**A summary of *The Grand Inquisitor***

excerpted from Anne Fremantle's Introduction to *The Brothers Karmazov*

(the full introduction is available at Freemantle; additional material is at Brothers K.)

You are encouraged to read the full text of "The Grand Inquisitor" even though you may find the language somewhat antiquated. It is available at the course reading schedule.

*[Note: There are three brothers and a half-brother in Dostoevesky's The Brothers Karamazov. This famous chapter contests Alyosha (or Alexei) the youngest, a Russian Orthodox novice just entering the monastery, and Ivan (or Vanya) "the dialectian," more subtle and pragmatic, and in this context representing the un-believer.]*

---

It is Ivan who is the most completely articulated of all the characters, and the one in whom Dostoevsky has expressed himself most fully; it is Ivan who tells Alyosha the story of *The Grand Inquisitor*. This, he explains, is a "fantasy," a "poem," although unwritten and in prose.

Ivan has been describing to Alyosha, in sadistic detail, the sufferings of innocent children: the little girl of seven whom her father enjoys beating; the girl of five dirtied by both her parents; the boy of eight torn to pieces by the dogs of a general who deliberately sets them on the child. The agony of these children proves to Ivan's "Euclidian" mind the utter absurdity of the divinely created order of things, according to which "eternal harmony" will be established only after suffering has been inflicted on the defenseless little victims of human brutality. Ivan refuses to accept this "fabric of human destiny, " wants no share in it, and therefore "most respectfully returns Him the ticket." Not even Christ who, as Alyosha points out, has suffered "for all and everything," can make Ivan change his mind. Ivan's answer to Alyosha is *The Grand Inquisitor*.

What is its meaning?

At the first, most obvious level, the story sets the person of Christ against the church founded by him. In particular, the story is an attack upon the Roman Catholic Church-not an attack on "the whole of Rome," as AIyosha points out, but on the Grand Inquisitors in its hierarchy. Be it noted, however, that, in the yes of Ivan the Grand Inquisitor is right, and Christ is wrong; for it is Christ whose unrealistic dreams about freedom block "universal happiness" and perpetuate a social order which a rationalistic, "Euclidian" mind cannot accept. If read within the framework of *The Brothers Karamazov*, *The Grand Inquisitor* is therefore an attack upon the Catholic Church only to those who sympathize with Alyosha, to whom Dostoevsky has given his faith. To those,

however, who sympathize with Ivan, the Grand Inquisitor and his theories ought to be what they once were for Dostoevsky: the great temptation of their lives.

Dostoevsky's own faith derives its strength from the fact that he has himself passed through atheism and come out the other side. Commenting on the critics of *The Brothers Karamazov*, he wrote contemptuously, "The dolts have ridiculed my obscurantism and the reactionary character of my faith. These fools could not even conceive so strong a denial of God as the one to which I gave expression... The whole book is an answer to that.... You might search Europe in vain for so powerful an expression of atheism. Thus it is not like a child that I believe in Christ and confess Him. My hosanna has come forth from the crucible of doubt."

Dostoevsky had come to this faith in Siberia. On his way to the labor camp, a lady visiting the convicts gave him a tiny volume, the Gospels, the only book permitted by the prison authorities. From that time on, God was for Dostoevsky "not somewhere, but everywhere"; and as for the painter Cézanne "light was the hero of every picture," so, for Dostoevsky, God was the hero of every novel as well as of every life.

On another level, *The Grand Inquisitor* is a terrifying prophecy of the totalitarian state which threatens to reduce the scope of human happiness to the happiness of "babes," united "in one unanimous and harmonious ant-heap."

The Grand Inquisitor promises man, as Satan promised Christ in the desert, everything in exchange for the one thing that makes man, man: freedom, this terrible, absolute freedom of man's will to choose or to reject at any and every moment what his own conscience shows him to be a moral good. Wearied by this continual, uninterrupted, and inescapable act of choice which alone makes possible both the act of "free love" and the anti-social act of injustice, the Grand Inquisitor has set out to establish "universal happiness"-in the name of Christ, as he tells his followers, for the sake of "positive Christianity," as the Nazis proclaimed in their program.

It is in analyzing the three temptations of Christ that Dostoevsky shows himself at his psychological and at his theological best.

The banner of earthly bread, which is the first temptation, the banner which Christ refused to raise, is raised by all modern philosophies. "Feed men, and then ask of them virtue! that's what they'll write on the banner which they will raise against Thee," says the Grand Inquisitor; and so they have from Marx and Mazzini to Hitler, Mussolini and Stalin. But "freedom and bread enough for all are," in the opinion of the Grand Inquisitor, "inconceivable together." As long, therefore, as men are free not to choose

what is best for society, a stable, perfect social order with bread enough for all is impossible.

