivate our minds and talents. We would live like pigs, contentedly wallowing in the muck. Without pain and suffering, writes Locke, man "would be a very idle unactive creature, and pass his time only in a lazy lethargic dream." Socrates makes a similar point in Plato's *Symposium*. Only the gods are wise and have everything they need. We humans are erotic and needy creatures, he argues, longing for wisdom and plenty. Because we lack that perfection, we must therefore strive for it. Indeed, in all wealthy societies, including America, the wealthiest society in history, men tend to degenerate, because

things are too easy. In this sense, as political scientist John Marini has observed, soft times are hard times.

From this philosophical point of view, Dostoevsky's preoccupation with suffering must be seen as a kind of self-indulgent sentimentality. Philosophers ancient and modern have understood that suffering is part of the price we pay for freedom and excellence. And they have counseled: do not submit to evil, even if one's father is its source.

Rejecting Reason and Nature

EARLY IN THE BROTHERS KARAMAZOV, Dostoevsky writes, "if he [Alyosha] had decided that there was no immortality and no God, he would at once have become an atheist and a socialist." That is because atheism and socialism go together (as Marx also said). Socialism tries to build the Tower of Babel, which means "to bring down heaven on earth." This is the alternative that Dostoevsky and his characters always see: either the authority of faith, that is, of the mysterious will of God, or the uninhibited and degraded reason of man. In *The Brothers*, the choice is solely between Alyosha the believer and Ivan-Smerdyakov the atheist. (The fourth brother, Dmitry, is in this respect a hybrid of the other three: he vacillates between forceful sinning and still more forceful repentance.) In *Crime and Punishment*, the alternative is Raskolnikov the rational theorist, for whom murder, even mass murder, is permissible, or Raskolnikov the penitent, who, yielding wholly to passion and forgetting all his rational arguments, throws himself at the feet of Sonia, a creature of feeling and emotion, a Christian for whom faith is entirely a matter of sentiment.

To be sure, questioning authority is dangerous if one is not capable of sensible thinking on one's own. As a practical matter, that means most men should follow authority, especially the authority of their fathers. Still, following one's own reason does lead toward the good, if one has the mind for it. According to Dostoevsky, however, every attempt to follow one's own reason leads to misery, perversion, and hatred of everyone and everything. (The first part of Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground* explores at length the reasoning behind this rejection of reason.) Nothing is forbidden, everything is permitted, as Ivan says. The degraded Smerdyakov shows what that means, as he hatefully echoes the intellectual but decent Ivan. For Dostoevsky, then, either we accept the absolute authority of the father and king and church, or we repudiate human reason and follow nothing but arbitrary will, personal or collective. Just as Dostoevsky said of himself, he is truly a reactionary.

Frank's biography rightly emphasizes that Dostoevsky's great theme is "the conflict between reason and faith," i.e., between "religious irrationalism" and reason understood as social-political radicalism. Although Frank is clearly made uncomfortable by this irrationalism—the likely source of Dostoevsky's anti-Jewish stance, well documented by Frank—he never repudiates it explicitly. Nor does he confront Dostoevsky's profoundly anti-democratic politics. Indeed, Frank calls himself a "Dostoevskian," perhaps because of his immense respect for the man with whom he has mentally dwelled these many years.

Deference to authority has its attractions in a world that seems ever more degraded. Milosz (but not Frank) notes that today's Western intellectuals have a lot in common with Dostoevsky's intelligentsia in *The Brothers* and *The Devils*. But in spite of Dostoevsky's loathing of the intelligentsia, in spite of the soundness of his diagnosis that a Russian revolution would elevate the most degraded cruelty to power, Dostoevsky shares with the intelligentsia of his day and ours, writes Milosz, a "loathing of democracy, which for them is synonymous with bourgeois mediocrity."

Russia seems to have been peculiarly susceptible to the most virulent aspects of 19th-century European thought. That is probably connected to the fact that in Russia neither the Greek and Roman classics, nor the early modern thought of sober men like Locke and Montesquieu, was ever widely accepted in educated circles. Russia's introduction to European philosophy came late, at a time when the leading European thinkers all denied what the earlier tradition from Plato and Cicero through Locke and the American Founders had affirmed: that an accurate understanding of human nature, discovered by reason, is a sound guide for human life and government. Russia moved as it were in a single step directly from the irrational willfulness of its peculiar brand of Christianity and its tradition of despotic politics, to the irrational willfulness of post-Hegelian philosophy with its despotic-utopian schemes completely at odds with the realities of human nature. Dostoevsky's solution, for all its anti-European sentiment, seems to take its departure from the same post-Hegelian premise: only will, and not reason, can guide us.

