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**THE THEOLOGICAL SENSE OF BEAUTY IN DOSTOEVSKY'S WORK**

- novels *The Idiot*, *The Demons* and *Karamazov brothers* -

(PhD Thesis)

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### BIBLIOGRAPHY

Editions of the Holy Scriptures

Liturgical books

Sources, patristic, philological, philosophical and literary

Books

Studies and articles

Online sources

Keywords: beauty, apocatastasis, chenosis, Dostoevsky

**Abstract.** In the thesis I alternated the descriptive, analytical and exegetical methods, the latter specific to theology. This alternation facilitated an exposition of the main ideas related to the concept of beauty, then through the exegetical method we managed to debate the meanings of beauty, apocatastasis and chenosis in Scripture, the works of the Cappadocian fathers, phillochs, ancient philosophers and in the work of Dostoevsky.

I consider that these methods have helped me unravel the enigma of beauty as much as my mind and heart are allowed. God reveals himself according to the theology of the liturgical texts in the "Law, in the Shadow and in the Scripture", and the Apostle Paul tells us that in "mirror and divination", although the meaningful alternative to the idea of divination can be the concept of enigma. So beauty is for Dostoevsky an enigma, and in enigma it is given to man to meet God. After the Resurrection, Christ reveals himself in different ways to the disciples, each according to his ability to perceive possibilities<sup>1</sup>. I think that in this consists the key of understanding the beauty, for each one according to his or her skills.

Before summarizing the content of the thesis, I consider important to draw the reader's attention to another aspect. As Viktor Shklovski noted - "the world has not yet managed to read Dostoevsky, just as it has not managed to definitively unravel the conflicts of his novels. And today it is unclear, or rather it is not clear enough, that Dostoevsky penetrated to the deepest depths of the cruelty of the world and condemned it even through the subject disciple of the abbot Zosima, through Alyosha Karamazov"<sup>2</sup> - and Troyat "Dostoevsky is great for that it did not achieve his purpose."<sup>3</sup> Here I mention that I don't know if I have reached the intended goal, not because I want it to be big, but because of the painful situation in the next sentence. Just when you think you've mapped the meaning of beauty, you realize you have to start all over again, until "the day that never ends."<sup>4</sup>

The thesis is segmented in four parts. The first one contains a bio-bibliographic overview of Dostoevsky. I have chosen this method of presenting his life and his writings together because they are incomprehensible presented separately. Although he conceives and thinks some ideas

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<sup>1</sup> John BEHR, *A devenit om. Meditații de antropologie creștină în cuvânt și imagine*, trad. Dragoș Dâscă, ed. Doxologia, Iași, 2017, p. 10

<sup>2</sup> Viktor ŞKLOVSKI, Dostoevski. O ipoteză, *Secolul 20 (Dostoevski)*, p. 38.

<sup>3</sup> Henri TROYAT, *Dostoevski*, trad. Marina Vazaca, ed. Polirom, Iași, 2022, p. 484

<sup>4</sup> LITURGHIER, EIMBOR, București, 2012, p. 141.

and characters of the novels from time, their evolution often changes when Dostoevsky, for example, contemplates a painting, reads a news that marks the course of the world or is simply marked by the disappearance or appearance of some people from his life. I have divided this first part into two subdivisions, the first ends when he is pardoned from the death penalty and sentenced to life in Siberia, and the second subchapter begins with the volume *Souvenirs from the Death House*, from where I consider that we already have a change of the Dostoevsky paradigm.

In the second part I tried to place Dostoevsky corpus in the cultural and theological context of the time. In the first sub-chapter of this part I showed the fact that in his great novels one can feel the thrill of changing the intentionality of the spirit towards nothingness. The appearance of the novel *Possessions* must be seen in the wider context of European culture. Now works like *The Flowers of Evil* and *Cain* are being written, there was already *Paradise Lost*. Also in the pages of this subchapter I tried to put Dostoevsky in dialogue with the German spirit that pulsates in Nietzsche, Kant reaches its peak in Hegel. If he influenced the first, the other two influence him. Hegel's reception is on his own account and on the Bielinsky branch, and he receives Kant more correctly than Tolstoy but surpasses him in relation to religion. The second subchapter of the part in question is dedicated to the two sides of the Russian spirit, specifically the assumption of the abyss and the apocatastasis are mentioned, then the whole part focuses on the conceptual filling of the valley. Concretely, in the next subchapter I analyze the Slavophile current as Dostoevsky seems to have thought of it, a little more complex than it is described in Western books, an idea supported in the novel *Demonii*. In other words, I analyzed theologically and philosophically the concepts of One and Multiple and their relevance for theology. The next subchapter, *Dostoevsky and the theology of Hesychasm* has two subdivisions. The first one analyzes from a dogmatic and philosophical point of view the theme of hesychasm, the next subdivision probes to what extent Dostoevsky read and was marked by hesychasm, by the time I got here, of course, I have shown how hesychasm permeates Russia, and the sub-chapter ends with the emphasis on the situation of philological theology today, a situation of embracing (Dostoevsky's solution) and one of rejection on the grounds of subjectivity and pietism (the solution of the controversial Yannaras). Abyss and kenosis continue part two. Here the ideas of kenosis, with its interesting variations in Russian theology (its touches being written by Filaret and the completion of the painting belonging to Sergiu Bilgakov) and the idea of Abyss, were

analyzed here with texts from novels. The second part ends with a few pages dedicated to apocatastasis, a theological look, and then I argued with texts the idea that apocatastasis cannot be sustained in a Dostoevsky way, but it can be hoped for in a Dostoevsky way.

