

**DOSTOEVSKY: LANGUAGE, FAITH AND FICTION** by Rowan Williams, (*Continuum*, London and New York, 2008) Pp. 285, £28.99

Dostoevsky is the perfect novelist for Rowan Williams, perfect in the sense that he brings almost all of Williams's central concerns to bear within his novels – the untidiness of human living, the importance of dialogue for the flourishing of human life, the call to ethical responsibility, the awareness of grace even in the darkness of tragedy. Looking back over Williams's *oeuvre*, these fundamental issues are latent even as far back as his first publication in which he challenged common assumptions about the nature of religious life, showing the history of spirituality to be about one who is inherently vulnerable and yet true to its source in its very vulnerability: “To want to escape . . . the costly struggles with doubt and vacuity is to seek another God from the one who speaks in and as Jesus crucified” (*The Wound of Knowledge*, 1979, p. 182). Surveying his work since then, it seems that much of what Williams has sought to bring to theology is an ever-greater exposition of this central conviction. It is perhaps unsurprising, then, to find Williams now turning his hand to a writer for whom costly struggles, doubt, and vacuity were very much constitutive of the world that he and, indeed, his characters inhabited. And, of course, this world is highly charged theologically as “the novels insistently and unashamedly press home the question of what else might be possible if we . . . saw the world in another light, the light provided by faith” (p. 1).

But *Dostoevsky: Language, Faith and Fiction* is far more than just an unpacking of Williams's own deep-rooted conviction about what the religious life looks like. Ultimately he is concerned to plunge us into the world of the novels – a world of saints and sinners, love and murder, dialogue and silence – in order to probe “how far we can rightly see the perspective of faith as radically informing both Dostoevsky's sense of what it is to write fiction at all and his understanding of the interdependence between human freedom and human language and imagination” (p. 5).

The book begins, then, with a discussion of where claims made about Christ in the context of faith stand in relation to truth, if truth is taken “as the ensemble of sustainable propositions about the world” (p. 25). Williams is concerned to show the way in which Dostoevsky allows an agency to be at work beyond the world created by the will, which rescues life from self-referential meaninglessness and despair. Where the will refuses such agency, there the diabolical appears. This shadow side of Dostoevsky's fiction (the topic of Williams's second chapter) is represented by those who, in the novels, not only flee from the bodily commitment of practical compassion but also those who seek to be the sole ‘authors’ of others' destinies by attempting to bring dialogue to silence, thus evading the uncontrollable word of the other. Open exchange thwarts their evil desire to subject the world to their will.

Only where dialogue is maintained in its very ‘unfinishability’ can the human person flourish, so Williams tells us in the following chapter. It is open exchange, with all its risks and surprises, which ultimately allows for the growth of characters. In this process they become visible to others (in contrast to the demonic desire to evade recognition), making space for the possibility of real absolution and reconciliation. Thus Williams goes on to discuss Dostoevsky's often confusing call to universal responsibility, which he interprets as precisely this ‘letting be’ of the other in dialogue. To be responsible is not to reduce the other to what I would have them be, but “to be open to a potentially unlimited range of relation”. In the final section Williams considers how the holy enters into this network of relations. According to Williams, it is in those characters iconic of Christ (Bishop Tikhon, Zosima) that holiness appears, disclosing a depth beyond the surface of things. Returning to Williams's central theological conviction mentioned earlier,

this means that we are not to see the holy as something unshakeable and impervious to disfigurement: to be a true image of Christ is to be vulnerable, open to suffering and violence.

What results from all this is a magnificent feat of imaginative engagement, both in terms of Williams's own engagement with the texts and also in terms of his ability to insert the reader once again within the murky world of the novels – except that this time the reader is accompanied by a guide who is able, in a masterful way, to bring to light unseen subtleties, moral challenges and profound insights previously missed or ignored. Williams's expositions of such passages as Ivan's nightmare confrontation with the Devil in *Karamazov* and the famous "Grand Inquisitor" scene are truly remarkable in their attentiveness to the intricacies of the text. Moreover, Williams is able to move with ease between the novels and a vast range of critical material without ever losing sight of his central line of argument. As a literary critic, no less than as a theologian, Williams shows a quite astonishing ability to take an enormously complex issue and boil down the key factors to pithy and cogent statements that provide new hermeneutical lenses for reading the novels. Take, for example, his conclusion on the Prince in *The Idiot* – "Myshkin is a "good" person who cannot avoid doing harm" (p. 55). As a notoriously difficult character to pin down, this description goes a long way in helping the reader better understand the complex set of relationships that surround the Prince in the novel.

There are, of course, areas that remain questionable. In particular, one wonders if Williams is rather too hasty in associating silence and the end of speech with the diabolical. Can silence not also be a thoroughly appropriate response, indeed a *responsible* response, within flourishing relationships? Words often fail; closure too can heal. Williams's oft repeated, "There is always more to be said", is not always entirely convincing. Furthermore, is Williams's distrust of anything that looks like resolution more of a post-modern than a theological commitment? "Humanity with its problems definitively solved is no longer human," he writes (p. 194). But what then for eschatology?

Nonetheless, this remains a remarkable achievement and deserves the attention of anyone who takes the possibility of literature as a theological voice seriously. In fact, it deserves even more attention from those who do not take such a possibility seriously. This book will surely change their mind.

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