

# Conceptualizing religious discourse in the work of Fëdor Dostoevskij

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**Abstract** I interpret Dostoevskij's religious concepts in terms of mythogenesis and mythopoesis. Dostoevskij's religious concepts arose on the basis both of his personal emotional experience and of the discourse of popular Orthodoxy. They demonstrate the antinomial nature of Russian spirituality, and are typified by his conception of the family, which illustrates the communal basis of the individual personality. The antimomial idea of the family is most fully developed in Dostoevskij's novel *The Brothers Karamazov*, in which the four models of fatherhood correspond to Isaac the Syrian's concepts of physical, spiritual, mental and divine fatherhood.

**Keywords** Dostoevskij · *The Brothers Karamazov* · Orthodox Christianity · Popular Orthodoxy · Fatherhood · Mythopoesis

Dostoevskij is always at the center of Russian national history. At a time when the general level of knowledge in society has sharply declined, Dostoevskij continues to be read in school and cited by politicians and theologians who link Orthodox doctrines concerning humility with nationalist slogans concerning "Russia for the Russians," i.e. for the Orthodox. The year 2006 even saw the publication of a new detective novel *F. M.*, dedicated to the writer and his ideas, by the "intellectual" writer Boris Akunin. The main feature of all this is that our present "postmodern" interest is based on the national and Christian emphasis on his work. Contemporary interpretations of the writer's religious worldview—and, through its prism, of Russian society in general—are the subject of the present essay.

Wherever Dostoevskij turned his sights, he always thought about and suffered for humanity. He captured the antinomies of the soul that are manifested in the human

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state of “achievement” [*podvig*], i.e. a spiritual crisis and breakthrough. At the same time, human being is closely linked to the worldview of its epoch, which in Dostoevskij’s case was dominated by two major orientations of thought: if one was based on a synthesis of secular and religious discourses, the other presupposed their sharp distinction. At the same time, religious discourse was universally used for self-description. This led to a conception of philosophy and politics in the terms of Christian anthropology. Ascetism, hesychastic isolation from the world, and “populism” were simultaneously attributes of Russian nihilists and of Russian monks. At the same time, asceticism as the feature of a particular, detached, “crisis” state of being, typical of a person who has dedicated himself to service, became a central discursive characteristic of the Russian intelligentsia. In the nineteenth century this process was the result both of the influence of German Romanticism and of the re-discovery for the intellectual public of patristic writing and the restoration of hesychastic monasticism (especially in the Optina and Sarov monasteries; Kotel’nikov, 1994). It may have been the first attempt in the history of Russian culture to present the borderline states of a man “in a spiritual labour [*podvig*]” as the conceptual basis of social life. In this process reality becomes the object of total mythologization. In particular, Dostoevskij created a model of “linguistic behaviour,” first as a literary type and then as a social type, centered on the phenomenon of the Russian intelligentsia.

The works of the Church Fathers entered Russian religious life largely thanks to the Slavonic translations of Paiskij Velichkovskij. By the mid-nineteenth century new translations had been made of the works of Isaac the Syrian, Abba Dorotheus, John of the Ladder, Nilus of Sinai and others. They were studied and subjected to philosophical examination, most notably in the milieu of the Slavophiles and the Native Soil movement (*Pochvennichestvo*), to which Dostoevskij belonged. Practically all of these books were in his personal library (Budanova, 2005).

The “discovery” of the Holy Fathers in Russia became the basis less for theology than for artistic and philosophical reflection, as well as revolutionary practice. Dostoevskij intuited and demonstrated a surprising similarity in the self-descriptions of such polar opposites as sanctity and passion, Orthodoxy and atheism, askesis and revolution, life and death, heaven and hell, and love and hatred. His analysis concerned less the sociological basis of this similarity than its anthropological or psychological principle. He demonstrated that the impulses at the basis of emotional passions can with equal force be directed at love and hatred, sometimes with the same motivation. For instance, the admirable desire to make humanity happy might equally inspire a young man to travel to Jerusalem or go and burn down a village (*PSS* 14: 117). Dostoevskij investigated the ambivalence of human nature with the aid of a unique creative method, which I would define as writerly mythopoesis.

