DOSTOEVSKY

with the hope that even in such an abstract theme I have not betrayed realism.

It simply doesn't matter whether God exists or not. Ivan accepts God's existence as you would accept the hypothesis of the universe supported by fishes. His acceptance implies its irrelevance, for the existence of God is an unreal question for the Euclidian mind. What is real, and what does matter is the world we live in, and that world is unacceptable because it is racked with senseless suffering. Ivan does not want rational justification, or Christian forgiveness. He wants justice, not justice at the last clanging of the world's gates, but justice here and now; such justice is the condition he poses for accepting God's world. But whose justice? Surely not the world's, for it is the world's justice that has condemned the birching of the eight-year-old, the tragedy of Richard's life, the terrors of the five-year-old in the privy; it is the world that has punished the General by taking away the administration of his estates from him.

Whose justice? The answer can only be—Ivan's justice. And the dream of that justice is the dream of a world re-made in the image of him. This dream is the legend of the Grand Inquisitor.

The Grand Inquisitor

D. H. Lawrence first read “The Legend of the Grand Inquisitor” in 1913 at John Middleton Murry's recommendation. “The whole clue to Dostoevsky is in that Grand Inquisitor story,” said John Middleton Murry. After finishing the piece, Lawrence asked Murry, “Why? It seems to me just rubbish.” He found it to be an irritating “cynical-satanical” pose. But later he found it to be more true and more depressing with every reading [see his “The Grand Inquisitor” in his Selected Literary Criticism, ed. Anthony Beal, 1955]. True and depressing because the Grand Inquisitor was right and Christ was wrong. His later interpretation is representative of a large body of critical opinion that sees the Grand Inquisitor as the victor of the duel with Christ:

Since then I have read The Brothers Karamazov twice, and each time found it more depressing because, alas, more drearily true to life. At first it had been lurid romance. Now, I read “The Grand Inquisitor” once more and my heart sinks right through my shoes. I still see a trifle of cynical-satanical showing off, but under that I hear the final unanswerable criticism of Christ. And it is a deadly-devastating summing up, because borne out by long experience of humanity. It is reality versus illusion, and the illusion was Jesus, while time itself retorts with reality.

And:

And we cannot doubt that the Inquisitor speaks Dostoevsky's own final opinion about Jesus. The opinion is, badly, this: Jesus, you are inadequate, men must correct you. And Jesus in the end gives the kiss of acquiescence to the Inquisitor, as Alyosha does to Ivan.

Lawrence takes his stand with the Grand Inquisitor and, thus, with the spirit of darkness and destruction. He takes his stand reluctantly (note the “more drearily true”), for he would like man different. He is perceptive enough to recognize that in taking his stand with the Grand Inquisitor, he accepts man as weak, slavish, and self-deceptive; that he gives up immortality, true freedom, and salvation. But he takes his stand because these are the facts and the rest is illusion. Even more, Lawrence tries, as those who have chosen the truth of the Grand Inquisitor have characteristically tried to do, to bring Dostoevsky over to his side.

We know that Lawrence's interpretation is not what Dostoevsky intended, at least consciously, but it is interesting that the truth of the Grand Inquisitor should have been chosen—and attributed to Dostoevsky—by so many distinguished critics and by critics of different philosophical background and culture. Leo Shostov's whole book Dostoevsky / Nietzsche is dedicated to proving that Dostoevsky was really on the side of his godless heroes, and Rozanov is similarly convinced that Dostoevsky was on the side of the Grand Inquisitor. In the Legend of the Grand Inquisitor Rozanov says:

When Dostoevsky died, he did not carry the secret of his soul to the grave with him. Before his death, he left us, as if by some instinct revealing his soul, an astonishing scene by which we can see that the words of Alyosha to Ivan “And you are with him” can be definitely applied to the author himself, who so clearly is on his side.

The revolt of so many distinguished readers against Dostoevsky's conscious intention is, whatever else, a testimony to the force and persuasiveness with which Dostoevsky was able to state the other case.

