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Who Says Miracles Can't Be the Basis for Faith? More Reasons Why Dostoevsky's Religion Isn't Christianity

In "Cana of Galilee," the culminating chapter of Book Seven of *The Brothers Karamazov*, Alesha stumbles upon the solution to the mystery of miracles. His mentor, Father Zosima, has just died. Not long before that, Alesha had listened to his brother Ivan's harangue on the fundamental paradoxes, therefore fallacies, of Christian faith. Among them is that Jesus allegedly asked his followers to believe in him in the absence of material proof of his divinity, while knowing all the time that his followers lacked the strength of will to do such a thing. This was the message that Ivan's Inquisitor delivered to the Savior himself by telling him that he (the Savior) had made the wrong choices in response to the Devil's temptations. Those temptations, after all, were designed to trick Jesus into offering his prospective disciples miracles, which is to say, material proof of his divinity.

The monks are keeping vigil over Zosima's dead body, and Father Paissy is reading from the Gospels. Alesha tries to pray, but his mind wanders off to other thoughts. Then he begins to pay attention to the Gospel passage that Father Paissy is reading. By astonishing chance, it's the one from John, chapter 2, telling the story of the wedding in Cana of Galilee, where Jesus turned the water into wine. With Ivan's words resonating in his head, Alesha must have been putting to himself now for quite a few hours the obvious question: if miracles deprive us of our freedom, then why did Jesus perform *any* miracles, let alone the many that are recounted in the Gospels? In a deft use of montage and interior monologue, Dostoevsky takes us back and forth between Alesha's

thoughts and the Gospel passage. Because we're in a monastery, the Gospel is being read in Old Church Slavonic. Dostoevsky reproduces the passage from John word for word in the archaic language, skipping only the inconsequential verse 6 (presumably because Alesha is thinking other thoughts during its recitation). But after only the third verse ("When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, 'They have no wine'"), Alesha had already said this to himself: "It was not the grief but the joy of the people that Christ visited; performing for the first time a miracle, he helped the joy of the people."¹ Here clearly is the answer to the burning question. If Jesus had performed the miracle in order to visit the people's *grief*, what would the source of that grief have been? No doubt it would have been the people's want of faith, and the purpose of the miracle would have been to restore that faith or even inspire it for the first time.

Alesha's thoughts finally turn into a dream, in which Father Zosima himself approaches his novice and confirms the interpretation that Jesus turned the water into wine "so that the joy of the guests should not be cut short."² Father Zosima, in fact, continues the Gospel story where it had left off, describing Jesus, in a departure from the text, as he invites yet more guests "forever and ever" and has yet more wine served. Everything is now tidy in Alesha's mind, so that when he wakes up from this dream he no longer listens to what's being read. And why should he? Now he's free to water the earth with the tears of his joy and embark on the new life his mentor had mandated by commanding him "to dwell in the world."

Here's the passage after which Alesha stopped listening—and after which Dostoevsky reproduces no further verses: "When the steward tasted the water that had become wine, and did not know where it came from, the steward called the bridegroom and said to him, 'Everyone serves the good wine first, and then the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk. But you have kept the good wine until now.'" But surely Alesha must have known that these lines, verses 9 and 10, are not the end of the wedding story. The story includes a natural conclusion in verse 11, consisting in a comment that tells the meaning of the story before the *next* story (the one about chasing the moneylenders out of the Temple) begins in verse 12. The comment is slightly ambiguous in English translation because of the nature of English verbs. It is not, however, ambiguous either in the original Greek or in Russian. Here is verse 11 in Greek:

¹ PSS, 14:326

² PSS, 14:327

Tautēn epoiēsen arkhēn tōn sēmeiōn ho Iēsous en Kana tēs Galilaias kai ephanerōsen tēn doxan autou kai episteusan eis auton hoi mathētai autou.

Literal translation:

This beginning of the signs [miracles] Jesus did [made] in Cana of Galilee, and [he] showed forth his glory, and his disciples believed in him.

The sentence contains three verbs, connected by *kai* (“and”): *epoiēsen* (“made,” “did”), *ephanerōsen* (“showed forth”), and *episteusan* (“believed”). These are all aorist verbs, which means that, like perfective verbs in Russian, they describe a sequence of mutually discrete actions that occurred in time in the same order as the verbs occur in the text: Jesus *did*, then Jesus *showed forth*, and then Jesus’ disciples *believed*. The final verb is the critical one here. Its action follows that of the second, just as the action of the second verb follows that of the first. Though there is no explicit indication of causality (for instance, a word or phrase meaning “therefore,” “thus,” “as a consequence”), there is no other way to understand this story than that (1) Jesus performed his miracle, (2) he *thereby* showed forth his glory, and, (3) *as a consequence*, his disciples *believed* in him, meaning that they commenced believing once he had shown forth his glory.

