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Science and Religion in Dostoevsky's Thought

Ciência e Religião no Pensamento de Dostoiévski

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Abstract

This article is the result of a work still in progress. We try to show how Dostoevsky, "the greatest Russian metaphysician," understands the relationship between faith and science, between mystery and reason. Dostoevsky postulates a rejection of the "Euclidean spirit" for solving the fundamental problems of man. It should be noted that, despite a long-standing critical tradition, the author of "Notes from Underground" wasn't exactly an irrationalist, even though in his diary, in his letters one might perceive an attitude of refusal of nineteenth-century scientific standards, such as the experimental method and the logical-argumentative discourse. By the way, in his novels, particularly in the dialogues between the characters, the author uses reason for the sake of the intelligibility of the plot. However, what most characterizes not only Dostoevsky's prose as his world view is the term of dialogues in antinomies. This is because, for him, science, reason would fall short of the divine mystery and the mystery of human life.

1. This paper is inspired by part of the book that still be released, *Faith and Reason in Russian Religious Thought*.

Keywords: Russian thought, Russian theology, Russian literature, Theopoetic, Fiodor Dostoevsky.

Resumo

O presente artigo é fruto de um trabalho ainda em andamento. Nele, procura-se mostrar de que modo Dostoiévski, “o maior metafísico russo”, compreende as relações entre fé e ciência, entre mistério e razão. Dostoiévski postula uma rejeição do “espírito euclidiano” para a resolução dos problemas fundamentais do homem. É preciso ressaltar que, a despeito de uma longa tradição crítica o confirmar, o autor de *Memórias do subsolo* não era exatamente um irracionalista, mesmo que em suas cartas, diários se possa perceber uma atitude de recusa dos padrões científicos do século XIX, tais como o método experimental e o discurso lógico-argumentativo. A propósito, em seus romances, particularmente nos diálogos entre os personagens, o autor se utiliza da razão para o bem da inteligibilidade do trecho. Contudo, o que mais caracteriza não somente a prosa de Dostoiévski como sua visão de mundo é o termo dos diálogos em antinomias. Isto porque, para ele, a ciência, a razão estaria aquém do mistério divino e do mistério da vida humana.

Palavras-chave: Pensamento russo, Teologia Russa, Literatura Russa, Teopoética, Fiodor Dostoiévski.

Dostoevsky is often perceived as “Russia’s greatest metaphysician” (BERDYAEV, 1957, p. 11) and one of the most influential Russian religious thinkers, “not only a philosopher,” but “also a *philosophical problem*,” (FLOROVSKY, 1996-1997, p. 30) so that the later Russian philosophical tradition is nothing but “a series of footnotes” to him. In both his fiction and non-fiction, like his diaries or letters, he paid much attention to the problem of the relationship between faith and reason. It was his deep conviction that faith has absolute priority over reason: “faith and mathematical proof are two irreconcilable things. There’s no stopping someone who makes up his mind to believe.” (DOSTOEVSKY, 1994, p. 422)

Any attempts at the “justification” of faith in the face of atheism are failed. The clear example of this conviction can be found in *The Idiot*:

Listen, Parfyon, a few moment ago you asked me a question, and this is my answer: the essence of religious feeling has nothing to do with any reasoning, or any crimes and misdemeanours or atheism; it is something entirely different and it will always be so; it is something our atheists will always overlook, and they will never talk about *that*. (DOSTOEVSKY, 1984, p. 238)

In particular, there are no so-called proofs or evidences of the existence of God. Furthermore, any attempt to grasp what is beyond a limited, three-dimensional “Euclidean mind” is the worst sort of atheism—it is the beginning of conceit and arrogance. Evidence of this would be the famous “The Legend on the Grand Inquisitor” scene contained in *The Brothers Karamazov*. Ivan Karamazov refused to accept the possibility of the rational explanation of religious truths:

If God does exists and if He indeed created the world, then, as we well know, He created it according to the principles of Euclidean geometry made the human brain capable of grasping only three dimensions of space. Yet there have been and still are mathematicians and philosophers—among them some the most outstanding—who doubt that the whole universe or, to put it more generally, all existence was created to fit Euclidean geometry; they even dare to conceive that two parallel lines that, according to Euclid, never meet on earth do, in fact, meet somewhere in infinity. And so, my dear boy, I've decided that since I'm incapable of understanding even that much, I cannot possibly understand about God. I humbly admit that I have no special talent for coping with such problems, that my brain is an earthly, Euclidean brain, and that therefore I'm not properly equipped to deal with matters that are not of this world. (DOSTOEVSKY, 1972, p. 282)

