E-ISSN: 2583-9667
Indexed Journal
Peer Reviewed Journal
https://multiresearchjournal.theviews.in

Received: 01-01-2025
Accepted: 07-03-2025

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ADVANCE RESEARCH IN MULTIDISCIPLINARY

Volume 3; Issue 2; 2025; Page No. 427-431

Beyond the Rational: Christianity as Resistance in Dostoevsky's Crime and Punishment and Bulgakov's The Master and Margarita

Ashish Gautam

Ph.D., Scholar, Department of English, University of Delhi, New Delhi, India

DOI: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15719094

Corresponding Author: Ashish Gautam

Abstract

This paper explores the paradoxical power of Christianity as a resistance ideology in Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* and Mikhail Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita*. Rejecting the commonplace notion that subversive Russian literature must be secular or anti-religious, I argue that both Dostoevsky and Bulgakov deploy religious frameworks to contest the ideological absolutism of their respective eras. Dostoevsky, writing amid the intellectual ferment of nineteenth-century Russia, responds to the encroachment of Western rationalism by reasserting the communal, redemptive virtues of Orthodox Christianity. His vision of pity and compassion stands as an explicit rejoinder to Kantian morality and Nietzschean critique. Bulgakov, confronting the desolate materialism and surveillance of Stalinist Moscow, turns to the carnivalesque and mystical, summoning the figure of Christ, alongside the Devil, to expose the spiritual barrenness of Soviet positivism. Through close comparative reading and engagement with leading scholarship, this study demonstrates how both authors reframe religion as a vital mode of intellectual and existential dissent. Ultimately, the novels under consideration reveal that Russia's most profound critiques of authority and conformity often arise not because Russia was steeped in religious and spiritual worlds. Instead it emerged through that very theological and epistemological paradigm that classical scholars view with suspicion, reminding us of literature's enduring capacity to unsettle, interrogate, and renew.

Keywords: Dostoevsky, Bulgakov, Christianity, Russian literature, resistance, subversive literature, Crime and Punishment, The Master and Margarita, Soviet censorship, Stalinism, Western rationalism, Orthodox tradition, semantic space, compassion, pity, mysticism, ideology, faith, totalitarianism, comparative literature, Russian Orthodoxy, Slavophile-Westernizer debate, literary modernity

Introduction

The story of Russian literature is, in no small measure, the story of its perennial confrontation with questions of faith, authority, and the soul's freedom. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the masterworks of Fyodor Dostoevsky and Mikhail Bulgakov, whose novels-*Crime and Punishment* and *The Master and Margarita*-stand as twin pillars of a tradition that regards religious inquiry not as a vestige of the past but as a living source of critique, resistance, and renewal.

Contrary to the widespread belief that subversive or critical literature must derive its force from rationalist or anti-religious fervor, the Russian tradition is marked by a distinctive, sometimes paradoxical embrace of Christianity as a vehicle for intellectual and existential dissent. Dostoevsky, writing amid the ideological turbulence of nineteenth-century Russia, witnessed the mounting influence of Western European philosophy-Kantian rationalism, utilitarianism, and scientific materialism-and responded with a profound, at times anguished, defense of Orthodox Christianity's unique moral resources. His depiction of pity, humility, and compassion-seen most vividly in the journey of Raskolnikov-serves as an explicit counter-argument to the secular optimism of his age, positing that without the spiritual discipline of faith, the bonds of community and conscience rapidly dissolve (Parts 62–65).

Half a century later, Bulgakov confronted a different, but no less imposing, adversary. In the Moscow of the 1930s, Stalinist authority sought to eradicate not only the institutional church but the very memory of Christ, replacing the language of redemption and forgiveness with that of ideological conformity and scientific atheism. *The Master and Margarita*-with its fantastical blend of black magic, metaphysical parody, and profound longing for grace-employs the figure of Christ not simply as a religious

symbol but as the axis of all authentic resistance to totalitarian meaninglessness (Raikin).

This study seeks to place these two great novels in dialogue, arguing that both Dostoevsky and Bulgakov deploy religious motifs not as tokens of reaction or mere piety, but as critical paradigms through which to contest the "ideological absolutism" of their time. Drawing upon recent scholarship as well as close textual analysis, I will show that each author's engagement with Christianity-far from being conservative or escapist-serves as a pointed response to the rationalist, bureaucratic, and materialist orthodoxies that threatened the Russian social and moral imagination. By tracing these parallel strategies of resistance, I hope to illuminate the enduring power of faith, not as an evasion of reality, but as a resource for literary and philosophical subversion in the Russian tradition.

