

# The grand inquisitor: the role of religion



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

The Grand Inquisitor  
The mind is its own place, and in itself  
Can make a heaven of hell, a hell of heaven.- John Milton

The questions proposed in Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *The Grand Inquisitor* challenge the very essence of human existence. The idea of freedom is examined and described through a bleak, contemptuous perspective. In the *Grand Inquisitor*, one of humanity's most protected and beloved ideals is illustrated as a destructive force that has plunged mankind into a state of anguish and disorder. From one angle, the story can be perceived as an attack on God and religion but closer examination reveals the opposite conclusion: The *Grand Inquisitor* is an explanation for the vital necessity of one religious institution. The context in which the story occurs is shocking: God visits earth in human form, performs a few miracles, and as is promptly locked in a jail cell by a flesh and blood man who proceeds to admonish God for giving mankind free will. The tale is not given to us directly. Ivan tells the story to his brother, Alyosha, with interruptions and elaborations sprinkled throughout. It is clear from the beginning that Alyosha is a religious man while Ivan has adopted a more cynical position. The first exchange that occurs between the brothers illustrates this contrast. "Brother," Alyosha said suddenly, his eyes beginning to flash, "You just asked if there was in this whole world a being who could and would have the right to forgive. But there is such a being, and he can forgive everything, forgive all and for all, because he himself gave his innocent blood for all and for everything. You've forgotten about him, but it is on him that the structure is being built, and it is to him that they will cry out: 'Just art thou, O Lord, for thy ways have been revealed!'" Ah, yes, the 'only sinless One' and his blood! No I have not forgotten about him; on the contrary, I've been wondering all the while why you haven't brought him up

for so long, because in discussions your people usually trot him out first thing.” (Pg. 413)As the reader gets deeper into the story, they realize this early conversation was deceptive. Ivan is the storyteller and dominates the majority of The Grand Inquisitor. He sneers at his brother’s faith and since he is the central character, it is expected that Dostoyevsky will attempt to persuade the reader to assume Ivan’s stance. As Ivan continues, the reader learns that the story is set Spain when the burning of alleged heretics was taking place. It is during this time that God chooses to move through earth. A portion of the story details His magnetism.” People are drawn to him by an invincible force, they flock to him, surround him, follow him. He passes silently among them with a quiet smile of infinite compassion. The sun of love shines in his heart, rays of Light, Enlightenment, and Power stream from his eyes and, pouring over the people, shake their hearts with responding love.” (Pg. 416)After the Grand Inquisitor becomes aware of God’s presence of earth, he orders his henchmen to remove Him. The description of the Inquisitor sharply contradicts the description of God in human form. The Inquisitor is presented as being a cold, formidable, judgmental presence; even the word “ sinister” is used.” He is an old man, almost ninety, tall and straight, with a gaunt face and sunken eyes, from which a glitter still shines like a fiery spark. Oh, he is not wearing his magnificent cardinal’s robes in which he had displayed himself to the people the day before, when the enemies of the Roman faith were burned-no, at this moment he is wearing only his old, coarse monastic cassock. He is followed at a certain distance by his grim assistances and slaves, and by the ‘ holy’ guard. At the sight of the crowd he stops and watches from afar. He had seen everything, seen the coffin set down at his feet, seen the girl rise, and his face darkens. He scowls

with his thick, gray, eyebrows and his eyes shine with a sinister fire.” (Pg. 417) Another contrast between the Inquisitor and God is the crowd’s reaction to them. The people do not demonstrate the same uninhibited awe and adoration for the Inquisitor but rather a fearful obedience.” And such is his power, so tamed, submissive, and trembling obedient to his will are the people, that the crowd immediately parts before the guard” (Pg. 417) A noteworthy detail from this section is how quickly the crowd abandons God, who, just moments ago, they were enthralled with. The theme of man’s weakness and the need for a rigid governing authority begins to emerge. What follows is a lengthy monologue delivered by the Grand Inquisitor to God. The lecture details the Inquisitor’s reproach for freedom. It should be mentioned that for Americans, the concept of freedom would likely evoke a different definition than it would for someone who existed in more restrictive circumstances. For Americans, political and social freedoms are an intrinsic part of our existence. In Dostoyevsky’s era, such freedoms did not exist but there were, and have been since the beginning of time, the most basic freedoms of man: the freedom to love, to hate, to believe in God, and so on. These are internal freedoms that emerge from having a free will and this is what the Inquisitor is speaking against. Initially, the Inquisitor’s claim is appalling. However, he puts forth a compelling argument. He fervently describes the way freedom has enslaved mankind and thrust the human race into a state of tormented chaos. The Inquisitor boldly confronts God on this error and declares that humanity will ultimately reject Him.” For the mystery of man’s being is not only in living, but in what one lives for. Without a firm idea of what he lives for, man will not consent to live and will sooner destroy himself than remain on earth, even if there is bread all around him. That is