In this connection it is worth saying that *The Brothers Karamazov* by Dostoevsky inspired, in a sense, Einstein! As the creator of the Theory of Relativity declared in his letter to his close friend Paul Ehrenfest in 1919: “It is the most wonderful book that I've laid my hands on.” (VICUNICH, 2002, p. 181) Later on, in 1921, he stressed the significance of ethics of Dostoevsky and in 1930 termed him “a great religious writer” (VICUNICH, 2002, p. 181) that gives him “more than any other thinker, more even than

Gauss.” (LEATHERBARROW, 2004, 2) Apparently, the author of *The Brothers Karamazov* was not a teacher of cosmology, even if he mentioned non-Euclidean geometry (which he learnt about during his studies at the Academy of Military Engineers in St. Petersburg in 1838–1843) and some scholars, such as Liza Knapp, maintained that there exist some “analogies may be drawn between the *physics* of Dostoevsky and those of Einstein”—on the grounds that:

When Ivan says that he cannot accept God’s harmony because of his three-dimensional, Euclidean mind, Dostoevsky indirectly seems to hint that the fourth dimension Ivan cannot comprehend, that the fourth dimension barring him from harmony, is none other than time. . . The novel thereby suggests that time is the “fourth dimension,” that it provides a fourth coordinate without which events in three-dimensional space cannot be fathomed. In this manner, Dostoevsky’s novelistic universe is grounded in physics and, specifically, it depends on a four-dimensional space-time continuum which anticipates Einstein’s perception of the physical universe. (KNAPP, 1987, 108-115)

This suggestion, although interesting, appears to be extravagant and preposterous. Perhaps the most accurate is the idea that Dostoevsky pointed out the impossibility of the complete cognition of the divine reality and his mystery in his considerations on the “Euclidean mind.” It is a kind of “monad” closed toward God (POPOVICH, 2007, p. 41) and enabled to solve “the final” questions about God, man, the meaning of life, death, suffering etc. “Dostoevsky’s profession of faith had to overcome not so much the claims of nineteenth-century Natural Science as the tragic, insoluble contradiction between belief in an omnipotent and merciful God and the cruel, bleak reality of innocent suffering.” (KIRILLOVA, 2001, p. 50) In *The Brothers Karamazov* the opposition or tension between the scientific-natural and religious-existential perspectives is expressed by Zosima.²

2. Modelled on the Russian Hesychast St. Tikhon Zadonsky, who perceived the “fight between the flesh and the spirit” as a battle between faith and reason. (BERRY, 1989-1990, p. 67)

Look at the worldly, at those who set themselves above the people of God . . . They have science, but science contains nothing that does not come through the sense. The spiritual world, the nobler side of man's being, has been rejected altogether, banned as it were triumphantly, perhaps even with hatred.(DOSTOEVSKY, 1972, 378)³

This statement should be completed by the remark that in his draft of this novel the Russian writer put in the mouth of Zosima the following words: "When we will be afraid of science and even point its new ways."(DOSTOEVSKIJ, 1976, p. 250) Dostoevsky distinguished between science and enlightenment as a spiritual activity. In his letter to a Russian jurist and publicist Alexander D. Gradovsky (1841–1889) he noticed:

You uttered an important word: "enlightenment." I wish to ask you what you mean by it? Western science, useful knowledge, handicrafts, or spiritual enlightenment? The former, i.e., science and trades, in truth, should not evade us, and there actually is no reason for us to seek to evade them. I am also in full accord with you that these can be acquired only from Western European sources, for which Europe deserves praise and our eternal gratitude. But my conception of enlightenment (and I believe that no one can have a different conception) coincides with what this word literally implies, i.e., spiritual light illuminating the soul, enlightening the heart, guiding the mind and indicating to it the road of life. If this be so, I wish to state to you that there is no reason for us to borrow such an enlightenment from Western European sources are fully available—and not absent.⁴(DOSTOEVSKY, 1949, p. 982, 983)

One can observe that in the works of Dostoevsky an initial Christocentrism was subsequently completed by cosmocentrism, although, nature was expressed chiefly in a spiritual way. (STRUVE, 2010, p.

3. Cf, Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, 1972., 204: "Secular science, which has grown into a great force, has investigated, particularly during the past century, everything that has been handed down to us in the sacred books . . . That was because they analysed only the parts and failed to study the whole, showing thereby a truly astonishing blindness" (the words of Father Paisii to Alyosha).

4. These sentences quoted a represent of Russian Academic philosophy Petr Linnicki (Linnitskiy, *Slavyanofil'stvo i liberalizm (zapadnichestvo)*, 217).

