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H. E. S. Woldring

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Dostoevsky: A Man of Mission*

H.E.S. Woldring

A Dostoevsky Memorial Lecture on the Occasion of the
Hundredth Year of his Death, January 28, 1981.

Without a doubt Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky is one of the greatest authors of world literature. His novels give more than a literary pleasure; he is also a man of mission. He especially had a mission for the Russians of his time. And because his works have been translated into many languages, we can ask, what is his message today? Therefore I divide this lecture in four parts:

- I. An outline of his career
- II. Dostoevsky as an ethical author
- III. The mission of Dostoevsky as a Russian Orthodox Christian
- IV. The relevance of his mission

I.

An Outline of His Career

Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky was born in Moscow on October 30, 1821. His father was a medical man in the Maria Hospital, which was situated in the district of poor people, orphanages, and houses of beggars. His parents' house was next door to the hospital; the garden of Dostoevsky's house and the park of the hospital were contiguous. Although his father prohibited him from having contact with the sick or with lower class people, Fyodor always looked for contacts with them. Evidently these people, whose characters were formed by their lot, interested him. At the country-seat of his father, Fyodor was often with the serfs, farmers in the country. It was no accident that his first novel had the title *Poor People*, and that in novels he also gave much attention to them; often they play a central part in his stories.

After his mother's death in 1837, he was sent to the Royal Academy of Engineering in St. Petersburg. There his literary career began. After some time he dissociated himself from his strong Russian Orthodox education and sympathized with revolutionary philosophies. At the house of the "communist" and free-thinker Petrashevsky, he regularly visited the meetings of a discussion group which centered on literature and political and societal reformations. They also read socialist

*Dr. H.E.S. Woldring, Lecturer in social philosophy and social ethics in the Free University of Amsterdam, presently at Calvin College Studies Center, spoke at Dordt College in commemoration of the 100th anniversary of Dostoevsky's death. Although the speech published here is substantially as delivered, the editors, with Dr. Woldring's permission, have edited it for the readers of *Pro Rege*.

philosophers of France and Germany whose works were banned by the Tsar's regime. A policy spy betrayed this group, and, in 1849, after a long procedure, Dostoevsky was sentenced to death. When the Tsar granted him reprieve, the sentence was changed to ten years of exile in Siberia, five years as a convict, and five years as a soldier with reduced rank.

I think that Dostoevsky was never a convinced socialist or an extreme revolutionary. True, he wished for societal and political changes; he advocated juridical reform, liberalization of censorship, and the abolition of serfdom. When he was younger he had been more vehement in his support of these causes, and he sympathized with socialist philosophers in their plea to realize these goals.

After his return to Russia, he retained this sympathy, but he detested socialism and anarchism mainly because of their atheistic character. He named the Siberian period the most useful one of his life. True, it was a hard time; he was the fellow-prisoner of murderers and other very serious criminals. But in this period, he said, he got to know his people. He got to know their crimes and cruelties, but he considered these facts of minor importance. He got to know the essence of the Russian man, that is, his legitimacy, his nobility, his belief, and his mission for the world. It was after this period, after 1860, that Dostoevsky wrote his great novels: *Crime and Punishment*, *The Idiot*, and *The Brothers Karamazov*.

It was also after 1860 that he traveled through Western Europe, visiting London, Paris, Geneva, Berlin, and other cities. During part of this period he became addicted to gambling. In his great novels and in his notes he is very negative about western culture. He detested the individualistic, rationalistic, and materialistic philosophy and attitude of western people. He also condemned the Roman Catholic Church as an institution of power, of unbelief and as an expression of secularized western society. In Dostoevsky's philosophy, western culture could end only in ruin. One possibility of salvation existed: Western Europe must listen to the message of the Russian people. This poor and orthodox people was the guardian of the divine truth. In his novels, Dostoevsky expressed this belief.

Dostoevsky's death was experienced by many Russians as a national loss and as a personal grief. More than thirty thousand people followed the funeral ceremony.

II.

Dostoevsky as an Ethical Author

Sometimes I meet people who say: "Dostoevsky's novels are too difficult; he is so long-winded, he describes so many figures, situations and intrigues." Such remarks are sometimes justified, but I shall try to disprove such objections by showing Dostoevsky to be essentially an ethical author.

