

# Religiosity and freedom in the brothers karamazov



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The chapter entitled “ The Grand Inquisitor” is unquestionably an integral part of The Brothers Karamazov. The poem allows Ivan to express many of the reasons that he cannot accept certain aspects of Christ’s behavior, the existence of God, and mankind’s intertwined freedom and suffering. Within the poem, the Grand Inquisitor represents one paradigm of belief, while Christ represents the antithesis. This is paralleled by Ivan’s beliefs contrasting with Alyosha’s in the frame of the novel itself. “ The Grand Inquisitor” serves mainly to delineate the conflict between the two principal belief systems evident in The Brothers Karamazov – that of accepting mankind’s freedom, and therefore his suffering, and that of rejecting it. Those of unwavering faith are able to blindly accept the world and everything about it. They do not question mankind’s suffering, instead attributing it to a larger, infallible plan of God’s. They do not need to understand in order to accept. To them, earthly suffering is a small price to pay for the eternal rewards they will eventually reap. The suffering, whether supernal or otherwise, is viewed as ameliorative for both character and faith. They have accepted the burden of freedom placed on them by their God, and sought the strength and wisdom to control that freedom from their God. They do not view their freedom as a “ burden,” however, instead seeing the process whereby they master their freedom as a beneficial experience. Only in this manner are they able to accept the otherwise intolerable suffering of the innocent. Alyosha strongly adheres to this belief system. He firmly believes that though it is indeed unpleasant, the suffering of the innocent is not in vain. God allows events to unfold according to a divine plan, which ultimately benefits all of mankind. The suffering of the innocent is akin to the sacrifice of the lamb, the crucifixion of Christ. The blood of the innocent has

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always been requisite to that which is most valuable – in this case, human freedom. Ivan challenges Alyosha as to whether or not he would found a world in which happiness would reign if that paradise were built upon the suffering of one innocent, and Alyosha responds that though he would not, that is indeed the action which Christ himself took. Alyosha responds to Ivan saying that he has forgotten the one who “...gave His innocent blood for everyone’s sins and everyone’s sakes” (296). Christ chose to give his life, in order that mankind would have the freedom to choose to come to him. Alyosha has, through the strength of his faith, accepted both the freedom and the suffering laid upon him. He has accepted God. The Grand Inquisitor represents those who lack faith. They accept nothing freely, and instead question and challenge that which they do not comprehend, and reject that which cannot be answered. Their view of the suffering of the innocent and the freedom man possesses differs from that of those endowed with great faith. In place of faith, they have questions: Why must innocents suffer? Why must good come only through suffering? Why would a merciful, benevolent God cause anyone to suffer, much less the innocent? Why would Christ place so unbearable a burden as freedom on the shoulders of man, when he clearly cannot wield it? Until these questions can be answered, they simply can accept neither the suffering of the innocent nor the freedom of man. Until they can accept the suffering and the freedom, they cannot accept God. Ivan, from the early stages of his life, questioned the circumstances around him and rejected that which he could not comprehend. He could not accept anything freely, including the charity on which he spent his childhood. The narrator says of Ivan, “ I gather that by the time he was ten, he had become very aware that he... was living on other people’s charity” (17).

Because of this awareness, he began writing for journals as soon as he could, to support himself. This same fervent need for independence applied even when Ivan was in need of money. The narrator says, " It must be pointed out that...[Ivan] made no attempt whatsoever to ask his father for assistance" (17). Ivan's inability to accept munificence freely applied to all aspects of his life. This was the cause of Ivan's rejection of God. Ivan simply could not accept the salvation and mercy bought with Christ's innocent blood - the greatest act of charity. Likewise, he could not accept the freedom Christ bought for mankind when he refused Satan's temptations. Ivan found the suffering of innocents utterly repugnant, and in accepting the sacrifice of Christ, he would have been accepting the greatest instance of the unexpiated suffering of an innocent. This chapter, " The Grand Inquisitor," personifies the ideological struggle that is prevalent throughout this novel by assigning each philosophy a tangible character to represent it. Through this book, Dostoevsky seeks to illustrate the tragic error in one's inability to accept Christ that will lead to one's ultimate demise. This poem of Ivan's, as well as Ivan's experiences throughout the entire novel, serve to more lucidly make this point. Within " The Grand Inquisitor" itself, the Grand Inquisitor and those he leads are also pictured as being spiritually dead as a result of having rejected Christ and having been deprived of the freedom for which he gave his innocent blood. Dostoevsky wishes the reader to realize the folly in not accepting Christ's sacrifice by contrasting Ivan's physical and spiritual emaciation with Alyosha's physical and spiritual salubrity. Acceptance of Christ is not only acceptance of mankind's freedom and suffering though; it is also the belief that with Christ, one has the strength to bear that freedom, and that the suffering of the innocent will in the end, bear more fruit.