Mythopoesis is characteristic for practically all Russian thinkers who have formed their subjective experiences into central mythologemes of their epoch. These mythologemes create a stable structure of meaning, which appear in various discourses and reflect the original system of mythological meanings. In Dostoevskij one can identify the Russian national idea, the holy Russian woman, fatherhood, and the holy Russian nation. Mythopoesis is not the conscious (ideological) distortion of facts, but the specific form in which ideas are preserved when discursive phenomena

are presented as phenomena of a historical or natural order (Barthes, 1994: 95). Myth appears when an idea (for instance the “Russian idea” concerning Russians’ particular religious feeling) coincides with the ideological manipulation of facts (for instance the interpretation of the Balkan conflict of 1876–1877) and begins to attain the status of a real phenomenon. Thus the myth of the sacrality of the Russian nation is “naturalized,” turning historical facts into derivative products of ideas. In essence, the writer is not interested in reality as such. His protagonists live in the world of ideas, not of phenomena. Mythopoesis possesses a surprising potential to become incarnate as reality which, being fed by myths, turns into a simulacrum that replaces genuine reality for years to come.

The work of Dostoevskij, which has long been viewed as Orthodox, is not in fact Orthodox from the standpoint of dogmatic religious consciousness. It is the result of mythopoesis, of the artistic and symbolic re-working of complex discursive texts. Religious language is founded on traditional cultural texts that are used in ecclesiastical practice and on apocryphal literature that is widespread in the popular milieu. The people knew the Holy Fathers only through the church service, the prayers, a large number of apocryphal tales and spiritual songs, and popular folklore. Popular Orthodoxy is the result of a dialogue between popular beliefs, traditions and rites with Orthodox dogma. Dostoevskij reworks this reception of patristic and ecclesiastical literature. Popular Orthodoxy becomes the base language for the writer’s religious-artistic language. Describing the reading habits of the old Grigorij Kutuzov in *The Brothers Karamazov*, Dostoevskij precisely notes the spectre of religious discourses from which the essence of popular faith was composed: “he [...] began to read mostly ‘divine’ matters, read the Chet’i-Minei, usually in silence and solitude, each time putting on big, round, silver glasses. He rarely read out loud, only during Lent. He loved the Book of Job, picked up somewhere a copy of discourses and sermons by ‘our God-bearing father Isaac the Syrian’ which he read diligently over many years without ever understanding anything in it; but perhaps for this very reason he valued and loved this book most of all. Most recently he began to note and understand sectarianism [...] but decided against converting to the new faith. His ‘divine’ bookishness, it stands to reason, lent his physiognomy even more pomposity. He may have been inclined to mysticism” (*PSS* 14: 89).

In her detailed study of the Biblical and patristic sources of Dostoevskij’s novels, S. Salvestroni has focused on the influence of the works of the Holy Fathers, stressing the particular role of Isaac the Syrian (1998). She notes the links between patristic literature and Gospel allusions in Dostoevskij’s novels. In our view, what Dostoevskij called Orthodoxy was undoubtedly an artistic reflection on theological and ascetic works seen from the standpoint of the national consciousness. On the other hand, his descriptions of elders, saints, sinners, criminals and victims reflected the full variety of popular-religious ideas about Russian identity. The religious substrate is but one component for the writer’s expression of his subjective views regarding the antinomic nature of the Russian nation and the mythologization of the image of the Russian nation. At any rate, in his descriptions of the two world pictures—the popular-Orthodox one with which he sympathized and the scientific-atheistic one typical of the intelligentsia, he revealed and contrasted two methods of



