

Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky: Bible, Pneumatology and the Supernatural, Spiritism and Epilepsy – Evil and the Body Politic

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KEY WORDS

| Angels and Demons | Christlikeness | Epilepsy | Good and Evil |
| Politics | The Holy Spirit | Sin and Possession | Supernatural |

ABSTRACT

To what extent is the Russian writer Dostoevsky's beliefs and faith conditioned, formed, by his youthful involvement in Spiritism and revolutionary politics, also by his epilepsy. How does this influence his triune understanding, specifically the pneumatological action of God in relation to sin and evil? Is evil for Dostoevsky primarily a case of bad politics, corrupted self-serving actions conflated into the public arena, through government and legislation? As theologian, prophet, and novelist, we can understand this development of Dostoevsky's beliefs from the impetuous naive socialism of his misspent youth through to his deep mature faith, grounded in the Bible: for example, the profound impact the mock execution had leading to Dostoevsky's imprisonment/exile for revolutionary sedition in a forced labour camp in Siberia, which triggered his return to faith through his discovery of the Russian New Testament, which he studied on a daily basis for the remainder of his life (is his mature faith more biblical than Russian Orthodoxy?). In conclusion we may ask, rhetorically, was Dostoevsky fearful of the Holy Spirit and the supernatural because of this youthful involvement in revolutionary politics (nineteenth century Russian anarchistic socialism and proto-Marxism) and his socialite flirtation with demonically driven Spiritism: both of which he repented of in his mature years and works.

INTRODUCTION

“For we wrestle not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the high places.”

EPHESIANS 6:12

Fêted in his later years as a prophet (пророк, *prorok*) the nineteenth century Russian writer and theologian Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky became a believing Christian in his middle years after a tumultuous youth spent flirting with spiritism/séances, anarchic atheism, franco inspired revolutionary politics, then surviving a mock execution at the hands of the Russian state for sedition, followed by imprisoned in a Siberian labour camp, and finally exile. The aim of this paper is to critically analyse key related elements in his writings which will explain his position on the Holy

Spirit, and on the supernatural, including the role his epilepsy played in the formation and nature of his beliefs, his understanding and acknowledgement of pneumatology, and his flirtation with spiritism and séances as a young man.

Issuing from his challenge to the body politic,¹ the mock execution and imprisonment/exile led to his rediscovery of the Russian New Testament, which is the foundation of the

1 The body politic: defined as a group of persons politically organized under a single governmental authority, a people considered as a collective unit. (Merriam-Webster Dictionary).

biblical world of his novels. Importantly this will cause us to consider the role Dostoevsky's epilepsy had in the formulation of his beliefs; that is, in informing and shaping – perhaps subliminally – how different his beliefs were in subtle ways from those of the average academically impartial, seemingly disinterested and neutral, theologian whose brain was not epileptic. Was the epilepsy responsible, so to speak, for certain nuanced details in his thought and in generating in him, to a degree, the conditions within his mind that gave him a more dynamic and truer understanding of the eschatological reality that humanity occupies, and the judgment that we all will face? More pertinently, did the condition of his brain allow the triune God to impart to him, to generate in his mind (in addition to the brutality of his imprisonment), a sounder eschatological understanding than many cosseted Western academics display? This inevitably raises questions about Dostoevsky's understanding of the supernatural, his acknowledgement of the pneumatological (as well as his flirtation with spiritism/spiritualism prior to his Siberian exile).

TRIUNE CONSIDERATIONS

Central to Dostoevsky's beliefs – post-Siberia – is the centrality of Jesus Christ, the God-man. Using the Gospel of John as evidence of Christ's divinity, he struggled to conceive of God outside of Christ: the immanent was all-important to him. At times Dostoevsky so believed in Jesus Christ as God that he lost any understanding or concept of God's transcendence, as in the Father in heaven.² Dostoevsky therefore accepted the transcendence of God axiomatically whilst

grounding the knowability of God in Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ. Any encounter with the Holy Spirit would then be perturbing, puzzling, and certainly not conforming to the cognitive and epistemological expectations of humanity as demonstrated by the immanent: Sacred Scripture (his term: Священное Писание; *Svyashchennoye Pisaniye*) was the measure and test of any perception/encounter. In addition, the second person of the Trinity was often perceivable for Dostoevsky through ordinary people, and distinctly through suffering.

But where was the Holy Spirit? Dostoevsky's novels, his belief system, is centred, in many ways, on deliverance from evil. This raises the question, what concept of evil is Dostoevsky working with? Evil is clearly manifold and present and active in his novels. But is it real, and what do we mean by real? For Dostoevsky evil is a spiritual force manifest in the corporeal, but it is not Manichean: it is not parallel or equal to God's goodness, it is goodness turned away from God, it is corrupted good, in many varying degrees, descending deeper and deeper, taking the human ever further from God's goodness, ultimately destroying the human. Evil, like demons, is not an abstract idea, even though such evil is clearly expressed psychologically in Dostoevsky's most depraved characters. Evil for Dostoevsky is real, but it is a transcendent actuality, the flip side of a coin: good and evil are states each and every human can rise to, or descend into. Dostoevsky's novels are full of evil motifs, but does such evil have a supernatural component, actual demonic powers exerting influence? It is clear from the Biblical witness generally, the sayings of Jesus of Nazareth specifically, that demons are very real, however, what of Dostoevsky's novels? There do appear to be real demons operating behind people, pulling their strings, so to speak, but

2 Alexander Boyce Gibson, *The Religion of Dostoevsky*, (London: SCM, 1973), 166.

Dostoevsky is ambiguous, and he falls safely on the line that evil may simply be bad politics, bad human actions within a hermetically sealed, closed-off world. So is evil solely psychological? Whether this transcendent actuality is ‘real’ or not, many of his characters are a reflection of actual people he knew of and observed: these characters are possessed by evil and go on to possess and destroy others (unless at the final moment in their lives, they turn to Christ and are saved!). Evil, as Dostoevsky saw it, is sometimes a noun, sometimes subjective verbs or adjectival criticism, though it is important to remember that Dostoevsky does sometimes regard good and evil as simply relative and comparative, subjective, seeking to avoid (as with demons) the question of the ontological nature of this transcendent actuality.

THE POLITICAL DOSTOEVSKY: THE FRANCO-RUSSIAN REVOLUTIONARY

i. Execution, Imprisonment & Exile

In 1847, as a 26-year-old, at the St. Petersburg Military Academy, Dostoevsky fell in with a secret revolutionary proto-socialist group under the aegis of the editor and writer Vissarion Grigorievich Belinsky; Dostoevsky then became part of the Petrashevsky circle (named after its founder Mikhail Butashevich-Petrashevsky, who was a self-confessed atheist, humanist, anti-Czar, proto-socialist). The group took inspiration from, and was centred on the writings of, two leading figures in the French revolution: Jean-Baptiste Joseph Fourier and Auguste Comte. In 1849 the members of the Petrashevsky Circle (Dostoevsky was seen as the leader) were arrested: convicted of sedition, then were sentenced to death by firing squad.

William J. Leatherbarrow notes:

Nicholas I was persuaded to commute the death sentences to imprisonment with hard labour, but he was determined to teach the conspirators an unforgettable lesson: they were kept in ignorance of the judgment of the court until the day of execution. Early in the morning of 22nd December, Dostoevsky and his fellow prisoners were transported to Semyonovsky Square, a regimental parade ground, where they were confronted with solemn priests, a black-draped scaffold, empty coffins, a line of armed soldiers and other signs that they were to be subjected to immediate execution. The original sentences were read and the first three prisoners, including Petrashevsky, were led to the stake. At the last moment, as the order to fire was about to be given, a messenger galloped into the square with news of the Tsar’s ‘gracious’ clemency. One of the prisoners lost his mind, and Dostoevsky himself was to be radically altered by this grim charade, which he later described in striking detail in his novel *The Idiot*.³

This experience had a profound effect on Dostoevsky: it was the experience of being born again, of resurrection. This theme of resurrection was to dominate his mature novels and he was to project this near-death experience onto his characters on more than one occasion.⁴ Dostoevsky, along with his co-conspirators, was shackled and imprisoned, and exiled in Siberia for ten years (1849–59). The significance of the trial, mock execution, and the imprisonment/exile are of profound importance to anyone who wishes to understand Dostoevsky’s theological beliefs.

3 W.J. Leatherbarrow, ‘Introduction,’ in Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment* (trans., Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky; London: Everyman’s Library, 1993), p. xii.

