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## Introduction

### 1.

Religious dimensions of Dostoevsky's life and work have always commanded attention, and scholarly interest in them is neither new nor controversial. The degree and nature of interest in Dostoevsky's religiosity appear to be changing, however. We are witnessing a distinctive turn to religion in our field, one characterized by trends that merit discussion. This special issue of *Dostoevsky Studies* has two goals. First, it offers essays that illustrate the wide range of approaches to Dostoevsky's religiosity practiced by scholars using English as their primary language of publication, the majority of them based in North America. Second, this special issue hopes to prompt further discussion of the religious turn by posing questions about its origins and consequences. Although the essays are drawn from primarily North American Anglophone scholarship, my introduction will address the phenomenon of the religious turn in global Dostoevsky studies.

One of the most striking features of the turn to religion in our field is the new prominence of the reader. For many critics, the act of writing about Dostoevsky has become devotional and confessional, a means to affirming personal faith commitments. Faith-based criticism, or what Caryl Emerson describes as "spiritualized inquiries," frequently yields theophanic readings. In 2009 the journal *Christianity and Literature* hosted a special feature relevant to our discussion, a "Seminar on Christian Scholarship and the Turn to Religion in Literary Studies."<sup>1</sup> Among the many topics addressed by the wide ranging and stimulating essays in this Seminar, theophanic criticism stood out as a topic of major interest.

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<sup>1</sup> *Christianity and Literature* vol. 58 no. 2 (Winter 2009): 213-94.

In her introduction to the Seminar, Susan Felch describes theophanic criticism as the product of a “revelatory, prophetic mode” of reading, one that goes beyond identifying and describing claims about the Christian faith qua claims (216). This critical mode presents religious propositions found in literature as objective truth: theophanic readings “boldly declare God’s revelation in and through artistic texts” (Felch 216). Theophanic criticism currently enjoys great popularity among Western and Russian Dostoevsky critics. “Russian scholars,” Victor Terras observes, “now joyously proclaim the Christian message of Dostoevsky’s life and works [. . .]” (770).

The turn to religion in Dostoevsky studies can be profitably addressed from two angles. Most obviously, the turn warrants study in terms of its impact on reading strategies. A primary goal of this introduction is therefore to identify how theophanic criticism may be transforming our ideas about what is desirable in Dostoevsky scholarship. In addition to assessing its impact on interpretive practices, we should reconstruct the cultural context within which our turn to religion is taking place. As an initial contribution to this extensive project, I offer a preliminary sketch of how the religious turn underway in Dostoevsky studies might be part of intellectual historical trends we are witnessing in continental philosophy and North American higher education. Situating our turn to religion within these interdisciplinary and international contexts may enable us to pose important questions about the state and future of our field.

## 2.

Unique risks and advantages inhere to every critical practice. Carol Apollonio argues eloquently here for reading Dostoevsky religiously; her essay clearly conveys the advantages that can accrue from making what she calls a “leap of faith” when approaching a Dostoevskian text. If necessary, she suggests, we might opt to engage in a suspension of disbelief, one that enables us to enter into the Christian worldview she finds embodied in the author’s fictional universe. “An approach to reading that relies on a leap of faith entails a particular set of dangers, of course,” Apollonio concedes, “but in the quest to ‘perceive and understand,’ we may find the risk worth taking.” The hermeneutic benefits of making this leap of faith—of reading Dostoevsky religiously, from within a Christian mindset—are evident in many of the insightful essays here.

Jerry Sabo's passionate reading of "The Dream of a Ridiculous Man" as "an instance of *Christian* hope for human society" illustrates how faith can illuminate qualities of a Dostoevskian text that may otherwise remain obscure. Critics are divided regarding the ridiculous man. Declaring him to be irredeemably solipsistic, many conclude that his story dramatizes a failure of conversion. Yet this reading, which has much textual evidence in its favor, leaves us dissatisfied. As Robin Feuer Miller explains, it misses something essential that a faith-based reading such as Sabo's perceives.

