

Lights and Shadows: “Dostoevsky’s paradox” or between Atheism and Faith in Jesus Christ

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Abstract:

This study presents the positive and the negative elements of the life and work of F. M. Dostoevsky. In fact, all his work is marked by the opposition between heroes and anti-heroes, between despair and hope, between faith and atheism. Nihilism is the keynote of his work, but the Russian writer fought all his life against this nihilism. This was, we believe, the “paradox” of his life.

Keywords:

Jesus Christ, faith, atheism, F.M. Dostoevsky

Introduction

Dostoevsky’s life was spoken of as “the impossible biography”¹, making reference to the writer’s permanent balance between lights and shadows. One author put Dostoevsky’s life and the “Russian soul”² on the same footing.

Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky was born on 30 October (11 November) 1821 in Moscow. His mother, Maria Feodorovna, religious and poetic, came from a family of merchants but soon died in 1837. His father, a doctor with the rank of

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¹ Michel Eltchaninoff, „Dostoievski et la vie vivant”, in Alain Houziaux, *Les écrivain face à Dieu*, Editions in Press, Clamecy, 2003, p. 39 and the following ones.

² *Ibidem*, p. 40.

Assist. Prof. Ciprian Iulian Toroczkaï & Assoc. Prof. Daniela Preda

nobility in a Moscow hospital, was given a small estate in Tula but- because of his cruelty- was killed by serfs in a riot in 1839.

His youth is marked by a few small traumas: his childhood spent- because of his sickness- in his father's hospital in Moscow; the embarrassing years in college and boarding houses; the enrollment, along with his brother Mikhail, at the School of Military Engineering in St. Petersburg. He graduates it, but he works only for a year as a designing engineer but, because of his romantic dreamy life, he resigns so that he could devote to his literary work. He makes several translations from French, including Balzac's novel *Eugénie Grandet* (1844) and a year later he finishes his own debut novel, *Poor People*. The manuscript receives appreciation among others from the critic Bielinski and from the poet Nekrasov who publishes the novel in 1846 in the journal he edits. In 1846 appears the second novel, *The Double*, which, unlike the first one, is a semi-failure. However, he continues to write and he publishes *White Nights*, subtitled *a sentimental novel* and *Netocika Nezvanova* (1849).

A decisive turning point in Dostoevsky's life occurs in 1849. Attending the revolutionary circle of the followers of Mikhail Vasilevich Petrashevski- the organizer of the first circle of utopian socialism in Russia- Dostoevsky reads on 15 April 1849 the famous "Belinsky's Letter to Gogol" from June 1847, which has been banned by the tsarist censorship. For this fault, he was arrested- along with other companions- on 23 April and incarcerated in Petropavlovskaya fortress, tried and, on 16 November, sentenced to death by shooting. On 22 December 1849 they are staged a gruesome farce of the "execution": "together with other prisoners, he is taken out from the centre of St. Petersburg; they marched on to the Semionovskiy Square, where, being dressed only in their white burial shirt at minus 21 degrees, being watched by three thousand spectators, they are read the sentence; the first three are tied to the execution post, being the sixth one- so in the next group- Dostoevsky still has a few minutes to live; after that the ceremony is suddenly interrupted and they are read the decision of His Imperial Majesty, Tsar Nicholas I to give them the right to live, their sentences having been commuted to four years of hard labor, followed by the service in exile as an ordinary soldier..."³ The hardships in Dostoevsky's life continue: after a month-long journey to Siberia

³ Ion Ianoși, *Prejudice and Judgment*, Hasefer Publishing House, Bucharest, 2002, p 305. Some details are known from the letter written the same day to brother Mikhail; references are also made in the novel *The Idiot* (Part I, chapter II) in which Prince Myshkin tells in the Epanchins' house: "Doubtless there may be men who have been sentenced, who have suffered this mental anguish for a while and then have been reprieved; perhaps such men may have been able to relate their feelings afterwards. Our Lord Christ spoke of this anguish and dread. No! No! No! No man should be treated so, no man, no man!"

Lights and Shadows: "Dostoevsky's paradox" or between Atheism and Faith in Jesus Christ

he reaches the Omsk fortress on 24 January 1850 and here he is incarcerated as a convict. This is the moment when his epileptic attacks start. He is released in mid-February 1854, being enlisted as a soldier in a battalion of Semipalatinsk and only after the death of Tsar Nicholas I he was promoted to officer. On 18 March 1859 he is allowed to leave the army and return to the European Russia; he goes to Tver and in November he returns to Petersburg.

Being married to a sick woman with a difficult character, he has a passionate love affair with the young Apolinaria Suslova, the model of the "infernal women" who populate his literary universe. Professionally, he collaborates with his older brother to the *Weather* (1861-1863), and *Epoha* (1864-1865) magazines. The period spent in St. Petersburg, romanticized in one of his novels by J.M. Coetzee (also having some fictional elements)⁴, is a culminating one in Dostoevsky's literary activity. One by one, his novels are published: *Uncle's Dream* (1859), *The Village of Stepanchikovo* (1859), *Humiliated and Insulted* (1861), *The House of the Dead* (1861) - which reminds of the experience of the years of prison- *A Nasty Anecdote* (1862) *Winter Notes on Summer Impressions* (1863) - the fruit of his first journey to Western Europe from June to September 1862- and *Notes from Underground* (1864). In the last fifteen years of his life Dostoevsky publishes his most important and popular novels, the real tragedies⁵: *Crime and Punishment* (1866), *The Idiot* (1868) *Demons* (1871), *The Raw Youth* (1874-1875) and his masterpiece, *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880).