4 See, for example, Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky, *The Idiot* (Constance Garnett trans. 1913; Melbourne: Heinemann, 1961).

ii. Dostoevsky and The New Testament

The New Testament is of crucial importance in Dostoevsky's rediscovery of his Christian faith and as the source and basis for the beliefs underlying his novels. On route to Siberia – marching the entire route – an elderly woman thrust a copy of the Russian New Testament into his hands:⁵ this helped him to reaffirm his commitment to Christian principles, as embodied in the traditions and spirituality of the Russian Orthodox Church (though he was always wary of ecclesial power and authority). He kept this New Testament⁶ until his death, reading John's Gospel on a daily basis, annotating it and writing his theological thoughts in the margins.⁷ From the evidence of the annotations, the following books were of most importance to him: The Gospel According to John, The Epistles of John, then The Revelation to John.⁸ Twenty-one of the twenty-seven books of the New Testament are marked – however, The Gospel of Mark is annotated only in two places, Luke in seven; by contrast there are fifty-eight annotations in The Gospel of John. The teachings of Christ and the passion are heavily marked and annotated. The short First Epistle of John is heavily marked and annotated in six places; The Revelation to John

5 See Ronald Hingley, 'Introduction,' in Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky, *Memoirs from the House of the Dead* (Oxford World Classics; Oxford: OUP, 2008), pp. vii-xviii. Details are also recounted in this text, Dostoevsky's auto-biographical reminiscences of his imprisonment.

6 F. Derek Chisholm, 'Dostoevsky as Political Prophet: Demons as Prophecy of Lenin, Stalin and the Foundations of Russian Communism.' Online: www.fyodordostoevsky.com/essays/d-chisholm.html. See, GBL, fond 93/I, K. 5b./1. *Evangelie. Gospoda nashego Iisusa Khrista Novyj Zavet. Pervym izdaniem. Sanktpeterburg. V tipografii Rossijskogo Biblejskogo Obshchestva 1823*. See also: Geir Kjetsaa, *Dostoevsky and his New Testament* (Oslo: Solum Forlag A.S., 1984), pp. 6 and 80

7 Irina Kirillova, 'Dostoevsky's Markings in the Gospel according to St. John,' in *Dostoevsky and the Christian Tradition*, edited by George Pattison and Diane Oenning Thompson; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 41–50.

8 Ibid., p. 43.

sixteen places.⁹ By contrast The Sermon on the Mount, respected and used by Dostoevsky's contemporary, Tolstoy, is largely ignored. (This may be due, in part, to Dostoevsky's fear of any abstract ideological system resulting from his experiences with the Petrashevsky circle and studying at the feet of Belinsky.) Even after his return from Siberia he regularly consulted, annotated, and wrestled with what were key passages, marking in ink, pencil (even fingernail indentations whilst in prison, when no writing implement was available); the practice of wrestling with Священное писание ('Sacred Scripture') continued even until the day before his death:¹⁰

The Gospel of St. John has particular significance for Dostoevsky because, more than any of the other New Testament books, it enables him to affirm his faith in the divine Son of God through the affirmation of Christ's Sonship made manifest in the 'theology of love' that is so central to both The Gospel of St. John and the First Epistle of John. Dostoevsky's profession of faith had to overcome not so much the claims of nineteenth-century Natural Science as the tragic, insoluble contradiction between belief in an omnipotent and merciful God and the cruel, bleak reality of innocent suffering. The luminous revelation of love in the person of Christ enables Dostoevsky to believe that it is possible to resolve the terrible antinomy of innocent suffering and divine mercy through faith in Christ, the God-Man, who is both innocent victim and Redeemer.¹¹

This antinomy between divine mercy and apparently innocent suffering presented by the dialectical contradiction between the idea of an omnipotent and merciful God and the reality of

9 Ibid., p. 48.

10 Anna Grigoryevna Dostoevsky, *Dostoevsky Reminiscences* (trans., by Beatrice Stillman. London: Wildwood House, 1975), p. 375.

11 Kjetsaa, p. 50 (Op cit 5).

suffering and death here on earth is reconciled only in the Lordship of the Son of God. This is the central dialectic in Dostoevsky’s beliefs and in the theology presented in his novels. All other examples of Dostoevsky’s dialectics flow from this resolution of the contradictions of faith and life in the God-man – hence ‘living life’ (живая жизнь : *zhivaia zhizn*)¹²

EPILEPSY ... AND RELIGION

i. Epilepsy ... and Religion

The medical condition of epilepsy (seizures caused by abnormal brain activity) holds a unique place in relation to mind and soul, the supernatural and eternity, God and salvation. A history of mild childhood epileptic events culminated in a major seizure when Dostoevsky was an eighteen-year-old cadet at the military academy. The idea that these seizures were caused by the stressful impact of his father’s death – a common argument by critics in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (including Sigmund Freud) – is now considered wide-of-the-mark by neurologists.¹³ His father’s death – three years after his mother had died – could have exacerbated an already latent tendency towards seizures in the brain, but a sudden onset of epilepsy is most often caused by a head-brain injury. Anecdotes and speculation as to the cause of epilepsy in historical figures

are considered unreliable: there is simply not enough actual evidence to determine the cause. However, Dostoevsky was certainly an epileptic; he suffered from seizures, and wrote about seizures, and they profoundly affected him.

Contrary to the view of most scholars that Dostoevsky’s epilepsy was an unfortunate illness that occasionally troubled him, a consideration of epilepsy and the profound effect the condition has on the mind of an epileptic is crucial in understanding the eschatological theology that can be read from his writings, indeed that undergirds his *corpus*. Epilepsy is crucial to understanding Dostoevsky and the dialectical foundation of his theological views.

Seizures may be caused by an injury to the brain, or sustained chemical abuse. A diagnosis may issue from the culmination of very mild seizures during childhood – moments of frozen expression, absent mindedness, losing all sense of continuity and place just for a second – which often indicate an underlying latent epileptic condition before the onset of actual and noticeable seizure events. Seizures may be focal or generalized. Focal seizures are caused by a small area of scar tissue in the brain; generalized seizures offer no focal point. In Dostoevsky’s case, there came a point in his teens where he collapsed with a major seizure. As he progressed through his adult years the seizures became more severe. This is a predictable prognosis, development. Seizures cause minute damage in the brain, and therefore leave scarring. Such scarring then triggers further seizures of increasing intensity, because at its most basic epilepsy is simply a minute electrical malfunction in the brain’s wiring, in the synaptic pathways that provide the conditions for thought. (From a reductionist perspective these electro-chemical events are taken as the sole manifestation of ‘thought,’ but the

12 See: P.H. Brazier, *Dostoevsky: A Theological Engagement* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, Wipf & Stock, 2016), pp. 44-45. See also, P.H. Brazier, *Barth and Dostoevsky* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster Theological Monographs, 2007), pp.83-84.

13 See, Theodor Reik, ‘The Study on Dostoyevsky,’ in *From Thirty Years with Freud* (New York: Farrar and Rhinehart, 1940), 158–76. Freud’s analysis (that Dostoevsky’s epilepsy was not caused by a physical flaw in the brain, but was a pseudo-epilepsy, the symptoms being brought on by stress and guilt, also hysteria) is now considered speculative and inaccurate. See also, Nathan Rosen, ‘Freud on Dostoevsky’s Epilepsy: A Reevaluation,’ *Dostoevsky Studies* 9 (1988) pp. 107–25.

functioning synaptic pathways do not so much constitute our thoughts, as provide a *vehicle* for our thoughts.) As the scarring increases, the number and intensity of the seizures increases.

