

"THE METAPHYSICAL MEANING OF THE LEGEND" from THE GRAND INQUISITOR

by ANTANAS MACEINA

[The first edition of **The Grand Inquisitor** appeared in 1946; a second corrected edition was published in 1950, by Venta press, in Germany. The excerpt translated here is taken from the second edition. A German translation, **Der Grossinquisitor**, appeared in 1952.

The Grand Inquisitor is the first volume of the author's **Cor Inquietum** series, devoted to the elucidation of the relations between man and God as these are manifested in the world we live in. In this series, the topic is approached through the medium of literature. Maceina believes, according to the essay "Philosophy and Poetry" which was added as an introduction to **The Grand Inquisitor**, that poetry and philosophy are essentially the same thing since both are intended to express existence, although they do this in different ways. Thus, the contents of a poem are, in a sense, already philosophical. The task of the philosopher is to transform the intuitive, direct experience of reality present in poetry, into a reflective understanding. **The Grand Inquisitor** is thus based on the belief that in Dostoevskii's poem, the legend of the grand inquisitor which he included in the **Brothers Karamazov**, there lies a metaphysics of history.

The selection which follows is taken from the first part, titled "The Meaning of the Legend" and is the third section in that part. The first section is concerned with the "psychological meaning" of the legend. We are told that the legend does express Ivan Karamazov's attitude towards God, so that the legend can be understood psychologically, as another device used by Dostoevskii to describe Ivan's personality. Ivan, while admitting that God exists, believes the world which God has created to be absurd. The legend shows that even Christ Himself, who came to close the breach between the world and God, perpetuates the absurd order begun by God. Where is the absurdity? Christ came to bring men freedom, but human nature is too weak and cannot stand it. Men are too weak to live in accordance with the teachings of Christ. Human nature cannot bear them. Men desire happiness, contentment, the satisfaction of bodily needs, yet Christ brings freedom and a constant struggle. Hence, history will turn around and the order Christ tried to establish will turn into its opposite. The inquisitor is the agent of this. He takes away men's freedom in exchange for happiness, and thus "corrects" the work of God.

This is Ivan's indictment of God. But yet, as Alyosha observes, instead of an attack, it turns out to be an apology for Christ. The inquisitor, who has turned away from Christ to satisfy human wants, turns out to be the villain.

This suggests that another interpretation is possible. This interpretation is stated in the second section, on the moral meaning of the legend. The legend is a criticism of the Catholic Church. The Roman Church has turned the teachings of Christ into their opposite. The Church has abandoned Christ and is now following the devil. The Church has succumbed to the temptations which the devil made to Christ in the desert. Maceina admits that this censure is part of the meaning of the legend. However, the legend cannot be interpreted simply in these terms. As a censure, it would be a defense of Christ against the inquisitor who has perverted His teachings, something which is out of character for Ivan. What then is the final meaning of the legend? It is a symbolic portrayal of the tensions found in human history.

These tensions are portrayed through the conflict between Christ and the inquisitor, identified by Maceina with the antichrist. The inquisitor is a man who has lived in the desert and has suffered much, who loves man, who is an idealist and is willing to sacrifice himself for the happiness of mankind. Why is the inquisitor, then, Christ's opponent? Because, in spite of what he publicly professes, the inquisitor believes neither in God nor in immortality. What he does, it now appears, he does not because he loves men, but because he has realized that there is no God and that death ends all. But in such

a case, why burden men with freedom of conscience and a freely chosen faith? Why not rather give them bread, by authority silence their consciences, and allow them to sin?

In history, we find a tension between the principle of Christ, human freedom and dignity, and the principle of the inquisitor, bread and an easy conscience. Maceina holds that, whatever may be true in principle, in this world freedom and happiness are incompatible in practice. Happiness is something we cannot obtain in this world, but yet, often we are ready to give away our freedom in order to obtain happiness.

The tensions of history are repeated in each individual man. Every man is both a rebel and a slave. The teachings of Christ are intended to save man the rebel, the inquisitor appeals to man the slave. Trans.]

