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Dostoevsky and the religious experience. An analysis of *The Possessed*

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ABSTRACT

This paper is a theological approach to the religious world of Dostoevsky. One of the most important themes for theology in the twentieth century – and indeed at all times – is the connection between anthropology and theology. In the past, this connection was formulated from the perspective of metaphysics and ethics, using knowledge as a guiding principle. In Dostoevsky, the thread that connects the anthropological with the theological is the religious dimension, which is not limited simply to man the creature's relationship with God the Creator, but involves the totality of existence. We will present the great models of religious existence that appear in Dostoevsky's work and his vision of paganism, focusing on the analysis of *The Possessed*. It is a theological re-reading of Dostoevsky from the prism of the relationship between religion and revelation, using elements of the phenomenology of religion. Dostoevsky's perspective is particularly related to contemporary theology, because it emphasizes the experiential-existential dimension of religion, and highlights the impossibility of a supposedly areligious Christian existence.

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Introduction

One of the most important themes for theology in the twentieth century – and indeed at all times – is the connection between anthropology and theology. In the past, this connection was formulated from the perspective of metaphysics and ethics, using knowledge as a guiding principle. In Dostoevsky, the thread that connects the anthropological with the theological is the religious dimension, which is not limited simply to man the creature's relationship with God the Creator, but involves the totality of existence. Starting from a definition of religion as the acceptance of man's relational nature, and from the role played by religious experience in guiding man's life, we will seek to relate the religious world of Dostoevsky to the phenomenology of

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religion, in order to see how Dostoevsky expresses the relationship between religious experience (understood as an anthropological constant) and the Christian faith.

What do we mean by the ‘religious dimension’, and why do we distinguish it from the merely cognitive dimension? The philosophy-phenomenology of religion has formulated the irreducibility of the religious experience (see Scheler 1923, especially the chapter *The essential phenomenology of religion*). Therefore, religious experience cannot be traced back to a particular faculty: it is neither fundamentally nor exclusively a thing of the intellect, nor of sentiment. Albert Lang, in his *Wesen und Wahrheit der Religion: Einführung in die Religionsphilosophie* (‘The essence and truth of religion: Introduction to philosophy of religion’) says that the religious act ‘is not a reflection on God, but one’s stance with respect to Him; it is not an ethical act of the will, but a *palingenesis* or recreation of the whole self; it does not correspond to certain feelings, but to the ultimate foundations of the whole existence’ (Lang 1969).

Although religious experience is by its very nature related to truth, it does not appear at first sight to be the knowledge of a truth, but adopting a position with respect to the sacred sphere. Therefore, to speak of religious experience is to speak of religious existence.

This is a very useful perspective when dealing with the religious world of Dostoevsky, because there is no important character or significant event which is not directly or indirectly full of religious meaning; they possess profoundly religious undertones. In his major essay on Dostoevsky, Guardini highlights the way the religious element embraces Dostoevsky’s entire world (see Guardini 1954, 11–16). Moreover, the characters are defined precisely according to their religious stance, and from it, all their decisions flow. Each personality is characterized by a particular position with respect to the question of God. This holds true for those who reject God as well as those who accept him.¹

The many-sidedness of religious positioning in Dostoevsky

Dostoevsky planned to produce a major work, to be called *Atheism*, which was never written as such but gave rise to his last great novels. In 1869, he wrote: ‘I have conceived an idea, in the form of a novel, which will be called *Atheism*, in which I think I will totally experiment [...] Afterward, never mind if I die, I will have said everything’ (quoted by De Lubac 1995, 286, footnote 26). For Dostoevsky, an atheist is not simply someone who does not believe or denies the existence of God. Rather, the atheist is one who opposes God, rebels against him or rejects him. It is not a merely intellectual process; there are different ways in which one can oppose God and each of them involves adopting a particular stance in relation to him. This multifaceted nature of religious positioning is well portrayed in Dostoevsky’s *The Possessed* (1872).

If read superficially, from a political point of view, *The Possessed* seems to be a pamphlet produced as a result of the revolts led by Nechayev, which ended with the death of the student Ivanov. In this book, Dostoevsky strongly criticizes the nihilist revolutionaries by pointing out the spiral of destruction that their ideas lead to. It is, of course, no less critical of the world that the revolutionaries seek to demolish.