Before the Grand Inquisitor is through talking, the Christ of all the people is the Christ of the chosen few; the Christ who had come to suffer for man has come only to make him suffer; and the Christ of compassion and love is the Christ of indifference and unconcern. The word “revolt” for the Grand Inquisitor's stand is not strong enough; Guardini's "aggression" is better, but it is even more than that. It is despoilment, for what Christ had stood for, now the Grand Inquisitor stands for. It is not Christ who loves all the people, who suffers for them and sacrifices not only his life but perhaps his eternal life for them. It is the Grand Inquisitor. This reversal is clearly implied in the final text, and in the notebooks to The Brothers Karamazov Dostoevsky made the contrast explicit. There the Grand Inquisitor tells Christ: “We are more humane than thou. We love the earth.” And, "I love humanity more than thee.” The Grand Inquisitor does not merely oppose his truth to Christ's truth, but he is the truth Christ had failed to erect. He is light and truth; Christ is darkness and falsehood. In the notebooks, the Grand Inquisitor goes so far as to identify Christ with the forces of hell and evil: “I have only this to say to you: you have been disgorge from hell; you are a heretic.”

The Grand Inquisitor's argument is not based on idle rhetoric or cheap tricks. Nor is it contradictory as some have claimed. Logic is on his side, not Christ's, although the truth of each is finally subject to more than logic. Lawrence, Shostov, Guardini, Rozanov, and many other distinguished critics have taken the side of the Grand Inquisi-
tor against Christ because his argument is powerful and
deed unanswerable. And they do this despite the fact
that Dostoevsky made the case he wanted to make for
Christ. There is no weakness in Christ's argument, and
there is no weakness in the Grand Inquisitor's argument.
Mochul'sky's argument that the Grand Inquisitor is
wrong because he argues from love of mankind, yet por-
trays mankind as weak and slavish is clearly a non sequi-
tur. One can love what is weak and slavish, and perhaps
love more deeply. Those who try to help out Dostoevsky
by showing that the Grand Inquisitor's argument is self-
contradictory do not understand the Grand Inquisitor,
and they do not understand Dostoevsky. Dostoevsky
made the only case he could for Christ, and the truth of
Christ he presents does not demolish the Grand Inquisi-
tor's truth any more than the Grand Inquisitor's truth de-
molishes Christ's truth. We are concerned here with two
ways of understanding man's nature, and they are discon-
tinuous; one cannot stand in refutation by the other be-
cause there are no common assumptions. This will become
clear by seeing and understanding the nature of the Grand
Inquisitor's truth, which is consistent and complete and
deep in its appeal.

Christ had bade men to follow his example, the essence of
which was contained in his rejection of Satan's three tem-
pitations in the wilderness: (1) to turn stones to bread, (2)
to prove his divinity by performing a miracle, (3) to agree
to the worship of earthly power. It is curious, as an aside,
that many important critics have failed to understand
what the three temptations are as Dostoevsky understands
them, even though a single careful reading will make this
clear. For some perverse reason—Margarshack and Rahv
are examples—many critics persist in seizing upon the
words "miracle, mystery, and authority" as the three
temptations, whereas for Dostoevsky these are clearly the
instruments of the second temptation only: man's eternal
desire for proof or certainty before giving his faith. The
eternal instruments of this deceptive proof are miracle,
mystery, and authority. Rahv's understanding [in "The
Legend of the Grand Inquisitor," Partisan Review, May-
June, 1954] is representative: "The three powers of all
which Satan had tempted Him in the wilderness are mira-
acle, mystery, and authority, the sole means of vanquishing
the conscience of men forever and holding it captive for
their own good."

The three temptations are the three great limitations of a
free faith. Christ's example is of a faith freely given, stand-
ing without the support of bread, miracles, or the need of
collective earthly power. Christ had bade men believe in
him with the same faith. But Christ had, according to the
Grand Inquisitor, cruelly misunderstood the nature of man,
for fifteen centuries had proved that man by his very
nature was incapable of what Christ had asked. Man had
always cried—and were crying in Dostoevsky's time—
"feed us and then we will be virtuous," and men had al-
ways asked not for the anxiety and fear of choosing freely
but for the certainty of miracles, mystery, and authority,
and they had always been afraid of being alone, craving
always the sheeplike comfort of worship with everyone
else. Christ had asked men to be alone and unafraid in the
presence of things unseen, supported only by the free
movement of the heart, but men had always chosen mate-
rial comfort, the certainty of proof, and the assurance of
collective worship.

