



Written by [Dr. Duke Pesta](#) on December 6, 2021

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The Golden Age of Christian Art and Culture From Dante to Dostoevsky

Before the calendar year of 2021 expires — and the Christian holidays that mark its conclusion pass fully into history — it is instructive and thought-provoking to consider two other momentous years ending in “21” that stand out across the long, eventful annals of Christian history and civilization.

Seven-hundred years ago, in 1321, Dante Alighieri died in exile in Ravenna, Italy. Despite being Florence’s most celebrated son and revered poet, civil faction and international strife meant that Dante would not see his native Florence for most of the last two decades of his life. Nevertheless, his *Divine Comedy* remains a high-water mark of Christian poetry and resulted in the first genuinely Christian epic, rivaling and in certain aspects superseding the epic masterpieces of Classical authors, including Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, and Virgil’s *Aeneid*. Often cited as both the great summation of Medieval wisdom and the path-breaking precursor of Christian humanism, the *Comedy* serves as a bridge between the scholastic philosophy of the Middle Ages and Europe’s new (re)encounter with classical learning and the burgeoning individualism that characterized Renaissance thought, an achievement that garnered for Dante the laurel garland as the first true poet laureate of Christian civilization.



A full five centuries later, in 1821, Fyodor Dostoevsky was born in Moscow. Like Dante, he too was banished and spent a long period in exile. Dostoevsky’s banishment took place, however, during his early adulthood, before he had achieved broad and lasting fame as a novelist and essayist. In 1849, he was sentenced to death for belonging to a subversive organization, the Petrashevsky Circle, and for the crime of reading banned books and circulating them to others. At the last moment — and in dramatic fashion — Dostoevsky’s death sentence was commuted, and he was ultimately sentenced to four years



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of hard labor in Siberia, followed by another six years of compulsory military service, also in exile. Dostoevsky's existential and brutal experiences in prison engendered in him a deep recommitment to the Christian faith, and upon obtaining freedom he moved to St. Petersburg in 1859, where he began in earnest his formal career as a novelist. Henceforth, his novels would plumb with increasing depth and insight the mysteries of the Christian faith, emphasizing redemption against a backdrop of secular Westernization and encroaching atheistic socialism that would eventually transform Russia into the world's first communist state. The art, philosophy, and Christian apologetics that underpin Dostoevsky's major novels — *Crime and Punishment* (1866), *The Idiot* (1869), *Demons* (1872), and *The Brothers Karamazov* (1881) — are among the most powerful arguments ever marshalled in support of a Christian worldview, a revival of faith that alone might check the rising tides of materialism, atheism, and socialism before they swamped under forever the grand civilization of Western Christendom. If Dante's death in 1321 marked the passing of the greatest poet of Christian imagination, then surely the birth of Dostoevsky in 1821 presaged the rise of Christianity's last major prophet, a monitory voice of Old Testament stature and vision, whose lamentation for the receding influence of the Gospels would fall on similarly deaf ears.

The years 1321 and 1821 thus loosely bookend the Golden Age of Christian art and culture: not a bad run for a religion that gave birth to such widely diverse civilizations — all under the aegis of Christ — spanning Europe from Florence to St. Petersburg, and from North Africa to Scandinavia, eventually spreading to the New World and beyond. In the arts alone, this empire of Christian thought and influence gave us Brunelleschi, Donatello, Michelangelo, and Bernini in sculpture and architecture; Giotto, Raphael, Titian, Caravaggio, and Rembrandt in painting; Bach, Handel, Mozart, Beethoven, and Haydn in Classical music; and Chaucer, Shakespeare, Donne, Bunyan, Milton, Swift, and Dickens in English literature. Prior to this Christian Golden Age — when Christendom was finally so well established that it had much less to fear from outside threats such as Islam than it did from internecine strife and denominational difference from inside — there were some 1,300 years of bronze- and silver-age Christian culture, of nascent, ascending, evolving, creating, and crusading Christian imagination, warring against infidels abroad and heretics at home, still heavily dependent upon Classical pagan and Byzantine traditions in painting, sculpture, and a host of other arts and sciences.

And from Dostoevsky's death in 1881 until now, the Golden Age of Christian culture has receded in the West, gradually giving way to a sterile era of increasingly confused and intellectually soft dogma and misplaced sentimentality masquerading as tolerance and inclusivity. Mainstream, and even many evangelical, churches have abandoned Christ's clear command to be in the world but not of it, and the call for Christians to be "as wise as serpents and as innocent as doves" has been warped by a pharisaical clergy, as dull as asses and as cowardly as chickens. Today, Western culture finds itself adrift in the muddy backwater of post-Christian culture, a morass of materialism and reanimated paganism, flowing more rapidly each decade toward the churning white waters and steep, rock-strewn falls of global socialism.

This is not to say that Christian culture had been completely moribund since the late 19th century. Despite its waning influence, such figures as G.K. Chesterton, J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Dorothy Sayers, Thomas Mann, and Malcolm Muggeridge, to name a few, rushed into the breach during the early and middle decades of the 20th century, though generally they served as defenders of a faith forgotten or apologists fighting off those who would bury her once and for all. When surveying the last



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50 years or so of Western culture, we see far fewer such intellectual knights charging to defend the virtues of mother Church.