The modern Russian version of the Gospel that Dostoevsky read conveys the same logic.

Сие начало чудесам положил Иисус в Кане Галилейской, и явил славу свою; и уверовали в Него ученики Его.

Literal translation:

This beginning to the miracles Jesus instituted in Cana of Galilee, and revealed [was revealing] his glory; and His disciples came to believe [started believing] in Him.

Though *явил* is not a perfective verb, *положил* and *уверовали* are, so there is clearly a sequence of actions. But even without a clear series of three perfective verbs, *уверовали* makes the case as clear as can be, because it explicitly signifies the *initiation of belief*. To judge from what’s written in verse 11, the disciples started to believe only after Jesus had performed the miracle and after he had revealed (or while he was revealing) his glory. Now, to be sure, there is no indication in the wedding story that the disciples were *asking* for a miracle or that they had struck a bargain with Jesus: turn this water into wine, or we won’t believe in you. But the temporal and hence the causal sequence is as clear as day.

Why did *Dostoevsky* (not Alesha) omit verse 11? Because it is one of the clearest refutations the Gospels offer to a central claim of the Grand Inquisitor. When he reproaches Jesus for failing to accept the temptations of the devil, the Grand Inquisitor gives his own explanation of Jesus' motives. Jesus refused to turn the stones into bread and refused to cast himself off the tower because to have carried out either of these actions would have been to deny the *freedom* of his prospective followers. The Inquisitor says it again and again. "But you did not want to deprive man of freedom and rejected the [devil's] proposition, for what sort of freedom is it, you reasoned, if obedience is purchased with bread?"³ He expresses his theory about freedom and miracles—that is, about how the two, as he sees it, are connected in the mind of Jesus—most explicitly with a reference not to the temptations but to the story of the passersby who taunted Jesus on the cross: "You did not come down from the cross when they were yelling at you, mocking and teasing you, 'Come down from the cross, and we will come to believe that it is you.' You did not come down, because, again, you did not want to enslave man with a miracle and thirsted for free, not miraculous, faith. You thirsted for free love, not the servile raptures of the slave in the presence of a power that has once and for all terrified him."⁴

The story of the taunting occurs in Matthew 27. Here is what the passersby really say, in the modern Russian translation that Dostoevsky read:

есть-ли Ты Сын Божий, сойди со Креста.⁵

In the New Revised Standard Version:

If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross.

Here are the words that Dostoevsky's Grand Inquisitor puts in the mouths of the taunters:

Сойди со креста и уверуем, что это ты.

The Grand Inquisitor explicitly uses the perfective *уверовать* (come to believe or start to believe), placing it in its sequential and causal relationship with the preceding perfective verb, *сойти*, to highlight the conditional nature of the faith that, in his view, is the best that most of us are capable of. Unable to bear the burden of the freedom that Christ

³ PSS, 14:230

⁴ PSS, 14:233

⁵ Matthew 27:40

allegedly wishes to place on their shoulders, people demand proof in the form of a miracle as a precondition of their belief. The Grand Inquisitor attributes both a response and a motive to Jesus in this story: Jesus refuses to come down (or simply does not come down), *because* he does not wish to enslave men. But of course in the Gospel story, nothing of the sort ever happens. Jesus doesn't say a word in response to his tormentors. The first words out of his mouth after these insults, in fact, come hours later, in response not to the taunts of the rabble but to the terrible ordeal he is undergoing. They are the famous words in Aramaic, quoted from the twenty-second Psalm: "Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?" (as spelled in the New Revised Standard Version), "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"⁶ As best we can tell from the actual text in Matthew, Jesus is oblivious to the words and actions of his tormentors.

