FAITH AND SUFFERING

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DOSTOEVSKY WAS A PROFOUND DOUBTER. HE WAS A doubter to the end. He once wrote: "Till now I have been a child of unbelief and doubt, and such I shall remain, I fear, to my dying day." And so he did. But he was a doubter who could not digest his own doubts. They tore at his vitals. He did not want to doubt. What drove him to doubt was the suffering of the world. He was not like most of his doubting contemporaries. People of his time—the nineteenth century—doubted their need of God. Dostoevsky doubted just because he needed God desperately. People of his day thought that the world was good enough without God. Dostoevsky thought the world was too evil for God. People of his optimistic age thought that science had rendered God obsolete. Dostoevsky thought that suffering made His reality intolerable. No, his doubts were not born of a new science or a new philosophy. They were born of the age-old problem of human suffering. As a reasonable philosopher he had no trouble with God. But when a child's cry of pain stabbed his heart, he could not believe. Yet, he longed for faith. "What dreadful tortures must I suffer and continue to suffer through my longing to believe, which with every fresh contradiction grows stronger?" The greater his doubts, the more urgent his cry for faith!

The great novelist lets many of his heroes press the claims of his own doubts. Ivan Karamazov is one of them. Ivan is spokesman for the doubter in Dostoevsky's soul. Ivan is the heroic atheist. He has made the awful, willful decision against God. On one hand, the idea of God offers no problem to Ivan. He can believe in God —in the abstract. He will buy the "eternal harmony" and the "ultimate truth" of God; he can believe the doctrine of the "eternal Word who was God." Keep God in the shape of an idea, and you will not make an atheist of Ivan. It is the world as it really is, especially the suffering, and especially the suffering of children, that Ivan cannot swallow. This is why Ivan keeps repeating: "It is not that I don't accept God, you must understand, it's the world created by Him I don't and can't accept." But he knows better. He knows that when he rejects God's world, he rejects God. He may be an inverted atheist; but an atheist he is.

To Alyosha, his believing brother, he puts the awful question of faith and suffering. He is sitting at a table in a tavern with Alyosha. He wants to bare his soul; he wants the believer to understand his, Ivan's, unbelief. So he presses in with his terrible question. Here it is:

> Imagine that you are creating a fabric of human destiny with the object of making men happy in the end, giving them peace and rest at last, but that it was essential and inevitable to torture to death only one tiny (child) . . . and to found that edifice on its unavenged tears, would you consent to be the architect on these conditions?

Put it another way. If you had a chance to make all men happy and well, prosperous and good, but to do it you had to torture and kill a baby, would you do it? Alyosha shudders, hangs his head, and mutters, "No." Would God?

The atheist makes his point. Remember that a great many wise men of Dostoevsky's day had been proving to everyone that this was the best of all possible worlds. The tidy rationalists with their neat schemes had demonstrated that in the eternal order of things everything—including suffering—has a useful and necessary place. They had, in short, been busy justifying God's ways with men. But Ivan will not buy it. Let the Euclidian mind say that suffering has a necessary place in the eternal order. Let even the believer protest that heaven and hell will balance the suffering of the innocent and the cruelty of the oppressors. Let them say that one day, at the world's finale, something will come "so precious . . . that it will . . . make it not only possible to forgive but to justify all that has happened with men." Let it be, too, that hell will see the guilty punished. Let the rationalist and the believer talk about the "underlying order and meaning of life." But then let them really hear the cry of a suffering child, let them really feel the pain of a tortured child. The moment they hear and feel the cries of suffering children, they will know that suffering cannot be blended into the eternal harmony.

Ivan is not a sloppy sentimentalist. Nor was Dostoevsky. He uses the child only to make the problem inescapable. Translate his single child into the agony of six million Jews in Nazi Germany. Translate his one infant into the hunger of almost half the world's children. But one child was enough for Dostoevsky to make his point, so

sensitive was he to suffering. He lets Ivan relate stories of child torture, one after another. There is a little serf boy. He throws stones at the lord's dogs. He hits one of them. He injures the dog's foot. The lord has the boy set in front of a pack of vicious dogs. He forces the boy's mother to look on. He makes the boy run. Then he sets his dogs loose to chase the boy. They tear him to shreds. His mother sees it all. The lord gloats over the lesson he has taught. Ivan asks Alyosha, "Does such a man deserve to be shot?" Alyosha says, "Yes, he deserves to be shot."

