

Christianity Against the Sacred

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Although the statement “If there is no God, everything is permitted” is usually traced back to *The Brothers Karamazov*, Dostoyevsky never in fact made it¹ (the first to attribute it to him was Sartre in *Being and Nothingness*). However, the very fact that this misattribution has persisted for decades demonstrates that, even if factually false, it does hit a certain nerve in our ideological edifice. No wonder conservatives like to evoke it apropos scandals among the atheist-hedonist elite: from millions killed in gulags up to animal sex and gay marriage, here is where we end up when we deny all transcendent authority which would set unsurpassable limits to human endeavors. Without such limits—so the story goes—there is no ultimate barrier to exploiting one’s neighbors ruthlessly, using them as tools for profit and pleasure, enslaving and humiliating them, or killing them by the millions. All that then separates us from this ulti-

1 The closest we come to this statement are some approximations, like Dmitri’s claim from his debate with Rakitin (as Dmitri reports it to Alyosha): “But what will become of men then?” I asked him, ‘without God and immortal life? All things are permitted then, they can do what they like?’” See Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov* (New York: Dover Publications, 2005), 672. In this translation, the last sentence begins with “All things are lawful then”; after comparing it with the original, I replaced “lawful” with “permitted,” *pozvoleno* in Russian .

mate moral vacuum are temporary and non-obligatory “pacts among wolves,” self-imposed limitations accepted in the interests of one’s own survival and well-being which can be violated at any moment . . . But are things really like that?

As is well known, Jacques Lacan claimed that psychoanalytic practice teaches us to turn around Dostoyevsky’s dictum: “If there is no God, then everything is prohibited.” This reversal is hard to swallow for our moral common sense: in an otherwise sympathetic review of a book on Lacan, a Slovene Leftist newspaper rendered Lacan’s version as: “Even if there is no God, not everything is permitted!”—a benevolent vulgarity, changing Lacan’s provocative reversal into a modest assurance that even we godless atheists respect some ethical limits . . . However, even if Lacan’s version appears an empty paradox, a quick look at our moral landscape confirms that it is much more appropriate to describe the universe of atheist liberal hedonists: they dedicate their life to the pursuit of pleasures, but since there is no external authority guaranteeing them the space for this pursuit, they become entangled in a thick web of self-imposed Politically Correct regulations, as if a superego much more severe than that of traditional morality is controlling them. They become obsessed by the idea that, in pursuing their pleasures, they may humiliate or violate others’ space, so they regulate their behavior with detailed prescriptions of how to avoid “harassing” others, not to mention the no less complex regulation of their own care of the self (bodily fitness, health food, spiritual relaxation . . .). Indeed, nothing is more oppressive and regulated than being a simple hedonist.

The second thing, strictly correlative to the first observation, is that today it is rather to those who refer to God in a brutally direct way, perceiving themselves as instruments of God’s will, that everything is permitted. It is so-called fundamentalists

who practice a perverted version of what Kierkegaard called the religious suspension of the ethical: on a mission from God, one is allowed to kill thousands of innocents . . . So why do we witness today the rise of religiously (or ethnically) justified violence? Because we live in an era which perceives itself as post-ideological. Since great public causes can no longer be mobilized as grounds for mass violence (or war), i.e., since our hegemonic ideology calls on us to enjoy life and to realize our Selves, it is difficult for the majority to overcome their revulsion at the torture and killing of another human being. The vast majority of people are spontaneously moral: torturing or killing another human being is deeply traumatic for them. So, in order to make them do it, a larger “sacred” Cause is needed, one which makes petty individual concerns about killing seem trivial. Religion and ethnic belonging fit this role perfectly. Of course there are cases of pathological atheists who are able to commit mass murder just for pleasure, for the sake of it, but they are rare exceptions. The majority of people need to be anaesthetized against their elementary sensitivity to the other’s suffering. For this, a sacred Cause is needed: without it, we would have to feel all the burden of what we did, with no Absolute upon whom to off-load our ultimate responsibility. Religious ideologists usually claim that, true or not, religion makes some otherwise bad people do some good things. From today’s experience, we should rather stick to Steve Weinberg’s claim that while without religion good people would continue doing good things and bad people bad things, only religion can make good people do bad things.