Miller draws our attention to a discrepancy between semantic meaning and effect that characterizes "The Dream" and Grushenka's tale of the onion. The tale of the onion has a terrible ending, but it works joyfully on Grushenka and Alyosha. Many aspects of "The Dream" are ambiguous, capable of supporting a Christian reading such as Sabo's or leading to the opposite conclusion, that Christian conversion is subverted; yet this story, too, works joyfully on many readers. The ridiculous man's complex story "becomes, by virtue of its telling, by being preached and rendered cautionary, a positive act," Miller explains (124). A reading informed by faith illuminates the impact of the whole as a positive communicative act.

Theophanic criticism is one of the most influential critical approaches in Dostoevsky studies today. Because it enjoys such preeminence, I will adopt an interrogative approach to reading Dostoevsky religiously. Appreciation of the strengths of faith-based reading practices should be balanced by awareness of which drawbacks, if any, may characterize the religious mode. This introduction will therefore subject theophanic Dostoevsky scholarship to critical examination, investigating which risks and limitations may be specific to it. I hope that the questions posed here will spur further discussion in the pages of *Dostoevsky Studies* and beyond.

My interrogatory introduction is followed by two essays that represent opposite poles of current critical practice. The collection begins with Apollonio's strong defense of reading Dostoevsky religiously, followed by Cassedy's equally strong explanation as to why he believes we cannot read Dostoevskian texts as expressions of Christian faith. The juxtaposition of these powerful, yet seemingly mutually exclusive, statements regarding Christianity's significance for reading Dostoevsky invites further dialogue. These strikingly different starting points form the portal through which the reader passes to the other essays, which have been selected to convey maximum diversity of opinion.

## 3.

The theophanic scholarship that has been popularized by the turn to religion, I believe, may sometimes entail violation of normative assumptions governing literary scholarship. Theophanic readers are “those critics and theologians who argue that literary texts, like other art forms, can be revelatory and that the role of the Christian critic is to mediate that revelation for those who don’t have eyes to see it,” Caleb Spencer writes in his contribution to the Seminar hosted by *Christianity and Literature* (278). Suppositions about the status of art and role of the reader/critic at the basis of theophanic criticism appear to differ from the suppositions that underlie other modes of literary scholarship.

Mediating the Christian revelation ostensibly contained in the Dostoevskian text, I submit, may run the risk of embroiling the reader in specific quandaries, such as erasing the specificity of literary language and committing the intentional fallacy. Theophanic readings sometimes display an external or heterogeneous orientation, away from the literary text. They appear to be guided by the authority of other words—usually Biblical or theological—or other systems of meaning—the author’s or reader’s biography.

Some observers of the religious turn in our field have voiced concern that the text itself, especially its irreducibly aesthetic qualities, is in danger of receding behind the reader’s personal commitment to communicating a religious message. In “Views of Dostoevsky in Today’s Russia: Historical Roots and Interpretations,” Rudolf Neuhäuser cautions against a trend in Russian Dostoevsky scholarship towards stripping away the artistic dimensions of Dostoevsky’s texts. “There are attempts underway,” he observes,

“both in the media and popular literature as well as in academic writing to gently reshape Dostoevsky putting him into an orthodox framework. Poetic and literary qualities recede into the background, the poetological approach is thwarted” (361).

In her review of Galina Ponomareva’s recent book, *Dostoevskii: Ia zanimaius’ etoi tainoi*, Milla Fedorova asserts that Ponomareva submits literature to the critic’s desire for a religious message. “The direction of the search,” Fedorova writes,

“...does not follow from an analysis of Dostoevsky’s texts, but is predetermined by the task that Ponomareva has set for herself: to prove that Dostoevsky never abandoned Christ as his ethical guide and never fell away from a religious worldview...” (785).

The practice of theophanic criticism, it seems, may endow the reader with new authority over the Dostoevskian text. The reader arrogates authority to authority to perform genre re-assignment—from “poetological” to “orthodox”—and presses the text into the service of his or her “predetermined task”—the affirmation of Christian faith.