But God does not think so. In hell, by and by? "What good can hell do, since these children have already been tortured?" The judgment of a future hell will not justify such suffering. "I will not accept harmony at such a price," says Ivan. Maybe, when "everything in heaven and earth blends in one hymn of praise and everything that lives cries aloud: 'Thou art just, O Lord, for Thy ways are revealed' " harmony will be gained. But I cannot accept it, says Ivan. "It's not worth the tears of that one tortured child. . . ." It is now, here and now, that suffering must be made plain. "I must have justice, or I shall destroy myself." This is the measure of Ivan's despair at the enigma of suffering.

The life-long question that haunted Dostoevsky was the problem of God. And the problem of God was the problem of suffering. If faith in God means to believe that suffering is not too bad a thing in the light of ultimate meaning, faith is impossible. If faith means that this world is the best of all possible worlds, suffering included, faith is demanded at too horrible a price. For the cries of hurt children proclaim that it is not and never can be said to be the best possible world. Suffering cannot be embraced in harmony. If it is, we must not have harmony:

> I don't want harmony. *From love of humanity, I don't want it.* I would rather be left with the unavenged suffering. . . . Too high a price is asked for harmony; it's beyond our means to pay so much to enter on it. And so I hasten to give back my entrance ticket. It's not God I reject, Alyosha, only I most respectfully return Him the ticket.

Dostoevsky is a rebel against the idea of a well-ordered universe. If God is guarantor that suffering can be made a blended note in the harmony of the universal symphony, His harmony must be rejected. This is Dostoevsky the doubter. He will not submit to suffering as part of that order. His heart is too hurt by the cries of suffering children. It cannot hold suffering and God's order too. Better to live with the pain of a dis-ordered universe; better to live without the rational God. Better to have the torment.

STILL, HIS HEART LONGS FOR FAITH. IF HE CANNOT have the reasoned faith that swallows up suffering in a universal harmony, can he have a faith that rejects the harmony for the sake of the suffering?

Now we meet Dostoevsky the believer. He turns out to be a simple believer, even a desperate believer. He must be simple, for he must have faith without philosophy. He must be desperate, for he must believe even against the force of logic. Where lies the possibility? In Christ. In Christ alone. When Ivan—the unbeliever in Dostoevsky—says that nothing in the future can justify suffering here and now, Alyosha—the believer in Dostoevsky—answers:

> But there is a Being and He can forgive everything, all and for all, because He gave His innocent blood for all and everything. You have forgotten Him, and on Him is built the edifice, and it is to Him (not the God of reason) they cry aloud, "Thou art just, O Lord, for Thy ways are revealed."

Christ is the answer. He does not give a rational answer. He does not explain away suffering. He does not melt suffering into the beautiful image of the harmonious universe. He only leads men to accept suffering, to share in His.

So suffering does become a good thing after all. Not a rational good. Not a good because it finally is offset by a proportionate measure of blessing. A pound of suffering now cannot be balanced off with a thousand pounds of glory by and by. Suffering must be good here and now. It can be if it is accepted freely and humbly and willingly. Indeed it is the only route to salvation. Petrovitch, the shrewd detective in *Crime and Punishment*, points the way. He points the way to Raskolnikof, the murderer who in torment is looking for a way to live again:

> Suffering too is a good thing. So, suffer. Fling yourself into life without deliberation; don't be afraid—the flood will bear you to the bank and set you safe on your feet again. What bank? How can I tell.

When Raskolnikof—in prison—came alive again in the presence of the suffering Sonya, when he felt the beginning of his own resurrection, he wept tears of joy. But he was still ignorant of the great cost. "He did not know that the new life would not be given him for nothing, that it would cost him great suffering." But he would discover it. And he would discover that "suffering is the one and only source of true knowledge; adversity is the mainspring of self-realization."

Dostoevsky looked hard at the rational faith-picture of the reasonable universe and rejected it. Some people have been willing to believe only if they could be shown that the whole of life embraces suffering as a necessary and useful ingredient. To Dostoevsky the best argument of this sort was the most offensive. For to make suffering fit into the world's harmony was to say that suffering was a rationally justifiable good. And he was not to be persuaded of that. No, faith could not rise from a whitewash of suffering. Nor could faith be an escape from the reality of suffering. Faith could exist only in the acceptance of suffering. With Christ before him, he was able to enter the world of suffering as the route of personal redemption.

