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Tyler C. Detrick  
*Cedarville University*, [tylerdetrick@cedarville.edu](mailto:tylerdetrick@cedarville.edu)

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Dostoevsky's Polyphonic Apologetic:

Dialogue and Defense of Christianity in *The Brothers Karamazov*

Tyler Detrick

Dr. Deardorff

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## **In Search of an Apologetic**

Apologetics, the defense of Christianity against its critics, has gained prominence in recent years as scholars seek to preserve Christian Theism in the twenty-first century. According to theologian Benjamin Warfield, apologetics is “the science that establishes the truth of Christianity as the absolute religion” (8). In his article “Apologetics,” Warfield explains that the term “apologetics” stems from the Greek concept of a lawyer defending the testimony of the accused (3). Similarly, Christians have worked throughout the centuries to uphold their faith as the only epistemology that reflects reality and offers a stable framework for society. The apologist enters the arena of worldviews, overarching systems of thought, in order to defend the unique perspective of the Christian faith.

Although theologians today recognize the importance of apologetics, they struggle to find an approach that can advocate for Christianity amidst the postmodern shift in America. In *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology*, theorist Kevin Vanhoozer explains the contrasting epistemologies of Christianity and contemporary philosophy. Confessional Christianity has always held that the Church’s views of God and salvation are exclusively true, but the postmodern position “rejects such unifying, totalizing, and universal schemes in favor of a new emphasis on difference, plurality, fragmentation, and complexity” (11). “Postmodernity allows for no absolutes and no essence,” he continues. “Yet, theology is concerned with the absolute, the essential” (13). Apologetics, the most absolute of all the theological sciences, only heightens this antithesis. As America becomes an increasingly pluralistic religious environment, postmodernists view the god figures of theistic religions as equally valid conceptions of the divine and label Christianity’s exclusivity outdated and intolerant (Hicks 39). Pluralist John Hicks expresses distaste for apologetics when he writes, “it is not possible to establish the unique

superiority of any one of the great world religions” (86). When faced with this rejection of the apologetic endeavor, a point of contact between Christianity and postmodernism seems impossible.

Author Myron Penner acknowledges the antithesis between these worldviews in his book *The End of Apologetics*, but he believes that modern apologists have too quickly abandoned hopes for effective dialogue with postmodernity. For Penner, Christianity and contemporary philosophy remain at an impasse because of an inherent problem with current apologetic methodology. He believes that Christianity’s leading defenders stifle the postmodern voice and misrepresent its opponents by using arguments that assume the very epistemic positions that contemporary philosophers reject (42). The common apologetic argument against postmodern disbelief, he explains, begins “by defending the modern philosophical move to understand truth, reason, belief, and so on in terms of the traditional commitment to objective truth as the correct approach...It then goes on to show how postmodernism is a rejection of all this. The obvious conclusion is...that postmodernism is rationally and morally objectionable” (37).

Apologist J.P. Moreland employs this strategy when he argues that postmodernism is “immoral and cowardly” because it is a “form of intellectual pacifism that lacks the courage to fight for the truth” (87). Moreland’s method is counter-productive, Penner contends, because it disregards the significant differences between the two worldviews and forces postmodernism into the mold of Christian philosophy instead of allowing it to express its position with its own voice (88). As Vanhoozer explains, Christianity and postmodernism interpret epistemological concerns like truth differently. Thus, Moreland’s argumentation ignores the postmodern perspective and gives credence to the critique of Christianity as narrow-minded.

Penner further contends that modern apologists defend the faith as a set of propositions rather than a robust confession and a way of life. “All worldviews are approached...by modern apologetics,” he states, “as if they were philosophical positions and propositions that are more or less disembodied and disconnected from the practices and practical concerns of everyday life” (41). In contrast to this focus on propositions, postmodernists privilege narratives. Although contemporary philosophers reject “metanarratives” that seek to explain reality, they value the “simple narratives” of individuals attempting to make human experience meaningful (Sim 9). Postmodernist Jean-Francois Lyotard affirmed the importance of philosophy centered upon simple narratives because he believed that scholars can escape the rationalistic tendency to “dehumanize humankind by reducing it to a thought process alone” by focusing on individuals in their subjective pursuits of truth (10). Thus, when the apologist’s case for the Christian faith rests on the strength of various evidences for isolated doctrines like the historicity of the resurrection, the plausibility of Scripture’s creation account, or the existence of a divine being, the contemporary audience is more likely to view Christianity as Enlightenment obsession with reason than a formidable challenge to the postmodern position. Indeed, Penner argues that modern apologists tend to focus so much on “the tools of logic” in debate that “what is defended is not the gospel or even an aspect of the Christian doctrine but what amounts to the modern conception of reason” (42).

In light of these shortcomings, Penner argues that apologists can restore healthy debate with opposing viewpoints and revitalize the defense of the faith only by altering how they dialogue with their culture. One-sided and evidence-driven apologetics must make way for a method that defends Christianity and honestly represents philosophical alternatives. Penner does

not provide such an approach in his book, but he does challenge apologists to consider new methods that can convincingly promote Christian Theism.

One such unexplored apologetic may be found in *The Brothers Karamazov*, a novel by the nineteenth century writer, Fyodor Dostoevsky. Since its publication in 1880, scholars have acclaimed this Russian novel for its masterful presentation of Christianity in literature.

