

## Article

# Theist–Atheist Encounters in *Les Misérables*, *The Brothers Karamazov*, and *The Plague*

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**Abstract:** Turning to the novels, *Les Misérables*, *The Brothers Karamazov*, and *The Plague*, this article focuses on theist–atheist encounters within fiction as guides and challenges to contemporary theist–atheist dialogue. It first provides a discussion of definitions pertinent to our topic and a reflection on the value and limitations of turning to fiction for the study and development of theist–atheist dialogue specifically, and interreligious dialogue more broadly. In examining each of the novels, I will first provide a very brief historical context of when each novel was written, the time and place the covered scenes transpire in the novel, and the authors’ positions toward religion(s) when writing their books. I will close the article on some lessons to glean from these fictional dialogues for contemporary theist–atheist dialogue.

**Keywords:** *Les Misérables*; *The Brothers Karamazov*; *The Plague*; atheism; dialogue



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## 1. Introduction

Seeking to learn from dialogues between atheists and theists in literature, I first need to state the obvious. Works written by novelists, who may or may not ascribe to a certain faith or ideology, depict an imaginary encounter between fictional characters as conceived from the novelist’s perspective. As such, they are closer to the monologues that have most often dominated (non-violent) interactions between believers and nonbelievers. Think, for example, of Cicero’s *On the Nature of the Gods* or David Hume’s *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*<sup>1</sup>. Consider also works that seek to address some so-called “other” though really aims to proselytize and to refute the “other”, not mutually learn. In Augustine’s *City of God*, for example, he argues why Christianity is the true faith—*notwithstanding the recent sack of Rome—and claims that such horrors would not have happened if belief and propitiation of the old gods had not been maintained*.<sup>2</sup>

For much of Western history, atheists and theists, if they spoke much at all, often did so at cross-purposes. As Charles Taylor has noted, though, it has only been in recent times that the real possibility of atheism in the North Atlantic World has been deemed a viable, potential life-choice option for the majority.<sup>3</sup> Or as Alec Ryrie writes in *Unbelievers: An Emotional History of Doubt*: “In many of the regional, educational, and political subcultures that make up the modern United States, open and unapologetic unbelief is the norm”.<sup>4</sup> Many parts of Europe, especially in the Nordic countries, had already anticipated the trend and seemed to cement the intractable inevitability of the secularization thesis.<sup>5</sup> Yet, even

<sup>1</sup> (Cicero 2008; Hume 2008).

<sup>2</sup> (Augustine 1980). On the question of the ubiquitous clashes between an author’s personal or moral lifestyle and the art he or she produces, specifically the question of whether to still teach an inspiring and moral novel written by an author with a racist and muddled biography, see (Admirand 2018). Care must be taken, of course, to ascribe ideas in a novel with the author’s own, though it is also not surprising that biographical elements are often present, consciously or unconsciously in creators’ works.

<sup>3</sup> (Taylor 2007). Writing about Taylor’s book is a field within itself, but for my analysis, see (Admirand 2010).

<sup>4</sup> (Ryrie 2019, p. 2).

<sup>5</sup> For a standard account, see (Bruce 2011); for a helpful examination of related terms, see (Casanova 2011).

as zeal for the thesis has cooled, the so-called European exceptions, such as Ireland and Poland, have seen great growth in the number of nones or those unchurched.<sup>6</sup> So, too is there an increase in multiple religious belonging in the West, a feature traditionally aligned with the East.<sup>7</sup> Regardless, human identity and longing for what are deemed religious or transcendental forms of belief and belonging, whether in traditionally religious or secular leanings, remain universal in scope.<sup>8</sup>

This article is focused on moments of private discussion and dialogue between two characters in novels, one identifying (or describable as) as theist and another as atheist. In doing so, I will first provide a very brief historical context of when each novel was written, the time and place the covered scenes are supposed to transpire in the novel, and the authors' position toward religion(s) when writing their books. At times, I will connect the discussions to recent or contemporary debates in interfaith dialogue. I will close the article on some lessons to glean from these fictional dialogues for contemporary theist–atheist dialogue. I will focus on three examples from well-known works of fiction: *Les Misérables*, *The Brothers Karamazov*, and *The Plague*.

Why these three novels specifically? According to Michael Schmidt in his magisterial, *The Novel: A Biography*, critics initially “savaged” *Les Misérables*;<sup>9</sup> Saul Bellow rebuked *The Plague* as an example of a novel formed from ideas and not believable characters: “Camus’ *The Plague* was an IDEA. Good or bad? Not so hot, in my opinion”<sup>10</sup>; while disparaging claims of Dostoevsky’s prose as “deliberately repetitious, flat, low key”, are not uncommon.<sup>11</sup> My reasons for examining these three otherwise acclaimed novels are mostly personal. While at The Catholic University of America in the mid-nineties, I was introduced to Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov* through Professor Declan’s honours seminar and in his book, *After Ideology: Recovering the Spiritual Foundations of Freedom*, while Professor Stephen Schneck encouraged close philosophical reading of *The Plague* for an ethics and politics class. As Camus so closely read Dostoevsky, the theodicy problem was lit in my own burgeoning theological imagination. *Les Misérables* was a more recent read, initially spurred by filling a gap in a novel I should have read by now, but has since become one of my favourites, along with *Ulysses*, *Moby Dick*, and perhaps an outlier to some, Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*. For our purposes, though, these novels offer fascinating and illuminating moments of theist–atheist encounters.

Before examining key scenes in those novels, I will first discuss definitions pertinent to our topic and reflect on the value and limitations of turning to fiction for the study and development of theist–atheist dialogue specifically, and interreligious dialogue more broadly.

## 2. Naming and Shaming: On Definitions, Identity, and Judgments

Not surprisingly in these discussions, terminology becomes suspect if not convoluted.

Consider atheism, a robustly fluid term. Recall how Christians were deemed atheists by the Roman Empire for their refusal to acknowledge and propitiate the Roman gods.<sup>12</sup> Those of the Abrahamic faiths, moreover, have not always seen the God of Abraham in the

<sup>6</sup> Decline in the Church’s lost power and role in Ireland has been especially evident in the referendums allowing gay marriage (2015) and abortion (2018). While Ireland did see great financial gains in the so-called Celtic Tiger, causes of Church decline have been rooted in Church scandals, from sexual child abuse and cover-up by clergy to the Magdalene Laundries, among other travesties. See, for example, (Ganiel 2016). On religion in Poland since the fall of Communism, see (Ramet and Borowik 2017; Luxmoore 2019).

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, (von Brück 2007; Cornille 2013b; Bidwell 2019).

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, (Blessing 2014; Ozmet 2017).

<sup>9</sup> (Schmidt 2014, p. 349).

<sup>10</sup> (Schmidt 2014, p.1093).

<sup>11</sup> (Schmidt 2014, p. 482).

<sup>12</sup> See, (Whitmarsh 2017, chp. 16).

other and so labelled them infidel, heretic, God denier and even god killer.<sup>13</sup> Christians have also slandered other Christians who do not belong to their church or sect,<sup>14</sup> while despite the proclaimed oneness of Islam, intra-Muslim conflicts and division are facts of the geopolitical world, as in Indonesia where Shi'ia Muslims or those of the Ahmadya Islamic sect are deemed heretics.<sup>15</sup>

Atheism is broadly defined in *The Oxford Handbook of Atheism* as “an absence of belief in the existence of God or gods”,<sup>16</sup> but probing further reveals further distinctions and nuance among many atheists. Philip Kitcher refers to himself as a “soft atheist” because he does not fully foreclose the possibility, even if unlikely, that science may one day prove a theistic framework.<sup>17</sup> He thus distinguishes his position from hard (or strong) atheists, especially New Atheists who are adamant that theistic belief is false.<sup>18</sup> J.L. Schellenberg has more recently promoted “progressive” atheism, which aims ultimately to be a moral system that improves upon and so transcends forms of theism in which a so-called God of love is still linked with oppressive actions or beliefs. It is also an attempt to move atheism away from what it does not believe towards what it does believe.<sup>19</sup>

For this article, can I, as a theist, define atheism as a position for those whom the existence of any supernatural power or being, whether manifest as one or the many, is nonsense, nonexistent, a chimera, a false proposition, a nonstarter? In my conception of atheism, such a worldview is bereft of any metaphysical understanding or potential, and so strictly material (even as that term is problematic from a scientific perspective).<sup>20</sup> Everything can be, or will be, tested, proved or disproved by rational, scientific means.<sup>21</sup> There can be no angels or devils inhabiting such worlds, no afterlife, no ultimate purpose to life and the universe, which instead has arisen only by chance and circumstance.<sup>22</sup> There is no metaphysical soul. Divisions, and any form of hierarchies based on reasonableness or goodness, though, persist.

For example, just as supposed God-lovers can be misanthropes, atheists can be deeply moral, even saintly in their actions and disposition.<sup>23</sup> While moral striving is ubiquitous across faith positions, some atheists, or nonbelievers may also still embrace what they label the “spiritual”. Sam Harris, one of the original four New Atheists, highlights the benefits of meditation and his study under Buddhist masters that opened his worldview

<sup>13</sup> Name-calling (and much worse) has been far too common among the so-called Abrahamic faiths (for an account challenging the term “Abrahamic”, see (Levenson 2012)). Christians calling Jews “God killers” in the Middle Ages or “vermin” during the Shoah, and slandering Muslims as “heathens”, while Jews and Muslims deemed Christians polytheistic on account of misunderstood Trinitarian belief, was once commonplace. Fortunately, the growth of interreligious dialogue and a deeper understanding of religious pluralism, especially after the 1965 Vatican II document, *Nostra Aetate*, has been encouraging. See, for example, (Grob and Roth 2012; Berger 2012). On the legacy of *Nostra Aetate* and interreligious dialogue, see for example, (Cohen et al. 2017).

