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# Stavrogin: The Anti-Christ of Demons

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Stavrogin: The Anti-Christ of *Demons*

Fyodor Dostoevsky's novel *Demons* is much more than the story of a political murder; it describes the clash of ideas in 1860s Russia as Russia battles between retaining its past national identity, rooted loosely in Eastern Orthodoxy, and Western ideas, rooted in atheism. It is a clash of politics, but even more it is a clash of religion. However, the opposing sides in the battle of religion appear far from balanced, for even Shatov, who supports Russian Orthodoxy, does not truly believe in God. Atheism seems to win out as all characters reject real, vital faith in God in some form, and havoc ensues. At the center of it all lies the enigmatic, fascinating, horrifying character Stavrogin. Though Stavrogin often lies in the background, rarely doing anything and often fading out altogether, his subtle yet powerful influence over the other characters drives the plot of the novel. Through it all, *Demons* sets Stavrogin up as an anti-Christ figure, hammering the dreadful consequences of replacing God with man.

Almost all the main characters of the novel gravitate to Stavrogin, elevating him to the level of a god and placing their hope in him rather than in the true God. For example, Kirillov is an atheist, and this leads him to proclaim that man is god. Kirillov worships this thought of god as man, going mad and in the end committing suicide in service to this idea (625). Yet it was Stavrogin who inspired Kirillov with this idea and Stavrogin who embodies this idea for Kirillov. As Kirillov says to Stavrogin, "Remember what you've meant in my life, Stavrogin" (239). Pyotr Stepanovich also idolizes Stavrogin, but for him Stavrogin embodies the perfect political

leader for his plan to start a revolution in Russia, as shown when he says, “Stavrogin, you are beautiful! . . . You are my idol! . . . You are precisely what’s needed. I, I need precisely such a man as you. I know no one but you. You are a leader, you are a sun, and I am your worm” (419). Stepanovich is an atheist and replaces God with his political revolution, and he sees Stavrogin as the only man capable of making this revolution possible. Thus, Stavrogin becomes the incarnation of his god, and he places his hope for the success of his revolution in Stavrogin. Both atheists depose God and transform the man Stavrogin into a god in their minds, making Stavrogin akin to an anti-Christ.

Even characters who are not clearly atheists reject God in some way and instead make Stavrogin their god. For instance, while it is not clear what Marya believes religiously, she does view Stavrogin as her Prince Charming come to rescue her and even calls him prince when he visits her (272). Furthermore, in the drawing-room scene, Marya reacts to Stavrogin with both “fear and rapture,” and she even asks Stavrogin, “And may I . . . kneel to you . . . now?” (183). This is not how one reacts to a mere mortal but to a god; thus, Marya’s Prince Charming becomes a god in her eyes. Like Marya, Liza also treats Stavrogin as a sort of god character, although it is not apparent what her religious views are. She nevertheless views Stavrogin as a romantic figure from the operas she grew up watching (523), becomes consumed with him throughout the novel, and in the end ruins herself just to spend a night with him (524). Even Shatov, at first glance the most Christian character, turns Stavrogin into a god. Though Shatov is a Slavophil, he supports Eastern Orthodoxy without actually believing in God, revealed when he says, “I . . . I will believe in God” (253). However, Shatov does cling religiously to the precepts of Slavophilism taught to him by Stavrogin, and he seems to idolize Stavrogin as the embodiment of Slavophil beliefs. This idolization persists even when he realizes that his

perception of Stavrogin is inaccurate: “Stavrogin, why am I condemned to believe in you unto ages of ages?” (255). In this way Shatov too turns Stavrogin into a god, the god of Russia. In this way, the major characters of the novel either directly or functionally reject Jesus as God, leaving them searching for a new god—and, though what this god looks like varies from character to character, each god becomes embodied in Stavrogin. Thus, Stavrogin becomes an alternative to Christ and, by extension, an anti-Christ figure.

Not only do others see Stavrogin as a godlike character, but Stavrogin also elevates himself to the status of a god. Stavrogin is an atheist, and like Kirillov, the idea that there is no God leads Stavrogin to see himself as a god and in turn to worship his own will, which, as Kirillov says, is “the attribute of divinity” (619). For the will is an expression of power and of sovereignty over one’s fate. No god tells Stavrogin what to do, for Stavrogin is God. He expresses this sentiment to the priest Tikhon when he says, “I don’t invite anyone into my soul, I don’t need anyone, I’m able to manage by myself” (689). Here Stavrogin declares his pride, sovereignty, and self-sufficiency. This belief in his own divinity based in his willpower leads Stavrogin to make ridiculous decisions all to assert his own will. One moment he pulls a man by the nose (45), bites the governor’s ear (50), and violently kisses another man’s wife (48); another time he purposely shoots too high in a duel (286) and endures a slap from Shatov (203). While sometimes it looks as if Stavrogin is violent and crazy and at other times it looks as if he is practicing Christian virtue, neither is true. On the contrary, Stavrogin is exerting his will. He performs acts that do not make sense because the only reason one would commit such acts is out of personal desire unmotivated by anything else. Everything Stavrogin does is an exercise of the will and therefore a proclamation of his godhood. Rather than allowing Christ to rule his life, Stavrogin sets himself up as God and rules his own life, making him an anti-Christ character.