“Dostoevsky is to me both the greatest novelist, as such, and the greatest Christian storyteller, in particular, of all time,” writes theologian J.I. Packer (vii). However, while critics like Packer correctly emphasize the theological nature of the novel, they consistently overlook its apologetic concerns. The central event of the text, the murder of Fyodor Pavlovich, does much more than raise questions concerning the meaning of life amongst the Karamazovs. More specifically, the crime ignites a central debate in which brothers Ivan and Alyosha draw from their respective worldviews of atheism and Christianity to offer conflicting explanations for the moral issues they face. This polemical structure of the novel suggests that Dostoevsky, himself a Christian, sought to engage in apologetics through his fiction writing.

The defense of Christianity in Dostoevsky’s novel is relevant to apologetic studies today because it arose from a historical situation similar to the shift towards postmodernism now occurring in America. According to scholars, this ideological situation emerged from the rigid rule of Tsar Nicholas I, a firm traditionalist dedicated to the long-standing class system of serfdom, the divine right of his dynasty, and the historic beliefs of the Russian Orthodox Church (Berlin 41). He viewed the philosophical developments of the Enlightenment in the west as a threat to authentic Russian life and targeted the nation’s intellectuals by legislating censorship laws that suppressed Enlightenment thought and forced universities into his mold of “autocracy, orthodoxy, and nationalism” (42). When Nicholas died in 1855, however, ideology in Russia

shifted to another extreme. Without the tsar's oppression, the various suppressed voices in society rushed to advocate their positions and competed against one another to fill the void left by the previous regime (Malia 431). This variety of philosophical factions, called the intelligentsia, resembled the fragmented worldviews in postmodern America. They rejected traditional beliefs and developed radical conclusions in contrast to established orthodoxy (431). The intelligentsia also mirrored the postmodern movement in its focus on narratives over abstract logic. Historian Isaac Berlin notes that progressives in Russia desired philosophical solutions to the Empire's problems that could protect "fundamental human needs" that were lost under Nicholas's rule (xv).

These parallels between nineteenth century Russia and twenty-first century America invite the reader to explore the methodology in *The Brothers Karamazov* in light of Penner's search for a new apologetic. How does Dostoevsky "establish the truth of Christianity as the absolute religion?" (Warfield 8). The text does answer this question, but in order to understand Dostoevsky's defense and its contribution to the Church today, the reader must frame the novelist's concerns in light of his apologetic situation, the religious turmoil of modernizing Russia.

By the 1850s, religion had become a chief concern among the intelligentsia. The empire was shifting, and political leaders saw that Russia's theological commitments would determine its future. As the possibility of political rebellion grew amongst dissatisfied commoners, Christians and atheists proposed radically different solutions to this volatile situation. "The masses were encouraged," historian Victoria Frede observes, "to choose between revolution or belief in God" (179). These religious sects had little in common except for their insistence that Russia needed a new worldview that could provide both a "liberator" and a system of ethics

(Berlin 63). A liberator was necessary because Russians needed some standard to guide society into a more stable future. They were ready to look beyond the tsar to some more effective representative of truth (64). The intelligentsia also desired a standard of morality that could stabilize Russia. In the aftermath of Nicholas's corrupt regime, intellectuals sought an ethic that could establish a sense of community and explain how Russians ought to relate to one another (Frede 143).

One dominant voice in this discussion was Russian Orthodoxy, represented by the Church. The priests and other educated "supporters of the Holy Faith" who belonged to this division of the intelligentsia pursued a restoration of Eastern Christianity (Shevzov 4). They upheld Christ as Russia's only liberator, insisting that God had not only provided salvation in the incarnate Son but also a standard for social transformation (5). Orthodox believers also argued that Russia could find moral stability through simple faith in Christ. Theologians like Aleksey Khomyakov explained that the lives of Christ and the saints demonstrate the doctrine of communal responsibility, the idea that loving one's neighbors means sacrificing complacency to suffer alongside of others (3). This teaching was the foundation of the Church's moral philosophy.

Russian radicalism stood on the other extreme of the debate in Dostoevsky's day. Radicals were atheists influenced by the skepticism of the west, particularly the materialism of Ludwig Feuerbach (Frede 17). In contrast to the traditional beliefs of the Russian Church, the radicals maintained that God is an illusion used to control the masses, a "detestable insult to reason" (Berlin 78). Leaders like Vissarion Belinsky and Nikolay Chernyshevsky insisted that instead of trusting in the myth of a transcendent savior, Russia should turn to man himself as a liberator (Frede 17). By overcoming the religious and political systems that restrain them,

Russians could construct a new socialist society in which mankind could realize its potential and overcome oppression. The radicals also proposed utilitarianism as the moral system that could stabilize society. Chernyshevsky reasoned that if God and the afterlife are myths, then morality becomes whatever action provides the best scientific outcome for the individual, a philosophy he coined as “rational egoism” (142). This ethic is freeing, the radicals argued, because it releases man from the burden of suffering with other unfortunates in society. Russian radicalism, then, presents the contrast to traditional Christianity. While the Orthodox Church professed that man should look outside of himself to Christ as the basis of truth and morality, radicalism proposed that man himself could guide Russia into a utopian future.