No less a critic than Harold Bloom invokes an alleged authorial intention to re-assign *The Brothers Karamazov* from secular art to sacred writ. “*The Brothers Karamazov* was intended as Dostoevsky’s apocalypse,” Bloom asserts; “its genre might best be called Scripture, rather than novel or tragedy, saga or chronicle” (1). Leonard Stanton comments on Bloom’s thoughts regarding the novel: “the thought of shelving it between *Acts of the Apostles* and St. Paul’s *Epistle to the Colossians* gives rise to a smile. Still, Bloom is very close to the mark [...]” *The Brothers Karamazov*, Stanton writes,

“is a book one might well shelve with confidence alongside such classics of the devotional canon of Orthodox contemplative spirituality as *The Ladder of Divine Ascent* by John Climacus and Father Pavel Florenskii’s *The Pillar and Foundation of Truth*” (451).

Regarding the novel and “The Life of the Elder Leonid,” Stanton asserts that “both works may be considered as belonging to the genre of Russian Orthodox devotional literature (444).” How might such a re-shelving of the novel, from the fiction section to the library of devotional literature, impact how we read and teach *The Brothers Karamazov*?

Dostoevsky forces us to refine our understanding of the relationship between literature and religion. “*The Life of Elder Leonid* is a useful guide in undertaking a critical reading of *The Brothers Karamazov*,” Stanton claims (444). When we read Dostoevsky, we are called on to explain what, exactly, we mean by a “guide” to literature. How should we understand the relationship between Dostoevsky’s art and the myriad sacred and theological sources with which it is obviously engaged? The Derridean supplement, invoked by Nariman Skakov in his exploration of the relationship between *The Idiot* and the Gospel passages describing Christ’s last moments alive on the Cross, may offer one model. “Some post-Soviet critics,” Harriet Murav writes, adopt a very different, fundamentalist model of the relationship between Dostoevsky’s art and the Bible. They use “literary criticism as a form of religious philosophy,” and so read Dostoevsky “as a fundamentalist, whose works are straightforward adaptations of the Gospels” (758).

The fundamentalist approach to Dostoevsky enjoys a great deal of prestige today among Russian and Western scholars. Tatiana Kasatkina confidently asserts that *Crime and Punishment* can be finalized with the Biblical word: “*Crime and Punishment* ends at the moment when ‘he that was dead came forth’ and Jesus said ‘Loose him and let him go,’” she proclaims (7). For Kasatkina, the relationship between the novel and its sacred inter-text appears to be hierarchical: the novel submits to the Bible; the Biblical word can be invoked to arrest the novelistic play of meaning. Because the Biblical word is primary in this critical mode, the novel can be decoded as a kind of fictional embellishment on theology, in this case the doctrine of resurrection.

The preeminence of fundamentalist criticism in Russia should not obscure the fact that each national community of Dostoevsky scholars hosts a broad diversity of opinions. Igor Volgin acknowledges the importance of Christianity for Dostoevsky, but asserts the primacy of art over religion, wresting Dostoevsky away from those who would place him within “church walls.” “Some are in a hurry to turn him [...] into a talented commentator of gospel texts,” Volgin observes; “of course, Dostoevsky is a Christian writer. But above all—he is a writer. As a writer of works of art he exists outside church walls” (10).<sup>2</sup> Volgin’s emphasis on Dostoevsky’s primary identity as a writer provides an important counterpoint to fundamentalist criticism, and forms the basis of an international community encompassing Russian, European, and North American scholars. Like Neuhäuser and Volgin, William Mills Todd claims Dostoevsky for art. “However much his readers have taken him to be a prophet, journalist and political thinker,” Todd asserts, “Dostoevsky’s vocation was imaginative literature, the art of writing” (11).<sup>3</sup>

How can these two complex international communities—comprised of those who, like Kasatkina, read Dostoevsky religiously, and those like Volgin who want Dostoevsky firmly outside the monastery walls—maintain a fruitful exchange?

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<sup>2</sup> Interview in *Kul'tura* 46-47, pp. 6-19; 12. 2001; quoted and translated by Neuhäuser (373).

<sup>3</sup> “Notes from *Underground*: The Art of Duplicity and the Duplicity of Art,” in Marie-Aude Albert ed., *Diagonales dostoïevskiennes. Mélanges en l'honneur de Jacques Catteau*. Paris: Presses de l'Université de Paris-Sorbonne, 2002, p. 161 quoted in Neuhäuser (374).