The novel shows how the revolutionary ideas take root and develop in people, leading to their destruction. The characters are from two generations. The teacher,

Stepan Trofimovich Verkhovensky, is a romantic who describes himself as a good pagan. His son, Pyotr Verkhovensky, is a revolutionary in whom all the forces of evil are incarnate: he is involved in all forms of deceit and treachery. Stepan's lifelong friend, Varvara Petrovna Stavrogina, is a rich and arrogant landowner. Her son, Nikolai Stavrogin, is the novel's enigmatic protagonist. A fascinating and terrifying character, he is the devil himself, Lucifer (who acts with total clear-sightedness and cruelty). The two sons, Pyotr and Nikolai, are the central core from which arises the spiral of destruction. Dostoevsky seems to point to his own generation as the guilty party, since their youthful Libertarian Europeanism was the soil in which the young terrorist generation grew. There are other characters who are no less important. For example, there is the engineer Kirillov who is a convinced nihilist and embodies the suicidal super-man. There is poor Maria Timofeyevna Lebiadkina, the crippled and mentally disturbed woman whom Nikolai Stavrogin marries only for the sake of asserting the sovereignty of his will by doing something completely unexpected. Another key character is the student Ivan Pavlovich Shatov, led by Stavrogin to believe in the people, but who will end up being murdered by his own gang of revolutionaries after accompanying his wife in labour, when she gives birth to Stavrogin's son.

This is a critique both of revolutionaries and of bourgeois society. However, the criticism goes much deeper. For Dostoevsky, the question at issue is not the socialist adventure, nor the problem of the fourth estate; it is 'the question of the form taken by atheism to-day, the question of the tower of Babel built without God, not to mount to heaven from earth but to set up heaven on earth' (Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov* Part I, Book I, Chapter 5).

The denial of God is presented in all its many-sidedness. In one corner is Kirillov who is against the *idea* of God (and appears an almost harmless, friendly, peaceful character) and in the other is Stavrogin, who combats the *image* of God in himself, and is deeply damaging. Kirillov's argument is seamless, perfect. In order to be consistent, he feels he has to commit suicide and so he does. Meanwhile Stavrogin, so as to assert his sovereign will, destroyed any hint of pity within himself, and committed the worst atrocities. There is a harrowing episode in which after having abused a girl, he returned the following week to the house where she was (Stavrogin recounts the event in confession at the end of the novel). He felt a certain impulse of compassion, almost like a temptation to do good because, when he saw the look of desperation on the face of the girl, he sensed what could happen. However, with terrifying coldness, he chose to crush that seed of sympathy within him. It cannot be said that he was not guilty, or that he was not aware; he was both. In fact, he let it happen and before he left, he looked through the door opening to check that the poor girl had actually hanged herself.

The interpretive key of the work is given by the initial quotation from Luke 8, 32–37, the episode of the demons of Gerasa. Just as the demons end up driving the herd of pigs headlong into the lake, the characters of the novel succumb one after another. Thus, Dostoevsky presents the devil – the denial of God, atheism – in all its crudeness as a force destructive of the human person. The author's great project is to show that the modern/Western/civilized claim to build a humanity apart from God – dissociated from Him – results in something profoundly inhuman. Dostoevsky

presents the parable of modernity in this light: the Christian West has sought to emancipate itself from God, and has become atheist. And since an attempt to run away from God implies running towards destruction, this is precisely why the Christian West is being diminished. At the base of his argument lies the conviction, derived from the Fathers of the Church, that disconnection from the source of life leads to death. *The Possessed* is a masterpiece that shows how the denial of God leads to destruction and death.

Religious experience and the configuration of existence

There are three points that are central to Dostoevsky's thought: the impossibility of founding humanism on any other basis than on God; the idea that both the acceptance and rejection of God constitute a specific religious attitude; and the recognition that the rejection of God implies destruction and death. Meanwhile, the phenomenology of religion has highlighted how, from the beginning, religious experience has played a part in shaping human life. Religious experience does not only affect the private sphere, but always involves a process of externalization, giving a definite direction to life. This is what Romano Guardini called *Daseinsanstrengung* (effort of existence) that consists of the attempt to throw light on the different aspects of life which always accompanies all religious experience (see Guardini 1934, 245–79).

The religious historian Mircea Eliade observed how, throughout history, relationship with the sacred – the religious attitude – has shaped all human reality. From the earliest religious signs, the *representation of the sacred* formed a fixed point in the midst of the amorphous fluidity of space, and constituted a 'centre' in 'chaos' (see Eliade 1984, 45). It is in relation to this centre – not in the physical sense – that everything acquires meaning; it is the source of direction. Everything is organized from this centre: the construction of the village, the sanctuary, each house, hut or shop. The sacred plays the role of the centre of space and the foundation of time: birth, death, and the different stages of life are governed by the sacred (see Eliade 1984, 34–35). The sacred guides existence and the 'building' of the world. Particularly in relation to death, symbolized by chaos, the sacred stands on the plane of salvation.

