

From Dante to Dostoevsky: The Golden Age of Christian Art (1321-1821)

Duke Pesta

In spring 2022, I had the kind of rare teaching schedule that literature professors used to dream about, long before social justice shaming and critical race theory cancelation made one leery of teaching *two* single-author courses devoted to long-dead white men. And not just any pre-woke white dudes, but Dante and Dostoevsky, authors whose work celebrated the primary role of Christianity in the creation of Western culture. Preparing to teach these authors during the Christmas holiday of 2021, I reflected on the arc of Western culture—from Dante’s death in 1321 through Dostoevsky’s birth in 1821—marveling how those profound Christian verities helped create a golden age of art spanning half a millennium. I also lamented how entirely academics had rejected these values, condemning the literary heritage of the Western tradition.

Dante died an exile in Ravenna 700 years ago. Civil faction guaranteed that he would not see his native Florence for the last two decades of his life. The *Divine Comedy* remains a high-water mark of Christian poetry, rivaling and often superseding the epic masterpieces of classical authors such as Homer and Virgil. A summation of medieval wisdom foreshadowing Christian humanism, the *Comedy* was a literary compendium to match the *Summa* of Aquinas, linking scholastic philosophy to Renaissance (re)encounters with classical learning.

Five centuries later, Dostoevsky was born in Moscow. In 1849, he was sentenced to death for circulating banned books. The sentence was commuted, and he was banished to hard labor in Siberia.

Duke Pesta is associate professor of English at the University of Wisconsin, Oshkosh; pestaj@fpeusa.org. He is also the Director of FreedomProject Education and last appeared in AQ in the fall of 2017 with “Deeper Reasons: The Politicization of Academic Publishing.”

Dostoevsky's brutal prison experience engendered a deep recommitment to Christianity. Henceforth, his writing plumbed the depths of Christian belief. His major novels—*Crime and Punishment*, *The Idiot*, *Demons*, and *The Brothers Karamazov*—offer some of the most powerful arguments ever marshalled in support of a Christian worldview: a revival of faith designed to check the tide of atheism and socialism before they swamped Western Christendom. If Dante's death in 1321 marked the passing of the greatest Christian poet, then the birth of Dostoevsky in 1821 presaged the rise of Christianity's last major prophet, a monitory voice of Old Testament gravity whose lamentation for the receding influence of the gospels was to fall on deaf ears.

Dante's Comedy: The Rise of High Christian Art

When identifying golden ages we seldom refer to Christianity, because until recently the moral, spiritual, and civilizational benefits of Christian culture were self-evident, giving rise to the most advanced and humane cultures the world has seen. Only now, from the wistful vantage of retrospection, do we have the distance to view the long march of Christian culture from outside of itself, as Western nations reject the morality, condemn the teachings, and cancel the figures who made it possible. How did Dante's masterpiece transform Christian art, inaugurating a golden age of Christian art and culture? The three parts of the *Comedy*—*Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, and *Paradiso*—bring together Christian and classical figures, movements, and mythologies that unify all past human history under the arc of Judeo-Christian thought.

In the Middle Ages, the literature of ancient Rome was filtered through Christian lenses. Virgil's *Aeneid*, for instance, was read as biblical allegory—pagan portents foreshadowing Christian revelations—rather than as an account of pagan Rome's rise. Dante did not co-opt Virgil; he created instead a Christian epic to surpass him. By writing in Italian, not Latin, Dante stirred poets across Europe to create native literatures in French, Spanish, and English. In the *Comedy*, Virgil remains Roman and his *Aeneid* a work of Latin genius,

despite his role as guide for Dante through the underworld. (As a pagan, Virgil can lead Dante only part of the way through).

The ancient epics are poems of conquest (*Iliad*) or the founding of empires (*Aeneid*). In *The Odyssey* and *Aeneid*, protagonists engage in a *katabasis*—an underworld visit to seek knowledge about the future. The message is clear: mortal life is better than Hades, where bloodless shades forget themselves and where there exists no reward for virtue. Dante’s Christian *Comedy*, however, is an extended *katabasis*, taking place entirely in the afterlife where the consequences of free will receive their fullest due. In ancient epics, favor is bestowed on the elite; there is little concern for average people. Dante’s Christian afterlife emphasizes instead a conscious experience where the choices of the lowly result in great bliss or consuming darkness.

