

THE FRAGILITY OF GRACE IN THE KARAMAZOV  
WORLD—SELECTED SESSION

Convener: Phyllis Zagano, Hofstra University  
Moderator: Elizabeth A. Johnson, Fordham University  
Presenter: Terrence W. Tilley, San Francisco, Calif.  
Respondent: Anthony Godzieba, Villanova University

Terrence Tilley's paper opens with the Russian folk tale told by Grushen'ka, a woman desired by brothers Fyodor and Dmitri Karamazov in Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*. A wicked woman thrown into a lake of fire by devils is offered rescue by a guardian angel at God's suggestion. The woman once gave an onion to a beggar woman. God directed the angel to take that same onion and use it to pull her out of the lake. When others in the lake saw what was happening, they began holding on to her for their own rescue. But she kicked them away. The onion broke and all were lost.

With this tale, Tilley sets up his argument: faith and reason are not antithetical, despite critical commentary of the work from that position. He rejects "the essential dichotomies" characteristic of readings of the work and sets out to resolve problems imposed by many modern interpretations. Referring to two widely anthologized chapters, Tilley finds Ivan Karamazov's "Rebellion" "the most powerful articulation of 'the problem of evil' in modern literature," and that Ivan's "Grand Inquisitor" portrays the tyranny of institutional religion, noting that Dostoevsky said the entire novel answered Ivan's challenges.

Tilley investigates the relationship between faith and reason presented by the "reasonable" Ivan and the "faithful" monk Zosima, suggesting it gives answers to questions embedded in Kant's three critiques: 1) What can I know? Ivan rejects God and immortality; he has reduced all reality to graceless matter; 2) What ought I do? Zosima and Alyosha Karamazov demonstrate that forgiveness can make the world a paradise, but we must risk suffering to have it alleviated. 3) What may I hope? Through Dmitri and Grushen'ka's relationship Dostoevsky shows "what we *can* hope" and that people are created for happiness.

Tilley does not specify that Dostoevsky argues for or against Kant; he concludes that the novel "knows where it is going": those who do what they ought can hope for love, and only if one loves are small acts and religious vision intertwined.

Hence the moral of the tale of the onion: The fragile onion will not break if we hold us together. If we do what we ought we might be able to hope that fragile grace leads to reconciling love in the real world.

In response, Anthony Godzieba agreed with Tilley's evaluation of the work (away from 19 century Protestant understandings) and pointed out Tilley's five meanings of "the fragility of grace." Grace is fragile because:

1. it "is not an irresistible power that can overcome human resistance" such as Ivan's stringent materialism;
2. it may fail: reconciliation in the world "is not guaranteed";
3. it is "an unmerited gift . . . as fragile and as chancy as love";
4. it is "mixed . . . never pure, but always appears in frail humans who can distort grace";

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5. it is real only where there is *sobornost*, a “harmony between unity and freedom” that can only be incarnated in our reconciling actions in the world.

Godzieba and asked if Tilley was “hoping to reorient commentary” away from a “stereotypically debased Protestant approach to faith and reason,” to which Tilley responded “yes.”

The lively conversation that ensued among the 25 attendees focused on how Tilley’s beginning his paper with the Russian folk tale demonstrated that the choice of selfishness over solidarity indicated that grace is fragile, as may be its source. Another intervention noted that the imaginative way in which Tilley presents the question of hope: Kant’s answer is essentially materialist, whereas Dostoevsky’s is in response to God’s grace. In fact, it is Ivan’s materialist rationalism that is fragile. Further discussion pointed out that Protestantism still enjoys remnants of sacramental imagination. Tilley’s consistent use of grace and its fragility recalled the fact that the word grace has disappeared from theological anthropology; it once was “sin and grace”—to which Tilley responded we do not talk about grace because we identify grace with “the extrinsic God who intervenes” and we do not see “uncreated grace” as the presence of God. Finally, Godzieba said we are still wrestling with the ambivalent: grace is a thing you get, a sacrament, and always because of God’s faithfulness.

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