Dostoevsky was familiar with this apologetic encounter. Biographer Joseph Frank explains that the novelist wavered between faith and doubt throughout much of his life, influenced by both the Russian Church and the radicalism of Belinsky (24). In 1821, Dostoevsky was born in Moscow to devout Christian parents. “I came up from a pious Russian family,” he wrote in a letter, “in our family we knew the gospel almost from the cradle (23). His youthful faith was challenged in the 1840s, however, when he became involved with the radicals of the Petrashevsky Circle. Belinsky was a member of this literary group, a skeptic who “reviled Christ in the most obscene and abusive way” (Frank 125). He so forcefully pushed his atheism and mocked Dostoevsky’s Christianity that, by 1848, the young novelist doubted his faith and contemplated accepting radicalism. Only the events of 1849 prevented this apostasy. In the winter of that year, Tsar Nicholas arrested all the members of the Petrashevsky Circle for violating his censorship laws and sentenced Dostoevsky to four years of labor in Siberia. During this time of imprisonment, he turned to the Church for guidance in the writings of Augustine and Aquinas, rejected the western ideals of the radicals, and re-dedicated his life to Christ (Belknap

13). He also became convinced that the God of the Orthodox Church was the only hope for the future of his homeland. “Russia,” he wrote, “is a God-bearing people” (Ivanits 162).

By the 1870s, when Dostoevsky began writing *The Brothers Karamazov*, he had only become more certain of these convictions and was eager to use his reputation as a writer to enter the apologetic debate in Russia. In his 1861 travelogue, *Winter Notes on Summer Impressions*, Dostoevsky expressed his desire to write a novel that would “challenge the assumption of the westernist intelligentsia...seek to undermine both the liberalism and the socialism espoused by that intelligentsia, and begin to outline an alternative utopian model based implicitly on orthodox spirituality” (120). These goals came to fulfillment in *The Brothers Karamazov*. Although Dostoevsky intended to develop his apologetic over the course of two works, he died before he could begin the second (Frank 912). Still, *The Brothers Karamazov* captures the novelist’s polemic, his presentation of Christianity as the answer to Russia’s turmoil.

### **Dostoevsky and Bakhtin: A Union of Polyphony**

While Dostoevsky’s prose writings reveal his desire to defend the Christian faith through his fiction, they do not explain how he achieved this task. An understanding of the novelist’s apologetic methodology, then, lies in a study of how Dostoevsky challenged the various worldviews of his day in *The Brothers Karamazov*. Mikhail Bakhtin, Russian linguist and Dostoevsky scholar, offers insight into this central aspect of Dostoevsky’s defense of Christianity. Specifically, his theory of polyphony demonstrates the role of dialogue in the novelist’s apologetic.

In his work *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, Bakhtin defines discourse as the study of voices, or perspectives on reality, as they interact with other voices in a society, and he explains that there are ultimately two philosophies of dialogue: monologism and polyphony. According to

Bakhtin, monologism is the traditional approach to the interaction of voices. In this scheme, many voices struggle to be heard, but one dominates and suppresses the rest. “Monologism at its extreme,” he writes, “denies the existence outside itself of another consciousness with equal rights and responsibilities...monologue is finalized and deaf to the other’s response” (292-293). Bakhtin argues that this “one-voicedness” also obscures truth because it caricatures opposing positions rather than representing them through honest interaction (294). Conversely, polyphony embraces the “multi-voicedness” of society by accepting every position as “fully valid” (6). By this phrase, Bakhtin does not mean that polyphony is relativistic but that all perspectives in this type of dialogue deserve authentic representation and fair interaction (56). He insists, therefore, that polyphony is the only type of dialogue that can secure a successful pursuit of truth (Morson 55).

Bakhtin saw polyphony at work in literature, particularly Dostoevsky’s novels. “A genuine polyphony of fully valid voices,” he claims, “is in fact the chief characteristic of Dostoevsky’s work” (6). When he considered what makes Dostoevsky’s writings polyphonic in contrast to the monologism of most literature, Bakhtin noticed that Dostoevsky joins characters with ideas so that individuals in his stories are inherently tied to dialogue (5). The actors in his works are so inseparable from the philosophical worldviews that they represent that Bakhtin prefers to call Raskolnikov, Alyosha, Zosima, and Ivan “character-ideas” (Morson 237). They are controversial perspectives just as much as they are unique personalities.

This strong sense of dialogue in Dostoevsky’s characters, however, is only the first step towards polyphony. The true sign of balanced dialogue, Bakhtin argues, is that Dostoevsky grants each of his character-ideas fully valid voices (6). Like God giving freedom to his creatures, Dostoevsky establishes each of his characters with perspectives that, as far as possible,

represent positions of their own (Morson 240) Unlike the monological writer who takes unfair advantage of his position as author to arrange in advance the triumph of his own philosophical position, the polyphonic author enters the dialogue of the novel on equal terms with the other ideas (237). The polyphonic author, scholars Gary Morson and Caryl Emerson explain, “necessarily plays two roles in the work: he creates a world in which many disparate points of view enter into dialogue, and, in a quite distinct role, he himself participates in that dialogue. He is one of the interlocutors in the great dialogue that he himself has created” (239). Bakhtin believed that Dostoevsky, more than any other author, managed to separate his own position from those of his characters and enter the debates in his novels on the same level as the character-ideas with which he disagreed. He subordinated his authorial position for the sake of seeking truth through dialogue. (238).