thought: the religious-mythological and the scientific or formal-logical. By contrasting these two logics as an ethical opposition, he introduced subjective criteria for distinguishing the saint from the sinner and the criminal from the victim. Moreover truth here is less a juridical concept than a properly ethical one, based on the principles of the mythology. The nation is *a priori* holy and in the right, even if it kills, swears, drinks and prostitutes itself. The educated member of the intelligentsia is always sinful and passionate even if he voluntarily dies for humanity or “goes to the people,” sacrificing his property, well-being, and even life. The humility to which Dostoevskij called the Russian intelligentsia first of all concerned the mythopoetic divinization and religious adoration of the Russian nation as the sole bearer of Christ’s truth. For the Orthodox believer there is something forced, “confused and partly false” in this summons (Leont’ev, 1997: 291). It is a mistake to seek dogmatic Orthodox consciousness in Dostoevskij’s works. Moreover, no matter how hard you try it is difficult to find the rites, services, sacraments, the veneration of icons and relics, without which it is difficult to speak of dogmatism. (In this respect he is the diametrical opposite of Lev Tolstoj, who filled his works with images of the Church.) In this context dogma loses its structure and is rendered meaningless. It receives structure and meaning only from a text that presents the cultural basis of reality. Reality in Dostoevskij turns into a complex sign system with a “semiotic character.” It is necessary to distinguish the author who created the system of the artistic vision of religious ideas from the man Dostoevskij who declared his personal affiliation with the Orthodox faith. Mythopoesis subsides only when Dostoevskij intuits the dialectics and antinomies of the psychology of personality. Here the romantic who aesthetically admires and believes in man yields to the realist who reveals the unconscious and instinctive essence of human nature in a psychologically authentic manner. As Georges Florovsky once noted, “in this way Dostoevskij’s dream never coincided with his vision of life. He failed to provide their final synthesis” (1937: 300). This is the source of the sharp polemics concerning his religious views.

The basis of Dostoevskij’s mythopoesis is the idea of the ambivalent nature of the Russian *mentalité*, which is illustrated in his concept of the family. The paternal principle lies at the basis of the Christian mentality. The family is a synonym of national life and continuity, and the humanistic basis for universal unity, and a synonym of the concept of *sobornost’*. The family is the ontological basis for the forming of the personality. The family is also the ideological substance of the Native Soil movement.

The family is at the center of Dostoevskij’s final novel *The Brothers Karamazov*, cemented to the other main themes—suffering, God, and faith—by the main axis of the novel’s plot: the story of fatherhood. The novel’s treatment of fatherhood bears comparison with Sigmund Freud’s analysis of the same issues from the standpoint of psychoanalysis. As Freud pointed out, it is also linked to a real tragedy in Dostoevskij’s life: the murder of his father Mikhail Andreevich Dostoevskij by his serfs. Dostoevskij’s works introduce another father-figure from his childhood, namely the peasant Marej who saved him from a wolf. Later, in the labor camp, he would recall this figure in the context of his divinization of the entire Russian nation as the saviour, parent and comforter of the “homeless” intelligentsia.

The father is a central symbol in the Russian national state paradigm of “Orthodoxy—nationality—autocracy.” It is a symbol of the heavenly God the Father; it is the nation as the spiritual father; it is the Tsar as a tribal or moral father; it is, finally, one’s physical father. In *The Brothers Karamazov* it is the basis of the entire family, a symbol of the myth of Russia, revealed in the symbolism of four fathers: the physical father Fëdor Pavlovich Karamazov; the tribal or emotional (moral) father Grigorij Kutuzov, who saves all four sons from physical death in childhood; the spiritual father Zosima, the bearer of the ideal features of a saint; and, finally, the “god-bearing father” Isaac the Syrian who personifies the ideal divine world, the image of whom connects all the fathers and sons in the novel into the unified Christian cosmos of Russian life.

The mental orientation of Orthodox believers towards fatherhood is vividly demonstrated by the daily prayer “Our Father,” which underscores the believer’s intimate kinship with God the Father. He is not an awesome and terrible Judge, but a kind and loving Father. There are seven discrete requests addressed to the Father in the course of this short prayer which highlight the main orientation towards God the Father: love and mercy.