How recurrent seizures affect the precise nature of theological beliefs in one such as Dostoevsky is an open question yet to be examined. Epilepsy may under certain circumstances be considered to be eschatological because epilepsy can foster dualistic, binary thinking, and as such has an inclination towards an eschatological way of seeing the world; in addition, there is a sense in many epileptics of the need for urgency in decision making, in dealing with a crisis, a sense that everything is coming to a head, that judgment is coming (these thoughts often precede a seizure of varying intensity). This may be considered a particular interpretation of eschatology when most people do not concern themselves with the crisis of life and the risk of eternal judgment. Epilepsy can lift people out of a worldly complacency. Dostoevsky's beliefs are profoundly eschatological and, to a degree, dualistic: light and dark, heaven and hell, good and bad, ecstatic and nihilistic, either-or: in a word, *dialectic*. Dualism, issuing from the epilepsy, accounts – in part – for this dialectic. Epilepsy is not an inconvenient illness that occasionally disables the individual. An epileptic brain operates differently from a so-called 'normal' brain. Epileptically conditioned beliefs significantly alter the superficial religious background (characterized by a relatively trite theological anthropology). Why? Epileptics are often forced into the position of outsiders. Dostoevsky demonstrates this in his novels: for example, Prince Myshkin (*The Idiot*) is often politely ignored, shunned, subtly omitted from social interaction for risk he may have a fit or damage something precious! People around him

fear a seizure, not just because they do not know how to cope with it, but it un-nerves them – they fear losing their own mind, not being in control, and they fear the risk of death (SUDEP: sudden unexplained death from epilepsy). Outsiders, like lepers in the biblical world of Jesus, or the blind, the lame, the disabled, who are ostracized from the Jerusalem temple cult and religion, either love Jesus, or loath him: the Gospel sees such matters in terms of light and dark, either-or, angels or demons, heaven or hell. Such is the case with epileptics, even if the condition is relatively well controlled. It may be speculated that this is why the marginalized, the afflicted, the suffering outcasts, saw Jesus and responded strongly, either one way or the other. In 1862 Dostoevsky visited clinics in Western Europe to try to find either a cure, or ways of stabilizing his epilepsy. There was no cure.

ii. Epilepsy ... And Christlikeness

Dostoevsky aligns the position of the suffering outsider with Christlikeness. This is starkly presented in *The Idiot* (1869): Myshkin, the Christlike figure, fails in his efforts to save Nastasya Filippovna because he is human and not divine. As Eduard Thurneysen notes, "The Idiot, Prince Myshkin, an epileptic, returns to Russia from a nerve clinic in Switzerland without being cured."¹⁴ At the end of the novel Myshkin ends up returning to the clinic after suffering his destruction at the hands of murderers, libertines, and the proud cultured classes in St. Petersburg. The only way to look at these events is eschatological: the world still remains the same, but there has been a change in people, this is movement, either the movement *towards* salvation or, for some, a movement *away* from salvation into damnation. The ancient Greeks, and the Romans to a certain extent, understood

14 Eduard Thurneysen, *Dostojewski* (München: Kaiser, 1921), pp. 25–26.

this in a way that many Christians today fail to: what we do in the here-and-now echoes through eternity. Dostoevsky’s faith was characterized by an existential eschatological crisis, which was conditioned by his epilepsy (in addition to the mock execution). Dostoevsky’s suffering was to a degree (but certainly not always) a form of Christlikeness that separated him from the polite social etiquette of the St. Petersburg religious classes. His wife, Anna Dostoevsky, noted a state that almost led to a seizure, which defines this outsidership:

On the way to Geneva we stopped overnight in Basel, with the object of viewing a painting in the museum there which someone had told Fyodor Mikhailovich about. This painting, by Hans Holbein, depicts Jesus Christ after his inhuman agony, after his body has been taken down from the Cross and begun to decay. His swollen face is covered with bloody wounds, and it is terrible to behold. The painting had a crushing impact on Fyodor Mikhailovich. He stood before it as if stunned. And I did not have the strength to look at it – it was too painful for me, particularly in my sickly condition – and I went into other rooms. When I came back after fifteen or twenty minutes, I found him still riveted to the same spot in front of the painting. His agitated face had a kind of dread in it, something I had noticed more than once during the first moments of an epileptic seizure. Quietly I took my husband by the arm, led him into another room and sat him down on a bench, expecting the attack from one

minute to the next. Luckily this did not happen. He calmed down little by little and left the museum, but insisted on returning once again to view this painting which had struck him so powerfully.¹⁵

Dostoevsky understood the height of the intensity of beauty and joy in an aura in the minutes before an epileptic seizure possesses, and how these may be moments of true knowledge of God and of humanity’s existence, only to be followed by the destructive nihilism of the seizure. For Eduard Thurneysen this is ‘to push the paradox to the limit ... wherein God is seen.’¹⁶ This can be seen in the depths of negation and nihilism, illness and suffering that allow the epileptic to gain deep knowledge out of the moment of near death. Thurneysen, continues, ‘Humanity can be true to the real meaning of this life only in those great negations of all human standpoints and possibilities.’¹⁷ These negations are like a premonition of the *eschaton* because they generate the crisis of judgment (the model for this was the crucifixion). In *The Idiot*, the unworldly Myshkin, the epileptic, unnervingly speaks the truth and never partakes in the games of status, power, and sexual politics that other people do, but he eventually returns to the asylum as the result of *status epilepticus* (continuous epileptic seizures

15 Anna Grigoryevna Dostoevsky, *Dostoevsky Reminiscences*, p. 134.

16 Thurneysen, *Dostojewski*, p. 24.

17 *Ibid.*, p. 48.

Hans Holbein the Younger, “The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb” 30.5×200 cm. Öffentliche Kunstsammlung, Basel



over several hours with the resulting brain damage that in most instances causes death) having effectively been destroyed by the people he was trying to help, to save. Myshkin is only understood truly for what he is – as an example of Christlikeness – by the outcasts in society, the outsiders: in Myshkin’s case, by a harlot (Nastasya) and a murderer (Rogozhin). The Swiss theologian Karl Barth noted of Myshkin’s character in *The Idiot*, ‘Why can we work up no indignation against Dostoevsky’s daring to make Christ pass as an idiot in society and the real understanding of him begin with the murderer and the harlot?’¹⁸ Jeannette Stirling notes that this psychotic murderer (Rogozhin) and this victim of child abuse, turned into a sex slave (Nastasya), ‘are also fragmented characters, their emotional fragility manifesting from time to time as “convulsive” and “hysterical” behaviours.’¹⁹ Perhaps it is that those outside of what we take to be the church are sometimes in receipt of a deeper, greater, and more profound (and therefore *true*?) understanding of the human and its relationship to God, than clerics and religious. The ranks of clergy and religious professionals may perceive something of this knowledge, but their witness is hampered and compromised by their religious status (Matt 7:21-23).

Dostoevsky describes the effect of seizures on the human through characters, he describes how the condition of epilepsy marks the epileptic as different to the rest of humanity, how the condition sets the individual apart. Some of Dostoevsky’s accounts are first-hand, drawing on his own recollections of the seconds and minutes leading up to a seizure (often for

him an *ecstatic aura*), and the state of confusion afterwards (i.e., *post ictal confusion*). No epileptic has a sound reasoned memory of the actual seizure, it would be like a camera trying to take a picture of itself, or a computer trying to analyse itself when it is switched-off! Many of his descriptions are from his wife’s observations, and those of various doctors. These descriptions are then projected onto characters in his novels: Kirillov (Бесы, *The Demons*, 1872); Smerdyakov (Братья Карамазовы, *The Brothers Karamazov*, 1880); Nellie in (Униженные и оскорблённые, *The Insulted and Injured*); Prince Myshkin (Идиот, *The Idiot*, 1869).

In *The Idiot*, Dostoevsky portrays Myshkin in the half-hour or so leading up to a seizure, wandering; this preamble is not so much confused or aimless, but without consistent purpose. Myshkin is focusing on small irrelevancies, obsessive details, in what to some may seem an autistic manner.²⁰ The lack of focus and the wandering continue and he begins to question reality. Myshkin then realizes that he may be drifting into a seizure. What Dostoevsky attempts to describe is the *aura* prior to a seizure (*prodromal* or *pre-seizure*), the dark nihilistic destruction that follows on he cannot describe, he will only know of the sheer destruction in his mind after the seizure is over: as the *post ictal* confusion begins to dissipate. During the last twenty years of his life Dostoevsky kept a record of the number of seizures he experienced in his notebooks. This is a total of 120 (which is actually a relatively low number: an average of one every two months). Jeannette Stirling, in *Representing Epilepsy: Myth and Matter*, considers Dostoevsky’s condition:

One of Dostoevsky’s friends wrote that the author often spoke of his *prodromal*, or

18 Karl Barth, ‘Der Christ in der Gesellschaft,’ in *Das Wort Gottes und die Theologie* (München: Kaiser, 1924), pp. 33–69 (quote, p. 61).

19 Jeannette Stirling, *Representing Epilepsy: Myth and Matter* (Liverpool, UK: Liverpool University Press, 2010), p. 97.

