

# God and Immortality in Dostoevsky's Thought

LOUIS C. MIDGLEY

Ivan Karamazov, Dostoevsky's "nihilist," fully recognized the consequences of the denial of God and immortality. Ivan gave us two different formulations of his position. First, "there is no virtue if there is no immortality" (BK, 66).<sup>1</sup> Secondly, Ivan

solemnly declared in argument that there was nothing in the whole world to make man love their neighbours. That there was no law of nature that man should love mankind, and that, if there had been any love on earth hitherto, it was not owing to a natural law but simply because men have believed in immortality. . . . [I]f you were to destroy in mankind the belief in immortality, not only love but every living force maintaining life of the world would at once be dried up. Moreover, nothing then would be immoral, everything would be lawful, even cannibalism (BK, 65).

The final pay-off of Ivan's nihilistic doctrine is that for every individual . . . who does not believe in God or immortality, the moral law of nature must immediately be changed into the exact contrary of the former religious law, and that egoism, even crime, must become, not only lawful but even recognized as the inevitable, the most rational, even honourable outcome of his position (BK, 65f.).

Ivan's bold doctrine, from one point of view, is high minded

---

1 References to Dostoevsky's writings are not separated by the use of superscript and notation at the end of the paper. They will appear as abbreviations in parenthetical references in the body of the essay. The abbreviations used for Dostoevsky's writings will include: (BK), *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Constance Garnett (New York: Macmillan, 1948); (NU), *Notes from the Underground*, in *The Best Short Stories of Dostoevsky*, trans. David Magarshack (New York: Modern Library, n.d.), pp. 107-240; (DW), *The Diary of a Writer*, trans. Boris Brazol, 2 Vol. (New York: Scribner's 1949), in the citations in this essay the volume number will not be indicated, however volume one ends with page 558; (P), *The Possessed*, trans. Constance Garnett (New York: Modern Library, 1936); (L), *Letters of Fyodor Michailovitch Dostoevsky to his Family and Friends*, trans. Ethel Colburn Mayne (New York: Macmillan, 1917); (I), *The Idiot*, trans. David Magarshack (London: Penguin, 1955).

and lofty. Ivan had considerable difficulty believing that his theory was just "an attractive theory for scoundrels . . ." On the contrary, "humanity will find in itself the power to live for virtue," Ivan argued, "even without believing in immortality. It will find it in love for freedom, for equality, for fraternity" (BK, 79).

#### THE MORAL ARGUMENT

In his novels Dostoevsky attempted to develop arguments for the existence of God and for human immortality. These arguments, in some respects, are strikingly similar to arguments proposed by Immanuel Kant, who felt that God was beyond the reach of both the senses and of analytical reason, but not beyond "moral proof." Kant based his belief in the existence of God on man's moral nature. The conscience of man assumes that the moral ideals of man are somehow realizable. But moral ideals apparently cannot be realized on earth. They can only be realized if there actually is a supreme moral will—God. Morality for Kant leads inevitably to religion. God becomes the postulate of practical reason.<sup>2</sup> In order for the world to make sense—that is, make moral sense—it is necessary that God exist. God exists in order to recompense evil for evil and good for good. Also, man must be immortal if he is to receive judgment. Kant also treated freedom of the will as a postulate of the practical reason.

Now it cannot be maintained that Dostoevsky follows Kant across the board. In fact there are significant differences as well as similarities between the two men on these matters, and some are profound differences at that. The chief difference between Kant and Dostoevsky is on the question of freedom. Not that Kant opposes freedom of will. For Kant freedom is not factually evident in the world of appearances—the phenomenal world. By observing the phenomenal world we discover rigid, deterministic uniformity. Freedom exists only in the noumenal world, and Kant was emphatic in declaring that man cannot know anything about the reality that stands behind this phenomenal world.

---

<sup>2</sup> The use of the term "postulate" by Kant was not intended to suggest that the belief was merely tentative or hypothetical, but, on the contrary, it was used to indicate that reflection on the facts of morality would produce necessarily a belief in what could only be realized by implication from morality.

