

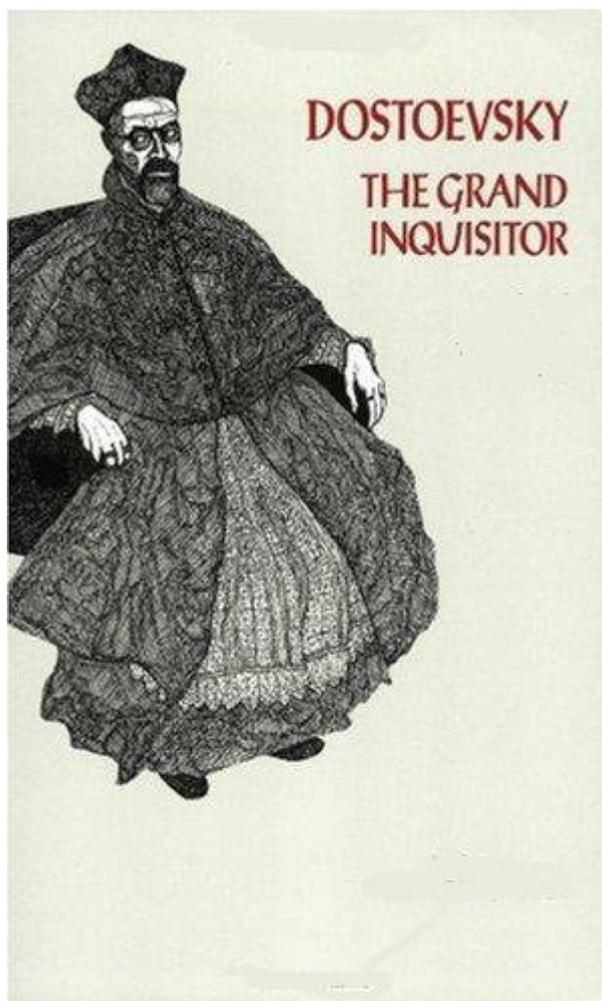
No one was paying attention to the sky...

Rene Girard on Dostoevsky's Legend of the Grand Inquisitor

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1 Votes



The Grand Inquisitor

When we consider the seventy years in the twentieth century his country was in the hands of its revolutionaries trying to build a Communist utopia, we cannot fail to discern in the nineteenth-century Russian novelist Feodor Dostoevsky a prophetic dimension — and one in which we may behold an image of our own culture's controversies even after the fall of communism. The crisis he explored in nineteenth-century Russia's belated and vexed encounter with Europe foreshadows the critical confrontations of our own time, as we face the decline of traditional religious, political, and epistemological authority while lost in a fog of competing claims about scientific determinism, groundless freedom, and the latest fashionable ideology.

If we cannot imagine Dostoevsky's adaptation of our culture wars to the debates he stages in the living rooms, taverns, and seminaries of his novels, we haven't grasped the implications of his work — as René Girard suggests in the concluding essay he has attached to Resurrection from the Underground, his twenty-year-old study of Dostoevsky's work, now deftly translated into English.

The narrator of the Russian novelist's Notes from the Underground neatly summarizes the far from completely secularized pandemonium in which we can recognize our own nihilistic climate: "Without books and literature, we are entangled and lost — we don't know what to join, what to keep up with; what to love, what to hate; what to respect, what to despise."

The famous passage in Dostoevsky's The Brothers Karamazov — where Ivan Karamazov tells the legend of Jesus Christ returning to the world, only to encounter the Grand Inquisitor — is perhaps the best example of the novelist's own relentless probing into modern culture's muddled relation to its religious inheritance, the repudiation of which in the name of purely human dominion he views as blindly self-destructive.

But only in Girard's retrospective comments twenty years after he wrote the book do these elements in Resurrection from the Underground come clear. Here is a reading selection from "Resurrection from the Underground" where Girard deals with the Legend of the Grand Inquisitor:

Dostoevsky begins to explain the freedom that comes from Christ in *The Brothers Karamazov*. He finally makes his way to this freedom with the aid of Christ and he celebrates it in the famous Legend of the Grand Inquisitor. It is put in the mouth of Ivan Karamazov as he seeks to explain to his brother Alyosha why he, Ivan, must "return his ticket" to a world which is not governed by a just and loving God — if there is a God.