20 See, Dostoevsky, *The Idiot* (Garnett trans.), Pt. 2, Chp. 5, p. 139–41.

pre-seizure, phase as a period of ecstasy. He claimed to have experienced:

... a contentedness which is unthinkable under normal conditions, and unimaginable for those who have not experienced it. At such times I am in perfect harmony with myself and the entire universe. Perception is so clear and so agreeable that one would give ten years of his life, and perhaps all of it, for a few seconds of such bliss.²¹

Many of these aspects of cerebral paroxysm, as well as the darker and more difficult sensory changes, are written into the characterizations in Dostoevsky’s fictional works. In *The Idiot*, Prince Myshkin’s pre-seizure states sometimes elevate him to a ‘lofty calm’ where ‘his mind and heart were flooded with extraordinary light;²² however his seizures also plummet him to the lowest mode of existence.²³

Dostoevsky therefore focuses on the *pre-seizure aura*, often termed ecstatic epilepsy, and the nihilism of the post seizure, or *post ictal* period of recovery, where the brain slowly ‘reboots’ and recovers, where perception and understanding needs to gradually re-ground in reality.

An interesting point he projects into his epileptic characters is the primordial scream immediately prior to a seizure:

Myshkin’s seizures, like those of Yelena in *The Humiliated and Insulted*, are preceded by a ‘frightful, unimaginable scream’:

In that scream everything human seems obliterated and it is impossible, or very difficult, for an observer to realize and admit that it is the man himself screaming. *It seems indeed as though it were someone else screaming from within the man.* That is how many people at least have described their impression.

21 Stirling, *Representing Epilepsy*, pp. 95 & 127. Stirling notes, the quote is attributed to Strakhov, cited in Henri Gastaut, ‘Fyodor Mikhailovitch Dostoevsky’s (1821–1881),’ *Epilepsia*, 19 (1978), p. 188.

22 Stirling is here quoting from Dostoevsky’s, *The Idiot* (Garnett trans.), p. 219.

23 Stirling, *Representing Epilepsy*, p. 95.

The sight of a man in an epileptic fit fills many people with positive and unbearable horror, in which there is a certain element of the uncanny.²⁴ (My emphasis.)

In an indexical turn, Dostoevsky describes Myshkin as having ‘that strange look from which some people can recognize at the first glance a victim of epilepsy.’²⁵

Dostoevsky, quoted here by Stirling, appears to be invoking something beyond the rational, beyond the immediate reductionist diagnosis of epilepsy; so what is going on here?

EPILEPSY AND CAUSE

i. Epilepsy ... and Nihilistic Determinism?

The standard reductionist (i.e., modern/scientific) approach to epilepsy – reflecting the closed-off world of Kantian philosophy – conceives of epilepsy as a brain disease, a malfunction in part of the grey matter/flesh inside of our skulls that is manifested by the synaptic pathways between our brain cells. Any spiritual dimension is simply where the sensation in a person’s mind leading up to a seizure may, under certain circumstances, and according to the individual’s background, be given a ‘religious’ gloss: thus is the nihilistic deterministic world view about epilepsy from the so-called experts. Feelings of warmth, light, contentment, pleasure, heightened awareness, and so forth – these are considered by psychologists and neurologists to be ‘religious’ (though without an accompanying definition and explanation of what being religious actually is). Thus, epileptic seizures, where there is

24 Op cit, pp. 22, 228–9). Note, descriptions of Yelena’s seizure can be found in Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky, *Humiliated and Insulted* (trans. Ignat Avsey; Richmond, UK: Alma Classics, 2012), p. 191f.

25 Stirling, *Representing Epilepsy*, p. 95.

consciousness of the pre-seizure or actual seizure in the epileptic,²⁶ are often considered spiritual, but this is no more than a comment upon the individual's interpretation of the event. The psychologists and neurologists themselves do not make sense of the event in terms of such categories, unless theology is defined as yet another brain activity, subjective and contained within a closed-off Kantian universe. They may indeed deny the reality of any spiritual – or supernatural – dimension to the world that transcends the psyche of human beings.²⁷

ii. Epilepsy ... and a Biblical World View?

Things are different with the Bible; the Bible being the repository of God's revelation and the truth about the reality we occupy and live out our lives in. The biblical world is invisibly peopled by angels and demons: spirits that underpin and influence the actions and beliefs of people. To the biblical authors, these spiritual beings were not to be considered abstract ideas; angels and demons were not to be seen as psychological projections, they were to be seen as real – as *real* as people are; invisible, perceived by their sway, their influence on humanity, but nonetheless an *actuality*.

What did Dostoevsky believe? He accepted and valued the Bible (more pertinently, the New Testament, he was somewhat ambiguous about

the Old Testament) and it is clear that many of his characters are defined by what appears to be angelic goodness or demonic evil, but also that they have the freedom to move between the states of good and evil. Did Dostoevsky realize or acknowledge that we cannot dismiss the influences of good or bad spirits on the human mind? If he did, did he learn this from his epilepsy? Or did he avoid the question? The concept that we may be influenced in our thinking, in our beliefs and actions, by angels and demons is not, to Dostoevsky, an abstract idea; it is a concept underpinned by his respect for the Bible, specifically the New Testament. The protagonists in Dostoevsky's novels are heroes or anti-heroes, the behaviour of many of these characters is 'demonic,' 'hellish,' as in *The Demons* (1872), and in the character of Raskolnikov (Преступление и наказание, *Prestupleniye i nakazaniye: Crime and Punishment*, 1866). But we must be clear that Dostoevsky does not assert actual real spiritual demons behind the evil behaviour of humans. Dostoevsky is very coy about the biblically asserted spiritual realm, a point we will consider in relation to his flirtation with, and then rejection of spiritism/spiritualism.

iii. Evil ... and the Demonic?

The apparent dualism between good and evil, angelic and demonic, between a closed-off reality, and a world porous to the eternal, this paradoxical duality may define the human condition, but it does not define God and God's economy with creation. It is of paramount importance to note that in traditional Christian theology the devil is not a parallel 'god,' equal to God, uncreated, co-existing from eternity. Rather, the devil, the arch-leader of demonic evil forces, is a creature: Lucifer was good, in some ways the highest creation, the brightest of angels, but he rebelled, set himself up as a 'god,'

26 A simple partial seizure involves a degree of conventional consciousness by the epileptic; a complex partial seizure involves no conventional consciousness, but altered consciousness, as the individual will still walk, try to talk, bump into things, but have no more understanding of the world and its dangers around her/him than a ten-month old child just beginning to walk (a state of complex partial seizure can sometimes be similar to advanced dementia). The depth of a complex partial seizure may lead into a full-blown seizure with total loss of consciousness and the risk of brain death.

27 See Coles, Alasdair. 'Temporal lobe epilepsy and Dostoyevsky seizures: Neuropathology and Spirituality.' Published online, *Royal College of Psychology*, 2013: <https://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/pdf/Alasdair%20Coles%20Temporal%20lobe%20epilepsy%20and%20Dostoyevsky%20seizures.pdf>

and attempted to parallel God. Lucifer could not coexist in heaven, in eternity, and fell. He was expelled. This rebellion and its consequences are mirrored in Dostoevsky’s anti-heroes, the depraved and *fallen* characters who move ever deeper into a ‘hell’ of *their own making*, eventually losing all traces of a God-given humanity. Madness and suicide await them; unless at the last moment they turn and repent. This is a recurring theme in Dostoevsky’s mature period novels. However, it is important to note that according to conventional interpretation Dostoevsky appears to use the biblical notion of devils, demons, and hell, as a motif and theme, he sees this reality from the Bible played out in the *Fall* of human characters. That, however, is not at all the same as seeing actual evil spirits at work as part of the world of the novel.

Epilepsy may help to generate this ‘either-or’ dualism in Dostoevsky’s understanding of the human condition, but Scripture bears witness to a deeper understanding of the relationship between seizures and the world of angels and demons: an epileptic seizure (or for that matter cramp in the leg!) may be the result of an electro-chemical reaction in the muscle, determined by our activities, and all that has led up to the person we are at a given moment in time; or, the cramp, the seizure, may have been triggered by the influence of a spiritual being: invisible, but outside of our control (but like Satan in the Book of Job, not beyond God’s purview!). This is a world that characterizes and underpins Dostoevsky’s novels, but he was not necessarily asserting that the evil anti-heroes in his books were manipulated by actual, real, demons. Is this a weakness in his work, and in his own life’s belief system? Did Dostoevsky create psychological barriers to the concept – and dangers – of the supernatural. We are on safer ground with Dostoevsky’s teleology if we assert

that demons – real or psychological – whisper into the conscious mind of an individual, suggesting, inviting them to indulge in beliefs and acts that will in time ensure their *Fall* and condemnation into an eternal hell. But what are the worst demonically inspired beliefs and acts? – for Dostoevsky this is the political. Bad politics is the ultimate evil: consider Lucifer’s *Fall* and humanity’s depraved addiction to original sin, imposed on others through the body politic!