But freedom, for Dostoevsky, is an empirically verifiable phenomenon. It is clear in the *Notes from the Underground* that radical freedom, the real fundamental of human nature, was not just a kind of postulate to make things work out all right morally in the end, but, on the contrary, freedom was the real stuff of life, something each individual realizes, something that can be seen functioning in the history of individuals and nations. Real freedom makes evil possible; freedom being the capacity to choose the evil as well as the good.

Dostoevsky felt that man could observe that he was not an "insect" (NU, 111), or the "keys on the piano" (NU, 136), or a "stop on an organ pipe" (NU, 132). Dostoevsky reasoned that "you can say anything you like about world history, anything that might enter the head of a man with the most disordered imagination. One thing, though, you cannot possibly say about it: you cannot say that it is sensible. If you did, you would choke at the first word" (NU, 75). Dostoevsky used the word "sensible" in the sense of determined; that is clear from the context. The real enemy of humanity in the *Notes* was a rationalist, a shallow fellow who feels that man can be comprehended and ordered in a way analogous to the deterministic harmony and order inherent in a mathematical proposition such as "twice-two-makes four" (NU, 132, 139f.). The deterministic quality can be seen in this example. You see, it follows necessarily, that starting with two and two, you will get four if you add.<sup>3</sup> Dostoevsky saw clearly the frequent alliance between philosophical rationalism and determinism. He distinguishes himself by rejecting both rationalism and determinism. In this respect the *Notes* represent a rather important contribution to the literature on the subject.

#### NO MORALITY WITHOUT IMMORTALITY

We have noted a distinct difference between Kant's argument for freedom and Dostoevsky's position with respect to freedom. It is, however, more difficult to distinguish Kant and Dostoevsky on the question of the existence of God, and, per-

---

3 Ivan confessed that: "With my pitiful, earthly Euclidian understanding, all I know is that there is suffering and that there are none guilty; that cause follows effect, simply and directly; that everything flows and finds its level—but that's only Euclidian nonsense" (BK, 250).

haps, even more difficult when the question of immortality is considered. Kant argued that immortality was a necessary postulate of practical reason and that it was necessary simply because human values appear meaningless without it. Immortality was necessary in order to round out Kant's ethical system.

It would not be too far from the truth to suggest that Ivan Karamazov's emphatic declaration that "there is no virtue if there is no immortality" (BK, 66) has a certain kind of fundamental compatibility with the Kantian moral postulate. But with Dostoevsky more than with Kant the argument appears to be a two-edge sword—meant to cut both ways. Dostoevsky argues it both ways. Without immortality there is no virtue, but it works the other way also, so that without virtue, there is no immortality.

In an editorial in *The Diary of a Writer* entitled "Arbitrary Assertions," Dostoevsky related his views on what he referred to as "the basic and loftiest idea of human existence—the necessity and inevitability of a belief in the immortality of the human soul" (DW, 538). It is clear right from the start that Dostoevsky's insistence on immortality was meant to have a direct relationship to his axiology. Dostoevsky's intense and abiding interest in crime and suicide is important at this point. Dostoevsky felt that he had discovered the formula of a "logical suicide." "Suicide," Dostoevsky argued, "is the necessity of the immediate inference that without faith in one's soul and its immortality, man's existence is unnatural, unthinkable, impossible" (DW, 538). He added that little by little

the thought of his aimlessness and his hatred of the muteness of the surrounding inertia lead him to the inevitable conviction of the utter absurdity of man's existence on earth. It becomes clear as daylight to him [the suicide] that only those men consent to live who resemble the lower animals and who come nearest to the latter by reason of the limited development of their minds and their purely carnal wants. They agree to live superficially as animals, i.e., in order "to eat, drink, sleep, build their nests and raise children." Indeed, eating, sleeping, polluting and setting on soft cushions will long attract men to earth, but not the higher types (DW, 538f.).

