

Images of life and death as a central theme to *Crime and Punishment* Intertextual analysis of *Crime and Punishment* through the eyes of the 11th chapter of John's gospel

ROBERT KUTHAN, *Charles University*
robertkuthan@seznam.cz

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ABSTRACT

The aim of the study is to provide a coherent analysis of Dostoevsky's use of biblical intertextuality as it appears in his novel *Crime and Punishment*. The presence of John 11 (The Raising of Lazarus) in its nearly complete citation is so apparent that it cannot have escaped any interpreter's attention. However, many interpreters have failed to see how this biblical passage permeates the whole novel. First, I aim to provide a deeper analysis of the symbolism of the resurrected Lazarus as it unfolds in this novel. Without full understanding of this symbolism our reading of the novel can only be partial. Secondly, I wish to present an analysis of Dostoevsky's very unique literary method of applying the biblical text to his narrative form. My main hypothesis is that John 11 forms an underlying theme (not just a mere allusion) of this great novel without which the novel as a whole makes little sense. Finally, my aim is to show that *Crime and Punishment* can be read as a highly adventurous existential drama whose interpretation of John 11 is from the theological point of view shockingly modern.

Keywords: Intertextuality, Death, Life, Resurrection, Lazarus.

Introduction

To claim that Dostoevsky's literary work is permeated with biblical textual references may hardly be considered a revealing discovery. Religious analysis of Dostoevsky's thought is nowadays a well-established branch of dostoevskology and biblical intertextuality analysis within Dostoevsky's texts has for many decades been a standard academic approach to reading Dostoevsky. I, therefore, do not claim primacy in dealing with biblical references in Dostoevsky's novels, as such a claim would be rather daring. However, *reading Dostoevsky religiously*⁵³ is not a task which can easily reach its definite and final stage once and for all. Religious reading of Dostoevsky will always depend on diverse forms of interpretive approaches, deriving mainly from the theological standpoints and denominational presuppositions of the interpreter. The author of this article presents an existential analysis of the symbolism used by the novelist in *Crime and Punishment* and shows how this symbolism may have been borrowed from Johannine writings. In my analysis I attempt to provide a non-confessional treatment of Dostoevsky's literary thought while openly adhering to Bultmann's existential theology. The interpretive method I have decided to follow is therefore anthropological and existential, rather than apologetic, while the focus of my attention is still on religious aspects of Dostoevsky's thought. From textual point of view, my method is in line with Bakhtin's while the focus of my study is on the symbolic structure of the novel (here I choose the same method as George Gibian did) which is then compared to the symbolic language of John's gospel.

⁵³ This term is used by Pattison and Thompson (2001).

My key hypothesis is twofold: 1. *Crime and Punishment* as a novel is modelled on John 11 (The Raising of Lazarus) to a greater extent than has been acknowledged so far 2. the novel contains clear paschal and messianic themes and motives of which Raskolnikov is the clearest representative.

Symbolic dualism in *Crime and Punishment*

Gibian (1989) provided a comprehensive and convincing analysis of the symbolic structure of *Crime and Punishment*. He sees the whole novel as divided into opposite symbolic categories such as water, light, darkness, vegetation, darkness, fresh air, earth. These categories, according to Gibian (1989: 529), are universal symbols, taken from both Christian and pagan cultural backgrounds. Although he notices that John 11 and the Passion of Christ entered the novel as a strong textual influence, his emphasis is not on intertextual biblical references. He, therefore, does not analyze the textual relationship of *Crime and Punishment* to John's gospel. Also, although his analysis of the fundamental symbolic terms of the novel is very accurate and thorough, he does not emphasize enough the essentially dualistic structure of this symbolism. He does not stress explicitly enough that the symbolic dichotomies operate in opposites throughout the novel and that they all boil down to one central dichotomy of life and death. These two ultimate symbols of life and death are both contained in the great theme of the novel: resurrection. Although John 11 is mentioned as a literary influence, it is not considered as a central theme of the novel. This article is an attempt to re-analyze and reinterpret (on the basis of Bultmann's existential hermeneutics) the symbolic structure of Dostoevsky's novel, bring it into closer contact with New Testament writings and interpret John 11 as an omnipresent hermeneutical key to the novel (not just a mere textual reference and allusion). The reason why we have chosen to study the symbolic aspects of the novel is not arbitrary. Even today the old debate over the relevance and persuasiveness of the Epilogue (the moral regeneration and religious conversion of Raskolnikov) has not faded. As Gibian (1989), or more recently Matual (1992), have shown, the Epilogue can be rediscovered as a logical and meaningful part of the novel on the basis of the symbolic analysis of the novel. The novel is structurally composed dualistically by means of symbolic dichotomies: water x drought, live vegetation x dying vegetation, light x darkness, open space x closed space. It is as if Raskolnikov found himself constantly on the verge between life and death (this being symbolized in the novel by bridges). The drama of the novel does not consist in detecting the murderer. The thrill is of spiritual dimension: the big question is whether Raskolnikov will choose life or death. In this respect the book is not a detective but soteriological novel. This is expressed by Dostoevsky by means of dualistic symbolism which he may have borrowed from his New Testament reading, namely the Johannine writings whose *Johannine dualism*⁵⁴ not only uses the same symbols of life and death as Dostoevsky does in *Crime and Punishment* but also expresses the same idea of existential choice between life and death. The symbolic dichotomies John and Dostoevsky use are expressions of the theological/anthropological concept of *dualism of decision*.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ This term was coined by Bultmann (2009).