The scene is in Seville in the end of the fifteenth century. Christ appears in a street and a crowd gathers about him, but the Grand Inquisitor comes along the way. He observes the mob and has Christ arrested. That night he goes to pay a visit to the prisoner in his dungeon and shows him, in a long discourse, the folly of his "idea."

Thou wanted to found thy reign on that freedom that human beings hate and from which they always flee into some idolatry, even if they celebrate it with words. It would be better to make humans less free and thou hast made them more free, which only leads them to multiply their idols and conflicts between idols. Thou hast committed humanity to violence, misery, and disorder.

The Inquisitor predicts that a new Tower of Babel will be raised up, more dreadful than the former one and dedicated, like it, to destruction. The grand Promethean enterprise, fruit of Christian freedom, will end in "cannibalism."

The Grand Inquisitor is not unaware of anything that the underground, Stavrogin, and Kirillov (characters in *The Possessed*) have taught Dostoevsky. The vulgar rationalists find no trace of Christ, neither in the individual soul nor in history, but the Inquisitor asserts that the divine incarnation has made everything worse. The fifteen centuries gone by and the four centuries to come, whose course he prophesies, support his account.

The Inquisitor does not confuse the message of Christ with the psychological cancer to which it leads, by contrast to Nietzsche and Freud. He therefore doesn't accuse Christ of having underestimated human nature, but of having overestimated it, of not having understood that the impossible morality of love necessarily leads to a world of masochism and humiliation.

The Grand Inquisitor doesn't seek to make an end of idolatry by an act of metaphysical force, like Kirillov; he wants rather to heal evil with evil, to tie humans to immutable idols and, in particular, to an idolatrous conception of Christ. D. H. Lawrence, in a famous article, accused Dostoevsky of "perversity" because he placed in the mouth of a wicked inquisitor what he, Lawrence, regarded as

the truth concerning human beings and the world.

The error of Christ, in the eyes of the Inquisitor, is all the less excusable because "he had adequate warnings." In the course of the temptations in the wilderness the devil, the "profound spirit of self-destruction and nothingness," revealed to the redeemer and placed at his disposal the three means capable of insuring the stability, well-being, and happiness of humanity. Christ disdained them, but **the Inquisitor and his ilk have taken them up and work — always in the name of Christ but in a spirit contrary to his — for the advent of an earthly kingdom more in keeping with the limitations of human nature.**

Agreeing with Dostoevsky, Simone Weil saw in the inquisition the archetype of all totalitarian solutions. The end of the Middle Ages is an essential moment in Christian history; the heir, having reached the age of an adult, lays claim to his heritage. His guardians are not wrong to mistrust his maturity, but they are wrong to want to prolong indefinitely their tutelage. The Legend resumes the problem of evil at the precise point where *Demons* abandoned it. The underground appeared in this novel as the failure and reversal of Christianity. The wisdom of the redeemer, and especially his redemptive power, are notably absent. Rather than hide his own anxiety from himself, Dostoevsky expresses it and gives it an extraordinary fullness. He never combats nihilism by fleeing from it.

Christianity disappointed Dostoevsky. Christ himself has surely not responded to his expectation. There is, in the first place, the misery that he has not abolished, then the suffering, and also the daily bread that he has not given to all human beings. He has not "changed life." That is the first reproach, and the second is yet more serious. Christianity does not bring certitude; why does God not send a proof of his existence, a sign, to those who would believe in him, but don't attain this belief? And finally and above all, there is that pride which no effort, no prostration of oneself is able to reduce, that pride which goes as far, sometimes, as envying Christ himself.

When he defines his own grievances against Christianity, Dostoevsky encounters the Gospel, he encounters the three "temptations in the wilderness":

Then Jesus was led by the Spirit out into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted for forty days and forty nights, after which he was very hungry~ and the tempter came and said to him, "If thou art the Son of God, tell these stones to turn into loaves." But he replied, "Scripture says:

Man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of God."

The devil then took him to the holy city and made him stand on the parapet of the Temple. "If thou art the Son of God," he said, "throw thyself down; for Scripture says:

He will put thee in his angels' charge, and they will support thee on their hands in case thou hurtest thy foot against a stone."

Jesus said to him, "Scripture also says:

Thou must not put the Lord your God to the test."

Next, taking him to a very high mountain, the devil showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. "I will give thee all these," he said, "if thou fallest at my feet and worship me." Then Jesus replied, "Be off, Satan! For Scripture says:

Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and serve him alone."