<sup>14</sup> Intra-Christian violence, a hallmark especially of postreformation Europe, momentarily stalled after the Treaty of Westphalia, then was masked under various national or racist ideologies and imperial aims, not to mention the horrors of WWI and WWII, but has since seen a great decline, even as some lament the stagnant state of ecumenical progress after the great hope of the 1910 World Missionary Conference. For a concise history and proposal for ecumenical growth, see, for example, (Rusch 2019); on the role of women and the ecumenical movement, see (Gnanadason 2020).

<sup>15</sup> See, for example, (Fealy 2017).

<sup>16</sup> (Bullivant and Ruse 2013, p. 2).

<sup>17</sup> (Kitcher 2014, pp. 23–25).

<sup>18</sup> Soft, weak, hard, strong, implicit, and explicit: these adjectives placed before “atheism” can mean different things to different atheists. Sometime “weak” or “soft” implies a lack of corresponding belief or any robust conviction in either the existence or nonexistence of deities. While this latter description would normally point to agnosticism, Shoaib Ahmed Malik contends some contemporary atheists have “conflated” agnosticism with atheism. See (Malik 2018). Consider also the issue of global or local atheisms. See, for example, (Diller 2016).

<sup>19</sup> (Schellenberg 2019).

<sup>20</sup> (Haight 2019, p. 14). Haight writes: “In fact, the physics of Newton and Einstein deals with mass rather than matter.”

<sup>21</sup> For an illuminating account of how science learns from failure (and ongoing testing), see (Firestein 2016).

<sup>22</sup> See, for example, (Stenger 2014).

<sup>23</sup> One place to look are atheist or humanist manifestos in which a call to heal the earth or save the poorest of the poor from economic exploitation and death seem little different from moral imperatives from religious institutions. Steven Pinker, for example, contends that reason and science embodied in humanism, and not religion, are what has most improved the quality of life most profoundly in contemporary times and which should be our focus in the future (Pinker 2018). See also (Roberts and Copson 2020).

to a spirituality that did not entail he “believe anything irrational about the universe”.<sup>24</sup> Ronald Dworkin, another atheist attuned to the mystery and sublimity of the universe, liked to call himself a “religious atheist”.<sup>25</sup> Humanist chaplain Christ Steadman, open to partnering and dialoguing with theists, came to embrace the term “faitheist”, initially a pejorative term hurled at him.<sup>26</sup> Does my definition of atheism above still hold? Not for many atheists, some of whom may self-identify by a wide range of terms, such as nonbeliever, nones, antireligious, secular humanist, Christian humanist, and so on.<sup>27</sup>

Consider also nontheistic religious traditions—such as certain forms of Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism—where few definitions or lines in the sand will be tidy and impenetrable on the question of spirituality, metaphysics, other realms, and deities. Going further on definitions, there are serious questions on the universality of Western terms and categories, such as “religion” or “religions”. Such terms sometimes have no direct equivalent in many Eastern or indigenous traditions, or only do so after historic encounters (or clashes). What is deemed “religious” is often plural, porous, and interdependent, learning from and responding to other traditions. John Thatamanil, for example, preferring to speak of what is religious, and not of religion or religions, writes: “Religious traditions are not communities of consensus so much as they are sites of internal contestation”.<sup>28</sup> Ideally, he would prefer what he calls “comprehensive qualitative orientation”.<sup>29</sup>

Thus, three descriptors that many theists traditionally claim as exclusively theirs; namely, “moral, spiritual, and religious”, are increasingly present in an atheist or non-believers’ worldview and quest for secular meaningfulness. Atheist philosopher Martin Hägglund, for example, highlights how accepting that there is only this life and the permanence of mortality is what gives existence heightened meaning and value.<sup>30</sup> In a similar vein, while I am a Catholic theologian, my work examining humility and forgiveness has been inspired by atheist positions which seem to demand a more precarious and so profound humility and forgiveness in a world deemed without God.<sup>31</sup>

Even as terms such as “religion” or “atheist” can be difficult to pin down, other terms such as “misotheist” may further complicate the picture. What about a person who believes in some form of a transcendent God but hates and rejects any kind of worship of such a being or beings?<sup>32</sup> One of my examples below, the famous conversation between brothers Ivan and Alyosha Karamazov in *The Brothers Karamazov*, is technically a debate and discussion between a theist and a misotheist; not a theist and atheist.<sup>33</sup>

Such terms, however, ultimately depend upon a stable, constant state of belief or non-belief, when in truth, most living people inhabit fairly fluid, if occasionally sharp, fluctuations. Agnostics, moreover, with various degrees, shades, and nuances, acknowledge the possibility and complexity on both the atheist and theist ledger. They do not feel or assert that a definitive position can be proved or determined either way, even as

<sup>24</sup> (Harris 2015).

<sup>25</sup> (Dworkin 2013, p. 4). Similarly, Michael Ruse has identified himself as an atheist who is religious (Ruse 2015, p. 5).

<sup>26</sup> See (Stedman 2012).

<sup>27</sup> See, for example, (Lindeman et al. 2020).

<sup>28</sup> (Thatamanil 2020, p. 150).

<sup>29</sup> (Thatamanil 2020, p. 156). Contending that American capitalism is also a “comprehensive qualitative orientation”, Thatamanil contends many Christians who practise capitalism are engaged in multiple religious belonging, especially when such economic practises are supported or allowed to hurt the most vulnerable in society (Thatamanil 2020, pp. 187–90).

<sup>30</sup> See, for example, (Hägglund 2019).

<sup>31</sup> See, for example, (Admirand 2019a); as an example of my “holy envy” towards atheist ethics, see (Fiala 2017).

<sup>32</sup> On misotheism, see, (Schweizer 2011).

<sup>33</sup> Stephen Bullivant contends that through their “dreams, visions, and gratuitous actions”, Ivan, like Raskolnikov in *Crime and Punishment* or Kirillov in *The Possessed*, imply “that at a deeper level (that of their inner double) they possess a profound and insuperable faith in Christ.” He thus describes them closer to pseudo-atheists or anonymous Christians. See (Bullivant 2008).

such individuals may lean strongly to one side or the other.<sup>34</sup> Still more of us may be nominal believers or nonbelievers, perhaps living extended periods of our lives without deep reflection or agonistic agony one way or the other—perhaps simply believing in belonging<sup>35</sup> or prioritizing other areas of our lives beyond religious identity, whether we tick the box for belief in God or not. Some, moreover, consider themselves apatheists, asserting that the God question has no value or meaning in their lives.<sup>36</sup>

Again, most human beings often inhabit shifting and variously solid or porous positions of belief and unbelief, or simultaneously inhabit elements of these various positions throughout their lifetimes. Faith and doubt are more often bedfellows than engaged in any life-or-death duel.<sup>37</sup> When we factor in multiple religious belonging, the picture again becomes multi-layered and somewhat paradoxical, or at least a context that cannot be settled as “black or white”.<sup>38</sup>

In the study of interfaith or interreligious dialogue, we speak of various kinds of dialogues: the dialogue of life, the intra or interfaith dialogues (ecumenical dialogues); academic dialogues, intermonastic dialogues, elite/institutional interfaith dialogue, and so on.<sup>39</sup> For the purposes of this article, I examine the atheist–theist dialogue, which is often overlooked.<sup>40</sup> Many atheists, for example, are pleasantly surprised when invited to academic or government forums on religious pluralism or interfaith dialogue, almost accustomed to not being included.

In the West, as well as in many communist countries around the world, atheist–theist relations have often been hostile and tense.<sup>41</sup> In the United States, atheists are often the groups deemed least trusted, according to a number of national and local surveys, as Phil Zuckerman and others have noted.<sup>42</sup> They are also deemed to be the least electable. There has not been an outwardly atheist, party-nominated US presidential candidate, for example.<sup>43</sup> After the 9/11 attacks and the publishing popularity of the New Atheists, atheist voices were more often heard in public discourse and other cultural mediums in the West (even as some scholars have challenged their long-term contribution to any growth in atheism).<sup>44</sup> Nevertheless, we have even seen the rise of what Arthur Bradley and Andrew Tate have called “The New Atheist Novel”. Examining the tropes and themes of Richard Dawkins and the other New Atheists, Bradley and Tate show how major contemporary novelists, such as Ian McEwan, Martin Amis, Salman Rushdie and Philip Pullman, promote reason and science over religious superstition and religious fundamentalism in their works.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Coined by Thomas Huxley in 1869, such a position of learned, but humble unknowing on whether a Divine Being does or does not exist can be of great appeal, even as the position is chided by some atheists and theists for refraining from taking a clear stance. See, for example, (Le Poidevin 2010). A grade between agnostics and theists are deists who believe the universe was created by God who then “withdrew” from the world and so rules out any divine interventions, prayers, or grace. As Charles Taylor and others have argued, the step towards deism heralded the advance of exclusive humanism (Taylor 2007, p. 318). For a history of atheism and its key figures, see (Watson 2014).

<sup>35</sup> On the pervasive need to belong to groups even if doubting the religious or metaphysical tenets, see (Day 2011).

<sup>36</sup> See (Norenzayan 2013, p. 189).

<sup>37</sup> See, for example, (Lane 2013; Yadlapati 2013).

<sup>38</sup> See, for example (Knitter 2017; Sigalow 2019).

<sup>39</sup> For a good place to start on interreligious (or interfaith) dialogue, see (Cornille 2013a). See also (Admirand 2019a, chp. 4; 2019b).

<sup>40</sup> In addition to my forthcoming book with Andrew Fiala (Fiala and Admirand Forthcoming), see (Hedges 2016).