If we wish to understand the deepest meaning of the legend of the Grand Inquisitor, we must begin not with any single element, not with any single idea in it, but with its totality, with its complete structure. Separate elements, separate ideas, even the separate parts, are only ways in which this totality develops and manifests itself concretely. These support the totality, they bring it out into the open, but they are not this totality in its essence. The totality lies deeper. It is that inner tie, that invisible but real form which unifies the separate ideas, binds them together into one whole, and thus contains the deeper and final meaning we are seeking. What then constitutes the wholeness of the legend of the Grand Inquisitor? What is the internal tie, the internal form, from which the separate ideas and the separate elements arise?

The careful reader of the legend can observe that Dostoevskii's tale is nothing else than a somewhat extended interpretation of the three temptations of Christ in the desert. Before beginning his public life, Christ was led by the spirit into the desert to endure three temptations of unusual significance. (Cf. Mt. 4.:1-11) In the gospels, the story of the temptations is told briefly and in a simple manner. Nevertheless, its meaning is profound. Because of this, it has always attracted the attention of thinkers, and more than one theologian and philosopher has undertaken to explain it. Dostoevskii also did this: in his legend of the Grand Inquisitor he tried to gain insight into the meaning of the temptations and give them a broader and deeper perspective. It is true that he did this not by means of rational reflection and abstraction, but through a concrete poetic image; however, no essential changes take place here. The legend of the Grand Inquisitor, while it is a work of poetry, becomes an interpretation of the three temptations.

Even at the beginning of his speech, the inquisitor mentions certain "admonitions and warnings" made to Christ, to which, however, He had not paid attention, which He had not heeded. These "admonitions and warnings" puzzle even Alyosha, the first hearer of the legend. He interrupts Ivan's narrative and asks: "what is the meaning of 'You did not lack admonitions and warnings'?" To which Ivan replies: "this point is the most important one so let the old one speak."¹ The speech lasts to the end of the legend. The whole legend of the Grand Inquisitor is one great and long speech by the old man. But this speech is nothing else than an analysis of the admonitions and warnings already mentioned, an attempt to show that Christ by not listening to them made an irreparable mistake. These admonitions and warnings are the three temptations which Christ had to endure in the desert, as the inquisitor himself in his speech clearly reveals.

"The dread and wise spirit, the spirit of self-destruction and non-existence, the great spirit talked to You in the desert. As the books say, he tempted You." Those admonitions and warnings originated with this spirit, who gave Christ a sign not to act in accordance with His own principles, but to follow his advice. But Christ rejected the spirit's suggestions because He considered them to be temptations. "You must not tempt the Lord your God" (Mt. 4:7)² was Christ's clear reply, followed by the words "vade, satana" (4:10). Christ understood the admonitions and warnings of the spirit of the desert not as signs originating in being itself and thus worthy of consideration, but as coming from a deceitful mind and thus to be rejected even without any deeper reflection. And really, Christ does not analyze the devil's suggestions. He does not even criticize them. He simply rejects them, saying three sayings having an eternal meaning: "Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God"; "You must not tempt the Lord your God"; "You will worship the Lord your God and Him alone will you serve." These three sayings are three gestures by which Christ rejects the three suggestions of the spirit of the desert. In the presence of the tempter, Christ acts as the Lord of being. He views the essence of being and sees the lie of the spirit of the desert. For this reason, He brushes him off, like dust from His sandals.

But the inquisitor regards all this in a different way. Here, as everywhere else, he tries to "correct" Christ's attitudes and actions. He regards the desert spirit's suggestions to Christ, not as temptations, not as lies, but as the most profound truth which has ever been uttered in the world. For this reason, he begins to analyze this "truth." When presented with the temptations, Christ did not pause for even a second. But the inquisitor devotes to them the whole of his long speech. "As the books say," he begins, "he tempted you. But is that so? Could anything truer be said than what he offered to you in three questions and what you rejected and what the books call "temptations"? I tell you, if there has ever been on earth a real miracle, never seen again, a miracle like a storm, it took place on that day, on the day of the three temptations. The statement of those three questions was itself the miracle." The inquisitor rightly feels that the appearance of the temptations was the really decisive thing. Not only the fate of Christ but of the whole world depended upon Christ's attitude towards them. As at no other time in history, that day mankind was at the crossroads: to follow the way of Christ or that of the spirit of the desert. Without any hesitation, Christ chose in accordance with his divine essence and rejected the temptations. However, this did not abolish them. The way once sketched out by the spirit of the desert remained ever alive and enticing. Even more, this way slowly infected the concrete everyday existence of mankind, slowly spread, turning mankind away from the path of Christ, and now, after fifteen centuries the inquisitor is able to announce to Christ that he has "corrected" His teaching, that he has heeded the temptations and made them the basis of this "corrected" life. The