What's going on here? The Grand Inquisitor has retold the story of the crucifixion, complete with Jesus' affirmation of freely chosen faith, by using as a *negative example* his own purposefully modified account of what the rabble is thinking (we'll start believing on condition that you come down from the cross) and what Jesus is thinking (if I come down from the cross and, as a consequence, they start to believe, I will have taken away their freedom). In its account of what the rabble is thinking (not in its account of what Jesus is thinking), however, this modified version is fully consistent with the actual story we read in John (not the carefully doctored version that Dostoevsky gives us) about the wedding in Cana: the guests commence believing after—and presumably because of—the miracle that Jesus has performed. The verb *уверовать*, highly charged because it denotes the *initiation* of faith and because, placed in sequence after a verb denoting an action other than the exercise of free choice, it suggests the possibility of faith that arises out of the witnessing of a miracle (and thus that is *conditioned on* that miracle), is what unites the Grand Inquisitor's revisionist reading of Matthew 27:40 with the text of John 2:11.

But Dostoevsky suppressed the actual text of John 2:11. His favorite Gospelist apparently agreed with the Grand Inquisitor that, at least some of the time (if not most of the time), prospective disciples of Jesus actually did commence believing in him only once they'd seen with their own eyes proof (or what they regarded as proof) of his divinity.

The story of the wedding in Cana is not the only example. The Gospels contain accounts of several dozen miracles (the exact number

⁶ Matthew 27:46

varies, depending on how you count and depending on what qualifies as a miracle). Most of these accounts leave in doubt (or simply do not comment on) any connection between the miracle that Jesus has performed and the faith of those who witnessed it. But as it happens, many of the passages that show a clear connection occur in John. I'll give two examples.

In John 4, we read about an official from Capernaum, near Cana in Galilee, who came to Jesus and begged him to cure his ailing son. Jesus says, "Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe." He then assures the official that his son has already survived. The official, on his way back home, hears from his servants that his son has recovered and realizes that the recovery occurred exactly at the time that Jesus had spoken to him. We read this: "The father realized that this was the hour when Jesus had said to him, 'Your son lives' [or 'is alive'—I've corrected this from the erroneous 'Your son will live' in the New Revised Standard Version]. So he himself believed, along with his whole household. Now this was the second sign that Jesus did after coming from Judea to Galilee" (John 4:53-54). In Dostoevsky's modern Russian version, we find the same verb as in the story of the wedding: *уверовать*.

Из сего отец узнал, что это случилось в тот самый час, в который Иисус сказал ему: сын твой здоров. И уверовал сам и весь дом его.

Once again, there is a temporal and causal connection between, first, the act of witnessing—or of learning of (*узнал*)—a miracle and, second, the initiation of belief (*уверовал*).

Perhaps the clearest indication that John saw a causal connection between miracles and the initiation of faith comes at the end of chapter 20, the next-to-last in his Gospel. The passage, surprisingly, follows immediately upon Jesus' proclaiming to his doubting disciple Thomas, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."⁷ Dostoevsky wrote one of his many marginal "NB"s next to this passage in his copy of the New Testament.⁸ What the Gospelist adds after this declaration, however, appears to contradict it:

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that

⁷ John 20:29

⁸ Geir Kjetsaa, *Dostoevsky and His New Testament* (Oslo: Solum Forlage, 1984), pp. 42-43.

Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.⁹

Here it is in Dostoevsky's modern Russian version:

Много сотворил Иисус пред учениками своими и других чудес, о которых не написано в книге сей. Сие же написано, дабы вы уверовали, что Иисус есть Христос, Сын Божий, и дабы веруя, имели жизнь во имя Его.

A moment ago I characterized the connection between free will and the initiation of faith as an idea belonging to the Grand Inquisitor, in the sense that, in the story, the Inquisitor attributes this connection to Jesus. But of course what we're really talking about here is a central assumption that *the author*, Dostoevsky himself, appears to have made about the way faith functions in Christianity. I'm not speaking about what form of faith Dostoevsky himself might have embraced, and I'm certainly not attributing to him the motive of attempting to convert the misguided to a "proper," Orthodox form of Christianity. I'm speaking purely about an intellectual construct that Dostoevsky, like his character Ivan, appears to have formed about a fundamental concept in Christianity. Ivan and "his" fictional character the Grand Inquisitor see the requirement of free choice before faith as one of Christianity's great flaws, because the vast majority of human beings are not capable of sustaining the burden of the volition on which that free choice is based.

Dostoevsky himself probably agreed with this view at odd moments of his life (those moments when he wasn't agreeing with the opposite). But his possibly agreeing or disagreeing with it (or doing a little of both) is not the issue. What matters is that he has set forth as an untested assumption about Christianity that this requirement exists. Faith must rest on free choice, or it's not legitimate faith. Maybe you yourself don't *have* faith or don't ever care even to *try* to have faith. Maybe you *think* you have faith while still hoping for a miracle to substantiate that faith. Maybe you think you've actually witnessed a miracle, and you then began to believe only as a consequence. Or maybe you agree with Ivan and the Grand Inquisitor that, with the requirement of freedom, true faith is simply ideal and therefore unrealizable. None of this matters. Dostoevsky has given us the assumption, if only as a dispassionate, scholarly, factual characterization of the way Christianity works.