## 4.

Theophanic criticism appears to be transforming the nature of our intellectual communities as well as the status of the individual reader. A question worth posing is: when the role of the reader is to mediate the Christian revelation ostensibly contained in a Dostoevskian text, how does this affect the composition and function of scholarly communities? This shift in the role of the reader, I believe, has the potential to create new bases of inclusion or exclusion. One of the most significant consequences of the turn to religion may be the final erasure of the intellectual map drawn by the Cold War; communities based on geopolitical affiliations appear to be yielding before groupings based on new combinations of spiritual and intellectual affinities. “The works of Western scholars, past and present, who lean toward a Christian reading of Dostoevsky are now favored by Russian scholars,” Terras observes (770). Are we as scholars justified in including or excluding a colleague’s work from our purview depending on the religious orientation manifested there?

Although he writes of “the Christian critic,” Spencer is careful to specify that Christian faith in the reader is not a requirement for practicing theophanic criticism. He acknowledges the initial impression of exclusivity—“this kind of reading really does seem to be available only to the Christian scholar”—but rejects it as false: “perhaps even theophanic practices of reading cannot be limited to believers,” he concludes (278, 279). In the absence of personal faith, however, the theophanic reader must be willing to perceive artistic texts as vehicles for Christian truth, and, more significantly for our discussion, be willing to present Christian belief *as truth* rather than as a proposition of a literary text under analysis.

When approaching the Dostoevskian text, Apollonio argues, the reader is confronted by a choice: he or she can choose “whether or not to commit to the ‘suspension of disbelief’—or, to put it more strongly, to the *belief*—that allows a text, be it artistic literature or scripture, to do its work.” This powerful statement raises several urgent questions. What work do we expect artistic literature to do? Do we expect similar work from artistic literature and scripture? Setting these questions aside, I would like to draw attention to the potential implications of faith-based criticism for scholarly community. Should willingness to commit to Christian belief for the purpose of reading Dostoevsky be a requirement (or even a desirable trait) for scholarly inquiry?

## 5.

The full significance of the religious turn for individual reading practices and communities can't be understood without analyzing the historical context from which it has emerged. We are accustomed to understanding the turn within a specifically Russian context. "A rediscovery of Russia's and, in particular Russian literature's, Orthodox Christian heritage is one of the remarkable phenomena of Russian intellectual life after the collapse of the Soviet Union," Terras notes (769). At first glance, the turn does appear to originate in unique aspects of post-Soviet experience. The indisputable Christian dimensions of Dostoevsky's art, Terras reminds us, had to be "'under cover' during the Soviet period" (770). Liberated from Soviet ideological constraints, many Russian scholars are now advancing an Orthodox understanding of Russian culture, and "the central figure in the promotion of these ideas is Dostoevsky" (Terras 770).

Closer scrutiny reveals that the religious turn in Dostoevsky studies is also deeply embedded in Western cultural trends, however. It may be useful to set aside any rhetoric of exceptionalism and instead situate ourselves within a multicultural and interdisciplinary landscape. The phenomenon of the turn itself, and our inclination to classify it as quintessentially Russian, both testify to the opposite: to the integration of Dostoevsky studies within Western intellectual history. The popularity of the "Orthodox literary criticism" Fedorova identifies in Ponomareva's work coincides with what critics have described as "a *tournant théologique*" in continental philosophy and the "postsecularity" of the American academy (Fedorova 785; Bradley 21; Spencer 278).

Jacques Derrida and scholars of continental philosophy manifested a turn to religion in the 1990s, at the same time as Dostoevsky critics were responding to the allegedly unique features of the post-Soviet cultural climate. In "Derrida's God: A Genealogy of the Theological Turn," Arthur Bradley argues that "the sheer volume of work" produced in the nineties addressing the religious dimensions of thinkers such as Heidegger, Levinas, Foucault, Deleuze, and Derrida reveals "how central religion has become to the contemporary philosophical imaginary" (Bradley 21). Derrida became a locus for theological investigation in Western intellectual circles, much as Dostoevsky has become a focal point for Russian Orthodox religious inquiry. "By the time of his death in 2004," Bradley writes of Derrida, "deconstruction had become the centre of a virtual publishing industry for theologians, biblical scholars and philosophers of religion" (21).