The apologetic in *The Brothers Karamazov* is polyphonic. Like Dostoevsky’s other novels, the individuals in his final work are inseparable from the theological worldviews they represent. Ivan and Alyosha, the central characters of the religious debate in the novel, demonstrate this connection. Dostoevsky introduces Ivan by labeling him “the learned atheist” (33). Similarly, Alyosha’s qualities of humility and meekness are peripheral, while his identity as an orthodox Christian “convinced of the existence of God and immortality” remain central to his characterization (28). Dostoevsky further ties these characters to worldviews by connecting them to individuals who espouse their respective positions. Ivan frequently rehearses lines written by radicals of his time. His phrase “I hasten to return my entrance ticket” is from Belinsky’s *Diary*, and his statement “man has actually invented God” cites Feuerbach’s *The Essence of Christianity* (202, 212). Alyosha, on the other hand, is tied to the Russian Church through his formal name, “Aleksey,” which links him to the popular hagiography of the saint “Aleksey the Man of God”

(Vetlovskaya 208). Dostoevsky also connects the other characters in the novel to either Christianity or atheism by their relation to these two central figures. Rakitan, for instance, mimics Ivan's atheist phrase, "everything is permitted," and Zosima treats Alyosha as his disciple in Christianity (497). This relationship between character and worldview suggests that Dostoevsky structured *The Brothers Karamazov* around a Bakhtinian dialogue driven by character-ideas.

As Bakhtin's theory makes clear, however, the real test of polyphony is the relation of these ideas to the position of the author. Did Dostoevsky frame the dialogue between his character-ideas in such a way that his cherished Christian view inevitably triumphed through Alyosha? A close examination dismisses this charge of monologism and establishes the religious debate of the novel as polyphonic. At first, Dostoevsky seems to position his Christian character to win the debate, even before the dialogue takes place. From the beginning of the novel, he calls Alyosha a "hero" and privileges him amongst the Karamazov brothers as "an early lover of humanity...struggling from the darkness of worldly wickedness to the light of love" (21). These descriptions, however, can be understood as the author's support for the ideas that Alyosha's character represents and confidence that they will triumph through the debate of the novel. As Bakhtin explains, polyphony is not the absence of an authorial position, a task he acknowledges would be impossible, but the equal standing of all voices within the dialogue of the novel (7). Indeed, after associating himself with Christianity by calling Alyosha a "hero," Dostoevsky safeguards his methodology from monological tendencies by adding that the boy is also a "novice" (33). He is prone to doubt and often struggles to defend his faith against Ivan's formidable arguments. Despite his confidence in the Christian worldview Alyosha represents, the

author acknowledges that he will have to withstand the test of dialogue on the same level as the other characters.

The “Pro and Contra” section further establishes the religious debate in *The Brothers Karamazov* as polyphonic. While writing his work, Dostoevsky explained in a letter that chapter five and six form the great “culminating point” in the novel, the section that frames the apologetic concerns that rest of the work debates (Miller 64). Through “The Grand Inquisitor,” Ivan proposes his best argument for his atheist worldview, and, in “The Russian Monk,” Alyosha presents his defense for Christianity by telling the life story of Father Zosima. The structure of this framing section is noteworthy because of how clearly it accomplishes Bakhtin’s call for equality in dialogue. Each chapter consists of a written text and a silent reader. Ivan first recites his atheistic story, *The Grand Inquisitor*, while Alyosha silently listens to his case (213). In the following section, “The Russian Monk,” the process is reversed and Alyosha rehearses his Christian text, *Notes of the Life in God of the Deceased Hieromonk, the Elder Zosima, Taken from His Own Words*, while the atheist Ivan is silent (245). This parallel process of text and silent interpreter heightens the polyphonic nature of the novel’s debate by presenting the contrasting worldviews of the work through “fully valid voices” (Bahktin 6). Dostoevsky gives Christianity and atheism equal opportunity to introduce their worldview and, uninterrupted by their opponent, present their best arguments against the other position.

Dostoevsky also avoids securing the outcome of the confrontation by writing “The Russian Monk” more persuasively than “The Grand Inquisitor.” Ardent atheists consistently argue that “The Grand Inquisitor” is so well written that it must express Dostoevsky’s own view, and *The Brothers Karamazov* must advocate doubt instead of faith (725). Skeptic D.H. Lawrence once wrote that Dostoevsky must have hated Ivan for offering the “final and unanswerable

criticism of Christ” that ended his Messianic hope (79). The novelist’s letters and journal entries refute the idea that he had secretly abandoned his faith, but the power that Lawrence sees in Ivan’s atheistic arguments proves that Dostoevsky was committed to fairly representing those voices with which he disagreed. Atheism and Christianity participate equally in the dialogue of the text.

As the debate framed in chapters five and six continues, Dostoevsky maintains his balanced dialogue through the parallel tests set before his characters. While Bakhtin insists that a polyphonic author “may not...retain for himself a superior position beyond the purely pragmatic necessities,” he admits that “the author creates the world in which...the character lives, and may put chance encounters or provocative incidents in his way” to stimulate debate (242).

Dostoevsky uses this polyphonic strategy. After he introduces the worldviews represented by Alyosha and Ivan in chapters five and six, he begins to place several “provocative incidents” in their way in order to generate dialogue. The murder of the Karamazov patriarch, Fyodor Pavlovich, is one such obstacle. Dostoevsky carefully placed Fyodor’s death in section eight, after introducing Christianity and atheism through Ivan and Alyosha, so that the drama of the murder can provoke these two worldviews to further discussion over questions of truth and morality. This murder becomes the great instance of evil in the text that the character-ideas must face.