Though Stavrogin attempts to live out the divinity he has created for himself, unlike Christ he has no firm convictions and becomes a god of lies. Without a God to define who Stavrogin is and how he should behave, Stavrogin, as a “god” who is free to and even *must* exert his own willpower, is left to define who he is and what is worthy of the exertion of his will. Yet Stavrogin, as he progresses through the novel, is unable to find any reason to define himself as one thing versus another. He explains this in his final letter to Dasha when he says, “My desires are far too weak; they cannot guide” (675). For this reason, Stavrogin dons a myriad of identities: he both teaches Shatov Slavophilism as if he himself believed in the idea and teaches Kirillov to become a god through suicide; he becomes Liza’s opera star and Marya’s Prince Charming; he imitates Christian virtue and acts like an animal. Yet none of these acts satisfy his quest to find something worth his willpower and thus leave him hopelessly bored. The will, while being a characteristic of deity, cannot give a deity an identity, and Stavrogin cannot find someone worth being. Furthermore, this acting turns Stavrogin into a lie, for he pretends to be the god each character wants him to be but is actually none of these things. Thus, in his attempt to become a god, Stavrogin lies both to himself and to those around him while remaining bored and meaningless in his godhood. If Jesus is the God of truth, Stavrogin becomes the god of lies.

Unlike the true Christ who came to save humanity, Stavrogin as the deceitful anti-Christ ruins the other characters of the novel. Marya marries Stavrogin believing that he will be her Prince Charming, yet he hates her and eventually allows her to be killed by Fedka (281). She loses her life because of her faith in Stavrogin. Furthermore, Stavrogin is also partially responsible for the death of Liza. The town, believing Stavrogin killed Marya to marry Liza, transferred the blame for Marya’s death to Liza, and so when she goes to see Marya’s dead body, someone attacks and kills her (539). This death also has consequences, of course, on those who

love her, like her mother and Mavriky. In addition, Stavrogin convinces Kirillov that he has a noble duty to commit suicide, leading a good man—one far better than Stavrogin—to die a purposeless death after seeming to descend into madness (625). Similarly, while Stavrogin is not directly responsible for Shatov's death, he is the one who convinced Shatov to change from a socialist to a Slavophil, leading Stepanovich's followers to suspect him of informing and to aid Stepanovich in eliminating him (548-549). Finally, Stepanovich believes in his revolution because he believes in Stavrogin's power to carry it out, leading him to commit atrocious acts that in turn cause Shatov's death and the madness of both Lyamshim and Virginsky (604-605). Stavrogin is not the god each character thinks he is, for Stavrogin is a lie, and putting faith in this lie ultimately destroys the characters who trust in him. In the end, Stavrogin ruins rather than saves everyone, completely different from Christ, who saves all people.

Stavrogin not only destroys the other characters of the novel but even destroys himself, once again illustrating the difference between him and Jesus Christ. In the chapter "At Tikhon's," Stavrogin describes an incident in his past in which he molested a young girl Matryosha not out of malice or out of lust for her but simply because he wanted to do it. He harmed this girl simply as another exertion of his will. Furthermore, when the girl, distraught and uncomprehending of what has been done to her, commits suicide, he predicts her actions yet does nothing to stop her. He lets the girl kill herself. However, though Stavrogin committed this heinous crime in cold blood, following the deed he is plagued by guilt. He tells Tikhon that he suffers hallucinations of the girl "almost every day" (686) that he compares to demons (687), illustrating his guilt. Even at the end of the novel, he is unable to escape the memory of his crime, as revealed when he writes Dasha, "I'm not well, but I hope with the local air I'll get rid of my hallucinations" (674). Stavrogin's attempt to make himself god by exercising his will

leads to his daily torment as he daily recalls his crime to an innocent child. This certainly contrasts with Christ, who as God never feared He was possessed by a demon and never suffered from guilt because he never hurt another person.