The third part of the thesis is devoted to the contemplation of beauty. The first subchapter is an analysis of beauty as the self-forgetfulness of Light, analyzing the relationship of theology and philosophy to the divine beauty poured out over the world. These considerations can be characterized as humble marginalia to the Dionysian corpus. The conversion of the view - the next chapter is a theology of creation starting from the theology of Saint Maximus the Confessor, passing through the theology of the Middle Ages, arriving at the neo-optrist theology and settling in the theology of Hart, of radical orthodoxy. The theme of the image of God in man is discussed in the sub-chapter Beauty of the One, repetition with variation, here using the concept of philosophy, the part contains the whole. The theme of epectase is analyzed in relation to beauty, this in the penultimate point of the third part, the part ending with the relationship between the thought of Saint Gregory Palamas and the thought of Saint Dionysius.

The fourth part consists in an analysis of the salvific role of beauty, or more specifically a verification of the veracity of Dostoevsky's statement that beauty will save the world. As a general idea treated throughout the chapter, I must say this: beauty comes from heaven, assumes the abyss, and returns to heaven. This is the image of beauty found in the three great novels: *The Idiot*, *The Demons* and *The Brothers Karamazov*. So, the first three subchapters are dedicated to the most aesthetic Romanian<sup>5</sup>, *The Idiot*. Analyzing the personality of Prince Mishkin, with his lights and shadows, I then dedicated a sub-chapter to the idea of beauty that assumes the abyss in the novel *Demons*, although the idea is also found in *The Idiot*, in the personality of Nastasia Filipovna, who, as Stamullis states, is the image of desecrated beauty. But let's go back, in *Demons* the light of Christ "descends to the lowest parts of the earth" and returning offers the saving solution, only by standing at Christ's feet will we be saved. The fourth part ends by analyzing the novel *The Brothers Karamazov* in the light of beauty. The emphasis clearly falls on the abbot Zosima and on his relationship with those around him, especially with Alioşa. On the one hand, we will see the idea of beauty in their spiritualized faces, and on the other hand, beauty also arises from the connection of spiritual paternity. This connection makes it easier for us to

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<sup>5</sup> Pe lângă faptul că romanul analizează unele opere de artă, cele ce l-au impresionat pe Dostoievski din muzeele din Europa, romanul este, după afirmația Aurei Christi, o muncă pentru dezlegarea enigmei frumuseții care salvează lumea. (Aura CHRISTI, *Dostoievski și Nietzsche. Elogiul suferinței*, Editura Academiei Române, 2013, p. 379.)

overcome the ego-drama to participate in the Theodrama, Balthasar's words. I also analyzed from a spiritual point of view Dostoevsky's saying: "the beauty of the Madonna and the beauty of Sodom".

The conclusions of the research can be summarized as it follows:

1. A first conclusion drawn from the pages of the thesis, pages related to Dostoevski's biography, can be made by showing the fact that immediately after returning from Siberia and after the novel *Memories from the House of the Dead*, Dostoevski changes the way he relates to the world and to divinity, and in the literary realm he manages to get out of Gogol's mantle. The pages from the aforementioned novel and those from *Crime and Punishment* seem to elucidate the mystery of this inner conversion. Let's explain it a little differently. At the end of the Gospel according to John, Christ tells Peter that when he grows old others will take him where he does not want. If I am allowed to read the passage symbolically, we have the following situation: every man, probably in the second part of his life, goes through a "spiritual depression" then, overcoming the moment, he is transformed by the Holy Spirit and put to work, the Spirit will coordinate the life of from now on. It is like in the case of Dante, in the middle of his life he goes through a kind of crisis, because of his unordered life, his sins. Calling out to the divinity, he receives the help of Virgil, who - gives him good news, there is only salvation that you will have to descend into hell, face your ego, purify it. Hence the whole story of the *Divine Comedy*. Augustine's case is strikingly similar. It is no different with Dostoevski, after many self-exaltations, after flirting with fashionable political ideas, the death sentence, paradoxically, offered him escape, he also admits it countless times. Then he faces the hell of Siberia, a frozen hell like that described by Dante, and returns a resurrected man, modeled after divine beauty. His heroes are carried through valleys of lamentation to make them understand, or let us understand, that it is not possible to remain in the faith without modeling man after the beauty of God. We are witnessing a conversion of the heart.

