

Tolstoy's Jesus versus Dostoevsky's Christ: A Tale of Two Christologies

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Leo Tolstoy and Fyodor Dostoevsky never met in their lifetimes, though they were in the same room together once. They were both attending one of Vladimir Soloviev's "Lectures on Godmanhood" in March 1878. Nikolai Strakhov—critic, philosopher, editor and close confidant of Dostoevsky in the 1860s—was with Tolstoy and supposedly didn't bring him to Dostoevsky because Tolstoy had requested not to be introduced to anyone. Both writers later regretted the missed opportunity, though I think it was better they never met. Both were insufferably vain and touchy and Tolstoy had a temper, having gone as far as to challenge his literary rival Ivan Turgenev to a duel not for any literary or philosophical differences, but over whether Turgenev's daughter was behaving hypocritically by mending the tattered rags of the poor as charity. Turgenev later apologized, thus heading off the duel. It is doubtful either Dostoevsky or Tolstoy would have done the same, had they quarreled. They were, as biographer A.N. Wilson puts it, like "two great monsters" who sniffed and paced the ground but never came into contact.¹ Nevertheless, when Dostoevsky died, Tolstoy wrote: "I never saw the man, and never had any direct relations with him, and suddenly when he died I realized that he was the very closest, dearest, and most necessary man for me."² One gets the feeling that Tolstoy could only have said this *after* Dostoevsky died, that while the two

writers lived they could not occupy the same space, like matter and anti-matter. There was always either Tolstoy or Dostoevsky, but never the two at once.

The one thing both writers shared, however, was a fervent and intense desire to understand both the nature of Christ and the essence of God's relationship with human kind. And, like Dostoevsky's search, Tolstoy's quest to believe carried him well into the regions of unbelief, at least as far as traditional Christianity goes. Tolstoy's Christ, like Dostoevsky's, was idiosyncratic to say the least, and both of their visions of him were radical in their own right. In an oft-quoted letter written when he was 33, Dostoevsky, calling himself "a child of doubt and disbelief," nevertheless describes a "symbol of faith in which all is clear and sacred." "This symbol is very simple," Dostoevsky writes, "and here is what it is: to believe that there is nothing more beautiful, more profound, more sympathetic, more reasonable, more courageous, and more perfect than Christ; and there not only isn't, but I tell myself with a jealous love, there cannot be. More than that—if someone succeeded in proving to me that Christ was outside the truth, and if, indeed, the truth was outside Christ, I would sooner remain with Christ than with the truth." Obviously, expressing allegiance to a Christ who might be outside the truth makes for a strange profession of faith, yet this image captures perfectly

the paradox of Dostoevsky's Christian outlook, both in life and in art. Always a maximalist, Dostoevsky gives us a Christ as overarching and enigmatic as Russia herself.

Every bit the maximalist himself, Tolstoy gives us an utterly different image of Christ. If Dostoevsky vowed to remain with Christ even if he were "outside the Truth," Tolstoy declared that Christ was neither the incarnate Son of God nor the second person of the Trinity precisely because the hero he declared he loved "with all the power of my soul" at the end of his 1855 story "Sevastopol' in May"³—the Truth—demanded that he do so. In their hyperbolic statements about Christ, both writers arrive at seemingly contradictory conclusions. On the one hand, Dostoevsky's "symbol of faith" is so radically Christo-centric that it is capable of acknowledging a non-divine Christ if necessary, thus potentially making his Christ no different from Tolstoy's concept of Jesus. Tolstoy, on the other hand, is so Christo-phobic as to divorce Christ from his message altogether. In *What I Believe* (1884) he goes as far as to confess: "It is terrible to say, but it sometimes appears to me that if Christ's teaching, with the Church teaching which has grown out of it, had not existed at all, those who now call themselves Christians would have been nearer to the truth of Christ [. . .] than they now are."⁴

Christ as Provocation

Here we bump up against a central truth common to both writers. At the heart of each writer's image of Christ is a provocation. Dostoevsky's novels are bound up with the search for God and the need of Christ but give as many reasons not to believe as to believe. (Indeed, I found a posting on online-literature.com from a reader in the middle of *Brothers Karamazov* who asked in all sincerity whether Dostoevsky was an atheist.) For his part, Tolstoy tells us Christ is not needed for salvation and has

even gotten in the way of the Christian message, and yet he professes that Jesus' teachings are the surest way to understand what God demands of us. For all of their differences in their respective images of Christ, however, each writer arrives at expressions of faith—whether in fiction or elsewhere—that are at times in remarkable accord with each other. Tolstoy's faith, for instance, is in places as ecstatic as Father Zosima's in *The Brothers Karamazov*, whose rapturous love for plants, animals and every living thing⁵ is shared by Tolstoy, who likewise preached a love "for every living creature."⁶ "If you say that birds, horses, dogs, and monkeys are completely alien to us, then why not say that primitive people and black people are alien to us," he wrote in 1910. "Do not ask who is the neighbor, but do for everything living what you want to be done for you."⁷

More significantly, there is scarcely any difference between Zosima's claim that "each of us is undoubtedly guilty on behalf of all and for all on earth" and his injunction not to judge others unless "you are able to take upon yourself the crime of the criminal who stands before you"⁸ and Nekhliudov's discovery at the end of *Resurrection* that "the only sure way of salvation [. . .] was for people to acknowledge that they are guilty before God and therefore disqualified from punishing or correcting other people" since you cannot "correct evil while being evil."⁹ Both authors arrive at similar conclusions about what it means to follow Jesus, but they do so by very different means and from very different understandings of the image of Christ.