Stavrogin's portrayal as an anti-Christ figure culminates in the conclusion of the novel when he commits suicide. In one way this man-become-god character bears a striking resemblance to Christ—both not only die, but in some form are responsible for their own death. While Jesus did not directly kill Himself, He clearly had the power to stop His death and did not but rather offered Himself as a sacrifice for humanity. He chose to die. Thus, one could argue that Christ in a way committed suicide. Yet the far more significant differences between Stavrogin and Christ powerfully convey the consequences of setting up man rather than Christ as God. One such disparity is the motivations behind these deaths. Christ died as a sacrifice to save all those who accept Him from their sins. Christ died not for Himself but for the good of others. In contrast, Stavrogin, like Kirillov, committed suicide as the ultimate form of self-will. Yet Kirillov at least thought of his suicide as a sacrifice for mankind, whereas Stavrogin openly admits in his letter to Dasha that this is not the reason behind his suicide: "I know I ought to kill myself, to sweep myself off the earth like a vile insect; but I'm afraid of suicide, because I'm afraid of showing magnanimity. I know it will be one more deceit" (676). Stavrogin reveals that there is no goodness to his suicide; it is one more lie, the characteristic that has come to characterize all his actions and his entire person. Stavrogin kills himself not for the good of mankind but because he himself wants to become a god.

Furthermore, while Christ's death was ultimately triumphant, Stavrogin's suicide is a crushing defeat. When Kirillov dies, he dies mad but believing he is acting heroically and saving mankind. He believes his death has meaning. Stavrogin is under no such illusion. In his letter to

Dasha, Stavrogin says, “I have no hope from Uri; I’m simply going” and “But what to apply my strength to—that have I never seen, nor do I see it now” (675). His final known words, like every other word he has spoken throughout the novel, convey a listless, bored, empty tone. Stavrogin is accomplishing what he set out to; he has exercised his will to the highest degree. Yet he has found no sense of identity and no joy in doing so. Stavrogin goes through his life performing acts without hope, destroying those around him, unable to find something to give him the direction he searches for. In this way, though he made himself into a god, his suicide is still not a victory, for he dies without purpose and without hope. In contrast, Christ through His death accomplished his purpose of redeeming the world from sin, and furthermore, he rose victorious from the dead three days after His death, ascended to Heaven, and now reigns with God. Stavrogin’s suicide and “godhood” seems rather petty in comparison with such a narrative.

Yet perhaps the most meaningful difference between Stavrogin and Christ’s deaths lie not in sacrifice versus selfishness or in their different outcomes but in their different wills. In the end, Stavrogin commits suicide as the ultimate demonstration of his will. His suicide note reads, “Blame no one; it was I” (678). Though Stavrogin’s words could indicate an attempt to protect others from guilt, in the context of Stavrogin’s character, these words are a ringing proclamation of his own will. Stavrogin alone controls his fate, even his own death. In this way Stavrogin once again attempts to make himself a god. Christ, in contrast, though fully God and thus actually in control of all things, willingly gave up this control when He went to the cross. In the garden of Gethsemane, anticipating His grueling death and horrific separation from His Father, Christ begged to be released from His mission to die for the sins of the world but sacrificed His will to the will of God the Father: “And going a little farther he fell on his face and prayed, saying, ‘My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will,



but as you will” (English Standard Version Bible, Matt. 26:39). When Jesus died, He did so because it was the Father’s will. Christ’s example is the opposite of Stavrogin’s. Stavrogin is determined to exert his own will to make himself God, while Christ is already God yet willingly sacrifices His own will. Submitting to another’s will does not forfeit deity; in fact, perhaps it actually is the ultimate act of will. In an earthly sense, it makes no sense for one to give up his own will, and thus only a true act of will could lead someone to do it. Thus, Stavrogin becomes an anti-Christ character by choosing to die and doing so not as a sacrifice of will like Christ but as an exertion of will.

Interestingly, *Demon*’s main character, an abominable man who lays waste to everything in his path, is named “Stavrogin,” which means “cross.” Dostoevsky is clearly trying to tie his character to Jesus Christ. Like Christ, Stavrogin becomes the hope for countless characters yet is not what any of them expect. Stavrogin also attempts to be like Christ, the God-man, imitating His sovereignty by controlling his own choices. He continually exerts his willpower. In effect, Stavrogin attempts—and in the end succeeds—in becoming the “man-God” of Kirillov’s theory. Yet the comparison of Stavrogin to Christ is loaded with irony, for while Christ brought healing and redemption to innumerable human beings, Stavrogin brings devastation to all he encounters. Indeed, Stavrogin cannot even protect himself from himself—when he becomes his own god, he has nothing to direct his will and becomes consumed with emptiness. Eventually he takes his own life out of sheer boredom and meaninglessness. While Stavrogin can in some way control his life and who he is, he cannot succeed in giving it meaning. This “Christ” dies on a cross not ultimately of victory but of apathetic defeat, and only after he ruins everyone around him. Thus, Dostoevsky’s novel compellingly argues that, when man becomes god, he becomes not a god at all but a demon.

Works Cited

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