

THE MYSTERY OF MANKIND: DOSTOYEVSKI AND OEPKE NOORDMANS

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Abstract

Oepke Noordmans was a Dutch Theologian (1871-1956) whose Collected Works comprise ten lengthy volumes with only about fifteen references to Dostoyevski (1821-1881). Furthermore, since "humankind" was Dostoyevski's central concern and there is no systematic anthropology in the Works of Noordmans, one would suspect that they have very little in common. This paper, however, shows how the theology of Noordmans finds its counterpart in the anthropology of Dostoyevski where they share one, all-important perspective on humankind: Namely, that one cannot know humankind without God. Both Noordmans and Dostoyevski view humankind in motion and not as an enclosed entity without a relation to God. In the final instance God is the only one who knows the mystery of the double nature of a human person.

Key words: Noordmans, Dostoyevski, Anthropology, Humankind

Introduction

At eighteen, Dostoyevski¹ wrote to his brother Mikhail, "...man is a mystery. This mystery must be solved, and even if you pass your entire life solving it, do not say you have wasted your time. I occupy myself with this mystery, since I want to be a man" (Hamill 1986:2).

Current multi-cultural theories and post-modern contextual sensitivity would probably abhor the idea that any person could say something universally significant about humankind. The question comes to mind whether all the emphasis on cultural sensitivity does indeed make us more human. Is our humanity not exactly that which all of mankind share? Is the post-modern view of mankind not one that effectively dehumanise us?

Berdyayev² points out that, "It has been said that all genius is national, even, nay, the more, when it is most human. This is incontestably true of Dostoyevski"³ (1957:16). In his Pushkin address in *Diary of a Writer*, Dostoyevski himself believes that universality is a particularly Russian characteristic, as it has been exemplified in the person of Pushkin (1949:785). He asserts that the Russian genius, probably better than any other nationality, has the ability to reincarnate in himself the geniuses of other nations (1949:961). Dostoyevski's popularity over a century and throughout many continents has shown that he is most human and quite often too human for our liking.

¹ I will consistently spell his name Dostoyevski, while in quotations and titles of books his name also appears as Dostoyevski, Dostoyevski or Dostoyevsky. See quotation at the end of the article.

² Nikolai Alexandrovich Berdyayev (1874-1948) was a Russian religious and political philosopher who was greatly interested in the work of Dostoyevski.

³ To speak of 'national' in Russia in the time of Dostoyevski would include an innumerable amount of cultural groups and peoples.

Noordmans, a Dutch theologian from the Reformed tradition, approaches humankind from the revelation of God in the Bible. "When we speak about God, we do speak about man. Jesus has indeed come to earth for the salvation of sinners... But we speak about man on occasion, when we speak about God. Otherwise it is better to keep quiet about him. Thus the teaching about man is considered – for example by Calvin – in the discussion on God the Father and again on Jesus and once again on the Holy Spirit. But each time in a different way. The teaching on man does not tear apart the teaching on God, as in Scholasticism, but the trinitarian discussion tears apart the teaching on man"⁴ (1979:241, 2). For Noordmans the mystery of humankind is inextricably linked to the mystery of the trinity. He says about Dostoyevski: "...The greatest authors ... and especially Dostoyevski, know that a human life is not a closed entity but that, according to its nature, it must be comprehended from eternity and from different angles simultaneously. Therefore, that actually only God knows the mystery and the name"⁵ (Noordmans 1981:500,501). The Trinity is in a sense the 'different angles' from which a human person is known 'from eternity'. In Noordmans' work there is therefore, no dogma on humankind and therefore no independent anthropology.

His theology, however, is not alien to human life, because for Noordmans the human person with whom God has a relationship is the human person in the work of Dostoyevski – the real and unfathomable person, who is lost – a human person who is as much a mystery to him/herself as to others and who is prone to self-delusion, self-will, self-annihilation and self-pity in his rebellion against God.