<sup>41</sup> See, for example, (Kosicki 2016). In China, see the amazing book by atheist dissident Liao Yiwu and his interviews and accounts with many religious people persecuted in Communist China, in (Yiwu 2011); for an account of the growth of religions in China despite sporadic (or increasingly, sustained) persecution, see (Johnson 2017). Writing in 2020, evidence for China’s persecution of the Uyghurs (predominately Muslim) in re-education camps is irrefutable. See, for example, (Roberts 2020).

<sup>42</sup> See, for example, (Zuckerman 2019; Zuckerman 2014).

<sup>43</sup> See, for example, (Smith 2019).

<sup>44</sup> (Kaufman 2019).

<sup>45</sup> (Bradley and Tate 2010). For an account contending that “various Anglo-American writers have gravitated to religious themes in trying to represent what happened on 9/11 and afterwards”, see (Eaton 2020, p. 69).



While anti-New Atheist books have been written by religious believers, there were also exceptions to the rule, from *The Oxford Handbook of Atheism*, coedited by a Christian theologian, Stephen Bullivant, and an atheist, Michael Ruse, along with a number of works by atheist writers who sought to present religious belief in a fair and balanced way; for example, Timothy Crane's *The Meaning of Belief: Religion from an Atheist's Point of View*.<sup>46</sup> My ongoing collaboration with atheist philosopher Andrew Fiala, moreover, has sought to find common ground among atheists and theists even while examining core issues of disagreement and dissonance around belief and unbelief in God.<sup>47</sup> Such works also share great resonance with the recent focus of The Dalai Lama in advancing secular ethics, especially the notion that all human beings, regardless of religious belief, are drawn and seek to promote compassion.<sup>48</sup> For The Dalai Lama, compassion "constitutes a basic aspect of our nature shared by all human beings".<sup>49</sup>

The key is to seek and encounter one another beyond identity-barriers, whether religious, economic class, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, nationality, or political affiliation. Through our stories and narratives, many bridges can be built or crossed.<sup>50</sup> While encountering real living beings is always preferable, fiction also provides a gateway and platform to meet, empathize, and experience the perspectives, fears, and dreams of the unfamiliar and unknown. The great Israeli novelist, Amos Oz, highlights how literature enabled him to overcome lingering or suppressed hatred of Germans after the Shoah. As he writes: "Imagining the other is not only an aesthetic tool. It is, in my view, also a major moral imperative".<sup>51</sup>

As a personal aside, I grew up in a rich and layered, even if perhaps a twilight-fading Catholic world in Long Island in the 1980s. While the presence of Jewish neighbours and friends no doubt later nurtured my latent interfaith awareness,<sup>52</sup> I knew no atheists. Yes, there were people struggling with their faith or perhaps (angrily was the word) renounced faith in God, but such was presented as an anomaly or mere phase. I also recall one or two instances where loss of faith was linked to an experience in war or the Holocaust, but in general, belief in God was taken for granted. I attended a Catholic grammar school and Catholic high school followed by my undergraduate years at The Catholic University of America. After a year in the Jesuit Volunteer Corps, I received two postgraduate degrees at two Jesuit Universities (Georgetown and Boston College) before my PhD at Trinity College Dublin in Ireland.

How deep and lasting were my contacts with atheists before my postgraduate work? Reading the essays of Kai Nielson and his striving for ethics without God in college, stands out, as do other, purely literary or theological encounters. From the writings of Camus to the nature essays of anthropologist and humanist Loren Eiseley,<sup>53</sup> I encountered atheists as immersed in the mystery of the world and in seeking to alleviate the pain and suffering of others, as any religious believer or theist. Such reading set a foundation for real, healthy contacts and friendships with nonbelievers today, even as my own Catholic faith (while often battered by doubt from clergy abuse of children)<sup>54</sup> still endures.

Turning to the novelists, it is not surprising, then, that even as I continue to work in the area of theist-atheist dialogue with fellow flesh-and-blood human beings, I also

<sup>46</sup> (Bullivant and Ruse 2014; Crane 2017). For an analysis of atheist writers critical of the New Atheists, see (Admirand 2020a).

<sup>47</sup> See, for example, (Admirand and Fiala 2019).

<sup>48</sup> (Dalai Lama 2011; Dalai Lama and Alt 2017).

<sup>49</sup> (Dalai Lama 2010, p. 109).

<sup>50</sup> See, for example, (Peace et al. 2012); in postconflict contexts, see (Admirand 2020b).

<sup>51</sup> (Oz 2005).

<sup>52</sup> See, for example, (Admirand 2020c).

<sup>53</sup> The best place to start for Eiseley's writing is in the collection, *The Star Thrower* (Eiseley 1979). For commentary, see especially (Lynch and Maher 2012). I have written about Eiseley in (Admirand 2011).

<sup>54</sup> See, for example, (Admirand 2014).

contend that examining literature can help to hone, challenge, and develop our dialogical, and for me, theological and ethical, language, horizons, and aims.

My first example, affectionately called, *Les Mis*, is, of course, a publishing sensation, whether as epic novel, a perennial East End and Broadway play, or a movie and television favourite.<sup>55</sup>

### 3. The Bishop and the Atheist<sup>56</sup>

Although the origins of *Les Misérables* begin in 1845, as Adam Gopnik notes, “[Victor] Hugo wrote *Les Misérables* in the Channel Island of Guernsey in the late 1850s while in exile from the Second Empire of Louis Napoléon, Napoléon’s nephew . . . ”<sup>57</sup> The magnum opus was published in 1862. While born Catholic, Hugo pulled away and rebelled against the institutional Church as he grew older, emphasizing instead social justice for the poor and oppressed. As Gordon Leah writes of the role of Providence in *Les Misérables*:

In the final analysis, the novel is an extended call to drastic social reform, incorporating memorable passages on the sewers, the housing conditions, the lives of street urchins, the treatment of orphans, the exploitation of the poor by criminals and by the social system. Additionally Hugo sees God as the provident Creator and Sustainer whose will it is that these evils should be cured and whose agent in so doing is the man of prayer and action whose soul has, in the words of the Bishop, been bought back from evil and given to God.<sup>58</sup> (Gordon is referring, of course, to Jean Valjean)

For our purposes, we will focus on the story of Monsieur Charles-Francoise-Bienvenu Myriel, who we are told in the novel’s opening, “in 1815 . . . was bishop of Digne” (1).<sup>59</sup> The Bishop was 75 years old and had been elevated to the episcopate in 1806. Especially illuminating are his interactions with the character called the Conventionist G—, who is identified and labelled as an atheist. Note that the Bishop was said to be modelled after Charles-Françoise-Melchior-Bienvenue de Miollis, whom James Maddon tells us, also lived simply, cared deeply for the poor, and even offered shelter to a criminal (Pierre Maurin) who was sentenced for stealing a loaf of bread. Conservative Catholics, including the Miollis family, were disgruntled about the Bishop’s portrayal in the book and the critiques of the institutional church (“Notes”, 1195). Others who shared Hugo’s critique of the institutional church feared his message was dulled by such a positive portrayal of a priest. As Lisa Gasbarrone writes: “According to his wife, Hugo defended his choice of the Bishop with the observation that a member of the liberal professions would be anachronistic for 1815, the momentous year in which the novel opens”.<sup>60</sup> He also felt the Bishop’s heroic saintliness would accentuate the underwhelming reality of clergy performance in his time.

In the longer context of the story, it is the Bishop’s altruistic forgiveness of Jean Valjean that shocks and inspires the ex-convict to overcome his (legitimate) bitterness and strive to take this new chance and live for God and true justice. He had stolen the Bishop’s only real possessions he had clung to from his previous life; “a set of six silver knives and forks and a big soup ladle . . . and two big solid silver candlesticks” (21). Yet, the Bishop protects and forgives him.

The opening of the novel expends 100 pages on the character of the Bishop, who is Christ-like in every way but martyrdom—kind, compassionate, forward thinking, and social-justice oriented. He foreshadows, I would contend, later liberation theologians such

<sup>55</sup> On its cultural impact, see (Bellos 2018).

<sup>56</sup> As will be seen below, calling G—an atheist again raises problems of terminology. Additionally worth noting is the Bishop’s earlier dinner with a senator who spouts an atheistic creed. As Bellos argues, through the Bishop’s witty banter, Hugo “slams the door on the fingers of his unbelieving left-wing friends” (Bellos 2018, p. 96).

<sup>57</sup> (Gopnik 2009, p. xiv).

<sup>58</sup> (Leah 2018, p. 33).

<sup>59</sup> (Hugo 2009, p. 1). All subsequent citations from *Les Misérables* will be in the text.

<sup>60</sup> (Gasbarrone 2008, pp. 1–24).

as Oscar Romero and Ignacio Ellacuría.<sup>61</sup> Unlike Christ, but more like a St Ignatius or St Thomas,<sup>62</sup> the Bishop was born into a wealthy family. He had also been married, though childless. His wife died while they were emigrants, having left the country after the 1789 revolution. He returned to France as a priest. He lived simply. “He didn’t preach so much as chat” (10), speaking with “the same eloquence as Jesus Christ himself, sincere and persuasive” (11). He stood with, and comforted, the criminal on the scaffold and happily met supposed robbers, saying: “Prejudices are the real thieves, vices are the murderers” (25). He was a Bishop to all—or nearly all, as he had eschewed the atheist.

The bishop’s dialogue with the atheist occurs in the subtitle: “The Bishop Before an Unknown Light”. The scene reveals both men in human illumination, warts and all. Their scene together is brief, and I can only imagine a deeper and longer-lasting connection if they had more time to converse, learn from one another, and correct false presumptions.