Dostoevsky found that there is no heaven without a hell. There is no grace without pain. There is no life

without death. There is no redemption but through suffering. The corn does not grow except it fall into the ground and die: "but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit." There is no way to gain your soul, but to lose it. There is a price to be paid. And it must be paid willingly.

The mystery is not swept away. Christ does not explain things. Only to the insensitive soul does suffering become a note blended into a beautiful symphony. The way of faith is harder. You look suffering hard in the face. You call it what it is. You make no bones about it. But then you leap into it, gladly and hopefully. And in your leap you come out a believer.

Dostoevsky did not go to theological seminary. He never had the privilege of setting everything in order with the help of a dogmatic guidebook. He never finished off a system of thought about God's ways with man. But he did see things. He went to prison, and there in Siberia discovered the worst and the best in the best and worst of men. He faced death by firing squad, only to be pardoned at the last split second. He ruined his own happiness. He felt to the quick the pain of all others. With the eyes of prophetic genius he looked long and deep into men's souls. And he read the Bible. Out of all this and in all this he found Christ. He found Christ in the poor folk about whom he wrote. He found Christ in the saints he admired. He found Christ in the depths of his own anguish.

Dostoevsky held on to Christ, amid his tortured doubts, with anguished desperation:

> If someone were to prove to me that Christ is outside the truth, and if it were really the case that there is no truth in Christ, I should prefer to cling to Christ rather than the truth.

Not system, not reason, not ultimate answers for the Euclidean mind to assimilate, but the living Christ. This complex reader of the torments of human souls could write simply to a woman artist who told him of her own anguish: "My dear Katerina Fyodorvna, do you believe in Christ and His promises? If you do (or if you want very much to believe) then give yourself up to Him entirely and the torment of this dualism will be greatly alleviated . . ."

DOSTOEVSKY BECAME A BELIEVER. HE WAS A TORmented believer to the end. For though he believed, he never stopped being a doubter. There was an atheist in his soul even while he believed. His faith was not gained by expunging a question from his heart by means of a logical system. His genius lay in his scorching discernment of the hidden ways of the heart. What lies dormant or repressed in most people, he pulled out and shocked into life. Too bad, some may say, that he did not know more theology. Too bad he was not a better philosopher. Had he been he would have saved himself torment and tears. Suffering would not have been such a problem to him if he had but known how to tie the ends of life together with a theologian's knot. But we have to take him this way. And we have to admit that he speaks to our condition. Anyone who stays with his novels long enough will hear him speak. He will hear Dostoevsky speak for him of his own doubts—and of his faith.

TRUE HUMANITY

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I

HAVE YOU EVER TRIED TO UNDERSTAND THE SECRET of your own inner being? Have you ever, in a moment of quiet meditation, reflected on the question of what it means to be man? What, for instance, is the difference between being a man and being an animal? Can man be called superior to an animal? If so, is he superior because he has an immortal soul (Plato), whereas an animal has not? Is he superior because he has reason, whereas an animal has not? According to Stoic philosophy man participates in the universal "logos." An animal knows but does not know that it knows; man not only knows but knows that he knows (Teilhard). Every being participates in the structure of being, but man alone is immediately aware of this structure (Tillich). Are statements such as these adequate descriptions of the uniqueness of man?

The answer requires a distinction. For, indeed, there are two ways of defining the nature of man. The first one is the way of scientific analysis, through the magnifying glass. In this way one can study man from many points of view, medical, biological, psychological, sociological, and so on. Cooperation between these various branches of science is of course bound to produce a most valuable picture of man. Christians must never underestimate the ability of science. Theology ignoring the results of science is a questionable affair. It is a sterile monologue rather than a fruitful dialogue. Hence no theological anthropology can be worth while if it fails to take into account the scientific investigations concerning the nature of man.

Nevertheless, for all the value and truth of scientific analysis, there is *one* level in human nature science cannot reach. Science cannot reach the deepest, the ultimate, level of religion, the level of man's relationship