True, man is hungry not for bread alone. He is capable by nature of searching for an object worthy of worship. But he who gives the bread can easily be mistaken for the "Lord and Giver of Life" (the English word "lord" actually comes from "hlafweard," meaning "he who guards the loaf") and so may easily become *ersatz* for the "Lord" and satisfy the craving for community of worship" still left in the masses.

Christ refused to establish social justice by sacrificing freedom for bread. "Thou didst reject," accuses the Grand Inquisitor, "the one infallible banner which was offered Thee to make all men bow down to Thee alone- the banner of earthly bread; and Thou has rejected it for the sake of freedom and the bread of heaven."

The analysis of the second temptation-Christ refused to throw himself down from the pinnacle of the temple in order to prove that he was the Son of God- leads Dostoevsky into the problem of the "free conscience."

Man, says the Grand Inquisitor, desires "not only to live, but to have something to live for." However, this "stable object" of an other-directed life must, according to Christ's teaching, be chosen by man's free conscience, aware of good and evil and always able to choose between them. Such a choice causes "spiritual agony"; and therefore, "man prefers peace, and even death, to freedom of choice in the knowledge of good and evil." It would be better, maintains the Grand Inquisitor, better for the good of the individual and for the good of society, for man to barter his freedom of choice for "miracle, mystery, and authority."

In emphasizing that the second temptation offered Christ by the devil was to do magic, to work miracles, to offer man a search for the miraculous instead of for the holy, Dostoevsky laid his finger on one of the perennial dangers to which Christians are always subject. Dostoevsky's Grand Inquisitor sees that once man thinks himself capable of lifting himself to God, of arriving, by techniques of asceticism or prayer, at having power over God Himself, he is "in the bag" and lost. So the Grand Inquisitor suggests to Christ that man can take what he must wait to be given; and this is antichrist indeed, for Christ is God become man, never man jacked up by himself to God: God lifts man up in history, and for Dostoevsky history is just that, the lifting up by Christ on the cross of the whole man.

The third temptation, which resulted in Christ's refusal to accept from Satan the kingdom of the world, is used by Dostoevsky to analyze man's "craving for universal unity," "the third and last anguish of men." Christ, by refusing to take "the sword of

Caesar" from the hand of Satan, preferred centuries of "the confusion of free thought" to a stable society. It is time, therefore, that men like the Grand Inquisitor begin to "plan the universal happiness of man."

And this third temptation, the will to unity, the conviction that what is believed by many, or by all, is true, is a terrifying prefiguration of modern democracy. "Thou hast only Thine elect," taunts the Grand Inquisitor, "while we give rest to all." "We promise that only when they renounce their freedom and submit to us will they be free," says the Grand Inquisitor, and defies Christ to contradict him. And when the end shall come, and Christ will call the Grand Inquisitor to account, the latter warns Him he will be not a whit abashed. "I will stand up and point out to Thee the thousand millions of happy children who have known no sin." But on earth, since the Fall, man cannot safely be unaware of what he does; the only safely ignorant people are children. The artificially protracted childishness, by which the masses have no idea that in abandoning their freedom of choice they are abandoning their capacity to know or choose good from evil, is total guilt. True that those who abandon their freedom of choice to the Grand Inquisitor can no longer sin, since the Grand Inquisitor sins for them, but they have, in giving up their freedom, placed themselves outside of God's providence. The Gestapo officers who only obeyed orders are the perfect examples of how truly Dostoevsky prophesied. The sinner so long as he knows he sins is in his place in creation; the person who has "most respectfully returned Him the ticket" is marginal, powerless thereafter to turn toward God or away from Him. To know we sin is the first step in faith and toward forgiveness.

Dostoevsky's Christ, that is, the Christ who rejected the devil's offer, and who is the prisoner of the Grand Inquisitor, does not show himself as the Incarnate Word, who assumed in His flesh and blood the eternal travail of the Father, and answered Pilate's "Art Thou a King?" with the proud "Thou sayest it" of the Gospel. Dostoevsky's Christ remains silent, and His only answer is to kiss the Grand Inquisitor on the lips.

What is the meaning of this kiss?

The only man who kissed Christ in the Gospels was Judas. Is Christ's kiss in Ivan's story analogous? Reminiscent? Is it approval?

Or is it the Divine pardon? "For if our heart condemn us, God is greater than our heart and knoweth all things," St. John wrote (I John iii, 20). Dostoevsky does not tell; he leaves us an enigma, and since he leaves us with a question let us agree that "we know all the answers; it is the questions that we do not know."