SPECIAL ISSUE ON DOSTOEVSKY

Nihilism and freedom in the Legend of the Grand Inquisitor

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this essay is to analyze the roots of nihilism as the great Russian writer has identified and described them in The Grand Inquisitor. In this story, Dostoyevsky captures the tension between the modern person’s spirit of rebellion and his or her infinite desire for God, a desire that is often expressed in compassion for the suffering of the innocent. As I hope to show, the response that Dostoyevsky offers to the problem of evil is still valid: only love can transform evil into a means of purifying the soul as well as of redemption.

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Certain people possess the ability to capture the defining traits of an era and even anticipate future ones. The saints, the great thinkers and artists, in fact, belong to this class of people. The origin of this gift, however, as well as the way it is put into practice, is unique to each. The saints, for example, receive this grace from God, yet they carry it out not through intellectual vision or by producing a determined work of art, but rather through their lives. That is why some saints, such as St. Francis de Sales or Mother Teresa of Calcutta, have experienced the evil of their age in their own flesh in the form of temptation. While St. Francis de Sales was familiar with the anxiety of seventeenth century Calvinism (cf. L. D’Amboise 1833, 22–23), Mother Teresa experienced the Death of God of the twentieth century. In fact, she not only felt in her own soul the terrible pain of the souls who were far from God, but also accepted it as the means adopted by God to redeem them. In her recently published diary, we read the words Jesus uses to reveal to her the ultimate sense of suffering Christians: ‘My dear children – without our suffering, our work would just be social work, very good and helpful, but it would not be the work of Jesus Christ, not part of the redemption. […] Yes, my dear children – let us share the sufferings – of our Poor – for only by being one with them – we can redeem them, that is, bringing God into their lives and bringing them to God’ (Madre Teresa di Calcutta 2007, 220). Besides witnessing the Gospel for all ages, these saints have conquered evil in their own time through
charity, whether specified as meekness in the face of heretics, in the case of St. Francis de Sales, or as gift of oneself to the neediest in the case of Mother Teresa.

The thinker or the artist, also gifted with a spirit that allows him or her to interpret the signs of the times, is capable, on the other hand, of capturing his or her knowledge and intuitions in a work of a theoretical or aesthetic character. Such a work, although belonging to a particular era, expresses universal values that transcend the lifetime of its author. This is the case with the great novelist Dostoevsky in *The Brothers Karamazov*. This work is considered by some experts to be the Russian writer’s greatest novel, notwithstanding the complexity of its narrative structure, often interrupted by long digressions and stories (cf. Luigi Pareyson 1993, 12). One such story, and arguably the most important one, is the *Legend of the Grand Inquisitor*. By means of this story, Dostoevsky demonstrates the origin of nihilism, or that is, the system of thought by which one leads his or her life as if God were dead. In the twentieth century, the mature fruits of nihilism did not take long to become patent to all: two world wars, dictatorships, extermination camps, post-modern relativism, etc.

The purpose of this essay is to analyze the roots of nihilism as the great Russian writer has identified and described them in *The Grand Inquisitor*. In this story, Dostoevsky captures the tension between the modern person’s spirit of rebellion and his or her infinite desire for God, a desire that is often expressed in compassion for the suffering of the innocent. As I hope to show, the response that Dostoevsky offers to the problem of evil is still valid: only love can transform evil into a means of purifying the soul as well as of redemption.