Dante Alighieri



Renaissance man: A poet of deep insight and learning, Dante was a transitional figure, representing the best of Medieval thought and anticipating key aspects of the Renaissance. *(Photo credit: MassimoMerlini/iStock/GettyImagesPlus)*

When talking about historical Golden Ages, we seldom apply the term to Christian cultures or movements. This is perhaps because until quite recently, the moral, spiritual, and especially civilizational benefits of Christian culture were ubiquitous, self-evident, and obvious, giving rise to the most advanced and humane cultures the world had ever seen. Only now, and from the wistful vantage point of retrospection, do we perhaps have the distance to view the long march of Christian culture from outside of itself, as Western nations increasingly reject the morality, condemn the teachings, and cancel the figures who made it all possible in the first place.

How did Dante's literary masterpiece help usher in the Renaissance and transform the trajectory of Christian art and literature forever? The three parts of Dante's *Divine Comedy* — *Inferno* (Hell), *Purgatorio* (Purgatory), and *Paradiso* (Paradise, or Heaven) — bring together Christian and Classical figures, ideas, movements, and historical and mythological events that unify all past human history under the overarching arc of Judeo-Christian thought. By no means did Dante create this template out of whole cloth. Out of the miracle of the Gospels arose hundreds of great minds bent exclusively on creating a cohesive Christian culture and civilization out of close reading and careful textual commentary on scripture. This tradition can be traced from Saint Paul, who in the first century sought to frame the Christian story in terms of dogma and evangelism for Jews as well as Greeks and Romans; to Saint Augustine, who in the late fourth and early fifth centuries reconciled nascent Christian thought with Platonism, creating a stronger intellectual link between Jerusalem and Athens; and eventually to Saint Thomas Aquinas, who in the 13th century finally established a coherent equilibrium between Christianity and the philosophical and scientific writings of no less a figure than Aristotle himself (named "the Master of the Men who know" in Canto IV of *Inferno*).

It is this often subtle and occasionally explosive shift in the *Divine Comedy* — away from pervasively



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scholastic Medieval unities and toward a more integrating and encompassing cosmic sense of order — that helped give rise in the West to what we may call the High Period of Christian Art and Culture. In the Middle Ages, the great works of ancient Rome were filtered through — and ultimately subordinated to — Christian lenses. Virgil’s *Aeneid*, for instance, was read primarily as an allegory on various aspects of the Old and New Testaments — pagan portents foreshadowing Christian revelations — rather than as a defining artistic account of the founding, rise, and eventual triumph of the pagan Roman people and their culture. For Dante, however, the *Aeneid* was the great epic prototype. He sought not to coopt Virgil’s *magnum opus* and make it conform to Christian dogma, but to create a uniquely Christian and — just as importantly — a decidedly Italian epic that surpassed the original. In so doing, he would create *ex nihilo* the first great epic poem in a newly conceived Italian literary heritage, one that could in time come to rival the best that had been written in Latin.



Birthplace of the Renaissance: Banished from his native Florence, Dante died in exile. In modern times, the city has exonerated its most famous son.

In choosing to write the *Comedy* in Italian, not Latin, Dante was making an international and decidedly Renaissance statement. Using common vernacular Italian for exalted epic poetry instead of time-honored Latin was a great leap forward for European Christendom, and Dante’s brave gamble would stir poets across the continent to create native literatures in such languages as French, Spanish, Portuguese, German, and even, eventually, English. In the *Comedy* itself, Virgil remains Roman and his *Aeneid* a discrete work of Latin genius, despite his role as mentor and guide for Dante through Hell and parts of Purgatory. Dante the pilgrim in the story admires and loves his Roman mentor, but seeks to supersede him as a poet even as the eternal verities of his Christian epic would naturally supersede the merely human account of the founding of Rome. Virgil can only accompany Dante so far in his eschatological journey to God, and his subsequent replacement by Christian guides in *Paradise*, including Beatrice herself, is as much a cultural and artistic statement as it is a mark of theological orthodoxy.

In Canto IV of *Inferno* — the realm of Limbo, where the unbaptized and those virtuous pagans dwell who lived before the revelation of Christ — Dante encounters the five great poets of the Classical world. Homer, Horace, Ovid, and Lucan are already here; Virgil makes five as he approaches the group with Dante in tow. And, as Dante describes the scene:



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When they had talked together a short while
They all with signs of welcome turned my way,
Which moved my master to a kindly smile;
And greater honour yet they did me — yea,
Into their fellowship they deigned invite
And make me sixth among such minds as they. (*Inferno*. Canto IV, 97-102)

This invitation to join the greatest poets from the Classical world is characteristic and highly self-flattering on the part of Dante, who receives the invitation *before* he has written his poetic account of this vision of the afterworld. The ancient poets actually welcome Dante to their the exclusive club on the basis of what he will write in the future, not on the basis of what he has written so far.

