

**Response to Meredith's "The Reification of Evil and The Failure of Theodicy:
The Devil in Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*"**

The title of Prof. Meredith's essay implies that the reification of evil, in the figure of the devil, holds Dostoevsky's answer to the problem of theodicy. It turns out, however, that the essay is more interested in a different kind of reification and its significance for our complaints against religion. Far from resolving what Meredith acknowledges is an intractable problem for monotheists, Dostoevsky simply sidesteps it: the person of Christ—the divine made flesh—is the artist's final response to theodicy, Meredith contends. The Incarnation is supposed to put an end to complaints against God, even those provoked by the reification of evil.

Is this really the deepest or most powerful position manifest in *The Brothers Karamazov*? I offer a suggestive outline of the strengths and weaknesses of this reading.

Its source of strength is simultaneously its greatest flaw. Meredith argues that the novel does not attempt to counter unassailable evidence of injustice, but instead satisfies our "need for the hypostasis of God into the suffering and dying body." This argument is deeply satisfying because it replicates the deep structure of the novel, which affords us intense pleasure. The novel assaults us with real evil (child abuse, the death of Ilyusha, evil embodied in Smerdyakov and perhaps incarnated in Ivan's devil), then consoles us with real good (Incarnated in Christ, embodied in Alyosha) without denying the existence of the evil that so troubled us. The structure of Meredith's essay attests to the powerful appeal of this move: he sets out to discuss the reification of evil, but ends up pointing to the fact of an embodied God, as Alyosha does with Ivan in "The Grand Inquisitor."

Meredith's discussion is thus contained within this deep rhetorical structure of the novel: he too silences questions about evil by pointing to good. A reading that remains controlled by the text it purports to analyze is probably missing something. In my view, what's missing from this essay (and most readings of Dostoevsky to date) is the theological significance of Smerdyakov. We should struggle against the rhetorical power of the text and keep our attention focused on this understudied and misunderstood character.

Meredith makes some astute and corrective observations. He counters prevailing opinion about Smerdyakov by establishing that he is not Ivan's victim, a helpless tool used by the more sophisticated intellectual; Smerdyakov exploits Ivan for his own purposes. He provides interesting discussion of whether Smerdyakov represents radical or Augustinian evil, and an intriguing comparison of Ivan's devil with the diabolical in Thoman Mann.

Where Meredith's analysis of Smerdyakov goes astray may be a starting point for further investigation. It's true that Dostoevsky opposed determinism, and so questions about "the psychodynamic origin of Smerdyakov's character" are, as Meredith argues, of limited value. Yet Meredith seems curiously anxious to deny that Smerdyakov has been wronged by his (God substitute) fathers. It's not possible to conclude, as Meredith does, that Smerdyakov was primarily excluded from the City of God by his own volition, rather than by others. His father figure Grigory tells the child Smerdyakov that he is slime, not human. Defending Fyodor Pavlovich, Meredith asks "in what way is Smerdyakov treated any worse than the legitimate sons?" It's true that all four are abandoned and forgotten, but Fyodor Pavlovich acknowledges his paternity of the other three, and their sonship;

only Smerdyakov is demoted from a son to a servant. There are rooms in Fyodor Pavlovich's house for Alyosha and Ivan, and Dmitry if he had asked (at least before the conflict over Grushenka), but none for Smerdyakov.

The point is not to analyze Smerdyakov. Discussions about why Smerdyakov is the way he is, or what kind of evil he represents, or whether or not he finds faith at the end, are useful to a certain degree, but are ultimately the consequences of a textual diversion, a trick. Rather than looking at Smerdyakov, we should look at *what the text does with him*, and, by extension, what Dostoevsky's other art works do with figures like Smerdyakov: sacrificial victims on whom the plots depend. The point is to see how Meredith's reaction to Smerdyakov has been controlled by the text, and to ask *what the text doesn't want us to see* by diverting us into questions about what kind of evil Smerdyakov may represent. The text needs Smerdyakov to kill and be destroyed; he is a sacrificial victim on whom the entire edifice is built. The deepest theological question this novel confronts us with is about the blindness of a system—in this case, a text, and behind it the Christian belief system *as Dostoevsky understood it*—that appears to commit and *render us complicit, as reader/witnesses who take pleasure in it*, an act of sacrificial exclusion of the sort it purports to condemn.

Susan McReynolds Oddo