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**Dostoyevsky between “Rosy” christianity and Gnosticism**

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**Abstract:** This article discusses Dostoyevsky’s ambivalent attitude to the world, his Gnostic assertions, and his world-accepting attitude. The author presents arguments supporting the conclusion that love for the world was the predominant attitude of Dostoyevsky, and clarifies the polysemantic concept of “world”. This attitude in Dostoyevsky is used to explain the strong attraction and reverence he felt for the “Russian startsi” phenomenon as an alternative to traditional monasticism and as an institution on which he set hopes that it might bring the Church closer to the “world”. The article presents some critical assessments made from the viewpoint of Orthodox doctrine regarding Dostoyevsky’s depiction of Russian “startsi” in his works.

**Keywords:** Dostoyevsky, “startsi”, Orthodoxy, “this world”, Gnosticism

This article discusses Dostoyevsky’s attitude to the world. Christianity – and Dostoyevsky is a Christian writer – takes an ambivalent stance towards the world. On the one hand, this stance is categorically expressed in texts like St. John’s First Epistle, which is invariably cited on this matter. The text in question reads:

“Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, love for the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the pride of life, is not of the Father but is of the world. And the world passes away, and the lust of it; but he who does the will of God abides forever.” (I John 2: 15-17).

Similar epistles express a view of the Christian as a person essentially unsettled, unsheltered in the world, not having the world as a home (“for we have no continuing city but we seek one to come”, in the words of St. Paul (Hebrews 13: 14)).

Hence, life in the world – as the living place of the “outer” man (by analogy with St. Paul’s “inner man”) – is of no great value. Christianity is at least indifferent, if not hostile, to that world. “For the Christian, the essence of every sin consists in prizing one’s earthly road”, writes Ortega y Gasset, and thus, Christianity sees the greatest sin in the desire for pleasure, which contains “a tacit and profound agreement with life” (Ortega y Gasset 2002, 66).

On the other hand, the world is God’s creation and as such – albeit damaged by man’s original sin – it cannot simply be rejected, totally denied; on the contrary, Christian efforts are aimed at transforming it, restoring its original purity and innocence. In this, the Christian

worldview differs from the closely similar view of Gnosticism (in the latter's various manifestations). The denial of the world as created is a basic Gnostic attitude, motivated by the notion that the world is the work of an alien god, an evil demiurge, and that victory over the world, which the bearers of Gnosis are called upon to achieve, is tantamount to its destruction.

John Meyendorff writes that “Christianity has always rejected the ontological dualism of the Manicheans, and also the idea (common to Gnosticism in the second century) that the visible creation is the work of an inferior demiurge, different from the transcendent God; instead, it asserts that the creation, ‘both the visible and the invisible’, is fundamentally good. However, the New Testament confirms the existential dualism between ‘this world’, which is in a state of insubmission to God, and ‘the world to come’, when ‘God will be all in all’. Christians await the ‘city to come’ and consider themselves only ‘dwellers’, and not full citizens of the present world. However, this New Testament eschatology and its practical consequences have been experienced and interpreted by Christians in different ways during different historical ages” (Meyendorff 2001, 126).

The core element of Gnostic beliefs is the conviction that the world is ontologically insufficient. The Gnostic experience of the world is a destructive one. The world/creation does not lend itself to transfiguration: this primary Gnostic conviction is permanently ingrained in the mentality of the revolutionaries of yesterday and today: “In speaking of Gnosis, I have in mind a very broad range of attitudes, meanings, intentions, cultural practices, penetrated by the conviction in the primordial ontological insufficiency of ‘this world’, in the fact that any attempt to transform it is doomed to fail, in the inevitability of suffering, and the theomachistic defectiveness of any attempt to organize and change your life for the better” (Yakovenko, Muzykantskiy 2010, 130).

Respectively, the natural world – the element of creation that is least “responsible” for the fallen state of the created world, and towards which various Christian thinkers have displayed a strong empathy – is seen as the embodiment of a dark material force, and as the opposite of the spiritual principle; hence, it is totally rejected.

In his exemplary study on world-rejecting attitudes (“A Theory on Religious Rejections of the World and Their Directions”), Max Weber deduces a common element, which is the devaluing of the world. Weber points out how, in their rejection of the world, the different world-rejecting ethics of salvation are positioned in different places along a rationally constructed scale (Weber 2001, 268). In this text, we will refer to a scale of this

type in our attempt to define the basic world-perceptions of Dostoyevsky (we know that in his paradoxical works, these perceptions are always mutually exclusive).