Kirillov, a revolutionary "nihilist" of *The Possessed*, had a penchant for suicide. Kirillov dreamed of suicide as a result of

his failure to believe in the existence of God. What Kirillov lacked, according to Dostoevsky, was the "true" religion. Shatov exclaimed: "Kirillov, if . . . if you could get rid of your dreadful fancies and give up your atheistic ravings . . . Oh, what a man you'd be, Kirillov!" (P, 581). Dostoevsky resented indifference even more than disbelief.<sup>4</sup> The rapid spread of "complete disbelief in one's soul and its immortality" was considered by the author of the *Diary* to be "the most dreaded apprehension" of the Russian future (DW, 539). But Dostoevsky also feared indifference or scoffing at the "loftiest ideas of human existence" (DW, 539). The man who has considered the "eternal questions" and ends up rejecting God and immortality may be lost, but he is really only one step from salvation.<sup>5</sup>

Stephen Trofimovitch's conversion was the result, at least in part, of his having realized that

The one essential condition of human existence is that man should always be able to bow down before something infinitely great. If men are deprived of the infinitely great they will not go on living and will die of despair. The infinite and the Eternal are as essential for man as the little planet on which he dwells. My friends, all, all hail to the Great Idea! The Eternal, Infinite Idea! It is as essential to every man, whoever he may be, to bow down before what is the Great Idea. Even the stupidest man needs something great (P, 675).

In *The Diary of a Writer* Dostoevsky wrote:

Neither man nor nation can exist without a sublime idea. And on earth there is *but one* sublime idea—namely, the idea of the immortality of man's soul—since all other "sublime" ideas of life, which give life to man, *are merely derived from this one idea* (DW, 540).

---

4 Tihon announced to Stavrogin that "outright atheism is more to be respected than worldly indifference. . . . Say what you may, but the complete atheist stands on the penultimate step to most perfect faith (he may or may not take a further step), but the indifferent person has no faith whatever. . . ." *The Possessed*, p. 698.

5 Perhaps it is not true that Dostoevsky treats religion as if it were just the condition of being concerned. However, he comes close to this formulation which has recently been popularized by Paul Tillich. The definition of religion as "ultimate concern" lies at the very heart, in one way or another, of the entire theology of Tillich. An atheist, in Tillich's view, is concerned about the important questions and is therefore both religious and one step from salvation. For both Tillich and Dostoevsky the worst condition is not unbelief. In Tillich's view being concerned with something less than the ultimate is the worst condition. Dostoevsky looked upon indifference as the highest sin. There is only a slight difference in these two formulations.

What was Stephen Trofimovitch's Great Idea?<sup>6</sup> It turns out to be God, and the corollary of the *idea* of God is the doctrine of immortality. The old man exclaimed:

My immortality is necessary if only because God will not be guilty of injustice and extinguish altogether the flame of love for Him once kindled in my heart. . . . If I have once loved Him and rejoiced in my love, is it possible that He should extinguish me and my joy and bring me to nothingness again. If there is a God, then I am immortal (P, 673f.).

The two keys to Dostoevsky's ethical system, God and immortality, are treated in his novels as postulates necessary to provide genuine meaning to life.<sup>7</sup> Kirillov, for example, recognizes that "God is necessary and so must exist" (P. 626). "But I know," says Kirillov, that "He doesn't and can't" (P, 626). Stavrogin suggests that God's non-existence is "more likely." Kirillov, however, draws the ultimate conclusion: "Surely you must understand that a man with two such ideas can't go on living?" (P, 626).<sup>8</sup>

The "eternal questions" that the "Russian boys" are endlessly engaged in discussing, torment Dostoevsky's "heroes."<sup>9</sup> Ivan Karamazov says: "It's God that's worrying me. That's the only thing that's worrying me. What if he doesn't exist? What if Rakitin's right—that it's an idea made up by men? Then, if He doesn't exist, man is the chief of earth, of the universe. Mag-

---

6 Dostoevsky wrote that he was "firmly convinced that the majority of suicides, *in toto*, directly or indirectly, were committed as a result of one and the same spiritual illness—the absence in the souls of these men of the sublime idea of existence." *Diary of a Writer*, Vol. I, p. 542.