G—lived alone and was a member of the National Convention. The narrator says the Bishop’s actions towards the Coventionist were even more “risky than the trip through the mountains held by bandits”. Conventionists, and especially atheists, were often feared and detested by many at that time. “The man was more or less a monster”, it was said—as he had rejected rule by kings. For this position, he was isolated in a “godforsaken hole of a place in an extremely wild valley” (32). He had neither neighbour nor visitor, and so the Bishop would say: “There is a soul there who is all alone” (32). Yet, even the Bishop’s initial thrust for kindness was tempered by cultural and societal “aversion” to what the man represented. A few times he headed in the man’s direction, but then turned away. Word spread that G—was dying and death was imminent. The Bishop, after a few false starts, headed off to that “unholy spot” (32).

When he steps into G—’s dilapidated hut, G—asks the Bishop who he is, as no one from the town had ever visited him. G—, discovering the man is his bishop, reaches out his hand. The Bishop does not take it (33). He notes that the man does not look as sick as he had been told.

The atheist says he only has a few hours left but is glad the Bishop came and is happy to see the sun one last time. He tells a shepherd boy, who was serving him, to go to bed as he must be tired. G—also thought this way he can die while the boy is sleeping. It was a kind act, but the saintly bishop was unmoved. He was perturbed, though, as G—addressed the Bishop like any other man, even as he “gazed at him with a congeniality in which one might have discerned, perhaps, the humility that is appropriate when a person is so close to returning to dust” (34).

As noted, the Bishop was hoping for a deathbed conversion, but G—, emotionally and mentally strong and alert, exuded fervour and perseverance even as his body was moving toward death. In this regard, G—foreshadows Hugo years later on his deathbed in 1885, where a priest also sought (but failed in) his return conversion to the Catholic Church.<sup>63</sup>

Regardless, the Bishop sits down and begins to speak with a tone of “reprimand” (34). When G—says that man should be governed by science”, and the Bishop adds conscience

<sup>61</sup> For a good introduction to the writings of Oscar Romero, see, (Romero 2004). For Ellacuría’s impact on Latin American Liberation Theology, see especially his edited collection (Ellacuría and Sobrino 1993; Drexler-Dreis 2019, pp. 136–43). For an accurate, novelistic account of the murder of Ellacuría, along with five fellow Jesuits, their housekeeper and the housekeeper’s daughter, see (Galán 2020).

<sup>62</sup> Debates on the socio-economic standing of Jesus’ family are ongoing. Luke’s Gospel and the well-known nativity tell of “no room in the inn” can be examined in various ways (for a helpful analysis, see (Bailey 2008)). Confer also that Mary and Joseph offer to pay for the sacrifice of turtledoves at their visit to the Temple (Luke 2:24)—such offerings were usually meant for the poor (Leviticus 12:8). Having to flee to Egypt, according to the Gospel of Matthew, would certainly have negatively impacted their economic situation. On the other hand, some may refer to the gifts of the magi at Jesus’ birth and the tradition of Joseph and Jesus as carpenters (Mark 6:3 and Matt 13:55) to contend the term artisan, not peasant, may be more applicable, though the biblical scholar John Dominic Crossan argues that would still position Jesus below peasant farmers. See (Crossan 2009, pp. 28–29). Recent archaeological findings challenge the image of Jesus as a peasant preaching in a pastoral backwater. Of note is the recent archeological discoveries in Nazareth and Sephorris, a sophisticated urban city, only four miles away from where Jesus grew up (see, for example, (Dark 2020)). In regard to Ignatius, after convalescing at Manresa from his battle wounds and determined to spend the rest of his life for Christ, Ignatius famously tried to give all of his possessions away and even exchanged his sumptuous clothes for a beggar—though the beggar was later arrested on suspicion of stealing and so Ignatius had to announce his good deed to clear the beggar’s name. St Thomas Aquinas, as St Francis of Assisi, also came from wealth and sought to give everything to the poor—both against their family’s wishes.

<sup>63</sup> (Robb 1999, p. 524).



too, G—replies: “It’s the same thing. Conscience is the quota of innate science we each have inside us” (34).

Already the Bishop is “amazed” by his words, more so when G—clarifies that he protested and called for the death of ignorance, not the death of the king as he believed no man had such a right, guided by a call for social justice and the end of slavery.

They then discuss and clearly disagree on the value of the 1789 Revolution, which pains the Bishop, but which G—sees as “mankind’s crowning achievement” (35). As they further discuss the violence of the revolution, the “bishop almost regretted having come, and yet he felt obscurely and strangely shaken” (36).

The atheist mentions the example of Christ, who spoke what we would call truth to power and that innocence cannot only be claimed by one group. The Bishop quietly agrees. The atheist then argues that we must cry over all the victims of state violence and oppression, whether the child king or the common people. Again, the Bishop agrees. G—pushes further and says the suffering of the people has lasted longer and there we must focus. Another silence unfolds. The atheist’s tone shifts. He accosts the Bishop for coming into his home and questioning his motives, so again asking the bishop who he really is, presuming he is just a toadied member of the Church elite, far from the plight of the people. Readers know that is not the case with this Bishop. When G—calls the Bishop “a worm in a carriage!”, the narrator justly remarks: “It was the Conventionist’s turn to show human weakness and the bishop’s turn to show humility” (37).

Gently, the Bishop asks—despite all the supposed riches he had and has—how all the destruction from the revolution “prove[d] that pity is not a virtue, clemency is not a duty, and that ‘93 was not hideously ruthless” (37).

G—then apologizes to the Bishop for not treating the other and his ideas with courtesy. He also apologizes for using all the Bishop’s material wealth against him in his argument, and that he will not make such references again. The Bishop simply thanks him but does not correct him by saying he renounced such luxuries years ago.

As the Conventionist adds and links mistakes on different sides of the political spectrum before and during the revolution, the Bishop, shocked by the comparison, then replies: “Progress should believe in God. Good cannot be served by impiety. An atheist is a bad leader of the human race” (37). Note how the bishop’s bias is still active today. G—, initially silent, experiences a shiver, and with tears exclaims, seemingly in a defensive or sarcastic tone: “O you! O ideal! You alone exist!”

In response, the Bishop “experienced an inexpressible commotion” (37). David Bellos contends the scene above and G’s response (which I will note in a moment) are meant to convey the existence of God, “boiled down in *Les Misérables* to a bafflingly dense paragraph put in the mind of the outcast revolutionary, G”.<sup>64</sup> G—’s “bafflingly dense” words, uttered after pointing to the sky, are: “Infinity is. It is there. If infinity had no self, the self would be its limit; it would not be infinite. In other words, it would not be. However it is. So it has a self. This self of infinity is God” (38–39). He dramatically shudders. G—’s words almost resemble something of the spirit of the great 14th century Dominican scholar and mystic, Meister Eckhart,<sup>65</sup> or contemporary new age spiritualism. It is not a typical statement of an atheist, and here again may be closer to Hugo’s evolving beliefs towards something Divine but free of any human, religious institution.

Returning to the scene, the Bishop looks more kindly on the man, especially sensing death was very near. He reaches towards him and asks if he wants to express belief in God. “This hour is the hour of God. Don’t you think it would be a shame if we met in vain?” (39).

<sup>64</sup> (Bellos 2018, p. 108).

<sup>65</sup> Meister Eckhart’s theology is richly robed in apophatic statements of God, and a contemplative yearning to become one with God, seemingly dissolving and perfecting our self though becoming divine. He had some of his tenets condemned for heresy in 1329 by Pope John XXII in the bull “In agro dominico”, though recent attempts to rehabilitate him during the Papacy of John Paul II were met with claims that such rehabilitation of his overall stature in the Church was not needed. More recently, he is seen as a bridge to Christian–Buddhist dialogue; for example, with his call for detachment and denial of the self. See (Radler 2006).

The atheist recounts his life, mostly the good deeds he has done and the suffering he has endured, even acknowledging how he protected a convent and “my own enemies—you lot” (39). He concludes: “What have you come to ask of me?”

Here, finally, is the key to the whole arc, and it is the Bishop who is changed. As Kathryn Grossman comments, “References to knees and kneeling recur at a number of critical, interlocking junctions”<sup>66</sup> and serve to unite the novel’s narrative strands and structure. Just as Jean Valjean later kneels before Myriel, here the bishop kneels before G—and asks for his “blessing” (40). Though G—has already died, the narrator comments that the Bishop then became even more gentle and caring of the poor and of the children, clearly touched and changed by his encounter with the atheist (40). Perhaps Jean Valjean was thus also a beneficiary.

#### 4. Brothers in Dialogue

Fyodor Dostoevsky, like all great theists, was also drawn to atheism.<sup>67</sup> Ultimately, though, he firmly believed that religion and God were needed to maintain some moral order in our world, and that without such a foundation, as Ivan Karamazov intoned, “everything would be permitted” (69).<sup>68</sup> Dostoevsky was a profoundly angst-ridden man who could also breathe life into holy, optimistic characters such as Zosima, Alyosha, or of Sonya’s unconditional and forgiving love in *Crime and Punishment*.<sup>69</sup>

Dostoevsky’s gambling and debts, his early political activism, his sentence by execution under a firing squad in 1849, and his last-minute reprieve, followed by imprisonment in the Omsk stockade from 1850 to 1854 in Siberia, are well-documented in his fiction, letters, and in scholarly biographies and journal articles. Especially relevant is his autobiographical prison novel,<sup>70</sup> *The House of the Dead*. As Joseph Frank has noted, these prison years “were of decisive importance in [Dostoevsky’s] life and resulted in what he called the “transformation of his convictions”. The experiences garnered in these years changed Dostoevsky from an opponent into a supporter of Tsarism, and finally consolidated the foundations of his faith in Christ and in a Christian God who transcended the bounds of reason”.<sup>71</sup> In *The House of the Dead*, the narrator even blesses the prison for saving his life.<sup>72</sup>

*The Brothers Karamazov* was published in 1881, so almost three decades after his release, and one year before his death in 1882. In the novel, Fyodor Karamazov, the father, is described as a landowner who is “not only worthless and depraved but muddleheaded as well” (7). He only thought of himself. He was an “old fool” (74). As the opening of the novel reveals, the father had died 13 years previously. As the story unfolds, the question is which of his sons killed him, for any one of them had motive. Fyodor Karamazov, it is worth noting, was said to be modelled after Dostoevsky’s own troubled father, who (among three competing versions) supposedly was murdered by his serfs, whom he treated

<sup>66</sup> (Grossman 2017, p. 248).