First, between Dostoevsky and the figures of his novels there is an *ethical* relationship, a relationship of love and loyalty. In his novels he describes extensively the persons, their feelings and their motives. Seldom does he favor one character above another. He is fair both to his heroes and to murderers and other criminals. He gives a full-length portrait of them all. In the course of his novels, he characterizes them so strongly that the reader actually seems to make their acquaintance. It is not at all surprising that many psychologists have studied Dostoevsky's works. He not only characterizes persons, he not only fathoms the depth of human life, but he also fathoms it to its "ultimate bounds." Especially in his great novels we see that actions express a character's convictions, his philosophy of life, and that convictions have consequences. He confronts his characters with the ultimate questions of life and death and shows them trembling between sin and grace. After man makes a

decision between these two, Dostoevsky insists that the ultimate consequences are inevitable. In biblical words: "Whoever is evil must go on doing evil and whoever is filthy must go on being filthy; whoever is good, and whoever is holy must go on being holy" (Revelation 22:11).

Second, an ethical relationship exists between Dostoevsky and his readers. During the reflections on and in the writing of his novels, he had in his mind a clear picture of his readers, the Russians of his time. He loved his people and wished to tell them his mission.

III.

The Mission of Dostoevsky as a Russian Orthodox Christian

Dostoevsky's novels have been translated into many languages. Many Christians read these novels and they recognize many things which appeal to them. The question is, do they correctly understand his philosophy of life? It is very difficult for western people, and for western Christians, to understand adequately the Russian way of thought. Dostoevsky had been educated in a strong Russian Orthodox family. When he was twenty-five years old, he sympathized with socialist philosophies, and during his life he struggled with the problems of socialism. He reflected upon these problems from this religious point of view, and he also wanted to answer them from this perspective.

I shall try to clarify in short something of the background of his philosophy. During the 19th century in Russia, a sharp struggle existed between the slavophiles and western oriented people. The latter thought that Russia had to pin its faith on Western Europe, that western sciences in particular would open a glorious future for Russia. If Russia would not accept the leadership of the West, it would sink into worthlessness. More and more it would become the slum of Europe.

The slavophiles, on the other hand, detested western influences. They considered Western Europe as that part of the world where the sun goes down; it was characterized by individualism, rationalism, and materialism, and these forces would destroy it. They considered Russia's power to be its Russian Orthodox belief, which was identified with the liturgy and mysticism, and not with dogmatism. Dostoevsky chose the side of the slavophile movement. He thought that Russia had a great role to play in world history.

After the fall of the Western Roman Empire in the sixth century, the Roman Catholic Church had been secularized; more and more it had grown into an institution of power. After the fall of the Eastern Roman Empire and the conquest of Constantinople by the Turks, the torch of Christian belief had been taken over by Moscow, the center of the Russian Orthodox Church. The Russian Orthodox belief was promising for the future of all people. Moscow was named the third Rome and it had a mission in the world.

Although Dostoevsky agreed with this vision on the calling of Russia and considered himself a representative of this philosophy of life, we cannot understand him without further consideration of the slavophile movement. He and many others were strongly influenced by the philosopher Vladimir Solovjov. They belonged to the "Sophia movement," devoted to holy or divine Wisdom. I place this phrase in quotation marks here because this movement was in no respect an organization. The Sophia was a devotion that was deeply founded in the Russian Orthodox belief. It was strongly reflected in the iconography, in the liturgy, and in mysticism. Solovjov elaborated this devotion systematically in his philosophy and theology, but for many centuries it existed as a feeling, an intuition that was manifested in

theologically inarticulate opinions.

Although Dostoevsky, Solovjov, and others wished to live and to work in the Russian Orthodox tradition, they were not true representatives of it, for they belonged to the vexed Sophia. In several respects, the Sophia can be considered as an independent philosophy and theology in which speculative, not orthodox, thoughts were elaborated. This sophiology was a very complicated religious philosophy or philosophical theology. It presupposed the potential holiness of reality. God was viewed as Creator and the Sophia as the plan of God's Wisdom for the creation. This divine plan was considered as the foundation and the dynamic force to lead reality to its destination, that is, to its deification. Men were called to participate in the realization of this divine plan to bring the whole creation to its fruition. By the dynamics of the divine plan and by human cooperation, reality must be propelled to its deification.