The fact that Western deconstructionists, post-Soviet Russian intellectuals, and Dostoevsky scholars throughout the world manifested an enthusiasm for theological inquiry at the same time should prompt us to question any specifically Russian genealogy of the religious turn. It should also alert us to the existence of intriguing parallels linking our field with developments in U.S. higher education. The popularity of faith-based readings of Dostoevsky coincides with a new visibility of Christian reading practices in the humanities at large. Among American humanists, Sharon Kim observes in her contribution to *Christianity and Literature*, “many people have been attempting to practice or theorize literary analysis as a modality of religious belief” (289).

Literary analysis as a modality of religious belief is not new, of course, but in American academic circles it has typically faced a good deal of opposition. In “Invisible Domain: Religion and American Literary Studies,” Jenny Franchot laments the lack of serious work on religious topics, chastising Americanists for displaying “a studied neglect of religion” (835). We have never been in a situation comparable to that of American Studies in the mid 1990s, when Franchot asked “But where is religion? Why so invisible?” (834). We can boast of scholars, who, in Franchot’s characterization of scholars of African-American religiosity, are “demonstrably engaged by the seriousness and splendor of their topic” (838). It might be worth asking why the fields of Dostoevsky studies and American studies have responded so differently to the religious dimensions of their subject matter.

Where does what is in many respects our strength—our ability to engage deeply with religion—come from? It can’t simply be prompted by our subject matter, because if the subject dictated or controlled the direction of scholarship, then American studies would be as rich in religious works as we are. The situation in American studies shows that scholars can be at odds with their subject matter. The neglect of religion “is especially ruinous in our field,” Franchot chides, “since America has been and continues to be manifestly religious in complex and intriguing ways. And not only America but American literature” (839). “The U.S. is the most religious nation in the developed world,” Susan Jacoby asserts in *The Washington Post* (2007); America is “the most professedly Christian of the developed nations” Bill McKibben writes in *Harper’s* (2005). Writing in 1995, coinciding with the urge to reintegrate Orthodoxy into Russian public life, Franchot affirms “the persistent vitality” of faith in American culture and “the renewed impulse... to make religious belief a more prominent feature of our public culture” (834). Yet American

literary scholars resisted the influence of American culture and persisted in a studied avoidance of religion.

According to Franchot, Americanists have evaded the deeply religious quality of American literature and culture “as if religious voices, like certain kinds of shame, have become unmentionable” (837). She identifies two primary reasons for the sense of shame surrounding religious inquiry in American studies. One reason may be the perception that interest in religion and “private regions of ‘interior life’” is “naïve unless those regions are subordinated to the domain of linguistic representation or to the critiques of Marx, Nietzsche, Freud, and Foucault” (834).<sup>4</sup> Franchot also cites her colleagues’ awareness that Christian religious commitment on the part of artists has sometimes been accompanied by anti-Semitism. “For more than forty years, literary critics have claimed either explicitly or (more typically) implicitly that to be interested in religious belief is to risk becoming an anti-Semitic Anglican like T.S. Eliot,” Franchot explains (834). There might be some benefit in asking: Why have we, compared to scholars of another deeply Christian culture—the U.S.—shown comparatively little concern about mixing the public and private? Why do we seem relatively unconcerned about the possible connections between Dostoevsky’s Christian faith and his anti-Semitism?

Americanists have not been the only ones to harbor misgivings about the role of religion in scholarship. “Critics and literary theorists,” Tiffany Kriner writes in *Christianity and Literature*, “have worried about the (potentially negative) effects of religious commitments on the integrity of scholarship” (267). Qualms about blurring distinctions between the public and private in one’s intellectual work may be receding, however. Surveying the American academy in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Stanley Fish argues that we are witnessing the retreat of Marxism before religion. When asked “what would succeed high theory and the triumvirate of race, gender, and class as the center of intellectual energy in the academy,” Fish explains, “I answered like a shot: religion” (1). If Fish is correct, Marxist categories of analysis are yielding before religious modes of criticism in the U.S., as in post-Soviet Russia.