On the personal level one has to note the encounter with Anna Grigorievna, a young stenographer, whom he married and loved to death. They travelled to Europe together and it was her who helped him overcome his passion for card games which left him broke so many times (this mania is admirably described in the novel *The Gambler*). Dostoevsky's life has many other shades, being marked by the early death of his first child, epileptic attacks, the chronic poverty which compels him to make loans all the time and especially his literary value recognition which comes too late: returning to Russia, Dostoevsky knows glory only a few months before his death, especially thanks to the famous "Pushkin Speech" in 1880.

These few data which are known with certainty by the researchers alternate with many other enigmas of Dostoevsky's life. Rumors about a hectic existence circulated right after Dostoevsky's death. In a letter sent by his "friend" Strahov to Tolstoy on 28 November 1883, the former wrote: "I cannot see in Dostoevsky a

⁴ J. M. Coetzee, *The Master of Petersburg*, translated by Maria Berza, Humanitas Publishing House, Bucharest, 2010. In the same category: Tasos Athanasiadis, Dostoevsky, *From the Prison to the Passion*, translated by Chisăliță, Omonia Publishing House, Bucharest, 2005.

⁵ Ileana Melnicioiu, *Tragic Guilt - The Greek Tragedians, Shakespeare Dostoyevsky, Kafka*, Romanian Book Publishing House, Bucharest, 1978

Assist. Prof. Ciprian Iulian Toroczkaï & Assoc. Prof. Daniela Preda

good or a happy man. He was evil, malevolent, perverted... I was told that he had raped a little girl whom his governess brought to him in a public bathroom... having the sensuality of an animal, he had no taste, no sense of the feminine beauty and charm.”⁶

Even though most biographers dispute the reality of this rape, Dostoevsky’s image remains ambivalent and so does his entire creation.⁷ If on the personal level he alternates between the character who loves beauty, who is faithful and adored by children and poor people, who is cheerful and generous, ready to help his deceased brother’s family and, on the other hand, selfish, manipulative, vain, rapist, nervous and violent, in his work his image alternates between the official representative of Christianity and, conversely, the satanic genius.

Below we outline how the Russian writer exemplified atheism, namely faith. References will be made to some of the most iconic scenes and characters from his work.

Atheism

Contemporary philosophers noticed that atheism could experience a variety of shapes, which are more diverse than they can be dreamed of in the pages of many philosophical journals and philosophical texts.⁸ Having good knowledge of the human soul, Dostoevsky has shown that sometimes the writer is more capable to describe the depths of the human being than a philosopher can do, as shown by the multiple facets of atheism that can be found in his work.

⁶ I. Ianoși, *op. cit.*, p. 306.

⁷ There were other authors who denied the very literary talent of F.M. Dostoevsky. Vladimir Nabokov, a Russian writer in exile and the author of the famous novel “Lolita” directly confesses that he does not like Dostoevsky, and he prefers Pushkin, Chekhov or Tolstoy instead. In his opinion Dostoevsky “is not a great writer, but a rather mediocre one” and the reasons are different: firstly, he was contradictory because, for example, even though he hated the West so much, he was “the most European of Russian writers”. Secondly, “Dostoevsky’s lack of taste, his monotonous dealings with persons suffering with pre-Freudian complexes, the way he has of wallowing in the tragic misadventures of human dignity — all this is difficult to admire”. Thirdly, under the guise of “realism” or “human experience” Dostoevsky’s work abounds of neurotic or insane characters. Fourthly, Dostoevsky made questionable combinations of detective stories and the French sentimental novel of the eighteenth century. Fifthly, he showed a pathological hatred of “Germans, Polish and Jews”. Sixthly, his literary techniques are far from being perfect: some characters are just “literary puppets” (see Liza in *Notes from Underground*), he repeats words and phrases and some statements are even banal (see *Notes from Underground*) some chapter titles are out of content (*The Brothers Karamazov*), etc. Vladimir Nabokov, *Lectures on Russian Literature*, translated by Cristina Radulescu, Thalia Publishing House, Bucharest, 2006, p. 78-110.

⁸ Stewart R. Sutherland, *Atheism and the Rejection of God: Contemporary. Philosophy and The Brothers Karamazov*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1977, p. 1.