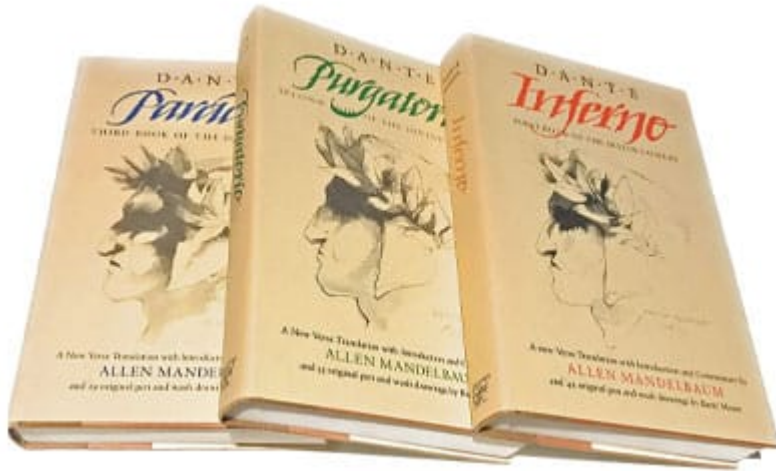
The Classical epics of Greece and Rome are largely poems of national achievement or conquest (*Iliad*), or stories about the founding of new empires (*Aeneid*), or tales about the suffering and redemption of a person dear to the gods (*Odyssey*). Nevertheless, in both the *Odyssey* and the *Aeneid* the protagonists are required to visit the underworld — Hell — to gain precious knowledge about their future paths and, in the case of Aeneas, learn all about the great empire that his suffering and perseverance will bring into being. In each instance, the message is the same: The physical life of the body on earth is the only reality in which a person can determine, to some limited degree, his own destiny. The afterworld is a place of complete forgetfulness, where the bloodless shades of the dead lose all sense of who they were on earth, and where there is ultimately no reward for virtue or especial punishment for sin. (As Classical culture evolved across 12 centuries of Greek and Roman understanding, ideas about reward and punishment in the afterworld did eventually develop, in both depth and scope.)

Dante's *Comedy*, on the other hand, takes place entirely in the afterlife, where the consequences of human sin, virtue, and free will receive their full due, and where conscious free will (in both *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*) continues after death to determine one's ultimate situation. In the Greek epics, the heroes were always men and women sublimely gifted with strength, wisdom, or beauty; the favor of the gods is bestowed on the elite alone, and there is very little concern for the choices and sufferings of average people. But Dante's Christian afterlife in the *Comedy* boldly highlights the idea of a merciful and loving God who supports each of His children, a world where the choices of the lowly and despised can result in great bliss or lead to consuming darkness.



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A real classic: Dante's *Divine Comedy* has been in print for seven centuries.

After the shade of Virgil encounters the lost Dante wandering in the Wood of Error, he reminds Dante that the only way out of desolation for any lost soul requires repentance and atonement. He must undergo a trip through Hell before he can rise through Purgatory and encounter the Heavenly truths of forgiveness and redemption. Dante's frightened response to Virgil's offer shows the profound gulf between pagan notions of implacable fate and inescapable determinism, and Christian ideas about a free and unfettered will that opens the possibility of human choice to accept God's offer of divine mercy and grace:

“But how should *I* go there? Who says so? Why?
I'm not Aeneas and I am not Paul!
Who thinks me fit? Not others. And not I.
Say I submit, and go — suppose I fall
Into some folly? Though I speak but ill,
The better wisdom will construe it all.”
As one who wills, and then unwills his will,
Changing his mind with every changing whim,
Till all his best intentions come to nil. (*Inferno*, Canto II,31-39)

Dante is not Aeneas and not Saint Paul. He is not a Trojan demi-god like Aeneas, whose mother was no less than the goddess Venus, whose supernatural support was always present. Nor is he Saint Paul, struck down and blinded on the road to Damascus and transformed into perhaps the single most consequential Christian in human history, after the scales of doubt and disbelief fell from his eyes. Yes, even a lost and habitual sinner such as Dante warranted the same type of heavenly intervention as great heroes and saints. Dante's subsequent choice to accept the perilous journey through the afterlife was on an equal plane with Paul's, and the consequences would lead directly to grace and salvation or despair and damnation. (In an apocryphal manuscript from the fourth century titled *The Apocalypse of Paul*, which Dante read, Paul reveals his own personal vision of Hell.)



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Not only does the *The Divine Comedy* reflect the intrinsic worth of every sinful human being in the eyes of God, but it also with great sensitivity “justifies the ways of God to men,” as the idea was formulated in John Milton’s own Christian epic, *Paradise Lost* (1667). When arriving at the gates of Hell to begin his ordeal, a terrified Dante reads the inscription carved in the lintel:

Through me the road to the city of desolation
Through me the road to sorrows diuturnal,
Through me the road among the lost creation.

Justice moved my great maker; God Eternal Wrought me: the power, and the unsearchably
High wisdom, and the primal love supernal.