Noordmans, the theologian, speaks about God in relationship with mankind, as portrayed in the novels of Dostoyevski. Dostoyevski, the author, speaks about humankind in relation to God in the theology of Noordmans.⁶

Mankind in Motion

Nicholas Berdyaev has said that one cannot approach Dostoyevski in a static manner, because his work and characters portray living ideas. Any attempt to analyse some part of his work from the outside would result in killing his characters. They have to be considered as an organic whole, as a living creature and this fact obliges one to read Dostoyevski with a "believing soul" (1957:11-15). His subject matter is not parts or aspects of persons, but the very persons themselves.

It has often been said that the reader frequently has the impression that Dostoyevski's characters seem to have a life of their own, often developing in a way that seems to extend beyond the control of the author. In *Diary of a Writer*, Dostoyevski himself comments on his appreciation for the author, Herten, who had the wonderful ability to let his character

⁴ "Wij komen, als wij over God spreken, ook wel over hem [de mens] te spreken. Jezus is immers op aarde gekomen om zondaren zalig te maken... Maar men spreekt dan over de mens *bij gelegenheid*, als men over God spreekt. Anders is het beter over hem te zwijgen. Zo wordt dan de leer van de mens behandeld – bijv. bij Calvin – naar aanleiding van de bespreking van God de Vader en dan weer bij Jezus Christus en nog eens bij de Heilige Geest. Maar telkens weer anders. De leer van de mens rukt de leer van God niet in stukken, zoals in de Scholastiek, maar de trinitarische behandeling doet de leer van de mens in stukken vallen." Noordmans is translated by the author in order to make Noordmans in some way accessible to non-Dutch speaking people.

⁵ "...de grootste schrijvers weten ... vooral Dostojewski, dat een mensenleven niet zo 'n gesloten eenheid is, maar dat het naar zijn wezen van verschillenden kanten tegelijk uit de eeuwigheid begrepen moet worden. Dat God dus het geheim en de naam eigenlijk alleen kent."

⁶ Dostoyevski, having lived before Noordmans does not refer to him, but it is the contention of this article that the compassionate God in Noordmans' theology is the God, to which the persons in the works of Dostoyevski call out.

outsmart him (1949:4). Noordmans in his *Gestalte en Geest*⁷ also poignantly points out how the living characters in the Bible can at times “outsmart” the living God. This is true in his meditation about the Canaanite woman in Matthew 15, who reminds Jesus that the dogs are allowed to eat the bread crumbs falling from the table of the chosen ones (the Jews) (1990:267) and in his meditation on Rizpah (2 Sam 21) who chases away the birds from the bodies of her sons (who have been sacrificed by God) and in doing so changes God’s mind (1990:229). Dostoyevski has allowed his characters to develop in freedom to such an extent that D.H. Lawrence would say that he was false to the truth of his own Grand Inquisitor (Sajkovic 1962:142). Furthermore, it would seem that Ivan and the Inquisitor leaves Alyosha and Jesus speechless in *The Brother’s Karamazov* (Dostoyevski 1958a:308,9).

In a letter to Miskotte, a colleague who wanted to do his doctoral dissertation on the anthropology of Dostoyevski, Noordmans points out the difficulties he faces: “But your difficulties I can well understand. It is a huge complex of concepts on the boundaries. And if it were only on the boundaries! Then you could only indicate them and then leave it at that. But the characteristic of this world learning is exactly the fact that it crosses the boundary. One has to be some sort of artist to represent this theology-across-the-boundaries... Dostoyevski was an author. Your dissertation must be a more meticulous summary and indication of his supra-empirical motivations. Therefore, to a certain extent you want to bring your booty back across the boundary. I am well aware, that therein lies the constant danger of surrendering something essential!”⁸ (1999a:358). Noordmans himself knew the dangers involved in trying to systematically describe the mystery of humankind.