Lights and Shadows: "Dostoevsky's paradox" or between Atheism and Faith in Jesus Christ

„I have been obsessed with God all my life!”⁹, said Kirilov (“*Demons*”), and we think that these words fit Dostoevsky himself very well. Following the experience of prison, Dostoevsky realizes that atheism is the most terrifying crime, the cause of all the evils that occur in this world. As part of the nobility, he is treated with hostility by his fellow sufferers, and “*Crime and Punishment*” (where Raskolnikov, after being convicted and sent to Siberia, has the same treatment) reveals to us the reason: ““You’re an infidel! You don’t believe in God,” they shouted. “You ought to be killed!”¹⁰ This is the reason: “the intelligentsia” (which Dostoevsky will always blame henceforth), under the pernicious influence of the West, has departed from the faith of its people and has been infected by this terrible disease, atheism.

The question of God’s existence is the topic for discussion “over the brandy” (the title of a chapter in “*The Brothers Karamazov*”), in which Fyodor Karamazov addresses the terrible question to his two sons (Ivan, the “modern” intellectual, skeptical, rebellious, rational, and Alyosha, the innocent one, who followed the path of the monastery and is under the obedience of the great abbot, Father Zosima): ““Yes, He does.” Is there a God, or not?”

The responses are categorical on both sides:

“No, there is no God.”

“Alyosha, is there a God?”

“There is.”¹¹

But, as his intuition has dictated him even before asking the question, the old Fyodor knew that “You [Alyosha], look sincere and you speak sincerely. But not Ivan. Ivan’s supercilious...”¹²

Nichifor Crainic considers “The Grand Inquisitor” (another chapter, somewhat autonomous from “The Brothers Karamazov”) the most grandiose thing that one can read in the universal literature, because “it embodies Ivan’s atheistic conception of the world and universe.”¹³ Without summarizing the chapter here, the plea of the Grand Inquisitor- the one who accuses Christ that He has not given in to the three temptations of the devil in the wilderness and that He has left the hu-

⁹ F.M. Dostoevski, *Demons*, translated by Marin Preda and Nicolae Gane, Romanian Book Publishing House, Bucharest, 1970, p. 121.

¹⁰ Idem, *Crime and Punishment*, vol. I, translated by Ștefana Teodoreanu and Isabella Dumbravă, The Library for All Publishing House, Bucharest, 1962, p. 206.

¹¹ Idem, *The Brothers Karamazov* vol. I, translated by Ovidiu Constantinescu and Isabella Dumbravă, RAO Publishing House, Bucharest 1997, p. 209.

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 208.

¹³ Nichifor Crainic, *Dostoevsky and the Russian Christianity*, Anastasia Publishing House, Bucharest, 1998, p. 93.

man freedom untouched, even at the risk of man rising up against Him- does not hide that he does not believe in God (even if he is wearing his “old monk’s coat, made of burlap” and is an ascetic, which is visible from his appearance: “*tall* and straight, with a *gaunt face* and *sunken eyes*”). Even the innocent Alyosha realizes this and tells Ivan: “Your Inquisitor does not believe in God, that’s his secret.”¹⁴

In the novel “Demons” two other antagonistic characters, Bishop Tikhon and Nikolai Stavrogin, have the same discussion:

“Do you believe in God? Stavrogin suddenly asks the question. “I believe”¹⁵, answers Tikhon and soon the temptation of the demon comes (remember that “diabolos” is translated from Greek with “the defamatory, the tempter”) who asks him if he can move mountains...

Although Stavrogin, like the Grand Inquisitor, confesses that he does not believe in God, but believes in the devil (“I believe canonically, in a personal, not allegorical, devil” says the former and the latter admits in front of Jesus that he is no longer with him, but with the “strong and skillful spirit”), however Tikhon says something that may seem surprising: “The complete atheist is on the penultimate step preceding the complete faith”, he says, opposing him to the indifferent one who has perverted to the lowest step the image of God that he was given when created. Dostoevsky thinks that an atheist believes in God, because in fact, there are no atheists but negative believers. “Unbelief is impossible. There is only faith that can take different forms: positive or negative”¹⁶.

Hence one can classify two types of atheists: the deicides (those who “have killed God” as Nietzsche says, i.e. the “fighters” against God, those who are active) and the indifferent ones (called by Dostoevsky “the hot-headed ones” i.e. those who do not even raise the question of God’s existence, the passive ones). In the Russian writer’s opinion the latter are guiltier, including Stavrogin. Those like him will never be able to pass the line which divides good from evil (just like one can go from good to evil, from faith to unbelief, one can easily go from evil to good, from unbelief to faith, according to the saying “extremes meet”): “I don’t know and don’t feel evil and good”¹⁷, confesses Stavrogin.

Foreboding the danger that is threatening the one who does not believe in God, Pulheria Raskolnikova asks her son in a letter: “Do you still worship God, Rodea, as you used to do, and do you still believe in the endless goodness of our Creator and Savior? I fear in my heart that you have been visited by the fashion-

¹⁴ F. M. Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, vol. II, p. 407.

¹⁵ Idem, *Demons*, p. 708.

¹⁶ Ion Mânzat, *Christian Psychology of Depths*, Encyclopedic Universe Publishing House, Bucharest, 1999, p. 199.

¹⁷ F. M. Dostoevsky, *Demons*, p. 721.