In the novel the theme of fathers and sons is represented via the binary opposition of life and death. The death of the fathers, whether real or symbolic, removes them from the immediate events of the novel and, at the same time, makes them responsible for the further life of their children. The culminating points of the novel, which illumine the opposition between father and son, are linked to the violation of the “death taboo” (Barthes), i.e. with the intervention of the sons’ lives in the death of the fathers. The “active intervention” of the children in the death of the fathers bares a moment of crisis for the individual, demonstrating a process either of fragmentation and destruction or of personal rebirth. Death in the novel is demonstrated through the symbolic space of dreams, a kind of inter-world in which the transformation occurs: the old dies away and the new is born. The death of the “old” Mitja and Alësha is a condition of their rebirth “in the spirit.” Ivan and Smerdjakov, on the contrary, are incapable of new birth and undergo fragmentation as individuals, the former intellectually and the latter physically.

The set of father-son relationships forms the structural model of the familial cosmos in the novel: Fëdor Pavlovich/Ivan, Grigorij Kutuzov/Dmitrij, Zosima/Alësha, and Isaac the Syrian/Smerdjakov.<sup>1</sup> The relationship between Fëdor Pavlovich and Ivan is at the lowest rung of the novel. The murder of his father lies completely on the conscience of Ivan, who is essentially the closest of all the sons to their physical father (as Smerdjakov notes in their final conversation). Their relationship is wholly devoid of spirituality. They are complicit in greed and mutual hatred, which becomes the basis of passion and sin. Their point of intersection is a combination of passion and atheism, which is essentially moral nihilism. The result is physical death and mental illness. Ivan’s madness signifies the mercy of God, who

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<sup>1</sup> Without directly addressing Dostoevskij’s renowned use of “doubles” for his characters, it is worth calling attention to this technique. As Jurij Lotman once wrote, “The appearance of doubled characters is the result of the fragmentation of the mythological image, because of which the various names of the One become different individuals; it created a peculiar narrative language by means of which it became possible to relate human events and make sense of human actions” (2002: 732).

relieves him of the unbearable torments of conscience. This opposition draws the lower limit of the Christian cosmos: the world of unnatural passions and moral degeneration. At the same time the Christian cosmos is a calque of the writer's worldview and a key to his anthropodicy. The social (middle) world, in which extremes are balanced and moderated, is represented by the oppositions Grigorij Kutuzov/Dmitrij and Zosima/Alësha. The old Grigorij is not just a personification of popular simplicity and a model of strict, straightforward father with all of the superstitions typical of the people. He is a personification of Russian Christian kindness, the saviour of all the Karamazovs and of Karamazovian Russia. He is a bearer of the idea of love and all-forgiveness. His religiosity and faith is shown by Dostoevskij through his love of reading Isaac the Syrian's *Sermons*. The "death" of old Grigorij is the reason for Dmitrij's rebirth, as a result of which Dmitrij becomes the incarnation of the entire essence of the Russian nation—a passionate martyr, humbly bearing punishment for another's guilt. If "father" Grigorij and "son" Dmitrij personify different facets of the nation, then the elder Zosima and Alësha symbolize the essence of the national faith. Zosima is not only an example of sanctity, a *starets* (i.e. a spiritual teacher and father), but also a bearer of a most important national sense: maternal love, mercy and all-forgiveness. In the novel Dostoevskij calls this sense "the onion," an image based on the story of the onion that renders aid to one's neighbour, ensuring both physical and religious salvation. This layer of the middle world reflects the measure of life and the basis for the family ideal. This love is both paternal and maternal at the same time. Christian love exemplified by Zosima and Alësha is a gift, and for this very reason is not appreciated by many. As both father and mother to Alësha, Zosima becomes for him (and for all) the incarnation of the Mother of God's love for her weak and sinful children. The opposition of Zosima/Alësha is closest to the paradigm of Christ. But they are also represented in a borderline state of their emotional being. The border of transition is the death of Zosima and the spiritual rebirth of Alësha. Thus the signifier "death" in the novel attains a double signification: smell and spirit (Klimova, 2002). When the death of the holy man leads to the smell of the corpse, a more general putrefaction sets in with the spiritual disintegration of the community that ridicules the deceased elder. The mythologeme of the sanctity of the Russian nation is thus threatened with disintegration. Russian belief fails the test of the smell, demonstrating spiritual insensitivity (in Ignatij Brjanchaninov's term) with respect to the dead. This spiritual putrefaction also touches the son, Alësha, who for a moment experiences disappointment and joins the persecutors of his father. Unfaith is a symbolic murder of one's spiritual father. The following repentance and birth (albeit in dream reality) of a new man is a symbolic transition from death to spiritual life. The death of the elder becomes the reason for the birth of a new type of individual, the "worldly monk" Aleksej Karamazov.

