

Ivan karamazov and "the grand inquisitor" essay sample

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Introduction

In understanding “ The Grand Inquisitor” and chapters taken from The Brothers Karamazov, the heart of Ivan’s search is a philosophical question: if God is almighty, why would God allow people to suffer? While this line of questioning can be seen as attacking faith by asking why God punishes people, it opens the door to understanding that faith requires willingness.

Ivan Karamazov’s rejection of secular and Westernized faith can also be seen as the failed struggle of trying to find a God he can believe in. Ivan says he wants to get to know his estranged brother Alyosha (Dostoevsky, 1993, p. 1), but Ivan is lost and faithless, primarily because Ivan is unwilling to believe in God when he sees so much suffering in the world. Alyosha cuts to the heart of the estrangement between the two of them when he asks Ivan how he can love without having God in his heart (Dostoevsky, 1993, pp. 36-37).

This sense of Ivan’s lack of faith, therefore, explains the balance between the Roman Catholic sense of happiness and well-being and the Protestant sense of individual freedom and dignity: Ivan is trying to find a truth that he is willing to accept. He is trying to come to believe and his struggle is between faith and doubt.

The clearest way to understand Ivan’s doubt is to see that he is using logic to examine the evidence of God, but he is doing it in a despairing and skeptical fashion that rejects God because it rejects crimes that are perpetrated by

humans. Dostoevsky, clearly, is using Ivan to represent the dismissal of religion and God, especially in terms of how Ivan does not believe that faith can be reasonable or logical.

In many ways Ivan's story feels like it is preaching or a type of parable. Ivan is putting forth his own principles and beliefs and the only reason that it is not a one-sided argument is because Alyosha is present for the conversation and occasionally interjects.

What Ivan presents is not definitive and requires personal reflection from the reader, but there is the clear sense that God cannot exist because an all-powerful being would not allow evil and suffering to exist. The Protestant Church is examined in terms individual freedom and dignity, primarily represented by the idea of people having free will. The Roman Catholic Church is considered in terms of being about happiness and well-being, primarily represented by how people are protected when they submit to authority.

An easy way to see how Ivan explores these concepts involves Christ being focused on how human beings can choose between right and wrong and how the Grand Inquisitor sees righteousness in following a stable path. It is the difference between choosing right from wrong and just blindly submitting to what others say is right. An example of how this is present in the two different faiths is that the Roman Catholic Church remained much more focused on having the word of God handed down from priests, while

Protestants challenged the authority of scripture being handed down from the Pope.

Ivan, while refuting God, still seems to present an affinity with the Grand Inquisitor's views. Ivan bases much of his argument on there being a righteous path. The Grand Inquisitor presents the three ideas of "miracle, mystery, and authority" as ways to restrain or tame free will. Christ is, instead, coming from the Protestant perspective. Ivan represents the Roman Catholic Church as a faith built on submission that then leads to happiness and well-being.

The Protestant Church is represented by individual freedom and dignity because Christ believes in forgiveness and sees human beings as able to choose right from wrong in the name of people standing up for their faith, not unlike Martin Luther leading the Protestant Reformation. In Ivan's construction of these ideas, the Protestant Church is truly about "protest" against the rigid submission of Roman Catholicism, but Ivan seems to favor the harsh submission to authority even as he seems to deny having any faith of his own.

Since Ivan is showing how the Grand Inquisitor and Christ place different values on security and free will, "miracle, mystery, and authority" represent the three ways that a rebellious conscience can submit to the Grand Inquisitor's side of the conflict (Dostoevsky, 1993, p. 28). The heart of this sentiment is that the Grand Inquisitor does not believe Christ's argument that free will is enough to save someone's soul. Ivan is actively refuting God

based on how God does not do what is best for alleviating human suffering. Christ believes in human goodness and freedom and the Grand Inquisitor is just as convinced that letting people choose right from wrong will lead them to damnation.