Lights and Shadows: "Dostoevsky's paradox" or between Atheism and Faith in Jesus Christ

able new unbelief!"¹⁸ Unfortunately, Raskolnikov falls into unbelief and, lacking the fear of God, he commits two murders... Only when he meets Sonia does he admit his sins and returns to the faith that has been planted in his heart since childhood. To Raskolnikov's excuse that "I wanted to have the courage, and I killed... I only wanted to dare", she tells him the truth straight to his face: "You turned away from God and God has smitten you, has given you over to the devil!"¹⁹ (In the novel "The Idiot" Lizaveta Prokofievna will do the same with the group of nihilists who comes to prince Myshkin "to demand their rights": "Fools and lunatics! You vain people full of pride! You do not have faith in God; you do not have faith in Christ! Your pride and vanity will eat up so much that you end up tearing each other, I predict it to you.)"²⁰

Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky believes that atheism is caused by Roman Catholicism, which has distorted Christianity from its true path, turning it into something earthly which has the pope and not Christ as a leader: "Roman Catholicism is even worse than Atheism itself, in my opinion! Yes, that's my opinion! Atheism only preaches a negation, but Catholicism goes further: it preaches a distorted Christ, a Christ calumniated and defamed by themselves, the opposite of Christ! It preaches the Antichrist, I declare it does, I assure you it does! This is the conviction I have long held, and it has distressed me, myself... Roman Catholicism cannot hold its position without universal political supremacy, and cries: 'Non possumus!' To my thinking Roman Catholicism is not even a religion, but simply the continuation of the Western Roman Empire, and everything in it is subordinated to that idea, faith to begin with. The Pope seized the earth, an earthly throne, and grasped the sword; everything has gone on in the same way since, only they have added to the sword lying, fraud, deceit, fanaticism, superstition, villainy. They have trifled with the most holy, truthful, sincere, fervent feelings of the people; they have bartered it all, all for money, for base earthly power. And isn't that the teaching of Antichrist? How could Atheism fail to come from them? Atheism has sprung from Roman Catholicism itself. It originated with them themselves. Can they have believed themselves? It has been strengthened by revulsion from them; it is begotten by their lying and their spiritual impotence! Atheism! Among us it is only the exceptional classes who don't believe, those who, as Yevgeny Pavlovitch splendidly expressed it the other day, have lost their roots. But over there, in Europe, a terrible mass of the people themselves are beginning to lose their faith — at first from darkness and lying, and now from fanaticism and hatred of the church and Christianity!"²¹

¹⁸ Idem, *Crime and Punishment*, vol. II, p. 48.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 179.

²⁰ Idem, *The Idiot*, p. 380.

²¹ *Ibidem*, p. 716-717.

Of course, these virulent accusations against Catholicism have their foundation in the Slavophil concept, which was then in vogue in Russia, but we can also add the statements of the contemporary Greek theologian, Christos Yannaras, which show the same idea: “The edifice of the European metaphysics was built on the premise of the existence of God, but with the gradual exclusion of the presence of God in the world...” - a phenomenon that occurred “over a period of almost a millennium.”²² So “The Western Christian world itself is responsible for the death of the God of the Western European metaphysical tradition. It has generated not only the metaphysical denial of the divinity of God, but also the denial of the problem of metaphysics as such; it has generated repulsion or indifference towards any metaphysical research, it caused the appearance, for the first time in the human history, of a phenomenon hitherto unknown, that of mass religious indifferentism which characterizes our century.”²³

If the Grand Inquisitor reasons according to the “Pro Satana et contra Deum” principle, Ivan Karamazov develops the “Pro Mundo et contra Deum.”²⁴ In a conversation with Alyosha, he acknowledges that it is absurd to ask yourself if there is a God or not, because “All such questions are utterly inappropriate for a mind created with an idea of only three dimensions”²⁵, but even if they accept God, they refuse to believe in the divine creation: “it’s the world created by Him I don’t and cannot accept.”²⁶ Which could be the reason for this rebellion?

Ivan then presents one of the most sensitive issues one should explain: theodicy, i.e. the suffering of children. If adults are guilty of having bitten the apple, Ivan believes that children “haven’t eaten anything and are so far innocent.”²⁷ The examples cited above are even more disturbing when we consider that Dostoevsky has got inspired precisely from real cases reported in the press. And Ivan’s cry that nothing in this world is worth the tears of an innocent child reflects the truth (after he is told the story about the General who has set his dogs on to kill a poor child, even the innocent Alyosha asks for the shooting of the executioner). The error

²² Christos Yannaras, *Christian Psychology of Depths*, Encyclopedic Universe Publishing House, Bucharest, 1999, p.10. These beliefs will be taken, among others, by St. Justin Popovich, *The Orthodox Church and Ecumenism*, translated by Adrian Tănăsescu, The Publishing House of the Holy Archangel Monastery, Petru Vodă, 2002, p 107 and the following ones; *Ibidem*, *The Man and the God-Man*, translated by Ioan Ică and Ioan I. Ică jr., Deisis Publishing House, Sibiu, 1997, p 170 and the following ones

²³ *Ibidem*, p. 39.