Tolstoy may well have agreed with Dostoevsky that there was nothing more "beautiful, profound, loving, wise, courageous and perfect" than Christ, but only in as far as Christ expressed best in word and deed how to live one's life. "For me the chief question was not whether Jesus was or was not God, or from

whom the Holy Ghost proceeded and so forth, and equally unimportant and unnecessary was it for me to know when and by whom each Gospel was written and whether such and such a parable may, or may not be, ascribed to Christ,” Tolstoy wrote in the preface to his *Gospel in Brief*. “What was important to me was this light which has enlightened mankind for eighteen hundred years and which enlightened and still enlightens me; but how to name the source of that light, and what materials he or someone else had kindled, did not concern me.”¹⁰ In his 1901 “Reply to the Synod’s Edict” excommunicating him from the Orthodox Church, Tolstoy articulates his *credo* in no uncertain terms. He writes: “I believe in God, whom I understand as Spirit, as Love, as the Source of all. I believe that he is in me and I in him. I believe that the will of God is most clearly and intelligibly expressed in the teaching of the man Jesus, whom to consider as God and pray to, I esteem the greatest blasphemy.”¹¹ Thus Christ for Tolstoy is but the bearer of the means of salvation; he is not salvation himself. It is what Christ said, not what he did or who he was, that is important. Least important of all is the claim that Jesus was resurrected from the dead. “What do I care if Christ was resurrected?” Tolstoy once remarked to the family tutor I. M. Ivakin, a Greek scholar whom he consulted while translating the Gospels. “So he was resurrected—God bless him! What’s important to me is the question of what I am to do, how I am to live.”¹²

Like Dostoevsky’s, Tolstoy’s image of Christ had its roots in something he wrote as a young man. If Dostoevsky described his “symbol of faith” in his March, 1854 letter to Fonvizina, Tolstoy made a similarly important declaration about Christ in a diary entry from March, 1855:

Yesterday a conversation about divinity and faith inspired me with a great idea, a stupendous idea, to the realization of which I feel capable

of devoting my life. This idea is the founding of a new religion appropriate to the stage of development of mankind—the religion of Christ, but purged of beliefs and mysticism, a practical religion, not promising future bliss but giving bliss on earth. [. . .] *Consciously* to work towards the union of mankind by religion is the basis of the idea which I hope will absorb me.¹³

While it would take Tolstoy some thirty years to undertake the realization of his dream, he had already grasped its essence at the age of twenty-seven. Like Dostoevsky’s letter, whose ironic affirmation of Christ over the Truth anticipates the metaphysical paradoxes that would pervade his major novels, Tolstoy’s diary sets the tone for all of its author’s own religious questing. Neither Dostoevsky’s nor Tolstoy’s conceptions of Christ in these documents would substantively change over the course of their careers. Dostoevsky’s image of Christ would always remain a sacred symbol of faith even as it would also always cohabit perilously close to doubt and unbelief. Tolstoy’s Jesus, on the other hand, would forever be the model and messenger of a divine way of living, even as he himself was emphatically not divine. Each writer’s Christ, then, describes simultaneously a presence and an absence and it is paradoxically the absence that most intrigues us about their images of Christ.

Dostoevsky’s Absent Christ

Vladimir Nabokov may have complained about the number of characters “sinning their way to Jesus” in Dostoevsky’s novels,¹⁴ but in truth, Christ is an elusive figure in the writer’s works. He is all but absent from Dostoevsky’s fiction before 1860, when *Notes from the House of the Dead* was published with its marvelous depictions of the convicts’ celebration of Christmas and Easter. There, the image of Christ fleetingly asserts itself in the midst of the monstrous brutality of penal servitude. But even in those post-

1860s works where the idea of Christ is central, it is Christ's absence that is most striking. This is one reason why one may find unbelief to be as strongly or even more strongly expressed in Dostoevsky's works than belief, for Dostoevsky's Christ is often articulated as an absence.

Notes from Underground (1864) is one striking example.¹⁵ Written in response to the scientific materialism of his day, which reduced human beings to biological entities bereft of a spiritual nature and ruled entirely by environment, *Notes* was supposed to make a case for the necessity of Christ. It was to do so by showing the failure of both the underground and the Crystal Palace as socio-philosophical destinations of mankind. The Underground Man's attempts to undermine the rationalist foundations on which radical materialism rests by asserting an extreme irrationalism were meant to be as ridiculous as they seem when we first encounter them. The idea was to move from the Underground Man's hell of arbitrary whim, spite and self-lacerating solipsism to a higher notion of irrationalism embodied by Christ's sacrificial love—the subject of the novel's tenth chapter. The escape route proposed by Dostoevsky from both the dead end of the underground and the fraud of enlightened egoism was to be faith. But the censors got in the way. "It really would have been better not to print the next-to-last chapter at all (the most important chapter, in which the main idea is expressed), than to publish it as it is, i.e., with sentences chopped out, which distorts the meaning. But what can be done!" he complained to his brother. "The censors are a bunch of pigs—those places where I mocked everything and occasionally employed blasphemy *for the sake of form* they allowed to stand; but when, from all that, I deduced the need for faith and Christ, they took it out."¹⁶

Instead, chapter ten is the shortest in the novel. But it does raise the issue of a better alternative to both the underground and the Crystal Palace: "Show me something better and I'll follow you," the Underground Man declares. "Can it be that I was made this way only in order to reach the conclusion that my entire way of being is merely a fraud? Can this be the whole purpose? I don't believe it."¹⁷ Curiously, however, Dostoevsky never attempted to restore his novel's tenth chapter. Either he did not relish asking the censors to reverse their ruling or he was not that interested in restoring a work that failed to make a splash when it appeared.¹⁸ Or perhaps he realized that the space where Christ was meant to be was still there, that his absence was as potent as his presence, perhaps even more so.