**The Legend of the Grand Inquisitor and the Rebellion before God**

Just as we read in the earliest novels in history, in *The Brothers Karamazov*, Dostoevsky recounts many stories within the main plot as a literary device to propose thoughts, narrate the life of characters, or anticipate their actions. The *Legend of the Grand Inquisitor* is no exception. The story is in the form of a long monologue by the old Cardinal of Seville, the Inquisitor, speaking to Christ who has returned to our world in order to comfort the suffering, cure the sick, and resurrect the dead. In spite of appearances, the story plays a central role in the novel, given that it brings to the fore the conflicting psychology and ideas of Ivan and Alyosha, two Karamazov brothers who had not spoken to each other since childhood (as Ivan had left home to pursue his studies, and Alyosha had joined the novitiate in a monastery). When Alyosha visits the city on account of Father Zosima, he meets Ivan at a tavern, where, in spite of the noisy surroundings, they are able to converse privately. The hustle and bustle of the place symbolize Ivan’s inner angst; an angst which he seeks to mask with an inordinate attachment to life and its pleasures. The purposefully exaggerated, frantic pace of the whole novel, which from beginning to end takes only seven days (i.e. from the initial arguments between Dmitri, the eldest of the Karamazov brothers, and his father over the inheritance, to the father’s murder by Smerdyakov, and Dmitri’s subsequent sentencing to Siberia after having been falsely accused of his father’s death), is dramatically slowed down to crystalize Ivan and Alyosha’s conversation in such a way as to allow the reader to pierce deep within their souls (cf. Pareyson 1961, 39).
The two Karamazov brothers, which up to then had only spoken about news of their father and their brother Dmitri, begin to discuss one of those ‘eternal’ ideas (as Dostoevsky denotes them with a bit of irony), which were in vogue among the Russian youth at the time: that of the existence of God. By means of this conversation, Dostoevsky confronts atheist reason (represented by Ivan), and naïve faith (represented by Alyosha). Ivan incarnates the figure of the tempter: a fascinating yet subtle and cunning tempter, who slowly leads Alyosha to the brink of despair.

The title of the chapter narrating this conversation is ‘Rebellion.’ It takes its name from Alyosha’s awestruck words when Ivan reveals that he will not accept a world where the innocent suffer. Ivan states, ‘And so I accept God and am glad to, and what’s more, I accept His wisdom, His purpose – which are utterly beyond our ken; I believe in the underlying order and the meaning of life; I believe in the eternal harmony in which they say we shall one day be blended. I believe in the Word to Which the universe is striving, and Which Itself was “with God,” and Which Itself is God and so on, and so on, to infinity. There are all sorts of phrases for it. I seem to be on the right path, don’t I? Yet would you believe it, in the final result I don’t accept this world of God’s, and, although I know it exists, I don’t accept it at all. It’s not that I don’t accept God, you must understand, it’s the world created by Him I don’t and cannot accept. Let me make it plain. I believe like a child that suffering will be healed and made up for, that all the humiliating absurdity of human contradictions will vanish like a pitiful mirage [...] that in the world’s finale, at the moment of eternal harmony, something so precious will come to pass that it will suffice for all hearts, for the comforting of all resentments, for the atonement of all the crimes of humanity, of all the blood they’ve shed; that it will make it not only possible to forgive but to justify all that has happened with men – but though all that may come to pass, I don’t accept it. I won’t accept it’ (Fyodor Dostoevsky [1880] 1912, 258–259). According to Ivan, the evil which is represented by the suffering of the innocent cannot be justified on any grounds whatsoever, and therefore, it is an obstacle for believing in a just God. Ultimately, in fact, it is the cause of Ivan’s atheism; an atheism, however, not based on syllogistic reasoning, but rather on facts that he gathers as evidence for a case against God. When confronting the facts, Ivan is not convinced by a Leibniz-like theodicy, whereby God would be the creator of the best of possible worlds. In other words, if there are things that in themselves make no sense, then he rejects the corresponding world where those things enjoy their existence. Moreover, neither can it be said that he is a convinced by a Hegelian-like justification of this world based on necessity, according to which the negative would be necessary in order to fully attain a self-awareness of reality. Ivan dismantles the outlooks promising that evil would be either ultimately reconciled with the totality of being, or overcome at the end of History. And he does so by means of the one existential proof unveiling the meaninglessness of existence par excellence: the suffering of children. Neither the best of all possible worlds nor the knowledge of the totality of reality can make sense of such suffering; and neither can Alyosha’s Christianity for that matter, given that the happiness of a world beyond this one cannot justify the suffering of innocent souls.

In contrast to the temptation that would be faced by the socialist youth and other theoretical atheists, the temptation for Dostoevsky, as embodied by Ivan Karamazov, is not one leading either to denying the existence of God, or the possibility that there
could be another life in which there is no more suffering. Rather, it is about the temptation of accepting a world in which evil is definitive. In the end, it is about the temptation to nihilism to which so many nineteenth and twentieth century thinkers were attracted when facing the apparent triumph of evil over good.