Nothing ere I was made was made to be Save things eterne, and I eterne abide; Lay down
all hope, you that go in by me. (*Inferno*, Canto III, 1-9)

Here before the eternal edifice of Hell we find the clarity, mercy, and even love that reveals the mind of God in action. The idea that Hell was a creation based on wisdom and love may not seem to make sense, at least from the perspective of flawed human understanding. Once again, the explanation falls back on the unique blessing of free will. In justifying His ways to mankind in this instance, God asserts that His love for us is so deep and abiding that He must allow us to be free to choose something other than Himself. If all our choices — good, bad, and indifferent — lead directly back to Him, then there can ultimately be no justice, for then there is no distinction and no consequence between those who choose good and those who choose evil. If our every choice simply returns us to God’s love and protection, then free will is an illusion. If free will is an illusion, then we cannot be held responsible for our actions in any case. No, free will means that God values our free choice to such an extent that He is willing to risk losing us to our own bad choices. To do otherwise is to undermine freedom, and by extension love itself, which is choice, not compulsion. Hell, then, is simply the final, fixed stage in which a human soul gets what it chooses. In the end, Hell is simply what remains after a soul refuses to choose Him.

Those cynical and material-minded readers of Dante who simply see the poetic scenery of Hell — the molten rivers, the trident-wielding demons, the frozen lake in the very depths under which the most miserable sinners are submerged and forgotten even by God Himself — have fallen into the trap. Throughout his journey, Dante repeatedly makes it clear that he is given a vision of Hell, one apprehensible to limited human understandings, a deeply detailed and imaginative hologram, but a hologram nonetheless. As a supreme poet, Dante’s powerful descriptions of the physical, emotional, rational, and spiritual landscape of Hell can move readers to deep experiences of terror, empathy, or piety. But the eternal mysteries of the actual metaphysical worlds of Hell, Purgatory, and especially Paradise are simply beyond the ken of our frail senses and sinned-warped rationality.



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Rest in peace: The Tomb of Dante in Ravenna, Italy, where Dante died in exile. The monument is surrounded by a *zona dantesca*, in which all visitors must remain silent and respectful. (Photo credit: SalvatoreLeanza/iStock/GettyImagesPlus)

Consider the following example taken from Canto XX of *Inferno*. Here, in the Fourth Bolgia of the Eighth Circle, Dante the pilgrim encounters the Sorcerers, a broad category of sinners that might include such con artists as magicians; readers of tarot cards, palms, and tea leaves; psychics; and even practitioners of astrology, phrenology, augury, and haruspicy; along with certain forms of witchcraft. The example of sorcery that Dante the poet chooses to visualize is the sin of fortunetelling in general. The sinners are all naked and their necks are horribly twisted and broken, so that they see only behind, not in front of themselves, and this torment means they can only walk backward as well. Here is Dante's poetic description of the sin and its punishment:

And, Reader, so God give thee grace to glean
 Profit of my book, think if I could be left
 Dry-eyed, when close before me I had seen
 Our image so distorted, so bereft
 Of dignity, that their eyes' brimming pools
 Spilled down to bathe the buttocks at the cleft.
 Truly I wept, leaned on the pinnacles
 Of the hard rock; until my guide said, "Why!
 And art thou too like all the other fools?
 Here pity, or here piety, must die
 If the other lives; who's wickeder than one
 That's agonized by God's high equity? (*Inferno*, Canto XX, 19-30)

The image is graphic and horrifying, and yet also rational, appropriate, and brilliantly conceived. Dante the poet has deftly highlighted one key aspect of the sin of fortunetelling: These miserable wretches



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engaged in a form of overweening hubris or pride — the most dangerous of the Seven Deadly Sins. Rather than be content to see as all humans do, neck up, eyes forward, and with all the limited capacities of human vision, they instead sought illicit means (usually demonic) to see into the future, a prescience belonging rightly to God alone. The detail of the bitter tears cascading perversely down the backs of their bodies and pooling between the buttocks as they walk in reverse is arresting. It's almost as if Dante, borrowing a trope from our own contemporary lexicon, is suggesting that these sinners "have it all ass-backwards."

The genius of Dante the poet's unforgettable illustration of the consequences of fortunetelling is highlighted in the way that the punishments always mirror the nature of the sin itself, "mirrored" in the sense of a reversed and therefore backward and false image. By definition, of course, Hell is a place of false and misleading images, and Dante the pilgrim is constantly falling for the illusion. Notice how his reaction to the horrible scene is a major mistake, one that endangers his very soul. Rather than be revolted by the behavior that gave rise to such punishment, Dante instead laments the indignity that such consequences impose on the human form, a deeply misplaced empathy that has him weeping along with the sinners. Ultimately, he is weeping for the injustice of their torment, not the evil sin that gave rise to it.

At this grave misstep, Virgil pounces, exclaiming that Dante is no better than "all the other fools" whose bogus empathy aligns them with the sinners and against the justice of God:

Here pity, or here piety, must die
If the other lives; whose wickeder than one
That's agonized by God's high equity.