<sup>67</sup> (Wilson 2017, p. 54).

<sup>68</sup> (Dostoyevsky 2004). All subsequent citations from *The Brothers Karamazov* will be in the text.

<sup>69</sup> For an illuminating account of Sonya’s radical hospitality through her reading of the raising of Lazarus to Raskolnikov, see (Izmirlieva 2020).

<sup>70</sup> See (Dwyer 2012). Dwyer examines the multi-ethnic and religious depictions of the characters in the novel, showcasing Dostoevsky’s growing awareness of the diversity of people within the Russian Empire. She also highlights what he came to see as his own new awareness of the *narod*, the Russian people. Interestingly, Gary Rosenshield, referring to the novel as semi-autobiographical, notes “it contains remarkable descriptions of the religious character, behaviour, and practice of Jews, Christians, and Muslims [and] can be counted as one of the few major works of nineteenth-century fiction that portray the religious practices of all the Abrahamic faiths”. See (Rosenshield 2006, p. 581). He contends its openness to other means of salvation besides the Russian Orthodox Church is rejected by the time Dostoevsky writes *The Brothers Karamazov*.

<sup>71</sup> (Frank 1966, p. 779). As Frank adds, Dostoevsky, in a beautiful letter in February 1854 to “Natalya Fonvizina, “the cultivated and deeply religious wife of an exiled Decembrist”, acknowledged his deep periods of doubt and unbelief, but having had moments of connection with God, contends that even if shown belief in Christ was a lie, he would still “remain with Christ rather than the truth” (ibid., p. 803). See also (Williams 2009, pp. 14–17).

<sup>72</sup> (Dostoyevsky 1985, p. 340). As Joseph Frank reminds us, though, it was really Dostoevsky’s new insights in how Christianity’s moral grounding and life pervaded the camps and “helped to mitigate some of its inhumanity” that it convinced him Christianity could not be replaced without great harm to Russian society. See (Frank 2010, pp. 211–12).

terribly. Dostoevsky was away at school during the death. Speculation (famously by Freud) on his father's demise and its impact on the son is ongoing.<sup>73</sup>

In the novel, the father had three sons through two wives. Alexei (Alyosha) is the young novice who often is seen to represent the spiritual side of man. Ivan is the brother who, we will see, has rebelled against belief in God, and represents the intellectual side of man. Dmitri, the eldest, represents the passionate or sensualist side of man. Their father was also rumoured to have a so-called illegitimate son, Smerdyakov. He had raped a vulnerable, mute, and homeless "holy fool" named "Reeking Lizaveta". The boy's name means "son of the 'reeking one'". She died while in childbirth.

According to Sharon Cohen, the rape of Lizaveta not only proved the wantonness of Fyodor Karamazov but the guilt of the town in not trying to care and protect her earlier. Thus, Smerdyakov "is a composite of the devil's son and a 'holy innocent', for he assimilates both the best and worst of humanity".<sup>74</sup> Smerdyakov was said to have skinned and hung cats as a child, later becomes a servant in his father's household, and shares Ivan's anti-God (or atheist) beliefs. He is also the one, perhaps driven on by Ivan's words, who murders their father (though Dmitri is blamed).

For our purposes, we will examine (though briefly) the well-known debate/dialogues about God and theodicy between Alyosha and Ivan, again focusing on challenges and lessons depicted in this believer–nonbeliever dialogue. It should be stressed that, much like Hugo, Dostoevsky was also a theist, but more so than Hugo, deeply feared what he saw as a nihilistic surge through Europe rooted in a turning away from God and traditional religious belief. Alyosha, deemed by Dostoevsky as the hero of the novel precisely for his stance and hope for God, was named after one of Dostoevsky's sons who tragically died three years into his life from epilepsy in 1878. Note also that Dostoevsky suffered from epilepsy (as did Smerdyakov).

*The Brothers Karamazov* is the most important, profound and damning literary text to examine the problem of theodicy: why an all-loving, omnipotent God could create and sustain a world in which the innocent suffer because, it is said, free will is needed for humanity's striving and fulfilment.<sup>75</sup> Ivan, who as Bernard Schweitzer argues, is really a misotheist—a hater of God as opposed to an atheist strictly speaking—presents the young Alyosha with lyrical, emotionally and rationally potent arguments on why he rejects the world as God has apparently constructed it, and so returns his "ticket" to him (245). As Rowan Williams comments, Ivan "is speaking for the Dostoevsky of decades earlier"<sup>76</sup>. On the one hand, as with all the Karamazovs, Ivan is attracted to signs of life and verdure—even hope—but is despondent and crushed by the useless suffering and horror also imbued in our world.

Even if Ivan was only to experience life's dregs, "still I would want to live—", he tells Alyosha, to taste all of life until at least 30. "Though I do not believe in the order of things, still the sticky little leaves that come out in spring are dear to me, the blue sky is dear to me" (230). So, too, he loves "some people" and great deeds. Alyosha says Ivan is halfway there, as he needs to love and believe that all this beauty and life that will die can be reborn and redeemed.

Ivan then tells Alyosha that, when he previously had blurted out there was no God, it was to tease him—but similar to the Buddha, now says there is no way of knowing if God invented man or man invented God, and Alyosha is best not to think about it (235). Ivan again admits he can believe in the idea of God as the infinite Good, but not "this world of God's" (235). He even admits that all the evil and destruction of this world, as Marilyn McCord Adams later argues in her book, *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God*,

<sup>73</sup> See, for example, (Frank 2010, pp. 47–49).

<sup>74</sup> (Cohen 2014, p. 46).

<sup>75</sup> On theodicy, see, for example, (Davis 2001); for my account of theodicy and witness testimonies, see (Admirand 2012). For other claims on the novel's greatness, see, for example, (Roberts 2018, p. 1).

<sup>76</sup> For a helpful literary and theological account of Dostoevsky's writings, see (Williams 2009, p. 28).

can and will be redeemed<sup>77</sup>—though Ivan stresses: “but I do not accept it, and do not want to accept it!” (236). Here Ivan is the opposite of the biblical Job, who bore the majority of his sufferings in silence, refused his wife’s advice “to curse God and die”, and who seemed happy enough when his riches were restored, even if his children, smitten by the satan, were not themselves reborn (he is granted new ones). The Book of Job, an exasperating and (I would argue) immoral biblical book, haunted Dostoevsky, and plays a key role in the novel, especially in Zozima’s preaching upon it.<sup>78</sup> Note also that spurring Ivan’s anger at God is the unjust suffering of others. According to Gustavo Gutiérrez’s reading of Job, it was Job’s plight and subsequent solidarity with the poor and forsaken of the world that gave to him the ability to speak a prophetic and contemplative language about God.<sup>79</sup> As a theist, I am grateful and humbled by challenges to belief in God because of suffering, whether from an Ivan Karamazov or Primo Levi.<sup>80</sup>

Alyosha thus wants to know why Ivan rejects this world, and Ivan is torn. He wants to tell his brother. He also fears persuading him to his position, and so admits: “Perhaps I want to be healed by you” (236). Is Ivan open, struggling and willing to cross back to the other side?

Ivan doubts, though, that Christ-like love is possible for human beings. It is plausible from a distance, but close up and daily love? No. He turns to the suffering of the innocent, of children, especially, at the hands of so-called “‘animal’ cruelty”. He then rightly notes such a term insults other animals, as “no animal could ever be as cruel as a man, so artfully, artistically cruel” (238). Ivan cites “atrocities” committed by Turks and Circassians in Bulgaria (238), a specific claim needing to be contextualized,<sup>81</sup> but we can mention any past and present atrocity, with any group of people, to witness such abysmal and creative destruction and terror.<sup>82</sup> This leads to Ivan’s deliciously true and wicked statement (after speaking of a game Turkish soldiers played with a baby before they “shatter its little head”, when he remarks: “I think that if the devil does not exist, and man has therefore created him, he has created him in his own image and likeness” (239). Contra Genesis 1:27, we are not holy beings created to be good by a holy God, Ivan is saying, but devilish beings who inflict misery on others. Ivan delights in his shatteringly agnostic comment about the Devil.<sup>83</sup>

Ivan then describes how the torturing of children is universal: “There is, of course, a beast hidden in every man, a beast of rage, a beast of sensual inflammability” (241–42). Of a 5-year-old girl, tortured by her parents, forced to eat excrement, Ivan says her prayers to God show the world should be rejected, especially when we claim we need to know the existence of good and evil, and so of cases like that girl’s suffering. However, he rejects such cases and reasoning and so rejects the world (242). Similarly, Anne Applebaum, in her majestic historical account of the Russian Gulag, retells the crushing story of “Little

<sup>77</sup> See (Adams 1999, p. 165).

<sup>78</sup> For my commentary on the Book of Job, and on Gustavo Gutierrez’s interpretation, see (Admirand 2012, chp. 7). On theodicy themes in Job that link *The Brothers Karamazov* and *The Plague*, see (Lešić-Thomas 2006, pp. 779–82); on Job’s influence in the life and work of Dostoevsky, see (Rampton 2010).