190) According to Alexander Vicunich, Dostoevsky recognizing the social and practical values of science, criticized materialism and the logical rigidity of the scientific method. (VUCINICH, 1970, p. 475) At first glance, Dostoevsky banned any rational activity as that which distorts truth which is beyond comprehension and especially distrusted science which submits life to the laws of necessity and deprives us of freedom and love. In other words,

Nature became thoroughly rationalised, and depersonalised . . . Science treats everything it investigates as objects, units, aggregates, whereas Dostoevsky's characters are pre-eminently subjects, personalities . . . The natural sciences and mathematics are context-free object systems, devoid of subjects, of human reference; they are not bound by history, by specific times and places.(THOMPSON, 194, 198)

Indeed, in the *Notes from the Underground* the hero of Dostoevsky claimed:

as soon as they prove to you, for instance, that you are descended from a monkey, then it is no use scowling, accept it for a fact. When they prove to you that in reality one drop of your own fat must be dearer to you than a hundred thousand of your fellow-creatures, and that this conclusion is the final solution of all so-called virtues and duties and all such prejudices and fancies, then you have just to accept it, there is no help for it, for twice two is a law of mathematics. Just try refuting it. . . you say, science itself will teach man (though to my mind it's a superfluous luxury) that he never has really had any caprice or will of his own, and that he himself is something of the nature of a piano-key or the stop of an organ, and that there are, besides, things called the laws of nature; so that everything he does is not done by his willing it, but is done of itself, by the laws of nature. Consequently we have only to discover these laws of nature, and man will no longer have to answer for his actions and life will become exceedingly easy for him. All human actions will then, of course, be tabulated according to these laws, mathematically, like tables of logarithms up to 108,000, and entered in an index; or, better still, there would be published certain edifying works of the nature of encyclopaedic lexicons, in which everything will be so clearly

calculated and explained that there will be no more incidents or adventures in the world. (DOSTOEVSKY, 2009, p. 8)

One could also cite the example derived from a notebook for *Crime and Punishment*: “the arithmetics destroy while spontaneous faith saves. As James Scanlan observed, whilst on the surface, “when Dostoevsky is accepted as a philosopher, it is typically as an ‘irrationalist’” and that he would seem to scorn rationality and welcome such a paradox, “with its disdain for basic laws of logic.” (SCANLAN, 2002, p. 5)

Yet, a closer consideration allows us to say that he was “far from an unqualified rejection of rational demands.” (SCANLAN, 2002, p. 7) To be more precise, Dostoevsky constructed some quasi-logical patterns of reasoning or syllogisms (i.e. the debate between Zosima and Ivan from *The Brothers Karamazov* or between Shatov and Stavrogin from *The Devils* concerning the belief in God and its significance for Russia), even if they resemble “a dialogue between an empirical scientist and a theologian: both use logic and reason to structure their arguments, but the theologian uses as a point of departure a claim that must be accepted purely on faith.” (CASSEDY, 2005, p. 97)⁵ For him, there are no conclusive, pivotal statements in the field of faith. Faith surpasses philosophical investigations and is full of antinomies. The task of reason is to stress the exclusive role of faith, but not negate rationality as such. The reality is much larger than the scope of an empirical experience or rational deliberations. Psychology delivers the simplest example of the weakness of science: as Dostoevsky show, the human attitude cannot be explained by means of the logical laws of identity. (LAUT, 1996, 70) The people conduct themselves in unpredictable, undetermined, incoherent yet still real, not illusory or deceptive ways.

5. Cf. PEACE, 2005, 77: “Dostoevsky’s thought processes are not the cold rationalism of the syllogism and its corollary—the logical inevitability of the triad. They inhere in inspired revelation, yet it is curious that the Golden Age takes on this revealed role throughout his writing.”

Undoubtedly the position of Dostoevsky with regard to the relationship between faith and reason was much more nuanced. The Russian writer was interested in science, especially physics and even “advocated to others the importance of scientific knowledge” (KALADIYOUK, 2006, 421) so that he mentioned non-Euclidean geometry in his novels. In the creativity of the Russian writer one could find other traces of his scientific preoccupation. Thus, Ivan from *The Brothers Karamazov* hinted at Charles Lyell’s work *Principles of Geology* which discussed a period of the universal denial of God which would be “analogous with geological periods.” (KATZ, 1998, p. 68) A number of times Dostoevsky referred to Darwin, ironically calling him “a leader of European progressive thought.” In his belletristic works, the writer presented a theory of evolution rather in a negative or skeptical sense as incompatible with Christianity. The reason was quite simple:

For Dostoevsky-the-writer Darwin means the extension of natural science, its method and conclusions, beyond its appropriate limits and into the realm of human spirituality and morality. The results were potentially disastrous: his fictional heroes could be saved only by love and faith. (KATZ, 1998, p. 72)

Yet, as a matter of fact, Dostoevsky did not always express his own views through the mouths of his heroes. For instance, in his documentary work like the letter to Vasilii A. Alekseev from June 7, 1876, Dostoevsky presented his position about the theory of evolution in a more cautious and tolerant way:

By the way: remember the contemporary theories of Darwin and others concerning the descent of man from monkeys. Without engaging in any theories, Christ explicitly declares that in man, in addition to an animal world, there is also a spiritual world. And what of it? What difference does it make where man is descended from (the Bible does not explain how God blinded him from earthly clay). God still *breathed the breath of life into him* (DOSTOEVSKIY, 1996, 523).