POSSESSION AND POSSESSORS: THE POLITICAL

i. Political Possessors

In *The Demons* (Бесы, *Besy*, often translated as *The Devils*, or wrongly translated as *The Possessed*, where, *The Possessors* would be a more accurate translation) Dostoevsky explicitly invokes this world of demonic influence whereby ideas are the main weapons that are used in the downfall into evil of seemingly altruistic and idealistic people. The novel draws on actual events, the assassination of opponents of revolutionaries in Moscow, St. Petersburg, and other places. Rowan Williams comments,

Fyodor Dostoevsky was already a major figure in the Russian cultural scene when he published *The Devils*, the third of the four great novels of his maturity. By this time, he had returned to Christian faith and practice, and saw himself as called to defend this faith in his writing. But this did not mean that he wrote improving stories on religious subjects. His way of defending Christianity was to try and show how it could cope with the most horrific and extreme of human situations. He never gives easy answers, but expects his readers to face the worst the world can offer so that the scale of God’s grace becomes even more astonishing.²⁸

28 Rowan Williams, ‘The Archbishop on Dostoevsky’s

Williams notes how the two key figures in a proto-socialist (arm-chair) revolutionary group are presented as demonically-driven: 'Verkhovensky is a brilliant manipulator ... Stavrogin is intelligent, wildly independent, mysterious and charismatic, a "messianic" figure.' Based on an actual incident, the murder of one member of the group binds all the others together.

Here, Williams understands how it is through wilful decisions, many tiny, little decisions, and the influence of those we live with, decisions that allow us to accept the courting of demons or angels – which will ensure our progress towards the eschatological judgment that none of us can escape, but also how that judgment permeates back into time as the individual becomes ever more evil, or good:

These two diabolical characters don't come from nowhere. Their parents also figure in the book. Pyotr's father is a vain and silly old man, who loves to think of himself as a daring revolutionary writer; Nikolai's mother is an equally silly woman, caught up in a whole complex of self-deceit... The message is clear: the demonic evil of the two younger men comes from this sterile, fantasy-ridden atmosphere, full of large talk about change and progress, but with absolutely no spiritual or moral substance. One generation's flabby fashions become destructive horrors in the next generation. You can see why Dostoevsky's novel was so unpopular with progressives in Russia at the time.²⁹

Williams asks the pertinent question, 'Can there be redemption for people like these, people whose emptiness invites the devil in?'³⁰ Dostoevsky explores this possibility, the

openness of redemption, towards the end of the book, but both characters walk away from the public confession and utter repentance that is required for salvation. Both are too demonically possessed to move to God. *The Demons* was profoundly influenced by Dostoevsky's reading of The Book of Revelation. It is an explicitly political and eschatological text. Revolutionary forces were highly active in Russia in the second half of the nineteenth century (only coming to power with the revolution in 1917). However, already in Dostoevsky's day, competing ideologies fought each other for power and control. Dostoevsky is highly critical of these radical proto-communist idealists, who presented their beliefs and ideas – their politics – as quasi-religious; indeed Dostoevsky saw the very foundation and ground of these ideologically motivated beliefs to be inherently evil.

Dostoevsky knew and understood the progressive politics of late nineteenth century Europe. In *Crime and Punishment* he has the anti-hero Raskolnikov, murder an old pawn broker simply for no justifiable reason other than he does not like her, he sees her as an obstacle to his development, and categorizes her as a louse. Dostoevsky was something of a prophet in the crime/trespass of Raskolnikov. In November 1869, three years after the book was published, a young student at the Petrovsky Agricultural Academy in Moscow was murdered by a revolutionary group headed by Sergei Nechaev³¹ for the supposedly humanitarian aims of radical ideology, or what Dostoevsky would have described as rational egoism: just like the character of Raskolnikov – killing for anarchic reasons.

"Devils":

<http://rowanwilliams.archbishopofcanterbury.org/articles.php/2003/the-archbishop-on-dostoevskys-devils>, para 1.

²⁹ Ibid., para 5.

³⁰ Ibid., para 6.

³¹ Sergei Nechaev (1847–82), a Russian revolutionary nihilist who advocated the single-minded pursuit of revolution by any means necessary, including violence: the end justified the means

ii. Evil as Politics

The imperial Russian establishment is presented by Dostoevsky as inept, toothless, and in many ways complicit through its failure to refute the arguments of the revolutionaries, but this imperial body politic is not necessarily evil. F. Derek Chisholm, assessing Dostoevsky understanding and use of the ‘demonic’ and eschatological, but also assessing the Russian and Soviet history that follows on after Dostoevsky’s death and into the twentieth century, comments:

The novel *Demons* accurately applies New Testament texts from Luke’s Gospel and Revelation on the demonic to Russian political extremism and the foundations of Russian communism. Second, that the formation of Russian communism by Lenin and Stalin provides an insightful case study of the demonic in politics... . Dostoevsky’s copy of the New Testament indicates that he believed the Book of Revelation was an eschatologically prophetic book that was being fulfilled within late nineteenth-century Russia.³²

Furthermore, Chisholm notes how,

Verkhovensky is modelled after the beast that rose out of the earth in Chapter 13 of the book of Revelation. Snakes rise out of the earth and have an association with Satan and the perpetration of evil that goes way back. Stavrogin is modelled after the beast from the sea described in Revelation 13:11–18. Stavrogin is described as being a ‘beast of prey’ that has ‘ungovernable wildness’ and ‘superhuman strength.’ In the book of Revelation the beast that rose out of the earth prepares the way for the beast that rose out of the sea. In the novel Verkhovensky prepares the way as Stavrogin’s subservient follower.³³

32 Dostoevsky explicitly uses Revelation, chps. 10 and 13. Op cit, Chisholm.

33 Op cit, Chisholm, ‘Dostoevsky as Political Prophet...’ para. 16, quoting Kjetsaa, *Fyodor Dostoevsky: A Writer’s Life*, pp. 253–56.

The conclusion that we can infer from these allusions to revelation in *The Demons* is that politics is more often than not demonically controlled: is this the conclusion Dostoevsky draws? Politics is a compromise; politics issues from the spirit of this world.³⁴

I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. (John 17:14-16)

Indeed, are all politicians, to a greater or lesser degree, demonically inspired and sometimes even demonically controlled? Or is this going too far? Or are some of them possessed by evil of this world, and then become – in a true translation of Бесы, *possessors*)? Dostoevsky offers no comforting nuances here, no grey, confused middle ground: politics rules and governs our lives and politics is either-or: politicians are for God or against God, angelic or demonic: but they, the politicians, the rulers, the movers and shakers, those who set trends and generate the political ideology that rules people (as Raskolnikov vainly believes of himself in *Crime and Punishment*) are the real *possessors* of the ordinary people, playing them like puppets. The *possessed* (demonically) then *possess* others and draw them into their hellish condemnation. But we err if we believe we can lump all demonic influence on politicians alone, leaving all other human activities free from demonic manipulation. Perhaps the reason Dostoevsky focused so much on the politics of revolutionaries, and its demonic foundation, was in a way to repudiate the flirtation he had

34 Perhaps only the Torah as a political system of government and law – given by God to the chosen people, the ancient Hebrews, the Jews – is the only valid political system, though this then raises questions about its implementation and the integrity of the body politic.

with political radicals during his misspent youth: the Franco-inspired revolutionaries that he came to be the self-styled leader of. William J. Leatherbarrow notes,

[t]his pattern of biblical motifs, imagery and allegory drawn from the apocalyptic revelations of St. John occupy a particularly significant place, and reveal much about the nature of Dostoevsky's Christian vision. This apocalyptic colouring emerged suddenly in Dostoevsky's works of the 1860s, and appears to be linked to his increasing awareness of the nature of Western European society.³⁵

We cannot deny that the apocalyptic in Dostoevsky's work from the time of the writing of *Crime and Punishment* is in all probability also linked to the worsening of his epilepsy. Therefore, Dostoevsky understood how the real risk in serious assaults by demons lay not in, say, an inept demon needling him by triggering an epileptic seizure, but in the way such evil spirits, whether understood as actual spiritual beings or as personifications of the lower aspects of our fallen natures, whispered ideas into the minds of people, gradually bringing about their downfall, their *possession*, and their *servitude* to this personified evil (to the possessors).