⁵⁵ This term is also used by Bultmann in his *Theology of the New Testament I-II*.

Bultmann, in line with Johannine and Pauline theology, defines faith as *decision*: ... *faith is the decision in face of the grace which confronts us in the proclamation of the Word ... almost identified with it* (Macquarrie, 1973: 181). Raskolnikov, like the reader of John's gospel, is confronted with an existential choice between life and death. This is expressed by Dostoevsky and John through almost identical images (symbols) which are summarized in the ultimate dichotomy of life (ζωή) and death. Bultmann claims that this dualism entered John's gospel from Gnosticism whose perception of the world is ontologically negative. This dualism is, however, reinterpreted by John in accordance with biblical cosmology and anthropology: the world is not evil in itself, evil enters the world through man. This biblical feature gives Bultmann an opportunity to interpret John's gospel existentially with strong anthropological focus: *The cosmological dualism of Gnosticism has become in John a dualism of decision* (Bultmann, 2009: 21). Dostoevsky's use of biblical themes moves along the same existential lines and Raskolnikov's drama can be read as an enthralling existential drama which finds its expression in the dualistic symbolism of life and death between which Raskolnikov must make his existential decision.

John 11 as a hermeneutical key to Crime and Punishment

It is impossible not to notice the citation of John 11 in Crime and Punishment as this is probably the longest biblical citation in any Dostoevsky's novel. This (and other textual traits) has led many critics to identifying Raskolnikov with Lazarus. However, few critics have shown how John 11 permeates the whole novel from beginning to end and have limited themselves to the explicit passages which deal with the Lazarus/Raskolnikov analogy. Similarly absent among critics is the analysis of Dostoevsky's hermeneutics of resurrection and often the term is used in its ambivalence without taking the trouble to analyse the interpretive shift (from Bible to novel) which Dostoevsky employed in using the term as a symbol of moral regeneration. The following lines will deal with textual analogies between the novel and John 11.

When Raskolnikov's mother compares his room to a гроб (coffin) this is not the only hint the author is giving us to make us believe that Raskolnikov is living in a dead environment. The careful reader knows the room is a coffin even without the explicit remark made by Raskolnikov's mother. Similar symbolism of death is used in depicting Svidrigaylov's hotel room which eventually turns into a horrific scenario of death. Just as Lazarus walked out of his grave, the same is expected of Raskolnikov but first it must be made clear to the reader that he is a dead character. This is done by means of describing the whole setting of the novel as dead and this is why Dostoevsky depicts Saint Petersburg as a dead city. This is implied by the frequent images of heat, lack of fresh air, overcrowdeness as opposed to alternative images of green parks, fountains etc. The novel's use of symbolic topology is artistically designed to create the sense of closed space (grave). This is opposed in the novel by the sudden opening of space, paradoxically within the prison environment in Siberia: as Raskolnikov sits by the river the gates of death open to an illuminating vision of endless space and freedom. In this way the main theme of John 11, which is the resurrection of dead Lazarus, resonates throughout the novel and finds its climatic expression at the end of the novel (This is one of the reasons why the novel is structurally incomplete without the often