²⁴ Paul Evdokimov, *Gogol et Dostoievsky ou la descente aux enfers*, Edition Desclée de Brouwer, Bruges, 1961, p. 259.

²⁵ F.M. Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, vol. I, p. 364.

²⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 364.

²⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 367.

Lights and Shadows: "Dostoevsky's paradox" or between Atheism and Faith in Jesus Christ

occurs when God is blamed for all these (to Whom Ivan "hurries up to return the ticket" in this world of unjust suffering) for his statement- "I think people are the guilty ones"- is true. Suffering is a consequence of the evil which is perpetuated not by God's will but by His permission, as He does not want to cancel the creatures' freedom, so as not to increase the existing evil (since, whatever one might think, stopping evil by evil only leads to the propagation of evil in the world). Hence, in fact, the phrase "Pro Mundis et contra Deo" only leads to "Pro Satan et contra Deum": to be against God is to belong to Satan. If one judges God by human logic it means that He is created in the image of man and so Ivan is right. It is true that evil should be punished and it is not right for "the mother to embrace her odor's murderer, the one who put the dogs to tear him", but he "wants the absolute in the relative."²⁸ The mistake is committed when it is stated that "One can love one's neighbors in the abstract, or even at a distance, but at close quarters it's almost impossible..."²⁹ In fact, the lack of love between humans and the lack of love for God is precisely the reason why there is so much suffering in the world.

In concluding this section, we shall discuss the opinion of the Romanian sociologist Petre Andrei who, based on the allegations of E. Stadtler, claims that the metaphysical revolt of the Russian people stems only from its geographical position and the climate influence. "The extreme continental climate, with its harsh long winters and its short burning summers, without the mild and conciliatory transitions of a nice spring or of a sunny autumn, certainly had an effect on the character of the people. That kind, fatalistic feature which characterizes the Russians is surely a physiological reflex of the pressure that extreme cold and extreme heat can exert on humans. At the same time, these climate changes from extreme cold to sudden extreme direct inorganic heat determines that radical and revolutionary character which only apparently contradicts the passive feature, as in reality it complements it very naturally."³⁰ We do not believe, however, that this could be the cause of nihilism, as nihilism has its origins more deeply, in the very soul of the person. "Russian Nihilism is a distorted Russian apocalism"³¹, says N. Berdyaev and the contemporary man desires nothing but to be a man-god (as opposed to Christ, the God-man), forgetting that "if there is no God, if he himself is God, then he is no man and, his image perishes."³² Dostoevsky will only show

²⁸ Paul Evdokimov, *Dostoiesky et le probleme du mal*, p. 236.

²⁹ F.M. Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, vol. I, p. 365.

³⁰ Petre Andrei, *The Sociology of Revolution. Studies of Political Sociology*, Polirom Publishing House, Iași, 1998, p. 26.

³¹ N. Berdyaev, *Dostoevsky*, translated by Radu Părpăuță, European Institute Publishing House, Iași, 1992, p. 11.

³² *Ibidem*, p. 35.

that even “the cleanest man (e.g. Kirilov in the novel “Demons”) who had rejected God and wanted to be God himself, is doomed to death and loses his freedom. He is possessed; he is under the spiritual power whose nature he does not know.”³³ In his conversation with Alyosha, Ivan Karamazov decides there is neither God nor devil but, in a vision, the devil laughs in his face and contradicts his statement that “I think the devil doesn’t exist, but man has created him, he has created him in his own image and likeness.”³⁴

In conclusion, the origin of nihilism lies- above any external cause- in an internal cause: the devil’s influence upon the world (and especially upon the human soul) and the temptation of the modern man is the same of Adam’s temptation in paradise: to be “like God” but without God, i.e. ”to become God creating the demonic element in itself.”³⁵

Faith

“The Flight from **God** phenomenon is the only certainly, just like God is the only certainty in the world of Faith... The basis of its existence is the imitation of God. Just as God is the basis which explains the appearance of man and upon which man develops in the world of Faith, Flight is the basis of man. But man does not become pure through it; he becomes unstable, without a shape and he always runs faster and faster, ahead of time; thus the faster run is more prominent than the slower one behind it. The Flight phenomenon is everywhere: the omnipresence of God is imitated.”³⁶ Dostoevsky himself was a “man of Flight”, but in prison, just like St. Paul, he met the One whom he was fleeing from, Christ. His conversion is evident from the discussion that he has here with Bielinski (one of the socialists previously valued by Dostoevsky). While they agree in terms of social injustice (“The most vivid national issues in Russia today are the abolition of slavery and the elimination of corporal punishment”) something essentially separates them: “He cursed Christ in front of me” and Dostoevsky could neither bear nor forgive this. Bielinski himself wrote, without understanding: “Every time I alluded to Christ, his physiognomy changed as if he wanted to cry.”³⁷ What a difference between Dostoevsky and Tolstoy: “Towards the end of his life, Tolstoy sought more and more for the supreme and saving wisdom. He sought for it in himself,

³³ *Ibidem*, p. 51.

³⁴ F.M. Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, vol. I, p. 369.