This raises the question for his readers: to whom do you belong? To Satan, the prince of evil; or to God, the Lord? Or do you subsist in the delusion that you belong only to yourself, that no one or no one thing lays claim to you?

EVIL AS A TANGIBLE TRANSCENDENT ACTUALITY

We cannot avoid the question, in relation to Dostoevsky's works, what do we mean if we

refer to evil as *real*? In defining evil as real, is this an attempt to acknowledge that evil exists and is more than just an opinion about human behaviour that offends? Is evil more than just a subjective judgement made by people to distance themselves from something they don't approve of? If evil is a turning away from God, is such evil supernatural, issuing from *actual* demonic powers (beings created good by God, but who have turned from God and embraced evil?) exerting influence in the here-and-now? Is evil multitudinous acts of sin that has lost the perception and capacity to repent? – in this instance is evil sheer wilfulness? Are the demonic motifs in Dostoevsky's writings an adjectival judgment, used to interpret and criticize political powers, or do they represent an interference, and at times perhaps even a possession, of the human by *actual* evil? Dostoevsky *does not* go down the latter path, of actual, tangible, real, and concrete evil, though for some readers his use of the demonic is ambivalent, it seems to call for acknowledgement of evil as a *transcendent actuality*. The allusion can be seen as Pauline in the sense that the New Testament speaks of principalities and powers and many biblical scholars debate whether these principalities and powers (Eph 6:12) are spiritual or political, as the original Greek text appears, for some, to be indecisive. Or are Paul's (and Dostoevsky's) spiritual powers 'real' but operative through earthly powers. The Pauline texts show this well, and so does the Book of Revelation; however, are these powers to be understood as individual demonic beings or something akin to actual evil spiritual forces, a transcendent actuality, or are they simply psychological – a mental manifestation in a closed-off universe? And what biblical background can we read between the lines of Dostoevsky's works? Dostoevsky

35 Leatherbarrow, 'Apocalyptic Imagery in *The Idiot* and *The Devils*,' *Dostoevsky Studies* 3, 1982, 44. Accessed online Nov. 28, 2013, www.utoronto.ca/tsq/DS/03/043.shtml.

is ambiguous, though he considers evil to be bad politics (wrong before Almighty God, the Lord), bad human actions (where humans wilfully exercise power and authority). For Dostoevsky evil issues from bad ideas, and as such is worse than brawling fisticuffs, or sexual sins: pride and arrogance issue from corrupt beliefs, bad principles, twisted and convoluted dogma, that lead to the turning away from God: the body politic forms a Pagan rebellion against *El Shaddai*, *Yahweh's* will for the people (this rebellion was seen by Dostoevsky in his mature years as the rise and development of socialist anarchy and proto-Marxism, in Russia in the second half of the nineteenth century, in addition to the Franco inspired commune-collectivization of his youth, grounded in the French revolution). But Dostoevsky does not appear to posit real demons operating behind people, pulling their strings, so to speak? Is the evil we can read from his novels analogous to a *tangible transcendent actuality*, which appears to exist without of the human, even though this was in all probability not Dostoevsky's intention.

GOOD AND EVIL ... AND EPILEPSY?

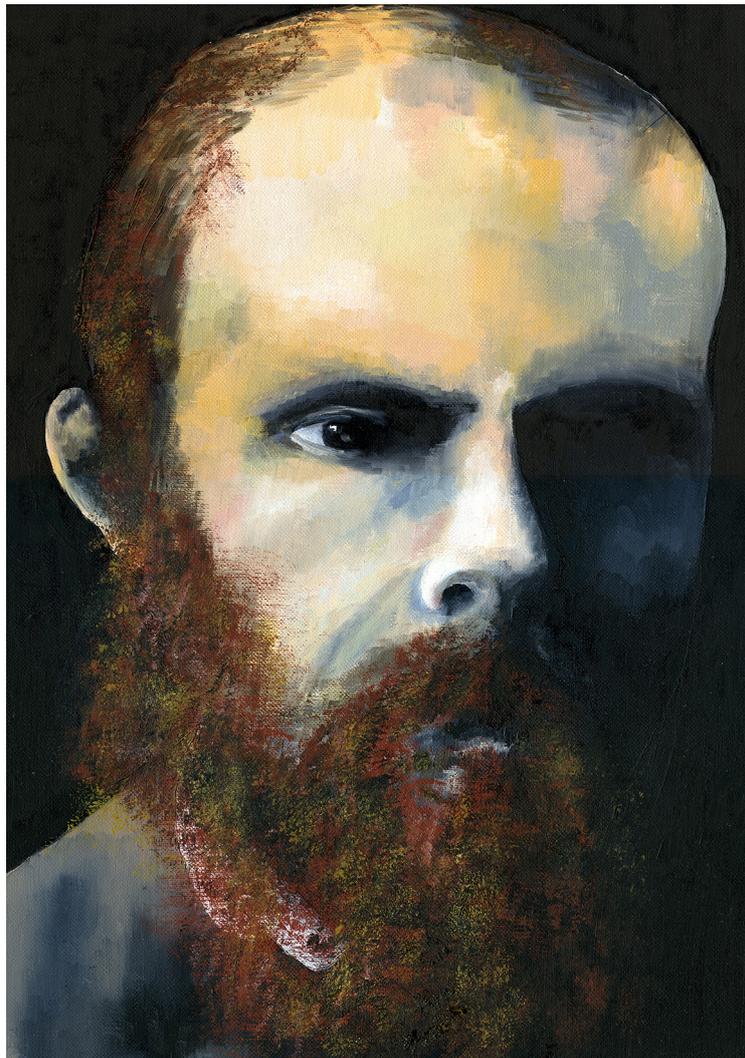
Epilepsy defines frailty. Dostoevsky understood this from observing people in the world, but also from his own epilepsy. It lays open our vulnerability. If the mind can be subject to forces from outside of what we take to be perceivable reality then not only bad forces but also good forces could act upon the mind, and in turn upon the brain. And good forces, good spirits, could trigger an epileptic seizure in one who is prone to such attacks in the same way that more tangible triggers may cause an attack. If the brain, or part of the brain, has a weakness

then something, even with good intention, may act as a trigger. Consider the account of Saul on the road to Damascus: a Spirit-enabled encounter with the risen and ascended Christ had a dramatic and cataclysmic effect on him (Acts 9:1-18). His symptoms are like a partial epileptic seizure (phasing between *simple* and *complex*, between consciousness and altered consciousness) both in the attack on the road and in the details given at the point of his healing at the hands of Ananias: ‘He laid his hands on Saul and said, ‘Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on your way here, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.’ And immediately *something like scales fell from his eyes*, and his sight was restored’ (Acts 9:18a; my emphasis). Saul's temporary blindness may have been an extended period of post seizure activity in his brain (*post ictal confusion*, or *ocular/retinal migraine?*³⁶). The phrase, *something like scales fell from his eyes*, indicates the possibility of a seizure in the rear of the cerebral cortex, which processes information from the eyes before sending it to the temporal lobes at the front of the brain for interpretation, recognition, and so forth. This reality of spiritual influence is more open, more noticeable, in epileptics. This eschatological reality is to be seen as a

36 Ocular/retinal migraine is a neurological eye condition that causes brief attacks of blindness or visual problems like flashing lights in the eyes, or like seeing through frosted glass, often having the appearance of ‘scales’ (as used in the Apostle Paul's case: *λεπίδες*, *scales*, *flakes*, from *λεπίς*, or *λεπρά*, *scaliness*: hence leprosy). In most cases an ocular/retinal migraine is harmless, though it can severely restrict vision, and can vary from minutes, to – in rare instances – days. An ocular/retinal migraine is a distinct condition from a headache-type migraine, though what is happening is not in the eye(s) but in the rear of the cerebral cortex (the back of the brain). Search Google images using *retinal migraine* and/or *ocular migraine* keywords for simulations. Hilary, my wife, had a continuous ocular migraine in the lower corner of her right eye – continuously for approximately 5 years – then it just cleared. See also, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qVF1cF9lyk8>, and, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G8P_ZTlqv8g

characteristic of Dostoevsky novels, and it is a reality that epilepsy bears witness to, an understanding that epilepsy may generate with Dostoevsky's writings. It is a question of to whom we belong: personified evil, or to God? Who are we exposed to? What influences us? Proximity and commitment to Christ, the incarnation of God, should alleviate such a danger: God protects *His* own. Genuine commitment to Christ will provide a pneumatological firewall against the wiles of the devil; but this spiritual protection is not available to those whose faith is false and disingenuous (Matt 7:21-23).