When the prostitute Liza throws her arms around the Underground Man in a spontaneous act of selfless compassion after being insulted and abused by him for having come to visit, we see an act that makes Liza what in theological parlance is called a "type" of Christ. She is not Christ but affirms and illuminates him, perhaps doing so more effectively than any speech the Underground Man may have made in chapter ten of part one. As Joseph Frank argues, she exemplifies "the ideal of the voluntary self-sacrifice of the personality out of love."¹⁹ In other words, she acts like Christ here who, humiliated and crushed, nevertheless responds with love to his tormentors. Dostoevsky himself may well have sensed this, hence his disinclination to restore the censored chapter. Liza had, in a sense, already articulated "the need for faith and Christ."²⁰ What we do not say about the Godhead may serve better to illuminate him than what we attempt to articulate. If Christ is silent, absent, parodied or otherwise distorted in the writer's mature works, it is because Dostoevsky may well have understood the danger of trying to articulate Christ's meaning in words. Say too much or the wrong thing and you may diminish

that which you seek to elevate. Much of what drives the narrative of *The Idiot*, with its Christ-like hero, seems to stem from this apprehension as well, while *Demons* marks the apex of Dostoevsky's textual anxiety regarding the nature of God and belief. The absent Godhead is more strongly articulated in *Demons* than anywhere else in Dostoevsky's work. Absence, inversion and negation dominate its Christology. All of these works offer persuasive proof that an apophatic approach to questions about the Godhead can be a powerful tool by which to define the indefinable.

Olga Meerson, Carol Apollonio, Tatyana Kasatkina, Malcolm Jones and other Dostoevsky scholars over the last twenty years have recognized the importance and applicability of apophatic theology in the writer's works. There are two reasons for this development. First is the realization that all of those characters in Dostoevsky's works who "exist on the threshold between the fullness of religious experience and the emptiness of nihilism"²¹ are, intentionally or not, perfect textual embodiments of the spiritual state of apophatic seekers of God. Second is a growing appreciation for what Jones calls "the ambiguity of the apophatic theology which permeated the air in which [Dostoevsky] drew his breath."²² Jones traces this apophatic atmosphere to Dostoevsky's "professed knowledge of the Russian monasteries," where among other things he observed "the renewal of hesychasm in the Russian Church"²³—the attempt to know God through prayer "that is stripped, so far as possible, of all images, words and discursive thinking."²⁴ Here, the apophatic strain in Orthodox prayer is strongly pronounced and easily observable.

The apophatic impulse in Russian culture of the nineteenth century can be traced to secular sources as well. A very specific but important example for Dostoevsky is Fyodor Tiutchev's 1836 poem "Silentium," a favorite of the writer. It famously

declares that "a thought once uttered is untrue,"²⁵ thus reinforcing the inadequacy of language in the task of true cognition. Even the influential works of the historical critical school of biblical scholarship played their role in the apophatic apprehension of the nature of God. In Friedrich Strauss's or Ernest Renan's portraits of a non-divine Jesus lies the basis for an apophatic understanding of Christ—beginning with their negation, we may better clarify for ourselves our own understanding of the Godhead, as both Dostoevsky and Tolstoy discovered in their own encounter with these works.

Paradox is key, hence the centrality of apophasis in Dostoevsky's novels, where unbelief can reveal belief and untruth can reveal the truth. Indeed, for Dostoevsky and his characters, lying is paradoxically—and apophatically—one of the best ways to get to the truth, as Razumikhin confirms in *Crime and Punishment*: "'I like it when people lie!'" he says, rather unexpectedly. "Lying is man's only privilege over all other organisms. If you lie—you get to the truth! Lying is what makes a man. Not one truth has ever been reached without first lying fourteen times or so, maybe a hundred and fourteen, and that's honorable in its way."²⁶ Razumikhin summarizes here an apophatic principle: truth, like God, is best revealed through negative assertions. He also, of course, summarizes the whole movement of the novel: Raskolnikov must also lie his way to the truth. And that is just what he seems to be doing, right up to the end of the novel's epilogue, where, despite our expectations, he never quite repents. That part of his story, if it ever happens, is deferred by the narrator to a different novel.

In no work is Dostoevsky's apophatic approach more apparent than *The Brothers Karamazov* (1879-80). In this novel as in no other Dostoevsky explores how negative assertions about the Godhead can, in fact, lead us to belief. Indeed, this apophaticism is a

natural outgrowth of Dostoevsky's use of inversions and doublings in *Demons*. While in *Demons* these inversions and doublings tended not to lead us closer to belief, in *Brothers Karamazov* they often function in exactly the opposite direction—as a negative affirmation of faith. It is precisely from this paradox that they derive their expressive force and polemical charge. Malcolm Jones and Carol Apollonio have provided the most sustained application of apophatic concepts to *The Brothers Karamazov* and to Dostoevsky generally. My analysis attempts to address aspects of apophasis in the novel not taken up by them.