After encountering Dante in the Wood of Error, Virgil reminds him that the way out requires repentance and atonement. He must experience Hell before rising through Purgatory to witness salvation in Paradise. Dante’s response exposes the profound gulf between pagan notions of implacable fate and Christian ideas about free will.

But how should *I* go there? Who says so? Why?

I’m not Aeneas and I am not Paul!

Who thinks me fit? Not others. And not I.¹

Dante is neither a Trojan demi-god whose mother is the goddess Venus, nor is he Saint Paul, blinded on the road to Damascus and transformed into one of the most consequential Christians in history. A lost sinner like Dante warrants the same heavenly intervention as great heroes and saints.

Not only does the *Comedy* assert the intrinsic worth of every person, it also “justifies the ways of God to men.” Arriving at the gates of Hell, Dante reads the inscription carved in the lintel:

Through me the road to the city of desolation

Through me the road to sorrows diuturnal,

¹ All quotes from *The Divine Comedy* are from the Dorothy Sayers translation (Penguin, 1949).

Through me the road among the lost creation.
 Justice moved my great maker; God Eternal
 Wrought me: the power, and the unsearchably
 High wisdom, and the primal love supernal.
 Nothing ere I was made was made to be
 Save things eterne, and I eterne abide;
 Lay down all hope, you that go in by me.

Here before the abyss, we find the mercy and love that reveal the mind of God in action. God's love is so abiding that He must allow us the freedom to choose something *other* than Himself. If all choices—good, bad, and indifferent—lead directly back to God, then there is no Justice, for there would be no ultimate consequence for those who choose good or evil. If every choice earns God's unqualified love, then free will is an illusion. If free will is an illusion, we cannot be held responsible for our actions. God values choice so much that He is willing to risk losing us to our own bad choices. To do otherwise is to undermine freedom, and by extension love itself, which is choice, not compulsion. Hell, then, is simply the final, fixed stage in which a human soul gets what it chooses.

Throughout his journey, Dante asserts that he is given a vision of Hell, adjusted to limited human understandings, a deeply detailed hologram, but a hologram nonetheless. His poetic descriptions may move readers to terror, empathy, or piety, but the actual mysteries of the afterworld are beyond the ken of sin-warped rationality. Consider Dante's encounter with the Sorcerers, a broad category of sin that includes magicians, tarot readers, and psychics. The specific illustration Dante visualizes is fortune-telling. The sinners are naked, necks horribly twisted so that they can only see behind themselves:

And, Reader, so God give thee grace to glean
 Profit of my book, think if I could be left
 Dry-eyed, when close before me I had seen
 Our image so distorted, so bereft
 Of dignity, that their eyes' brimming pools
 Spilled down to bathe the buttocks at the cleft.

Truly I wept, leaned on the pinnacles
Of the hard rock; until my guide said, "Why!
And art thou too like all the other fools?"

Here pity, or here piety, must die
If the other lives; who's wickeder than one
That's agonized by God's high equity?"

Dante highlights a key aspect of fortune telling: these wretches engaged in Pride, the most dangerous of the Seven Deadly Sins. Rather than be content to see as all humans do, neck up, eyes forward, and with the limited capacity of human vision, they instead seek illicit and demonic aid to see the future, a prescience belonging to God alone. The bitter tears cascading perversely down their backs and pooling between the buttocks are arresting. It's as if Dante, borrowing a modern trope, suggests that these sinners "have it ass-backwards."

The genius of the *Comedy* is how the punishments mirror the nature of sin, "mirrored" like a reversed and therefore backward and false image. By definition, Hell is a place of false images, and Dante constantly falls for the illusion. Notice how his reaction to the scene endangers his soul. Rather than reject the sinful behavior, Dante laments the indignity imposed on human form, a deeply misplaced empathy that has him weeping along with the sinners. Dante is in Hell to recognize sin, not to excuse it. Once recognized, sin must be hated and shunned, not accommodated. The choices that bring souls to Hell abuse free will most of all.

Dante's *Comedy* surveys Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise across theological, philosophical, and eschatological traditions, ushering in a remarkable 500-year era of high art and cultural imagination celebrating the foundational ideas of Christianity. To this day, our interactions with Christian theology are indelibly influenced by these magisterial poems. Our debt to Dante is still being paid. In 1921, the 600th anniversary of Dante's death, Pope Benedict XV wrote an encyclical naming Dante one "of the many celebrated geniuses of whom the Catholic faith can boast" and the "pride and glory of humanity."