Dante, lost as he was in the Wood of Error, was sent to Hell to learn to recognize sin, not make excuses for it. And once recognized, sin must be hated and shunned, not accommodated. But Hell is precisely the place to make these all-too-human mistakes, and the deeper Dante travels through the bowels of the underworld, the more he learns. By design, Hell is a place of despair, not hope. And the sinning souls that Dante encounters here are no longer creatures of hope because they are no longer beings who possess free will. It is a maxim in Dante's *Inferno* that the sinner cannot retain in the afterlife that which was acquired or perverted by sinful means. More than anything else, the choices that ultimately bring people to Hell are the choices that abuse free will most of all. Dante's subsequent journeys up Mount Purgatory and into the heavenly realms reap more positive lessons, for both Purgatory and Paradise remain places of hope where free will and the desire to rise make all the difference.

Dante's masterful *Divine Comedy* surveys Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise across theological, philosophical, historical, cultural, artistic, and eschatological traditions, ushering in a remarkable 500-year era of high art and cultural imagination celebrating the foundational ideas and emotions generated by Christianity and the varied and diverse ways that Christians worshipped, celebrated, survived, and flourished across Europe and, increasingly, the world. Dante's vision of Christianity in the *Comedy* dramatically expands our understanding of God and man, both anticipating and inaugurating what historians broadly call the Renaissance.

To this very day, our interactions with the Bible, the Gospels, and Christian dogma across



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denominational lines have been indelibly influenced by the language, the intellect, the psychology, and the theology incorporated in these magisterial poems. So much so that our debt to Dante is still being paid. The Italians continue to refer to him as *Il Sommo Poeta* (the Supreme Poet). In 1921, to honor the 600th anniversary of Dante's death, Pope Benedict XV wrote the encyclical *In praeclara summorum*, naming Dante one "of the many celebrated geniuses of whom the Catholic faith can boast" and the "pride and glory of humanity." In 2008, the case of Dante's banishment was reopened in Florence, and a motion passed rescinding his sentence and extending a posthumous apology. In 2021, the 700th anniversary of Dante's death, an actual retrial was held in Florence, clearing Dante's name of all civic wrongdoing, once and for all.

Fyodor Dostoevsky



Portrait of a master: This famous portrait of Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky was painted in 1872 by Vasily Perov and is displayed in the Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow. Dostoevsky's real life was much less serene than this image would have you believe.

By Fyodor Dostoevsky's birth in 1821, Western Europe had survived both the Enlightenment and Romanticism. The former movement had increasingly deified reason at the expense of Christianity, culminating in Deism and a series of bloody revolutions; the latter movement had increasingly deified Nature, also at the expense of Christianity, culminating in a revival of paganism and the subordination of the Divine to the prison of materialism. Both movements, remarkably, could rightly claim the rise, apotheosis, and fall of Napoleon comfortably within the bounds of their own precepts. And both movements, ultimately grounded in materialist philosophy, served as perfect petri dishes out of which to nurture the rise of materialist thinkers such as Marx, Darwin, Nietzsche, and Freud.

As we saw above, Dante appeared at a critical moment between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, a time when the clash of tradition and the clamor for progress required an extraordinary individual to make sense of what was waning and what was waxing, and how best to discern which threads of culture to draw forward through the eye of the needle and which to leave behind. So too was Dostoevsky perfectly suited to address the ideological cataclysms of his world and help classify the wheat and the chaff for future generations. In many ways, the Renaissance that Dante influenced was the same Renaissance facing Russia in the 19th century. As a cultural event, the European Renaissance became self-aware in Italy during the period of Dante's life (1265-1321). Over the next three centuries, evolving



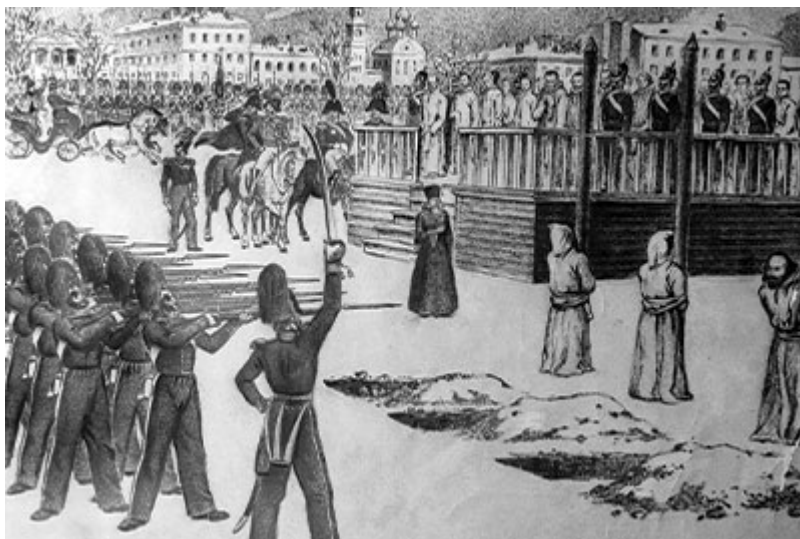
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Renaissance ideals swept across Europe. Between the 14th and mid-17th centuries, it had spread from Italy to Spain, France, Germany, Scandinavia, and Eastern Europe.