<sup>79</sup> See (Gutiérrez 2002).

<sup>80</sup> Surprisingly, Primo Levi wrote he profited little from his reading of Dostoevsky.

<sup>81</sup> See, for example, (Sahni 1986). Sahni writes: “Russia in the war against Turkey in 1877 is seen as a saviour of the Slav people still under the yoke of Turkey. The war assumes the proportions of a crusade. Dostoevsky becomes more and more intolerant of non-Christian peoples and nations. The decision by the Russian Government to forcibly evict the Crimean Tartars is fully approved by the writer, who fears that if the Russians do not move in it will be the Jews”, with Sahni adding that Dostoevsky’s “anti-Semitic leanings are well known” (Sahni 1986, p. 42). Regarding Circassians as victims of genocide committed by the Russians in the 19th century, see (Richmond 2013). Finally, Alexis Heraclides and Ada Dialla highlight crimes committed by “irregular” Bashibazouks (mercenary soldiers of the Ottoman Empire) and Circassians (“refugees from Russia”) sent to Bulgaria to “terrorize the population into submission” on account of a recent uprising in 1876. Estimates of the Bulgarian dead vary widely among the Ottoman and Bulgarian sources, from up to 3000 victims according to the former, and 100,000 by the latter. See (Heraclides and Dialla 2015, pp. 150–51).

<sup>82</sup> See, for example, (Gretton 2019).

<sup>83</sup> The question of the inherent goodness of human nature is a standard belief in Christianity—even if various churches demure on how or to what extent original sin has corrupted human beings. For an atheist’s account of our inherent compassion and solidarity (also echoing here the Dalai Lama), see (Bregman 2020, p. 314).

Eleanora" who is born and dies in the camps, despite the desperate pleas and prayers of her mother to God. Ivan, too, has cut to the heart of the impossible challenge brought to theists, impossible to justify or to ignore if theistic faith can somehow be maintained.<sup>84</sup>

Knowing he has struck a chord, Ivan apologizes for upsetting Alyosha, but his younger brother tells him to proceed. So, Ivan presents the story of a "house-serf" who accidentally hurt the favourite hound of his master, a general from an aristocratic family. The boy had thrown a stone which hit the dog's paw. Because of the affront, the boy, eight, is stripped naked, and with all the servants watching, especially his mother, is told to run. Mercilessly, the Master sends all his many hounds after the boy. They rip him to shreds. Ivan asks what to do with this general (243).<sup>85</sup>

Alyosha says he should be shot. Ivan approves. However, this returns Ivan to the why question: why must innocent children, especially, suffer for some future harmony? On account of the innocent victims, Ivan refuses to sing, "Just art thou, O Lord"—even if some harmony, some peace could be possible in the future. Ivan will stay here with the victims and their screams and so is incapable of singing such praise. For how can there be any atonement for such suffering? And hell is of no value: "what do I care if the tormentors are in hell, what can hell set right, if these ones have already been tormented?" (245). No one, moreover, can forgive the torturer of the children but the children—and how can we expect hope or justify such an embrace? Ivan thus returns his ticket to God, rejecting this world. He then challenges Alyosha if he would create a world like ours if only one child had to suffer, such as that poor girl whose parents made her eat excrement, to "found your edifice on the foundation of her unrequited tears?" (245). Alyosha says he cannot. Such a world cannot be justified upon the existence of one case of innocent, useless, anguished suffering (let alone genocides and mass atrocities).

Alyosha, does, though, bring up Jesus, and his sacrifice and atonement. Ivan tells him he was building towards Jesus and so tells the story of "The Grand Inquisitor". As Frank Armstrong comments, through Ivan and the Grand Inquisitor story, "Dostoyevsky is voicing his deep animosity to Catholicism, the Jesuit order in particular and the conflation of religious with temporal power generally".<sup>86</sup> According to Gary Adelman, Dostoyevsky also "poured his extreme life-hatred of Jews . . . into the Grand Inquisitor, quite consciously attacking in him the Jew in his own imagination".<sup>87</sup> Antonio Malo, meanwhile, contends that through the Legend of the Grand Inquisitor, "Dostoyevsky demonstrates the origin of nihilism, or that is, the system of thought by which one leads his or her life as if God were dead".<sup>88</sup> As Malo, argues, though, "for Dostoyevsky, evil can only be defeated by love", and this claim and hope is embodied in Jesus.<sup>89</sup> The tale has garnered a plethora of views. *The Brothers Karamazov* is what David Tracy would call a classic work, which jars and surprises the generations that encounter it, transforming and challenging them.<sup>90</sup> Bridging the persuasive accusation of Adelman with the hope of Malo, I follow here Harold Bloom who writes: "And yet the greatness of . . . *The Brothers Karamazov* is unquestionable. Dostoyevsky the novelist transcends the idolizer of the Tzar, the anti-Semite, the enemy of human freedom".<sup>91</sup> In Ivan's tale, a story within a story, Jesus is said to have returned during the Great Inquisition in Spain in the 16th century. Such, too, it is worth noting, was a time of great violence committed in the name of God. Supposed converts from Islam and Judaism were particularly distrusted (recall that Jews were expelled from Spain in

<sup>84</sup> (Applebaum 2003, p. 320).

<sup>85</sup> For an analysis on the question of the unforgivable act in *The Brothers Karamazov*, see (Murphy 2014, pp. 181–214).

<sup>86</sup> (Armstrong 2017).

<sup>87</sup> (Adelman 2000, p. 83).

<sup>88</sup> (Malo 2017, p. 260).

<sup>89</sup> (Malo 2017, p. 267).

<sup>90</sup> On Tracy's method of hermeneutical suspicion, see (Tracy 1987, pp. 14–15). For another work that employs Tracy's term of "the classic" to *The Brothers Karamazov*, see (Contino 2020, pp. 1–2).

<sup>91</sup> (Bloom 2003, p. 10).



1492, and surviving Muslims forced to convert after the Reconquista against the Moors). Violence in the name of religious belief is pervasive.

Thus, in this charged setting, Jesus is arrested by the Grand Inquisitor because he fears that Jesus' trust in human beings is dangerous; that humankind needs to be ordered what to do, not presented with more trust. Excessive freedom will only lead to further suffering. The Grand Inquisitor contends that Jesus gave the Church the means to make men happy through obedience. The Church gives the masses the basic sustenance they desire, and in return they relinquish their freedom, which they cannot morally and properly execute. Man cannot have bread and freedom, the Grand Inquisitor argues, and man really needs and prefers bread. Is this assessment of the human condition correct, as DH Lawrence and others have asked?<sup>92</sup>

The Inquisitor's claims are not new. They echo Juvenal's phrase of "bread and circuses" given to Roman citizens to appease them. They also resonate with similar phrases in later Maoist China and with a China economically strong today but still hiding past failures like the Great Chinese Famine.<sup>93</sup> Just as Jesus would be a threat in such 20th century totalitarian regimes, he is arrested in 16th century theocratic Spain. Throughout the Grand Inquisitor's narrative, Jesus says nothing. His only reply is to "gently" kiss the Grand Inquisitor on the lips, resembling Judas' betrayal of Jesus (Mark 14: 44–45). While the betrayed is the same, here the kissed and kisser are reversed. Though the Church betrays Jesus, he kisses the Grand Inquisitor out of kindness and forgiveness, not from Judas' malice or disappointment. Gorman Beauchamp writes: "The implication of Christ's remaining silent is clear: there *is* nothing more to be added to what he had said of old. His message has not changed, will not change, remains forever what it was, admits of no clarification or amendment. One accepts it, suggests Dostoevsky, as it is—a great and profound mystery, apprehensible only by faith—or accepts it not at all".<sup>94</sup> Additionally, it is worth highlighting that Wil van den Bercken notes:

Seen from Orthodox iconography, the portrait of Jesus that emerges from 'The Grand Inquisitor' is unconventional. It is the opposite of Christ Pantocrator or the throned Christ of the Day of Judgement. Instead, we have here a compassionate Jesus among the people and then a submissive, silent prisoner in front of a human judge.<sup>95</sup>

To me, Dostoevsky's Jesus echoes my own Catholic theological vision, rooted in my mature following of liberation theology and in the kind, gentle Jesus taught to me as a child.

Serving as a Christ figure, Alyosha then also kisses Ivan (263). The elder brother says he will think upon Alyosha's actions and when he is on the cusp of ending it all at age thirty, he will return to Alyosha for one more talk. Sadly, instead, Ivan suffers the onset of brain fever, a Victorian condition that was said to bring on madness from "emotional shock or excessive intellectual activity".<sup>96</sup> Was he tormented by the "demons" of his anti-God beliefs, as someone like Dostoevsky might think? Examining Aquinas' account of wisdom, Alina Beary alleges Ivan's picture of a godless world really showed his "infatuation with his own intellectual brilliance" and not wisdom.<sup>97</sup> This failure was especially evident

<sup>92</sup> (Lawrence 1955, p. 239). Lawrence notes he initially dismissed *The Brothers Karamazov* and especially the Grand Inquisitor section as "a piece of showing off", but had since reread the novel two times, and "each time found it more depressing because, alas, more dreadfully true to life" (ibid., p. 233).

<sup>93</sup> (Jisheng 2013). On human beings fleeing from freedom and so aligning with dictators who provide basic needs, see (Fromm 1994).

<sup>94</sup> (Beauchamp 2007, p. 137). The main thrust of the article is to show the parallels of the story with Plato's *Republic*, both of which reveal sadistic atrocities abutted by attempts to create utopias.