Then the devil left him, and angels appeared and looked after him.

Matthew 4:1-11 The translation of Gospel passages follows the Jerusalem Bible except for the use of

the archaic pronouns “thou,” “thy,” “thee.” Dostoevsky evidently made the language of the Inquisitor archaic, and this pronoun usage helps to convey that.

These are indeed the major temptations of Dostoevsky: social Messianism, doubt, and pride. The last one is especially worthy of meditation. Everything that the proud desire leads them, after all, to prostrate themselves before the Other, Satan. The only moments of his life when Feodor Mikhailovich did not succumb to one or the other of the temptations were those when he succumbed to all three at once. So it is therefore to himself in particular that this message is addressed; the Legend is the proof that he finally understands its call. The presence in the Gospel of Matthew of a text so adapted to his needs affords him great comfort. There it is, the sign he was seeking, as he tells us in brilliant and veiled fashion by the mouth of his Inquisitor:

And could one say anything more penetrating than what was said to thee in the three questions or, to speak in the language of the Scriptures, the “temptations” that thou rejected? If ever there had been on earth an authentic and resounding miracle, it occurred the day of the three temptations. The very formulation of these three questions constitutes a miracle. Let us suppose that they had disappeared from the Scriptures, that it had been necessary to compose them, to imagine them anew in order to replace them there, and that one had gathered for this all the sages of the earth, persons of state, prelates, scholars, philosophers, poets, saying to them: imagine and compose three questions which not only correspond to the importance of that event, but express in three sentences all the history of future humanity — dost thou believe that this summit gathering of human wisdom could imagine anything as strong and profound as the three questions put to thee by the powerful Spirit? These three questions prove, all by themselves, that one has met here the eternal and absolute Spirit and not a transitory human mind. For they summarize and predict simultaneously all the later history of humanity. These are the three forms in which all the insoluble contradictions of human nature are crystalized. One could not understand it then, for the future was veiled, but now, after fifteen centuries have elapsed, we see that everything had been foreseen in these three questions and has been realized to the point that it is impossible to add anything to them or to remove a single word from them.

The Legend is basically only the repetition and expansion of the Gospel scene evoked by the Grand Inquisitor. This is what must be understood when one wonders, a little naively, about the silence that Alyosha maintains in face of the arguments of this new tempter. There is no “refuting” of the Legend since, from a Christian point of view, it is the devil, it is the Grand Inquisitor, it is Ivan who is right. The world is delivered over to evil. In St. Luke the devil asserts that every earthly power has been delivered to him “and I give it to whom I will.” Christ does not “refute” this assertion. Never does he speak in his own name; he takes refuge behind the citations of Scripture. Like Alyosha, he refuses to debate.

The Grand Inquisitor believes he can praise Satan, but it is of the Gospel that he speaks, it is the Gospel that has preserved its freshness after fifteen, after nineteen centuries of Christianity. And it is not only in the instance of the temptations, but at each moment the Legend echoes the Gospel sayings:

Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth: it is not peace I have come to bring but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, a daughter against her mother.

Matthew 10:34-35a

The central idea of the Legend, that of the risk entailed by the increase of freedom for humans, or of the grace conferred by Christ, a risk the Grand Inquisitor refuses to run — this very idea figures in passages of the Gospel which evoke irresistibly Dostoevsky’s concept of underground metaphysics.

When an unclean spirit goes out of a man it wanders through waterless country looking for a place to rest, and cannot find one. Then it says, “I will return to the house I came from.” But on arrival, finding it unoccupied, swept, and tidied, it then goes off and collects seven other spirits more evil than itself, and they go in and set

up house there, so that the man ends up by being worse than he was before. That is what will happen to this evil generation.

Matthew 12:43-45

Behind the dark pessimism of the Grand Inquisitor is the outline of an eschatological vision of history that responds to the question Demons left in suspense. **Because he foresaw the rebellion of man, Christ foresaw also the sufferings and ruptures that his coming would cause. The proud assurance of the orator allows us to discern a new paradox, that of the divine Providence which effortlessly outwits the calculations of rebellion. The reappearance of Satan does not nullify his prior defeat. Everything must finally converge toward the good, even idolatry.**