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<sup>4</sup> A similar neglect of religious topics as the realm of the spiritual, rather than as subjects for socio-economic, psychoanalytic, or semiotic demystification, may characterize early modern English studies as well. According to Jackson and Marotti, scholars of the early modern period “adopt the stance of analytic observers who know how to decode religious language and ideas as mystifications of economic, political, and social conditions and relationships, usually assuming that religion itself is a form of ‘false consciousness.’” See Ken Jackson and Arthur F. Marotti, 2004, p.168.

There may be other, more specifically “academic reasons for the new importance of Christianity in literary studies,” in addition to a general retreat of Marxism: “the erosion of the rationalist and scientific foundation of the academic enterprise,” or more simply, the “move toward antifoundationalism (the epistemology most often referred to simply as ‘postmodern’)” (Spencer 274). A central consequence of postmodernism for literary studies, Spencer explains, “is that the central role of conviction to the academic enterprise comes to the foreground and Christianity as well as other religions no longer seem at an epistemic disadvantage for having been based on faith/belief” (274). Although the field of Dostoevsky studies cannot boast of much criticism informed by an explicitly postmodern sensibility, our turn to religion may attest to an intellectual affinity linking us with the larger community of academic humanists.

Far from evincing the influence of Russian exceptionalism or traditionalism, I submit, the surge of interest in Christianity among Dostoevsky’s readers, both East and West, may signify our participation in postmodernism’s rejection of classic liberal distinctions between public and private, belief and truth, evidence and revelation. The relationship between our turn to religion and developments such as postmodernism and “the theological turn within deconstruction” is surely complicated and worth investigating (Bradley 21).

Our turn to religion may likewise be evidence of another deep-rooted Western tradition coming to expression, in addition to dissatisfaction with both Marxism and liberalism: the Western urge to create exotic “others” inspiring phenomena such as Orientalism. There is a significant exception to the “studied neglect of religion” in American studies, Franchot points out, and that is the vibrant field dedicated to studying Black spirituality (835). “The field of Black Atlantic studies is one of the very few contemporary locations for interesting work on religion,” Franchot writes (838). Americanists may resist studying the religious life of white Americans, Franchot observes, but they engage enthusiastically with the spiritual experience of African-Americans. Franchot’s explanation for this discrepancy may be relevant for our field. “Religion,” she writes, “must be deemed sufficiently outside the Western tradition to elicit the intellectual attention needed to write provocatively about its workings.

One might suspect that a still potent exoticism—a romanticizing of the ‘primitive’—partially motivates the engagement that distinguishes scholarship on early American and Black American spirituality” (Franchot 838).

Does Russian religiosity, like Black spirituality, occupy an exoticized space within which faith is appealing to Western scholars?<sup>5</sup>

Our desire to read Dostoevsky religiously may have yet another Western lineage as well. In her analysis of *Crime and Punishment*, Kasatkina advocates performing “a multilevel interpretation comparable to the exegesis of sacred texts” (9). Is sacred exegesis the proper model for literary scholarship? The assumption that it is has a Western European genealogy. In his 1319 letter to Cangrande della Scala, Dante instructs his patron to read the *Commedia* with the same hermeneutic method used for reading the Bible. After the Renaissance, Protestant theologians and scholars of language such as Friedrich Schleiermacher developed the hermeneutic turn even further, arguing for the legitimacy of each individual as reader and the extension of exegetical reading practices, originally reserved for sacred texts, to other forms of writing.

Several of the essays presented here attest to the extraordinarily complex genealogies behind Dostoevsky’s art, and his capacity to surprise us with unexpected affinities. A striking image emerges from the analysis of *Crime and Punishment* provided by Lyudmila Parts: Dostoevsky the philosophical pugilist, fearlessly entering into debates about Christianity and the value of pity with some of the most powerful thinkers of the Western tradition. His preoccupation with Western developments was counterbalanced by his respect for native Russian spiritual traditions, as Olga Stuchebrukhov’s essay reminds us. *Crime and Punishment* can be simultaneously read as a voice in a Western dialogue about pity, and as a manifestation of Slavophile respect for Orthodox hesychasm.