debated Epilogue). Other dualistic symbols used in John 11 such as light x darkness (John 11:9-10) also found their way into the novel. Raskolnikov's room is described as dark, his decision for life is made during a night and reaches its definite stage in the early morning (on the brink of night and day) and when Porfiry talks about Raskolnikov's new mode of existence in the future, he tells him to *become a sun* (Dostoevsky, 1989: 277). The symbol of light accompanies Nastya as the character whose very name promises resurrection. The crucial reading from John 11 takes place by candlelight. Dostoevsky connects the sacred text with the literary text through yet another symbol: that of time. Just as four days have passed since Lazarus died (John 11:17,39), so have four days passed since Raskolnikov's murder at the time of Sonya's reading from John 11. Both Lazarus and Raskolnikov had been dead for four days when they were resurrected. John's gospel plays with the ambivalence of language when it speaks about Lazarus's state. While the narrator, Mary and Martha describe his state using the expression *sick* (John 11:1-2,3,6) Jesus shifts the literary meaning from the literal to the eschatological when He speaks of *sicknes not unto death* (John 11:4). Similar ambivalence of words appears when Jesus describes Lazarus's state using the term *sleep*: *Now Jesus had spoken of his death, but they thought that He was speaking of literal sleep* (John 11:13). To make matters clear Jesus explains to the disciples that Lazarus is *dead* (John 11:14). Similar ambivalence concerning Raskolnikov's state is found in the novel. While Zosimov interprets Raskolnikov's state psychologically and attributes it to mental illness (Dostoevsky, 1989: 188-210) Razumikhin uses more casual language when calling him *mad* (Dostoevsky, 1989: 265). Razumikhin is, however, aware of the ambivalent essence of Raskolnikov's illness and undervalues all medical interpretations of his state by considering it *some mystery, some secret* (Dostoevsky, 1989: 373-374). What Raskolnikov in fact personifies is expressed throughout the novel by two sets of images (images of life and death) between which Raskolnikov lives his dead life, for the term which best characterizes Raskolnikov's state can be called *dead life*. Raskolnikov must choose either complete death (like Svidrigaylov) or complete life (as Sonya). The most part of the novel describes him as living both life and death simultaneously: until the very end of the novel he finds himself on the border of each.

Likewise, the relationships in the novel would appear to have been modelled on those in John 11. Lazarus's sisters Martha and Mary are represented by Dunya and Sonya (note the phonetic similarity in each pair) and his resurrection is conditioned by the affectionate and sacrificial family-like atmosphere in each narrative (i.e. that of John 11 and the novel). Sacrificing love is expressed in the novel by both Sonya and Dunya who are willing to sacrifice themselves for Raskolnikov. Deep love in John 11 is expressed by Jesus's feelings (Luke 5:33-36) for Lazarus and Mary's love (Luke 7:47). This Mary is in the Christian tradition identified with Mary Magdalene. Dostoevsky's depiction of Raskolnikov's state of overall confinement also may have found its inspiration in Jesus's words to Lazarus: *Unbind him, and let him go* (John 11:44).

An easily missed symbol which is also used in both texts is that of a stone. While John's use of the symbol suggests the borderline between life and death (John 11:41) Dostoevsky's use of it is more moderate: it is a stone under which the stolen possessions were stored by Raskolnikov and they are not recovered until the end of the novel. The binding theme is, however, the removing of the stone (John 11:41) which takes place at the end of both the

literary and the sacred narrative.

Paschal themes in Crime and Punishment

The detective genre of the novel conceals the fact that the murderer’s narrative contains clear paschal analogies. The whole novel in fact follows the structure the Paschal narrative in which Raskolnikov is brought to a boldly close literary proximity to Jesus. This is related to the fact that that one of the novel’s key themes is that of messianism. If the humanist motives of his murder are emphasized then Raskolnikov’s murderous project can be interpreted not as mere crime but a metaphysical crime with messianic traits. This statement can be analyzed and supported by intertextual analysis of the novel for Raskolnikov is a messianic figure regardless of his unorthodox or even anti-Christian nature.

The very existence of Paschal motives in the novel also supports the premise that the novel was inspired by John 11, as this is where the Passion of Christ is introduced. If death in the novel is an introduction to the great passion of Raskolnikov then Lazarus’s death in the gospel provides an introduction to Christ’s Passion and resurrection. The motive which binds Raskolnikov and Christ together is one of messianism. However, while Raskolnikov’s messianic programme must undergo a transformation (decarnevalisation) and become orthodox, Jesus’s messianism is authentic from the very start. Messianic features of Raskolnikov were most explicitly explored by Mochulsky (1973) who describes Raskolnikov’s crime as an act of *love for mankind* (Mochulsky, 1973: 283) and *service* (Mochulsky, 1973: 281) to it. This Raskolnikov is a prelude to Great Inquisitor who will appear in Dostoevsky’s later novel.

The novel can be read as a contest of two competing messianic programmes. The first one is represented by Raskolnikov’s napoleonic project. The other one is introduced by Sonya. The former brings death, the latter life. That the theme of redemption is central to the novel is supported by the horse dream. The horse has traditionally been identified with the victim Alyona which is a hypothesis I do not find convincing. The horse, in my interpretation, represents a messianic figure and introduces the messianic theme of the novel. The novel examines the double nature (Napoleon-like and Christ-like) of that power which has the ability to save mankind. That is why any interpretation which reads the novel as a story of an individual’s striving for individual redemption is incorrect. The motive of Raskolnikov’s *мрачный катехизис* is messianic: it involves all mankind.