The most dramatic and weighty example of apophaticism in the novel is Ivan Karamazov's "poem" of the Grand Inquisitor, a text which neither Jones nor Apollonio submit to an apophatic analysis. D.H. Lawrence characterized it as "the final unanswerable criticism of Christ. And it is a deadly-devastating summing up, because borne out by long experience of humanity. It is reality versus illusion, and the illusion was Jesus, while time itself retorts with reality."²⁷ Edward Wasiolek succinctly describes the effect of the Grand Inquisitor's critique thusly: "Before the Grand Inquisitor is through talking, the Christ of all the people is the Christ of the chosen few; the Christ who had come to suffer for man has come only to make him suffer; and the Christ of concern and love is the Christ of indifference and unconcern. The word 'revolt' for the Grand Inquisitor's stand is not strong enough."²⁸ Dostoevsky himself called his creation "a powerful denial of God" in a diary entry.²⁹ And yet, if there is any doubt that this bitter critique of Christ and Christianity, with its blasphemies, clever temptations, and damning indictments, can somehow be understood as an apophatic evocation of Christ, we have only to listen to what Alyosha Karamazov says when his brother Ivan finishes narrating: "But . . . that's absurd! Your poem praises

Jesus, it doesn't revile him" (5:5, 260).³⁰ Alyosha's reaction is astounding, given what he has just heard in Ivan's poem, and it is remarkable that so few critics have noted its seeming inappropriateness. How does Ivan's Grand Inquisitor poem, a poem Ivan intended to be a damning denunciation of the incomprehensible and unfulfillable expectations of Christ's teachings, wind up praising Jesus? It cannot, unless it does so apophatically, by articulating that which is not Christ, and doing so dramatically and even convincingly.

Jones mentions Alyosha's reaction but does not connect it to apophatic theology. Joseph Frank also quotes Alyosha's response, but provides the more conventional explanation that rebuking Christ for proclaiming mankind's radical freedom is "in effect to praise Him for protecting the very foundation of man's humanity as Dostoevsky conceived it."³¹ Wil van den Bercken is the only critic I have been able to find who recognizes the negative theology at work in Alyosha's statement. He declares this moment "the climax of apophasis: minus becomes plus, an explanation meant as a rejection turns out to be a defense, and the nameless figure of Ivan's story receives from Alyosha the name, Jesus. Without intending to, the anti-theist, Ivan Karamazov, has sketched a positive portrait of Jesus."³² But though he discerns the apophatic impulse of Alyosha's response, Beckern does not identify the Grand Inquisitor text as a "traditional apophasis in which the negative expressed the opposite." Rather, he argues that the Grand Inquisitor winds up making positive statements about Jesus and faith: "The Inquisitor's indictment against Jesus is really an explanation of the nature of the Christian faith."³³ Thus he blunts his apophatic analysis and replaces it with an argument that is much harder to support. It is, after all, difficult to see how the Inquisitor is merely explaining the Christian faith, given what he says about the devil's three temptations of

Christ, which he describes as containing “the entire future history of the world and mankind” (5:5, 252). The content and meaning of these three momentous questions of Christian faith are distorted and bent almost beyond recognition by the Inquisitor, all toward his own purposes.

Alyosha recognizes this fact. What the Grand Inquisitor says about Christ is nothing like the Christ of the Gospels nor can he be. He is a negative distortion, a projection of the objections that the Grand Inquisitor—and by extension, Ivan—harbor toward Christ and his message. “Miracle, mystery and authority”—the pillars on which the Grand Inquisitor has created his deformed and perverse church—have nothing to do with Jesus, as the two acts Jesus performs in the poem remind us, an instance where Ivan even seems to have sabotaged his own argument. Healing and forgiveness—Jesus’ raising of the dead child and the kiss he bestows on the Grand Inquisitor—are the essence of the Jesus of the Gospels and they help us to distinguish the real Christ from the negative one of the Inquisitor. The “church” created by the Grand Inquisitor’s atheistic cabal—where the masses are bribed with bread, manipulated with “miracles” and kept in blissful ignorance of the death of God—more closely resembles Shiglayov’s “unlimited despotism” from Dostoevsky’s *Demons* than the “unlimited freedom” offered by Christ and decried by the Grand Inquisitor as an ideal too high and hard for humanity to accept.³⁴ Alyosha grasps all of this immediately in his excited reaction to his brother’s poem: “Your poem praises Jesus, it doesn’t revile him.” The negative portrait of Jesus and his message in Ivan’s poem only serve to set off in vivid contrast the goodness of Christ and the gospel he preached. We are meant to recognize this along with Alyosha.

It turns out that Dostoevsky need not have feared that he would be unable to refute his arguments in

Book 6 of the novel, the Russian Monk, which he hoped to make “the answer to this whole *negative side*” (*otritsatel’nuiu storonu*, his emphasis: a hint at the apophatic forces at work here).³⁵ He wondered whether it would be an “adequate answer.” His Alyosha didn’t wonder, and he didn’t need Book 6 as an answer. While it might seem like the Grand Inquisitor gets the last word in his exchange with the silent Jesus, in actuality he has simply helped us tread a *via negativa*. Christ is to be found in his absence here, as Alyosha immediately understands. The Grand Inquisitor, paradoxically, points towards Christ, not away from him.

Dostoevsky’s other Christo-centric novel—*The Idiot*—is also an essentially apophatic work in which we traverse a *via negativa* toward an understanding of Christ. The purported spectacular failure of the Christ figure Prince Myshkin in *The Idiot*, a novel haunted by the unresurrectably dead body of Jesus in Hans Holbein’s painting so prominently featured in the story, can actually be understood apophatically as the articulation of the negative space necessary for the true apprehension of the Godhead, as I have argued elsewhere.³⁶ The figure of the ridiculous, powerless prince whose attempts at kindness lead to tragedy is both an indictment of Christ and the Christian ethos and a negative affirmation of them, and this is where it derives its incredible expressive force and polemical charge.