Berdyayev shows how the art of Dostoyevski was able to show humankind without the loss of this mystery: “His work is anthropology-in-motion in which things are seen in such an atmosphere of flame and ecstasy that they have meaning only for those who are themselves involved in the tempest” (1957:45). The hardening of a concept of mankind for Dostoyevski would be tantamount to the annihilation of mankind. That is also why he does not call himself a psychologist, but rather a realist in the higher sense of the word. In a sense the desperate fight of his characters not to become mere piano-keys, as seen in *Notes from the Underground* (Dostoyevski 1918:73), is also the continuous struggle in Dostoyevski not to make a human person into such a piano key. Dostoyevski himself related this struggle to the message of Christ, who does not force humankind to believe, but follows the way of the cross and in doing so does not make humankind into sheep like the Grand Inquisitor in *The Brother’s Karamazov* (Dostoyevski 1958a:308,9).

As a theologian, Noordmans also guards against this hardening of a concept of mankind as is seen in his refutation of the Romantic nineteenth century concept of “personality”. Noordmans consistently refutes any attempt at substantialistic thought. In his work *Gestalte en Geest* as well as in *Herscheping*,⁹ it becomes evident that nothing, neither a human

⁷ Especially the term “Gestalte” is difficult to translate into English. I shall use the term “substance”, but it actually refers to a whole range of things and ideas that is given a form or substance, which is not seen in relation to God. “Geest” is “Spirit”, referring to the Holy Spirit in the trinity.

⁸ “Maar uwe moeilijkheden kan ik levendig meegevoelen. Het is een reuzencomplex van grensbegrippen. En waren het nog maar grensbegrippen! Dan kondt U ze, na aanwijzing met rust laten. Maar het kenmerkende van de bedoelde wereldleer is juist, dat ze over de grens gaat. Men moet min of meer kunstenaar zijn om deze theologie-over-de-grenzen uit te beelden... Dostojewski is litterator. – Uw dissertatie moet nu weer een meer rustige samenvatting of aanwijzing zijn van het boven-empirisch bewogene. U wilt dus tot op zekere hoogte met Uw buit weer binnen de grenzen terug. En daarin ligt, ik begrijp dat levendig, telkens het gevaar, het essentiële te moeten prijs geven.”

⁹ “Herscheping” means “Recreation”. In the work of Noordmans, “Herscheping” is the closest he comes to writing a systematic dogmatics.

person, nor even the person of Christ could take on a substance that is not mediated to us by the Spirit of God.

Berdyaeu explains how the German Idealist philosophy sees the conflict between God and Satan only on the periphery of the spirit, and beneath that, they find God and all antinomy disappears. For Dostoyevski, however, the conflict reaches to the depths of the spirit (1957:58). There is no divine substance in mankind, even though mankind cannot be understood outside of a relationship with God. Dostoyevski does not show mankind becoming God, but mankind needing God.

Beyond Humanism

Berdyaeu says, "Dostoievski devoted the whole of his creative energy to one single theme, man and man's destiny. He was anthropological and anthropocentric to an almost inexpressible degree: The problem of man was his absorbing passion. The whole of Dostoievski's work is a plea for man, a plea which goes to the length of strife with God, which antinomy is resolved by referring human destiny to Jesus Christ, the God-man" (1957:39). The way he portrayed humankind was neither from the perspective of some naïve Christian moral nor from naïve rationalistic Humanism. Berdyaeu was of the opinion that Dostoyevski "...marks an absolutely new stage in anthropological knowledge, one that is neither humanist nor yet Christian in the traditional sense of the fathers of the Church" (1957:61).

Humankind has become too complicated for the old moral catechisms of the church. The Catholic view of humankind within the framework of *natura – supra-natura*, where there is an almost biological progression from the sinner to the saint, is unacceptable for Dostoyevski. Being in constant flux, humankind has become so complicated, confused and so divided in itself, that the old ways, presupposing some innocence or divine potential that could be developed in humankind, have become quite obsolete. "... (T)he profoundly Christian anthropology of Dostoievsky differs from patristic anthropology... Man has not become better, he is not nearer to God, but his soul has become much more complicated and his spirit has grown bitter" (Berdyaeu 1957:62).