In this process the incarnation played a very important part. According to the Sophias, incarnation meant not only the incorporation of God in Jesus Christ, but also and ultimately the fulfillment and deification of reality. This perfection will also be realized in life of men. Mutual love will characterize human relationships; complete harmony will exist between men and nature. Dostoevsky does not speak of Jesus Christ's relationship to God, the Creator. In his philosophy, Christ is the morally perfect center of mankind; he has no power other than love. Dostoevsky speaks of "our," "the Russian Christ." He embodies perfect beauty and humility, both of which are living in the heart of the Russian people and which determine the spirit of its culture. The suffering Christ is incorporated in the suffering Russian people.

According to Dostoevsky, God dwells in these people. And they have a historical task and calling: the fraternization of all men in the name of Jesus Christ.

Another person plays an important part in the Russian Orthodox belief: the Mother of God. She is important in the iconography; churches and religious feasts are devoted to her. Several elements of Russian popular belief play an important part in the worship of the Mother of God. For ages these elements were especially important in the Sophia. The story of the "suffering Mother of God" had appealed to many Russians. In this story, which tells us of her trip through hell, she discovers how seriously people are suffering there. The suffering people have given her a great shock, and she prays to the Lord to lighten their punishment. She asks angels to help by praying together. At last God complies with this prayer, and He promises to deliver all sufferers during the period between Good Friday and Whitsuntide.

In this context, Maria, the Mother of God, is considered as the mother of suffering people and of the whole suffering earth that groans with pain and waits with eager longing for God to realize his redemption. She is also considered as the personification of the earlier mentioned plan of divine Wisdom, that leads the whole of reality to its destination and perfection. Thus she is both the personification of the divine Sophia and of Mother Earth.

I have already mentioned two reasons for calling Dostoevsky an ethical author. There is a third reason, namely, that ethics plays a central or fundamental part in his philosophy. In the Russian belief, one can never separate the suffering of Maria from the suffering of Jesus Christ, who was humble and became like man. Dostoevsky considered Jesus Christ and Maria the personifications of the highest moral ideals. His novels express these thoughts. For example, in his novel *Demons*, an old woman (often used as the symbol of the Russian people) says that the Mother of God is the trust and the hope of mankind and of earth. We see this thought very strongly in *Crime and Punishment*. The murderer Raskolnikov confesses his crime to the

prostitute Sonya. Her name comes from the Greek *Sophia* and refers to the divine Sophia. She shows him the way to redemption and says: "go to a crossing, kiss the earth, bow for mankind and say I have died; then God will give you life again." In her name and her words, Sonya refers to Maria, the symbol of the Mother of God and Mother Earth.

Many sophiological elements are present in Dostoevsky's novels. This does not mean that we cannot ask what the further relevance of his work is. Many people are reading his novels; one cannot deny the power of his novels to lead readers beyond their interest in Dostoevsky's Russian Orthodoxy.

IV. The Relevance of His Mission

Many elements can show Dostoevsky's relevance for us. We could speak of the ethical characteristics of his novels, of his criticism of western culture and of Russian society today, and of the most decisive choice of life, for or against Jesus Christ and others. On the last matter, we note the central story of Dostoevsky's last and greatest novel *The Brothers Karamazov*: the dialogue between Jesus and the Grand Inquisitor. Ivan Karamazov tells his younger brother Alyosha of the return of Jesus Christ. In the sixteenth century Jesus suddenly appears in the Spanish town of Seville, the center of the Inquisition. From a distance, the cardinal, who is head of the Inquisition, sees him and he also sees that people are recognizing and following him. He commands his soldiers to arrest Jesus. The day before, he had let a hundred heretics burn. He will also give the command to burn Jesus.