The most complex level of the father/son opposition is its highest, encompassing the symbolic "holy father" Isaac the Syrian and Pavel Smerdjakov, the last, illegitimate son of Fëdor Pavlovich. The key to understanding it is Isaac the Syrian's concept of love, an aspect of the supernatural world of heavenly love and all-forgiveness which is granted by the image of Isaac the Syrian to the petty murderer Pavel Smerdjakov, "the son of a righteous woman and a demon" (PSS 14: 104).



Based on the work of the patrologist Bishop Hilarion (Alfeev), it is possible to agree with the attribution to Isaac the Syrian of a second volume of *Sermons*, discovered only in 1983. Moreover this second volume proves the membership of Isaac the Syrian in the non-Orthodox Syrian Church of the East. Many ideas in the second volume reflect the apocatastatic idea of universal forgiveness. In fact, *The Brothers Karamazov* demonstrates the consistency between the ideas of Isaac the Syrian's first and second volumes. For one thing, almost all of the main protagonists of the novel are linked to the name of Isaac Syrian, whether explicitly or not. For the servant Grigorij—the second father in the novel—Isaac the Syrian's *Sermons* are his favourite book. Moreover, the most important allusions to patristic works generally are the teachings and conversations of the elder Zosima. The book of Isaac the Syrian was also lying on the table of the murderer Smerdjakov. It is possible that he read it in the last hours before his suicide, before he placed it on top of the bloodied money which he stole from Fëdor Pavlovich and then—after his “spiritual cleansing”—returned to Ivan as thirty accursed pieces of silver. Salvestroni has justly noted that both Ivan and Smerdjakov can be considered Judas-figures, for both betray their father for money. But Ivan is more of a Judas than Smerdjakov because he is last to return the money and is forced to look into himself, which is no longer the gesture of a traitor, the only kind of person (according to Salvestroni) who is “devoid of spiritual light” in the novel. She demonstrates that in his hands the book of Isaac the Syrian is “the profanation of a holy thing” (Salvestroni, 2001: 155).

In my view Isaac the Syrian's *Sermons* are the catalyst for a rather different thought, that the “holy father” and Smerdjakov can also be viewed as a father-son pairing. Isaac wrote that the Father “with his endlessly great love transcends any paternal love, has the power to aid us to the point of abundance, even more than we request, conceive or imagine” (*Sermon 25*). In the spiritual cosmos of the novel Isaac himself acts as a symbolic image of heavenly paternity. The spiritual word of this father of the Church, obscured by unbelief, nihilism, and the crimes of the prodigal son Smerdjakov, end up as a central element in the awakening of conscience in this man, who has practically become erased from the world of the family, of light and love. Smerdjakov hangs himself because “the conflict of faith and unbelief is sometimes such a torment for a conscientious man that it is better to hang oneself” (*PSS 15: 80*).