**The Suffering of Children as an Unforgivable Evil**

But why is the suffering of children the only kind of suffering in this world that is senseless and cannot be justified? In Ivan’s view, the answer is that only children are absolutely innocent as they have not yet eaten of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. And, for this reason, they are always able to be loved. In fact, for Ivan, love toward one’s neighbor is not possible because those who have known evil are not innocent. It is true that one can love humanity and the person who is far away, but not one’s neighbor since, as soon as we see his or her face—a face deformed by evil—the love we would have had for them disappears altogether. Through Ivan, Dostoevsky explains the paradox of so many philanthropic societies and political regimes which, while pretending to aid Humanity, end up killing and torturing individual persons, because in reality these societies and regimes do not love Humanity nor promote love of one’s neighbor.

It is precisely this lack of love toward one’s neighbor, according to Ivan, that impedes us from putting ourselves in their shoes and feeling their pain. Our neighbor merits punishment for having eaten the prohibited fruit, and he or she would be justly punished even with the greatest of sufferings. With regard to children, on the other hand, given that they are completely innocent, we can feel their pain, have pity on them and even vindicate them.

In contrast to the suffering of children is human bestiality, which causes it and happens to be the only one among animals that is deemed an art: the art of torture and sadism. That is why Ivan believes that the devil, the spirit of non-being and of self-destruction, has been created by man in *his own image and likeness* (cf. Dostoevsky, 262).

Thinking that Ivan has made a mistake, Alyosha corrects his brother’s affirmation: it is not the devil that is created in the image and likeness of man, but rather man who is created in the image and likeness of God. In reality, this apparent error on Ivan’s part conceals a trap for Alyosha’s naïve faith. Ivan summarizes what has been said up to then by saying that a world in which the suffering of children and the bestiality of murderers exist cannot have been created by a good God. In fact, in a world like that, only earthly justice is necessary, not a heavenly one. An earthly justice does not justify those who have committed crimes against children, but rather sentences them with the death penalty. Therefore, these crimes are unjustifiable, and hence unforgivable.

Thus, Ivan seems to anticipate the confluence of the unjustifiable and the unforgivable that will later be found in the thought of Hannah Arendt, when she deals with the Holocaust. Both, in fact, believe that an absolute, unjustifiable, and unforgivable evil exists. However, whereas for Arendt, the unforgivable is so insofar as it cannot be properly punished, for Ivan, the unforgivable is not bound with punishment as much as with the impossibility of any type of reconciliation whatsoever, whether in this
world or in the next. Deep down, unforgivableness in Hannah Arendt is relative to the impossibility of punishment in this world (cf. Hannah Arendt 1958, 241; 1963, 234). Ivan goes further: unforgivableness of the suffering of the innocent is not relative to the punishment of the murderer, since after all, the death penalty indeed takes away the life of the murderer in this world. The problem lies in that it fails to remedy the suffering it causes, given that this kind of suffering is absolute. Hence, refusing the possibility of reconciliation translates to accepting the absolute character of evil.

Ivan’s arguments drag Alyosha to the edge of rebellion. Here, we can see yet again the mimetic character of the relations between the two Karamazov brothers. In fact, if in the novel we can observe a continual mimetic violence between the brothers and their father (which would eventually lead to parricide), even in this dialogue between the two brothers, there emerges a certain mimesis when Ivan tells the story of how a general orders his dogs to devour a servant who had unwillingly wounded the paw of his favorite dog with a rock. Alyosha confesses that even he himself desired the death of the murderer, the firing squad, and not reconciliation. Of all this, however, Alyosha subsequently repents because, as he admits, he allowed himself to be taken by passion. He thus refuses to give in to his brother’s catastrophic conclusion, as he believes in the existence of a Savior, who has given his blood for us. The Savior can, therefore, forgive the unforgivable. Alyosha’s reasoning is simple: Jesus has suffered for all, and can, therefore, forgive all. It would follow that the proper response to evil is not rebellion, but rather universal reconciliation through love as exemplified in the final embrace between the assassin general and the victim’s mother in the story.

Alyosha’s goodness, which drives him to hope in an ultimate reconciliation, a kind of apocatastasis (i.e. a restoration to the original status quo), does not seem too convincing for Dostoevsky, since, as Benedict XVI writes in his encyclical Spe Salvi, ‘grace does not cancel out justice. It does not make wrong into right. It is not a sponge which wipes everything away, so that whatever someone has done on earth ends up being of equal value. […] Evildoers, in the end, do not sit at table at the eternal banquet beside their victims without distinction, as though nothing had happened’ (Benedict XVI 2007, 44). Perhaps Alyosha is right in that which refers to his faith in Jesus as a response to evil. In any case, as we can see, through the character of Ivan, Dostoevsky examines the objections that the nihilists bring up against the faith of the simple.