tempting by the spirit of the desert is not only a specific event which once affected the person of the historical Christ; the spirit's scheme is also an essential force at work in history, an essential aspect of history. It is always a living option which constantly tempts mankind. The spirit's appearance in a desert of Palestine was only its total concentrating in the presence of the God-man. He, like sin and death, was destroyed in his essence. However, he remains and acts in his concrete manifestations. Mankind in its history must experience what Christ experienced in the desert. For this reason the inquisitor asserts that if it were possible that these three questions had disappeared without a trace from all books, if it were necessary to think them up again and replace them in those books, then it would be hardly possible to find anything which "in its force, power, and profundity" would bear even a distant resemblance to the question posed by the "great and wise" spirit, even if for this task we were to gather "all the wise ones of the earth, rulers, priests, scientists, philosophers, and poets." The three questions expressed the whole subsequent way of mankind. By means of them, the most secret fate of man was stated. In them, that side of human nature from which Christ turned away, that side upon which He did not build His teaching and so — in the eyes of the inquisitor — was defeated, reveals itself. Since he faces Christ as the "corrector" of His teaching, as the judge of His allegedly unwise behavior, the inquisitor is an apologist for the three temptations.

Thus in his speech he undertakes to analyze the temptations. That speech is very systematic. He explains the temptations one after another, points out the importance for man of each one, and sketches out what would have taken place if Christ had heeded the spirit of the desert. His whole speech is a subtle and profound explanation of the temptations. But it is at the same time the content of the legend. Everything that Ivan relates before the inquisitor's speech, interjects in its course, or adds once he has finished is significant but not really essential. All of that belongs to the framework of the legend, to its setting, throws light upon one or another of the legend's thoughts, provides a sharper background, but does not alter its meaning. The essence and meaning of the legend lies in the speech of the inquisitor.

But this speech, as was said, consists of an explanation of the temptations. Thus, the legend of the Grand Inquisitor becomes an interpretation of these temptations. It is molded around these temptations as its essential content. The three temptations are the bases of the legend, the contents of the legend, for which all the external clarifying circumstances are shaped. The matter of the legend is not the psychological fact that Ivan wishes to justify his attitude towards God and the world; this is only its motive. It is not the moral censure of Catholicism; this is only an illustration. It is instead the metaphysical meaning of the question posed by the "great and wise spirit of the desert." The legend of the Grand Inquisitor is a symbolic extension of the fourth chapter of the gospel according to Matthew.

But in themselves, what are these three questions or three temptations? The inquisitor himself answers this: "In truth, in those three questions the whole subsequent history of mankind is brought together into one whole, and foretold. In them are stated three things in which meet all the unsolved historical contradictions of human nature. At that time," — the inquisitor continues — "this could not be known, since the future was not understood. But now that fifteen hundred years have passed, we see that in those three questions everything has been foretold correctly, and that nothing can be added to them or taken from them." In other words, the temptations of Christ are a summarized vision of the history of mankind, while the history of mankind is the development of these three temptations and their concrete manifestation in life. What at that time took place in the desert takes place every day in the history of mankind. In the three temptations are hidden the contradictions of human nature, which grow and develop in the course of history. The three temptations are like a seed which slowly grows into the immense tree of history. For this reason, the inquisitor when talking about the importance of the temptations and the need to replace them if they were to be lost mentioned the "three words, three human phrases which would express the whole of future history." In the opinion of the inquisitor, not even all of the world's wise men, philosophers, and poets could construct such sentences. But the spirit of the desert thought them up and in this way expressed the whole future history of the world.

