

Dostoevsky's Struggle With Faith
Gary Saul Morson, WSJ 2.27.25

Fyodor Dostoevsky was taken to Siberia as a political prisoner in 1850. Natalya Fonvizina gave him a copy of the New Testament, the only book prisoners were allowed to have. It sustained him in adversity and led him to faith. Five years later, when Fonvizina was deeply depressed, Dostoevsky consoled her in what is doubtless the best-known letter in Russian literature.

Recalling his own days of despair, Dostoevsky explained that “at such moments one thirsts for faith like ‘parched grass,’ and one finds it at last because the truth becomes evident in unhappiness.” The faith Dostoevsky found resembled not an unshakable conviction but a struggle with doubt. “I will tell you that I am a child of this century, a child of disbelief and doubt,” he wrote. “I am that today and (I know) will remain so until the grave.”

Since the rise of modern science, educated people have often found it difficult to believe with calm certainty the ideal of their medieval predecessors. Like Dostoevsky, they experience a painful internal conflict. “How much terrible torture this thirst for faith has cost me even now, which is all the stronger in my soul the more arguments I find against it,” Dostoevsky wrote.

Readers of “The Brothers Karamazov” will recognize this same tortured struggle in its intellectual hero, Ivan. As a student of natural science, Ivan accepts that amoral natural laws govern everything and that good and evil are social conventions. But he can’t relinquish a belief in transcendent, absolute morality. His whole being tells him that not all standards are mere convention; some things, such as child abuse, are plainly wrong. Ivan is torn by this contradiction. Dostoevsky’s spokesman, Father Zosima, assures Ivan that even if he never finds faith, he will never give up searching for it. “That is the peculiarity of your heart,” Zosima instructs, “but thank the Creator who has given you a lofty heart capable of such suffering . . . [and] of seeking for higher things, for our dwelling is in the heavens.”

To be sure, Dostoevsky writes to Fonvizina, God sometimes sends blissful moments when “I love and feel loved by others.” Then he affirms his own “credo”: Nothing is “more beautiful, profound, sympathetic . . . and more perfect than Christ.” Whether or not Christ existed, his image is an unsurpassable ideal, a picture of the best possible moral being.

Dostoevsky continues: “If someone proved to me that Christ is outside the truth, and that in reality the truth were outside Christ, I should still prefer to remain with Christ rather than with the truth.” How can one believe in what one knows to be untrue? In the Gospel of Mark, the father who implores Jesus to cure his afflicted child exclaims: “Oh Lord I believe, help Thou my unbelief.” That Dostoevsky writes “even if” someone were to prove that the truth excludes Christ already indicates that he, like Ivan, will never be content with the complacent nihilism of other intellectuals.

This peculiar kind of faith, which consists partly of doubt, has become Dostoevsky's trademark and explains why he has brought so many people to God. It is hard to imagine educated Westerners converted by Dante or Milton, for whom God's existence was a simple fact. Dostoevsky's idea that the essence of faith lies in the process of searching for it speaks to those who are also children of "disbelief and doubt."

Dostoevsky's focus on process rather than goal shaped his view of human life. The utopian socialists of his day presumed that if you gave people everything so that they had nothing to strive for, they would be happy. Dostoevsky believed the opposite. People would instead soon see that "they had no more life left, no freedom of spirit . . . no personality. . . . They would see that their human image had disappeared." They would recognize "that there is no happiness in inactivity, that the mind which does not labor will wither, that it is not possible to love one's neighbor without sacrificing to him of one's own labor." In short, Dostoevsky concluded: "Happiness lies not in happiness but only in the attempt to achieve it." So does faith.

Tolstoy once criticized Dostoevsky as "all struggle," but it is that characteristic that explains why his ideas resonate with so many. Those who can't view life with fashionable complacency, who understand that uncertainty can be a blessing and that no scientific discovery will ever reveal life's meaning, find inspiration in Dostoevsky's supremely paradoxical idea that true faith includes doubt and embraces wonder.

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