As a symbol of Christian love Isaac the Syrian “grants” Smerdjakov the paternal consolation of hope that even he—the executor of an alien will and the physical murderer of his father, a man without honor and conscience—has a chance for salvation and can attain what he has been absolutely deprived of in this world. As Isaac wrote: “A sign of compassion is the forgiveness of any debt, while a sign of an evil mind is arguing with the fallen world. Whoever teaches with the goal of making whole, teaches with love; whoever seeks vengeance is devoid of love. God teaches with love and does not avenge (and never will!); on the contrary, he seeks for his image to be made whole and does not remember his wrath. This means of love is a consequence of correctness and never tends towards the passion of vengeance” (*Sermon 85*). Isaac's teaching on the all-forgiving power of divine love, which links God the Creator and his fallen creation, symbolically links the saint and the murderer with paternal-filial feelings. Accepting Smerdjakov, we accept the world

created by God. Therefore Smerdjakov ends up in the same space as Isaac in the final minutes of his life: thanks to the divine word of his intellectual father he senses the presence of the living God: “‘There is no spectre apart from the two of us, along with some third. No doubt, right now this third is between us,’” says Smerdjakov to Ivan at their last meeting. “‘Who is he? Who is here? Who is the third?’ Ivan nervously asked, looking around and hurriedly surveying the corners in search of someone. ‘This third is God, providence itself, sir; it’s here now alongside us, but don’t seek it because you won’t find it’” (*PSS* 15: 60). Smerdjakov sees God, but Ivan sees only the devil. Smerdjakov hangs himself because he cannot withstand the torments of conscience and the meaninglessness of his actions; Ivan cannot even choose this “solution of power” (in Tolstoj’s definition of suicide) and descends into madness, remaining with the devil and rejecting God in the world without understanding the meaning of Christ’s suffering.

It is important to note that Smerdjakov does not see God *in* himself but *between* himself and Ivan, who is not granted this vision. One might suppose that Smerdjakov is undergoing a process of metanoia: the search for “new image of oneself, others and God.” This process ends up being purely destructive for the individual in question, for Smerdjakov sees that he does not know God. He once again we return to the mechanism of mythopoesis which Dostoevskij uses to investigate the ambivalence of human nature. Smerdjakov, who has already committed murder, suddenly experiences such torments of conscience that he commits suicide (perhaps as a symbol of repentance). Thus the family theme and the criminal plot grow into a national tragedy of the Russian world view that connects God and Judas, Isaac the Syrian and the thirty silver pieces for which one may kill one’s father, God and one’s homeland. The fulcrum of all of these collisions is the discussion of the nature of the passionate and suffering nature of the discussion of the passionate and suffering nature of Russian identity.

Dostoevskij’s interest in the fallen and sinful, in criminals and murderers, reflected his religious questioning and is closely linked to the teaching of Christ’s sacrificial love and the conception of Christian all-forgiveness. It is here that Dostoevskij’s mythopoesis was exercised most fully. Dostoevskij describes the nature of passion and sin as an abyss of human suffering, comparable only to the suffering of God the Son. One gets the sense that he equated Christ’s faultless sacrifice of suffering with the suffering not only of faultless children, but of criminals and murderers. Dostoevskij shows the symmetry of Christ’s and humans’ suffering, all the while preserving in each criminal an integral basis—the divine image, which may be lost by man (concealed and obscured for its bearer) but not for God who grants each the hope for love and forgiveness. If the phenomenal world is ruled by suffering and hatred, then in the divine world all are met by a kingdom of love and world harmony. The image of Zosima as the ideologue of humble love is formed under the palpable influence of the ideas of early Christianity, which were practically unknown in the establishment church of the late nineteenth century. Zosima’s ideas are quite close to the ideology of love of the Church Fathers, particularly Isaac the Syrian and Abba Dorotheus. Like Isaac the Syrian, Zosima is the ideologue of heartfelt love. “Love is sweeter than life, and understanding through God, who engenders love, is even sweeter than honey and honeycombs. [...] Love is engendered by knowledge, and knowledge is engendered by emotional



health; emotional health, in turn, is a force originating in long-suffering” (*Sermon* 38).