If the world flees Christ, he will be able to make this flight serve his redemptive plan. In division and contradiction he will accomplish what he wanted to accomplish in union and joy. In seeking to divinize itself without Christ, humankind places itself on the cross. It is the freedom of Christ, perverted but still vital, that produces the underground. There is not a fragment of human nature that is not kneaded and pressed in the conflict between the Other and the Self. Satan, divided against himself, expels Satan. The idols destroy the idols. **Humankind exhausts, little by little, all illusions, including inferior notions of God swept away by atheism. It is caught in a vortex more and more rapid as its always more frantic and mendacious universe strikingly reveals the absence and need of God. The prodigious series of historical catastrophes, the improbable cascade of empires and kingdoms, of social, philosophical, and political systems that we call Western civilization, the circle always greater which covers over an abyss at whose heart history collapses ever more speedily — all this accomplishes the plan of divine redemption. It is not the plan that Christ would have chosen for human beings if he had not respected their freedom, but the one they have chosen for themselves in rejecting him.**

Dostoevsky's art is literally prophetic. He is not prophetic in the sense of predicting the future, but in a truly biblical sense, for he untiringly denounces the fall of the people of God back into idolatry. He reveals the exile, the rupture, and the suffering that results from this idolatry. In a world where the love of Christ and the love of the neighbor form one love, the true touchstone is our relation to others. It is the Other whom one must love *as oneself* if one does not desire to idolize and hate the Other in the depths of the underground. It is no longer the golden calf, it is this Other who poses the risk of seducing humans in a world committed to the Spirit, for better or for worse.

Between the two forms of idolatry, the one attacked in the Old Testament and the other unmasked in the New, there are the same differences and the same analogical relation as between the rigidity of the law and universal Christian freedom. All the biblical words that describe the first idolatry describe analogously the second. This is certainly why the prophetic literature of the Old Testament has remained fresh and alive.

The Christianity that the Inquisitor describes is like the negative of a photograph — it shows everything in a reversed manner, just like the words of Satan in the account of the temptations. It has nothing to do with the metaphysical milk toast that a certain bourgeois piety holds up as a mirror to itself. Christ wanted to make humans into super-humans, but by means opposed to those of Promethean thought. So the arguments of the Grand Inquisitor are turned against him when one understands them as they are intended. It is just this that the pure Alyosha observes to his brother Ivan, the author and narrator of the Legend. "Everything that you say serves not to blame, but to praise Christ."

Christ has been voluntarily deprived of all prestige and all power. He refuses to exercise the least pressure; he desires to be loved for himself. To reiterate, it is here the Inquisitor who speaks. What Christian would want to "refute" such statements? The Inquisitor sees all, knows all, understands all. He understands even the mute appeal of love but is incapable of responding to it. What to do in this case but to reaffirm the presence of this love? Such is the sense of the kiss that Christ gives, wordlessly,

to the wretched old man. Alyosha, too, kisses his brother at the conclusion of his story and Ivan accuses him, laughingly, of plagiary.

The diabolical choice of the Inquisitor is nothing else than a reflection of the diabolical choice made by Ivan Karamazov. The four brothers are accomplices in the murder of their father, but the guiltiest of all is Ivan, for he is the one who inspires the act of murder. The bastard Smerdyakov is the double of Ivan, whom he admires and hates passionately. To kill the father in place of Ivan is to put into practice the audacious statements of this master of rebellion; it is to anticipate his most secret desires; it is to go even further on the road he himself designated. But a diabolical double is soon substituted beside Ivan for this double who is still human.

The hallucination of the double synthesizes, as we have seen, quite a series of subjective and objective phenomena belonging to underground existence. This hallucination, at once true and false, is not perceived until the phenomenon of doubling reaches a certain degree of intensity and gravity.

The hallucination of the devil that Ivan experiences may be explicated, at the phenomenal level, by a new aggravation of psychopathological troubles produced by pride; it embodies, on the religious level, the metaphysical overcoming of underground psychology. The more one approaches madness, the more one equally approaches the truth, and if one does not fall into the former, one must end up necessarily in the latter.

What is the traditional conception of the devil? This character is the father of lies; he is thus simultaneously true and false, illusory and real, fantastic and everyday. Outside of us when we believe him to be in us, he is in us when we believe him outside of us. Although he leads an existence useless and parasitic, he is morally and resolutely "Manichean." He offers us a grimacing caricature of what is worst in us. He is at once both seducer and adversary. He does not cease to thwart the desires that he suggests and if, by chance, he satisfies them it is in order to deceive us.