**Deconstruction of the image of Christ**

By means of the Legend of the Grand Inquisitor, Ivan attempts to demolish the ultimate basis of Alyosha’s faith: the figure of Christ who saves from sin and from evil. Ivan argues that Christ is devoid of mercy and compassion for human beings, given that he not only overburdens them with heavy yokes, such as with the commandment to love one’s neighbor and enemy, but he also wants to set human freedom free so that it be able to make choices for itself. In Ivan’s view, this latter aim of Christ belongs to an incommensurate kind of evil. He thus thinks that human beings do not desire to be free for they believe they already are: they have let themselves be fooled by people such as the Grand Inquisitor, who are familiar with human wretchedness and, because these are truly merciful, they accept the pitiful human condition without
looking to remedy it. It is because of this that the old Inquisitor rages in anger when, after 1500 years, he sees Jesus return to this world, and specifically to Seville, his city. He thinks that Jesus has come to ruin the work that since the beginning of Christianity, men like the Inquisitor have undertaken to make human beings happy. Therefore, the Inquisitor turns to Christ as his greatest enemy saying, 'why, then, art Thou come to hinder us? For Thou hast come to hinder us, and Thou knowest that. But dost Thou know what will be to-morrow? I know not who Thou art and care not to know whether it is Thou or only a semblance of Him, but to-morrow I shall condemn Thee and burn Thee at the stake as the worst of heretics. And the very people who have to-day kissed Thy feet, to-morrow at the faintest sign from me will rush to heap up the embers of Thy fire' (Dostoevsky, 274).

The Legend of the Grand Inquisitor is little more than a condemnation of Jesus for having created an inhuman religion. It seems that Jesus does not know how the heart of man is full of evil and even more, of weakness. Man is weak; he does not desire to be freed from evil, from sin, but only wants to satisfy his needs. The devil, on the other hand, knows well the abyss that exists in the human soul, and he unveils it through three temptations that take the form of miracle, mystery, and power. The Inquisitor accuses Jesus of having refused to perform the miracle of the transformation of rocks into bread to satisfy the needs of man; this actually prolongs man’s suffering even further; and all because Jesus sought to nourish him not with earthly bread, but with a heavenly one, a situation which drives man to give up his freedom at the feet of people that understand him, like the Inquisitor.

When all is said and done, the worst accusation against Christ is that of having trusted human beings, when a minimum of knowledge of their nature would suffice to understand that they are weak, vicious, and rebellious. Heavenly bread is too elevated for them and only the few are capable of following Jesus if fed with this bread; the majority want to follow him by means of earthly bread. Jesus does not care for the majority; the Inquisitor and his likes, on the other hand, do. But given that the figure of Jesus helps to attract the masses, people continue to use his name. Therefore, to the actual suffering of the masses who look for a god to satisfy their needs, there is added the suffering experienced by people like the Inquisitor who see themselves obliged to lie in order to do good. However, unlike the masses, they know how to distinguish between good and evil, are fully aware that their actions are evil, and the remorse they experience in their conscience impedes them from being happy. That notwithstanding, they are willing to sacrifice their own happiness for the sake of that of the masses.

According to the Inquisitor, in the end, the most profound human desire is to find a god that can be adored by all. Here, it seems that Ivan – or perhaps Dostoevsky himself – anticipates René Girard’s idea according to which the origin of religion lies in the desire of the desire of the others which, as it says in the Legend, implies separation and, as a result, violence. In fact, according to Girard, ‘human societies are the work of the mimetic process that has been disciplined by ritual. Human beings know very well that they cannot master mimetic rivalries by their own powers. That is why they attribute this mastery to their victims, whom they take for gods’ (René Girard [1999] 2001, 92). Peace will be attained, therefore, when there will be a god desired
by all and this god is, according to the Inquisitor, not Jesus, but rather the one who will be in a position to offer earthly bread to all.

