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The Legend of the Grand Inquisitor: A Poetic View of Freedom and Mass Conformity

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I cannot read any of the Russian writer Fyodor Dostoevsky's fiction when the sun is shining. Instead, I read him early in the morning, before first light, or, on a day like today, with heavy rain and clouds that rest heavily on the roof of our home. Now I can enter the dark brooding genius of his suffering imagination.

Recent politics have driven me back to re-think one of his greatest poems, tucked neatly into Book Five, "Pro and Contra," of his last masterpiece, *The Brothers Karamazov*, finished in 1881 just months before Dostoevsky's death (1821-1881). The poem's poignancy sharpens like a startling cheese as it ages.

Briefly put, the poem is an invention of Ivan Karamazov, one of three Karamazov brothers. Ivan anguishes over God's creation, one that allows the suffering of children, of innocence without defenses to counter their abuses and of what he sees as senseless suffering in general. He tells his younger brother, Alyosha, a novice in a monastery in Russia, that it is less that he disbelieves in God than that he rejects the terms of His creation. So, says Ivan to his brother before telling him the story of the Grand Inquisitor, "I give back my ticket." He does not reject God but the world of senseless suffering he finds so deeply imbedded in it.

Then to the poem, which Ivan prefaces by calling it "a ridiculous thing, but I want to tell it to you." He relates then the story of Christ's second coming, this time into Spain during the height

of the Inquisition's scourges, "when fires were lighted every day to the glory of God" wherein heretics were burned in staggering numbers. Christ comes into the hot pavement of Seville "softly, unobserved, yet strange to say, everyone recognized Him." Ivan relates how the crowd gathers around Him in worship and adoration and with a familiarity that is startling, which upsets the old cardinal of the church who happens upon the scene; his brow grows dark and his forehead furrows. He immediately has Christ arrested and thrown into a dungeon and announces to the fearful crowd that the intruder will be burned the next morning as yet another heretic.

That night, alone and carrying one torch, the old man, thin, dry-lipped and brittle, visits Christ in his cell. Here one of the most dramatic speeches in all of literature unfolds around the themes of belief, authority, freedom, miracle and mystery.

What enhances this dramatic and powerful meeting is that throughout it Christ utters not one word, even when the Grand Inquisitor begins with a question: "Is it Thou? Thou?" but when Christ does not answer, the old man demands he remain silent. In the beginning the Grand Inquisitor tells Christ that the church has spent centuries undoing what He expected of each human being, a full and responsible exercise of freedom. Claiming that mortals are naturally unruly and unable to understand the full fabric of freedom, the church took their freedom and in exchange gave them bread and belief. But, he chastises Christ, "Thou wouldst not deprive man of freedom and didst reject the offer, what is that freedom worth, if obedience is bought with bread?" What mankind hungers after, claims the old church official, is not freedom but food; in the end individuals say in unison: "Make us your slaves, but feed us."

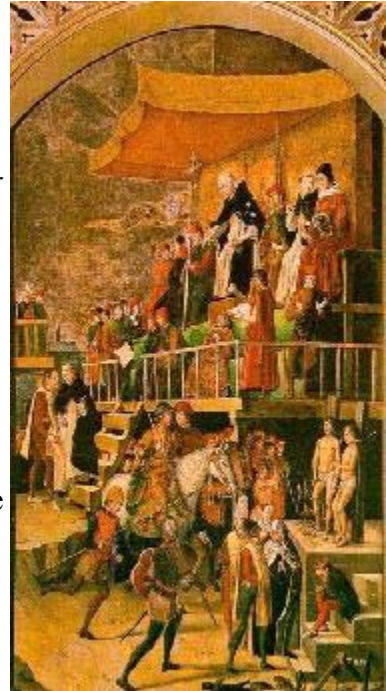


Contrary to Christ's first arrival on earth, in which he gave mortals, through great sacrifice of Himself, an image to follow, the Grand Inquisitor says He expected too much of mankind, and that what they seek is to be obedient to authority, to relinquish freedom for material goods. Christ, in effect, aimed too high for mankind; instead, people prefer to worship in community, "to worship the same thing in common...and for the sake of common worship they've slain each other with the sword" over the centuries.

The Inquisitor's voice heats up as he warms to his theme of setting Christ straight: "Instead of taking possession of man's freedom, Thou didst increase it, and burdened the spiritual kingdom of mankind with its suffering forever." Christ miscalculated again by seeking man's free love with only His image "as his guide." But did you not know, continues the old man, that "at last they would reject even Thy image and Thy truth" for it is weighed down too much "with the burden of free choice?"

The church's doctrines, claims the Grand Inquisitor, have corrected Christ's errors about His expectations on mankind's more limited abilities. We have given "mankind a mystery, which they must follow blindly, even against their conscience.... We have corrected Thy work and have founded it upon miracle, mystery and authority. And men rejoiced that they were again led like sheep and that the terrible gift [of freedom] was lifted from their hearts."

And then, with a great power of victory in his voice, the old Inquisitor proclaims to Christ: "Oh, we shall persuade them that they will only become free when they renounce their freedom to us and submit to us, to the voice of authority." Only then will the masses of mankind, he continues, accept fully how "they are weak, that they are only pitiful children, but that childlike happiness is the sweetest of all.... We shall set them to work, but in their leisure hours we shall make their life like a child's game, with children's songs and innocent dance." Bread and circuses will trump the anguish of having the courage to live freely, as Christ's image promoted.



As Ivan, excited and, one imagines, glassy-eyed in his reverie, arrives at the end of his story, his young brother Alyosha bursts out: "Your inquisitor does not believe in God, that's his secret!" to which Ivan responds immediately: "What if it is so?"

Dissension, disharmony, rebellion, contrary voices — all these and more have been silenced by miracle, mystery and authority in which mortals have gladly, "with tails between their legs," exchanged their freedom for security, for sameness and for a stereotyped existence.

Ivan ends his poem by relating how the old Inquisitor wished mightily that Christ would say something. Instead, He approaches the old man's face "and softly kissed him on his bloodless aged lips." That was all his answer. The old man recoils from Christ, hastily opens the dungeon door and commands him:

"Go, and come no more...come not at all, never, never! And he let Him out into the dark squares of the town. The Prisoner went away."

While Ivan himself ends by calling it once more "a senseless poem of a senseless student," his narrative does provoke some fundamental and essential questions of today, wherein beliefs, policies, decisions of leaders who refuse and restrict questioning, who act by fiat of faith and not open debate, who wish for a silencing of the masses under rubrics of security, safety, and survival. It is a dark cell in the soul that Ivan Karamazov uncovers, however cavalierly he addresses it. Dostoevsky's words are more than worth returning to as a way to meditate on the current existential suffering of our age in which freedom's presence is indeed its hoary subject.