The problem is that it's nonsense, and for at least two reasons.

⁹ John 20:30-31

First, the Scriptures simply don't bear out the assumption. True, Jesus reproaches Thomas for needing to see before he believes, but nowhere in the Gospels or elsewhere in the New Testament is there a global assertion that those who believe only after seeing have violated one of Jesus' core tenets. Why would Jesus perform miracles at all if that were true, and why, as in the case of the official in Capernaum *and in the case of Thomas himself*, would he perform such miracles expressly so as to provoke belief?

A second reason is that what Dostoevsky seems to understand by "freedom" is flatly anachronistic in connection with the Gospel stories. To be sure, it's no easy task to characterize Dostoevsky's conception of freedom. As it appears in the central books of *The Brothers Karamazov*, *freedom* always needs to be defined partly by the tension in which it exists with something else and partly by an implicit notion of the individual self. Freedom doesn't get to be freedom unless it asserts itself either in the face of an opposing force or in the absence of a supporting force. You must freely choose your faith precisely either when experience yields up to you what would appear to be clear evidence of an unbridgeable chasm between God's justice and the real, secular world or when experience simply yields up no evidence to support your faith. Turkish soldiers murder babies before the eyes of the babies' mothers, and yet I will believe. The man who claims to be the Son of God, though he should be capable of turning stones into bread, won't, and yet I will believe he *is* the Son of God and will follow him.

What's more, this free choice must originate in *me*. That means it comes not even from God himself. It means that I was formed as an individual with the power to initiate all my actions and thoughts entirely from within myself. To complicate matters further, Dostoevsky's characters continue to remind us that the free will with these powers might very well be purely an ideal, therefore something that none of us truly possesses. But then Dostoevsky's world is filled with ideals of this sort. Bishop Tikhon doesn't believe "perfectly," and so he can't move a mountain as a reward for his faith in God.¹⁰ But as Jesus explains in Matthew 17:20, all it takes to move a mountain is faith "the size of a mustard seed." And Dostoevsky himself, at the bier of his first wife, famously declared what he has Ivan declare, namely that loving your neighbor as yourself is an impossibility¹¹. That's because the author understands Christ-like love, as expressed in the commandment, to be an

¹⁰ PSS, 11:10

¹¹ PSS, 20:172 ff

absolute ideal, one that implies the dissolution of the self. There is no more scriptural basis for this notion than there is for the notion that faith must be based on free will or for the notion that both faith and free will are purely ideal qualities.

It goes without saying that the theologies of specific religious traditions over the centuries have shown innumerable departures from what we might take to be the literal meaning of Scripture—not to mention that there is no absolute way to establish a correct version of “the literal meaning of Scripture.” But to my way of seeing things, Dostoevsky has shown again and again (a) that somewhere along the line he adopted a philosophical worldview that was deeply idealist, without being specifically Christian, (b) that when he turned his attention to Russian Orthodox Christianity—or Christianity in general, for that matter—he carried a set of assumptions that were fully consonant with this idealist worldview, and (c) that he uncritically attributed these assumptions to Christianity. After all, in Ivan’s rebellion, the ideality of neighborly love, the intrinsic innocence of children, and the origin of faith in free will are never even open for discussion; they have the status of *a priori* postulates. If any one of them is false, his entire system (the one that, in his view, *challenges* Christianity) crumbles into dust. But the possibility that any one of them is false is not open for discussion either. Ivan reckons that *anyone* will at least agree with the postulates. The only matter that *is* open to discussion is what to do with a religious system that has been constructed on a foundation composed of these postulates. The answer, of course, is the debate between Ivan’s Euclidean understanding (the empirical cosmology that can’t recognize the existence of ideals) and Father Zosima’s own spongy idealism, in which miracle and mystery are, well, pretty much the same thing and the inscrutability of God’s justice is something to be celebrated.

But of course, we’re really given no choice at all, because in the end Zosima’s idealism degenerates into earth-worship (how much *less* ideal can you get than that?), and Ivan’s critique is based on completely fallacious assumptions about Christian faith. No wonder the topic of religion was such a source of agony and turmoil to Dostoevsky himself and to the characters he created.