Even though Girard distinguishes between natural needs that can be satisfied and desires that come from imitation and are not able to be satisfied, the explanation that the Inquisitor offers of human needs coincides with the one the French author uses to refer to desires, given that satisfying them requires both a mediator and an object. ‘The mediator’s prestige is imparted to the object of desire and confers upon it an illusory value. Triangular desire is the desire which transfigures its object’ (Girard 1965, 17). According to the Inquisitor, in refusing to perform the miracle, that is, to satisfy the world’s hunger, Jesus is at the same time refusing to act as a mediator for the people, and hence his failure.

In contrast, the Grand Inquisitor’s critique helps us understand why, in reality, Jesus is the true mediator. In fact, while all other mediations give rise to mimetic violence in usurping the desired objects for themselves, Jesus’ mediation on the Cross liberates humanity from mimetic violence, as dying for another is the way to imitate his love. Thus, ‘the cross of Christ is the sign of salvation, which is revealed as the overcoming of mimetic desire and violence through the nonviolence of love and forgiveness’ (Girard 2001, 18).

In spite of that, however, the Inquisitor must admit that in order to be happy, it is not enough to simply satisfy one’s every desire (and in this he agrees with Jesus). The reason for this is that man will be free, for he will seek not only to live, but also to know the meaning of why he lives. And it is in this seeking, according to the Inquisitor, on which freedom depends. Given that freedom creates in man a continual tension, obliging him to choose between good and evil, he who gives bread to men should also be capable of taking away his freedom. And thus we unveil yet another evil Jesus performs. Instead of liberating man from the yoke of his freedom, Jesus has freed human freedom itself and has made it even more powerful than before, and, as a result, has made man’s suffering all the greater, for man himself feels the pressure to choose more than ever before. This is a duty that no longer originates from an external law, but rather, from one’s personal conscience and from the figure of Jesus, who proclaims himself to be the Truth. In any case, the failure of the Kingdom of God on earth is caused by Jesus himself who has not wanted to take into account the true nature of human beings. In his desire to be loved freely by man, Jesus has furthermore worsened the state of affairs by refusing the three powers (of miracle, mystery, and authority) that make it possible to take possession of the people’s rebellious consciences. By refusing to perform the miracles of the bread, of throwing himself down from the pinnacle of the temple, and of coming down from the cross, Jesus has also provoked the rejection of God, given that for man, there is no God without miracles. In fact, man looks for miracles rather than for God. ‘Thou didst not come down from the Cross when they shouted to Thee, mocking and reviling Thee, “Come down from the cross and we will believe that Thou art He.” Thou didst not come down, for again Thou wouldst not enslave man by a miracle, and didst crave faith given freely, not based on miracle’ (Dostoevsky, 281). By asking too much from men, Jesus has dragged them to despair and to blasphemy, which are followed by a lack of peace, confusion, and unhappiness, all of which lead one to understand the negative
consequences of Jesus’ love. Besides blasphemous, all this can initially seem illogical as well.

With respect to mystery, the Grand Inquisitor is perplexed. On the one hand, Jesus refuses it, while, on the other hand, it seems that in the Redemption worked by him there is mystery (at least to Ivan and the Grand Inquisitor). In spite of the fact that Jesus knows that only a few are worthy of being liberated, while the rest should remain enslaved, he liberates all. It seems, therefore, that Jesus has come for the chosen and only for the chosen, the only ones capable of choosing the good. Even the Grand Inquisitor has a mystery. In becoming aware of the limits of the love of Jesus and of its negative consequences, he and his contemporaries allied themselves with the devil in order to achieve the rule of all the peoples of the earth, as the desire for unity is the fundamental passion of the human race. The old man justifies himself: before uniting himself to the enemy, he was part of the chosen ones, but then, he became humble and took part with the humble. Since only the person who can satisfy the hunger of the people and appease their consciences is able to govern, the Inquisitor allows them to sin and, for this reason, they are grateful. ‘Yes, we shall set them to work, but in their leisure hours we shall make their life like a child’s game, with children’s songs and innocent dance. Oh, we shall allow them even sin, they are weak and helpless, and they will love us like children because we allow them to sin. We shall tell them that every sin will be expiated, if it is done with our permission, that we allow them to sin because we love them, and the punishment for these sins we take upon ourselves’ (Dostoevsky, 285). In such a way, everyone will be happy, no longer rebellious, and no longer will they destroy one another. They truly are free when their freedom is taken away.

