

Models of Self-emptying Love

by
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In imperial Russia several writers, among them Fyodor Dostoevsky, captured “the mind of the Church” on the issue of war and peace – at least that part of the Orthodox mind that upholds nonviolence, nonresistance, and universal forgiveness as moral and spiritual ideals: the “kenotic” model.

The Greek word on which the concept of kenoticism is based (*kenein*, to empty) appears only five times in the New Testament and only once in the sense that has become associated with *kenosis*. St. Paul declares in Philippians 2:6-7 that “Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men.” The meaning of “empty” is metaphoric, suggesting voluntary humiliation. The same idea is present in the prologue to the Gospel of St. John, where the Word “came to his own home, and his own people received him not” (John 1: 11), as well as in Hebrews 2:14-18, where Christ is referred to as being “made like his brethren in every respect” and having “suffered and been tempted, he is able to help those who are tempted.” Kenosis entails Jesus Christ's willingness to identify with His human creation even to the extent of suffering unjustly.

Christ's kenotic role is not, however, characterized by pathos alone. For a triumphant vindication of His absolute selflessness awaits the Lord at the end of His redemptive act. In the same text in which St. Paul employs the verb *kenein*, he declares about Jesus: “Therefore, God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name.” (Philippians 2:9) The Johannine imagery of Jesus being “lifted up from the earth” refers not only to Jesus' eventual visible manifestation of glory through the resurrection but also to the “lifting up” of Christ on the cross, where victory was hidden in seeming defeat and the fullness of redemption contained in the last measure of selfless devotion.

Kenoticism was prominent in Kyivan Rus. George Fedotov remarks that the Saints Boris and Gleb “created in Russia a particular . . . order of ‘sufferers’, the most paradoxical order of the Russian saints.” Boris and Gleb – the voluntary, nonresistant sufferers for their evil brother's designs – have been held in special esteem since their martyrdom in 1015 in imitation of Christ's Passion.

Russian kenoticism was the object of a revival following the death of Tsar Peter I in 1725. Nadejda Gorodetzky observed that the “kenotic mood” was expressed through “meekness, self-abasement, voluntary poverty, humility, obedience, nonresistance, acceptance of suffering and death” in imitation of Christ. Metropolitan Filaret of Moscow (1782-1867) always referred to the kenotic passage in Philippians in his Christmas sermons on the Incarnation of the Son of God. Archimandrite Alexis Bukharev (1822-1871) often urged his fellow Russians to follow the “humiliated Lamb” and attempted to lead his own life as a “fool for Christ.”

Professor M.M. Tareev (1866-1934) of the Moscow Theological Academy honored the popular devotion to a “God's man, humiliated and suffering.” In *Foundations of Christianity*, published on the eve of the Revolution, Tareev directly linked the doctrine of kenoticism to a pacifist emphasis on nonviolence and nonresistance. The Church, he argued, “cannot conquer the world in the Christian spirit unless by the victory of meekness.” The Sermon on the Mount occupied the center of his moral theology and represented for Tareev, as Gorodetzky observed, that “love which extends to the form of nonresistance.” Given “the duty of voluntary death” to which all followers of Christ are called, a Christian, in Tareev's estimation, could only refuse to engage in violence against other human beings without exception. If the freedom to make of oneself a willing sacrifice were a moral necessity, then war and capital punishment were unmitigated evils that violated the freedom of mankind.

St. Tikhon of Zadonsk: Canonized in 1861, the mystical works of St. Tikhon of Zadonsk (1722-1783) became standard texts in Russian seminaries and were widely read beyond theological schools. An inspiration to Dostoevsky, St. Tikhon was one of the models for Elder Zossima in Dostoevsky's novel, *The Brothers Karamazov*.

St. Tikhon taught kenoticism in word and deed. Fr. Georges Florovsky referred to "his unremitting concentration on the memory and contemplation of Christ's sufferings" even to the point of falling at times "into a helpless torpor, confinement, and immobility, when everything around him was dark, empty, and unresponsive." Nadejda Gorodetzky observed that the saint believed that the true basis of Christianity was the "voluntary self-abasement of Christ, both in His premundane life as the Son of God and in His earthly life."