Here we reach the final meaning of the legend of the Grand Inquisitor. As we said, the inquisitor's speech constitutes the substance of the legend. But the speech itself consists of the exposition and explanation of the three temptations. In this way, practically in a syllogistic manner, it follows that the ultimate, the metaphysical purpose of the legend is to depict the history of mankind and to reveal the contradictions of human nature raging within it. Using the three temptations, Dostoevskii presents before us the way of mankind which began with Christ and will end in the complete breaking up of the world. Christ stands at the beginning of this way, and at the end. As he concludes his speech, the inquisitor clearly refers to the second coming of Christ and to the last victorious confrontation with the same three temptations, as they had manifested themselves in human history. "Men say," the inquisitor says, "that You will come again and triumph again; that You will come with your chosen ones, with the proud and powerful." This final coming, as we will see later, disturbs the inquisitor, and he is preparing for that meeting. But at present, the meeting still seems far away and thus the inquisitor still has time to "correct" the teaching of Christ. The tempting of Christ began in the desert. In the world He has redeemed, this tempting lasts forever. At the end of time, it will be finally rejected. But until this takes place, the threat of the temptations, the danger of heeding them, is great and perfectly real. More than one really surrenders to them; more than one worships the spirit of the desert and accepts its suggestions; more than one bows before it, so that he may obtain bread or have his doubts settled by wonderful and mysterious signs, so that he may be united to the mass of mankind even by force. The whole history of the world is full of such obeisance. The whole of history is full of contradictions, filled with the conflict between Christ and the spirit of the desert. In the legend of the Grand Inquisitor, Dostoevskii depicts for us this conflict. On that day in the desert, two opposed principles came face to face. From this confrontation, Christ emerged victorious, opening up a new path for the whole world. However, what would history be like if the spirit of the desert were to win?

What would the picture of human life be like if in history the suggestions of the tempter were to triumph, if history were to be determined by them? These are the questions which are answered by the legend of the Grand Inquisitor.

Thus, the ultimate and most profound meaning of the legend hides not on the psychological or moral level, but on the metaphysical one. In its essence, the legend is nothing but a poetic expression of Dostoevskii's philosophy of history. It is true that Dostoevskii develops his views on history in a concrete form, using the experiences of one individual; develops them not in concepts, but images. But these images signify a higher reality. They symbolize human life, life as it develops in the tension between Christ and the spirit of the desert. The legend of the Grand Inquisitor is a poem, as Ivan titles it at the beginning, but a poem in the highest sense historical, for its object is the whole history of mankind. It is at the same time a tragedy, as it is called by Alyosha, but a cosmic tragedy, for the struggle is a struggle between the deepest elements of the world. Through the mouth of Dimitri Karamazov, Dostoevskii at one point says that God and the devil are battling in the human heart. The legend of the Grand Inquisitor portrays this battle. Its center is man. Everything turns here upon the happiness and freedom of man. Just because man is the center, in him meet and battle the elements of the cosmos itself: God and the devil, Christ and the spirit of the desert. Man must bear their struggle in his being and in his life. The heart of man, the very depths of his essence, provides the battlefield. In the legend of the Grand Inquisitor, this field gains cosmically historical aspects. Dostoevskii portrays the struggle between God and man not in psychological terms, as does Mauriac for example, but cosmically, transferring the action of his tragedy from the narrow psychological level to the cosmic stage of human history.

H. Rickert in his work on Goethe's **Faust** has said that **Faust** is the last truly cosmic work created in modern Europe. This remark is not quite accurate because the legend of the Grand Inquisitor, in its cosmic scope, its problems and in its tragic character, does not take second place to **Faust**. On the contrary, in our view, this work is even more cosmic than Goethe's **Faust**. The tensions of human nature, which in **Faust** are confined more to the moral level, in Dostoevskii's legend achieve a metaphysical meaning and thus gain both in profundity and in breadth. **Faust** is more the ethical drama of a single person; the legend of the Grand Inquisitor is a metaphysical tragedy of mankind as a community. Goethe's Faust seeks happiness through knowledge; the man of Dostoevskii's legend seeks it through freedom. But freedom is tied to a deeper aspect of human nature than is knowledge. Without doubt, it is dramatic to study philosophy, law, medicine, even theology and to confess to being as ignorant as before; without doubt it is dramatic to begin with a great thirst to know and end with the claim that "we can know nothing at all." However, it is tragic to place one's freedom at the feet of another, so submit one's power of decision and one's conscience to the will of another, to bury one's personality in an ant heap, and for all this pay with peace and happiness. Dostoevskii develops this tragedy not from the limited perspective of a single man but from that of the whole of mankind. Sergei Bulgakov, in his **Philosophy of Economics**, saw man's apocalyptic drama precisely in the fact that in the course of history an ever increasing number of men will decide in favor of their physical needs. Physical survival will finally become the highest purpose, for the sake of which truth, freedom, love, beauty and all other spiritual things will be sacrificed. The time will come, it is perhaps not very far away, when bread will become the supreme and final ingredient of human happiness. The inquisitor of Dostoevskii's legend is the symbol of this apocalyptic man. In him, the tensions between spirit and matter reaches its highest pitch. In essence, he does not reject the teachings of Christ. He recognizes and admits their nobility and divine character, but he considers the teachings to be too difficult for human nature and hence decides against Christ. He places bread before freedom. And thus in him the cosmic tragicness and apocalyptic strife become especially sharp. These cosmic elements are revealed here in all their breadth and with infinite terror.