But Russia, with one foot in easternmost Europe and another in Asia, lagged centuries behind her European peers. It was not until 1703, when Peter the Great established St. Petersburg and opened the fabled “Window to the West,” that Russian culture began evolving along the lines of Western Europe. When Russia’s Renaissance fully emerged in the 19th century, its genius was in Classical music and literature: Alexander Pushkin, the Russian Shakespeare, died when Dostoevsky was 16, and in his wake came artists including Gogol, Turgenev, Lermontov, Herzen, Nekrasov, Belinski, Chekov, and Tolstoy. This burgeoning literary culture was deeply concerned with Westernization — the rapid influx of scientific, political, and philosophical ideas from Western Europe — and how these ideas undermined traditional Russian values while forcing the country to modernize its political, social, and industrial frameworks. In 1848, when Marx and Engels wrote *The Communist Manifesto*, Dostoevsky was an earnest 27-year-old writer with revolutionary sympathies, heavily involved in progressive causes that sought to reshape Russian culture in the direction of an increasingly atheist and materialist West.

For Dostoevsky, the bell struck in April 1849 when the Petrashevsky Circle — a literary group of progressive intellectuals living in St. Petersburg — was raided and 35 members, including Dostoevsky, were arrested by the tsar’s police. Dostoevsky was accused of possessing an illegal printing press and distributing anti-government propaganda. He was also charged with a plot to overthrow Tsar Nicholas I. After spending eight months in subhuman conditions at the St. Peter and Paul Fortress, he and 21 confederates were sentenced to death by firing squad in November of 1849.



Death by firing squad: Dostoevsky was sentenced to death in 1849 for distributing anti-government propaganda. The tsar commuted the sentence of death, but not before Dostoevsky and other prisoners were subjected to a terrifying mock execution.

Privately, the tsar agreed to lesser sentences, including prison terms in Siberia, but he insisted the prisoners not find out about the clemency until the last possible minute. On December 22, the prisoners were transported to Semyonovsky Square to be executed. The sentence of death by firing squad was proclaimed, and the first three prisoners were tied to stakes before the firing squad. After an agonizing minute of silence, the soldiers stood down. Dostoevsky, who was in the very next threesome to be shot, describes the experience in his novel *The Idiot*: “The uncertainty and feeling of aversion for the new



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thing which was going to overtake him immediately, was terrible.”

The mock execution had a profound effect on the prisoners. One convict who exhibited signs of strain due to the capital sentence lost what was left of his mind and lived out his days as an invalid. And as we can see in Dostoevsky’s *The Idiot*, the trick affected Dostoevsky for the rest of his life, a dangerous trauma to impose upon a man already suffering from a rare form of temporal lobe epilepsy called “ecstatic epilepsy.” By the time of his trial, Dostoevsky had been suffering serious seizures for at least a decade. Ecstatic seizures are rare but impactful: During the first moments, ecstatic auras give rise to feelings of well-being, serenity, bliss, and enhanced self-awareness. Ecstatic epileptic seizures are almost always felt as a positive experience, some even describe them as a mystic experience. The disease loomed large over Dostoevsky’s future as a novelist and defender of the faith.

Dostoevsky spent four years at hard labor in Siberia, where suffering awakened his dormant Christianity. After working alongside violent criminals of the most dangerous sort, Dostoevsky was shocked to find that these murderers and rapists — men who would cut your throat for an extra ration of bread — would nevertheless weep like children before the Holy Sacrament when it was brought into the prison every Easter and Christmas. He found through these lost but suffering convicts a regeneration of faith and empathy that turned him back to the Russian Orthodox Church.

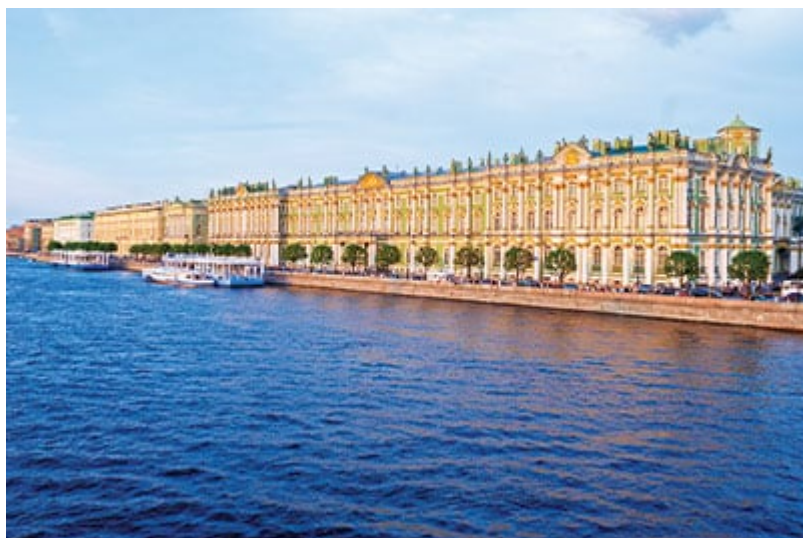
In prison, Dostoevsky was called to live his Christianity every day. He was brutally beaten for making a complaint on behalf of his fellow prisoners, protesting a lump of filth found in the soup. He endured a second horrific beating for saving the life of a fellow prisoner after the officer in charge forbade him to do so. This second beating — categorized as an “execution” — was so vicious that he was taken to the hospital. The entire camp believed him dead. Six weeks later, when the “dead” man left the hospital and returned to camp life, his shocked fellow convicts gave him the nickname “the deceased.”