Perhaps the best testimony of St. Tikhon's practice of kenoticism is the memoirs of one of his monk servants at the Zadonsk monastery, Ivan Yefimov. Yefimov wrote that during his first few years at Zadonsk, St. Tikhon "had a violent temper" and punished his attendants severely "for the slightest fault." But the saint prayed to God for some measure to teach him patience and humility. In a dream about an infant in a church the saint was slapped on the left cheek by the child with such force that the saint awoke.

He deemed the dream a sign from God and henceforth "began to acquire patience and humility." Whenever he rebuked his peasant servants such as his cook and suspected that he had offended the attendant, the saint "would bow before him, asking to be forgiven." Another story by Yefimov illustrates how deeply this spiritual transformation affected those around St. Tikhon:

One day the saint heard of a squire who mistreated his serfs. His Grace intervened and betook himself to the lord of that estate in order to remonstrate with him. The hot-blooded nobleman started to dispute. The Bishop answered him gently but firmly. The anger of the nobleman grew, and finally he forgot himself so far as to strike the Bishop on the cheek. His Grace then left the nobleman's house. But on his way, true to the evangelical precept, he resolved to return to the man who had insulted him and to beg forgiveness for "having led him into such a temptation." So, going back, he fell at the feet of his host. The story goes on to say that this unexpected act of the pastor who knew no anger so deeply impressed the nobleman that he himself fell on his knees at the Bishop's feet, imploring forgiveness. From that day on his behaviour toward his serfs was completely altered.

Elements of this anecdote apparently inspired Dostoevsky in his characterizations of Prince Mishkin in *The Idiot* (the slap in the face) and the Elder Zossima (prostrating himself before Dimitri Karamazov) in *The Brothers Karamazov*.

In his letters and treatises St. Tikhon revealed an unyielding kenotic commitment to voluntary suffering, forgiveness, nonviolence and nonresistance. He exhorted those imprisoned for failure to pay debts: "Remember that you are co-sufferers with the martyrs and confessors, and Christ our Lord was bound for our sins. After this you will reign with Christ with whom you suffer." Always mindful that "a vindictive heart" or a state of anger pleases Satan more than any other passion, St. Tikhon counseled unreserved forgiveness: "We offend one another, therefore, we must forgive one another." He knew in his heart that reconciliation is of far more lasting value than enmity toward another: "If you make peace with him, your love will be remembered until you die." In his will the saint added, "I have forgiven, and I forgive, all who have offended me; may God forgive them in His gracious mercy. I too pray to be forgiven wherein I have offended anyone, being a man." We may easily concur with Gorodetzky's conclusion: "Any form of vengeance, injustice or violence, whether it came from those in power or from their subjects, was to him a breach of brotherly love – a civil war."

There is no clearer evidence of St. Tikhon's pacifist aversion to the violence and lack of both forgiveness and voluntary kenotic suffering inherent in war than a letter written in September 1773 toward the close of the Russo-Turkish War. He bluntly referred to that war as an occasion "for breaking the divine law, dishonouring the Law-Giver, and causing the loss of men's souls." As a result of the war, the saint perceived a providential punishment for the Russian Christians: "We see our fatherland sighing and groaning because of the bloody war in which we are engaged with the Moslems." St. Tikhon's opposition to war is revealed most eloquently in the following passage:

Once more our fatherland groans and sighs as foreign arms are turned against us: once more all are seized with confusion and fear, once more our brothers are wounded, once more is Christian blood shed; once more are thousands killed, once more is heard the weeping of fathers, mothers, wives, and children. The issue of this public calamity is as yet unknown,

but I do know that without God's help we can expect no good. For we are saved, not by arms, but by God's omnipotent aid. But God has mercy upon those who repent, and saves them; He defends those who trust in Him and not in gold or other things, who appeal to Him with true devotion.

Dostoevsky's novel, *The Idiot*. If we were to judge from occasional letters and journal entries, Dostoevsky was hardly a pacifist. In the June 1876 entry in *Diary of a Writer*, Dostoevsky proclaimed his belief in Russia's predestined role as protector of the Slavs, leader of Orthodoxy, and servant of all peoples, albeit for "for the sake of universal reconciliation." Included in this grand scheme was the author's expectation that "sooner or later, Constantinople must be ours." Konstantin Mochulsky rightly criticized this aspiration, for "Russian messianism was converted into warlike imperialism." However such militaristic language stands in sharp relief to Dostoevsky's manner of life and with the attitudes that shine through his novels.