Noordmans points out that the Dialectical Theologians¹⁰ of the twentieth century, especially Karl Barth, was greatly influenced by Dostoyevski. Against a harmonious view of humankind, Barth would say "Hinter die grundsätzliche Gebrochenheit der Lebenserkennnis Dostoiewskis wollen wir nicht wieder zurück..." (1924:58). From him they have learned that the truth about God and about humankind can only be reached in an indirect and dialectical way. The Dialectical Theologians reacted against all the religious psychology and pragmatism of the nineteenth century and earlier that wanted to find God directly in conditions in humankind's soul or through biological means. Noordmans would say that this is impossible to do with the characters of Dostoyevski and that is why they are the best illustration of Barth's theology. There is almost no evolution in their lives, but in the background one sees something of their shadow in eternity. They remain a mystery to us and their truth lies "jenseits von Geburt und Tod" (1981:578). Dostoyevski himself refers to this in the *Brothers Karamazov* when Father Zossima says: "God took seeds from other worlds and sowed them on this earth, and made his garden grow, and everything that could come up came up, but what grows lives and is alive only through the feeling of its contact with other mysterious worlds" (Dostoyevski 1958:377).

¹⁰ Noordmans speaks of Dialectic Theology as represented by Karl Barth and Emil Brunner, which he also discusses under the term Swiss Theology.

Dostoyevski's characters develop paradoxically, acting in ways that one cannot deduce from their previous acts. Noordmans says it is as if Dostoyevski looks for every opportunity to show the double in his characters by which their empirical person is taken up by their transcendent personality (1981:543). His characters show what the dialectical theologians propose; namely, that there is no direct pathway to God and therefore that no biological or psychological description of humankind is exhaustive. This radically criticised the pseudo-humanistic religious views on conversion or sanctification as a natural progression from the sinner to the saint. God is God and human beings are human beings and God alone can cross the abyss between the two.

Dostoyevski, being concerned with humankind, used other means of saying just that, but from his perspective the abyss was in the heart of humankind itself. In comparing Dostoyevski and Tolstoy, Berdyaev points out that Dostoyevski was the greater of the two in that he could understand the eternal contradictions in humankind. For Tolstoy life is an emanation from nature, for Dostoyevski human life is spiritual and not the result of a mere biological process. Berdyaev believes that Tolstoy was a bad theologian in following this naturalistic method, while Dostoyevski who was no theologian said more about God in speaking about humankind than Tolstoy did, "All his life Tolstoy was seeking God as a pagan seeks God; his mind was obsessed by theology, and he was a bad theologian. Dostoyevski, on the other hand, was much less concerned with God than with man and his destiny, with the riddle of the spirit; he was not haunted by theology but by anthropology; he did not have to solve the divine problem as does the pagan but the problem of mankind, which is the problem of the spiritual man, the Christian" (Berdyaev 1957:24).

Dostoyevski searched for the answer to humankind's destiny in a totally different way than Humanism. Not in psychological development and progress did he see us becoming truly human, but in the depth of our divided self did he find humankind torn from our divine origins. For him, to solve the question of humankind is to solve the question of God. Berdyaev sees a division between Dostoyevski's earlier work, where he still has some psychological and humanitarian traits in his compassion for the "poor folk" and the downtrodden, and his later works: *Letters from the Underworld* inaugurated Dostoyevski's superb dialectic. From being only a psychologist he becomes a metaphysician, following the tragedy of the human spirit to its very end; he ceases to be a humanitarian on the old pattern and no longer has anything in common with Hugo or Sand or Dickens; he breaks definitely with the theories of Bielinsky"¹¹ (1957:28). The old rationalistic humanism with its self-sufficiency, developmental aims and clear-cut morality, has not only been called into question by Dostoyevski, but has effectively been destroyed.