Tolstoy’s Missing Christ

The absent or apophatic God often met in Dostoevsky is also Tolstoy’s God. It is the same God who haunted and eluded Prince Andrei, the “indefinable, unfathomable power” which we “not only cannot address, but which [we] cannot express in words” (1:3:19: 293).³⁷ It is the *panentheistic* God (Gustafson’s term, “all-in-God”³⁸) Pierre apprehends in captivity “not through words, not arguments, but though immediate sensation;” the God that is “here,

right here, everywhere” (4:4:12:1103). This is Levin’s God, “whom no one can either comprehend or define” (8:12: 795).³⁹ It is the unprovable God Tolstoy had been pursuing since an 1853 diary entry, in which he complains: “I can’t prove the existence of God; I can’t find a single sensible piece of evidence, and I find the concept unnecessary. It’s easier and simpler to understand the eternal existence of the whole world with its incomprehensibly beautiful order than a being who created it.”⁴⁰ Thirty years later, Tolstoy would write: “God is for me that after which I strive, that the striving after which forms my life, and who, therefore, is for me; but he is necessarily such that I cannot comprehend or name him. If I comprehended him, I would reach him, and there would be nothing to strive after, and no life.”⁴¹

To strive after God is to perfect oneself, according to Tolstoy, and in later years, this program of self-improvement became a full-blown “theology of perfection”⁴² at the center of which was Jesus’ teachings. God may be essentially unknowable, but through Jesus we at least have a notion of how we must proceed. However by the name “Jesus Christ” we identify not the second person of the Trinity or a real Jew from first century Judea, but rather a body of teachings, which, for Tolstoy, “gives us the meaning of life.”⁴³ Thus, neither theological arguments about Jesus’ divinity from scripture or church doctrines nor historical claims about his life and times have any relevance. Thus Jesus in Tolstoy is an absence, but a very significant one. He is an index—he points elsewhere, to the divine teaching. Once we confuse Jesus for his teaching we have already made the grave mistake of attributing flesh to the Godhead, and thus limiting it.

Jesus shows us the way not because he is the messiah or the Son of God. On the contrary, after *Confession* Tolstoy rejects Jesus altogether as God incarnate and is supremely indifferent to and at times even

dismissive of Jesus as a specific, historically real person. Thus, neither theological arguments about Jesus’ divinity from scripture or church doctrines nor historical claims about his life and times have any relevance. On the one hand, “the Epistles, the decrees of the Councils and the decisions of the Fathers” only lead us away from Christ’s message and, worse yet, darken it with obscure doctrines “that God is three persons, that the Holy Ghost descended upon the apostles and was transmitted to the priesthood by the laying on of hands; that seven sacraments are necessary for salvation; that communion should be received in two kinds, and so on.”⁴⁴ On the other hand, the ascendancy of secular studies of Jesus in the nineteenth century—particularly David Friedrich Strauss’s *Leben Jesu* (1835) and Ernest Renan’s *Vie de Jésus* (1863), both well known and highly influential in Russia—are as harmful as claims for Christ’s divinity, and, like those claims, they miss the point altogether. The adherents of the historical-critical method of biblical scholarship, according to Tolstoy, are so intent on teaching that Jesus was not God that they ignore altogether what he taught and why this message has endured for so long, even in spite all of the layers of distortion that Tolstoy insists have been inflicted upon it by the Church.

Thus Tolstoy charts his own course toward understanding the meaning of Christ and his message. But however much Tolstoy criticized or deviated from the Church, his own ideas and thinking about Christ and God were nevertheless distinctly influenced by his native Orthodox faith. In his influential monograph, *Leo Tolstoy: Resident and Stranger*, Richard Gustafson makes a strong case for Tolstoy’s affinity with Eastern Christian thought, thus revealing the writer’s paradoxical dependence on concepts and beliefs central to a religion which he disparaged the last thirty years of his life.⁴⁵ Adopting the methodology of apophatic

theology in his thinking and writing about God is one way Tolstoy reveals his dependence on Orthodox ideas. Likewise, in his emphasis on self-perfection as a way toward God, Tolstoy evokes the Orthodox notion of theosis or deification, as Gustafson has also shown.⁴⁶ Both of these concepts are central to Tolstoy's understanding of Jesus Christ and what it means to follow him, an outcome hardly surprising given the link between apophaticism and theosis in Orthodox theology.⁴⁷

Of course, Tolstoy is hardly an Orthodox writer. His adaptation of these concepts in his writing—both fiction and non-fiction—about God, Jesus Christ and the construction of personhood ultimately lead to conclusions quite at odds with Orthodox theology. Tolstoy believed his revolt against received notions of faith, God and Christ offered the possibility of achieving paradise on earth, the fulfillment of his youthful dream of “founding a new religion appropriate to the stage of development of mankind—the religion of Christ, but purged of beliefs and mysticism, a practical religion, not promising future bliss but giving bliss on earth.”⁴⁸ In four works which he intended to be read together as parts of a larger composition, Tolstoy set out the basic features of this new religion. As mentioned above, *Confession* chronicles his crisis of unbelief, his struggle to find God and faith and his inability to do so within the beliefs and practices of his native Orthodox church. It was to serve as a preface of sorts for his *Critique of Dogmatic Theology* (1880-84, published 1891), where he next systematically dismantles—with indignation, rage and sarcasm—all the tenets of Orthodox doctrine and practice as being in fundamental disagreement with what Christ taught and spoke in the Gospels. His *Harmony and Translation of the Four Gospels* (1880-84, published 1892), written while he labored over his *Critique*, seeks to restore Christ's true teachings by separating the “pure water of life” from the “mud and slime”