No less importantly, the same also seems to hold for the display of so-called “human weaknesses”: isolated extreme forms of sexuality among godless hedonists are immediately elevated into representative symbols of the depravity of the godless, while any questioning of, say, the link between the much more massive

phenomenon of priests' pedophilia and the Church as an institution is rejected as anti-religious slander. The well-documented story of how the Catholic Church as an institution protects pedophiliacs in its own ranks is another good example of how, if God exists, then everything is permitted (to those who legitimize themselves as his servants). What makes this protective attitude towards pedophiliacs so disgusting is that it is not practiced by tolerant hedonists, but—to add insult to injury—by the very institution which poses as the moral guardian of society.

But what about the Stalinist Communist mass killings? What about the extra-legal liquidation of nameless millions? It is easy to see how these crimes were always justified by the Stalinists' own ersatz-god, "the God that failed," as Ignazio Silone, one of the great disappointed ex-Communists, called it—they had their own God, which is why everything was permitted to them. In other words, the same logic as that of religious violence applies here. Stalinist Communists do not perceive themselves as hedonist individualists abandoned to their freedom; no, they perceive themselves as instruments of historical progress, of a necessity which pushes humanity towards the "higher" stage of Communism—and it is this reference to their own Absolute (and to their privileged relationship to it) which permits them to do whatever they want (or consider necessary). This is why, the moment cracks appear in their ideological protective shield, the weight of what they had done became unbearable to many individual Communists, since they had to confront their acts as their own, with no cover in a higher Reason of History. This is why, after Khrushchev's 1956 speech denouncing Stalin's crimes, many cadres committed suicide: they had not learned anything new during that speech, all the facts were more or less known to them, they had just been deprived of the historical legitimization of their crimes by the Communist historical Absolute.

Stalinism adds another perverse twist to this logic: in order to justify their ruthless exercise of power and violence, the Stalinists not only had to elevate their own role into an instrument of the Absolute, they also had to demonize their opponents, to portray them as corruption and decadence personified. This was true to an even higher degree of Fascism. For the Nazis, every phenomenon of depravity was immediately elevated into a symbol of Jewish degeneration. A continuity between financial speculation, antimilitarism, cultural modernism, sexual freedom, and so on, was immediately asserted, since they were all perceived as emanating from the same Jewish essence, the same half-invisible agency which secretly controlled society. Such demonization had a precise strategic function: it justified the Nazis in doing whatever they wanted, since, against such an enemy, in what is now a permanent emergency state, everything is permitted.

And, last but not least, we should note here the ultimate irony: although many of those who deplore the disintegration of transcendent limits present themselves as Christians, the longing for a new external/transcendent limit, for a divine agent who imposes such a limit, is profoundly non-Christian. The Christian God is not a transcendent God of limitations, but a God of immanent love—God, after all, is love, he is present when there is love between his followers. No wonder, then, that Lacan's reversal, "If God exists, then everything is permitted!," is openly asserted by some Christians, as a consequence of the Christian notion of the overcoming of the prohibitive Law in love: if you dwell in divine love, then you need no prohibitions, you can do whatever you want, since, if you really dwell in the divine love, then, of course, you would never want to do anything evil . . . This formula of the "fundamentalist" religious suspension of the ethical was already proposed by Augustine when he wrote: "Love God and do as you please." (Or, another version: "Love, and do whatever

you want”—from the Christian perspective, the two ultimately amount to the same, since *God is Love*.) The catch, of course, is that if you really love God you will want what he wants—what pleases him will please you, and what displeases him will make you miserable. So it is not that you can just “do whatever you want”: your love for God, if true, guarantees that in whatever you want to do you will follow the highest ethical standards. It is a little bit like the proverbial joke: “My fiancée is never late for an appointment, because when she is late, she is no longer my fiancée”—if you love God, you can do whatever you want, because when you do something evil, this is in itself a proof that you do not really love God. However, the ambiguity persists since there is no guarantee, external to your belief, of what God really wants you to do—in the absence of any ethical standards external to your belief in and love for God, the danger is always lurking that you will use your love of God as a legitimization for the most horrible deeds.