When discussing the world-rejecting attitude of Christianity (the contrary attitude does not require clarification), we should always specify exactly what those who reject mean by “world”, for as it was pointed out, “there is ‘God’s world’, there is also ‘this world’ (the world of human passions, the world of sin), and although ‘God’s world’ is the captive of the latter, the two should not be confused” (Perevezentsev 2007, 167).

Could it be that the world rejected by Christianity is simply human society, a sphere of the creation where insufficiency is most salient? Let us turn to some of the reflections of authors powerfully influenced by the aura of Dostoyevsky – for instance, Berdyaev. The question as to what the *world* represents (respectively, what it is that Christianity rejects) occurs frequently in his works. Commenting (in 1907) on the “religion of childbirth” professed by Vasiliy Rozanov, Berdyaev points out, “The question about the *world* is very unclear and undefined <...> What is such a world, and what sort of world is referred to? What sort of meaning does Rozanov invest in the word ‘world’, and is this world the aggregate of empirical appearances or of the positive fullness of being? Is the world everything given, a medley of the authentic and illusionary, the good and the evil, or is it only the authentic, the good? If the question about the world is taken as applying to the aggregate of everything empirically given, in which the pleasure derived from jam occupies the same place as the pleasure from the greatest artistic works, then this question is almost of no interest to us. The eternal in the world and the perishable in the world cannot be taken at the same level, and the very formulation of the question regarding the world is impermissible without clarification. Such a world is a ‘world’ in parentheses. Our factually given and experienced by us world is a mixture of being and non-being, of reality and illusion, of eternity and decay” (Berdyaev 1910, 237). To affirm this world is to affirm the law of decay, of slavish necessity, of poverty and sickness, of deformity and falsehood. It is the world immersed in evil. This is the world that Christ condemned – this perishable, ghostly, chaotic world. “But worldly factuality”, Berdyaev adds, “is neither of this world, nor of that world, but a mixture, a mixing of the real and the ghostly world, of being and non-being, of value and worthlessness”. What is rejected in this perspective is the empirical world as a whole (deserving of nothing but fire, in Berdyaev’s words) – as transient, perishable, delusory. The Gnostic element is clearly perceptible here.

In a letter to Erich Hollerbach dating from 1916, Berdyaev shares that he does not believe in the *religion of the world* because it is “the religion of satisfaction, whereas every religion is a profound, suffering, tragic dissatisfaction with the ‘world’. All creativity is dissatisfaction with the ‘world’, a surmounting of the ‘world’, the fulfillment of the command ‘love not the world or anything that is in the world’” (Berdyaev 1998, 143).

Coming back to Dostoyevsky, when comparing his attitude to the *world* with the attitude described above, we come across a clearly visible difference – both as regards the natural world alone and the *world* in general.

Regarding the natural world, Dostoyevsky’s love of the Mother-Earth is a sufficiently clarified topic, on which scholars are unanimous. Aaron Steinberg even considers it to be a basic tenet of Dostoyevsky’s philosophy, and asserts that “He loves the earth as if it were an animated being. ‘Kiss the earth and love it with a consuming unceasing love’ – this testament of Zosima is part of Dostoyevsky’s own beliefs, because the Platonic idea of the universe, the idea of the earth, the transfiguration of the surface in its human aspect, is an immutable aspect of Dostoyevsky’s metaphysics” (Steinberg 1991, 66).

Kenoske Nakamura distinguishes two kinds of attitude to nature in Dostoyevsky: nature as a source of life-loving joy and nature as eliciting despair at its implacable laws. The former, “contact with nature”, represents a full, meaningful life, it *is* the feeling of life, while the latter, “the stone walls”, is the feeling of death. However, this division is surmounted and the life-loving attitude has triumphed (see Nakamura 1997, 32).

As for the attitude towards the world as a *totality*, here are Father Zosima’s words (in “Conversations and Exhortations”) through which Dostoyevsky expresses his own attitude to the world: “Love all God's creation, the whole and every grain of sand in it. Love every leaf, every ray of God's light. Love the animals, love the plants, love everything. If you love everything, you will perceive the divine mystery in things. Once you perceive it, you will begin to comprehend it better every day. And you will come at last to love the whole world with an all-embracing love” (Dostoyevsky, 1984, 337).