Dostoevsky's Russia: Orthodoxy and Resistance to Western Rationalism

The second half of the nineteenth century was a period of profound intellectual anxiety for Russia, when the foundations of social and spiritual life foundations appeared to tremble before the onslaught of new philosophical and scientific paradigms that arrived from the West. Russian intellectual life was sharply polarized between "Westernizers," who believed that Russia's future lay in adopting Western Europe's rationalism, liberalism, and technological progress, and "Slavophiles," who insisted on the singular destiny and spiritual mission of Russia, rooted in the traditions of the Orthodox Church. This polarity deeply characterized Fyodor Dostoevsky's career, personal life and his intellectual journey. His early engagement with utopian socialism led to arrest and exile in Siberia. This ordeal transformed his worldview and set the stage for the spiritual investigations dominating his later work (Dostoevsky 27–30).

Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* emerges from this crucible as a sustained meditation on the fate of the human soul under the shadow of rational egoism. The novel's protagonist, Raskolnikov, is a figure torn between a Westernizing ideology-grounded in utilitarian calculation, self-will, and the will to power-and the half-remembered Christian virtues of humility, suffering, and compassion. It is no accident that Raskolnikov's intellectual ambitions bear the mark of the "extraordinary man" theory, reminiscent of the Nietzschean and Kantian traditions then permeating Russian intellectual circles (Parts, "Christianity as Active Pity in Crime and Punishment" 62).

In her essay "Christianity as Active Pity in Crime and Punishment," Lyudmila Parts reminds us that Dostoevsky's Christian response is not a mere conservatism but an original critical intervention. She writes: "Dostoevsky presents pity and/or compassion as the most important Christian virtue, one above the other Christian virtues and human emotions for which scientific and political theories have no place. He, in effect, posits pity as the essence of Christianity. Dostoevsky thus privileges an emotion with a rather problematic status, one that many influential thinkers of his day see as Christianity's weakest point" (Parts, "Christianity as Active Pity in Crime and Punishment" 61–62).

This is a direct riposte to Immanuel Kant, who in *The Metaphysics of Morals* dismisses pity as a morally unreliable impulse, unworthy of the dignity of the rational subject. Kant's position is, "But there cannot possibly be a duty to increase the evil in the world and so to do good from compassion. This would be an insulting kind of beneficence, since it expresses the kind of benevolence one has toward someone unworthy, called pity; and this has no place in men's relationship with one another" (qtd. in Parts, "Christianity as Active Pity in Crime and Punishment" 65)—is taken up by Raskolnikov as he attempts to live, and to justify, the murder of the pawnbroker through abstract reasoning rather than emotional engagement.

Dostoevsky's narrative, however, exposes the limits and dangers of such rationalism. The emotional and ethical core of the novel lies in those scenes where compassion erupts into the bleakness of urban Petersburg: Marmeladov's confession of his own degradation, Sonia's sacrificial endurance, and, above all, Raskolnikov's tortured oscillation between intellectual pride and the longing for absolution. Marmeladov, in particular, gives voice to the conflict between the "science" of modernity and the irreducible human need for pity: "But Mr. Lebeziatniko, who keeps up with modern ide, as explained the other day that compassion is forbidden nowadays by science itself…" (Dostoevsky 21).

It is through his relationship with Sonia-a character who embodies the Christian paradox of strength in weakness, the capacity to "take on the other's suffering and act to lessen it"-that Raskolnikov is drawn away from the barren logic of rationalism and toward the spiritual economy of mercy (Parts, "Christianity as Active Pity in Crime and Punishment" 63). Sonia's reading of the story of Lazarus and her unyielding love enact Dostoevsky's belief that Christian pity is not sentimental condescension but the very precondition of ethical and communal life.

Crime and Punishment is a testament to the confrontation between Western rationalism and Russian Orthodoxy, and is dramatized not in philosophical argument but in the suffering, confession, and eventual redemption of its protagonist. Dostoevsky's answer to the anxieties of his age is not the rejection of reason, but its transformation—an insistence that the "heart" and the "mind" must be reconciled through active compassion. The novel's critique of ideological absolutism proceeds not by negating reason but by exposing its limits when severed from the Christian vision of the person. As Parts concludes, "if pity is necessary for social community and pity is inherently Christian, then social cohesion is impossible without Christianity" (Parts, "Christianity as Active Pity in Crime and Punishment" 62).

Bulgakov's Moscow: Mysticism, Christ, and the Anti-Stalinist Paradigm

If the ghosts of Western philosophy haunted Dostoevsky's Petersburg, Bulgakov's Moscow is suffused with the surveillance, suspicion, and ideological severity characteristic of Stalinist Russia. The 1930s in the Soviet Union were years of intense political consolidation, when institutions and inner lives were subject to the state's relentless drive for uniformity. Literature, once a sphere of philosophical inquiry and spiritual search, became a site of struggle-now "desk-drawer literature," as Bulgakov himself

experienced, survived by secrecy and subterfuge (Raikin, "The Problem of Christ in The Master and Margarita" 3–4).

