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Father Zossima's World View in *The Brothers Karamazov*

In Fyodor Dostoyevsky's most famous novel, *The Brothers Karamazov*, the renowned Father Zossima exhibits a theistic existentialism world view. All people hold some kind of world view, or way of viewing the seen and unseen world. Those who hold a theistic world view and place emphasis on existential characteristics are said to exhibit a theistic existentialism world view. Father Zossima is theistic but also emphasizes existential characteristics, such as having faith derived from subjective experience and not by reason, valuing subjective experience of the joy of life, and subjectively interpreting passages of the Bible which then gives precedence to one's current existence. Thus, Zossima holds a world view of theistic existentialism.

Consciously or not, all people hold a world view. By definition, a world view is a "philosophy of life, way of perceiving the world, God, human nature, death, ethics, and time" (Carlson 195). Sire elaborates as follows:

A worldview is a commitment, a fundamental orientation of the heart, that can be expressed as a story or in a set of presuppositions (assumptions which may be true, partially true or entirely false) which we hold (consciously or subconsciously, consistently or inconsistently) about the basic constitution of reality, and that provides the foundation on which we live and move and have our being. (17)

According to Sire, every world view reflects on seven basic issues: "the nature and character of God or ultimate reality, the nature of the universe, the nature of humanity, the question of what happens to a person at death, the basis of human knowing, the basis of ethics and the meaning of history" (25). An author or a character in a novel, such as Father Zossima, could hold one of many categorized world views or could possibly hold beliefs attributed to various world views.

Theistic existentialism is one of nine major world views cataloged in James Sire's book, *The Universe Next Door*. Sire lists presuppositions of theism that are normally accepted as a starting point for theistic existentialism:

God is infinite and personal (triune), transcendent and immanent, omniscient, sovereign and good. God created the cosmos ex nihilo to operate with a uniformity of cause and effect in an open system. Human beings are created in the image of God, can know something of God and the cosmos and can act significantly. God can and does communicate with us. We were created good but now are fallen and need to be restored by God through Christ. For human beings death is either the gate to life with God and his people or life forever separated from God. Ethics is transcendent and based on God's character. (127)

One tenet of faith that differs between theists and existential theists is their view of history, especially as recorded in the Bible. Theists believe history is meaningful and God is guiding it toward a specific end, whereas theistic existentialists "distrust the accuracy of recorded history" and do not see its facts as being important but emphasize instead "its religious implication or meaning" and "its examples of the good life and its timeless truths of morality" (135-36). While "abandoning historical facticity as religiously important" could lead one to doubt and lose faith,

this simply leads a theistic existentialist into a “leap of faith” based on subjective experience instead of objective facts (139). Thus, belief in God’s existence and in Christianity is rooted in a person subjectively looking inward and around and making a radical leap of faith in the midst of “more darkness than light,” for God’s revelation is ambiguous and thus reason cannot be relied upon according to a theistic existentialist (129). Sire also notes about this world view, “Knowledge is subjectivity; the whole truth is often paradoxical”. Also, “theistic existentialists emphasize the personal as of primary value”—a living relationship with God and Christ as opposed to a dead orthodoxy of mere beliefs and rules to follow (131). This faith emphasizes “committing oneself to a person”—Jesus Christ—by seeking to please him (131). In summary, theistic existentialism “took a subjectivist turn [from theism], lifted religion from history and focused its attention on inner meaning” (139).

Father Zossima exhibits a theistic existentialism world view, as one of Dostoyevsky’s main characters. While the novel contains an elaborate murder mystery involving the three Karamazov brothers, one of which is falsely accused of murdering their father Fyodor, the book is “also a philosophical and theological probe into Christianity, theistic existentialism, and atheistic existentialism” (Carlson 105). Within a century after writing *The Brothers Karamazov*, Dostoyevsky was “labeled a theistic [existentialist] because of the emphasis he placed on certain aspects of Christianity as well as some ways he deviated from orthodox beliefs” (Carlson 164). Among other things, he emphasized “the joy of Christianity and its relevance to the moment” (164). In the novel, Father Zossima is an elder monk within the monastery who is close to death and is considered by most to be a saint. Serving within the Russian Orthodox Church, Father Zossima’s base views are in line with that of theism, but he is no ordinary monk and he does take some liberty to deviate and emphasize particular aspects of faith in line with existentialism.

Father Zossima believes, like theistic existentialists, that faith has no objective proof but can only be confirmed by a subjective experience. Madame Hohlakov asks Father Zossima how she can get back her faith in immortality and be able to prove it (Dostoyevsky 64). Zossima responds that “there’s no proving it, though you can be convinced of it” (64). He further states how to have convincing faith:

By the experience of active love. Strive to love your neighbor actively and constantly. In so far as you advance in love you will grow surer of the reality of God and of the immortality of your soul. If you attain perfect self-forgetfulness in the love of your neighbor, then you will believe without doubt. (64)

Thus, for Zossima, faith is obtained, increased, and confirmed by inward subjective experiences of actively loving, which shows another aspect of theistic existentialism held by Zossima.

Father Zossima emphasizes subjectively experiencing the joy of life and courage, a characteristic of theistic existentialism. When pronouncing a blessing on his beloved disciple Alyosha, Zossima expresses the importance of living life fully, “Life will bring you many misfortunes, but you will find your happiness in them, and will bless life and will make others bless it—which is what matters most” (Dostoyevsky 275). A “rapturous ‘thirst for existence’ is a keynote of existentialism” (Carlson 164). Zossima says that only the elect are given the gift and inward feeling of ecstasy that comes from loving all men (Dostoyevsky 312). Zossima also emphasized to his listeners to sincerely pray, for “there will be new feeling and new meaning in it, which will give you fresh courage . . .” (308). This inner strength “which comes from a subjective experience or awareness is also associated with theistic existentialism” (Carlson 164).

Father Zossima emphasizes subjective experiences and subjective interpretations as are characteristic of theistic existentialism. In his last speech to the Fathers and teachers prior to his

death, Zossima rhetorically asks “What is hell?” Instead of replying with a literal interpretation of the Bible, he responds that “it is the suffering of being unable to love” (Dostoyevsky 312). His response is a subjective interpretation of “eternal punishment” (Carlson 164), and he shuns the “talk of hell fire in the material sense” (Dostoyevsky 313). He sees hell as “spiritual agony”: a “suffering that is not external but within” that longs to actively love but cannot (313). Furthermore, after Zossima’s death, the acetic monk Father Ferapont, who is antagonistic to Zossima and claims to see devils lurking everywhere, derides Zossima saying that he “did not believe in devils” (323). Therefore, though Zossima loves the Bible (283), he evidently does not regard some historical stories as literal such as when the Bible portrays the reality of devils and has Jesus casting them out of people. Emphasizing subjective experience and interpretation, Zossima is in line with theistic existentialism.

In conclusion, the theistic elder monk, Father Zossima, exhibits existential characteristics as he emphasizes a faith based on subjective experience, the joy of life, and a non-literal interpretation of some historical passages in the Bible. Zossima can therefore be classified as having a world view of theistic existentialism.

Works Cited

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