so, but what came of it? Instead of taking over men's freedom, you increased it still more for them! Did you forget that peace and even death are dearer to man than free choice in the knowledge of good and evil? There is nothing more seductive for man than the freedom of his conscience, but there is nothing more tormenting, either. And so, instead of a firm foundation for appeasing human conscience once and for all, you chose everything that was unusual, enigmatic, and indefinite, you chose everything that was beyond men's strength, and thereby acted as if you did not love them at all—and who did this? He who came to give his life for them! Instead of taking over men's freedom, you increased it and forever burdened the kingdom of the human soul with its torments. You desired the free love of man, that he should follow you freely, seduced and captivated by you. Instead of the firm ancient law, man had henceforth to decide for himself, with a free heart, what is good and what is evil, having only your image before him as a guide—but did it not occur to you that he would eventually reject and dispute even your image and your truth if he was oppressed by so terrible a burden as freedom of choice? They will finally cry out that truth is not in you, for it was impossible to leave them in greater confusion and torment than you did, abandoning them to so many cares and insoluble problems.” (Pg. 422-423)The Inquisitor's argument is difficult to refute, as man's ability to discern good from evil is undeniably questionable. The freedom of will allows each individual to have a different moral system or, in some cases, no moral system at all. If one considers the violence and depravity that occurs in the world on a daily basis, it appears man is unable to manage freedom of the will. The myriad of choices and possibilities, the moral decisions one is confronted with every day, seem to overwhelm many. It is what Milton

speaks of; the mind's ability to construct its own environment, to make " a hell of heaven" that the Inquisitor claims has wrecked humanity. Many people make choices throughout their lives that lead to the creation of hellish circumstances. Perhaps it is not free will itself but the massive responsibility that accompanies it that overpowers mankind. As the Inquisitor continues, he states that men long for unity. This point becomes a principal element in the Inquisitor's contention that religion is the one thing that can save man from an existence plagued by turmoil and suffering." Had you accepted that third counsel of the mighty spirit, you would have furnished all that man seeks on earth, that is: someone to bow down to, someone to take over his conscience, and a means for uniting everyone at last into a common, concordant, and incontestable anthill-for the need for universal union is the third and last torment of men. Mankind in its entirety has always yearned to arrange things so that they must be universal." (Pg. 425)The Inquisitor goes on to say that the religious institution will deliver mankind from the burden of free will. He asserts that humanity will submit to the church and only then will they be relived of the crushing responsibility they were incapable of shouldering." But the flock will gather again, and again submit, and this time once and for all. Then we shall give them quiet, humble happiness, the happiness of feeble creatures, such as they were created." (Pg. 427)The Inquisitor also believes he is rectifying God's error and acting in the best interest of the people. At one point, he states his mission and reprimands God for interfering." But I awoke and did not want to serve madness. I returned and joined the host of those who have corrected your deed. I left the proud and returned to the humble, for the happiness for the humble. What I am telling you will come true, and our kingdom will be

established. Tomorrow, I repeat, you will see this obedient flock, which at my first gesture will rush to heap hot coals around your stake, at which I shall burn you for having come to interfere with us. For if anyone has ever deserved our stake, it is you," (Pg. 428) The Inquisitor's position is distasteful but again impossible to disregard. Since its conception, humanity has existed in a state of chaos and, even today, is plagued by violence, war, and incomprehensible cruelty. How can one refute the Inquisitor's wish to persuade man to relinquish their free will and fall into a peaceful, united existence? Dostoyevsky doesn't pretend that this is a pleasant notion. Instead, he presents it as a necessary evil, unpleasant but essential for the stabilization of the human race. Fyodor Dostoyevsky was a devout follower of the Russian Orthodox faith and well acquainted with the brutality that afflicts earthly existence. He was a compulsive gambler and often had financial troubles. The writer also suffered from epilepsy. Perhaps, *The Grand Inquisitor* is a reflection of both Dostoyevsky's faith and the desire for something to deliver him from his woes. The concepts of free will being questionable and man's desire for unity and security have retained their relevancy and are particularly germane in the present day. We are living under the looming threat of war, terrorism, and escalating occurrences of crime and violence. If there has ever been a time where it seemed reasonable to wonder if free will was a mistake of extraordinary proportions, it is now. The Inquisitor's case remains difficult to argue, as the supporting evidence continues to mount. It can only be said that life without freedom of the will would not be life at all. The removal of free will would equal the removal of our humanity because what defines us as humans is the ability to reason, to think, to choose. Even if one arrives to this conclusion after

reading the Grand Inquisitor, Dostoyevsky has still challenged us to consider the very foundation of humanity and to question the framework of our own existence. The ability to persuade a reader to reconsider a liberty as immense as freedom of the will is a profound achievement, which is why The Grand Inquisitor is a one of Dostoyevsky's greatest works.