which obscured it in the Gospels as they are handed down to us.⁴⁹ To do this, Tolstoy harmonized all four Gospels, removing miracles and downplaying social and historical references, in order to reveal “a teaching which gives us the meaning of life,” “a very strict, pure, and complete metaphysical and ethical doctrine, higher than which the reason of man has not yet reached.”⁵⁰ Finally, in *What I Believe* (1884) Tolstoy lays out a catechesis for his new faith in which he distills the great intellectual, emotional and physical labors over his previous three works into one succinct and sustained apologia for his new faith of reason and enlightenment—a belief not in the divinity of Christ, but in that of his teaching.

So great was Tolstoy's desire to separate Christ from his teaching that Jesus as a person almost disappears entirely from his harmonized Gospels. Having spurned the “Strausses and Renans” for their insistence on placing Jesus in a specific historical reality and for stressing his humanity (in particular, how he “sweated and went to the lavatory,” as Tolstoy scornfully complained in a letter to Nikolai Strakhov⁵¹), Tolstoy's Jesus becomes a disembodied figure distinctly displaced from any concrete historical reality. As Ani Kokobobo argues, “in the later portions of the *Harmonization* he ceases being a fleshy person” altogether and instead “grows into an abstraction, a mere personification of his teaching.”⁵² Or, as David Matual puts it, he becomes a “semi-abstract being.” At the same time, this “semi-abstract” Christ is certainly not a divine being. He is, rather, that most important of all things in Tolstoy's writing: he is “the most eloquent and most authoritative spokesman of the Tolstoyan message. Apart from this consideration, there is nothing extraordinary about him.”⁵³ If, as Wilson puts it, “Tolstoy could not approach the Gospels without a compulsion to rewrite them”⁵⁴ it was because, as Gustafson argues, so much of the Gospels reflected truths he had long “forged in the smoldering furnace

of his own life.”⁵⁵ Simply put, the Gospels afforded him the best material with which to articulate his own long-held beliefs. Indeed, in an 1884 letter to Chertkov, Tolstoy calls his Gospel “the best manifestation of my thought.” It was, he declared, the “one book” he had been writing all of his life.⁵⁶

Tolstoy’s point is that we must emphasize Christ’s teaching over his acts and understand this teaching everywhere as an expression and elucidation of the *razumenie* (‘understanding,’ ‘knowledge,’ ‘enlightenment’) that, in Tolstoy’s cosmology, takes the place of *logos*, the word of God. It is *razumenie* (with its root, *razum*, ‘reason’) that, in Tolstoy’s Gospel, existed “in the beginning” and “gives true life,” which “the darkness cannot extinguish” and which “manifested itself in the flesh, through the person of Jesus Christ.” And it is the teaching of Jesus that “is the perfect and true faith” because it is “based on the attaining of knowledge [*razumenie*].”⁵⁷ This knowledge Tolstoy sums up in five commandments, taken from the Sermon on the Mount: do not be angry, do not lust, do not swear any oaths, do not resist evil, and love all others, even those who hate you. These five commandments are the centerpiece of chapters four and nine of Tolstoy’s harmonized Gospel and constitute the core of his own Christian beliefs. According to Tolstoy, the fulfillment of these “very simple definite commands” would soon “establish the Kingdom of God” on earth.⁵⁸

We may legitimately object that these, of course, are hardly simple commands, nor are they entirely reasonable, for that matter. For one thing, Tolstoy is demanding that we behave in a way that goes against human nature. For another thing, he is asking us to live by the high and hard ideal of Christ but without any recourse to the concept of Christ’s grace (so important in Dostoevsky’s fiction) to help us out. In this aspect, he reveals his own radical faith, not in Christ, but in the power of human reason. This level

of faith in our ability to follow these “very simple definite commands” is fantastical in its own right. Lev Shestov once declared that Tolstoy’s insistence on the strict adherence to Christ’s doctrine of non-resistance to evil was more other-worldly than an acceptance of the veracity of the Gospel miracles attributed to him.⁵⁹ Here, as E.B. Greenwood points out, Tolstoy shows his readiness, like Dostoevsky before him, “to err with Christ against all reason.”⁶⁰

Having reached this point in our exploration of Dostoevsky’s Christ and Tolstoy’s Jesus, we have come full circle and our two great thinkers reveal their paradoxical mirror images. For his part, Tolstoy’s ultra-rational Christianity founders on the arguably irrational demands of the unknowable Godhead communicated by his messenger, the non-divine Jesus who, himself, through the distortions of the Church he apparently never meant to found, has been the main impediment to our understanding of his message. As for Dostoevsky, his mystical, irrational Christ is an absence articulated by the rational arguments made by atheists, materialists and metaphysical rebels who themselves are a hair’s breadth away from true faith, thus revealing how closely related are complete belief and absolute unbelief. Neither thinker gives us a simple concept of faith or a comforting portrait of Jesus Christ. On the contrary, both writers wish to rankle our sensibilities, so that we may better understand the figure at the center of each writer’s idiosyncratic Christology. In this way, the extremes meet and the Jesus of Tolstoy touches, if only tangentially, the Christ of Dostoevsky.