Later in the novel, Dostoevsky further ensures that both Ivan and Alyosha experience a three-fold examination of their ideas. Ivan meets with his half brother Smerdyakov three times after the murder concerning his involvement in his father’s death. Smerdyakov insists that Ivan gave him permission to kill Fyodor, and Ivan is forced to wrestle with whether this accusation is true. Alyosha also experiences three tests through Fyodor, Dmitri, and Ivan. Fyodor’s greed,

Dmitri's lust, and Ivan's skepticism are all worldly sins that he must confront in his ministry while also learning to love the sinners who commit them. This challenge becomes even more difficult after Fyodor's death when Alyosha must learn to show love to his brothers despite the crime they have allowed to occur.

In all these trials, Dostoevsky proves his dedication to Bakhtin's theory by establishing a parallelism in his dialogue. Alyosha and Ivan both confront the ethical questions presented by murder, and Dostoevsky gives them equal opportunities to respond according to the worldviews they represent. In every stage of his work, Dostoevsky is committed to the Bakhtin's polyphonic principle of balanced debate.

### **Dostoevsky's Apologetic: Dialogue as Defense**

Dostoevsky's agreement with Bakhtin reveals his powerful apologetic methodology. At first, it might seem that polyphony poses a problem for the defense of the faith. If Dostoevsky sought to equalize the dialogue of all the positions in his novel's debate, including Christianity in Alyosha and radicalism in Ivan, then how could he fulfill Warfield's definition of apologetics as "the science that establishes Christianity as the absolute religion?" (8). A polyphonic approach, at first glance, seems to result in perpetual dialogue, never privileging one position over another. This conclusion, however, overlooks the higher purpose of truth sought through polyphony. As Bakhtin observed, the polyphonic author transcends mere discourse because he is committed to pushing worldviews to internal consistency, and dialogue is only the tool he uses to allow philosophies to foretell their own success or failure. Bakhtin's insight into the polyphonic nature of *The Brothers Karamazov* suggests Dostoevsky accomplishes his apologetic task through dialogizing the opposing worldviews of nineteenth century Russia. Specifically, Dostoevsky champions the Christianity represented by Alyosha by providing atheism a voice in Ivan and

demonstrating through these characters' contrasting fates where each position leads on its own terms.

In his article "The Deep Heart's Core," Robin Miller observes that Ivan is a self-defeating character. "It is Ivan himself," he writes, "who offers us the most compelling counterpoints to his own objections" (64). In contrast, Alyosha's character is self-fulfilling. Scholar Valentina Vetlovskaya calls him a "hagiographic hero," one who rises to saint-like prominence because of his commitment to virtue (206). These insights capture Dostoevsky's apologetic methodology. He faithfully represents radicalism and Christianity through his character-ideas and then uses dialogue to push each worldview to consistency.

Dostoevsky presents this apologetic through two overarching issues: The question of a Russian liberator and the search for a stable system of ethics. As the novelist expressed in his prose works, his polemical task pertained specifically to Russian society. He wanted to uphold Christianity as the only foundation of life amidst the radical ideas in his day. Logically, he uses his method to defend Christianity in relation to these two crucial questions of the intelligentsia.

The first concern, the question of a liberator for Russia, appears in "The Grand Inquisitor" and later in "The Russian Monk." Ivan, replicating the arguments of radicals like Belinsky and Chernyshevsky, defends man as the savior of Russia. He mocks Christianity for its trust in a good and just God, arguing that any being who would allow the suffering of infants and other innocents is unworthy of worship. In his parable, he presents Christ as returning to earth only to be interrogated by an inquisitor who finds him guilty of dooming humanity to suffering (224). Instead of God, Ivan presents "the strength of the Karamazov," a symbol that scholars agree represents mankind, as Russia's only hope (229). He implies that unaided human reason is the best foundation for truth in Russia, and the child Kolya extends this argument when he insists

that “[Christ] was a most humane person, and if he were alive today, he would be found in the ranks of the revolutionists” (467). In other words, Christ would support humanity’s attempt to construct a utopia apart from God.

Alyosha, however, supports the Church’s position that only God can save Russia from disorder (272). He insists that God has provided a solution to human suffering in Christ. “There is a Being,” he says, “and He can forgive everything, all and for all, because He gave His innocent blood for all and everything” (213). In “The Russian Monk,” Alyosha further enforces the importance of simple faith in God through Zosima’s own story of transformation from an angry skeptic to a humble monk. When Zosima considers his life, he compares it to the story of Job, saying that God had an unseen purpose with the suffering he permitted. “In the face of the earthly truth, the eternal truth is accomplished,” he explains (252). Zosima’s story illustrates the Christian conviction that man’s reasoning is limited and must depend on God. Man needs God as a savior because he lacks eternal power and perspective.

After granting the brothers fully valid voices, Dostoevsky uses several provocative events to generate debate and lead each position to internal consistency. Fyodor’s murder destabilizes the Karamazov family and allows for Ivan and Alyosha to propose their different theological solutions. Furthermore, Dmitri’s trial tests their respective positions by raising questions concerning justice and order that pertain to overarching worldviews. The prosecutor’s question, “What will become of the foundations of society?” suggests that philosophical ideas are on trial even more than the characters that represent them (626).