³⁵ Paul Evdokimov, *Dostoievky et le probleme du mal*, p. 173.

³⁶ Max Picard, *The Flight from God*, translated by Patricia Merfu and Fr. George Remete, Anastasia Publishing House, Bucharest, 1998, p. 58.

³⁷ See Paul Evdokimov, *Gogol et Dostoevsky ou la descente aux enfers*, p. 195.

Lights and Shadows: "Dostoevsky's paradox" or between Atheism and Faith in Jesus Christ

in the peasants, in the thinking of the wise men. He embraced the ancient Chinese philosophy, the Indian, Hebrew and Christian ones. He called on Buddha, Lao Zi, Isaiah, Jesus to help him."³⁸ Tolstoy was even criticizing Dostoevsky for "this kind of mystical approach... Christ, Christ!"³⁹

Gogol said so beautifully: "Here, more than any other countries, we celebrate Christ's bright Sunday. Is it a dream? But why is this dream just for the Russians? Does it mean that the holiday has disappeared and that that its visible signs are floating so clearly in front of our earth: at midnight one can hear the words *Christ has risen* and the bells ring all over the country, as if they wanted to wake us up? Where the signs are so obvious, they are not in vain; they will eventually wake people up in the places they really want to wake them up"⁴⁰. However, realizing-as Raskolnikov confesses- that the "new life is not won in vain, but it must be redeemed at a high price, paid with heroism..." when being released from prison, Dostoevsky talked about "Freedom, a new life, resurrection from the dead..."⁴¹ In prison, Raskolnikov gets to say in relation to Sonia: "Can her convictions not be my convictions now?"⁴² For Sonia "is a paradoxical creature par excellence, she is the «sacred prostitute» or the «saving prostitute»"⁴³, despite the fact that Raskolnikov believed that "There are three ways before her, the canal, the madhouse, or ... at last to sink into depravity which obscures the mind and turns the heart to stone."⁴⁴ Another choice was that of Sonia, the choice of faith, but being too "skeptical, young and accustomed to thinking abstractly" Raskolnikov could not yet know it. To his question: "So you pray to God a great deal, Sonia?" – the latter firmly replies: "What should I be without God?" *Ce-aş fi fără Dumnezeu?*⁴⁵ God supports her, gives her strength to endure the shame, to feed her younger brothers and especially lets infamy touch her only „mechanically, not one drop of real depravity had penetrated to her heart; he saw that. He saw through her as she stood before him..."⁴⁶

Dostoevsky tells of a woman who, seeing her baby smiling at her for the first time, she makes the sign of the cross on his forehead and says "Just as a mother is happy when she sees the first smile of her child, God too rejoices every time a

³⁸ Ion Ianoşi, *Dostoevsky*, p. 504.

³⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 505.

⁴⁰ According to Dmitri Merejkovski, *Sick Russia*, translated by Emil Iordache, Ades Publishing House, Iaşi, 1996, p. 148.

⁴¹ F.M. Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment* vol. 2, p. 348.

⁴² *Ibidem*, p. 348.

⁴³ Ioan Mânzat, *op. cit.*, p. 70.

⁴⁴ F.M. Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment* vol. 2, p. 59.

⁴⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 60.

⁴⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 59.

sinner gets on his knees and addresses a heartfelt prayer to him”⁴⁷. This is “an idea that comprises the entire Christian background, in other words, the idea of a God Who is a true parent for us and is happy for a man just like a father is happy for his own child! This is the foundation of the doctrine of Christ!”⁴⁸ Thus it is possible for a nihilist to return to God, for “The essence of religious feeling has nothing to do with reason, or atheism, or crime, or acts of any kind—it has nothing to do with these things—and never had.”⁴⁹ Man needs faith, even if he is solitary, sad, immersed in their own wickedness like Rogojin: “Rogojin was not merely a passionate soul; he was a fighter. He was fighting for the restoration of his dying faith. He must have something to hold on to and believe, and someone to believe in!”⁵⁰

In the novel “Demons” Stepan Trofimovich shows the reason for believing in God: “My dear, he said, we need God’s presence even for the fact that He is the only being who can be loved forever...”⁵¹ Love makes man happy and “What is far more essential for man than personal happiness is to know and to believe at every instant that there is somewhere a perfect and serene happiness for all men and for everything. The one essential condition of human existence is that man should always be able to bow down before something infinitely great...” The whole law of human existence lies only in the possibility of man to worship something infinitely great. “Deprive the people from the infinite great and they will not accept to live and they will die in despair. Immeasurable and infinite are as necessary for the people, as the small planet they live on...”⁵² This faith and love of life stopped Ras-kolnikov from committing suicide, his sister, Dounia, saying: “Thank God! That was just what we were afraid of, Sofya Semyonovna and I. Then you still have faith in life? Thank God, thank God!”⁵³ Although the seminarian Rakitin had told him that God was just a fantasy of the people, then Dmitri Karamazov knows that “everything is possible” that there is no difference between good and evil: “If God does not exist, it means that man is the master of the earth, of the entire universe. Terrific! But can he still be virtuous without God? That is the question! I always come back to the same point. For whom will the man love then?”⁵⁴

Dostoevsky was also concerned about the relationship between miracle and faith. For him, not the miracle leads to faith, but faith leads to acceptance of the

⁴⁷ Idem, *The Idiot*, p. 293.