<sup>95</sup> (van den Bercken 2011, p. 86). Den Bercken also writes: "Although the picture of Jesus, sketched here by Dostoevsky, does not fit into Orthodox iconography, it does fit into nineteenth century representation of Jesus, manifested in popular Catholic and Protestant pictures for religious education and in Russian romantic painting (A. Ivanov, I. Kramskoy)" (ibid., p. 86).

<sup>96</sup> (Peterson 1976).

<sup>97</sup> (Beary 2018, p. 35).

in Ivan's pride-filled dealings with Smerdyakov. Easily influenced,<sup>98</sup> Smerdyakov takes Ivan's views that all is permitted and that there is no God to then murder their father. It also results in Dmitri's (false) arrest. While Ivan hopes Smerdyakov will testify to exonerate Dmitri, Smerdyakov instead kills himself. Traditionally, suicide was a symbol of rejection and despair at the possibility of God's grace and forgiveness, again commonly linked with Judas as betrayer, who died from hanging (Matt 25: 27, though from a fall with his intestines spilling out; Acts 1: 18). The father, though, was no Christ figure as a victim.<sup>99</sup>

Nevertheless, while Alyosha's religious belief is humbled and challenged and Ivan's misotheism seems to leave him in madness, few theists would allege that Ivan's challenges have been satisfactorily answered, especially in regard to growing dissatisfaction with atonement theories.<sup>100</sup>

In our third and final example, it is the theist who is again challenged and ultimately most distraught from these theodicy discussions.

### 5. A Doctor and a Priest (and Two Journalists)

Albert Camus' *The Plague* was begun before WWII, but mostly written shortly after its end, and published in 1947. As Tony Judt notes:

He started gathering material for it in January 1941, when he arrived in Oran, the Algerian coastal city where the story is set. He continued working on the manuscript in Le Chambon-sur-Lignon, a mountain village in central France where he went to recuperate from one of his periodic bouts of tuberculosis in the summer of 1942. However Camus was soon swept into the Resistance and it was not until the liberation of France that he was able to return his attention to the book.<sup>101</sup>

While perhaps historically rooted in a choleric epidemic that descended upon Oran after French colonial occupation in 1870, the novel takes place in the 1940s. Both a literal and allegorical reading of the plague is common. Its setting in the 1940s with a Nazi and Communist threat and war resonate. The novel is rooted in a search for meaning and purpose in the context of loss and plague, with the hovering sense that all of life, sooner or later, will succumb to such tragedies. How we respond is of the utmost importance. Both now and then, this eternal question lingers: Is it absurd to care about a human response when there are no gods, no ultimate justice? It is not surprising that Camus' novel has seen deep rereading in our time of COVID-19.

For our purposes here, I will mostly focus on the interactions between Dr Bernard Rieux, who is an atheist, and the Catholic priest, Father Paneloux. We will also include some key discussions with Rieux and two journalists, Tarrou and Rambert, who also do not believe in God.

Camus is usually identified by others as atheist, even as he could be coy about the label. Some theists have sought to find in Camus a sign or movement towards theism before his tragic death, but at most, I agree with Robert Royle:

He's questing and enigmatic, something like Ivan Karamazov, his favorite character in his favorite novel by his favorite author. He's more indignant over suffering and injustice than hardened in a stance against God. In this, Camus was some-

<sup>98</sup> Contrary to the claim that Smerdyakov is a mere tool of Ivan, Vladimir Kantor warns that "If we endorse the point of view on Smerdyakov that he is a passive murderer . . . in someone else's hand, a person merely carrying out Ivan's plan, then we will enter naturally into a contradiction with the poetic and worldview-shaping concepts that govern Dostoevsky's cosmos, a cosmos resting on the fact that each person bears full responsibility for his or her own acts, regardless of the social level from which he comes and no matter how undeveloped he may be". See (Kantor 2009, p. 190). For Kantor, Smerdyakov is Ivan's tempter. As Caryl Emerson pens Smerdyakov is "an active force for evil at work on a delicate, corruptible, still undecided soul". See (Emerson 2009, p. 223).

<sup>99</sup> Rowan Williams helpfully shows how the Story of the Grand inquisitor is not unresolved but has its themes addressed in the "life and teaching of Zosima" in the sixth book of the novel and "Ivan's encounter with the Devil in chapter nine of book 11" (Williams 2009, p. 29).

<sup>100</sup> See, for example, (Admirand 2008).

<sup>101</sup> (Judt 2001).

what in the Samuel Beckett mode: ‘God doesn’t exist, the bastard.’ He still might exist and be a bastard for all he seems to allow.<sup>102</sup>

It is worth noting that, as Vivienne Blackburn comments, Camus’ desire is “for genuine dialogue” and cooperation with religious believers.<sup>103</sup>

In the novel, as dead rats start to appear throughout the city, foreboding ill, Dr Rieux is contacted by a journalist, Raymond Rambert (as noted, a fellow atheist, 205),<sup>104</sup> who is supposed to write about the conditions of the Arab populations, ill-treated then (and now) in France. When Rieux admits he will not share his thoughts if the full truth of their condition is not uncovered, the journalist says he speaks “in the language of Saint Just”, referring to the French revolutionary (who remains a controversial figure). Tellingly, the narrator remarks that Rieux knew nothing of such a claim, but “the language he used was that of a man who was sick and tired of the world he lived in—though he had much liking for his fellow man—and had resolved, for his part, to have no truck with injustice and compromises with the truth” (12). This is much like Camus’ humanist creed—no belief in God, but deep love for his fellow man and woman, a commitment to the unvarnished truth and no allegiance or dealings with injustice.

Instead, Rieux tells the journalist about the rats (13), whose corpses pile up, soon to be matched by human beings. As the horrid truth slowly dawns on Rieux—that this was plague—he tells himself not to waste time on worry and reflection: “The thing was to do your job as it should be done” (41).

Father Paneloux was a Jesuit priest. As an aside, in *The Brothers Karamazov*, Alyosha had tried to distance himself from that Catholic order after Ivan narrated his Grand Inquisitor story.<sup>105</sup> In Camus’ novel, after the plague had been raging in Oran for a month, the narrator focuses on a particular homily of Fr Paneloux.<sup>106</sup> We are told he was scholarly and reached nonspecialists on previous sermons on individualism. “In these he had shown himself a stalwart champion of Christian doctrine at its most precise and purest” (92). He had earned some “local celebrity” for his unvarnished truths.

To combat the plague, the religious authorities organize a week of Prayer, culminating in Father Paneloux’s Sunday sermon “under the auspices of St. Roch, the plague-stricken saint” (92). In his sermon, the Jesuit claims plague has fallen on the people because of their moral laxity and lack of faith—that “they deserved” this present calamity (94). He intones that these are the end times, and we need to focus on God and our salvation—but that “God is unfailingly transforming evil into good”—the classic theodicy statement and justification (99). Words of his sermon—especially as the town is mostly shut down—reach many.

Another journalist, Tarrou, asks Dr Rieux what he thought of the sermon. Rieux had heard about the sermon from others. He generously replies that his work in hospitals prevents any belief in collective punishment, but kindly says Christians sometimes say such things but do not really mean it and are “better than they seem” (125). When Rieux confirms to Tarrou that he does not believe in God (126) but emphasizes that the main difference between him and Paneloux is that the scholar has not seen death up close so can speak more confidently of truth “with a capitol T”, he also clarifies that a country priest may know of death.<sup>107</sup> Tarrou then wants to know about Rieux’s devotion (to alleviate suffering) while being an atheist.

<sup>102</sup> (Royle 2014). On Dostoevsky’s influence on Camus and his works, see (Epstein 2020).

<sup>103</sup> (Blackburn 2011, p. 315).

<sup>104</sup> (Camus 1975). All subsequent citations from *The Plague* will be in the text.

<sup>105</sup> The Jesuits had been suppressed by Pope Clement XIV and then later restored by Pope Pius VII in August of 1814, shortly before the opening of *Les Misérables*. Jesuits receive a few passing references in the novel.

<sup>106</sup> While I focus below on a scene (the death of a child from the plague) which Gene Fendt calls one “of the classics of the anti-theistic argument from evil”, I acknowledge his sharper retort that only seeing the antitheistic layer “suffers from an incomplete evaluation of Paneloux’s sermons, and is blind to the Augustinian substructure of the novel, which reveals that something more divine is present and active.” See (Fendt 2020, p. 471).

<sup>107</sup> See, for example, the poems of RS Thomas, many of which show the local, country priest having to confront the daily reality of death in his parish.

Rieux tells him it is simple: there are sick people “and they need curing” (127)—even as the struggle is a “never-ending defeat” (128). Rieux’s teachers are, in fact, “suffering” (129) and “the moral code” of comprehension (130). He later tells the journalist Rambert the only way to face the plague is with “common decency” (163), doing his job as a doctor, and through healing. His example later inspires Rambert (again, a fellow atheist) to stay in Oran and not run off with his love and to seek happiness because, similar to Rieux, he is driven to work on a cure (210).

Plague continues to spread, though. Hope for a cure in a child was instead met with the innocent’s slow, agonizing demise. Surrounded by a sense of helplessness and impotence (216), Father Paneloux sank to his knees imploring: “My God, spare this child!” (217). However, the cries and moans of others only smother the prayer. Rieux, meanwhile, “tightly gripp[ed] the rail of the bed shut his eyes, dazed with exhaustion and disgust” (217).

The child, finally, dies.

When the priest motions to speak with Rieux, who is utterly spent after months of twenty-hour days, helplessly seeking to heal, Rieux “swung round on him fiercely. ‘Ah! That child, anyhow, was innocent, and you know it as well as I do!’” (218).

After Rieux breaks away, they then continue the discussion, Rieux apologizing for his tone, feeling sometimes all one has is a feeling of “mad revolt”. While resonant with much of Camus’ *The Myth of Sisyphus*,<sup>108</sup> the phrase also resembles the passion of Ivan.