This spiritual protection can be seen in many of the characters of Dostoevsky's novels, for example, Father Zossima in *The Brothers Karamazov*, or Sonya's younger sister in *Crime and Punishment*, the innocent and charismatically holy child, Polenka. Grace will surround and protect holy individuals from the guiles and charms, of the devil, the ever present invitation to *Fall*, to recapitulate on original sin, and from the subversive influence of demons. This is not favouritism; the potential is there for all humanity, and to all of Dostoevsky's characters. It comes down to a question of faith and proximity. Christians may have epileptic seizures (a physical breakdown in the wiring – the synaptic pathways – in the brain) and still be insulated by God's Holy Spirit from the demonic world. It comes down



P.H. Brazier, 'Dostoevsky – Light and Perception,' oil on linen, 2015
Dostoevsky, on his return from Siberia and imprisonment,
from a photograph taken in 1861

to the relationship between the individual and God – which brings us back to the characters in Dostoevsky's novels: the promise of spiritual protection.³⁷

What is important is that two of the main

³⁷ In Mark's Gospel, the boy who manifests epileptic seizures is in his right-mind, and morally sound before God after the seizures. An interesting question is, did this boy continue to have mild momentary seizures, or auras, after the exorcism at Jesus's hands; was there a residual epileptic condition no longer aggravated by demons, no longer life threatening?

epileptic characters in Dostoevsky’s work – Myshkin and Smerdyakov – are in some way diametric: Myshkin, the innocent fool, who fails through his humanity to be truly Christ-like; Smerdyakov, the scheming murderer who flirts with evil till it possesses and destroys him. Both suffer from seizures, which may or may not be thought to result from ‘demonic’ interference (though Dostoevsky does exclude the actual demonic from causing them, though he is uncertain as to how *real* such evil is), therefore it is not the seizures *per se* that are of concern, but the ethical teleology: what impact on the moral character did the seizures have, and how did the person develop and progress after the seizure? What do we say of demons and epilepsy? – that what is most dangerous is, the impact of demons on the minds of Myshkin and Smerdyakov’s (and Dostoevsky). The aim of such demons – if we follow the biblical paradigm – is to ensure the downfall of an individual by whispering ideas into the person’s mind.³⁸ Demons may, or may not, have triggered epileptic seizures in Dostoevsky’s brain, but they did not necessarily cause him to *Fall*; where demons had been successful was in whispering revolutionary *ideas* into the mind of the young Dostoevsky, encouraging him down the path of bad politics. These demonically-driven ideas nearly led to Dostoevsky’s execution, at a point where he had not repented of his youthful (political) mistakes. In his later life he was much more morally sound before God: despite being plagued, racked, and broken by the seizures: he held to his right mind and a right judgement before God.

38 Demons did not need to trigger seizures in Judas, Pilate, or Herod, to ensure their fall, only whisper ideas into their minds.

DOSTOEVSKY AND SPIRITUALITY/SPIRITUALISM?

But why when Dostoevsky asserted so fiercely a tradition/orthodox/evangelical Gospel, emphasising the utter absolute necessity of the Christ to answer the depravity of the human, was he so reluctant to speak of the supernatural and invoke the power and authority of the Holy Spirit? The answer lies again in his misspent youth(!).

Spiritism,³⁹ a form of Spiritualism, was something of a fashionable preoccupation amongst the wealthy and leisured classes in St. Petersburg, particularly in the 1840s and 1850s. Thomas Berry notes,

From the reign of Catherine the Great to the Revolution of 1917, Russian society and literature were affected by the relationship between Western spiritualism with its séances and mediums and an ancient folk tradition with its superstitions and fancifulness. The common Russian belief in spirits, combined with the Western occult science, brought charlatans into the highest court circles throughout the last hundred and fifty years of the Romanov’s rule.⁴⁰

These were people who considered themselves Christian but dabbled with séances and mediums, the occult and psychic phenomena, in particular, what they considered to be communication with the dead, all framed by religious interests and practices that denied fundamental Christian doctrine. Considered an innocent playtime, many were drawn into a much darker world than they expected, becoming infatuated with these gatherings. As a

39 See, Alexander Moreira-Almeida, Allan Kardec and the Development of a Research Program in Psychic Experiences. Cited on Wikipedia, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spiritism>, accessed Jan. 16, 2016.

40 Thomas Berry, ‘Dostoevsky and Spiritualism,’ *Dostoevsky Studies* 2 (1981) pp. 43–51 (quote, p. 43).

young army officer Dostoevsky was involved in such séances, flirting with the pronouncements of mediums, and so forth. As such Dostoevsky's seduction by Spiritists is interlinked with the military society he moved in, then with the fashionable bourgeois world of his early novellas where he is a sceptic but plays with Spiritist ideas as an innocent pastime, and then – ironically – with his politicization through revolutionary Franco-ideologues: 'Dostoevsky was aware of the literary tastes of the period and his own writing reflected his effort to appeal to the public's taste for the esoteric.'⁴¹ In *The Landlady* (1847), Dostoevsky flirts with the idea that the heroine is possessed by the devil, but narrates that this is psychological imbalance; the early Dostoevsky weaves some ideas from Russian folklore into his short stories and novellas, for example, a violinist possessed by evil powers when he plays the instrument (*Netochka Nezvanova* 1848).

Post-Siberia Dostoevsky embraced Orthodox Christianity, grounded for him in the New Testament, and rejected Spiritism; his understanding of the supernatural is related to this rejection of Spiritism/Spiritualism; this rejection then effects, to a degree, his reading of the New Testament. It also shaped his theology generally, his eschatology specifically, creating apparent anomalies and flaws, contradictions in his otherwise biblical/traditional/orthodox theological framework. Fundamental to this question is whether the 'other,' the supernatural, exists, and is acknowledged; that is, a spiritual dimension: good and bad, holy and evil, angelic and demonic. Does such a reality exist in a way not reducible to the physical world we occupy? A Naturalistic position considers the material world to be all there is. Spiritualism, specifically Spiritism as a form of transdimensionality,

was rejected by Dostoevsky post-Siberia, at a time when it was even more highly fashionable amongst the leisured classes in St. Petersburg. Dostoevsky is critical of spiritualism/spiritism as a system of belief or religious practice based on supposed communication with the spirits of the dead, especially through mediums in séances. But does this rejection also involve a denial of the reality of the supernatural as attested to in the Bible?

Implying, in philosophical terms, the doctrine that the spirit exists distinct from matter, or that spirit is the only reality (OED), Spiritism can be considered to be, for many, Gnostic and heretical, raising serious questions about the incarnation, and the value of the corporeal. Aware of the 'tremendous popular regard for the occult science'⁴² Dostoevsky does weave into his major novels some examples, but walks a fine line between belief and scepticism, for example, 'the dual nature of Russian spiritualism from the folkloric devils in many of his works to the sophisticated devilish phantom of Ivan's dream in *The Brothers Karamazov*.'⁴³

If in his major novels he tries to steer a path between belief and scepticism with regard to the influence the supernatural might exert on us in the here-and-now, he ends up with an hermetic world where any sense of the supernatural is to be considered psychological. However, in his personal life he toyed with the idea of a spiritual reality that can exert influence on us.

Although sceptical of demons and spiritism, Dostoevsky was aware of what we may term the action, the enigmatic presence, of the Holy Spirit in his life, of unusual, nigh impossible, coincidences.