⁴⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 293.

⁴⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 294.

⁵⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 307.

⁵¹ Idem, *The Demons*, p. 686.

⁵² *Ibidem*, p. 687.

⁵³ See Paulin Lecca’s comments in *The beautiful divine in Dostoevsky’s work*, Discipol Publishing House, Bucharest, 1998, p. 146.

⁵⁴ F.M. Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov* vol. 2, p. 408.

Lights and Shadows: "Dostoevsky's paradox" or between Atheism and Faith in Jesus Christ

miracle. Describing Alyosha, he says: "in the monastery he fully believed in miracles, but, to my thinking miracles are never a stumbling-block to the realist. It is not miracles that dispose realists to belief... Faith does not, in the realist, spring from the miracle but the miracle from faith."⁵⁵

In June-July 1877 Dostoevsky visited- along with VI. Solovyov, who will be a prototype of Alyosha Karamazov- the famous Optina hermitage "in which the hesychastic revival movement of the paisian abbot (starcestvo) flourished through Abbot Ambrose."⁵⁶ Here he finds the true Orthodox God (even if V. Rozanov writes to K. Leontiev that "his monasticism is concocted" and at the Optina Hermitage, the novel «The Brothers Karamazov» is not recognized as an Orthodox literary work and Abbot Zosima resembles Abbot Ambrose neither by teaching, nor by character)⁵⁷ and he realizes that "confidence has absolutely nothing to do with the truth."⁵⁸ He opposes the truths of this world to The Truth- which is a person, Jesus Christ and calls: "Let us oppose the West to the truth of our Incarnate Christ, a truth that we have kept while they did not even know!"⁵⁹ This is what Stepan Trofimovitch said: "I've been lying all my life. Even when I was telling the truth. I never spoke for the truth, but only for myself..."⁶⁰ Dostoevsky also remembers his mother who took him to partake; through the "adolescent's words" he said: "... and about you, Mother, I only kept one clear memory, the moment you were holding me in your arms to receive communion and to kiss the cup; I was in the church in the village during summer and a dove flew under the dome, from one window to another..."⁶¹ This union with Christ is not just a simple memory, as it will follow the author throughout his entire life: "This is not about memory. I do not need to remember these happenings, because I have had them in mind all my life."⁶² That is why Dostoevsky may say: "If anything does preserve society, even in our time, and does regenerate and transform the criminal, it is only the law of Christ speaking in his conscience."⁶³

⁵⁵ *Ibidem*, vol. 1, p. 45.

⁵⁶ Vladimir Solovyov, *The Spiritual Foundations of Life*, translated by deacon Ioan I. Ică jr., Deisis Publishing House, Alba Iulia, 1994, p. XXII.

⁵⁷ „K. Leontiev's Letters to V.Rozanov”, in *The Grand Inquisitor. Dostoevsky- Theological Lectures*, Polirom Publishing House, Iași, 1997, p. 166-167.

⁵⁸ Lev Shestov, *Revelations of Death*, translated by de Smaranda Cosmin, European Institute Publishing House, Iasi, 1993, p.18.

⁵⁹ F.M. Dostoievski, *The Brothers Karamazov*, vol. 1, p. 718.

⁶⁰ Idem, *The Demons*, p. 675.

⁶¹ Idem, *The Raw Youth*, translated by Emma Beniuc, RAO Publishing House, București, 1998, p. 138.

⁶² *Ibidem*, p. 139.

⁶³ Idem, *The Brothers Karamazov*, vol. 1, p. 103.

Dostoevsky, however, draws attention to the hazards that can arise from a misunderstanding of faith. Firstly, “proud people are inclined to believe in God, especially when they consider themselves superior to others”, not out of love for God and for people, but precisely because they hate them: they believe in an abstract idea about God in order not to believe and serve others, “instead of worshipping their fellow, they prefer God- unconsciously, of course- for they feel less humiliated like this.”⁶⁴ (This “humiliation” prevents nihilists from believing in God- the Creator, superior to all creatures...) Secondly, although he says that the Russian people are safe, God-bearer, Dostoevsky refuses to make a coincidence between God and the Russian people. In the novel “Demons”, he criticizes the populist movement, exemplified by the character Satov, who said that “God is the synthetic personality of a people, from its beginning to its end”. What does this mean? “It means that this God is only an idea that reflects upwards the genius of a nation, an imaginary creation, in the image and likeness of that people.”⁶⁵ While we can notice some passages in which the Messianic character is usurped from the Hebrew people and given to the Russian people⁶⁶, Dostoevsky knows that “The Church is a kingdom not of this world.” “The Kingdom of Heaven, of course, is not of this world, but in Heaven; but it is only entered through the Church which has been founded and established upon earth...”⁶⁷ The importance that Dostoevsky gives to faith in Jesus Christ is also shown in the following exhortation: “Be steadfast in your faith to the end, believe even if all the people on earth have denied the faith, and only you have eventually walked in His paths.”⁶⁸

Conclusions

Somehow or another, everyone is nihilistic. We live in an age prone to nihilism: regardless of the ethnic origin, social function and intellectual formation, we all feel the effects of secularization, rationalization and extreme technicality. When referring to the two great “rebels” of the twentieth century (S. Kierkegaard and Fr. Nietzsche) a contemporary philosopher, Jeanne Hersch, wrote that “no modern thinking can avoid nihilism or the philosophi-

⁶⁴ Idem, *The Raw Youth*, p. 74.