In the process of dialogue, Ivan shows his atheistic trust in man as liberator to be untenable. Because Ivan knew that his father would be murdered but did nothing about it, he feels that he should confess his involvement and absolve his falsely accused brother. He plans to

work out his principle of man as liberator by arriving at the courthouse to deliver an enlightening speech and re-establish order amongst the Karamazovs. Yet, Ivan struggles to fulfill this salvific role. Before he goes to the courthouse, he argues with the devil, a manifestation of his own consciousness, over his deep-seated philosophical concerns. “Is there a God or not?” he questions the satanic apparition (540). The best explanation for why Ivan asks this question at this late point in the novel, when he never doubted his atheism before, is that he is overwhelmed by both the guilt of his own failures and the burden of resolving the conflict in light of his own frail state of mind. As Ivan lives out the implications of his man-centered system, he realizes that he lacks the power to forgive himself and others for the death of his father. Unable to execute justice in the courtroom, he senses his need of supernatural assistance. Nevertheless, Ivan suppresses these thoughts of God and intends to restore order to the Karamazovs, the microcosm of humanity, at the courthouse the next day.

In the end, Ivan’s plan fails dramatically. His guilt and skepticism drive him mad, and his speech in the courtroom is so “confused” and “incoherent” that the judge dismisses his testimony (578). Dialogue has revealed Ivan’s weakness, and, consequently, has exposed radicalism’s trust in human rationality as indefensible. Significantly, Ivan’s madness at the end of the novel is called “brain fever,” demonstrating that the central problem with the atheist theory lies within man’s limited reasoning (533). Humanity, this phrase suggests, is too corrupt and frail to serve as its own liberator.

The child Kolya also demonstrates the logical end of radicalism. Like Ivan, he is a “learned atheist” dedicated to the power of autonomous reasoning (33). He chastises his schoolmates for believing in God, and he flaunts his knowledge of atheistic literature by quoting writers like Belinsky and Feuerbach (453). Nevertheless, in the end, Kolya’s extensive

philosophical reading accomplishes nothing for his friend Ilyusha's terminal illness. As Dostoevsky places Kolya in dialogue with Ilyusha's devastated family, his faith in rationality appears trivial because his intellectualism offers little comfort to those mourning the loss of their child. Kolya's character, like Ivan, reveals man's inability to serve as Russia's liberator.

The process of polyphony demonstrates a different outcome for the Church's trust in God as Russia's liberator. While Ivan degenerates from "learned atheist" to mumbling madman over the course of the novel, Alyosha triumphs as a humble novice turned respected leader, proving that Christianity's appeal to God as Russia's savior outrivals the atheist trust in man (33). Notably, nothing within Alyosha accounts for this disparity but only his identity as a "man of God" (48). As Dostoevsky involves Alyosha in dialogue through events like Zosima's death, his faith in God consistently upholds him through the disorder.

This victory of Christianity becomes most apparent in the joy that emerges from suffering throughout the novel for those who rely on God. As the characters grieve the injustices of life, those who trust in God's sovereign purposes achieve stability in the midst of chaos that skeptics like Ivan cannot comprehend. Alyosha demonstrates victory over suffering through his response to Father Zosima's death. He expected God to perform a miracle through Zosima, so when the clergyman's corpse begins to stink, he falls into doubt and depression (293). Only after Alyosha prays does he remember the gospel story of the wedding in Cana and conclude that just as Jesus changed water into wine, God is using evil in his life to bring forth joy for himself and others (311). Specifically, he notes that Zosima's death served to strengthen his own faith, teach him the value of forgiveness, and prepare him to begin his ministry (312). From this broader perspective, Alyosha learns that only God can serve as Russia's liberator because he alone has a

sufficient reason for the suffering he allows, even if his purposes are not always perceptible to his creatures.

Alyosha achieves the same permanence through his trust in God during Dmitri's trial. The night before the trial he declares, "God will conquer," expressing his conviction that God will work good out of evil in spite of the court's verdict (551). Dmitri follows Alyosha's example of faith by trusting in heavenly justice rather than the earthly court's decision. "I swear by God and His dreadful Day of Judgment," he cries, "I am not guilty of my father's blood!" (630). Furthermore, while the dialogue of the trial reveals the impossibility of Ivan's man-centered agenda, polyphony privileges the faith of Alyosha and Dmitri. Ivan spirals into insanity, but Alyosha and Dmitri accept the jury's verdict, convinced that God has a purpose with the court's injustice. The epilogue further confirms their Christian hope. Dmitri's suffering turns to joy as he works towards a new life with Grushenka, and Alyosha emerges from the trial even stronger in his faith and eager to advance his gospel ministry than before. By leading Alyosha's position to its logical conclusion, Dostoevsky proves that the Church's trust in God as Russia's liberator succeeds while Ivan's radical ideals fail.

While answering the question of Russia's liberator, Dostoevsky shows his commitment to Bakhtinian dialogue as an apologetic tool. He participates in the debate only as one who provokes discussion through obstacles he places throughout the text, and he is careful not to misrepresent the atheist perspective by stifling Ivan's voice or limiting his dialogue. In the end, his balanced approach to debate strengthens the reader's confidence in the conclusion that God is Russia's only savior because it suggests that Christianity's victory over atheism was reached without monological meddling of the author.

Simultaneously, Dostoevsky employs his polyphonic apologetic to answer the second concern of the Russian intelligentsia, the question of an ethical system. Ivan also adopts the radical position on this issue, arguing that utilitarianism is the best moral framework for Russian society. Although Ivan admits that practical guidelines must govern behavior, he insists that these moral rules are conventional, and no transcendent standard requires men to love one another. "I can never understand how one can love one's neighbors," he tells Alyosha, explaining that many men are so evil they are not worth loving. (204). Ivan reinforces this atheistic ethic by defending Chernyshevsky's theory that if there is no God or afterlife, then there is no absolute morality. "Everything is permitted," he repeats throughout the novel (229). Like the radicals of the nineteenth century intelligentsia, Ivan believes that Russian society can realize its full potential only by moving beyond the traditional ethic taught by the Church to embrace a rational egoism that frees each individual from his moral bondage to others.