Ten years after his exile, Dostoevsky moved to St. Petersburg and began writing the novels that would push back at the highest levels against the atheism and materialism undermining Russian civilization and warping Western culture. His flirtation with socialism as a young radical gave way to the voice of a prophet, taking on the materialism of Marx and atheism of Nietzsche with the zeal of Elijah. Dostoevsky was one of the first existentialist writers — a type of philosophical writing that emphasizes the individual as a free and responsible agent, capable of determining his development through acts of will. He not only demonstrated that our walk in this world is analogous to that of Dante’s in the afterworld, but also endured a type of transformational death and resurrection in the Siberian gulag, where he sacrificed his life for another, only to be resurrected and restored to life.



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Window to the West: St. Petersburg, Russia, was commissioned by Peter the Great in 1703.

Dostoevsky was critical of Westernization, and warned about the negative influences of European atheism and socialism. (Photo credit: Rostislavv/iStock/GettyImagesPlus)

Scholars have suggested that Dostoevsky's masterpiece, *The Brothers Kara-mazov* (1881), contains all the wisdom and insight of his earlier novels — and so much surpassing them — that one need only read *Karamazov* to get the complete scope of Dostoevsky's genius. While this may be true, it is also true that most readers are not equipped to tackle *Karamazov* without first progressing through his lesser works, much as Dante could not understand Heaven without having first experienced Hell and Purgatory.

In *Karamazov*, each character — besides being fully human — represents one or more worldviews or philosophical positions. The trick is to determine for each character the major idea that drives behavior. Only then will you have a chance to determine who murders Fyodor Pavlovich Karamazov, the father of the brothers. Fyodor Pavlovich represents hedonism — the idea that if there is no God or afterlife, then the only logical thing to live for is pleasure, like a pampered animal. Speaking to his youngest son Alexei, the old man opines:

I, my dearest Alexei Fyodorovich, plan to live on this earth as long as possible ... and therefore I need every kopeck, and the longer I live, the more I'll need it.... At the moment I'm still a man, only fifty-five years old, but I want to occupy that position for about twenty years longer; I'll get old and disgusting and [the young girls] won't come to me then of their own free will, and that's when I'll need my dear money. So now I'm saving up more and more, for myself alone.... Because let it be known to you that I want to live in wickedness to the very end. Wickedness is sweet: everyone denounces it, but everyone lives in it, only they all do it on the sly and I do it openly.

Given his disbelief in God and the afterworld — “I say a man falls asleep and doesn't wake up, and that's all” — there is a grim honesty to his selfish materialism, and the pursuit of lust and greed are consistent with a world in which people are not held accountable for their behavior once they are dead.

The three Karamazov brothers — Dmitri, Ivan, and Alexei — represent ideas that produce in them and others a sense of Hell, Purgatory, or Heaven. The oldest brother, Dmitri, is a slave to emotion, unable to control himself in the heat of the moment. Driven by passion, Dmitri is a prime suspect for the murder



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because he has two issues that tax his emotional nature to the extreme. First, the broke Dmitri believes his father stole his inheritance from his late mother; and second, they are both in love with same venal woman, Grushenka, who is perhaps willing to sell herself to the highest bidder. While talking to his younger brother Alexei, he is asked what he will do if he catches Grushenka heading to his father’s house. Dmitri responds, “I’ll kill. I couldn’t endure that.... The old man. I wouldn’t kill her.” He continues:

I don’t know, I don’t know.... Maybe I won’t kill him, and maybe I will. I’m afraid that at that moment his face will suddenly become hateful to me. I hate his Adam’s apple, his nose, his eyes, his shameless sneer. I feel a personal loathing. I’m afraid of that. I may not be able to help myself.

As prone to violence as he is to irrational sacrifices in the name of love, Dmitri swings wildly between exhilaration and despair, carrying in his own breast a Purgatory of irreconcilable and unmanageable emotions.

The middle brother, Ivan, is the walking representation of reason. So deeply rational is he that he confuses other reason-driven characters who don’t have his breadth. As a very young man, he wrote an extremely influential article about the possibility of God’s existence. The argument was so complex that both believers and atheists claimed victory. In Ivan, Dostoevsky creates a mind so profoundly rational that he is stuck in a paradox. Ivan understands clearly that, from a rational perspective, God must exist or nothing makes sense and everything is permissible, “even cannibalism.” Ivan is quick to accede to the truth of Voltaire’s maxim: “If God did not exist, mankind would have had to invent Him,” or human civilization itself could never have materialized.