⁶⁵ Nichifor Crainic, *op. cit.*, p. 232.

⁶⁶ See Maxim D. Shrayer, „The Jewish Question and *The Brothers Karamazov*”, in Robert Louis Jackson (ed.), *A New Word on The Brothers Karamazov*, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, 2004, p. 210-233.

⁶⁷ F.M. Dostoevski, *The Brothers Karamazov*, vol. 1, p. 99.

⁶⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 501.

Lights and Shadows: "Dostoevsky's paradox" or between Atheism and Faith in Jesus Christ

cal impossible."⁶⁹ Any attempt to understand the man of today is to enter this gloomy sphere.

Starting from Ivan Turgenev's lecture entitled "Hamlet and Don Quixote" (held on January 10, 1860), Ion Ianoși divides Dostoevsky's characters in these two categories, stating that: "some seek their ideal outside, others in themselves. Don Quixote is defined by the centrifugal movement; Hamlet is defined by the centripetal force. The first one is altruistic, the second one is selfish. Don Quixote means faith, faith that comes from little but unwavering knowledge, faith irradiated on other people. Being enthusiastic, a moral being, Don Quixote embodies the high principle of self-sacrifice. What does Hamlet represent? First of all he represents analysis and selfishness and therefore unbelief. He loves himself, without believing in something, he is a skeptic lost in narcissism. To the naive enthusiasm he opposes the lucid irony, the profound analysis which discovers vices, including his own vices: he denounces himself, he struggles and he hurts himself. Don Quixote fights windmills; Hamlet suffers. Don Quixote is funny but cute, close to his fellows who forgive him; nobody laughs at Hamlet but nobody can love him either because he does not love anyone. The aristocrat philosopher despises his fellows, he is useless to them, he does not give them anything; he leads them nowhere. How to rule when you do not feel the earth under your feet? ... Hamlet does not love Ophelia, he has no faith; he leaves behind not facts but only traits of his own personality. People like him are lonely, so sterile... Hamlet embodies denial". In Dostoevsky's work "Sonia, Myshkin, Satov, Makar, Dolgoruki, Alyosha Karamazov- «the ridiculous man», will become instances of a Russian Don Quixote; Hamlet will give his voice to «the underground man» and the image to Raskolnikov, Ippolit Terentiev, Stavrogin, Versilov, Ivan Karamazov."⁷⁰

Without making a mistake, we will say that the two types of characters - the "heroes" of faith and the "anti-heroes"- are nothing but the embodiment of the soul of the great Russian writer. This was highlighted by some of the modern interpreters of his work⁷¹, while others have seen Dostoevsky's entire universe through religion.⁷² Being a paradoxical combination between nihilism and ide-

⁶⁹ Jeanne Hersch, *The Philosophical Wonder: History of European Philosophy*, translated by Drăgan Vasile, Humanitas, Publishing House, București, 1994, p. 331.

⁷⁰ Ion Ianoși, *Dostoevsky*, Teora Publishing House, Bucharest, 2000, p. 14-15.

⁷¹ Nathan Scott, *Dostoevsky – Tragedian of the Modern Excursion into Unbelief*, Association Press, New York, 1956; Michael Stoeber, „Dostoevski' Devil: The Will to Power”, in *The Journal of Religion* 74 (1994), no. 1, p. 26-44.

⁷² See especially A. Boyce Gibson, *The Religion of Dostoevsky*, Westminster Press, 1974; Rowan Williams, *Dostoevsky: Language, Faith and Fiction*, Baylor University Press, 2011.

Assist. Prof. Ciprian Iulian Toroczkaï & Assoc. Prof. Daniela Preda

al⁷³, Dostoevsky's work continues to challenge and fascinate⁷⁴-a proof of how good and evil continue to fight in the human heart, with repercussions for the entire universe.⁷⁵

⁷³ Ion Ianoși, Dostoevsky, *The Tragedy of Underground; Dostoevsky and Tolstoy. Story with Two Strangers*, Europess Group, Bucharest, 2013, p. 332-336.

⁷⁴ Gary Saul Morson, „Paradoxical Dostoevsky”, in *The Slavic and East European Journal* 43 (1999), no. 3, p. 471-494.

⁷⁵ See the remark of Alexander Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago* Volume 1, translated by Nicolae Iliescu, Universe Publishing House, Bucharest, 1997, p 138: “If it could be so simple: that somewhere there are evil people who purposely commit evil acts and one only needs to differentiate them from others and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil intersects every human heart. And who will destroy a piece of their heart?”