Dostoevsky vs. Solzhenitsyn

FRANK COMPARES DOSTOEVSKY TO HIS rival, the liberal novelist Turgenev, and finds the latter wanting. In this judgment Frank is surely correct. But I would compare Dostoevsky, the greatest Russian novelist of the 19th century, to Solzhenitsyn, the greatest of the 20th. Unlike Dostoevsky, Solzhenitsyn is confident of reason's ability to guide us, if only we

will consult it. Solzhenitsyn is therefore not at all tormented by resentment against God for the suffering of innocents. On the contrary: it was precisely in the midst of the most enormous suffering deliberately inflicted on innocents in world history—in the belly of Stalin's Gulag—that Solzhenitsyn came to God and "natural law" (*Gulag Archipelago*, "The Ascent"). Like Dostoevsky, Solzhenitsyn is sympathetic to the Old Regime and the Orthodox Church. But in *August 1914* Solzhenitsyn shows that there was also something profoundly wrong with this old regime, namely, its habit of mindless submission to authority and its excessive trust that some Higher Power will solve our problems for us—be it God (Russian Orthodoxy), history (Tolstoy), or the Tsar. What for Dostoevsky is the solution, is for Solzhenitsyn part of the problem.

Solzhenitsyn's own intellectual formation, unlike Dostoevsky's, was aided by the Greek and Roman classics at a crucial time in his life. In *The First Circle*, speaking of himself as a 30-year-old, he writes, "On the planet of philosophy all lands have long since been discovered. I leaf through the ancient philosophers and find my newest discoveries there." The novel contains important themes explicitly linked to the classics, such as the ideal of male friendship and the philosophic life.

In *August 1914*, Solzhenitsyn shows us, through the character of Vorotyntsev, that there was nothing inevitable about the great Russian disaster at the Battle of Tannenberg. The battle could have been won if it had been conducted more sensibly. And if this battle and others like it had been won, there might then have been no

Communist revolution, with the immense carnage and suffering it caused.

Like many other characters in the novel, General Samsonov is a great admirer of Tolstoy. But Samsonov's incompetence is a leading cause of the loss of the battle. Samsonov believed he had learned from Tolstoy that human thought and reason are unimportant. In *War and Peace*, Tolstoy argues that Napoleon's invasion of Russia was defeated by an inevitable course of events which human planning and reason were powerless to effect. Kutuzov, Tolstoy's favorite general, never used his reason to figure out how to defeat Napoleon. He simply waited and allowed himself to be swept along by events. Tolstoy believed that "in history what is known to us is called laws of inevitability, what is unknown is called free will." Therefore there is no need for us to intervene with our puny minds and ineffectual plans. Solzhenitsyn demonstrates in one detail after another how untrue, how debilitating, is this blind trust and faith in the higher authority of history.

In *August 1914* Solzhenitsyn shows the same Russian defect on the political level. Reason could have saved Russia—almost did save Russia—from the impending disaster. The man who understood best how to correct the problems of the Old Regime was Stolypin, who nobly gave his life trying against all odds to implement a system of private property rights and a prudent mixture of hereditary monarchy and representative government grounded in local communities. This would have led to the rise of a landed class of hard-working, independent-minded, and politically responsible farmers who, if all went well,

would have become the backbone of the regime. They would have had both the interest and the power to stop the insane slide into revolution and the abyss, out of which Communism emerged with all its destructive fury. But Stolypin was assassinated by an alliance between the Communist hard Left and the monarchical Right.

In sum, Solzhenitsyn's respectful answer to Dostoevsky may be said to be this: Reason does not lead to the dead end of atheism and rebellion against God. Properly employed, it leads to a well-governed country, a well-tempered Christianity, and a well-governed life. Not that suffering and evil can ever be abolished—as if that were even desirable. But they can be mitigated and curbed, confined to bearable proportions.

Solzhenitsyn echoes, in many respects, the spirit of the American Founders, who created the form of government and the way of life that would challenge and eventually prevail over Russia's bloody experiment in atheistic socialism. Reason, in the founders' view, can lead us to sensible political policies. These policies can be achieved on the basis of government by consent, if the constitutional order is well designed, and if the people have sufficient virtue.

Liberty rightly understood, therefore, not blind submission to authority, is man's best hope for government in this world. This is what separates reasonable accounts of good government from all forms of traditionalism, including Dostoevsky's.

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