ENDNOTES

- [1] A.N. Wilson, *Tolstoy* (New York, 1988) 307.
- [2] Letter to N.N. Strakhov, February 5-10, 1881, cited in Wilson, 327.
- [3] Leo Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 90 vols. (Moscow, 1928-58) 60:293 (hereafter, PSS). In his 1901 “Reply to the Synod’s Edict” of excommunication from the Orthodox Church, Tolstoy wrote: “I began by loving my Orthodox faith more than my peace, then I loved Christianity more than my Church, and now I love truth more than anything in the world. And up to now truth for me corresponds with Christianity as I understand it.” Leo Tolstoy, *On Life and Essays on Religion*, trans. Aylmer Maude (Oxford,) 225.
- [4] Leo Tolstoy, *A Confession; The Gospel in Brief; What I Believe*, trans. Aylmer Maude (London, 1971) 462; PSS 23:411.
- [5] “Brothers, have no fear of men’s sin. Love a man even in his sin for that is the semblance of Divine Love and is the highest love on earth. Love all God’s creation, the whole and every grain of sand in it. Love every leaf, every ray of God’s light. Love the animals, love the plants, love everything. If you love everything, you will perceive the divine mystery in things. Once you perceive it, you will begin to comprehend it better every day. And you will come at last to love the whole world with an all-embracing love. Love the animals: God has given them the rudiments of thought and joy untroubled. Do not trouble it, don’t harass them, don’t deprive them of their happiness, don’t work against God’s intent. Man, do not pride yourself on superiority to the animals; they are without sin, and you, with your greatness, defile the earth by your appearance on it, and leave the traces of your foulness after you—alas, it is true of almost every one of us! . . . [A]ll is like an ocean, all is flowing and blending; a touch in one place sets up movement at the other end of the earth. It may seem senseless to beg forgiveness of the birds, but birds would be happier at your side--a little happier, anyway--and children and all animals, if you yourself were nobler than you are now. It’s all like an ocean, I tell you. Then you would pray to the birds too, consumed by an all-embracing love, in a sort of transport, and pray that they too will forgive you your sin. Treasure this ecstasy, however senseless it may seem to men.” (Book 6, Chapter 3, Garnett translation).
- [6] Tolstoy, *PSS*, 53:172.
- [7] Tolstoy, *PSS*, 45: 50-51, cited in Gustafson, *Leo Tolstoy: Resident and Stranger* (Princeton, 1986) 185.
- [8] See, respectively, Book 4, Chapter 1, 164 and Book 6, Chapter 3, 320-21 of *Brothers Karamazov*, here in the Pevear and Volokhonsky translation.
- [9] Leo Tolstoy, *Resurrection*, trans. Anthony Briggs (London, 2009) 507; PSS 32: 442.
- [10] Tolstoy, *Gospel in Brief*, 124.
- [11] Tolstoy, *On Life and Essays on Religion*, 223.
- [12] PSS 24: 980. Ivakin’s memoirs were unpublished and are cited in the commentary to Tolstoy’s *Kratkoe izlozhenie evangeliia*.
- [13] Leo Tolstoy, *Tolstoy’s Diaries: Volume I, 1847-1894*, ed. and trans. R.F. Christian (New York, 1985) 101.
- [14] Vladimir Nabokov, *Lectures on Russian Literature* (New York, 1981) 104.
- [15] Olga Meerson’s article “Old Testament Lamentation in the Underground Man’s Monologue: A Refutation of the

- Existentialist Reading of *Notes from the Underground*,” *Slavic and East European Journal*, 36:3 (1992) 317-22, is the first to my knowledge to point to an apophatic aspect in *Notes*.
- [16] Dostoevsky, *Selected Letters of Fyodor Dostoyevsky*, trans. Andrew MacAndrew, ed. Joseph Frank and David I. Goldstein (New Brunswick, 1987) 68.191. *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 30 vols. (Leningrad, 1972-1990), 28:2, 73 (hereafter, *PSS*).
- [17] *PSS* 5, 120-21. English translation Michael R. Katz, *Fyodor Dostoevsky, Notes from Underground* (New York, 1989) 25-26.
- [18] On the weak reception of *Notes*, see Frank, *Dostoevsky: The Stir of Liberation* (Princeton, 1986) 311. On Dostoevsky’s motivation for not appealing to the censors to restore the chapter in later publications, see Frank, *The Stir of Liberation*, 328.
- [19] Frank, *The Stir of Liberation*, 344-45.
- [20] In “The Hidden Religious Message of *Notes from Underground*,” Carol Apollonio argues that the Underground Man’s tormented existence is an example of suffering which, “like the passion of Christ,” could “lead people to faith.” She goes on to say: “In *Notes from Underground*, as in his mature works, the author gave the most direct expression, the *words*, to the ideas he was fighting—but here he ensured that the words would be ambiguous. He had not yet fully developed the silent gesture of faith—the kiss, the embrace or the bow to the earth—that in the later novels brings God’s grace to people, through people—but he provide an inconclusive gesture that was full of potential (Liza’s embrace).” *Slavic and East European Journal*, 37:4 (1993), 510-29, here 527.
- [21] Malcolm Jones, *Dostoevsky and the Dynamics of Religious Experience* (London, 2005) 72-73.
- [22] Jones, 72.
- [23] *Ibid.*, 75.
- [24] Timothy Ware (Bishop Kallistos), *The Orthodox Church* (New York, 1993) 64.
- [25] Dmitry quotes partially from Tiutchev’s poem while being interrogated in Mokroe: “Be patient, humble, hold thy peace.” *Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York, 1990) 9:4, 469.
- [26] Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York, 1992) 3:1, 202. Earlier, Razumikhin tells Raskolnikov: “Lying can always be forgiven; lying is a fine thing, because it leads to the truth” (2:4, 135).
- [27] D.H. Lawrence, “The Grand Inquisitor,” *Selected Literary Criticism*, ed. Anthony Beal (London, 1955) 233. Cited in Edward Wasiolek, *Dostoevsky: The Major Fiction* (Cambridge, 1964), 164.
- [28] Wasiolek, *Dostoevsky: The Major Fiction*, 165-66.
- [29] Responding to his detractors, Dostoevsky wrote in his 1881 diary: “These blockheads never dreamed of such a powerful denial of God as is put in the Inquisitor and the preceding chapter.” *PSS* 27, 48.
- [30] All references to *Brothers Karamazov* will be cited parenthetically in the text by part, chapter and page number from the Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky translation (New York, 1990) with modifications by me where necessary.
- [31] Frank, *The Mantle of the Prophet, 1871-1881* (Princeton, 2002) 616.
- [32] Wil Van Den Bercken, *Christian Fiction and Religious Realism* (London, 2011) 88-89.

