Response to Susan McReynolds' review of Rowan Williams, *Dostoevsky: Language, Faith, and Fiction*. By Paul J. Contino

Although Susan McReynolds' review comes three years after the publication of Archbishop Rowan Williams' book, it is quite timely. Susan helpfully summarizes the positive reception Williams's book has received since its publication, and graciously invites Williams to now enter into "a conversation [with] members of the International Dostoevsky Society." One hopes that the daily demands of serving as leader of the worldwide Anglican Communion will allow him to do so – perhaps at the International Symposium in Moscow in 2013? As one of the reviewers who praised Williams' book upon its publication, I am grateful that she has invited me into the very kind of dialogue that Williams, building upon Bakhtin, emphasizes as vital toward understanding Dostoevsky's novelistic art, and to our human flourishing.

I agree with one of Susan's early criticisms: Williams could certainly engage other leading literary commenters of Dostoevsky, especially those that explore his religious dimension. To those whom she mentions I would add her own recent work on Dostoevsky's response to atonement theory, *Redemption and the Merchant God*, and Robert Louis Jackson's pioneering work on form. However, I would add that Williams's book has also alerted me to a number of commentators whose work I now intend to explore.

In response to Williams's discussion of Dostoevsky's Orthodox sources, Susan asks: "Is some putative reconstructed authorial intent the measure of significance in a literary text? We are dealing with novels, after all, and not theological treatises…." Here I am pretty sympathetic to Williams. It is vital to understand Dostoevsky's theological intentions, especially in his final novel, of which Dostoevsky wrote to his editor : "I shall compel [his contemporary atheists] to recognize that a pure, ideal Christian is not something abstract but is graphically real, possible, obviously present…." (Letter to N. A. Lyubimov, June 11, 1879). But the centrality of Dostoevsky's theological concerns does not – as Williams is consistently aware – make *The Brothers Karamazov* a treatise, but, rather an artistic work that bears comparison with Dante's *Commedia* or Bach's *St. Matthew Passion*. In Book 5, Dostoevsky sought to make the best case for atheism that he could. For some, like James Wood, Ivan's "unanswerable attack on the cruelty of God's hiddenness . . . . proved decisive," and provided his final step to atheism (*Broken Estate* 270). But in Dostoevsky's response to Ivan, he did not intend to write a "point by

point answer, but an oblique one. . . . in artistic form" (Letter to K. P. Pobedonostsev, August 24,1879).

Williams attends to this form, and discerns that Dostoevsky's dialogical art is fundamentally Christological. Here Williams picks up where Bakhtin felt compelled to leave off. As Bakhtin told an Sergey Bocharov near the end of his life, under Soviet surveillance he "couldn't speak directly about the main questions. . . . What Dostoevsky agonized about all his life – the existence of God" (cited in *Bakhtin and Religion,* "Introduction" 2). Williams – who knows the Orthodox tradition deeply – points to these influences to show "Dostoevsky carefully finding his way between tradition and modernity" (205). Perhaps, as Susan suggests, Williams overemphasizes Dostoevsky's Orthodoxy. From my vantage point, he could acknowledge more fully Dostoevsky's ecumenical potentialities. He rightly observes that Dostoevsky could be "spectacularly pigheaded" about Roman Catholicism (14), but one might note that numerous Catholic literary artists and theologians (and Anglo-Catholics like Williams) have found great spiritual sustenance in Dostoevsky's narratives: Georges Bernanos, Walker Percy, Henri de Lubac, Hans Urs von Balthasar – and even the two most recent Pontiffs, who cite Dostoevsky in their encyclicals! When considering Dostoevsky's Catholic dimension, it's worth recalling his deep friendship with the younger, more ecumenically-inclined Soloviev, who helped arrange for the gift that Dostoevsky perhaps treasured most: the copy of Raphael's "Sistine Madonna," which hung in his study. The "thoroughgoing sacramental theology. . . of the Eastern Church" (75) is shared by the Catholic West.

Dostoevsky's profound influence on numerous Christians – Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant (notably Karl Barth) – offers evidence that Williams is not projecting, a la Feuerbach, when he reads Dostoevsky. More than any literary work I know, *The Brothers Karamazov* offers a complex, capacious case for the integral nature of the two-fold commandment at the heart of small "o" orthodox Christianity: love of God and love of neighbor as oneself. Zosima's prescription of the "harsh and dreadful" path of active love (which Dorothy Day took so dearly to heart), his depiction of the difficulty of serving as a "monk in the world," remains constant in its inspiration to and relevance in a world that questions – perhaps even more fiercely than Ivan – the possibility of persons to enact "Christ-like love." Dostoevsky's contemporaries said to him, "We've become better people because of the Karamazovs" (Letter to Anna G. Dosotyevskaya, June 7, 1880) ; many continue to say it. The

spiritually transformative potential of this novel can never, in my view, be underestimated.