7 Dostoevsky wrote a letter to N. L. Osmidov that presented a reasoned argument for the existence of God. "Now suppose that there is no God, and no personal immortality (personal immortality and God are one and the same—an identical idea). Tell me then: Why am I to live decently and do good, if I die irrevocably here below? If there is no immortality, I need but live out my appointed day, and let the rest go hang. And if that's really so (and if I am clever enough not to let myself be caught by the standing laws), why should I not kill, rob, steal, or at any rate live at the expense of others? For I shall die, and all the rest will die and utterly vanish! By this road, one would reach the conclusion that the human organism alone is not subject to the universal law [every single organism exists on earth but to live—not to annihilate itself], that it lives but to destroy itself—not to keep itself alive. . . . Is that no indication of personal immortality?" Dostoevsky, *Letters*, p. 234.

8 In 1870 Dostoevsky admitted to A. M. Maikov that one fundamental idea had tormented him all his life and that was "the question of the existence of God." *Ibid.*, p. 190. Dostoevsky knew about a man "with two such ideas" because he was that man.

9 Dostoevsky wrote in 1854 that there are moments of deep and genuine religion for man, and "in such moments, one does, 'like dry grass,' thirst after

nificent! Only how is he going to be good without God? That's the question. I always come back to that" (BK, 676f.). Ivan asked, in another place: "But what will become of men then, . . . without God and immortal life?" (BK, 623). Rakitin, an atheist, replied, "Didn't you know? . . . a clever man can do what he likes . . ." (BK, 623). There is an old captain in *The Possessed* who, after having participated in a discussion in which "short work" was made of God, exclaimed: "If there's no God, how can I be captain?" (P, 229). Dostoevsky produced an amusing dialogue in *The Brothers Karamazov* between Alyosha and Ivan in which the question of the existence of God and immortality was tossed back and forth (BK, 134f.). It is significant to note that the ironic statement by Ivan combined some of Dostoevsky's favorite ideas, but they are stated in reverse. Ivan said: "If there is a God, if he exists, then, of course, I'm to blame and I shall have to answer for it. But if there isn't a God at all, what do they deserve, your fathers? It's not enough to cut their heads off, for they keep back progress" (BK, 134). Atheism cuts the props out from under values and leads to terrible crimes.

In the early part of *The Brothers Karamazov* one of Dostoevsky's characters asks the saintly Zossima how he can regain faith:

But I only believed when I was a little child, mechanically, without thinking of anything. How, how is one to prove it? . . . How can I prove it? How can I convince myself? (BK 51).

Zossima's answer was simply that proof is impossible, "though you can be convinced of it" (BK, 51). The way to gain conviction is by "the experience of active love," whatever that is. Love is a product of the "practical reason" and not a matter of knowledge.

---

faith, and that one finds it in the end solely and simply because one sees the truth more clearly when one is unhappy." For Dostoevsky, the impact of raw experience on man produced suffering, torment and eventually terrible unhappiness. "I want to say to you, about myself, that I am a child of this age [the age of wanderers], a child of unfaith and skepticism, and probable (indeed I know it) shall remain so to the end of my life. How dreadful has it tormented me . . . this longing for faith, which is all the stronger for the proofs I have against it. . . . If anyone could prove to me that Christ is outside the truth, and if the truth really did exclude Christ, I should prefer to stay with Christ and not with truth." *Ibid.*, pp. 70f.

The long review of parallel passages is intended to indicate the seriousness with which Dostoevsky took the problem of the existence of God and immortality, as well as to indicate the direction of his thought. It should be clear that Dostoevsky rested his ethics on religious considerations. That God gives meaning and value to life was a central theme in Dostoevsky's religious thought.