In this respect, Zosima’s antipode is Ivan Karamazov. When he most respectfully returns the ticket to the Creator, he is thinking of the world as a place where dogs can be set on little children. He does not seem to be particularly interested in nature. No, he takes a very firm stance precisely against the world “which lies in evil”, against the world of human relations, the world of depravity and cruelty, the world of sin. His unlove for such a world is typically Christian, but the notion that it is utterly incorrigible is Gnostic. Ivan not only “does

not love the world” because of the unjustified (with respect to innocent creatures) evil in it, but in refusing to accept that world, he sees no perspective for its transformation and he condemns it to destruction.

Though Ivan is the antipode of Zosima, the bearer of the chief message (of the novel and of the author himself), Dostoyevsky is speaking through Ivan as well. The latter is young, gifted, handsome: knowing how sensitive Dostoyevsky was to beauty (including physical beauty), we are justified to look for some of the author’s personal thoughts among the passionately expressed thoughts of Ivan – specifically, his rejection of the world.

Penetrated as he was by both world-rejecting attitudes – of Christians and of Gnostics – Dostoyevsky sought a solution in traditional Christian means. He turned to monasticism, an institution specifically devoted to this attitude towards the world, and to the phenomenon of the holy fool, even more radical than monasticism.

In this text, we will consider only the first of these forms, which we will look for in the works of Dostoyevsky. (As for his attitude to the holy fools, that is the topic of one of my other studies (see Dimitrova, 2007).)

The first thing to be noted is the specific Russian form of institutionalized non-participation in the world, which inspired Dostoyevsky, i.e., the Russian “startsi”, or elders. As Tatyana Goricheva explains, “The *starets* institution is not a rank of Church hierarchy. It is a special form of holiness that can be proper to anyone. A *starets* might be a monk with no spiritual rank, he may be a bishop, he may be a woman” (Goricheva 1991, 63).

The Russian startsi theme was first presented by Dostoyevsky in “Stavrogin’s Confession”. As Rostislav Pletnev points out, “the monastery was already marked as a haven, as a beginning and end, and the teaching type is presented, the educator and spiritual father, the sower of spiritual seeds in man’s soul” (Pletnev 1933, 77).

The philosopher Simon Frank was one of the researchers of the Russian *startsi* (he published a study on “Die russische Starzen” in the journal *Hochland* in 1937, with which he acquainted the Western public with this typically Russian phenomenon). He described this as a marvelous phenomenon of Russian religious life, which first emerged early on, in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. “The ‘starets’ is usually not a priest, not an ecclesiastical official, more often he is an elderly peasant who has left his home and has become a God-worshipper. He has a long life behind him – as a rule, a life spent in seclusion, asceticism, and constant prayer. Eventually, he returns to the society of people and enriches them with the spiritual wealth he has accumulated. His personal wisdom is his life in God, which generates his boundless love for

all people, his deep understanding of all the needs of the human heart. He is always radiant, calm, cheerful, and imparts that feeling to others – the joyful feeling of birth in God” (Frank 2005, 282).

Why did Dostoyevsky prefer the Russian *startsi* to the traditional form of monasticism? A possible answer might be the assumption that in them, he discerned an elated love of God’s creation, which particularly commanded his respect and coincided with his own attitude.

It was precisely this fundamental and dominant world-accepting attitude (which prevailed over his world-rejecting impulse) that determined his preference for the *startsi*. The most important thing for him was the possibility for connection to “the world”, and he believed the mission of the *startsi* was to provide this connection. In this specifically Russian phenomenon, Dostoyevsky saw the *startsi* as throwing a bridge to the *world* (even the sinful world), as people striving for the unity of spiritual and social life, of the sacred and the profane.

Commenting on the *startsi* of the Optina monastery (whom Dostoyevsky depicted “from life”), Sergey Horuzhiy points out the writer was evolving in the direction of “socialization”, and emphasizes the contribution of the starets Amvrosiy, prototype of Zosima, to this evolution. “The *starets* Amvrosiy became the spiritual advisor of everyone who came to him, and this means that he entered deeply into that person’s experience, into his world, made it his own, and responded to it. In this way, he removed the barrier separating the world of the hesychast, the man of intelligent prayer, from the world of any random person, from the Other. In Amvrosiy’s experience, the hesychast practice became completely compatible with acceptance of the Other. But, after all, the Other carries all the passions of the world! Accepting the Other, accepting that Other’s inner world and experience into himself into his own inner world, is exceptionally difficult and dangerous for the hesychast” (Horuzhiy 2003).