“Miracle, mystery, and authority” are therefore, in Ivan’s conflict and from the side of the Grand Inquisitor, the only way for people to live righteously in the name of God—but Christ sees those same qualities as ways to shackle people’s freedoms because Christ believes that human beings need to choose righteousness based on their own free will. Happiness is balanced against freedom in a way that can be seen as the Grand Inquisitor saying that rebellious evil lives inside everyone and Christ saying that there is good in everyone and that their choosing to embrace that goodness is what leads to a person being saved.

Both of these two sides of Ivan’s story believe that they know what is right for humanity and that they understand human nature. Christ does not believe that people should submit to “miracle, mystery, and authority” and the Grand Inquisitor does not believe that people should open themselves up to the innate weakness that is in their hearts. It seems as if Ivan is examining just how much human weakness is worth in terms of the grand scheme of human existence. It is not surprising that contemplating that topic leads him to despair.

It is simplistic to imply that the truth Ivan sought was right before his eyes but that he failed to see it. Yet Father Zossima, the priest and monk in the

Eastern Orthodox Church, does hold the possibility to soothe Ivan's woes. The primary issue is that Ivan could only see the bad in human nature. Skepticism and doubt color everything that Ivan sees and everything that Ivan believes.

Because of his doubt, Ivan is not really saying that submission or freedom are enough to believe in God because Ivan is convinced that churches and faith are just human constructions. Ivan's doubt can be summed up as his seeing that submission to the church based on "miracle, mystery, or authority" is better than having to choose right from wrong—but it is also important to understand that Ivan's doubt and despair are connected to his lack of faith in God.

Therefore, first and foremost, Father Zossima could help to lift Ivan from despair because Father Zossima is a man of faith. Christianity would offer Ivan Karamazov the ability to learn how to love and how to forgive. The story of Markel demonstrates how confessing one's sins can lead to redemption. Father Zossima's story, like so many of Ivan's concerns, also involves a suffering child, in Markel, but shows a child who is suffering yet also demonstrating grace, humility, and acceptance (Dostoevsky, 1993, pp. 40-41). If Ivan could embrace the lesson that "everyone is really responsible to all men for all men and for everything" (Dostoevsky, 1993, p. 41), then Ivan could begin to be healed and made whole.

Father Zossima eventually comes to believe in views that are similar to those of his brother, which would also benefit Ivan since it is clear that Ivan's

brother, Alyosha, is a man of faith. Father Zossima believes that he is responsible, which is the complete opposite of Ivan's argument that he does not " want to understand anything now" (p. 14). Father Zossima wants to understand everything. Ivan cannot be whole because he is balancing his belief that no one should suffer against his awareness that many people suffer.

Ivan has nihilism that humanity could be soothed by seeing how the loss of faith is behind his " devil-ridden chaos" (Dostoevsky, 1993, p. 2). When Ivan views the devil as representing the worst of men (Dostoevsky, 1993, p. 9), it is implied that Ivan also views himself as representing the worst of men. Father Zossima was a drunken and debauched man of devilry (Dostoevsky, 1993, p. 48) who never opened a Bible (Dostoevsky, 1993, p. 49) yet eventually become a man of God.

Ivan goes on and on about the suffering of children, but it is also clear that his " youthful greenness" (Dostoevsky, 1993, p. 2) is linked to his own angst. Ivan could be helped by the faith of Father Zossima because Ivan seems to be very angry at God even though Ivan claims not to believe in God. Ivan wants the ways of God to be laid bare before him (Dostoevsky, 1993, p. 15) even though Ivan does not think that he is a believer. Father Zossima represents the truism that " only a little tiny seed is needed" (Dostoevsky, 1993, p. 46) as long as a person's heart can be honest and willing.

Faith in salvation requires wanting to be saved and Father Zossima wanted to be saved. Ivan could be helped by asking for forgiveness (Dostoevsky,

1993, p. 52) and by having strength of character and serving truth (Dostoevsky, 1993, p. 56). Sincere prayer is described as invoking “ new feeling,” “ new meaning,” and “ fresh courage” (Dostoevsky, 1993, p. 74) and that is what Ivan needs in his heart. It is said that faith without works is dead and the emptiness that Ivan Karamazov feels offers a powerful example of that principle: Ivan wants to believe, but he is not willing to open his heart to God.