But God and immortality also rest on the value system. Kolya said in *The Brothers Karamazov*: "Oh, I've nothing against God. Of course, God is only a hypothesis, but . . . I admit that He is needed . . . for the order of the universe and all that . . . and if there were no God he would have to be invented . . . " (BK, 584). It certainly is not unreasonable to speak of inventing a hypothesis: Kant, of course, would have called it a postulate. Dostoevsky not only makes abundant use of a kind of Kantian argument but he also recognizes the major theoretical flaw in the argument. The postulate may represent only a kind of wish and not a concrete reality.<sup>10</sup> Dostoevsky never seems to have solved this very important problem. He never solved it, that is, to his own satisfaction. The difficulties inherent in the moral argument for God and immortality are not as important for Kant as they are for Dostoevsky. Kant was a philosopher of religion only after he had arranged his "rational" and "scientific" worlds.<sup>11</sup> Dostoevsky, if he was a philosopher at all, was a philosopher of life and of religion. Dostoevsky not only fails to have made use of the Kantian epistemological superstructure and the metaphysical assumptions upon which the moral argument is based, assuming of course, that Dostoevsky borrowed it in the first place from Kant; but he also fails to provide an epistemology for himself.<sup>12</sup>

---

10 Ivan said: "there was an old sinner in the eighteenth century who declared that, if there were no God, he would have to be invented. . . . And man has actually invented God. And what's strange, what would be marvelous, is not that God should really exist; the marvel is that such an idea, the idea of the necessity of God, could enter the head of such a savage, vicious beast as man." *The Brothers Karamazov*, p. 240.

11 Kant, however, wanted to stress the primacy of the practical reason over the pure or theoretical reason. The primacy is sometimes called the "*moral a priori*." Kant's moral argument has had an enormous impact on religious thinking. Many have taken up the argument and have refined and sophisticated it. See especially the Anglican writer C. S. Lewis, *The Case for Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1947).

12 I know of no literature on the subject of the possible relationship of

## "LOGICAL SUICIDE"

We began by attempting to treat the question of immortality, but have been forced to shift slightly and consider its favorite running mate, the existence of God. In Dostoevsky the two are intimately related.<sup>13</sup> The questions of God and immortality have been dealt with more or less separately for two reasons: (1) the existence of God, for Dostoevsky, raises special problems; (2) the question of immortality leads more directly to Dostoevsky's axiological assumptions.

Dostoevsky wrote two essays on immortality and suicide in *The Diary of a Writer* (see DW, 470 ff.; 538 ff.). The man who is not indifferent to the "eternal questions," "not a cast-iron man," will, according to Dostoevsky, suffer and be intensely tormented by religious doubts. "Irresistibly, there stand before him the loftiest, the most pressing questions," and he added:

What is the use of living if man has already conceived the idea that for man to live like an animal is disgusting, abnormal and insufficient? And what, in this case, can retain him on earth? He cannot solve these questions and he knows it, since even though he realizes that there is what he calls a "harmony of the whole," still he says: "I do not understand it, I shall never be able to understand it, and of necessity I am not going to partake of it: this comes of its own accord." Now, it is this lucidity that finished him. Well, where is the trouble? In what was he mistaken?—The trouble is solely in the loss of faith in immortality (DW, 540).

Dostoevsky asked the question: "Who is happy in this world and what kind of people *consent* to life?" (DW, 471). Both are radically difficult questions. Well, it's the animal types who *consent* to live. Materialists enjoy life because they only think of eating, sleeping, drinking, and building a nest. Dostoevsky was sure that "to build one's nest pre-eminently signifies—to plunder" (DW, 471). Now we have reached the criti-

---

Kant and Dostoevsky. The only indication I have that Dostoevsky was at all familiar with Kant's works is the fact that while in Siberia Dostoevsky was apparently able to secure a copy of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*. See E. H. Carr, *Dostoevsky; A New Biography* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1931), p. 82; and Ernest J. Simmons, *Dostoevsky: The Making of a Novelist* (London: John Lehmann, 1950), p. 65.

<sup>13</sup> In one of his letters he says that God and immortality are identical. See note 7.

cal question for Dostoevsky's ethics. "Perhaps," he wrote,

I may be told that one may arrange one's life and build one's nest on a rational basis, on scientifically sound social principles, and not by means of plunder, as heretofore.—All right, but I ask: What for? What is the purpose of arranging one's existence and of exerting so much effort to organize life in society soundly, rationally and righteously in a moral sense? Certainly no one will be able to give me an answer to this question. All that could be said in answer would be: "To derive delight." Yes, were I a flower or a cow, I should derive delight (DW, 471).