Horuzhiy continues. “The Russian *startsi* draw close to the main goal of this participation in the life of the world: to introduce into the world the principles of hesychast life, motivated in this by the striving to make the world Godly. This united process, the socialization of hesychasm and the “*hesychastization*” of society, abolished the barrier separating the ascetic tradition from society – the very same barrier they had zealously raised and fortified at the start of the tradition” (Horuzhiy 2003).

This was Dostoyevsky’s dream, for his fundamental vitality demanded that the *world* and Christianity be brought together. He chose the *startsi* (over traditional monasticism!) because of their world-asserting pathos.

In his study on Dostoyevsky’s *this-worldly Christianity*, Yuriy Ivask points out how Dostoyevsky “revered the *startsi* of Optina for their monastic practice of contemplation, the guidance they gave to lay persons, but that is not what he was expecting from Christianity. He wanted to overturn this world, like the socialists, but with God’s help, through faith in the beloved Christ. This active Christianity in Dostoyevsky, which Konstantin Leontiev, who abhorred him, called Utopian (“rosy”), seemed fiery to him and always inspired him” (Ivask 1981, 99).

Scholars commenting on Dostoyevsky invariably draw comparisons between the *startsi* depicted in his works and those in real life. Tikhon Zadonsky was the prototype of the saintly man described in “Stavrogin’s Confession”. In this separately published chapter of *The Possessed*, Tikhon’s humility (specially emphasized by Dostoyevsky) is such that the other monks in the monastery treat him “not exactly with neglect, but with a sort of familiarity” (Dostoyevsky 1996, 8). The furnishings of the room described by the author is also not typical for the dwelling of a saint: there are some elegant pieces of furniture, an expensive Bokhara carpet, and in his library, “side by side with the works of the great ecclesiastics and the Christian fathers, there were works of drama and fiction, *and perhaps even something worse*” (Dostoyevsky 1996, 9). Rostislav Pletnev believes that Dostoyevsky obviously deviated from the canon in these descriptions, and was inventing creatively here (Pletnev 1933, 76).

Grigoriy Pomerantz estimates Tikhon as a psychologically unconvincing character, and writes that Tikhon, “speaks like a village priest to a grand lord – timidly, hesitantly. Is that what he should have said to Stavrogin, that his confession was a caprice, that, without trying any tricks, he should go to a monastery and repent under the guidance of a *starets*?... Maybe Stavrogin would have indeed gone to a monastery, had he heard a masterful voice; but hesitant advice, he rejected, just as he had rejected hesitation and timidity all his life...” (Pomerantz 1987, 126).

Discussing the importance that Dostoyevsky attached to the press (the newspaper has taken the place of Holy Communion), Boris Groys is convinced that “the *startsi* in Dostoyevsky do not exercise guidance over the soul of the believer, i.e., they never guide the actions of the believer by their advice. They only listen to (or read) the confession addressed to them and afterwards confirm that the person who did all this may be accepted and justified.

The *startsi* in Dostoyevsky are a kind of uncensored press, capable of healing the person tortured by demons by drawing him into candor, into universal communicability and the socially acceptable. The acceptance of the sinner by the *startsi* is equated with his acceptance by God” (Groys 1977, 106).

The rejection of the literary depiction of *startsi* in Dostoyevsky, as well as the doubt as to the authenticity of his Orthodox religiousness, is a tradition that goes far back, even to the lifetime of the writer. Both Leontiev and Pobedonostsev (the latter discussed the idea of depicting *startsi* with the writer and approved of it) do not acknowledge Zosima as an authentic Russian *startsi*. In his commentary on the “Pushkin Speech”, Konstantin Leontiev asserted that “the monks in Dostoyevsky say not exactly what the very good monks in our country and at Mount Athos, and the Russian monks, and the Greek, and the Bulgarian, would say, or more precisely, they say exactly what those monks would not say...” (Leontiev 1911, 88). Even though he had personal experience as a monk and should have been able to give a trustworthy testimony, Leontiev was quite biased against Dostoyevsky, and we should perhaps not accept this well-known judgment of his without reservation.

Moreover, it would be absurd to accuse the writer of having incorrectly depicted literary characters, even if based on real historical figures, as Leo Zander says in connection with Dostoyevsky’s depiction of monks. Zosima is a project, a task the writer has set himself, rather than the description of an accomplished ideal (Zander 2002, 205). In view of the writer’s self-assessment about his “realism in the higher sense”, the demand for historical veracity seems indeed pointless.