In opposition to Ivan, Alyosha adopts the Church's doctrine of communal responsibility as the solution to Russia's search for an ethical framework. Dostoevsky develops his character-idea to represent the perspective of orthodox believers like Aleksey Khomyakov who taught the biblical idea that every man is responsible for his neighbor. Through Zosima's story in "The Russian Monk," Alyosha teaches that men should pursue Christ-like love, even if that means suffering with those who seem unlovable. "Brothers, have no fear of men's sin," he writes. "Love a man even in his sin, for that is the semblance of divine love and is the highest love on earth" (275). Alyosha is so convinced of love's power that he closes "The Russian Monk" with Zosima's words that the spiritual torture of hell is "the suffering of no longer being able to love" (278). In contrast to Ivan, then, Alyosha upholds God's command to love one's neighbor as the moral principle that can stabilize Russian society.

Dostoevsky uses Bakhtinian dialogue to test these two moral frameworks by setting up Fyodor's murder as a central incident that provokes both Ivan and Alyosha to discuss their opposing theories and reconcile their worldviews with a clear instance of evil. Fyodor is well suited to incite ethical debate because it seems that it would serve the greater good if he were dead. He is an "old buffoon" who failed to provide for his sons born out of illegitimate relationships and continues to take advantage of his children even in his old age (38). "Why is such a man alive?" Dmitri asks. "Tell me, how can he go on defiling the earth? (69). Ivan and Alyosha are present when Dmitri poses this question in book three, and they debate its answer throughout the rest of the novel.

Through this dialogue, Ivan himself exposes utilitarianism as unsustainable. At the beginning of the novel, he insists upon rational egoism, comfortable with his conviction that Russian society will become stable if everyone gauges morality by what most benefits himself. However, his belief that "everything is permitted" quickly spirals to its chaotic conclusion that nothing is forbidden (229). When Smerdyakov hints that he has planned Fyodor's death, Ivan is distressed, but he cannot provide a moral criticism for murder. Instead, he follows his utilitarian convictions by leaving the next day for Chermashnya so that his own reputation is not tarnished when the crime unfolds (236). Ivan's passive acceptance of murder unwittingly demonstrates that utilitarianism logically leads to nihilism. If utility governs morality, then everyone chooses what best advantages himself, and not even manslaughter is immoral.

Furthermore, Ivan's psychological deterioration demonstrates the impossibility of living out his atheistic ethic. He insists that he shares no responsibility for the suffering of others, but he cannot hide the truth that his father's death "irritates," "worries," and "torments" him (533). During his three meetings with Smerdyakov, Ivan becomes increasingly distressed, indicating

that he cannot observe the ethical system he claims to follow. He shoves a drunken peasant and leaves him to freeze in the cold to prove that he does not need to love his neighbor, but he is so driven by guilt that he returns to pick him up and find him help (522, 532). Smerdyakov recognizes the inconsistency in Ivan's philosophy and actions. "You used to say yourself that everything was permitted," he reminds him, "so now why are you so upset?" (538).

At the height of this dialogue about morality, Ivan hallucinates that he is speaking with the devil in his apartment (533). Satan's presence reminds the reader of Zosima's definition of hell, suggesting that Ivan experiences the torment of living life without love for others. Ivan's struggle to live out his utilitarian principles demonstrates that this moral philosophy cannot comport with human experience. As Dostoevsky uses dialogue to bring Ivan to the logical end of utilitarianism, it creates tension between his professed atheist beliefs and his genuine desire for love and leads to madness. Society cannot adhere to the idea that everything is permitted because it conflicts with the human conscience.

Finally, Smerdyakov's downfall confirms the detrimental results of utilitarian philosophy. Throughout the novel, he functions as an extension of Ivan's character-idea, advocating his atheistic perspective and following these convictions to levels of consistency that Ivan himself never achieves. Thus, when Smerdyakov murders Fyodor, falls into depression, and hangs himself, the reader understands these actions as further polyphonic conclusions concerning Ivan's ethic. When Alyosha announces that Smerdyakov has committed suicide, Ivan claims that he already knew that his half-brother had killed himself. Alyosha dismisses his brother's statement as impossible, but Ivan's claim makes sense if he is speaking on the basis of the similar worldview he shares with Smerdyakov. Ivan knows that Smerdyakov is dead because he is living out the maddening effects of his utilitarianism, and he understands the suicidal

trajectory of a life founded upon rational egoism. Once again, Ivan himself reveals the deficiency of his own atheistic worldview.

At the same time Dostoevsky's polyphony leads Ivan's atheism to its unstable conclusion, his dialogue also demonstrates the success of Christian morality through Alyosha. Ivan's utilitarianism implodes, but Alyosha's sacrificial love gradually transforms society. In contrast to Ivan, Alyosha believes that he has a moral duty to protect Fyodor. His father ridicules and offends him, but Alyosha still follows Zosima's doctrine of loving the greatest of sinners by mediating the conflict between Fyodor and Dmitri to protect his father from harm (246). After Fyodor's murder, Alyosha continues to uphold his theology of sacrificial love. While this provocative event drives Ivan to insanity, it encourages Alyosha to leave the monastery and focus his ministry on bringing Christ to those who are suffering.