A classic: The first page of *The Brothers Karamazov*, originally published as a serial in *The Russian Messenger* from January 1879 to November 1880. Dostoevsky died less than four months after its publication.

And yet it’s Ivan’s very rationalism — his need for material proof — that torments him, for without material proof reason alone cannot consent to belief. Reason won’t allow it. Talking about suffering, Ivan argues that whatever God can do by way of forgiveness, He cannot “make it up” to a little child who was tortured and murdered by her own parents:



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Is there in the whole world a being who would have the right to forgive and could forgive? I don't want harmony. From love for humanity I don't want it. I would rather be left with the unavenged suffering. I would rather remain with my unavenged suffering and unsatisfied indignation, even if I were wrong. Besides, too high a price is asked for harmony; it's beyond our means to pay so much to enter on it. And so I hasten to give back my entrance ticket, and if I am an honest man I am bound to give it back as soon as possible. And that I am doing. It's not God that I don't accept, Alyosha [Alexei], only I most respectfully return him the ticket.

This is existentialism that cuts closest to the bone. God may be able to forgive the murderous parents; He may even be able to distract the child who suffered with endless joys. But neither He nor anyone else can restore what was taken from that suffering child. And, Ivan reasons, if there is something out there that can pay such a debt and wipe such a slate clean, it is clearly too far beyond the limits of human reason to comprehend it. And if that type of restoration can be made, but cannot be made understandable to Ivan's hyper-rational, three-dimensional mind, then Ivan is under no obligation to simply have "faith." No, indeed — Ivan returns his ticket and disavows all belief so deeply divorced from rational understanding.

It is, of course, Alexei Karamazov to whom Ivan is talking. Alexei is the youngest Karamazov and the character embodying all the innocence, sincerity, and selfless love that comes from ardent faith. Alexei understands how deeply Ivan suffers from his inability to believe in God, despite the logical necessity of doing so, a position that ironically aligns Ivan with Satan himself, who visits Ivan in a "dream" later in the novel. Alexei's response to Ivan is profound: "I think everyone must love life more than anything else in the world." Ivan responds as reason itself must: "Love life more than the meaning of it?" Alexei explains:

Yes, certainly. Love it regardless of logic, as you say. Yes, most certainly regardless of logic, for only then will I grasp its meaning. That's what I've been vaguely aware of for a long time. Half your work is done, Ivan: you love life. Now you must try to do the second half and you are saved.

Alexei knows that love is greater than logic and reason. Indeed, in our increasingly materialist Western culture, the more we seek to replace love — especially "irrational," self-sacrificial love such as the love of Christ, where the strong and powerful subordinate themselves to the weak and suffering — the more we devalue life at every level, from the unborn to the very aged. By measuring faith by selfless love, and not by data or empirical calculation, we come to realize quite rationally that sacrificial love is not irrational love. Sacrificial love is rather *supra*-rational love, a type of logic that only makes sense in a universe where the *motive* behind God's creation was love of the other, and the mere *means* of that creation an exercise in materialist logic.



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A fruitful legacy: Dostoevsky's grave, bearing the following inscription: "Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone: but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit." (John 12:24) (Photo credit: *Blincov/iStock/GettyImagesPlus*)

In *The Brothers Karamazov*, the only character whose faith is deeper and more time-tested than that of Alexei is the Elder Zosima — Alexei's mentor and spiritual guide. Zosima's death triggers Alexei's own trial of faith. Before the aged monk dies, he delivers a long reflection in which he expands on the idea of active and passive love. Passive love is abstract, divorced from action and sacrifice. This type of love is ubiquitous in our materialistic culture. Passive love says you are a good person if you simply vote a certain way, or adopt "correct" views about the right people and issues, or if you are a member in good standing of the right political party. It is virtue-signaling without any virtue or sacrifice made on anyone else's behalf. It is very much the type of "love" you see in socialist countries, where acts of private charity are eschewed and all choice in distribution belongs to the state alone; a world where free will and choice vanish before central planning and rational sustainability.

Zosima defines active love, on the other hand, as "labor and perseverance, and for some people, perhaps, a whole science":

Try to love your neighbors actively and tirelessly. The more you succeed in loving, the more you'll be convinced of the existence of God and the immortality of your soul. And if you reach complete selflessness in the love of your neighbor, then undoubtedly you will believe, and no doubt will even be able to enter your soul. This has been tested. It is certain.

This indeed is the only way we can return America and the West to anything like a genuinely Christian culture. Dante knew this. The thrust of *The Divine Comedy* drives us closer and closer to the throne of God, where such sacrificial love is both self-evident and eminently "rational." Dostoevsky, as we have seen, built his entire defense of Christianity around the idea as well. This is not to say that during the years between 1321 and 1821 we accomplished the goal — far from it. But for that 500-year period, from Dante to Dostoevsky, the pieces were in place, the cultural landscape was propitious, and our children were nurtured on the great books of Western culture. It's all right there if we stop canceling and start reading them again.



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