In 2008, the case of Dante's banishment was reopened, and a motion passed rescinding his sentence and extending a posthumous apology. And in 2021, the 700th anniversary of Dante's death, a retrial was held in Florence, clearing Dante of all civic wrongdoing, once and for all.

Dostoevsky and the Defense of Christian Civilization

By Dostoevsky's birth in 1821, Western Europe had experienced the Enlightenment and Romanticism. The former deified reason at the expense of Christianity, culminating in Deism and a series of bloody revolutions; the latter deified Nature, also at the expense of Christianity, culminating in a revival of paganism and the subordination of the Divine within the prison of materialism. Both movements served as Petri dishes out of which grew materialist thinkers like Marx, Darwin, Nietzsche, and Freud. And like Dante, Dostoevsky was perfectly suited to address the ideological cataclysms of his age.²

In 1849 Dostoevsky was a twenty-eight-year-old writer with revolutionary sympathies, heavily involved in progressive causes that sought to remake Russia in the mold of an increasingly atheist and materialist Western Europe. The bell struck that same year when the Petrashevsky Circle was raided and thirty-five members arrested, including Dostoevsky, who was accused of possessing an illegal printing press and distributing anti-government propaganda. He and his confederates were sentenced to death by firing squad.

Privately, the Tsar agreed to lesser sentences, including prison terms in Siberia, but insisted the prisoners not find out about the clemency until the last possible minute. The first group of three prisoners were tied to stakes before the firing squad. After an agonizing minute of silence, guns pointed, the soldiers stood down. Dostoevsky, in the very next threesome to be shot, was deeply affected by the Tsar's trick, a dangerous trauma to impose upon a man already suffering from a rare form of temporal lobe epilepsy called "ecstatic epilepsy." Dostoevsky was sentenced to hard labor in Siberia, where

² It is worth noting that *The Communist Manifesto* was published in 1848, one year before Dostoevsky was banished for revolutionary "crimes." His return and retooled career as a Christian novelist coincided with the publication of Darwin's *Origin of Species* in 1859.

profound suffering awakened his dormant Christianity. After working alongside violent criminals, Dostoevsky was shocked that these murderers—men who might cut your throat for an extra ration of bread—would nevertheless weep like children before the Holy Sacrament when it was offered every Easter and Christmas. Through these suffering convicts, Dostoevsky experienced a regeneration of faith that turned him back to Christ.

In prison, Dostoevsky was called to live his Christianity every day. He was brutally beaten for making a complaint on behalf of fellow prisoners, protesting a lump of filth in the soup. He endured a second horrific beating for saving the life of a prisoner after the officer in charge forbade it. This second beating—categorized as an “execution”—was so vicious that the prisoners believed him dead. Six weeks later, the “dead” man returned to camp: his shocked fellow convicts nicknamed him “the deceased.”³

Ten years after exile, Dostoevsky began writing novels that pushed back against the atheism and materialism undermining Russian civilization. His youthful flirtation with socialism gave way to the voice of a prophet, taking on the materialism of Marx and Nietzsche with the zeal of Elijah. One of the earliest existentialist writers, Dostoevsky had endured a kind of transformational death and resurrection in the Siberian gulag, where he had sacrificed his life for another, only to be resurrected and restored to life.⁴

In his *magnus opus* *The Brothers Karamazov* (1881), each character represents one or more worldviews or philosophical positions. The trick is to determine the major idea that drives behavior, only then can readers determine who murders Fyodor Karamazov, the father of Dmitri, Ivan, and Alexi. The ideas that drive the brothers produce in them and others a sense of hell, purgatory, or heaven. The oldest brother Dmitri is a slave to emotion, unable to control himself in the heat of the moment. Driven by passion, he is a prime suspect for the

3 See George Kennan, *Siberia and the Exile System, Volume 1* (New York: Russell, 1970).

4 The most typical forms of literary existentialism, like that of Sartre, are characterized as man’s struggle for meaning in a godless, random universe. In a world like this, there is no actual existential struggle: To live or not carries no metaphysical consequences. The Christian existentialism of Dostoevsky is much more raw, where the struggle is between a random universe and a creator God, where belief and doubt create genuine metaphysical tensions. In the words of Keats in the poem “On Sitting Down to Read King Lear Again” (1818), it is “the fierce dispute / Betwixt damnation and impassion’d clay.”