During the night he visits Jesus in his cell. The cardinal begins to question Jesus: Why do you disturb us, he asked. You do not have the right to disturb us. Fifteen centuries ago, when you were on the earth, you had the opportunity to say what you wanted. And you did. But after your time, we, the clergy of the church, have told people what they may do and what they may not do and they have followed us. Oh yes, we are saying something other than you did, but people are following us and they are content. During your stay on earth, you made a great mistake. From the Holy Scripture we know that in the desert the devil tried to tempt you. The cardinal speaks of the devil as the terrible and wise spirit and of the spirit of self-destruction and non-existence and he continues. This spirit spoke to you and the Holy Scripture says that he tempted you, but we know that his words were more close to the truth than you thought. Who was right? He or you? Do you remember his first question? If you are God's Son, order these stones to be turned into bread. You answered that man cannot live on bread alone, but that he needs every word that God speaks. Your choice was a wrong one. You would not buy people with bread. You wanted to give them freedom, but nothing is more unbearable than freedom. It leaves man in doubt; it makes them anxious. If you had given them bread, they would have followed you and they would have been content and grateful. You would not deprive them of freedom, but thus you asked too much of them. You did not really love them. Men will never learn what freedom is, they will never learn to share and share alike. However, we give them bread, and if they go to confession, we allow them to sin. But we master them; they are in our power!

Second, the devil set you on the highest point of the temple and he said to you: If you are God's Son, throw yourself down from here and God will order his angels to take good care of you, but you would not convince men and bind them to you by a miracle and you answered, Do not put the Lord your God to the test. You chose wrongly again, for men do not want anything else. You did not understand what

weak persons need.

At last, the devil showed you all the kingdoms of the earth and he said, All this I will give you, if you kneel down and worship me, and you answered, Worship the Lord your God and serve only him! This choice was also a wrong one.

In his profound story of Jesus and the Grand Inquisitor, Dostoevsky focuses on the three questions of the devil, because these three questions point to issues of the history of mankind. Jesus refuses to buy people with bread, he refuses to bind them to him by miracles, and he refuses to win them to him by demonstrating earthly power. Men are always inclined to abandon their freedom and responsibility and to trust materialistic security and earthly power. While Jesus asks that men will believe and trust without coercion, miracles, or the appeal of earthly power, the devil says: you chose wrongly, you do not love men really, you have to admit their weaknesses and then they will follow you and you can master them.

The relevance of Dostoevsky's philosophy is that we must choose between Jesus and the devil not only in our personal life, but also in society, politics, and science. I shall try to clarify this. If man, with the help of scientific knowledge and research, uses sufficient fertilizer and intensively cultivates the ground, we know that it will be possible to feed ten million men. And scientists may succeed in discovering a source of cheap energy by extracting raw materials out of stones and minerals. In other words, it has become nearly possible to make bread out of stones. Concerning the miracle, we must say that with the help of scientific research and technology, it is now possible to send men to the moon. Lastly, the third temptation. It is well-known that, during World War II, physicists were present in the corridors of power. They put their research and the results of it in the service of political and military powers; in this context they produced the atom bomb. They subordinated themselves to political and military powers.

For us, the most serious question is this: do science and technology in our time function as the Grand Inquisitor? Are scientists and technologists now saying: men are weak, they want material security, they want wonders, they want societal and political security, and we can give it?

Of course, scientists do not desire to be the Grand Inquisitor of our time. But many are working in the corridors of power and therefore they receive a high salary, bonuses, privileges, and honors. How many scientists are working for military industries which seriously pollute the environment? The great secret of the Grand Inquisitor is what he confesses (to Jesus:) We are not with you, but we are with him!

The serious relevance of Dostoevsky consists of the question: are we with Jesus or not? What Lord are we choosing and serving in our sciences, in elections, and in other societal and political problems? To what extent are we Christians in personal life and in the church using devout words while using secular words in science and in politics?

I think that we as scientists have the calling to serve God and His world. We must not follow uncritically or indiscriminately the fashion and mainstream in our disciplines. Neither should we trust the existing order of societal structures nor follow the political processes indiscriminately. We have to realize our Christian freedom and responsibility in this society. We can hope that churches and other Christian institutions may awaken Christians to this freedom and responsibility. The hymn of praise our society sings to a science that will resolve all problems of the future, and the trust science places in existing societal and political structures (with or without nuclear weapons) show that the Grand Inquisitor was right. Christians run this risk: that although they use many biblical concepts and are very devout in their personal life, if they do not bring their Christianity to bear on science, on

economics, on politics, and on society as a whole, they may be playing along with today's Grand Inquisitors.

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