Among Dostoevsky's fictional characters who illustrate the author's pacifist leaning is Prince Mishkin. In *The Brothers Karamazov* would come two others: the Elder Zossima, and young Alyosha Karamazov. All three reflect the classic Orthodox ideals of the absolute pacifist social ethical trajectory: nonviolence, nonresistance, voluntary kenotic suffering, and universal forgiveness. in exemplary rather than didactic fashion, Dostoevsky was, in the perceptive judgment of Metropolitan Antony Khapovitsky, "not a propagandist, tempting and tempted, but a preacher, confessing and causing confessions." As Dostoevsky knew well, experience is the best teacher and the mother of spiritual growth.

The spiritual anguish that awaits the reader at the climactic scene of *The Idiot* may be unparalleled in the history of literature. Prince Mishkin's reversion to "idiocy" is particularly troubling for the empathetic Christian who must wonder whether violent "evil" has triumphed and whether the "good" of nonviolent nonresistance is too weak and too ephemeral to endure. The anguish is intensified by the realization that Dostoevsky intended, as he wrote a friend, "to portray a wholly beautiful individual." Mochulsky later termed the quality "the grace-filled image of the innate just man." Mishkin is a fictional

version of the nonviolent, nonresistant, Passion-bearing saint in the Orthodox moral tradition, an apotheosis of exemplary kenotic holiness.

Dostoevsky intended Prince Mishkin to be an exemplary figure. In a letter to a niece, he reiterated his goal of depicting a Christ-like character and referred to Cervantes' Don Quixote as "the most perfect" of "all the noble figures in Christian literature." Noting that the noble and the comic are inseparable, he continued, "The reader feels sympathy and compassion with the Beautiful, derided and unconscious of its own worth. The secret of humor consists precisely in this art of wakening the reader's sympathy."

Mishkin's virtues are humility, forgiveness, justice, mercy, honour, courage, faith, hope, and self-sacrificing love. We see that those whom Mishkin encounters are frequently disarmed by the innocence of the Prince. When Natasha leaves Mishkin at the end of Part One, she calls him "the first human being I've seen." Even the embittered Ippolit comes to appreciate the Prince for his inherent justice and goodness. According to an account of the delightful little Kolya Ivolgin, "Ippolit took hold of the prince's hand and kissed it twice." Others seem drawn to the Prince like moths to a pure flame even as they sometimes mock and deride him.

What allows Mishkin to be a truly exemplary religious figure is a reflection of the only original Beauty, the only real holiness. At least as well as any fictional character could be, Mishkin's development is reminiscent of the Word described in John 1: 11- 12: "He came to his own home, and his own people received him not. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God."

What is it that subsequently makes Mishkin a human reflection of the divine? The Prince incarnates several attributes traditionally associated with the divine in Russian Orthodoxy or Christianity in the broader sense. The Prince is a "holy fool" (*iurodiv*) who reveals Dostoevsky's vision of voluntary suffering and non-resistance to evil.

Holy fools, or fools for Christ, have long been venerated in Orthodox Christianity. They voluntarily appear as imbeciles, renouncing all intellectual powers and forms of worldly wisdom in order to achieve the ideals of humility and self-denial. The personal

value of this lifestyle as an extraordinary spiritual exploit, or *podvig*, was complemented by a useful social function. Like the court jesters in medieval palaces, the *iurodivyi* were able to exercise a critical prophetic role vis-à-vis those in political power, a role not easily assumed by others recognized as more "sensible."

There is no better depiction in literature of the exemplary kenotic holiness of the *iurodiv* than Prince Mishkin in *The Idiot*.

In their initial encounter, Rogozhin, the primary antagonist, says to Mishkin: "You are a regular holy fool, Prince, and such as you God loves." The motif of the holy fool pervades *The Idiot* from the title itself to the last page, where the often sensible Mrs. Lizaveta Yepanchin, deeply moved by the apparent demise of "this poor fellow," the Prince, and, speaking to Radomsky, vindicates the witness of Mishkin by pronouncing "all this, all this life abroad, and all this Europe of yours ... just a delusion." She seems to be asking, "Who are the real fools in the long run?"

What the classic *iurodivyi* endeavoured to effect, the Prince displays by the very constitution of his personality. Moreover, he is sometimes acutely aware of his seeming foolishness as a potential hindrance to his relations with others. "I know perfectly well myself that I've lived less than other people and that I know less of life than anyone," he confesses in his first meeting with the Yepanchin women. "I'm afraid I talk rather strangely sometimes."