Dostoyevski's break with humanism is evident in the fact that he spoke of humankind in relation to God (be it more often than not in conflict with God): "It was given to him to reveal the struggle in man between the God-man and the man-god" (Berdyaev 1957:60). This concurs with Sajkovic, contending that in Dostoyevski's philosophy the theocentric and the anthropocentric perspectives meet and that this perspective could well be called Christocentric, since he sees the only solution to the problem of humankind in the person of Christ (1962:154,155). In his *Diary of a Writer*, Dostoyevski breaks with the naïve humanistic beliefs, since he believes that evil goes much deeper than the 'physician-socialist' supposes: "In no organisation of society can evil be eliminated, sin emanate from man's soul itself; the laws of the human spirit is so unknown to science, so obscure, so indeterminate and mysterious, that, as yet, there can neither be physicians nor final judges, but that there

¹¹ A Russian romantic idealist.

is only He who saith: ‘Vengeance belongeth unto me; I will recompense. He alone knows the whole mystery of the world and man’s ultimate destiny’ (1949:787).

Double Truth

Noordmans often refers to Dostoyevski in his articles on the Dialectic Theologians. He mentions him mostly in the same breath as Kierkegaard, because he sees them both as exponents of a particular form of dialectical thought. He believes their dialectic is from a different order than that of Hegel.¹² With Hegel the tension between the thesis and the anti-thesis is in a sense resolved in the synthesis. Kierkegaard and Dostoyevski do not have such a synthesis, they keep the thesis and its anti-thesis directly opposed to each other, where the ‘wounds of negativity’ is in a sense consistently left open. Karl Barth tries to express this unresolved tension in saying: “The creatureliness and the Revelation of the Son of God mutually exclude each other. Yet again, only in God can the synthesis be found, – but it can be found in God, the synthesis, which is meant in the thesis and sought in the antithesis”¹³ (1924:66). Like Rembrandt, Dostoyevski creates the dark places next to the light in a *clair-obscur*. In a sense the darker the places, the brighter is the light that is needed to contrast with it. That is why he would go to the ultimate extremes of human perdition, resolutely hoping and blindly believing that God alone can shed light in the depths of darkness.

Dostoyevski attempted to write about this tension in humankind in his novel *The Double*. This is the story of Golyadkin, who after a humiliating experience is suddenly confronted by his exact double. This double has much better relationships with his co-workers and humiliates him at every opportunity. All attempts to make friends with his double fails. In *Diary of a Writer*, Dostoyevski considers *The Double* a failure, because he was not able to master the novel even though he felt that there could be nothing more serious than this particular theme (1949:883). Romein in a chapter entitled *The Diabolical Perspective*, points out that both Zweig and Lavrin sees this unresolved dual as a central theme in all Dostoyevski’s work. According to Romein, Merezhkovsky sees Kirillov as the double of Myshkin and both of them as the two sides of Dostoyevski’s own self. He elaborates on the relations between opposites by showing the same connection between Svidrigailov and Raskolnikov; Stavrogin and Verchovenski; Ivan and Smerdjakov all being two parts of one person, a split third in search of and persecuting himself. This diabolical state of humankind is expressed in Ivan’s encounter with his chimerical double (devil) in the *Brothers Karamazov* (1924:137).

Ivan’s encounter with his double has indeed been mastered by Dostoyevski, where Ivan is constantly tormented by his inability to ascertain if this devil is only a part of him or exists independently of him. The devil in turn tries to convince him of both these possibilities and torments him exactly by the fact that he will never be sure of the truth of either of them:

“‘You don’t exist!’

‘Judging by the vehemence with which you refuse to acknowledge my existence’, the gentleman laughed, ‘I’m convinced that you believe in me all the same.’ ‘Not a bit! I don’t believe a hundredth part in you!’ ‘But you do a thousandth part, Homeopathic doses, you know, are perhaps the strongest. Confess you believe, well, a ten-thousandth part.’

‘Not for a moment!’ Ivan cried furiously. ‘I’d like to believe in you, though,’ he added strangely.

¹² See Sajkovic 1962:148,149.

¹³ “Die kreatürlichkeit und die Offenbarung der Söhne Gottes schliessen sich gegenseitig aus. Noch einmal: nur in Gott ist die Synthesis zu finden, – aber in Gott ist sie zu finden, die Synthesis, die in der Thesis gemeint und in der Antithesis gesucht ist” [translation by author].

