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FYODOR DOSTOEVSKY: THE LEGEND OF THE GRAND INQUISITOR: STUDY GUIDE, 2009
Steven Alan Samson

NOTE: This story has spawned a rich literature, as has the entire novel: *The Brothers Karamazov*. As a young man, Dostoevsky himself had been deeply implicated in such intellectual circles as he depicts. In fact, he faced execution for his activities. It should be noted that the father in the novel shares Dostoevsky's given name *Fyodor*, which is consequently shared as the patronymic also by the sons. The novel is Dostoevsky's ultimate contribution to the literary debates over nihilism associated with, among other works, Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons*. In *The Genealogy of Morals* Nietzsche echoes the "everything would be lawful (or permitted)" theme associated with but not stated by the character Ivan.

Study Questions

1. The poem "The Wanderings of Our Lady through Hell" draws on the myth of Cupid and Psyche]. What does Ivan suggest when he says that "my poem would have been of that kind if it had appeared at that time?" (255-56)

2. Summarize Ivan's "poem." The Grand Inquisitor alludes to Rev. 22:18f when he says: "Don't answer, be silent." What does he think about the character of the people? [Here the passage below by the Rev. Frederick T. Gates – his "dream" – should come to mind]. What does Ivan think of the freedom that Christ freely gave? What does he suggest to be the only way that men (rebels) might be made happy? What does the Grand Inquisitor claim to have been the "real stupendous miracle?" How do the questions ("a real stupendous miracle") asked by "the wise and dread Spirit" sum up the subsequent history of mankind? (256-61)

3. Why will "the terrible tower of Babel" be built again? Who finishes it? The earthly bread offered by the spirit of the earth may be characterized as a **false sacrament**. The reference to "fire from heaven" recalls the myth of Prometheus. Oscar Wilde's *The Soul of Man under Socialism* may be compared with the line: "Feed men, and then ask of them virtue!" The previous chapter of *Brothers Karamazov*, entitled "Rebellion," is recommended for more context. What is the significance of the first question in the wilderness? "So long as man remains free," what does he strive for so incessantly and so painfully? What is the **chief misery** of every man individually and all humanity? The craving for a **community of worship** dealt with in chapter five of *The Revenge of Conscience*. In a critical manner Dostoevsky anticipates some of the arguments **Friedrich Nietzsche** makes about *ressentiment* and the role of priestly castes in *The Genealogy of Morals* and *Beyond Good and Evil*. Nothing is more seductive but also a greater cause of suffering than what? What are the **three powers** "able to conquer and to hold captive for ever the conscience of these rebels?" (262-64)

4. What will man worship if he cannot have the miraculous? What will come of man's rebellion against "our power?" How have "we . . . corrected Thy work?" What is the mystery? The reference to eight centuries would place this priestly acceptance of the "kingdoms of the earth" back to the eighth century, making this perhaps a reference to the beginning of the schism between the western and eastern churches at Frankfurt in 794. See *The Christian Future*, pp. 152-55. What is the third and last anguish of man? The reference to a universal state and universal peace is a theme that is not only found in Scripture but also in the long history of conquerors and empires. Dante, Kant, Hegel, and many others fell into the grip of this dream.

5. How well does the following describe the progressive-socialist program: "Receiving bread from us, they will see clearly that we take the bread made by their hands from them, to give it to them, without any miracle," etc.? Compare the sins permitted in Wells's "New Republic" (*Anticipations*) with the following: "We shall tell them that every sin will be expiated, if it is done with our

permission, that we allow them to sin because we love them, and the punishments for these sins we will take upon ourselves." What sort of humility does the Grand Inquisitor claim?

6. Alyosha lodges an exasperated protest. How does Ivan reply? Here Ivan is clearly taking a Nietzschean view of such "priestcraft," seeing it as something more sinister than a mere lust for power. Father Païssy is named after Father Païssy Velichkovky, who promoted *starchestvo*: the spiritual leadership of a *starets* or elder (Alyosha is a disciple of Father Zossima in the novel). What is the Grand Inquisitor's secret? What makes him a tragic figure in Ivan's eyes? The hopelessness of Ivan's position resembles the ambiguous parable below: **Franz Kafka**'s "Couriers." A story by **Miguel de Unamuno**, "San Manuel Bueno," also takes up suffering of an unbelieving priest. The selection by the Rev. Gates below is taken from his address at the meeting of John D. Rockefeller's General Education Board, which had been established to promote humanitarian reform in the Appalachian highlands. The ministrations of some of the eugenics advocates of that period, like H. G. Wells, Margaret Sanger, and Harry Laughlin, were generally less high-toned.

7. Alyosha's response is to ask: "How will you live? . . . With such a hell in your heart, how can you?" In many ways the novel as a whole is driven by that question. Earlier, in Book II, chapter 6 of the novel, the character Miüsov quotes Ivan as saying the following: "He solemnly declared in argument that there was nothing in the whole world to make men love their neighbours. That there was no law of nature that men should love mankind, and that, if there had been any love on earth hitherto, it was not owing to a natural law, but simply because men have believed in immortality. Ivan Fyodorovitch added in parenthesis that the whole natural law lies in that faith, and that if you were to destroy in mankind the belief in immortality, not only love but every living force maintaining the life of the world would at once by dried up. Moreover, nothing then would be immoral, everything would be lawful, even cannibalism. That's not all. He ended by asserting that for every individual, like ourselves, who does not believe in God or immortality, the moral law of nature must immediately be changed into the exact contrary of the former religious law, and that egoism, even to crime, must become, not only lawful but even recognised as the inevitable, the most rational, even honourable outcome of his position. From this paradox, gentlemen, you can judge the rest of our eccentric and paradoxical friend Ivan Fyodorovitch's theories." Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Constance Garnett. New York: Modern Library, n.d., p. 69.

Dostoevsky Review

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