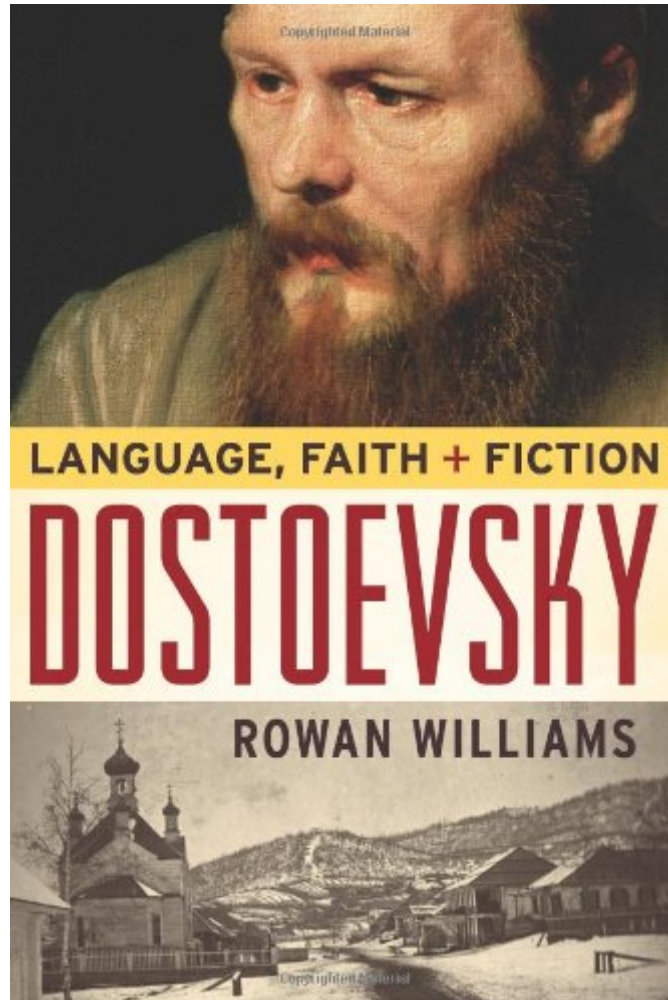
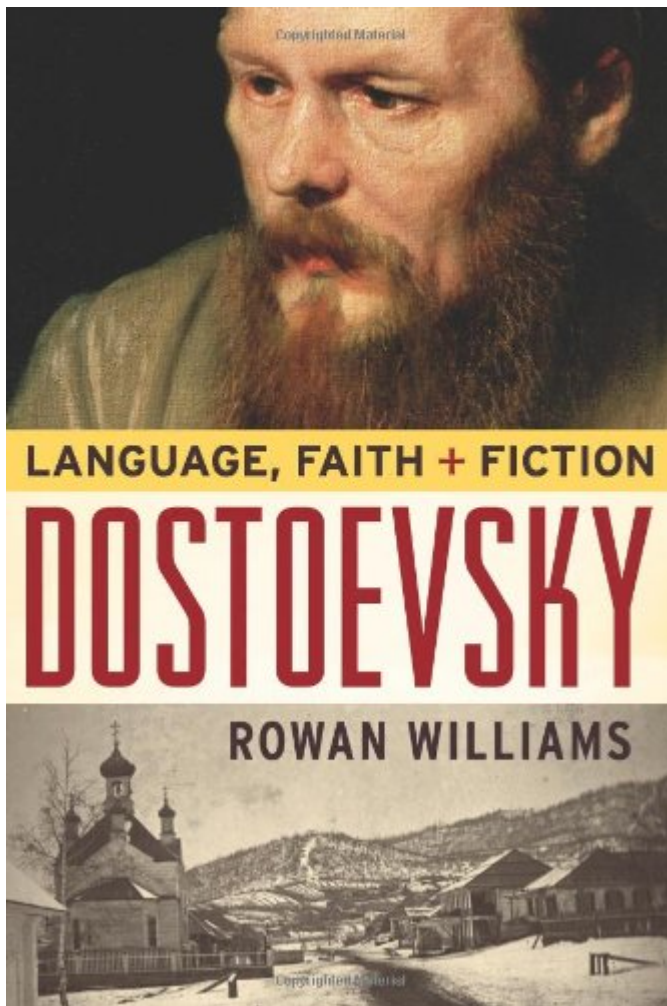


4 Απριλίου 2017

## **Dostoevsky - Language, Faith, and Fiction (Fr. John Garvey)**

Ξένες γλώσσες / In English





***DOSTOEVSKY***

***Language, Faith, and Fiction***

***Rowan Williams***

***BaylorUniversityPress, \$24.95, 290 pp.***

One of the problems with Dostoevsky is that too many readers have read into his novels the ideas they wanted to find there, so that for secular readers he was an early existentialist who argued for an anguished agnosticism, while for many believers he was a kind of Christian apologist. Neither reading does him the courtesy of seeing that he was above all a novelist—a believer, yes, but one who wanted to explore in depth the consequences of unbelief, in a way that someone who wanted to make an apologetic argument would find uncomfortable.