‘Oho! That *is* an admission! But I’m good-natured and I’ll help you there, too. Listen, it’s I who caught you out and not you me! I deliberately told you the story you had forgotten so that you should lose your faith in me completely.’

‘You’re lying! The purpose of your appearance is to make me believe that you exist.’

‘To be sure. But hesitations, uneasiness, the conflict between belief and disbelief – why, this is sometimes such a torture to a conscientious man like yourself that one would rather hang oneself... I keep you dangling between belief and disbelief by turns...’ (1958:758).

Poets and singers have also tried to express this double in humankind. The South African poet, NP van Wyk Louw, speaks of this double present in humankind in the poem *Ballad of the Evil One*.¹⁴

Do you know me now?
 Have you looked in the mirror and do you know you...?
 And the quick ones flee, where to? from whom?
 I am not lovely or horrible, and where-ever they flee
 along they carry me
 in the grey-white grooves of their nerves.
 I am the ground of your being,
 and follow your trail like a good dog.
 Do you know me now?
 Have you looked in the mirror
 Do you know you?

This division in the characters of Dostoyevski is also echoed in the song *Mijn Stad* [My city] by the Dutch singer Stef Bos:

...in the Godforsaken dumps,
 In the rooms without light,
 there lives toothless hags,
 filled with regrets,
 they have so much to tell,
 but no-one to understand...
 my city, my city, my heart...
 I hate, I love my city,
 I love my city I hate my city
 I love my city, my heart...¹⁵

¹⁴ In Afrikaans: *Ballade van die Bose*:
 Ken jy my nou?
 Het jy die spieël gesien en ken jy jou...
 En die snelles vlug, waarheen? Vir wie?
 Ek is nie skoon of aaklig nie , en waar hul vlug
 Daar dra hul my mee
 In die gryswit groewe van die senuwee...
 Ek is jou wese se ondergrond,
 en ek trap jou spoor soos ‘n goeie hond
 Ken jy my nou? Het jy die spieël gesien
 En ken jy jou? [translation by author].

¹⁵ “In de godvergeten krotten

This incomprehensible and irresolvable tension in humankind is expressed by Dmitry Karamazov in *The Brothers Karamazov*: "It makes me mad to think that a man of great heart and high intelligence should begin with the ideal of Madonna and end with the ideal of Sodom. What is more terrible is that a man with the ideal of Sodom already in his soul does not renounce the ideal of Madonna, and it sets his heart ablaze, and it is truly, truly ablaze, as in the days of his youth and innocence. Yes, man is wide, too wide, indeed. I would narrow him. I'm hanged if I know what he really is!" (Dostoyevski 1958:122). The tension is as great as the distance between time and eternity, between God and humankind.

Noordmans sees this tension theologically present in the person of Jesus Christ. In the dogmatic formulation at Chalcedon, stating that Christ is God and a human person unmixed and undivided, he sees a general theological rule (Noordmans 1979:113). There is no natural growth from humankind to God, but an unresolved tension. Pascal also believes that this tension between opposing truths needs to be honoured and can only be honoured by faith when he says: "Faith embraces several truths, which seem to contradict one another... Its source is the unity of the two natures in Jesus Christ... New life, new death. All things doubled and the same names remain"¹⁶ (Pascal 1977b:146).

The immeasurable distance between God and humankind, which is mirrored in the divide within a human person, is present in the person of Jesus Christ who was made sin for us (2 Cor. 5:21). In this context Noordmans refers to Kohlbrugge, who criticised the theologians of the nineteenth century who wanted to resolve this distance between God and humankind too easily and in doing so detracted from the comforting truth of the Gospel. Kohlbrugge believed that by respecting the ethical distance between God and humankind a minister brings greater comfort to sinners. Regarding a sinner as a saint does not bring salvation, only the Holy Spirit can breach the gap and connect what cannot be connected (1981:497). In this sense I would venture to say that Dostoyevski's work is fundamentally Pneumatological, because in his works what seems to be mutually exclusive; namely, God and the sinner, are connected.