murder because of two issues that tax his emotional nature to the extreme. First, the broke Dmitri believes his father stole his inheritance from his late mother, and second, they are both in love with the same venal woman, Grushenka, who is willing to sell herself to the highest bidder. While talking to his brother Alexi, he is asked what he will do if he catches Grushenka with Fyodor. Dmitri responds, "I'll kill. I couldn't endure that. . . . The old man. I wouldn't kill her." He continues:

I don't know, I don't know . . . Maybe I won't kill him, and maybe I will. I'm afraid that at that moment his face will suddenly become hateful to me. I hate his Adam's apple, his nose, his eyes, his shameless sneer. I feel a personal loathing. I'm afraid of that. I may not be able to help myself.⁵

As prone to violence as to irrational sacrifice in the name of love, Dmitri alternates between exhilaration and despair, carrying in his heart a Purgatory of irreconcilable and unmanageable emotions.

The middle brother Ivan is the walking representation of reason. In Ivan, Dostoevsky creates a mind so profoundly rational that he is stuck in a paradox. Ivan understands that from a rational perspective God must exist or nothing makes sense and everything is permissible, "even cannibalism." He accedes to Voltaire's maxim: "If God did not exist, mankind would have had to invent Him" or human civilization could never have materialized. And yet it's Ivan's very rationalism—his need for material proof—that creates a hell within him, for without material proof reason alone cannot consent to belief. Talking about suffering, Ivan argues that whatever God can do by way of forgiveness, He cannot "make it up" to a little child who was tortured and murdered by her own parents:

Is there in the whole world a being who would have the right to forgive and could forgive? I don't want harmony. From love for humanity I don't want it. I would rather be left with

5 All quotations from *The Brothers Karamazov* are from the Pevear and Volokhonsky translation (1990).

the unavenged suffering. I would rather remain with my unavenged suffering and unsatisfied indignation, even if I were wrong. Besides, too high a price is asked for harmony; it's beyond our means to pay so much to enter on it.

This is existentialism closest to the bone. God may forgive the murderous parents; He may distract the child who suffered with endless joys. But neither He nor anyone else can restore what was taken from that suffering child. Ivan argues that if there is something that can pay such a debt and wipe the slate clean, the restoration is beyond the limits of human reason to comprehend.

The youngest brother Alexi embodies selfless love that comes from ardent faith. Alexi understands how Ivan suffers from his inability to believe in God, despite the logical necessity of doing so, a position that ironically aligns Ivan with Satan himself, who visits Ivan in a “dream” later in the novel. Alexi’s response to Ivan is profound: “I think everyone must love life more than anything else in the world.” Ivan answers as reason must: “Love life more than the meaning of it?” Alexi explains:

Yes, certainly. Love it regardless of logic, as you say. Yes, most certainly regardless of logic, for only then will I grasp its meaning. That’s what I’ve been vaguely aware of for a long time. Half your work is done, Ivan: you love life. Now you must try to do the second half and you are saved.

Alexi’s sacrificial love is ultimately more logical than reason, a revelation that leads to heaven. The more materialism defies reason at the expense of Christian love—where strong subordinates itself to weak—the more life is devalued, from the unborn to the very old.

The only character whose faith is deeper than Alexi’s is the elder Zosima, his spiritual guide. Before dying, Zosima explains active and passive love. Passive love is abstract, divorced from action. It is virtue signaling without personal sacrifice. On the other hand, Zosima defines active love as “labor and perseverance . . . perhaps, a whole science”:

Try to love your neighbors actively and tirelessly. The more you succeed in loving, the more you'll be convinced of the existence of God and the immortality of your soul. And if you reach complete selflessness in the love of your neighbor, then undoubtedly you will believe, and no doubt will even be able to enter your soul. This has been tested. It is certain.

This time-tested focus on sacrificial, other-centered love is the only way to return the West to a genuinely Christian culture. *The Divine Comedy* drives us to the throne of God where sacrificial love is self-evident and eminently “rational.” Dostoevsky explicitly defends Christianity on these grounds as well. This is not to say that during the years between 1321 and 1821 we accomplished the goal of universal harmony—far from it. But for that 500-year period, from Dante to Dostoevsky, the pieces were in place, the cultural landscape propitious, and our children nurtured on the great books of Western culture. It's all right there in the Christian Classics, but only if we stop canceling and start reading again.