

## **A Response to W. F. Meredith's Reading of the Demonic in *The Brothers Karamazov***

W. F. Meredith's "The Reification of Evil and the Failure of Theodicy: The Devil in Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*" has much to commend it. His basic thesis is admirably clear: Human beings tend to make evil into a thing (i.e., we reify it) because we find all theodicies finally unsatisfactory for meeting the actual horrors of undeserved suffering. Augustine and Aquinas and Leibniz have provided the most rationally consistent answer to the problem of innocent suffering: evil is intrinsic to any finite universe, especially one having a transfinite *telos*. It follows that even the most unedifying pain conduces, however mysteriously, to the ultimate good that is superintended by God. Yet few of us would be willing to offer such an argument as providing real solace to the victims of Birkenau and Auschwitz, of Hiroshima and My Lai, of Rwanda or Darfur or the killing fields of Cambodia. Nor will a more specifically Christological answer completely suffice—the notion that, in the Cross, the incarnate God has absorbed into himself the entire misery of our species, thus redeeming the millions of lives destroyed by human maleficence through the ages. This claim may serve to comfort the survivors, but it does little to justify the unjust and unnecessary deaths of history's victims. On the contrary, we demean their earthly worth by declaring that this most vexing of all mysteries will be answered in the life to come, where we will no longer see "through a glass darkly" but rather through the clear crystal of the Beatific Vision.

What then is to be done, how is life to be lived, when this "best of all possible worlds" suppurates with inexplicable and seeming unjustifiable anguish? Meredith's answer constitutes an inverted form of Feuerbach's thesis: Instead of projecting our fondest dreams and hopes upon a vacant cosmos, thus inventing a Deity who can satisfy them, we create metaphysical monsters in order to replace unsatisfactory theodicies. Hence the grand devils of Marlowe and Byron, those swaggering and lordly rebels who set their faces like flint against God, declaring with Milton's Satan, "Evil, be thou my good." The great merit of Dostoevsky's work, in Meredith's view, is that he refuses to create such convenient monstrosities, such easy caricatures of evil. Dostoevsky fabricates no such Archfiend. "[T]he devils of Dostoevsky," Meredith writes, "are Augustinian: they are evil by virtue of the privation of being and goodness."

He refers, of course, to the Augustinian estimate of evil as *privatio boni*; i.e., all wickedness is a perversion or distortion of the good, and in this sense it is unreal, having no real basis.<sup>1</sup> The demonic is thus parasitic, battenning off the good creation. But in seeking to devour everything else, it eventually devours itself. In the meantime, it must necessarily take the form of something that has been emptied of its goodness. The devil who confronts Ivan Karamazov in his nightmare is thus a shabby and seedy Lucifer, a risible rather than a dreadful demon. As a fallen and discarnate angel, this Satan comically resents his disembodied and unbelieving condition:

My dream is to become incarnate, but so that it's final, irrevocable, in some fat, two-hundred-and-fifty-pound merchant's wife, and to believe everything she believes. My ideal is to go to church and light a candle with a pure heart—by God, it's true. That would put an end to my sufferings.

He would be willing, this fourth-rate devil tells us, even to suffer the pains of rheumatism in order to affirm Terence's celebrated claim that nothing human can be alien to a fellow human—or, presumably, a devil: “Why not, if I sometimes become incarnate? Once incarnate, I accept the consequences. Satan *sum et nihil humanum a me alienum puto*”<sup>2</sup>

For W. F. Meredith, the question is whether this devil is feigned or real: a phantom of Ivan's own imagining, or a creature having metaphysical status. His answer is that Dostoevsky is “a rationalist malgré lui.” Like Ivan, the author of *The Brothers Karamazov* registers our basic discontent with all rational accounts of evil because they really don't suffice in the face of unaccountable evil. Even so, he reifies evil in the form of a pathetically small-minded fiend whom Ivan fantasizes in order to flee from his own complicity in the death of his father, Fyodor Karamazov. For it was Ivan's atheism—with its central premise that “if God doesn't exist, all things are permitted”—that inspired the truly demonic Smerdyakov to slay the old man.

