

## Poet and Prophet: Dostoevsky for Our Time

There is no other author who has influenced European thinking as Dostoevsky did: Friedrich Nietzsche and Karl Barth, Sigmund Freud and Alfred Adler, Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus among many others were deeply influenced by him. Dostoevsky (1821-1881) is still very modern. He asks all the important questions: The possibility of human freedom, of knowledge, of good and evil, the character of beauty, the possibility of faith. He writes about man in his need who is seeking himself and does not know who he is.

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### Introduction:

As a student I read with enthusiasm the works of the French existentialist and Nobel prize winner Albert Camus. His questions about life were radical and uncompromising. Camus was an admirer of Dostoevsky and dramatized some of his novels. In the introduction of *The Possessed* he wrote in 1959 (two years before he died), "Now everybody knows that Dostoevsky and not Karl Marx is the prophet of the 20<sup>th</sup> century." When I read this I closed the books of Camus, didn't open the works of Karl Marx and started reading Dostoevsky.

### I. Poet and Prophet – Dostoevsky's Influence on European Thinking

There is no other author who has influenced European thinking as Dostoevsky did.

A few examples:

- a) The French existentialists *Jean-Paul Sartre* and *Albert Camus*
- b) The Austrian psychotherapists *Sigmund Freud* and *Alfred Adler*
- c) The Swiss theologians *Karl Barth* and *Eduard Thurneysen*
- d) The German novelists *Hermann Hesse* and *Thomas Mann* and *Friedrich Nietzsche*

## II. A Life like a Novel – Short Biographical Notes

In the year 1821 Dostoevsky was born in Moscow. In 1845 he published his first novel *Poor Folk*. This title became programmatic for his writing. In his novels poor people play an important part and *The Insulted and Injured*.

In 1848 he became part of a group of government officials, students, writers, officers, who were dissatisfied with the political and social situation in Russia and discussed a new society for their land. But the Tsar had placed a spy in this group. Therefore they were arrested in April 1849 and eight months later twenty-two of them were sentenced to death in a public place in St. Petersburg. Dostoevsky stood in the second row. But at the very last moment the sentences were changed to imprisonment in the ‘gulag’ in Siberia. Dostoevsky had to stay for four years in the ‘gulag’ and some more years as a simple soldier in Siberia.

He returned to St. Petersburg in 1859. After 1866 he wrote his most famous novels: *Crime and Punishment*, *The Idiot*, *The Possessed*, *The Brothers Karamazov*. He died in 1881.

## III. Changes in Siberia – Dostoevsky and the New Testament

The years 1849 to 1854 brought many changes in the life of Dostoevsky – not only external but above all internal:

- a) The experience of being sentenced to death and receiving back his life as a gift
- b) Living in the ‘gulag’ for four years side by side with murderers and other cruel people
- c) Contact with the New Testament

Before he entered the ‘gulag’ a New Testament was given to him. This was the only book which was permitted in the ‘gulag’. Dostoevsky read it several times. In the last period of his writing (1866 – 1880) the influence of the New Testament can be seen in all his great novels.

The New Testament plays a prominent role including the questions of *God and immortality*, *Jesus and his resurrection*. Two of his great novels have a motto out of the New Testament.

In some novels long passages of the Gospel are quoted and discussed. Very famous is the quotation of *the resurrection of Lazarus* (John 11) in *Crime and Punishment*. This story is mentioned three times in the novel and Sonja is reading the passage to the murderer Raskolnikov.

Another passage is very famous too: The *Grand Inquisitor* in the novel *The Brothers Karamazov*: The story of Jesus' temptation told by the tempter. According to *Solshenizyn* Dostoevsky did foresee (as the only man in the 19<sup>th</sup> century) the totalitarian systems of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

#### **IV. The Mystery of Human Being – the Actuality of Dostoevsky for Our Time.**

In Germany a famous translator has translated in the past few years the great novels of Dostoevsky anew. She states: “Dostoevsky is very modern. He asks all the important questions: The possibility of human freedom, of knowledge, of good and evil, the character of beauty, the possibility of faith. He writes about man in his need who is seeking himself and does not know who he is. Therefore Dostoevsky stays very modern.”

- a) *Faith*: How can modern man believe in God in a world with so much suffering?
  
- b) *Freedom*: Man is a rebel. He is searching for freedom. But then he is seeking for someone to whom he can give his freedom.
  
- c) *Good and Evil*: If there is no god, everything is permitted

#### **Further Reading**

F.M. Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment, The Devils, The Brothers Karamazov*

Joseph Frank, *Dostoevsky – A Writer in His Time*, 2009

Rowan Williamson, *Dostoevsky – Language, Faith and Fiction*, 2009