But man's nature was such that Christ's demands were be-
yond his strength, and Christ's demand of a free faith
could only visit upon him pointless sufferings. Fifteen cen-
turies had proved that only a handful of men were strong
enough to follow Christ's example, and that the rest could
never follow it. From this it follows—and the Grand In-
quisitor makes this charge again and again—that Christ
had acted as if he had not loved man, as if he had cared
only for the few strong and free and not for the millions
upon millions who had not been able to bear his terrible
freedom. It also follows that Christ had either misunder-
stood man's nature or understood it and visited needless
sufferings upon man. If the first, then he was not Christ;
if the second, then he had been gratuitously cruel.

If the Grand Inquisitor were simply opposing man's slav-
ery to Christ's freedom, man's sheeplike desire for the
peace and comfort of body and conscience to Christ's dig-
nity of suffering body and conscience; man's weakness to
Christ's strength, then there could be little appeal in his
argument against Christ. Even we of the twentieth century
have not yet grown callous enough to prefer weakness to
strength and slavery to freedom. No, the appeal of the
Grand Inquisitor lies deeper, and those like Lawrence and
Shestov, who have cast their lots with the Grand Inquisi-
tor, have sensed this appeal. They too would prefer the
strength and beauty and freedom of Christ, but with the
Grand Inquisitor they have seen that it is not a question of
what man would like to be but what he is and can be.
For them, all of history has shown man to be as the Grand
Inquisitor has painted him, not as Christ had demanded
him to be.

It is the failure to see the fundamental, sincere, and belie-
vable appeal of the Grand Inquisitor's argument—as I am
convinced Dostoevsky saw it—that has led his supporters
to argue in support of Christ on false premises. It is useless
to argue on the grounds of which is the more attractive
picture of man and to grant on that basis the truth to
Christ. The Grand Inquisitor would be the first to grant
that Christ's view of man is more attractive than his own,
but he would correctly maintain that this does not estab-
lish the truth of Christ one bit. Mochul'sky, for instance,
argues correctly that without Christ there is no essential
manhood, humanity, or love. But he fails to see that this
does not prove that there are such things as essential
manhood, humanity, and love. The Grand Inquisitor is not
wrong because he sees man as weak and slavish, or be-
cause he is contemptuous of man. Nor does he contradict
himself when he speaks of working for man's happiness,
while seeing him as weak and slavish. He loves man for
what he is, not for what he is not, and he accepts the mel-
ancholy fact of man's weakness because it is a fact. The
Grand Inquisitor is wrong only if his view of human na-
ture is wrong, and neither logic nor the facts of history are
against him. The testimony of things seen are overwhelm-
ingly on his side. But Christ never based his truth on the
testimony of things seen, but on the testimony of things
unseen. The demand for proof is the second temptation,
and what he offers men is the freedom and struggle to reject the demand for proof. What he offers them is the same as what he demands of them. He asks them to rise above their natures, to make over their natures in his image, and they can do that only as he had done it: in loneliness, terror, and anxiety. Men crave what he asks them to give up: the firm foundations of conduct that will assure them that they are acting rightly; the assurance that they are right beforehand, so that they may be relieved of the terrors and anxiety of a free conscience, and so that they may have the comfort of knowing that others and, best of all, all others are doing the same thing. But Christ asks something different: though all men be against you, though history prove it impossible, choose what the heart whispers as possible, even though this choice will most certainly be in loneliness, anxiety, and despair, with no other guide than Christ. This choice—against logic, and history and the examples of others—is Christ's freedom. Why is it freedom? Because for Dostoevsky freedom is what is determined by nothing else. A free choice based on the condition of earthly comfort, on the assurance beforehand from miracle, mystery, and authority, or on the condition that your neighbor believes as you do, is not a free choice. A free faith for Dostoevsky is a faith without conditions; it is a faith that knows only the free movement of the heart.