Furthermore, when Dostoyevsky introduces the line of thought “if there is no God, then everything is permitted,” he is in no way simply warning us against limitless freedom—i.e., advocating God as the agency of a transcendent prohibition which would limit human freedom. In a society run by Inquisition, everything is definitely not permitted, since God is operative here as a higher power constraining our freedom, not as the source of freedom. The point of the parable of the Grand Inquisitor is precisely that such a society obliterates the very message of Christ—were Christ to return to that society, he would have been burned as a deadly threat to public order and happiness, since he brought to the people the gift (which turns out to be a heavy burden) of freedom and responsibility. The implicit claim that if there is no God, then everything is permitted thus turns out to be much more ambiguous—it is well worth taking a closer

look at this part of *The Brothers Karamazov*, the long conversation in Book Five between Ivan and Alyosha which takes place at a restaurant. Ivan tells Alyosha a story about the Grand Inquisitor that he has imagined: Christ comes back to earth in Seville at the time of the Inquisition; after he performs a number of miracles, the people recognize and adore him, but he is soon arrested by the Inquisition and sentenced to be burnt to death the next day. The Grand Inquisitor visits him in his cell to tell him that the Church no longer needs him—his return would interfere with the mission of the Church, which is to bring people happiness. Christ has misjudged human nature: the vast majority of humanity cannot handle the freedom he has given them; in giving humans freedom to choose, Christ has excluded the majority of humanity from redemption and doomed it to suffer.

In order to bring the people happiness, the Inquisitor and the Church thus follow “the wise spirit, the dread spirit of death and destruction”—the devil, who alone can provide the tools to end all human suffering and unite everyone under the banner of the Church. The multitude should be guided by those few who are strong enough to take on the burden of freedom—only in this way will all humankind be able to live and die happily in ignorance. These strong few are the true self-martyrs, dedicating their lives to protecting humanity from having to face the freedom of choice. This is why, in the temptation in the desert, Christ was wrong to reject the devil’s suggestion that he turn stones into bread: the people will always follow those who will feed their bellies. Christ rejected the temptation by saying “Man cannot live on bread alone,” ignoring the wisdom which tells us to first “Feed men, and then ask of them virtue!” (or, as Brecht put it in his *Beggar’s Opera*: “*Erst kommt das Fressen, dann kommt die Moral!*”).

Instead of answering the Inquisitor, Christ, who has been silent throughout, kisses him on the lips. Shocked, the Inquisitor

releases Christ but tells him never to return . . . Alyosha responds to this tale by repeating Christ's gesture: he also gives Ivan a soft kiss on the lips.

The point of the story is not simply to attack the Church and advocate the return to the full freedom given to us by Christ. Dostoyevsky himself could not come up with a straight answer on the matter. One can argue that the story of the life of the Elder Zosima, which follows almost immediately the chapter on the Grand Inquisitor, is an attempt to answer Ivan's questions. Zosima, on his deathbed, tells how he found his faith in his rebellious youth, in the middle of a duel, and decided to become a monk. Zosima teaches that people must forgive others by acknowledging their own sins and guilt before others: no sin is isolated, so everyone is responsible for their neighbor's sins . . . Is this not Dostoyevsky's version of "If there is no God, then everything is prohibited"? If the gift of Christ is to make us radically free, then this freedom also brings with it the heavy burden of total responsibility. Does this more authentic position also imply a sacrifice? It depends on what we mean by this term.

In his "Sketch of a Phenomenological Concept of Sacrifice,"² Jean-Luc Marion begins with the claim that our godless times have "abolished every difference between the sacred and the profane, thus every possibility of crossing over it by a *sacriement* (or on the contrary, by a profanation)." The first thing to add here is Agamben's distinction between the secular and the profane: the profane is not the secular-utilitarian, but the result of the profanation of the sacred and is thus inherent to the sacred. (We should also take the formula of "making it sacred" literally: it is the sacrifice itself which makes an ordinary object sacred, i.e.,

2 Marion's unpublished essay is based on his "Sketch of a Phenomenological Concept of the Gift," which appeared in M. M. Olivetti, ed., *Filosofia della rivelazione* (Rome: Biblioteca dell' *Archivio di Filosofia*, 1994).