Reformed theology, since Martin Luther, has described a human person in his relationship to God paradoxically as *simul iustus et peccator* (both justified and sinner), but this bow has probably never been drawn to the all destructive tension it has reached in the work of Dostoyevski. To follow the line of thought of Kohlbrugge it follows that probably never has the depth of God's compassion been illustrated so fully. Dostoyevski has brought Ras-kolnikov, Grushenka, Kirillov, Ivan Karamazov and Stavrogin *coram Deo* like the murderer in Luke 23:42, the prostitute in Luke 7:47, the betrayer in Mark 14:10, the doubter in Joh. 20:24 and the cross.

In de kamer zonder licht
 Daar wonen tandenloze vrouwen
 Door de weemoed aangedaan
 Ze hebben zoveel te vertellen
 Maar geen mens kan ze verstaan...
 Mijn stad, mijn stad, mijn hart...
 Ik haat, ik hou van mijn stad
 Ik hou van mijn stad
 Ik haat van mijn stad
 Ik hou van mijn stad
 Mijn hart" [translation by author].

¹⁶ "La foi embrasse plusieurs vérités qui semblent se contredire ... La source en est l'union des deux natures en Jésus-Christ ... Nouvelle vie, nouvelle mort. Toutes choses doublées et les mêmes noms demeurant" [translation by author].

Noordmans points out that for the Dialectical theologians as for Kierkegaard, spiritual matters do not work like nature: While nature goes out only once, the spirit goes out twice. The new person does not develop naturally from the old person on a single line, but the spirit, which is reflexive, reveals a person as double. Dostoyevski knows the darkest corners of a person's life, but he knows it twice, calling people from the darkness to their eternal significance. This is why Noordmans sees that almost all the characters in Dostoyevski are double. They are neither holy nor sinner, as in Dickens, but they are holy and sinner at the same time. He says that Dickens shows us humankind on the sixth day, while Dostoyevski shows us humankind before the sixth day where the divide between light and darkness is a moment in the creation of humankind. One seldom finds a conversion in Dostoyevski's characters with a resultant evolution in their lives, much the same as in the Bible (Noordmans 1981:578). Light and dark do not replace each other, but are both present simultaneously in them. The depth of their despair is but the inverse of God's grace.

Why they sin is not known, even though they know that they will sin.¹⁷ "As a matter of fact, all Dostoyevski's characters are aware of their 'wrong position', even though they often do not 'find the way out' (Stavrogin in *The Possessed*)" (Sajkovic 1962:161). Sin draws them along even though they wish to do good, like Paul in Rom. 7. Noordmans says that Dostoyevski's characters seem to have existed before the respectable world we created:

Their lives seem like convulsions, but these convulsions are simultaneously the quivering in the corners of God's mouth in infinite compassion. They cry with shrill voices that are muffled by the noise in the streets. But the echo's resound in the corners of eternity. They cry in a corner or on a bedstead over their lost lives; but there they lie at God's breast and he dries their tears. Poor wretches spending their last dimes for a bowl of food, only to throw half of it at each others' heads in a raging frenzy. But we see Jesus sitting among the prostitutes and tax collectors and he eats and drinks with them¹⁸ (Noordmans 1981:591).

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¹⁷ Like the main character, Raskolnikov, in *Crime and Punishment*.

¹⁸ "Hun leven lijkt stuip trekken, maar die trekkingen zijn tegelijk het trillen van Gods mondhoeken in eindeloze barmhartigheid. Ze schreeuwen met schrille stemmen, die ondergaan in het straatruoer. Maar de echo klinkt in de hoeken der eeuwigheid. Ze wenen in een hoek en van een bedstede hun verloren leven uit; maar daar liggen ze aan Gods borst en Hij droogt hun tranen. Arme scharminkels verdoen hun laatste centen aan een maaltijd, waar ze elkaar in halve razernij de resten van het bord naar het hoofd gooien. Maar Jezus voelen we zitten tussen de hoeren en tollenaars en Hij eet en drinkt met hen" [translated by author].

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