The Inquisitor, as the proven nihilist that he is, then takes the refusal of the good and truth to its ultimate consequences given that, far from guaranteeing freedom, these are the cause of human misery. In so doing, he uncovers the root of the philanthropic dictatorships as could be Marxism or post-modern relativism: since the proponents of these systems of thought are fully convinced that the great majority of the people has an ambiguous attitude with regard to freedom, they do not think it wrong (nor do the people), if their freedom is cheapened and traded in for a piece of bread and base entertainment, as long as the appearance of being free is maintained. Thus, next to a Kierkegaard and Heidegger-like outlook of metaphysical nothingness taken as the angst of freedom and of the existent itself, it seems to me that throughout this story, an exquisitely anthropological vision of man is proposed that only the saints and the learned have been able to discover, and which can be called the paradox of freedom: to desire a fulfilled slavery, while fooling oneself, however, into thinking that one is truly free. Hence, it is not only the metaphysical nothingness that swallows up freedom as in a vortex, but also the ‘small-time’ nothingness of the golden prison where all of one’s needs are fulfilled to the point of thinking oneself to be free.

Regardless, however, the story ends in a surprising way. The Inquisitor does all that he can in order to take the moral high-ground over and above Christ, who looks at him and remains silent. Thus, the Inquisitor says in his kind of closing arguments: ‘Judge us if Thou canst and darest.’ Know that I fear Thee not. Know that I too have been in the wilderness, I too have lived on roots and locusts, I too prized the freedom with which Thou hast blessed men, and I too was striving to
stand among Thy elect, among the strong and powerful, thirsting ‘to make up the number.’ But I awakened and would not serve madness. I turned back and joined the ranks of those who have corrected Thy work. I left the proud and went back to the humble, for the happiness of the humble’ (Dostoevsky, 286). After the accusations against him, Jesus kisses the bloodless lips of the old cardinal, who, in spite of his hatred for Jesus, releases him.

Throughout the years, scholars have long debated about the meaning of Jesus’ kiss. Most recently, Zagrebelsky proposed three interpretations; namely, the kiss as (a) confirmation that the cardinal has acted well as far as the rule of this world or, as Bonhoeffer says, as far as the ‘penultimate things’ (cf. Dietrich Bonhoeffer [1949] 1995, 125–133) are concerned; (b) compassion on behalf of Christ before the wretchedness of the old cardinal; and lastly as, (c) the manifestation of a love that overcomes all limits, which for Zagrebelsky, is an overly sappy kind of interpretation (cf. Gustavo Zagrebelsky 2013, 84). Even though all three interpretations are possible, I think that the most accurate one is the last one, since, for Dostoevsky, evil can only be overcome with love.

Throughout the pitiless analysis of the figure of Christ, who (according to the story) pretends to be the savior when, in reality, he ends up condemning man to unhappiness, we can sense the cynicism of the grand inquisitors of history. In fact, they themselves, pretending to be humanity’s true saviors, usurp both what belongs to the divine and the human in order to ruthlessly accomplish their goal of enslaving people by taking advantage of their natural resentment. They believe, in other words, that the good, truth, and happiness are too great to be accessible to mere mortals. The task of human beings, like that of the Grand Inquisitor, is to discourage them continuously, holding their evilness and weakness against them, and allowing them to sin so that they do not dare to rise above the base things of this world. In the end, however, they fail to maintain human freedom chained since it is made in the image and likeness of God.

The greatness and wretchedness of man

Alyosha objects to Ivan’s partial and distorted representation of Christianity, which, in his eyes, could at best describe the Roman Catholic Church (Dostoevsky’s hostility toward Catholics is well known). According to Alyosha, the figure of the Inquisitor has been idealized by Ivan, because this kind of people do not oppress men in order to make them happy, and neither do they feel spiritual remorse for having fooled them. Their aim is none other than earthly power and worldly glory.

But Ivan does not allow himself to be persuaded by his younger brother’s counter-arguments. Jesus and Christianity, just like Alyosha, fail because their sacrifice is unsolicited, and therefore also futile. The victors are, on the other hand, men like the Grand Inquisitor who have discovered the great secret that there is no redemption since evil is definitive and cannot be eradicated by anyone. We simply have no choice but to accept it and abandon ourselves to it.