The elder combined love for God and ceaseless inner work with a Christ-like active love for people. We see similar ideas in the teachings of Abba Dorotheus. Abba Dorotheus calls a loving attitude towards things a characteristic of conscience. It consists of “not treating anything carelessly, not letting it be spoiled or abandoning it at all; and if we see anything abandoned then we must not neglect it” (Abba Dorotheus, 1895). This view of the world as God’s creation is not contradicted by the idea of monastic detachment by the world and hesychastic service of God. Dostoevskij possessed a fine sense of the dialectics of the world and the monastery, which informs the special status of those who reject creation for the creator himself. Only in this aspect can one understand the difference between the dialectical opposition of God/world and Ivan Karamazov’s antinomy “I accept God, but I do not accept His world” (*PSS* 14: 214).

The main source of theological controversy concerning the image of Zosima were his teachings on paradise, hell and the universal end of human history. Zosima’s thoughts are remarkably close to Isaac the Syrian’s ideas of the apocatastasis, i.e. the universal salvation of all souls. Orthodoxy unambiguously condemns the teaching of apocatastasis, although there are direct allusions to it in the Gospels (Demarest 2004: 71). Dostoevskij’s partiality for these ideas is linked to his mythologeme of the sanctity of the Russian nation and the conception of suffering. In the famous conversation of the brothers in the tavern the theme of suffering and punishment is calmly linked to the thesis of universal brotherhood at the end of time, which would institute the harmony “of the murderer and the victim” (*PSS* 14: 222). Ivan called this apocatastatic state “world harmony,” based on the single tear of a tormented child. As a rebel and an atheist Ivan desires a cruel and vindictive God. He is alien to the idea of the apocryphal story *The Descent of the Mother of God among the Sorrows*, which he mentions at the end of the conversation. This apocryphal tale, a reflection of popular belief, tells of the suffering of the Mother of God and her intercession for the terrible murderers of her son. In tears she “embraces them” and requests for them God’s love and forgiveness. The apocryphal tale compares hell to darkness, to a full immersion in a darkness so dense that “God forgets” the sinners (*PSS* 14: 225). He does not curse them; he simply forgets them. Her maternal love proves stronger than His forgetful love. If in Catholicism the soul passes through purgatory, the Orthodox mentality is alien to the idea of “just” vengeance and redemption. To “receive according to one’s merits” is perceived as a juridical approach which (even today in Russia) fails to work even at the level of moral consciousness. To “forgive all without discrimination” is a principle of ethical relativism typical of the Russian consciousness, and consistent with Zosima’s “all-forgiveness,” expressed in the phrase “everyone is guilty for everyone” (*PSS* 14: 290). For Russian consciousness the idea of “justice” has no principled juridical meaning; morality is based not on “law,” but on “grace.”

In this way the novel *The Brothers Karamazov* is the literary incarnation of the writer’s mythopoetic conception about the essence of Russian religiosity. The resolution of the Karamazovian question is a dialogue about the cosmic nature of

Russian life, the array of forces and structure of the world of “voluptuaries, possessors and holy fools” (*PSS* 14: 75). All the main protagonists of Russian life possess distinctive features—they all possess an element of the monastic state of being, one markedly different from that of the everyday world. The “otherness” of Russian vis-à-vis the West and of Orthodoxy vis-à-vis Catholicism (see Salvestroni, 2001: 59–60) is the product of the individual mythopoesis of a deeply-ingrained conception of Russian uniqueness in comparison to the western world, which will remain for the foreseeable future.

Georgij Fedotov once noted that the fact that Christianity in Russia was received in the native language was both a plus and a minus for the Russian mentality (1925). On the one hand, this fact encouraged a broad historical and artistic re-thinking of central Christian ideas. On the other, it cut Russia off from the continuity of the ancient cultural heritage. Therefore the common elements in the ideas of Russian national Orthodoxy in Dostoevskij’s artistic mythopoesis and in certain teachings of the Church Fathers are not indicative of the actual historical content of Russian Orthodoxy, but primarily of the discursive innovations in the creative thought of this great Russian writer.

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