Paneloux, ever dutiful, invokes a theodicy comment, saying, “we can love what we cannot understand”. However, Rieux “shook his head. ‘No, Father. I’ve a very different idea of love. Additionally until my dying day, I shall refuse to love a scheme of things in which children are put to torture’” (218).

The priest then mentions the gift of grace. The doctor acknowledges he has no such gift, but says the more important thing, despite their differences, is that they are “working side by side for something that unites us—beyond blasphemy and prayers” (219).

Paneloux then says Rieux is also working for “man’s salvation”, an extraordinary statement for its time. Remember, this is before Vatican II, and especially *Nostra Aetate*.

As the priest gets up to leave, and Rieux again apologizes for his tone, the Jesuit, unlike the Bishop in *Les Mis*, cannot conceal his disappointment in not convincing Rieux of God. Rieux again stresses they are both together fighting disease. Paneloux now knows “the smell of the sheep”, as Pope Francis, a Jesuit, likes to say.

Paneloux invites Rieux to a sermon he will give touching on their discussions and experiences together. Rieux goes to the Church, which is much more sparsely attended than the last main sermon. So, too, the Jesuit’s tone is generally gentler, and as the narrator notes, the priest speaks of we and not you. He does not deny the message of his first sermon but emphasizes that we must have total belief or none. Those are the stakes—and the death of innocent children make the stakes even higher—so he has to fully trust all will be ok. There is a desperation in his voice that other clergy notice and distrust.

Physical suffering follows the priest—though, as Rieux surmises, it is not plague symptoms. He still treats him with care. Father Paneloux soon dies, in what is labelled a “doubtful case”. As always, answers are not clear. Why did he die? Was it a statement about his faith?<sup>109</sup>

We again come back to the issue posed by the Bishop and G— in *Les Misérables*. As Tarrou asks Rieux: “Can one be a saint without God?” (255; Tarrou is also an atheist).

For the narrator, and for Rieux (and Camus), the answer is to be healers (308), with or without faith in God. Of that, there is little doubt.

<sup>108</sup> See (Camus 2005, p. 62).

<sup>109</sup> David Stromberg writes that the “old Jesuit priest Father Paneloux” resembles the sketch of a “young priest who loses his faith”, in Camus’ early notes on the novel. See (Stromberg 2018, p. 58).

## 6. When Fiction Instructs Life: Lessons for Atheist–Theist Dialogue

The three well-known examples above are rich and varied in the types and level of lessons gleaned for contemporary atheist–theist dialogue in the North Atlantic World. Note that I again return to Taylor’s phrasing because, in general, the discussion would shift drastically in, for example, India, where religious pluralism or the historical validity of atheism is more accepted (at least before the rise of Hinduva ideology). In Hinduism, even as perhaps the majority strand emphasizes one God through many approaches and manifestations of deities, there is a healthy atheist path also possible.<sup>110</sup>

In traditional Muslim countries, and for much of Africa, atheism is deeply marginalized if nonexistent. Consider, for example, the ravages of horrors after the Rwandan genocide, and yet, unlike much Jewish writing after the Shoah,<sup>111</sup> there was little doubt and questioning about God (though there was questioning of the failures of its institutional churches).<sup>112</sup> In Jean Hatzfeld’s most recent publication, *Blood Papa*, predominantly focusing on the children in the next generation (but born in or after the 1994 genocide), faith in God is deep and engaging.<sup>113</sup>

While there are pockets (especially in the United States) where Christian identification and belief are expressed in more rigid and fundamentalist tones, and despite the reality that atheists are continually viewed with distrust in many polls and case studies, the spread of those affiliating as atheist, none, or agnostic remains robust, if not growing consistently.<sup>114</sup> As noted, in Europe attachment to the major institutional Christian churches continues to decline, including the countries often deemed as exceptions, namely Ireland and Poland. Atheism, or at least those identifying as a none (especially among the youth) is also rising.

Of course, Muslim immigrants and those of other non-Christian faiths continue to bulk up and nuance overall theistic faith in Europe, but the atheist–theist dialogue has become especially important. There is little or no evidence that those born after the late 1990s will return to the Church in the way of my parents’ generation, for example—and they are more likely to be religiously and spiritually fluid even as they are driven by social justice and especially environmental concerns.

Overall, the most important lesson in these novels is the power of face-to-face interactions; the back-and-forth process of listening, responding and questioning, sustained, ideally, over time or by a succession of encounters. Unfortunately, in our novels, the discussions were more often one-off events, as in the case of the Bishop and the Conventionist, where everything was a bit more dramatic and existential. So, too in *The Plague* as Father Paneloux dies soon after his humbling, while Ivan’s intellectual and spiritual fate in *The Brothers Karamazov* is left unknown.

Crucially—almost despite themselves—we see the way the other’s words move and challenge. This is especially true as there were (and remain) so many preconceptions and biases against atheists in the context of these works. Today, one may also acknowledge contexts where God believers are marginalized. The Conventionist, for example, just assumes that the Bishop is as economically corrupt as all the others (which the Bishop humbly and graciously does not try to refute). The Bishop, however, is steadfast in his belief that salvation and moral good are not possible for atheists and cannot fathom an atheist’s ethics, even as the Conventionist exudes a deep moral life that came with consequences for his ethical ideals and values. When the Bishop asks for the atheist’s blessing—there is no more dramatic and telling sign of the change—we witness the catharsis of an already good and holy man. As noted, the Bishop ends up becoming even more radically attuned to the needs of the poor. While the Conventionalist remains faithful to his atheistic vows (though

<sup>110</sup> See, for example, (Flood 2020).

<sup>111</sup> For the best account of post-Shoah Jewish theology, see (Katz et al. 2007).

<sup>112</sup> (Rittner 2004).

<sup>113</sup> (Hatzfeld 2018).

<sup>114</sup> (Case and Deaton 2020, p. 176). Case and Deaton note, however, that the lack of a religious community is one factor that the poor whites under their discussion have grown in isolation, and so deaths of despair.



I am a little confused by his use of the infinite, God language, and the self), he dies in the presence of a bishop (though outside the Sacramental life of the Catholic Church). There is a kindness that both show the other after some testy moments and presumptions. Both, in different ways, are healed and gift one another with their fidelity to their distinctive creeds.

The dialogue of the brothers in Dostoevsky's novel, as noted, is the greatest discussion of the problem of evil in any medium, literary or theological—especially from an atheist or misotheist's perspective. Ivan's arguments are concise, careful, and full of vexation. Alyosha was no intellectual equal to Ivan—though a lengthy discussion between Father Zosima and Ivan would have been interesting. Again, the key issue—as it was in *The Plague*—is the suffering of innocent children. Why do they have to needlessly and unjustly suffer? Ivan is adamant that there is no answer of justification for such loss. Alyosha tries to emphasize Christ—and similar to Father Paneloux's sermons in *The Plague*—promotes a total fidelity and trust in God. Neither Ivan nor Rieux (nor Tarrou nor Rambert) is impressed in the end. Again, troubling from a theist's perspective, the illness of Paneloux is dubbed a "doubtful case" (234), literally in terms of whether it is plague that had killed him, but metaphorically could also purport his movement from extreme fideism to doubt.

The dialogues in all three of these novels reveal nuance, integrity, and complexity among its conversation partners, even if there is no full conversion either way. More importantly, we are reminded how labels like "the atheist" or "the Jesuit" can be distracting and restrictive. Human beings are works-in-progress, steeped in contradictions and paradoxes. Faith and doubt can often seem interchangeable words at various periods or moments in our lives. As noted above, Ivan does not deny the existence of God; even Alyosha experiences doubt regarding his faith, echoing some of Ivan's claims (341).<sup>115</sup> The Conventionist G—, while termed an atheist, seems to acknowledge something transcendent, though he rejects any institutional religious belonging. Father Paneloux, dying with the label of a "doubtful case", best exemplifies the ambiguity and the ebbing and flowing of faith and doubt in our lives.

This realization is deeply relevant to the believer-non-believer dialogue, which is usually structured in an oppositional manner. Forced divisions, though, overlook ample overlap and blending. Such is not simply because underneath labels, we are all human beings who love and are loved, though this truth should not be cursorily dismissed. As importantly, the distinctive aims, perturbations, and desires of atheists and theists share sufficient space and similarity for understanding, and hopefully, compassion. Can we recognize one another as parts of ourselves and see ourselves in one another? Such is when dialogue and partnership can flourish.

It is unfortunate that Ivan (like Nietzsche) suffers madness so that some theists can posit his doubt of God spurred such a state, but in Dr Rieux we have only reasonable and kind responses to a world of suffering without God. Note also the moral changes and conversions of Tarrou, Paneloux, and Rambert—a conversion of social justice—to choose to be close to death and suffering and to become, as the end of *The Plague* notes, healers.

In all the New Atheism rebukes against religion, and theistic counterclaims,<sup>116</sup> what is lost and forgotten are the beauty and value of the people on both sides of the divide, of those in between, and the far greater need beyond, or perhaps deeply intertwined with, some belief in the Transcendent. There was little call in their debates to join together to be healers in this world—for all who are broken, plague-sick, alone, and all those suffering in jails, refugee camps, ghettos, plague-quarantine, anonymity, and general indifference.

The God question and labels, such as atheist or theist, become secondary to social justice concerns in two of these novels, and virtually unanswerable outside of faith in *The Brothers Karamazov*. However, the encounters humble and challenge all who take the time to listen and truly try to learn from the other, whether in real life or as seen in the fictional encounters examined in these three classic novels.

<sup>115</sup> For commentary, see (Vetlovskaya 2011, p. 686).

<sup>116</sup> For a reasoned overview, see (Davies 2011).

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