Even when Mishkin wishes he could escape the strain of human discourse and "the idea of trying to solve the problems that filled his mind and heart to overflowing," he reveals a beguiling tendency to blame himself for everything, a characteristic that strikes others intermittently as foolish or endearing.

Only a holy fool could address an assemblage of nobles, as does Prince Mishkin, in starkly critical terms mixed with self-condemnation: "It's quite true that we are absurd and frivolous, that we have bad habits, that we are bored, that we don't know how to look at anything or understand anything."

Early in the novel, Dostoevsky recorded an incident that set the tone for the entire work. When he intervenes to prevent Ganya Ivolgin from striking his sister, Varya Ivolgin, Mishkin suffers a humiliating "resounding slap in the face" from Ganya to the horror of all the others in the room. At first Mishkin responds quietly, "Oh,

well, I don't mind you striking me, but I shan't let you touch her." Then, having repaired to a corner of the room and covered his face with his hands, the Prince says in a quivering voice, "Oh, how you'll be ashamed of what you've done!" Here again in the emotion of the moment, without realizing what he has done, Mishkin has acted the holy fool in his prophetic role. For the significant effects of this critical prophetic statement are indeed profound. First, Rogozhin exclaims, "You'll be ashamed, Ganya, of having insulted such a sheep!" – a choice of words pregnant with kenotic meaning ("the Lamb that was slain" referred to in Revelation 5:12) and indicative of the powerful religious effect of the Prince on Rogozhin.

In his address to the nobility at the Yepanchins' party, the Prince, despite his at once endearing and distracting self-deprecation, offers sound practical as well as spiritual advice "to save you all, so as to prevent our class from vanishing for nothing into utter darkness, without realizing anything, abusing everything and losing every thing." Virtually straight from the gospel message of Jesus Christ to His disciples, the Prince urges, "Let us stay in the front rank and be leaders. Let us be servants in order to be leaders."

Mishkin displays an unrelenting desire to see the best in people. He perceives even the repulsive Antip Burdovsky as a defenseless and innocent man "who is being deceived by everybody." Thus, as Mochulsky commented, Prince Mishkin "convinces unseemly and evil people that they are beautiful and good, persuades the unfortunate that they are happy, looks at the world lying in evil and sees only the image of pure beauty." Far more than the noble but deluded Don Quixote, Mishkin is a fictional embodiment of "the true light that enlightens every man [that] was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world knew him not."

Mishkin's most impressive quality is his Christ-like kenoticism. When the Prince announces to General Yepanchin early in the narrative, "I'm in need of good, kind people," the reader should begin to wonder whether Mishkin is sounding his death knell in advance. It becomes obvious that not only are those simple needs of the Prince not met, but Mishkin continually diverts all of his own energies to meeting the needs of everyone around him, ranging from the troubled Natasha to the presumptuous, hostile Burdovsky.

The climactic bedroom scene, toward which the Prince appears almost predestined, is indeed his crucifixion and descent into hell. When at last people come in, they find the murderer in a raging fever with Mishkin sitting motionless beside him. Every time the sick man bursts out screaming or begins to ramble, Mishkin passes a soothing hand gently over his hair and cheeks, but he no longer understands the questions he is asked or recognize anyone. He is truly become the idiot of the book's title - a "suffering servant" or "co-sufferer" who, like the patristic teachers of vicarious atonement such as St. Mark the Ascetic and St. Symeon the New Theologian, so identifies with those others that their evil is redeemed by the overwhelming, empathetic sorrow that engulfs the Prince and drains him of his last moments of consciousness, doing so graciously and freely in imitation of Christ's voluntary kenotic humiliation for the world.

Martin Luther King, Jr. often said that all innocent suffering is redemptive. His insight applies perforce to the Prince as a Christ-figure.

Having achieved all that he could in this paradoxical, antinomian world of freely-chosen spiritual death, the Prince, through his mental death, demonstrates the full measure of his pacifist self-sacrifice for and devotion to those in whom he rejoiced in spite of themselves. In this respect, his "departure" to a presumably happier state is one of triumph, not defeat: terror is transfigured finally into pure transcendence as the morning light breaks over the Light that dwelled in the Prince. Any serious doubt as to the ultimate victory of the Prince may be dispelled by the enriched and transformed lives of those who knew him.

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