Well, what is the validity of the "humanistic" ethic? In treating "humanism," Dostoevsky raised a question that had tormented him all his life. The issue is simply the problem of evil—how can suffering in life be justified?<sup>14</sup> "Yes, were I a flower or a cow, I should derive delight," retorts Dostoevsky.

But, incessantly putting questions to myself [an old habit with Dostoevsky], as now, I cannot be happy even in the face of the most lofty and *immediate* happiness of love of neighbor and of mankind, since I know that tomorrow all this will perish: I and all the happiness, and all the love, and all mankind will be converted into naught, into former chaos (DW, 471f.).

At this point we may see an important element of Dostoevsky's view of human nature emerge in his demand for universal justice and meaningfulness.

And on such condition, under no consideration can I accept any happiness—and not because of my refusal to accept it, not because I am stubbornly adhering to some principle, but for the simple reason that I will not and cannot be happy on the condition of being threatened with tomorrow's zero. This is a feeling, a direct and immediate feeling—and I cannot conquer it. All right: if I were to die but mankind, instead of me, were to persist forever, then perhaps, I might nevertheless be consoled. However, our planet is not eternal, while mankind's duration is just as brief a moment as mine. And no matter how rationally, happily, righteously and holily mankind might organize its life on earth—tomorrow all this will be made equal to the same zero (DW, 472).

---

14 Perhaps a better way to state the problem would be: how can the existence of evil, i.e. sin and suffering, be reconciled with the character of God? If you believe that God is both somehow all-powerful and at the same time good you are taxed in the extreme to make the reconciliation.

Dostoevsky had reached the point where he could attack one of his favorite enemies—the idea that by assuming some fundamental kind of unity or order in the universe you have justified God or the universe to man. This is not a useful theodicy. To be told of some “almighty, eternal and fixed law of nature . . .” does not console Dostoevsky for human suffering. The finding of a law of nature to explain how mankind and the earth shall ultimately be wiped away does not solve the problem. The whole idea appears to be “profoundly insulting,” and completely disrespectful to mankind, “and all the more unbearable as here there is no one who is guilty” (DW, 472).

We have had occasion to note the “Underground Man”—the man with the sneer—the one who defends human nature from the onslaughts of those who would deny the ultimate, radical freedom of man in the name of some deterministic theory of “science,” and also against the encroachments of materialistic self-interest. Dostoevsky never got over the feeling of disgust for the ant-heap or the “Crystal Palace.” Concerning the “Palace of Crystal” of the materialists, Dostoevsky’s “sneering man” said:

You see, if it were not a palace but a hencoop, and if it should rain, I might crawl into it to avoid getting wet, but I would never pretend that the hencoop was a palace out of gratitude to it for sheltering me from the rain. You laugh and you tell me that in such circumstances even a hencoop is as good as a palace. Yes, I reply, it certainly is if the only purpose in life is not to get wet (NU, 141).

Dostoevsky was not satisfied with the gay and optimistic European conception of the inevitable progress of man based on the laws of nature. This optimistic tale appeared to him to be empty and meaningless. To have everything that man has struggled for and built with endless suffering washed away by some blind movement of nature appeared to be the greatest possible injustice—an injustice against which the “thinking man” would ultimately rebel. Dostoevsky had his “logical suicide” proclaim his own sentence: “I sentence this nature, which has so unceremoniously and impudently brought me into existence for suffering, to annihilation, together with myself . . . And because I am unable to destroy nature, I am destroying only myself, weary of enduring a tyranny in which there is no one guilty” (DW, 473).

## A SUBLIME IDEA

To Dostoevsky the thought that all life would ultimately be reduced to a "zero" (one of Dostoevsky's favorite expressions) was highly intolerable. He argued that it so completely stirs the spirit of the "logical suicide" that "it even kills in him love itself of mankind."