The most important point of disagreement among Dostoyevsky’s Orthodox critics is his thesis, and dream, about monasticism in the world. The image of the Optina *startsi* Amvrosiy sending Alyosha Karamazov out into the world does not seem Orthodox to the writer’s critics: it seems to them to express the world’s desire to soil Christianity. It would be justified to see Gnostic motives in such arguments.

To these critics, the tenderly compassionate and world-asserting Christianity of Dostoyevsky does not seem true to life. In this respect, those who disagree with the writer’s description of *startsi* concur that the works of Dostoyevsky are not illuminated, and that it is absurd to call him an Orthodox Christian writer. In Zosima’s ideas there is nothing but a kind of sensuality and emotionality that is not proper to a holy person. Everything Zosima says is sentimental, sweet, tender. The “sweetly tender” quality of the righteous characters in



Dostoyevsky’s works has been pointed out as untypical of the authentic *startsi*, and hence as unnecessary.

The assessment of Czeslaw Milosz is in the same spirit: “Was he a Christian? There is no complete conviction about this. Perhaps he decided to be one, inasmuch as he saw no salvation for Russia outside Christianity? But the ending of *The Brothers Karamazov* makes us doubt whether he found in his thoughts a remedy for the process of decay he observed. The pure adolescent Alyosha, at the head of his twelve schoolboys, like a troop of boy scouts – and this is what is being proposed to Russia to save her from revolution? It is somehow pleasurable and banal” (quoted in: Skalinskaya 2013).

But it was precisely this attitude of Dostoyevsky towards the world that would be fundamental to the Russian Silver Age, which sought the formula of a closer connection between profane and sacred. With regard to the major debate – Alyosha’s being sent out into the world – Dmitriy Merezhkovsky saw this as the accomplishment of the future contact between the stellar secret and the earthly secret, the revelation of the holy earth: “This is the most profound revelation of Christianity in Russian, and perhaps in world, culture. Until now, it had seemed to us that to be a Christian means to love the heavens, only the heavens, and to reject the earth, to loathe the earth. But here is Christianity not as a rejection of the earth, nor as a betrayal of heavens, but as a new, never before seen “loyalty to the earth”, a new “kissing of the earth”. It turns out that not only is it possible to love the heavens and the earth simultaneously, but that they cannot be loved in any other way except simultaneously, they cannot be loved separately, according to Christ’s teaching” (Merezhkovsky 2000, 352).

Thus, faith is antinomic; all three Christian confessions comprise conflicting trends presenting various nuances of world rejection and world acceptance that all claim to be speaking in the name of “authentic” Christianity. Dostoyevsky was constantly striving to find the path that would make an intermediate position acceptable. As Tatyana Goricheva writes, “... on the one hand, we have a religiosity that, in its autonomy and vicious extreme, ‘spits at the world’, sees all of life as a ‘bad performance of a role’, does not take either one’s brother or oneself seriously. Hence – ‘everything is permissible’ (because there is a God and only He is). But on the other hand, we have before us a happy humanity that prefers bread to God’s Word and the actual joys of life to preachers’ vague promises about the beyond. Here too, ‘everything is permissible’ (because there is no God). So, on the one hand – the egoism of holiness, on the other – the egoism of the flesh. As we see, extremes coincide. The true path is

narrow, it lies somewhere in the middle, although this is not a lukewarm, indifferent middle” (Goricheva 1977, 173).

Such was Dostoyevsky’s path – found with difficulty and “narrow”. He sought a Christianity that is life loving, life accepting, “radiant”, opposed to renouncement of the world, to contempt for earthly life, and to complacent asceticism taken as an end in itself. It is compassionate and preaches “active love”; its “activism” aims to make the world holy by the penetration of a monastic ethos into the world; the dichotomy between monasticism and the world seemed increasingly impossible to him. Eschatology and “pochvennichestvo” (return to the soil) were equally inherent to Dostoyevsky’s religiousness, but they are inherent to Christianity in general, and this antinomy is inescapable and indicates the paradoxical nature of Christianity: “This bond is mysterious and unclear; but only he who stands firmly on earth is capable of rising high; and only when contemplating the world from high above do you see it in the perspective of eternal beauty and God-inspired holiness. This is what Dostoyevsky meant when he taught us to love the earth and be loyal to it for ever and ever” (Zander 1948, 14).

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