Dostoevsky had never before offered himself and his readers a choice so stark, because he had never granted so much to his antagonists before. He had not granted so much in Notes from the Underground, where the bulls had been portrayed as callous, stupid, and slavishly attracted to the laws of nature; nor in Crime and Punishment, where he had been eager to prove Christ right and Raskolnikov wrong; and he had not granted so much in The Possessed, where the antagonist of freedom, the socialists, are cruelly crushed by satire, and the antagonists of Christ, Stavrogin and Kirillov, are led down the path to self-destruction. The Grand Inquisitor's monologue is an argument against Christ, and it is an argument against almost everything Dostoevsky had written up to this point. For the Grand Inquisitor grants Dostoevsky every premise he had worked so hard to establish, only to show that the nature of man Dostoevsky had defined supports not Christ but the imitation of Christ. Man is a rebel, as Dostoevsky had shown in Notes from the Underground, but he will tire of his rebellion; he hungers for immortality, but he will accept and, indeed, can endure only the pretense of immortality; he hungers for freedom, but can suffer only the illusion of freedom; he will find neither peace nor equality in socialism, but he will accept socialism because it will give him a false peace and equality.

This is Dostoevsky's final statement against God. It is Dostoevsky confronting himself with the candor and courage to place everything he had built up into the balances again. It is his final confrontation with the testimony of things seen and with man's desolating weakness and infinite capacity for self-deception. Only the words he wrote from prison to a friend remain at the end to sustain him, as they had all his life, and to sustain his world: "If anyone proved to me that Christ was outside the truth, and it really was so that the truth was outside Christ, then I should prefer to remain with Christ than with truth."

Who is the Grand Inquisitor? He is, of course, first and foremost, Ivan. He is Ivan's hypothetical dream; he is Ivan remaking the world. In his conversation with Alyosha before narrating the poem, he says—as does the Grand Inquisitor—"The kind of love Christ had for people is a miracle that is not possible on earth." When Ivan finishes his catalogue of tales of suffering, he poses for Alyosha precisely the question of remaking God's world without suffering. And this is what the Grand Inquisitor does. Ivan, like the Grand Inquisitor, bases his revolt on the unjustified suffering in the world, a case made stronger by restricting his example to the suffering of children. Like the Grand Inquisitor, he bases his revolt on the evidence of his Euclidian mind, that is, on the testimony of things seen. Both Ivan and the Grand Inquisitor are identified with Satan in the notebooks, and both sum up and express in its most complete form the various antagonists of God that had appeared in Dostoevsky's novels.

Is there an answer to Ivan and the Grand Inquisitor in The Brothers Karamazov? Formally, the answer is given in the chapters on the Elder Zossima, although these chapters have often been found wanting. But it is wrong to look only at these chapters for the answer. The full answer is in the words of the Elder Zossima, the character of Alyosha, in Dmitry's regeneration, in the rallying of the boys about Alyosha's truth, and, most powerfully of all, in the consequences of the Grand Inquisitor's views on Ivan.

"The Legend of the Grand Inquisitor" is Ivan's dream of a world built on enlightened, virtuous self-interest; but Smerdyakov is the real embodiment of the world built on self-interest. The Grand Inquisitor is what Ivan would like; Smerdyakov is what he is forced to confront. Ivan is both the Grand Inquisitor and Smerdyakov. Ivan makes the poem of the Grand Inquisitor, and he makes Smerdyakov, for Smerdyakov's views are formed largely by the long conversations he has with Ivan.

As the dream of the hard, necessary, and tragic conflict against an unjust Christ fades and Ivan turns to go home, reality presses upon him. He is overwhelmed, for some unknown reason, by a vague, nasty feeling, the cause of which he cannot drive away or make clear. It becomes clear when he sees Smerdyakov languidly cooling himself on a bench outside the Karamazov property. At first sight, Ivan understands "that the lackey Smerdyakov lay in his soul and it was precisely he whom his soul could not bear." When he first addresses Smerdyakov, he wants to say: "Get away, miserable idiot. What have I to do with you? But to his astonishment, he asks: "Is my father still asleep, or has he waked?" From the first question, Dostoevsky makes clear what the relations between Ivan and Smerdyakov are and what they will be. It is Ivan who speaks first and he who waits for Smerdyakov's answers; it is Ivan who becomes irritated, excited, perturbed; Smerdyakov is calm and assured. It is Ivan who is deferential; Smerdyakov is almost contemptuous. Ivan is alternately attracted and repelled: he hates the smirking, contemptible lackey, and yet he cannot bear himself away from him. He cannot, because Smerdyakov lies in his soul; it was Ivan who taught Smerdyakov how to see the world, and