A selection of paschal references which identify Raskolnikov with a messianic figure is as follows. In both the gospels⁵⁶ and the novel we find paschal scenes of mocking the messianic figure. The mocking which Christ has to endure tries to undervalue the messianic dimension of Christ’s mission. Similarly, Raskolnikov is concerned about being mocked for his crime (Dostoevsky, 1989: 355, 460), which is in fact a messianic project. Raskolnikov, like Jesus, willingly undergoes a criminal punishment and dies among, or *between* as for Jesus (Lk 23:33; Mt 27:38; Mk 15:27), criminals. The novel scene in which Raskolnikov is stripped naked to be given different clothes (Dostoevsky, 1989: 99-111) can be read as a reflexion of John 19:23-24 or Mark 15:20. The scene in which Raskolnikov says goodbye to his family and leaves them in care of Razumikhin is a reference to John 19:25-27 and the

⁵⁶ Mt 27:27-31; Mk 15:16-20; Lk 23:36-38; Jn 19:2-3; Mt 27:39-44; Mk 15:29-32; Lk 23:35-37; Lk 23:39.

relationship of Raskolnikov and Razumikhin is analogical to the one of Jesus and John. The passages in the novel where Siberia is mentioned as a future possibility are analogous to the New Testament passages which predict Christ's Passion and therefore Siberia in the novel's language presents a secular form of Golgotha.

Dostoyevsky's intertextual method

Intertextual reading of Dostoevsky's fiction has since Bakhtin become a standard approach and is still popular in contemporary criticism.⁵⁷ Intertextuality in Dostoevsky is particularly heavy in the area of biblical texts as Kjetsaa (1984) illustrated by careful textual study of Dostoevsky's personal copy of the New Testament. It, however, does not suffice to stress the presence of textual biblical references in Dostoevsky. The question as to how they are treated and used in his novels must be asked. This is no easy question and I therefore focus on a single aspect of Dostoevsky's intertextuality which Bakhtin called *carnevalesque* and which Thompson (2001: 70) renamed as *testing by the pervasive medium of double-voiced discourse*. Dostoevsky's technique of merging the secular with the sacred through intertextuality is provocative to some religious readers while at the same time it provides the reader with exciting spiritual adventure. Ashikawa (2015) attributes this literary technique to *верпен*: a Ukrainian traditional theatrical method whereby holy and profane merge. This technique was by Bakhtin coined as *carnavalesque*. The desirable outcome of carnivalisation is regeneration of the old (i.e. the traditional or the holy) and its revitalization. Before the Word is regenerated or purified it must undergo a test. The holy is tested while passing through the secular context in which it is deconstructed, overturned or even attacked. This is what Thompson means by *testing by the pervasive medium of double-voiced discourse*. Dostoevsky places Christian concepts into prosaic environment (into the so called *real world*) where they are to triumph or perish. The question Dostoevsky puts forward in each of his novels is whether the Christian message is still relevant and valid in the secular environment of the second half of the 19th century. God's word is not taken for granted uncritically, it is put to a test. In *Crime and Punishment* in particular what is being tested is the idea messianic power and the concept of resurrection interpreted as spiritual and moral regeneration.

Dostoevsky's hermeneutics of resurrection

The term resurrection is often used rather too lightly to refer to Raskolnikov's experience. However, the difference between the biblical and Dostoevsky's concept of resurrection is obvious. Although Raskolnikov is depicted through images of death, he never actually dies as a literary character. The term resurrection is used existentially, almost psychoanalytically to describe an individual's state of mind. It lacks the eschatological dimension of the Bible. Along with Johannine theology the stress here is not on futuristic but present eschatology: Raskolnikov is resurrected within his lifetime by means of his decision for life. He never dies literally. It is therefore surprising for the reader of *Crime and Punishment* to learn that Dostoevsky's belief in resurrection was a literal, orthodox one which troubled him deeply and drove him to find genuine interest in Fyodorov's rather eccentric concept of resurrection

⁵⁷ See e.g. Perlina (1985); Terras (1981).

(Lord, 1970: 175-200). The resurrection of Raskolnikov is, however, taken out of the realm of orthodox Christian dogma and examined anthropologically and existentially. It is this simple fact which is often overlooked in Dostoevsky studies.

Kremer (1988), a Catholic theologian, nevertheless, thinks otherwise. In his opinion Dostoevsky's literary use of resurrection is in line with the symbolic and spiritually based Christian tradition which was forgotten during the Enlightenment period, replaced by literal and materialistic interpretations of resurrection with their empirical focus on the physical process of this great miracle. Dostoevsky's depiction of resurrection, according to Kremer, is a symbolic and spiritual one, and thus follows the Orthodox Christian tradition.

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