Dostoevsky: Language, Faith and Fiction by Rowan Williams. Continuum 2008. £16.99.

The present Archbishop of Canterbury has more than his fill of very contemporary issues to deal with. So we may be forgiven for supposing that a flight into nineteenth century Russia might offer him a happy issue out of all his afflictions, a kind of intellectual bolt-hole, somewhere to seek (and find) refuge in these troubled times. But *Dostoevsky* just isn't like that. Not at all! From the very first to the very last, he emphasises that this is a work of importance for our own day.

"Terrorism, child abuse, absent fathers and the fragmentation of the family, the secularisation and sexualisation of culture, the future of liberal democracy, the clash of cultures and the nature of national identity," all these "twenty first century anxieties" are present in the writings of Dostoevsky. So begins this important book. And it ends by reminding its readers that the questions addressed in the course of the book's narrative are "at once literary, theological, political and unmistakably contemporary."

The book opens with a breathtaking survey of possible explanations for Dostoevsky's early declaration that "if someone were to prove to me that Christ was outside the truth, and it was really the case that the truth lay outside Christ, then I should choose to stay with Christ rather than with the truth." This might mean for some a determination to resist "the bullying of reason." For others it might identify Christ with "the recycling of stale nationalism" on the part of those who equate true Christianity with Russia and Orthodoxy. Then again, this might point to the anti-rationalism of those who make Christ a tool for "the inquisitorial class, a sanction for benevolent power which can manifest itself in 'miracle, mystery and authority.'" Or finally, it might suggest the view that it is possible to settle for "the truth" in the sense of an ensemble of finished propositions, a position which denies gratuity and open-ness and diminishes what is human.

This survey is magisterial and sets the parameters for the ongoing argument. Williams draws effortlessly from the whole of Dostoevsky's work. In doing so he shows an intimate knowledge of the language, piety, culture and quirkiness of mind of the people whose minds and interactions he goes on to study. It is truly awesome.

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Human language is an early theme of this book. How do we speak about belief? “Every new statement of faith,” Williams argues, “has to issue into a linguistic world where it may be contradicted, parodied, or (as in *Karamazov*) trivialised as a cliché.” But faith, like fiction, is a gratuitous linguistic practice and it stands over against a functional scheme of things. So it must expect contradiction. Speaking about faith requires more than a modicum of courage.

Devils appear frequently in Dostoevsky’s novels. A chapter on this subject shows how the Devil is “the enemy of narrative and so of the freedom of persons to shape their identity over time.” It is the Devil’s priority “to prevent historical change and to freeze human agency in the timelessness of a ‘rational’ order in which love or reconciliation is impossible.”

This is taken further in the next chapter entitled “The Last Word.” Dostoevsky’s characters are given the freedom to subvert their author’s intended direction for them. He is no author of happy or tidy endings. In *Karamazov*, for example, the three brothers are given distinct delineations – one is a sensualist, another an intellectual while the third is a monk. But these flat descriptive words can never be enough to portray multi-dimensional human beings. Only through dialogue do other aspects of their character emerge, aspects which challenge and undermine any simplistic understanding of any of them. Williams calls this “a co-operative discovery of the truth of the self.” It makes for untidiness but it rests real responsibility for the development of character on their interaction with others. “What I say and do and thus who I am is inseparable from how it is received and answered in the reality of others,” he says at one point – and it is worth noting Williams’s rare use of the first person pronoun in this sentence.

“Exchanging crosses” is the title of the next chapter. This refers to a popular Orthodox practice which serves as a sign of committed friendship. It opens up the theme of taking responsibility for each other. A key concept in Dostoevsky’s fictional method is “giving room to the voice that is not your own.” Again and again, the “Christ-like figures” of his novels are “those who offer time and space to others.” The author keeps out of the way. His absence, we read, “mirrors God’s relation with creation.” God gives his creatures a freedom to express themselves. They are not puppets. This view of things, a view centring on “mutual displacement,” introduces something

new to the moral situation where characters "are given more room to be who they are." Responsibility, a key word in the writing of Dostoevsky, is "the free acceptance of the call to give voice to the other, while leaving them time and space to be other."

The last chapter of this amazing book describes Zosima, the old monk in *Karamazov*, who makes an astonishing gesture towards Mitya, the oldest of the three brothers and, to the ordinary reader, the least promising from a moral point of view. The monk bows down to the great suffering Mitya is going to have to face. This is no empty gesture. The whole narrative will be shaped by Mitya's fate. His is "the most costly embrace of responsibility" in the whole novel. It is truly immense that he says yes to it. Like an icon, this gesture points to a Christ-like quality: "a divine self-withholding, a voluntary absence, that most powerfully testifies to loving presence."

In difficult times, people tend to want a clear lead. But reality is more complex than that. "What is revealed in moments of poised indecision and multiple options is not the simplicity of a bare will that can decide quite arbitrarily but the immense complexity of an embodied and embedded self, upon which countless lines of force converge." If we fail to find the Christ-like way through this morass, if what the icons point to comes to nothing, "there is nothing to hope for in history," we will be left with the chilling options either of "quietism or suicidal violence."

Ivan Karamazov tells the story of the Grand Inquisitor. Williams argues that what is "perennially haunting" about this figure is that his voice is clearly audible on both sides of our present-day global conflict. He is both the manager of a universal market in guaranteed security and comfort for a diminished human soul and, at the very same time, the violent enforcer of a system beyond dialogue and change." Phew! The lessons Williams draws from this superb piece of literary criticism and social analysis are pressing ones for our own age which makes this a work of prophecy as much as anything else.

One last word. Rowan Williams wrote the bulk of this book in a few weeks "study leave" which he snatched from his busy schedule in the summer of 2007. Ahead of him at that time lay the General Synod of the Church of England and the decision about women bishops. And lurking beyond that

was the Lambeth Conference which threatened to tear the Anglican Communion apart. It's interesting that he chose to prepare himself for these occasions by wrestling with the ideas of Dostoevsky. It might be worth re-reading what I've written above with this question in mind: How much did Rowan Williams learn from the creative mind of Fyodor Dostoevsky which helped him establish a model of working in the momentous gatherings he was about to lead? You might just end up concluding (as I did) that this book is as much about the Archbishop of Canterbury as it is about a nineteenth century Russian novelist.