Every more extensive and distinctive historical period has produced some one work which expresses the spirit and basic attitudes of that period. The Middle Ages are crowned with the **Divine Comedy** of Dante, the Enlightenment with Goethe's **Faust**; the legend of the Grand Inquisitor becomes the crown of recent history. In his work, Dante gathered up and expressed the unity of medieval life, its hierarchical structure, its vertical orientation towards God. In his work, Goethe gathered up and expressed the longing for moral life which arose in an individualism marked by an ever more dissolute spirit. Dostoevskii in his legend gathered up and expressed the life of man who has turned away from God and has lost Him. The period of modern history is the hour of an especially intense warfare between God and the devil. In it, these two elements are especially sharply separated and in conflict with each other. The most recent history has been a renewal of the dialogue between Christ and the spirit of the desert. In his legend, Dostoevskii gathered up and expressed the tensions of this history. In the legend, man's idealism, his endless love for weak and suffering humanity, his suffering and courage are brought out into the open, but at the same time also, his succumbing to a lower essence, his constant use of lies and deceits, his trampling of conscience, and finally, his total unbelief in God or the immortality of the soul. Here, man is shown filled with profound contradictions which ultimately destroy each other and reveal the tragedy of historical life in all its horror. There are no more frightening characters in the world's literature than the inquisitor of Dostoevskii's legend. He is not a demon whose "real milieu" is evil, as in the case of Goethe's Mephistopheles. The inquisitor is a man, a suffering and searching man, dying for mankind and for the sake of mankind engaging in a final battle with Christ. If the works of Dostoevskii, as is maintained by Merezhkovskii³ and Ivanov⁴, are not epics, not novels, but tragedies, then the legend of the Grand Inquisitor is the most tragic of them; and within the legend, the most tragic figure is the inquisitor. As was said, he is a symbol of historical man on his way to the apocalyptic solution. He is the symbol of man who travels through time, of man whose life develops and takes place in time. The whole of the history after Christ finds voice through him. The historical road of mankind is painful and tragic, for it is the way of the conflict between Christ and the spirit of the desert. This conflict has taken place in all ages. But our times experience it in a special way. In Dostoevskii's legend this way is

depicted. For this reason, this work has a metaphysical significance which goes beyond the domains of psychology and of ethics. For this reason, it is the peak of Dostoevskii's creativity.

The following chapters of this study will attempt to unravel the separate strains of this significance, point out their relations and foundations, and, in this way employing the symbolic images of this great poem, recreate Dostoevskii's metaphysics of history.

1. [Quotations from the *Brothers Karamazov* are translated from the Lithuanian version of Maceina. The English translation by Constance Garnett, published in the Modern Library, was consulted. Trans.]
2. [Biblical passages are translated from the Lithuanian text used by Maceina. However, the translator relied heavily on the *Jerusalem Bible*, published by Doubleday & Co., in 1966. A translation in contemporary English was chosen, since there is no "Biblical Lithuanian" corresponding to the "Biblical English" of the older English versions. Trans.]
3. [Dimitri] Merezhkowskii, *Tolstoi und Dostojewski*, 1903 [German translation].
4. Ivanov, *Dostojewski*, 1932. [This could be a reference to a work by Vyacheslav Ivanov, translated into English as *Freedom and the Tragic Life*, New York, 1952.]