The first structured religious concepts that we have records of go back to the Upper Palaeolithic. The historian André Leroi-Gourhan has emphasized how cave paintings are genuine mythograms, by reading which primitive man learned how to live. From humanity's first moments, myths have taught man how to live; the sacred is the key to guide human life (see Leroi-Gourhan 1966). In the first representation of the divinity – the first icon – which dates back to the Neolithic revolution, we see that man had recognized the divinity as a source of life. And this led to the first form of culture (agriculture) and the first civilization, Natufian (Cauvin 1998). Somehow, it seems as if religious man had pre-understood the Supreme Being as the source of life, he had come to understand that the sacred realm is the guiding principle of existence, and that to dissociate himself from this dependence would mean chaos and destruction.

In view of this, it is worth asking whether Dostoevsky's great prophecy of the impossibility of founding a humanism without Christ is nothing more than the Christian formulation of the fundamental religious intuition that recognizes man's

naturally dependent condition – whether, in other words, Dostoevsky’s genius consists of sounding the hidden depths of the human spirit. Henri de Lubac, in his work *The Drama of Atheist Humanism*, arrives at a similar turning point of the same type. After taking apart man’s claim to emancipate himself from God, and showing how, in the end, atheism is a religious option, he asks: ‘If that is what Dostoevsky offers us after having conquered atheism, are we to rejoice in his victory? He has plumbed the depths of our flesh-and-blood nature, and he has wonderfully exalted the sense of “holiness”’ (De Lubac 1995, 365).

It is Dostoevsky himself who answers this question. His particular vision of paganism provides the key to the question about Christianity and religious experience.

Paganism in Dostoevsky

In Dostoevsky’s works, the religion he presents is the Christian religion; there are few references to any other form of religion. However, in *The Possessed* his particular idea of paganism is clearly presented.

Three pagans appear in this novel. The first is Maria Timofeyevna, who says, ‘I think that God and nature are just the same thing’ (Dostoevsky, *The Possessed*, 141). And later in a conversation with a laywoman who had been confined to the convent for fortune telling, she said: “What is the mother of God? What do you think?” “The great mother,” I answer, “the hope of the human race.” “Yes,” she answered, “the mother of God is the great mother – the damp earth” (Dostoevsky, *The Possessed*, 141). The other pagan is Shatov, who in a conversation with Stavrogin states: ‘God is the synthetic personality of the whole people, considered from its beginning to its end’ (*The Possessed*, 255). And later: ‘I reduce God to the attribute of nationality? On the contrary, I raise the people to God’ (*The Possessed*, 256). And when at the end of the conversation, Stavrogin asks if he believes in God, he responds hesitantly that he believes in Russia, in the Orthodox Church ... and when Stavrogin insists ‘and in God? In God?’ Shatov does not know what to say (*The Possessed*, 257). Maria Timofeyevna Lebiadkina deifies nature while Shatov deifies the people. Dostoevsky shows that in neither case do they break out of a circle of immanence. There is belief, there is mysticism, there is religion ... but there is no God. Dostoevsky thus shows the inadequacy of these two positions.

There is also a third type of pagan: a ‘more refined’ pagan, Stepan Trofimovich. He will say, ‘I believe in God, *mais distinguons*, I believe in Him as a Being who is conscious of Himself in me only. I cannot believe like my Nastasya (the servant) or like some country gentleman [...] I am more of an antique pagan, like the great Goethe, or like an ancient Greek’ (*The Possessed*, 29). He is a romantic pagan (like Schleiermacher) who needs religion, but he knows that it is just that: his own need. Later on, he says, ‘The one essential condition of human existence is that man should always be able to bow down before something infinitely great. If men are deprived of the infinitely great, they will not go on living and will die of despair. The Infinite and the Eternal are as essential for man as the little planet on which he dwells’ (*The Possessed*, 688). Here we see how Dostoevsky considers the intrinsic ambiguity of paganism: on the one hand, the imperious need for the ‘infinitely great’, and at the

same time the impossibility of reaching it. He values paganism positively for its openness, while pointing out its inadequacy.

The fundamental religious act appears in Dostoevsky's work as somewhat incomplete, and in danger of tying the sacred to immanence. Religious man seeks what he cannot attain. The target of all religious efforts is beyond man's reach; it transcends him, and he risks ending up instead with a man-god (Stepan Trofimovich), or a nature-god (Maria Timofeyevna Lebiadkina), or a people-god (Shatov). One could say that Dostoevsky sees a tension in paganism towards 'impossible fulfilment' (in the words of a professor of the philosophy of religion, Italo Mancini). Italo Mancini defines religion as an 'impossible possibility', in the sense that religion points to something that it cannot guarantee. The religious dimension itself refers to a sphere that cannot be reached without Revelation (Mancini 1968, 61). And, as Evdokimov points out, the vanishing-point towards which man's yearnings aim – the unapproachable reality that solves everything – is always beyond the horizon, at an inaccessible distance (see Evdokimov 1942, 83). The only way to reach God is to be reached by God, who on his initiative has come out to meet us, has become man. Christianity, and the Revelation it brings, bring about, in a sense, the 'decisive and definitive disambiguation of the sacred' (Ferretti 1997, 446).