In his personal life, Dostoevsky gave evidence of his curiosity about psychic

41 Ibid.

42 Ibid.

43 Ibid.

phenomena. Doctor Janovskij, who treated the author, reported that Dostoevsky believed in premonitions and related the following incident. During the second year of their acquaintance, the doctor lived in Pavlovsk, returning to St. Petersburg three times a week for his medical practice. One day a strange urge convinced him of the necessity of returning to the city for an unscheduled visit. In a remote area he accidentally ran into Dostoevsky who had no money to pay a petty debt demanded of him by some military clerk. When the writer saw the doctor, he shouted, ‘See! See who will save me!’ Later Dostoevsky called the incident remarkable and every time he would remember it, he would say, ‘Well, after that, how could one not believe in premonitions!’⁴⁴

Saved from punishment under the law for this debt by this unexpected, unpredictable, encounter, Dostoevsky saw this as a form of divine intervention, though he fails to identify and acknowledge the pneumatological nature of the encounter, grounded in the triune God, he also fails to see the moral paradox: was God aiding and abetting his avoiding repaying a debt? Premonitions, for Dostoevsky, equal the enigmatic presence of the Holy Spirit, though he fails to distinguish, or test, the spirits.⁴⁵

Although there are sometimes references to devils/demons/evil imps in his novels (as distinct from *the* devil as a dark personified evil force),⁴⁶ he states explicitly that he does not believe in such devils/demons/evil imps: ‘My whole trouble is that I, too, cannot believe in devils/demons; this is really a pity, since I have conceived a very clear and most remarkable theory of Spiritism, but one exclusively based

upon the existence of devils: without them, my whole theory comes to naught of its own accord.’⁴⁷

If we check through Dostoevsky’s New Testament, examining the annotations, there are no marks against any passages in the Synoptic Gospels describing demons, demonic encounters, demonic possession, exorcisms, or the supernatural generally. He clearly selects the parts of the New Testament he feels comfortable with. There are likewise no annotations or markings against the episodes of exorcising of humans possessed by demons where the possession appears to be responsible for epileptic seizures.⁴⁸ Dostoevsky nowhere questions the cause of his epilepsy, or considers the possibility of supernatural interference as a trigger for seizures (whether good or evil – we noted earlier the possibility of pneumatological interference triggering a type of epileptic seizure as part of Saul/Paul’s Damascus Road encounter/experience).

It is pertinent to note that there are no exorcisms in John. There is the devil, but Satan’s influence is mediated through the darkness of the world. The devil is also mediated through the darkness in and of an individual like Judas Iscariot; indeed, this is the self-destructive darkness that starts initially with ideas, maybe one seemingly innocent idea that progresses through a manifold till the darkness engulfs the individual, condemning him/her. Such darkness ensures the demonic behaviour, and

47 Dostoevsky’s theory was that the apparent revelations and encounters that appeared to happen in séances were demons/evil spirits toying with susceptible people, but he denies the existence of such spiritual phenomena and thus he concludes that what is happening can be explained psychologically. See, Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky, *The Diary of a Writer* (trans/annotated, Boris Brasol. 2 vols; New York: Scribner’s Sons, 1949). See, Vol. 1, Chp. 3, §.2, ‘Spiritism. Something about Devils. Extraordinary Craftiness of the Devils, if only these are Devils,’ pp. 190–96, quote, p. 191.

48 For example, Mark 9.

44 Ibid., p. 44.

45 1 John 4:1f. See also, Rom 8:16, Acts 10:30–32, 1 Thes 5:21–22.

46 For example, in *Crime and Punishment* (Pt. 4, Chp. 1), the conversations between Svidrigailov and Raskolnikov about ghosts, and hauntings, often generated by a guilty conscience.

the intolerance and persecution, the destruction and chaos, which Dostoevsky saw at its worst in bad politics. Dostoevsky wrote, in 1876, in his mocking criticism of Spiritism (and associated demons), of the dangers of a theological debate:

Naturally, I have been jesting and laughing from the first word to the last; yet this is what I wish to express in conclusion: if one were to regard spiritism as something carrying within itself a new creed (and virtually all spiritists, even the sanest among them, are a bit inclined toward such a view) ... [then] for this reason, may God speedily bring success to a free investigation by both sides; this alone will help to eradicate, as quickly as possible, the spreading stench, and this might enrich science with a new discovery. But to shout at each other, to defame and expel each other from society on account of spiritism – this, to my way of thinking, means nothing but consolidating and propagating the idea of spiritism in its worst sense. This is the beginning of intolerance and persecution. And this is precisely what the devils are after!⁴⁹

So evil/the devil is, under certain qualified conditions, *real*, but demons may be psychological creations of our imagination, though still result from the action of this dark personal force. Did Dostoevsky, in effect, retain the closed-off world of a Kantian philosophy from his youth, a concept of the world that denied the supernatural and was *de rigueur* amongst the proto-communist revolutionaries and anarchists he scorned, post-Siberia? And it is perhaps important to note that we do not dictate the conditions under which the Holy Spirit acts on us and in us (if we try to, we end up inventing impish demons and spirits, the idea of which is generated by real personified evil). Rhetorically, we may ask, did Dostoevsky, post-Siberia, have, in effect, a phobia about demons and the supernatural, which coloured

49 Dostoevsky, *The Diary of a Writer*. See, Vol. 1, p. 196.

his understanding and acceptance of the real spiritual world of heaven and hell, the triune God and salvation/damnation? Was this how he dealt with the sins of his youth – specifically, his flirtation with spiritism which he had been involved in at the same time as his politicization into Franco-Russian revolutionary ideas and praxis? Dostoevsky noted, ‘I don’t believe in spiritualism, but besides that, I don’t want to believe.’⁵⁰

CONCLUSION

Critics working from within an essentially Enlightenment perspective or from what may be termed a modernist and/or liberal position will claim, with some justification, that there are no real angels and demons affecting the characters in Dostoevsky’s novels, that Dostoevsky presents good and evil as psychological projections, relativistic modes of behaviour. The opposite idea is that the world of angels and demons is no mere (Feuerbachian) psychological projection, but an accurate perception of the reality *fallen* humanity has willed itself into. Is Ivan’s dream encounter with the devil simply a hallucination, or is it a genuine meeting between a human and a powerful spirit, a trans-corporeal being, who can influence the thoughts and actions of individuals?⁵¹ Was Dostoevsky being intentionally ambiguous by presenting this encounter as a dream? To try to claim one or the other – psychological projection, or real angels and demons – is to go beyond what Dostoevsky wrote. We can assert the truth of the biblical world – though critics would dismiss such a biblical mindset as belonging to primitive peoples who knew no better.

However, we might ask, where do ideas

50 *Ibid.*, pp. 139–40.

51 Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, Bk XI, Chp 9, ‘The Devil. Ivan Fyodorovich’s Nightmare’, pp. 634–49.

come from? Where does the existence of utterly depraved and evil thoughts and consequent actions come from? Dostoevsky does not have angels and demons appearing (like cherubs and imps in a Renaissance painting!) and enacting events of their own volition; no, Dostoevsky presents people who are being torn first one way then the other between evil and goodness. But if we do not accept the reality attested to in the Bible then where does the distinction come from. Do good and evil exist in a way that transcends humanity? – good and evil as nouns, not as subjective verbs? Do ethics then come down to psychological relativism or do they reflect a God-given reality, and a God-given natural law? Clearly Dostoevsky does believe that good and evil *are not* simply subjective and relative. However, believing that goodness is grounded in God and is not subjective does not require literal angels and demons as spirit persons to account for goodness and evil: or does it?

As an epileptic Dostoevsky’s mind was driven into an understanding of the dichotomy between angels and demons (whether they were ‘literal beings’ or psychological projections). Seemingly healthy people – who do not suffer from epilepsy – are often blind to this reality (whether the reality is literal or psychological, or some other explanation, the impact is still the same); they are also blind to the notion of demonic suggestion and interference (again whether literal or psychological). Eschatology is framed by angels and demons, whatever their ontological status, for they may generate in many ways the path the individual human travels: whether to heaven or to hell. This eschatology then becomes a theological axiom that underpins Dostoevsky’s works: in his post-Siberian writings he was warning people of the two paths and the dangers of taking the

wrong one: whether psychological or ‘real’ the experience of an eternity ‘in’ hell will be very, very real to the condemned.

Startlingly original, stripped of all religious pretence (for Dostoevsky some prostitutes and criminals *might* just have a better understanding of salvation than many of the wealthy and cultured classes), Dostoevsky as a prophet warned not only of the eschatological reality that ruled individual lives, but also – prophetically – of the corporate politicized humanistic delusions of the twentieth century; he may have been a lone prophet crying out in the wilderness, but his theology is biblical, Evangelical while it resonates with that of the Russian Orthodox tradition and becomes more and more pertinent as the decades roll on and humanity becomes increasingly possessed by wilful self-destruction.

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