According to Ivan, therefore, there are three kinds of people. The first, who are few (like Father Zosima and Alyosha), believe that life is meaningful because God has sacrificed himself to redeem us from evil. They maintain they can attract
human freedom toward the good. According to the old Inquisitor, it is naïve people, such as Christ, who make others suffer, who then sacrifice their own lives for others, and then think that that is the only thing that truly matters. Their naïveté consists in that they have failed to realize that evil is more powerful than good since it has no limits.

The second kind of people are the great majority of mortals, i.e. ordinary people who are happy when all their needs are met, when their consciences are appeased, and when they are led as one sheepfold by a single shepherd. Thus, they avoid having to make choices; others make choices for them while they lead happy lives, believing that in so doing, they will obtain eternal life. Like the slaves in Plato’s cave, they do not want to look for the light, but rather for the false semblances that distract them. To this group belongs Fyodor, the lustful and greedy father of the Karamazovs, as well as Dmitri, the oldest of the brothers.

The third kind of people are composed of those who, though not being believers in the meaning of life nor in the final victory of the good over evil, are sensitive to self-deception and compassionate to the weakness that is part and parcel of the human condition. In order to come to the aid of the miserable, they employ the three means that Christ refused: thus, they use the miracle to satisfy their needs; mystery to accept sin as something that belongs to the human condition; and authority to impose order on the sheepfold, which, although takes away their freedom, appeases their consciences. They protect man from knowing the terrible truth and allow them to go through life without ever having to suffer any setbacks. This third kind of people would be the true benefactors of the human race, because they maintain mankind in the cavern of ignorance. They, on the other hand, suffer because they know the truth: beyond the grave there is nothing. And so, ‘is everything permissible?’ asks Alyosha, repeating Ivan’s well-known phrase. In spite of the fact that he realizes the destructive nature of such a thought, Ivan reaffirms it: ‘The formula “all is lawful,” I won’t renounce’ (Dostoevsky, 290).

As Alyosha sustains, Ivan’s problem is that he is fighting a Christianity that does not exist; he and many other atheists are fighting a caricature of Christianity. The Jesus the Grand Inquisitor fights against, in fact, is an impossible idealized model to imitate, because he is too elevated for man’s excessively weak will-power, and, therefore, the cause of rivalry and violence among men. But the true Jesus, more than a model to imitate, is the origin of grace that allows everyone to follow in his footsteps, notwithstanding our sinful condition.

The opposition between law and conscience is also false. Neither authority nor laws take away happiness when they are open to the will of God, because that is precisely what he wants; nor can one say that conscience is appeased when fooled and ends up mistaking evil for good. In reality, law and conscience are two sides of the same transcendence: the voice of God that guides us toward him as we walk in our earthly pilgrimage.

In the end, there is no opposition between freedom and happiness. The Inquisitor is not unhappy because he is free and knows the truth, nor are ordinary men happy because they have ceased to be free. The ones who are freest, like Father Zosima and Alyosha, are also the happiest, whereas Ivan, who wants to drink from the cup of life to the end, is terribly unhappy. All this is well represented in the life of Dmitri who,
more than Alyosha, is truly Ivan’s foil, not only because he desires the same woman, but especially because, like Ivan, he is dominated by his father’s very desire to the point of coveting his lover and creating a love triangle that leads to unrestrained mimetic violence. In any case, even if he is the most similar of the brothers to their unprincipled and materialistic father, Dmitri undergoes a profound transformation upon being unjustly condemned to prison in Siberia for the murder of his father. Accepting his sentence as expiation for his sins and those of his brothers, Dmitri becomes a new man and finds what he truly desired: love, life, and fulfillment. ‘What am I to say, gentlemen of the jury? The hour of judgment has come for me, I feel the hand of God upon me! The end has come to an erring man! But, before God, I repeat to you, I am innocent of my father’s blood!’ (Dostoevsky, 850). For Dmitri, as for Raskolnikov in Crime and Punishment, when evil and punishment are accepted, they become the beginning of a new life.