In Irina Paperno's suggestion, Dostoevsky even borrowed his artistic method "from positivist science:" and the human consciousness depicted by him "serves as the nutrient medium in which as idea is allowed to grow—the writer stages a scientific experiment"(PAPERNO, 197, p. 126) in order to test the atheistic worldview. Besides, some of his contemporaries (the poet Apollon N. Maikov, 1821–1897) "observed Dostoevsky's almost 'chemical' method of characterization," what is not surprise since he "took the challenge of science seriously" and, as a "child of his century" (using the words of the writer) "was to a certain degree a man of science."(EVDOKIMOVA & GOLSTEIN , 2016, p, 4)

One can add that Dostoevsky in his *A Writer's Diary*, together with the famous Russian chemist Dmitrii Mendeleev (1834–1907), the head of the Commission to Investigate the Phenomena of Mediums, challenged the spiritualism that was extremely popular at the time especially in the cultural circles of St. Petersburg society, albeit using quite different tools. (GORDIN, 2001, p, 756-780) Contrary to Mendeleev, Dostoevsky was unconvinced about the possibility to confirm or deny any super-rational phenomena by means of science, yet understood the fascination of spiritualism from an existential and religious point of view.

On the other hand, Dostoevsky read the works of the Fathers of the Church with passion, especially St. Isaac of Nineveh (c. 613 – c. 700) and contacted the monk-elders from the Optina monastery (in 1878 he visited this place together with Vladimir Soloviev). In the spirit of St. Isaac and the entire Hesychast tradition, the Russian writer favored the concept of so-called cardiognosy so that cognition in the order of heart, "the descent of the mind into the heart."(SAL'VESTRONI, 1996, p. 270-306) He was also close to the concept of integral knowledge proclaimed borrowed by the Fathers of the Church and by the Slavophile. For examples, in his famous novel entitled *Crime and Punishment* (1866) Dostoevsky was preoccupied with the issues of intelligence and wisdom, head and heart, mind and nature (STUCHEBMKHOV, 2009, p. 78, 79) showing the dangers of rationalism and the justification of his own attitude which the main hero,

Raskolnikov performed. Therefore, the novel ended with the following statement: "Instead of dialectics, there was life, and something completely different had to work itself out in his consciousness"(DOSTOEVSKY, 1993, p, 547) that described the state of reconciliation of mind and heart, or "believing reason," a holistic knowledge guided by faith. It is the only way for the cognition of God and transcendent values.

Proclaiming the freedom and unpredictability of human existence, Dostoevsky seemed to deny the cognitive role of philosophy and science as a way to obtaining the truth. At the same time, it was not a mere fideism.

Despite the epistemological preference he gave to faith, he should not be classed with irrationalists such as Soren Kierkegaard and Lev Shestov (see below—T. O.), who saw no role whatever for logic in the discussion of religious truths. In the epistemological sphere, Dostoevsky's "irrationalism"—if such it must be called—consists entirely in relegating reason to a secondary role and denying it the power of production certainty on ultimate questions such as the existence of God and the immortality of the soul. . . . Reason, if not the sole source of our mystical knowledge of a higher reality for Dostoevsky, is consistent with it and participates in establishing it (SCANIAN, 2002, 237-238).

In this context, Sergei Kibal'nik shrewdly said, referring to Mark Twain, "rumours about Dostoyevsky's irrationalism are 'slightly exaggerated'."(KIBAL'NIK, 2013, p. 82) Following Semen Frank, he characterized the views of Dostoevsky as a sort of anti-rationalism that, however, "is not identical with irrationalism, that is some kind of romantic and lyrical vagueness, logical disorder of spiritual life. It doesn't involve either a tendency to deny science or inability to carry out scientific research" (FRANK, 1996, p, 165) The writer remarked that true science (contrary to positivist science) searches for the interpretation of facts and, additionally, the unity of the various branches of knowledge.(TARASOV, 2013, p. 93-94)

In this sense he was like Pascal, who defended the “reason of faith” and at the same time was interested in physics and mathematics. Proclaiming the priority of faith, Dostoevsky respected natural science, even if he definitively marked the limits of the scientific explanation and objected the “blind realism” that ignore transcendent sphere. He struggled against aggressive scientism, positivism and secularization, narrow interpretation of the world as submitted to necessary, against false hope in scientific progress that was supposed to replace the religious tenets and values, but not against science itself. Together with the Slavophiles, Dostoevsky strove for an integral attitude embracing faith and reason in a single spiritual unity.

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