It is superfluous to emphasize the relations between this devil and the Dostoevskyan double. The individuality of the devil, like that of the double, is not a point of departure, but an outcome. Just as the double is the origin of all doublings or divisions, the devil is the locus and the origin of all possessions and other demoniacal manifestations. The objective reading of the underground leads to demonology. And there is no reason to be astonished by that, for we are really always in this "kingdom of Satan" which is not able to maintain itself, for "it is divided against itself."

Between the double and the devil there is not a relation of identity but a relation of analogy. One moves from the first to the second in the way in which one moves from the portrait to the caricature; the caricaturist relies on characteristic features and suppresses those that are not. **The devil, parodist par excellence, is himself the fruit of parody.** For an artist imitates himself, he simplifies, schematizes, makes himself starker in his own essence, in order finally to render ever more striking the meanings with which his work is permeated.

There is no break in continuity, no metaphysical leap between the double and the devil. One moves imperceptibly from one to the other, just as one passed imperceptibly from romantic doublings to the personified double. The process is essentially aesthetic. For Dostoevsky there is, as for most great artists, what could be called an "operational formalism," from which, however, a formalist theory of art should not be deduced. Perhaps the distinction between form and content, which is always dialectical, is not truly legitimate except from the standpoint of the creative process. It is proper to define the artist by his quest for form, because by form as intermediary he accomplishes the penetration of reality, the knowledge of the world and himself. The form here literally precedes the meaning, and this is why it is bestowed as "pure" form.

In Dostoevsky the devil is thus called forth by an irresistible tendency to bring forth the structure of

some fundamental obsessions which constitute the primary subject-matter of the work. **The idea of the devil does not introduce any new element, but it organizes the old ones in a more coherent and meaningful manner.** In fact, this idea is revealed as the only one capable of unifying all the phenomena observed. There is not a gratuitous intervention of the supernatural in the natural world. The devil is not represented to us as the cause of the phenomena. For example, he repeats all the ideas of Ivan, who recognizes in him a “projection” of his sick brain but who ends up, like Luther, by throwing an inkwell at his head.

Ivan's devil is even more interesting to the extent that Dostoevsky's realism is so scrupulous. Never, before *The Brothers Karamazov*, had the theme of the devil contaminated that of the double. Even in the “romantic” period we do not find in Dostoevsky those purely literary and decorative comparisons and connections to which the German writers devote themselves so readily. On the other hand, he had already thought about giving a satanic double to the persona of Stavrogin, but this double is already that of Ivan. It is particularly with *Demons* (more familiarly known as *The Possessed* in its first translation), one may recall, that the entire underground psychology appears to Dostoevsky as an inverted image of the Christian structure of reality, as precisely its double. If Dostoevsky temporarily withdrew from his idea, it was not because the novelist within him still held in check a fanaticism to which he gave free rein in *The Brothers Karamazov*. It is rather because he feared misunderstanding from the public. The interior demand and motivation were not yet mature enough to surmount this obstacle.

With *The Brothers Karamazov* all things are accomplished. The devil is totally objectified, expelled, exorcised; he must therefore figure in the work as the devil as such. Pure evil is disengaged, and its nothingness is revealed. It no longer causes fear, for separated from the being that it haunts, it seems even derisory and ridiculous, nothing more than a bad nightmare.

This impotence of the devil is not a gratuitous idea, but a truth inscribed on all the pages of the work. If the Inquisitor is able to express only what is good, this is because he goes further in evil than all his predecessors. There is almost no longer any difference between his reality and that of the elect. Indeed, it is with full knowledge that he chooses evil. **Almost everything he says is true, but his conclusions are radically false.** The last words he states are the pure and simple inversion of the words that end the New Testament in the Apocalypse: for the *marana tha* of the early Christians — “Come, O Lord” — he substitutes a diabolic “Don't come back, don't ever come back, ever!”

This evil that is at once the strongest and the feeblest is evil seized at its root, that is, evil revealed as pure choice. The pinnacle of diabolic lucidity is also extreme blindness. The Dostoevsky of *The Brothers Karamazov* is just as ambiguous as the romantic Dostoevsky, but the terms of ambiguity are no longer the same. In *The Insulted and Injured* the rhetoric of altruism, nobility, and devotion covers over pride, masochism, and hate. In *The Brothers Karamazov* it is pride that comes into the foreground. But the frenzied discourses of this pride allow us to catch a glimpse of a good that has nothing otherwise in common with romantic rhetoric.