In his notes for *The Possessed*, Dostoevsky points out how the human ideal will not be achieved by any scientific or anthropological approach. Instead, 'the source of life [...] is contained in the saying: 'the Word became flesh', and in faith in that saying.' (Dostoevsky, notebooks for *The Possessed*, quoted in De Lubac 1995, 305). In this work, the religious problem is posed as a deeply Christian problem. It could be said that, of all human realities, the religious experience is precisely the one most in need of redemption. In fact, these 'good pagans' – Shatov and Stepan Trofimovich – end up converting to the faith. Stepan Trofimovich, thanks to his discovery of love, opens up to Christ. He will say, 'as soon as I understood ... that turning of the cheek, I ... understood something else as well. *J'ai menti toute ma vie*, all my life, all!' (*The Possessed*, 688). When he discovered what love was – the scandalous love of the cross, the 'turning the other cheek' that totally surpasses the human law of 'an eye for an eye' – he realized that everything he had previously defended was all lies, because the attempt to have a religion without God is nothing more than self-deception. And his conversion was precisely because of an encounter with something that, because it is scandalous, cannot come from the depths of our being of flesh and blood, but is something new: the love that reveals Christ. The student Shatov also ended up being open to the faith (see *The Possessed*, 649–668). This novel seeks to illustrate that humanity has dedicated its best efforts to an impossible dream. Even the 'good' pagan efforts, locked as they are within a horizon of immanence and marked by deep ambiguity, are incapable of reaching their aim. The novel presents Christianity as the only force that can bring about the 'definitive disambiguation of the sacred'.

Conclusion

According to Dostoevsky, Christianity cannot be reduced to religious experience, even though it is deeply religious. What is more, he presents the religious dimension as the one most deeply in need of redemption. It is the religious experience itself that calls

for impossible fulfilment, so outrageously achieved in Christ. ‘The West has lost Christ, and that is why it is dying: that is the only reason’ (Dostoevsky, notebooks for *The Possessed*, quoted in De Lubac 1995, 304). The way in which Dostoevsky harmonizes the anthropological and the theological dimensions (starting from the religious dimension as the essence of what it means to be human) is particularly in tune with contemporary theology. It avoids the two major excesses that mark the theological image of our time: ‘on the one hand, a dialectical theology (which denies that the human religious search has any connection with God’s revelation of himself), and on the other, the anthropological turn that ends up stifling the word of God to the point of eliminating its capacity to scandalize us’ (Tanzella-Nitti 2016, 22–23).

Dostoevsky’s way of presenting the relationship between religion and revelation is especially important in a context such as the present one, which some describe as post-secular. This is because of the great value of considering religion as an anthropological reality that expresses the openness of the human being to Revelation. ‘Dostoevsky’s type of genius is at once profoundly human [...] and profoundly Christian; he is human *because* he is Christian’ (De Lubac 1995, 308).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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Sara Garcia, born in Badajoz (Spain). She received a bachelor’s degree in Biochemistry from the University of Cordoba; a Master’s in Physiology and Neuroscience from the University of Seville; and a Master’s in Theology at the Pontifical University of the Holy Cross, Rome. Her main area of investigation is the interdisciplinary study of the religious phenomenon: from neuroscience to phenomenology and the comparative history of religions and theology.

Chinwe Nzewi is a British economist who has worked for many years in the actuarial profession. She recently obtained degrees in Theology and Philosophy at the Pontifical University of the Holy Cross, Rome, and has a keen interest in Dostoevsky.

Note

1. In this analysis of religious experience in Dostoevsky’s work, we consider the perspective of religion in the singular, that is, understood as the fundamental religious act. That is different from the perspective of religions (in the plural) since religions are structures through which the fundamental religious act is configured historically. We believe that in *The Possessed*, Dostoevsky reviews all possible religious positions that can be derived from the fundamental religious act by which man rejects or accepts his own dependence on the Supreme Being. That is, it addresses the question of religion in the singular. But Dostoevsky does not explicitly present his consideration of religions (plural) in this work. Dostoevsky’s personal view of religions, understood in their concrete historical-political configuration, is well known and is documented in his diaries. In these, we find certain anti-Semitism and a strong criticism of the temporal power assumed by the Church of Rome. For a deeper consideration of the theological importance of the distinction between the approach of religion and religions, see Selvadaggi (2007).

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