- [33] Ibid., 87.
- [34] A member of Pyotr Verkhovensky's group and the novel's chief theoretician of socialism, Shigalyov shares his vision of the "social organization of the future society" only to discover that his idea leads him to the exact opposite position from the one with which he started. "I got entangled in my own data, and my conclusion directly contradicts the original idea from which I start," he declares. "Starting from unlimited freedom, I conclude with unlimited despotism." Dostoevsky, *Demons*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York, 1994) 2:7:2, 402.
- [35] Letter to K.P. Pobedonostsev, 24 August / 5 September, 1879, *PSS* 30:1, 120. English translation from *Selected Letters*, 486.
- [36] John Givens, "A Narrow Escape into Faith? Dostoevsky's *Idiot* and the Christology of Comedy," *Russian Review*, Vol 70, No. 1 (January, 2011) 95-117.
- [37] The parenthetical reference to *War and Peace* citing volume, part (when necessary), chapter and page are from the Pevear and Volokhonsky translation (New York, 2007).
- [38] Gustafson writes: "Tolstoy's doctrine of god is panentheistic (all-in-God). His God is in everything and everything is in God, but God is not everything and everything is not God." See his *Leo Tolstoy: Resident and Stranger*, 101.
- [39] The parenthetical reference to Anna Karenina citing part, chapter and page are from the Pevear and Volokhonsky translation (New York, 2000).
- [40] *Tolstoy's Diaries: Volume 2*, 1895-1910, 2:70.
- [41] Leo Tolstoy, "Thoughts on God," *My Religion, On Life, Thoughts on God, On the Meaning of Life*, trans. Leo Wiener (Boston, 1904) 409.
- [42] Gustafson, *Leo Tolstoy*, 434.
- [43] Tolstoy, *Gospel in Brief*, 123.
- [44] Ibid., 128, 129.
- [45] See also Pål Kolstø, "Leo Tolstoy, a Church Critic Influenced by Orthodox Thought," *Church, Nation and State in Russia and Ukraine*, Geoffrey Hosking, ed., (London, 1991) 148-66, esp. 158.
- [46] Gustafson writes: "[D]eification entails a total transfiguration of self, a turning away from all personal passion, desire, perception, and reasoning which returns you to your life 'in God.' Tolstoy's conception of the career of life follows the pattern of this doctrine of deification. It assumes an 'eternally growing soul' which exists in a process of increasing participation in true life and ends up becoming one with the All. However, when this doctrine of deification is generalized into a metaphysical vision, as with Tolstoy and other Eastern Christian thinkers, it leads to a cosmic conception of the purpose of life wherein all things on earth are seen in the process of return to their divine source." *Leo Tolstoy: Resident and Stranger*, 104-05.
- [47] On the link between apophaticism and theosis, see Randall A. Poole, "The Apophatic Bakhtin," *Bakhtin and Religion: A Feeling for Faith*, ed. Susan M. Felch and Paul J. Contino (Evanston, IL, 2001) 151-75, especially 158-60.
- [48] *Tolstoy's Diaries*, 1:101.
- [49] Tolstoy, *Gospel in Brief*, 123.
- [50] Ibid., 123, 131-32.
- [51] Letter to N.N. Strakhov, April 17/18, 1878, *Tolstoy's Letters, Vol. I*, 1828-1879, ed. and trans. R.F. Christian (London, 1978).
- [52] Ani Kokobobo, "Authoring Jesus: Novelistic Echoes in Tolstoy's Harmonization and

- Translation of the Four Gospels,” *Tolstoy Studies Journal*, 20: 2008, 10.
- [53] David Matual, *Tolstoy’s Translation of the Gospels: A Critical Study* (Lewiston, 1992) 36, 14.
- [54] Wilson, *Tolstoy*, 318.
- [55] Gustafson, *Leo Tolstoy*, 190.
- [56] Letter to Chertkov, cited in “Soedinenie i perevod chetyrekh evangelii: istoriia pisaniia,” *PSS* 24: 981.
- [57] Tolstoy, *Gospel in Brief*, 4; *PSS* 24: 817.
- [58] Tolstoy, *What I Believe*, 401, 404; *PSS* 23: 368, 370.
- [59] Lev Shestov, “The Gift of Prophecy,” in *Chekhov and Other Essays* (1916, repr. Ann Arbor, 1966), 78.
- [60] E. B. Greenwood, “Tolstoy and Religion,” in *New Essays on Tolstoy*, ed. Malcolm Jones (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978) 149-74, here 152.