In essence, according to Dostoevsky, and against what the old Inquisitor maintains, man is not an evil beast, but is at the same time, light and shadows, sinner and one capable of sublime heroism. Jesus, in fact, is the only light that can enlighten the darkness in which man is often enveloped. God does not limit himself to forgiving. As he is just, he punishes and even allows evil, and that is why, in his mysterious plan, there is room for the suffering, blood, and tears of the innocent. As Dmitri explains, it is possible to suffer in order to atone for the sins of others. This communion in suffering is perhaps the deepest mystery of the human condition that only the sacrifice of Christ on the cross fully reveals, since he sacrifices himself out of love, in order to redeem us and make us part of his mystical Body. In this sense, the suffering of children, the closest in kind to Christ’s, the most innocent Victim of all, acquires a special value in that it now has the possibility of being co-redemptive.

Even in Ivan’s life, there too is room for repentance, as can be gathered by his petition to Katya to help Dmitri, his rival, flee to America. Notwithstanding the fact that Ivan had lived by and defended the maxim ‘everything is permissible; anything goes,’ he aspires to the good and deep within. He is fully aware that evil ought to be avoided because God exists and because evil destroys persons and their mutual communion. Hence, once he realized that Smerdyakov, his half-brother, had murdered their father following his maxim, Ivan goes insane as he cannot accept having become someone who committed parricide.

**Conclusion**

Throughout the Legend of the Grand Inquisitor, Dostoevsky helps us discover that evil is not only the absence of a good that ought to exist, but also and more importantly so, that it is the suffering of the innocent and the bestiality of the murderer. In this light, evil calls into question the very meaning of life and, ultimately, the existence of God, if God is thought to be the Creator of this world.

So, does evil have the last word? According to Ivan and the Grand Inquisitor (his mask), yes. Given that evil is indelible, the freedom to choose does not make sense and should be taken away from human beings so that they can be happy. This is the great mystery of the human condition. Only some – like the Grand Inquisitor, who is
a kind of Nietzschean superman but still in possession of a moral conscience – have discovered and come to terms with this secret. They know full well that miracle, mystery and authority have no other purpose than to protect ordinary men and women from a life devoid of meaning.

Dostoevsky lays bare the different kinds of men depending on how they use their freedom. He does not advocate for any one of them as they all reflect the complexity of his own tormented soul, and this is especially true as regards the characters of Alyosha and Ivan. They represent naïve faith and intellectual doubt when faced with unforgivable crimes. According to Dostoevsky, true faith needs to deal with the ambiguity of reality, given that ‘evil can lead one to condemnation or to salvation, to despair or to atonement; ideas could be divine or diabolical; beauty is an enigma as it can damn or save; love is divided between ecstasy or passion; freedom can lead to a liberating good or to an enslaving evil; it is the same God who hides and who reveals himself, who dies and resurrests. Hence, reality is ambiguous and enigmatic before the final victory of good over evil.’ (Blanco Sarto 2006, 422–434).

In the dialogue between the two brothers, and especially in the Legend of the Grand Inquisitor, there is continual tension, though not of a dialectical kind, but rather of an existential one. Dostoevsky seems to tell us that in order to affirm God in the era of atheistic reason, the Christian should have overcome nihilism after having experienced its fatal attraction in the first person. That is possible since, as Scripture states, an abyss calls upon another abyss: the abyss of nothingness calls into question a grace without limits (cf. Pareyson, 142–143).

Perhaps in this tension, we can find the elements that still allow us today not only to overcome the mentality of ordinary people who exclusively seek to satisfy their every desire without scruple, but also of those who live off of a naïve faith or believe in a reason without God. The suffering of the victims and the evil of the murderers allows us to better understand the limits of either a too-ready and comprehensive an answer with which to soothe the scandal of reason when dealing with evil, or of a reason which loses sight of the complexity of the human condition and of its mystery: the communion in suffering and love. There is not only a difference between innocence and an awareness that clearly demonstrates the presence of evil but also within our own judgments on the justification of punishment, forgiveness, and reconciliation. The questions that are put before the believer and the philosopher are not simple: they need to determine whether these questions are the leftovers of a stage that has already been overcome by post-modern man, or if, on the contrary, they cannot be over come as they belong to that which makes us all the more human. Dostoevsky seems to indicate that not even supermen, for all their claims to be beyond good and evil, can do away with these differences, these judgments, and especially the voices of remorse in each one’s conscience.

Note
1. A story is told that for long periods of time during his life, St. Francis de Sales was unable to overcome the thought that God had already condemned him to hell. And even though he would feel the pains of hell in his own soul, he would pray to the Lord to grant him the grace to always love him in this life and in the next.
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