Clint Walker shows how Dostoevsky’s passionate political and religious commitments inform his art, analyzing the use of Gospel quotation in *Crime and Punishment* as a key to parsing Dostoevsky’s views on Russian history. Walker’s integration of religious and historical inquiry exemplifies an approach masterfully developed by Russian scholars such as Boris Tikhomirov. Feminist criticism, like postmodernist criticism, is underrepresented in Dostoevsky studies. Katherine Briggs contributes to a small but significant body of scholarship drawing our attention to the feminist dimensions of Dostoevsky’s art.<sup>6</sup> Developing the

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<sup>5</sup> Dale Peterson explores potential parallels linking Russian and African-American culture in *Up From Bondage*: “these separate voices have expressed their historical distinctiveness in words and texts that are remarkably akin to one another,” Peterson argues (2).

<sup>6</sup> See for example the work of Nina Pelikan Straus (1994) and Liza Knapp (2004).

notion of “spiritual motherhood,” she points out the ways in which Dostoevsky’s representations of Mary accord with a feminist emphasis on Mary as a loving, suffering mother to her female spiritual children, rather than as a virgin with a primary relationship to a male God.

## 6.

After outlining a multi-cultural genealogy of the theological turn and sketching its potential implications for reading practices and communities, I’d like to conclude by returning to the role of the reader, specifically the role of the individual reader’s faith commitment. Dostoevsky’s art clearly yields different readings to different readers; some vistas are accessible only from certain starting points. Can the different approaches—those informed by faith and those not—be reconciled within one scholarly community? Questions about the role of faith in literary criticism are being posed in many quarters. The special seminar hosted by *Christianity and Literature* showcases the diversity of opinion that can reign even within a community that identifies itself as Christian. The variety of perspectives evident in the community of Christian literary critics may prompt discussion about the relevance of the reader’s faith for Dostoevsky studies.

Spencer sets out “to determine what Christians can contribute to literary studies that non-Christian critics cannot” (273). He produces a brief taxonomy of critical modes, all of them relevant to Dostoevsky scholarship, and concludes that none of them require Christian faith in the reader. When the job of the critic is “to spell out the themes, metaphors, and allusions in texts—such as Dante’s *Divine Comedy*—that are indebted to Christianity,” Spencer writes, “...we don’t need Christians to do it. There is nothing about this kind of scholarship that requires one to be a Christian.” (275).

“Even if it might be empirically the case that scholars who are likely to recognize theological overtones in texts are themselves religious, there is no need for them to believe the theology, do the practices, or have lived the history, any more than a scholar of ancient Hittite religion needs to be a practitioner of that religion to understand and explain the theological references in the Gilgamesh epic” (Spencer 275).

“Another type of ‘Christian’ scholarship is that which sees literature as primarily a prompt for theological reflection,” Spencer notes (275).

“But again, one need not be a Christian in order to do theological reflection, any more than one would need to be a person of an oppressed gender to recognize gender oppression and construction in the text. Beliefs are not required, only knowledge” (Spencer 276).

Perhaps “even theophanic reading is not fundamentally a Christian critical practice,” Spencer concludes. “And if this is the case, then it may be that Christian identity has no fundamental effect upon the practice of criticism and that the notion of Christian criticism is simply a mistake” (279). Spencer rigorously distinguishes between identity and performance. Anyone, he claims, can execute the sorts of readings invited by literary texts engaged with Christian faith, such as Dostoevsky’s.

A different position is staked out by those who affirm the superiority of identity over performance. Writing in the same volume of *Christianity and Literature* with Spencer, Kriner approvingly quotes a call for papers for a 2007 MLA seminar on “The Turn to Religion in Literary Studies:”

“seminar papers are invited that explore ways in which Christian scholars can participate in the ‘turn to religion’ by strengthening a critical sensibility... and by demonstrating that Christian commitments can lead to greater interpretive clarity” (266).

Like Kriner and the organizers of this MLA panel, and in distinction to Spencer, George Pattison and Diane Thompson assert that Christian *identity* yields interpretive power. Christian faith in the reader, Pattison and Thompson claim, may be a prerequisite for understanding Dostoevsky. “The remark that there are some things one understands only when one believes is not to be dismissed,” they write (11). It certainly should not be dismissed, but analyzed and contextualized.