Rowan Williams insists that we see Dostoevsky first of all as a novelist, one whose

religious faith and profound moral convictions formed the direction of his fiction. *Dostoevsky: Language, Faith, and Fiction* is a demanding, difficult, and excellent work. Far from being an introduction to the novels and the novelist, it should probably not be attempted by anyone unfamiliar with the major novels (*Crime and Punishment*, *The Idiot*, *The Devils*, *The Brothers Karamazov*). But for those who have read Dostoevsky and want a serious engagement with his fictional method and the theology that informs it, the book is deeply helpful, even illuminating.

No one I can think of is better suited to undertake this sort of profound examination. Rowan Williams, the archbishop of Canterbury, is himself a poet and gifted writer, fluent in Russian, familiar with Dostoevsky's original texts, conversant with all the relevant critical commentary, and more acquainted with Orthodox theology than most Orthodox bishops. (His doctoral thesis was a study of the work of Vladimir Lossky, an important modern Orthodox theologian.)



*Fyodor Dostoevsky*

Dostoevsky's novels, Williams writes, ask

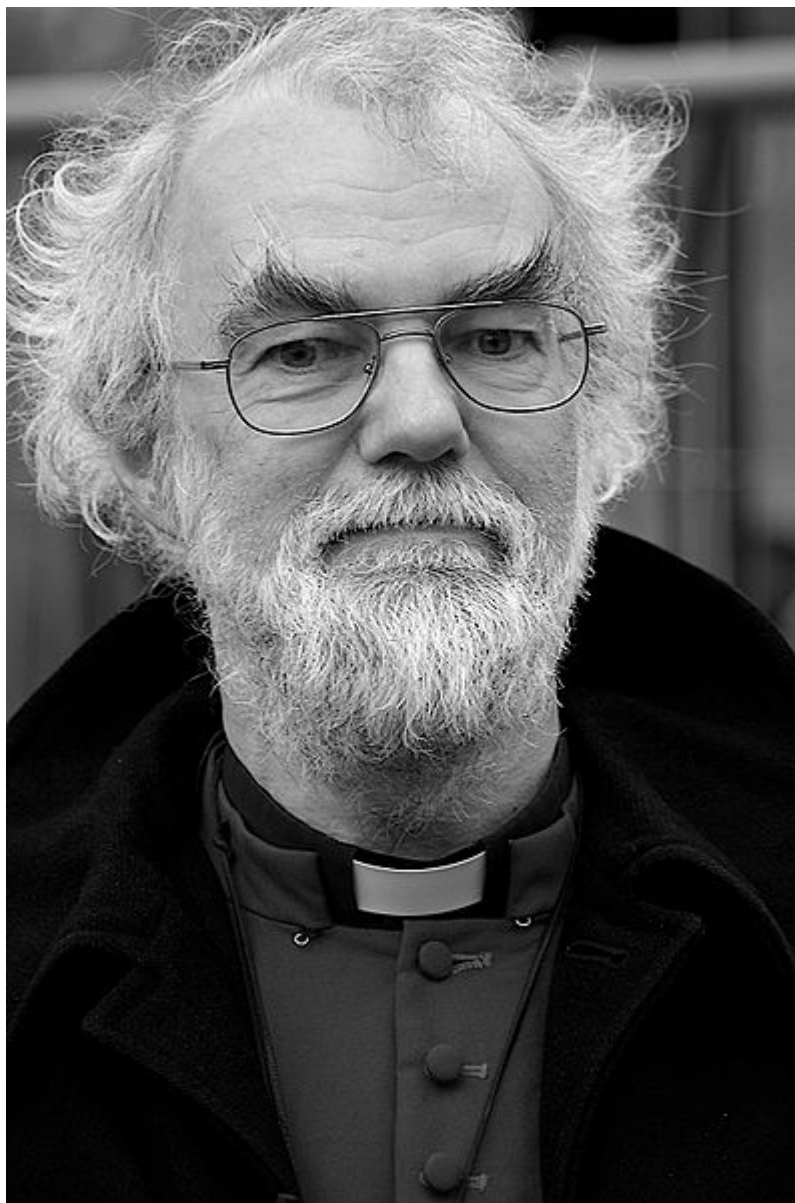
*whether we could imagine living in the consciousness of a solidity or depth in each other which no amount of failure, suffering, or desolation could eradicate. But in order to put such a challenge, the novels have to invite us to imagine precisely those extremes of failure, suffering, and desolation.*