But is Williams sufficiently attentive to historical difference? Is the God that he discerns in Dostoevsky simply an ideal therapist, the projection of twenty-first century wish? Well, not if one recognizes that, in Dostoevsky's analogical imagination, a character like Alyosha – that "spiritual therapist," to borrow Robin Feuer Miller's words (*Worlds* 86) – is an image of Christ. Like the penetrating gaze of the Sinai icon of Christ Pantocrator, the words and visage of Zosima and Alyosha offer both gift and task, grace and a call to responsibility. They lend "loving attention" (26) to use a phrase that Williams aptly employs. Two Sundays ago, I led a reading group discussion of the novel in our local Catholic parish after Mass. The Gospel reading that morning was John 9, Christ's meeting and dialogue with the Samaritan woman at the well. "Come see the man who has told me everything that I have done," says the faltering woman-turned-apostle near the end of the story. The image of this gospel dialogue of transformation resonates in scenes like Zosima's with his mysterious visitor, and Alyosha's with Grushenka, as so much of scripture does throughout the novel.

But Susan raises another vital question: Does Williams' celebration of dialogue entail a refusal to come to closure? After all, Christ often concludes spiritual interventions with clear words of closure: "Go and sin no more" (John 8.11). At first, I was inclined to agree with Neuhaus's implied critique of Williams's "dialogical enmity toward every form of closure," his seeming allergy to any "last word." After all, don't therapeutic dialogue and sacramental confession both seek closure? Doesn't the beauty of Christ – especially in the Sinai icon – balance mercy with judgment? Reading Bakhtin's work as a whole, one can see that his early emphasis (in his early *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*) upon "signature" – the need to take responsibility for one's deeds – and his critique of the vicious cycle of the loophole (in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*) balances his affirmation of unfinalizability.

However, upon closer reading, it becomes clear that Williams does not celebrate openness uncritically. For one thing, he insists upon the ethical failures of those who resist the closure forged through decision and commitment. His remarkably severe critique of Myshkin points up the prince's reductive benevolence, his "will to believe [of others] less of them than is actually true" (50). Myshkin's refusal to recognize "the obstacles and limits of the everyday" (51) pushes him further from the incarnational and closer to the demonic. So too Stavrogin, who underlines

"the paralyzing effect of freedom without decision and commitment" (93), and Ivan, who "wants to slip away from the words he speaks, so as to remain hidden, free from what he has said" (127).

To further clarify Williams's complex approach to openness and closure, it's helpful to underline two recurring emphases in his study: realism vs. voluntarism, and the way eternal life becomes integral to Dostoevsky's mature faith. First realism. As do I, Williams sees in Dostoevsky the vision of a metaphysical realist: "he is repeatedly directing us toward a pattern of divine action that is outside our heads or hearts" (234). The emphasis here is less epistemological than ontological. God's gratuitous and abundant love remains the hidden ground of our being. Our call is to recognize this ground and respond in trust and gratitude. In laceration, we can willfully refuse his gift: God grants humans freedom. But, paradoxically, freedom can only be realized when the person receptively conforms to the reality of God's sustaining love. Thus, Dostoevsky's vision stands opposed to any voluntarist view: reality is not a construction of capricious, competing human wills in which "there is nowhere and no one to which or to whom fidelity can be given, no source outside the will from which difference, otherness, can be absorbed in a renewal of life or energy" (220).

Given the reality of difference, and the way the wrong kind of "last words" can reify reality, Dostoevsky's realism is necessarily perspectival and dialogical. Thus, as Williams rightly recalls, "the deplorable Rakitin has published a life of Zosima, as if to remind us that there will always be an alternative story to be told" (137). However, Williams could here make clearer that some perspectives are closer to the truth than others. Certainly Alyosha sees and "authors" Zosima more clearly than Rakitin does! In Book 7, we see the way Alyosha discerns the events at Grushenka's as the unexpected miracle they are, whereas Rakitin sneers and dismisses them. Alyosha is a *believing* realist who recognizes miracles as integral to the weave of reality; Rakitin is an *unbelieving* realist who denies miracles even when they unfurl before his eyes. This side of eternity, all perspectives pass through a glass darkly. But Zosima's and, over time, Alyosha's come very close to seeing face to face.

Here I come to Williams's second recurring emphasis: his observation that immortality is integral to Dostoevsky's understanding of faith in God: "Dostoevsky projects the idea of a continuation of growth and self-definition beyond death" (133-34). But how can this be? Isn't eternity non-temporal, non-narrative, simply static? On the contrary, it's most fully alive. Allow me to extend Williams's idea: if eternity is participation

of human life within the Triune God – that infinitely loving Divine conversation iconically imaged in Rublev's Trinity – such dialogue is, in fact, unending, without a final word. (Recall the repeated "three's" in Dostoevsky's final novel.) Fully conforming to the reality of God's love, such dialogue of creatures within Creator would be perfectly free, unblighted by sideward glances or lacerating rebellions. And eternal dialogue is not reserved for heaven: in the hell described by Zosima, God continues to "call." It's hell with a loophole, as I sometimes like to call it.

Williams's prose can be dense, and he might have articulated more clearly the way the Dostoevsky balances the closure demanded by realism with the reality of unending dialogue. Further, while I clearly share Williams's sense that theological matters are at the heart of Dostoevsky artistic vision, I appreciate the point made by Susan and others that Williams might attend more fully to the *literary* aspects of the novel. Here one recalls, for example, the rhyming chimes of imagery so elegantly noted in Robin Miller's commentary.

But as someone one who has also written on the Christological dimension of Dostoevsky's work (and who has now been inspired by Williams to consider more fully the Trinitarian), I can happily apply Williams's description of "the iconic other" to his own book: It serves as "a presence that offers to nourish and augment what I am" (208). Like others, I will gratefully turn to it again, and look forward to continuing dialogue.