2. A second conclusion derived from the thesis refers to the placement in the cultural context and the issue of interpretation keys. Understanding Dostoevsky begins with that conversion of the heart also described in the novel *Crime and Punishment*, great novels contain many autobiographical allusions, but not enough. There is a need to understand



the novels in their setting in the cultural context of the time. Dostoevsky understands and discerns the spirit of the times, the break with Infinity meant an implosion of the spirit that reoriented its intentionality, he feels this and although he does not have the opportunity to follow the architectural movements that were produced in the West, Dostoevsky still has the genius to be caught these movements and, thinking them Russian, that is, to the end, shows through his characters and through his novels the apocalyptic implications of radical nihilism. The "friendship" of Russian and German variations of the spirit also depends on the cultural context. Thus, placed in a dialogue on the important themes of suffering, freedom and evil, Kant and Dostoyevsky seem to complement each other, in the sense that the Russian novelist begins his story where Kant seems to end it. The contact of the Russian novelist with Hegel and his philosophy seems to have taken place while the former was a soldier in Semipalatinsk, where together with the prosecutor of the area, A.E. Vrangeli, they tried a translation from Hegel's philosophy. His philosophy will influence Dostoevsky, and will be used as a springboard to theologially solve the problem of nihilism at the end of the novel *Demonii*. If so far the keys to interpretation have only been tangentially touched upon in some works, the Slavophile optics of reading Dostoevsky's corpus has been talked about, even very pertinently. The nuance brought to Slavophilism in the present thesis is the following. Homyakov proposed the interpretation of the One Multiple only through German philosophy, hence the nickname Hegelian Christians, Dostoevsky seems to have taken the theme on his own and thought it in terms of spirituality. Noica's idea, only with Nicaea does Europe begin. Another key marginalized by Dostoyevsky exegesis is the influence of the Philokalia and Hesychast spirituality. His novels are influenced by hesychasm, and a closer understanding of his work requires familiarity with hesychastic practice and theology. This fact is suggested by the author himself at the beginning of the novel *The Brothers Karamazov* where he lays out many details about the institution of abbotship. A literary device very often used by novelists is to reveal the structures of meaning in the universe of his novel in order to draw our world into that world. References to hesychasm are sprinkled throughout the other novels as well. At the same time, kenotic love is a major key to interpretation. Kenoza is the attribute by which we recognize God in Dostoevsky's work. Theologially speaking, I have shown that the

mentioned novels are tributes to the kenotic theology preached by Metropolitan Filaret. Regarding Dostoevsky, I believe that we would miss a good understanding of his novels if we overlooked the idea of apocatastasis. The conclusion of the above lines is contrary, by arguments, to the theses that support the apocatastasis with Dostoevsky texts. In Dostoevski, apocatastasis is not supported, it is hoped for all sinful people, but it is denied to the metaphysically ill. Ivan, Stavroghin and Kirillov do not receive absolution because they exist by themselves, they claim a salvo of their own.

3. Owing to the theology of Saint Dionysius, the Cappadocians, Saint Maximus the Confessor and Saint Gregory Palamas, I was able to highlight the beauty of the entire creation, starting from the Beauty of God in the logic of participation. Likewise, the way in which beauty is offered to the world is perceived by man as an invitation to make a journey from the body to the spirit, to realize the shift of the gaze from the created world to the divinity, to not want the map of the earth to map the map of the sky, but vice versa; it is interesting that Palamas' theology brings a Christological correction to Dionysius, uses his conceptual apparatus and their "systems" of thought meet precisely in the theme of beauty.

4. I chose the novel *The Idiot* as the starting point for the search for the meaning of beauty in Dostoevsky because there the theme is formulated with subject and predicate: Beauty will save the world. In the complexity of the novel and the character of Mişkin, we noticed two important details: when the author introduces him into the world of the novel, he draws our attention to the fact that he comes from somewhere else, from a different world but not foreign to man, leaving a reference to the Ioannis prologue. Then, when he begins to characterize him, he calls him a noble prince, of old, which means that his full understanding must be sought further back. Following this track, I probed the author's clues and argued that they are linked to the theme of beauty, and thus we have: the aristocracy of Mishkin's spirit which is linked to "the ancients" (the author's library had Plato's volumes) where the beautiful has the character of unity, totality and absoluteness; and we have the idea of Christlike beauty. It's just that the denouement of the novel seems to put these things in parentheses. How to explain: 1. Mishkin is like a mirror that shows you as you are, but cannot change you (everyone calls him an idiot to defend himself from the truths spoken about them), he is soulful transparency, capable of

deep humility only that all these are given to him THROUGH the disease (not FROM the disease). He fails to save the world, because Dostoevsky, takes the theme of beauty in the company of the Possessed, in other words centers everything in Christ and descends into hell. Once passed there beauty is given in a complex way in the novel The Brothers Karamazov. Here we have the sanctity supported by asceticism and the ideal of the Madonna's beauty. From what was said above, I can concisely formulate the idea of the thesis. The understanding of beauty in Dostoevsky is gradual, we are warned that it is present in the world, it descends into hell where it assimilates and transforms evil, returns among people and lets us understand that the enigma will be fully resolved in the eschaton. The beauty of the Madonna is a foretaste of the eschaton.