A deliberately unresolved tension is part of the method of the novels, but Williams insists that it is not primarily a tension between belief or nonbelief in God's existence. Referring to *The Brothers Karamazov* he says that it is rather about "what the nature is of God's relation with the world, and most of all with the human world. Alyosha's problem is in fact very close to Ivan's—not in admitting the existence of God, but in the possibility of accepting God and the world and the problem of what sort of life such acceptance would entail."

A great theme throughout the novels is freedom, and the consequences of choosing to live out belief or nonbelief, or the unwillingness to engage either. In his introduction Williams writes that

*the central question posed by the various moral crises to which Dostoevsky was seeking to respond [is] "What is it that human beings owe to each other?" The incapacity to answer that question coherently—or indeed to recognize that it is a question at all—was for Dostoevsky more than just a regrettable lack of philosophical rigor; it was an opening to the demonic—that is, to the prospect of the end of history, imagination, and speech, the dissolution of human identity.*

Williams is frank about Dostoevsky's uglier side: he acknowledges the obvious anti-Semitism and says that "Roman Catholicism was one of those subjects on which Dostoevsky could be spectacularly pigheaded." Myshkin, the protagonist of *The Idiot*, is among other things sentimental about the holiness of Russia and anti-Catholic. He is also remarkably detached from the sacramental life of Orthodoxy. Williams is right, I think, to call the portrayal of Myshkin as a Christ figure a failure: "If this is selfless love, it is also, troublingly, love that seems not to relate to the one loved." His argument is complex and fascinating: Myshkin is not evil, but rather "a 'good' person who cannot avoid doing harm."



Rowan Williams

In some ways the Christianity Williams finds in Dostoevsky is much like his own approach to Anglicanism: in *The Brothers Karamazov* Dostoevsky shows that “faith moves and adapts, matures and reshapes itself, not by adjusting its doctrinal content (the error of theological liberalism, with which Dostoevsky had no patience) but by the relentless stripping away from faith of egotistical or triumphalistic expectations.” This is not to say that Williams reads into Dostoevsky only what he wants to find there. As noted, he is frank about Dostoevsky’s more unattractive qualities. But he does insist on Dostoevsky’s centrally Christian insight. And he believes that it is essentially Orthodox.

Father Zosima, in *The Brothers Karamazov*, is based on St. Tikhon of Zadonsk. Williams quotes the great Orthodox theologian Georges Florovsky on “the essential thing that must have secured Dostoevsky’s loyalty: the saint was unquestionably a *modern man*”

. Educated, self-aware in a contemporary way, experiencing the divided self unavoidable for a committed Christian in an Enlightenment culture,” Tikhon was involved at the same time in a rediscovery of the transfigurational mindset of classical Orthodoxy. St. Isaac of Syria is another model for Zosima, who—like Isaac—insists that we must love all creation, animals included. (Isaac wrote that we must shed tears “even for the reptiles”!)

The icon, whether it is the iconic figure of a Zosima (or St. Tikhon) or the icon on a wall, “does not leave the world unchanged...the icon makes visible the assumption of plenitude.” And of course the source of the idea of the icon is the image of God embodied in our world in the flesh and blood of Christ.

Williams is very good on another element in Orthodox theology, that of apophaticism (often called “negative theology” in the West). Apophatic theology emphasizes the fact that ultimately religious truth cannot be captured in words or concepts, which can be fatally misleading: “The negative moment is the recognition of excess, not absence or privation.”

This is a rich book in many ways. Williams offers brilliant reflections on otherness, on violence, on the demonic (which involves a world in which there are no true others), and finally on love. “Most importantly,” he writes, “Dostoevsky believes love is *difficult*.... [The] novels overall present a picture of effective, unsentimental, and potentially transforming love as something painfully learned.”

*This article was first published by Commonweal, on April 23, 2020, and is posted here with permission.*