Similarly it has been observed many a time that in a family dying from starvation, father and mother—when at length the suffering of their children grew intolerable—began to hate them, those hitherto beloved ones, precisely because of the intolerableness of their suffering. Moreover, I assert that the realization of one's utter impotence to help, to render some service, or to bring alleviation to suffering mankind—and at the same time when there is a firm conviction of the existence of that suffering,—*may convert in one's heart love for mankind into a hatred of it* (DW, 540f.).

Dostoevsky felt that in the area of private morality, murder, and suicide were the inevitable results of being deprived of a lofty idea: revolution and the nihilistic blood bath rest on the same kind of moral failure—the lack of living faith.

Dostoevsky had a plan for a novel that he never fully completed. It was to feature a man who suddenly lost his belief in God. "The loss of faith has a colossal effect on him . . ." Dostoevsky planned to have his hero attach himself to various atheist movements and he "finds at last salvation in the Russian soil, the Russian Saviour, and the Russian God" (L, 158; for an early plan for the novel about "the atheist"). The atheist was to finally gain a living faith. But faith in what? What is all this talk about the soil and the people? In the same editorial in the *Diary* where Dostoevsky proclaimed that suicide is the logical answer for one who is infected with the nihilistic spiritual illness, that is, one who lacks the "sublime idea of existence," we are told that the "ugly segregation from everything essential and real . . ." is "detachment from the soil and from the people's truth . . ." (DW, 544).<sup>15</sup> But this "segregation" or On the other hand, and this is the helpful side of Dostoevsky's insight, the youth may also "as soon as he has reflected serious-

---

<sup>15</sup> Dostoevsky once wrote an article on the suicide of a young girl who had killed herself because of indignation. Why would anyone want to kill himself because he felt indignant? According to Dostoevsky: "Against the simplicity

"detachment," (both terms are frequently used) from the Russian people is not entirely the same thing as failure to believe in immortality. Did Dostoevsky have two formulas? The moral postulate that we first discovered went something like this: "For if there is no everlasting God, there's no such thing as virtue, and there's no need for it" (BK, 669).<sup>16</sup>

What is Dostoevsky's God? Dostoevsky felt that socialists of the European variety necessarily had to be atheists (DW, 6f, P, 253). The close relationship of atheism and socialism is illustrated by a passage from *The Brothers Karamazov*. After Dostoevsky had remarked that the young men of Russia "fail to understand that the sacrifice of life is, in many cases, the easiest of all sacrifices," but that long, hard, determined effort for an ideal is the most difficult thing in the world, he noted that one of these young men:

if he had decided that God and immortality did not exist, he would have at once become an atheist and a socialist. For socialism is not merely the labour question, it is before all things the atheistic question, the question of the form taken by atheism to-day, the question of the tower of Babel built without God, not to mount to heaven from earth but to set up Heaven on earth (BK, 22f.).

ly . . ." be "convinced of the existence of God and immortality . . ." (BK, 21). In this case he will say: "I want to live for immortality, and I will accept no compromise" (BK, 21). Both belief in God and immortality, and, on the other hand, belief in socialism and atheism, are, for Dostoevsky, what would today be styled "ultimate commitments."

Dostoevsky was always concerned with what the "Russian boys" (one of his favorite expressions) were doing. What do the "Russian boys" talk about when they chance to meet in some tavern? Russian "green youth [he might have said 'raw-youth'] have to settle the eternal questions first of all" (BK, 238). What are the eternal questions? For many, the eternal

---

of the visible, against the meaninglessness of life! Was she one of those well-known judges and deniers of life who are indignant against the 'absurdity' of man's appearance on earth, the nonsensical casualness of this appearance, the tyranny of the neat cause with which one cannot reconcile himself?" *Diary*, Vol. I, pp. 469f.

<sup>16</sup> "But what will become of men then?" I asked him, "without God and immortal life? All things will be lawful then, they can do what they like?" *The Brothers Karamazov*, p. 623.

questions are "the existence of God and immortality." But there are others.