In his article "The God of Onions," Gary Morson argues that Alyosha practices communal responsibility through "acts of prosaic goodness," Christ-like gestures towards those who are suffering (107). Indeed, when the prostitute Grushenka attempts to seduce Alyosha, he subverts her perverse intentions by forgiving her and thanking her for the opportunity to show kindness to a fellow sinner. Grushenka is so used to men taking advantage of her that this small act of goodness strikes her conscience and causes her to confess her sins (111). "[Alyosha] treats her a someone better than he is," Morson writes, "as unexpectedly kind to him; and that unwitting kindness of hers...turns out to make the significant difference" (112). A similar act of prosaic goodness appears in Alyosha presence with those who are grieving. After Alyosha leaves the monastery, he focuses his ministry on a group of schoolboys who regularly visit their dying friend, Ilyusha. His willingness to suffer alongside of the sick child strengthens the other

children, and after Ilyusha dies, Alyosha comforts his friends and family by reminding them that they will see the dead again at the Resurrection (646).

In all these selfless acts, Alyosha proves the opposite of the egoistical and self-destructive Ivan. As Dostoevsky uses dialogue to drive the Christian system of morality embodied by Alyosha to its logical conclusion, the young novice conquers through the test of polyphony. The novel ends with the schoolboys cheering “Hoorah for Karamazov,” not for Alyosha, but for the faith-driven love of God and community that he represents (646). These final words demonstrate that the biblical teaching of sacrificial love has prevailed over the utilitarianism of Russian radicalism.

The contrasting fates of Alyosha and Ivan demonstrate the unique methodology Dostoevsky employs in *The Brothers Karamazov* by bringing apologetics and polyphony together. The sweeping philosophical concerns of his character-ideas and the rigorous search for logical consistency of their principles reveals that the novelist was committed to fighting for the faith in the sphere of worldviews, and his response to the search for a Russian liberator and a stable system of ethics in Ivan and Alyosha “establish Christianity as the absolute religion” (Warfield 8). The strongest feature of his apologetic, however, is its polyphonic nature. Dostoevsky distances himself from a monological control of his novel’s debate and gives atheism a voice of its own through Ivan. Because Bakhtinian discourse governs the results of the apologetic encounter, rather than the author’s intruding opinion, the self-destructive conclusions of Ivan’s atheism and the self-affirming results of Alyosha’s Christianity carry the force of authentic truth and represent a powerful defense of the Church in nineteenth century Russia.

### **Apologetics and Postmodernism: A Polyphonic Point of Contact**

Dostoevsky's apologetic was effective in his lifetime, but can it assist twenty-first century apologists attempting to reach a postmodern audience? The contemporary focus on tolerance has replaced the revolutionary fever of nineteenth century radicals, and today's atheists only remotely resemble Russian skeptics like Belinsky and Chernyshevsky. Nevertheless, the modern apologist encounters the same challenge that Dostoevsky faced while writing his novels, the task of defending the Christian faith while promoting honest discourse. Dostoevsky's methodology can serve today's apologists because the unique role that dialogue plays in his apologetic provides an effective point of contact between Christians and postmodern culture.

Postmodernists are perhaps the greatest advocates of polyphony. Their distaste for monological discourse and support of "many-voicedness" in debate so closely resembles the concerns of polyphony that one might say Bakhtin was a proto-postmodernist. Christianity, with its commitment to absolute truth, cannot adopt postmodernism's relativizing agenda, but Dostoevsky's methodology shows that some degree of commonality does exist between these disparate worldviews. The consistent Christian will value equality in dialogue because he will want authentic Christianity, not a caricature of his faith, to prove true over other theological voices. Thus, Christians can join Dostoevsky in echoing the postmodern concern that discourse is too often abused. Furthermore, Christians can also imitate Dostoevsky by moving beyond this dialogical point of contact to show postmodernists that their desire for honest dialogue ultimately affirms Christianity. The strength of the polemic in *The Brothers Karamazov* is that the debate between Christianity and atheism most effectively reveals the truth of Christian Theism when Dostoevsky intensifies the atheist voice through Ivan to show where the skeptic's philosophy leads on its own terms. Apologists, then, can defend their faith in a postmodern context by using Bakhtinian dialogue as a point of contact.

Dostoevsky's methodology also accommodates the postmodern interest in narratives. Apologists today rely on evidential arguments for the faith that remain "disembodied and disconnected from the practices and practical concerns of everyday life," but Dostoevsky's apologetic balances logic-driven argumentation with an equally important appeal to human experience (Penner 41). Ivan and Alyosha are characters, creative personalities who seek to understand the implications of their beliefs on their lives. On this level, Dostoevsky's novel fulfills Lyotard's desire for "simple narratives," philosophy grounded in that which is genuinely human rather than abstract (Sim 9). Yet, this method also transcends the subjective to allow for a defense of Christianity. The "simple narratives" of Ivan and Alyosha remain inseparable from the overarching concerns of atheism and Christianity, and the purpose of the polyphonic discourse that drives the novel is to determine which of these positions can provide a foundation for the basic preconditions of human experience. The apologist, then, can mirror Dostoevsky's strategy by demonstrating through Bakhtinian dialogue that Christianity can make life meaningful while postmodern disbelief cannot.

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