The belief that the individual’s (religious) identity is essential to the interpretive process is a central tenet of postmodern criticism. Those American academics from other humanistic fields who, like Pattison and Thompson, assert the centrality of religious identity for the scholarly enterprise cite postmodern identity politics as legitimizing their claims. In the humanities at large, Kriner writes, Christian scholars argue that “aspects of a postmodern academy are what justify and frame the right to claim a religious identity as fundamental...” (270). Postmodern identity politics emboldens Christian scholars, like racial, sexual, and gender minorities, “to map out how religion as subjectivity and subject might contribute to academic endeavor,” Kriner explains (269). Harold Bush urges Christian scholars to follow the lead of “feminist and Africanist and Marxist and psychoanalytic critics,”

“who lie awake at night dreaming up intriguing and original angles on their fields of study. These critics are not shy about asserting the continued relevance of their own particular subjectivities to literary studies... Christian identity has very much to contribute to these theoretical areas, and aspects of postmodernism support the fundamental right to claim as much” (2001: 88)

We find ourselves once again confronted by the possibility of deep affinity with postmodern dimensions of the larger academy.

If Dostoevsky’s art (or at least significant dimensions of it) does yield itself exclusively to believing Christians, what are the implications for reading, teaching, and scholarly community? An emphasis on religious identity raises tough questions about the role of the reader, and about inclusions and exclusions. We agree that literary interpretation is performed by individuals who bring different backgrounds and skill sets to bear, but we aren’t often pressed to define exactly how, or to what extent, subjective factors influence interpretation. The fact of faith-based readings does just that: it demands that we clarify how we understand the role of the reader in literary criticism.

Are Jewish readers barred from appreciating certain dimensions of Dostoevsky’s novels? Should we caution our Moslem, atheist and agnostic students that some aspects of Dostoevsky’s art will remain forever inaccessible to them? Should we give them compensatory points on essays and exams? These are not frivolous questions. Dostoevsky himself was comfortable with the idea of exclusions. In 1873 he visited an exhibition of contemporary Russian paintings that were being sent to an international exposition in Vienna, and recounted his impressions for readers of his *Diary of a Writer*. “Can they understand our artists there?” he asks in “Apropos of the Exhibition” (205). “Well, I ask you, what will a German or Viennese Yid (Vienna, they say, is full of Yids, just like Odessa) understand in this picture?” (“Nu chto, sprashivaetsia, poimet v etoi kartine nemets ili venskii zhid (Vena, kak i Odessa, govoriat, vsia v zhidakh?)” (Lantz, vol. 1: 209; *PSS* 21:71).

## 7.

There can’t be any last word regarding any aspect of our engagement with Dostoevsky. He was multi-voiced in his letters and non-fiction as well as in his novels. The towering figure who crafted a prophet status also cautioned Moscow university students against the search for a prophet. “Esli khotite mne sdelat’ bol’shoe udovol’stvie,” he writes them in 1878,

“to, radi boga, ne sochtite menia za kakogo-to uchitelia ili propovednika svysoka” (*PSS* 30.1:25). I turn the page over to his great contemporary, Leo Tolstoy. Tolstoy’s words about Dostoevsky can serve as a point of departure for further discussion, with all due awareness of the ironies and complexities involved: Leo Tolstoy criticizing the making of a contemporary prophet; and, of course, the issue of the addressee, Nikolai Strakhov. With all due respect for Dostoevsky’s artistic achievement—Tolstoy elevates Dostoevsky above even Pushkin, asserting of *Notes from the House of the Dead* that there is “no better book in all modern literature, including Pushkin” (Tolstoy 517)—Tolstoy objects to what he calls “a false and lying attitude [...] towards Dostoevsky:”

“you have exaggerated his importance and exaggerated in the usual way, raising to the rank of prophet and saint a man who dies at the burning point of his inner struggle between good and evil. The writer touches and interests us, but it is impossible to place a man entirely composed of struggle on a pedestal to edify posterity” (Tolstoy 550).

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