And those who do not believe in God talk of socialism or anarchism, of the transformation of all humanity on a new pattern, so that it comes out the same, they're the same questions turned inside out. And masses, masses of most original Russian boys do nothing but talk of the eternal questions (BK, 239).

To ask those "eternal questions" is to really live. Dostoevsky was furious with indifference. Stavrogin is a listless type. He did not even care if he died in the duel. But in the end he cared enough to kill himself. At least he got off dead zero. The events that nudged Stavrogin into "real" action also brought about profound changes in other "Russian boys" in *The Possessed*. Stephen Trofimovitch was another "type" who failed, except at the very conclusion of his life, to take the real questions of life seriously. All he could say was "I am weary of life and nothing matters to me" (P, 77). The "free thinking" Shatov also found God. Dostoevsky reported that "Shatov had radically changed some of his former socialistic convictions . . . and had rushed to the opposite extreme" (P, 27). To Kirillov, Shatov said: "Kirillov if . . . if you could get rid of your dreadful fancies and give up your atheistic ravings . . . Oh, what a man you'd be, Kirillov!" (P, 581).

#### THE RUSSIAN GOD

Dostoevsky was essentially a pessimist, but he does offer hope and this hope is in Russia's God. He states the idea in *The Possessed*: "To cook your hare you must first catch it, to believe in God you must first have a God" (P, 256).

Dostoevsky's novels are full of strange passages that relate in some way God and the "people." Shatov, for example, proclaimed that "he who has no people has no God" (P, 36). Shatov simply asserted that a loss of faith in the Russian people would result in either atheism or possibly indifference.<sup>17</sup> The

17 Dostoevsky felt "all evil to be grounded upon disbelief, and maintain[ed] that he who abjures nationalism, abjures faith also. That applies especially to Russia, for with us national consciousness is based on Christianity. 'A Christian peasant-people'; 'believing Russia'; these are fundamental conceptions. A Russian who abjures nationalism (and there are many such) is either an atheist or indifferent to religious questions." *Letters*, pp. 257f. "Russians do

indictment of "youths" who separate themselves from the people may or may not be significant, but what has it really got to do with atheism?

Shatov attempted an answer. Dostoevsky had Shatov argue that nations are not built on science or reason but are actually grounded on another principle. This principle is "the seeking for God." Well enough, but this is then followed by a most remarkable passage. Shatov continued:

The object of every national movement, in every people and at every period of its existence is only the seeking for its god, who must be its own god, and the faith in him as the only true one. God is the synthetic personality of the whole people, taken from its beginning to its end. It has never happened that all, or even many, peoples have had one common god, but each has always had its own. It's a sign of the decay of nations when they have gods in common (P, 254).

It would be hard to deny that Shatov was speaking for Dostoevsky when he said: "Only one nation is 'god-bearing,' that's the Russian people . . ." (P, 255).<sup>18</sup> Stavrogin interrupted Shatov with the observation that Shatov had actually reduced "God to a simple attribute of nationality . . ." (P, 254). But Shatov soon replied: "On the contrary, I raise the people to God. And has it ever been otherwise? The people is the body of God" (P, 255). This position is fully consistent with other statements made in *The Possessed*. For example: "the mother of God is the great mother—the damp earth" (P, 144). Was Dostoevsky's "hare" the Russian people? After having taken into consideration the fact that Dostoevsky frequently went out of his way to identify atheism with a separation from the people, it seems difficult to avoid drawing the rather gloomy conclusion that his Russian God was the Russian people.

---

not simply become atheists, but actually *believe* in atheism, as though it were a new religion, without noticing that they believe in negation." *The Idiot*, p. 587. It may seem strange to treat atheism as a religious phenomenon, but that was Dostoevsky's intention.

18 The "ultimate destiny, of the Russian nation," according to Dostoevsky, was to "reveal to the world her own Russian Christ, whom as yet the peoples know not, and who is rooted in our native Orthodox faith. *There* lies, as I believe, the inmost essence of our vast impending contribution to civilization, whereby we shall awaken the European peoples; there lies the inmost core of our exuberant and intense existence that is to be." *Letters*, p. 175.