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<sup>1</sup> Meredith wisely quotes Aquinas on the subtlety of this distinction: “... not every absence of good is evil. For absence of good can be taken in a private and in a negative sense. Absence of good, taken negatively, is not evil; otherwise, it would follow that what does not exist is evil, and also that everything would be evil, through not having the good belonging to something else; for instance, a man would be evil who had not the swiftness of the roe, or the strength of a lion. But the absence of good, in a privative sense, is an evil; as, for instance, the privation of sight is call blindness” (ST Q48, a.2, Rep. Obj. 1, and Q48, a.3.

<sup>2</sup> *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Vintage Classics, 1991), pp. 638-39.

As I have indicated, there is much merit in Meredith's argument. He is especially subtle in his treatment of the relation between Ivan and Smerdyakov. He also offers helpful side-glances at Voltaire and Freud, Flannery O'Connor and Walker Percy, even Kant and Star Wars! His discussion of Thomas Mann's *Doctor Faustus* is especially illuminating. And though his footnotes are almost twice as long as the main text, the entire essay is blessedly free of lit-crit jargon. Yet in wanting to avoid the wilderness of secondary criticism on Dostoevsky, Meredith may have overlooked a couple of items that would have caused him drastically to alter his argument. Mikhail Bakhtin's *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* is a seminal work that has come virtually to define contemporary Dostoevskyan scholarship. His celebrated thesis, now almost universally accepted, is that Dostoevsky is a supremely dialogic and polyphonic novelist. Ambiguity is his métier, not in a perverse desire to leave all endings open and all arguments undecided, but to demonstrate the character of human existence:

Dostoevsky's extraordinary artistic capacity for seeing everything in coexistence and interaction is his greatest strength.... [It] sharpened, and to an extreme degree, his perception in the cross-section of a given moment, and permitted him to see many varied things where others saw one and the same thing. Where others saw a single thought, he was able to find and feel out two thoughts, a bifurcation; where others saw a single quality, he discovered the presence of a contradictory quality. Everything that seemed simple became, in his world, complex and multi-structured. In every voice he could hear two contending voices, in every expression a crack, and the readiness to go over to another contradictory expression; in every gesture he detected confidence and lack of confidence simultaneously; he perceived the profound ambiguity, even multiple ambiguity of every phenomenon.<sup>3</sup>

Rowan Williams, the archbishop of Canterbury, has seized upon Bakhtin's insights to offer a brilliant theological reading of Dostoevsky, and Meredith would have done well to consult it. In brief, Williams argues that Ivan's Devil is necessarily both real *and* feigned, both rational *and* irrational. That the demonic will not reveal itself to be one or the other constitutes its terrible strength. The essence of diabolical power, Williams maintains, is to convince us that nothing enters human life from beyond itself, that everything is appearance and illusion, and thus that the world is but a creation of the ego. Yet this would mean that the devil himself would also be a figment, and of course this is what he seeks to deny. He does so by trying to convince Ivan that, without the devil, human life would be static, that the irrationality and unpredictability of

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<sup>3</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, trans. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. 30.

freedom would disappear, that human existence would be little else but an ant heap of automata. Satan thus styles himself as “a benign rascal who is permitted to exist in the created order simply to keep human events moving” in “their contingent or irrational way.” In this sense, the Devil is “the patron saint of (Dostoevskian) novelists.” He thus convinces Ivan that life is nothing other than mere successiveness, one thing after another, without differentiation:

If all we have before us is a continuum which includes equally horror and beauty, the horror is worse than it would otherwise be because there is no way of putting it into a context where it can in any way be healed or modified. It just happens.... The ego moves in the vacant place of God. “Everything is permitted”—which means not simply that all crime is legitimate but that all valuation must come from the willing self.... if everything is permitted in a world without God, so is the love of God and neighbor, but what cannot be sustained is any sense of anchorage of such a policy in the nature of things. And if that self is conscious of its own complicity in cruelty [as Ivan’s surely is], what then?<sup>4</sup>

The answer, alas, is silence and death and insanity. That Ivan ends in madness indicates what W.R. Meredith might yet consider in modifying his proposal concerning the reification of evil: the Devil is real precisely in his unreality.

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<sup>4</sup> Rowan Williams, *Dostoevsky: Language, Faith, and Fiction* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2008), pp. 72, 73, 77.