Dostoevsky lets evil speak to bring it to the point where it refutes and condemns itself. The Inquisitor discloses his scorn for humanity and his appetite for domination that drives him to prostrate himself before Satan. But this self-refutation, the self-destruction of evil must not be utterly explicit for otherwise it would lose all its aesthetic and spiritual value. It would lose, in other words, its value as temptation. This art of which the Legend is the model could indeed be defined as the art of temptation. All the characters of the novel, or almost all, are tempters of Alyosha: his father, his brothers, and also Grushenka, the seductress, who gives money to the wicked monk Rakitin so that he will lead Alyosha to her. Father Zossima himself becomes, after his death, the object of a new temptation as the rapid decomposition of his corpse shocks the naive faith of the monastic community.

But the most terrible tempter is certainly Ivan when he presents the suffering of innocent children as a

motif of metaphysical revolt. Alyosha is stunned and upset, but the tempter, once again, is powerless, for without knowing it he works even for the victory of the good, since he incites his brother to concern himself with the unfortunate little Ilyusha and his friends. The same reasons that distance the rebel from Christ impel those open to love toward him. Alyosha well knows that the pain he experiences at the thought of the suffering children comes from Christ himself.

Between the temptations of Christ and the temptations of Alyosha there is an analogy that underlines the parallelism of the two kisses given to the two tempters. The Legend is presented as a series of concentric circles around the Gospel archetype: circle of the Legend, circle of Alyosha, and finally the circle of the readers themselves. The art of the tempter-novelist consists in revealing, behind all human situations, the choices that they imply. The novelist is not the devil but his advocate, *advocatus diaboli*. He preaches the false in order to lead us to what is true. The task of the reader consists in recognizing, with Alyosha, that everything he has just read "is not for the blame but the praise of Christ."

The Slavophil and reactionary friends of Dostoevsky did not recognize anything at all. No one, it seems, was really ready for an art so simple and so great. They expected of a Christian novelist some reassuring formulas, some simplistic distinctions between good and bad people, in a word, "religious" art in the ideological sense. **The art of the later Dostoevsky is terribly ambiguous from the point of view of the sterile oppositions with which the world is filled because it is terribly clear from the spiritual point of view.** Constantine Pobedonostzev, the procurator of the Holy Synod, was the first to demand this "refutation," whose absence continues to chagrin or elate so many contemporary critics. There is no need to be astonished if Dostoevsky himself ratifies, in a way, this superficial reading of his work by promising the demanded refutation. It is not the author but the reader who defines the objective meaning of the work. If the reader does not perceive that the strongest negation affirms, how would the writer know that this affirmation is really present in his text? If the reader does not perceive that rebellion and adoration finally converge, how would the writer know that this convergence is effectively realized? How could he analyze the art which he is in the process of living? How would he divine that it is the reader, not he, who is wrong? He knows the spirit in which he has written his work, but the results escape him, if one says to him that the effect sought is not visible, he can only bow. This is why Dostoevsky promises to refute the irrefutable without ever following through, and this for good reason.

The pages devoted to the death of Father Zossima are beautiful, but they do not have the force of genius found in the invectives of Ivan. The critics who try to bend Dostoevsky in the direction of atheism insist on the laborious character that Dostoevsky's positive expression of the good always had. The observation is fair, but the conclusions usually drawn from it are not. Those who demand of Dostoevsky a "positive" art see in this art solely the adequate expression of Christian faith. But these are always people who conceive a lame idea either of art or of Christianity. **The art of extreme negation is perhaps, to the contrary the only Christian art adapted to our time, the only art worthy of it. This art does not require listening to sermons, for our era cannot tolerate them. It lays aside traditional metaphysics, with which nobody, or almost nobody, can comply. Nor does it base itself on reassuring lies, but on consciousness of universal idolatry.**

Direct assertion and affirmation is ineffective in contemporary art, for it necessarily invokes intolerable chatter about Christian values. The Legend of the Grand Inquisitor escapes from shameful nihilism and the disgusting insipidity of values. The art that emerges in its entirety from the miserable and splendid existence of the writer seeks affirmation beyond negations. Dostoevsky does not claim to escape from the underground. To the contrary, he plunges into it so profoundly that his light comes to him from the other side. "It is not as a child that I believe in Christ and confess him. It is through the crucible of doubt that my Hosanna has passed."

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