In this context, *The Master and Margarita* emerges as a work of breathtaking audacity. It is a novel that dares to resurrect not only the figure of Christ but the metaphysical possibility of meaning itself, at a time when both were officially proscribed. The "problem of Christ" was, as Alexander Raikin observes, not simply a question of faith, but a question of resistance: "At the time of Bulgakov's near descent into madness from censorship, many Soviet academic presses were becoming increasingly fixated on 'the problem of Christ,' claiming that Christ was only a mythological figure, no different from a fairy tale. It was not enough for the atheist Soviet Union to revile the Bible. Instead, state-sponsored literature fixated on the claim that Christ never existed…" (Raikin, "The Problem of Christ in The Master and Margarita" 5).

Bulgakov's answer to this campaign is, characteristically, both playful and profound. The novel opens with a scene of metaphysical farce: the Devil, in the guise of Woland, debates the existence of Christ with atheistic Soviet literati at Patriarch's Ponds. "And keep in mind, Jesus existed. He simply existed, that is all," Woland pronounces, thus undermining the ideological project to erase the sacred (Bulgakov 13; Raikin, "The Problem of Christ in The Master and Margarita" 5). The refusal to allow Christ's memory to be extinguished becomes, in Bulgakov's hands, an act of literary insurrection.

However, Bulgakov's challenge extends far beyond the mere assertion of faith. The novel weaves together multiple narrative planes: the grotesque, carnivalesque mischief of Woland's retinue in Moscow; the tragic, eternal drama of Pontius Pilate and Yeshua in ancient Jerusalem; and the passionate, self-sacrificing love of the Master and Margarita. The result is a "semantic space" where Soviet reality is destabilized by the irruption of the miraculous, the parabolic, the otherworldly. As Geoffrey Westgate writes in his essay "The Control of Semantic Space: Bulgakov's Challenge of the Stalinist Vision," Bulgakov's prose illustrates how space forms society and influences cultural development. Through his prose, Bulgakov exhibits a unique understanding that Stalinism maintained control of society by controlling Soviet space. His challenge to Stalinism rests within the framework of his narrative setting and also within the wisdom and actions of his main characters…" (Westgate, "The Control of Semantic Space" 1).

Central to this challenge is Bulgakov's persistent return to the question of the home-the site of private life, intimacy, and cultural memory-which, under Stalin, is collectivized, surveilled, and rendered "anti-home." In *The Master and Margarita*, authentic "home" is a space that cannot exist in Moscow until the very end, when the Master and Margarita are granted their final refuge "with peace, not with light" (Bulgakov 383; Westgate, "The Control of Semantic Space" 7). For the rest of the novel, the characters move through anti-homes: crowded, watched, anxious spaces where one is every word may be overheard, reported, or turned against oneself.

Nevertheless, it is precisely within these constraints that Bulgakov stages his subversion. The "semantic space" of the novel, by weaving together satire, metaphysics, and religious myth, creates zones of ambiguity-places where the totalizing logic of the state is suspended, and something freer, older, and wilder breaks through. The resurrection of Christ in the narrative of Pilate is not simply an act of nostalgia, but a sign that history itself is open to interruption, and that "baseless love," as Raikin phrases it, may be the only genuine answer to the "baseless hatred" that underpinned both Jerusalem's and Moscow's collapse (Raikin, "The Problem of Christ in The Master and Margarita" 6).

Bulgakov's use of carnivalesque, of black magic and the Devil's games, is never simply escapist. Instead, it is a calculated deployment of irony and wonder against the stultifying language of Soviet rationalism and scientific atheism. As the devil's entourage exposes the moral emptiness of the city's elite, as Margarita's flight breaks the boundaries between the material and the spiritual, Bulgakov insists that the soul's hunger for meaning cannot be forever stilled. "There are those who belong to parable and those who belong to reality. Some go over it, and those who do not. There are those who win in parable and become parables themselves, and there are those who win in reality. However, this reality belongs to Woland" (Bulgakov, Introduction xxvi).

In sum, *The Master and Margarita* dramatizes a uniquely Russian mode of resistance: not the rational critique of the Enlightenment, nor the dry materialism of official ideology, but a return to the deep, playful, and sometimes dangerous mysteries of religious and mythic imagination. Bulgakov's Christ is not simply a dogma but a living possibility-an answer to the closure of meaning and the shrinking of the soul under Stalinist rule. In this way, as Westgate notes, "Bulgakov's challenge to Stalinism rests within the framework of his narrative setting and also within the wisdom and actions of his main characters, who exemplify how we interact with space on a very individual level" (Westgate, "The Control of Semantic Space" 1).

Comparative Analysis: Religion as Subversive Paradigm

It is a commonplace of Western literary history to imagine the great works of modern critical literature as fundamentally anti-religious, or, at the very least, products of the secular intellect's liberation from inherited dogma. Yet in the Russian tradition, the relationship between faith and subversion is at once more fraught and more fertile. Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* and Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita* stand as exemplary cases-not as anachronisms, but as reminders that religion in Russia has long been a form of critical discourse, a means by which writers interrogate, unsettle, and sometimes overturn the prevailing rationalities of their day.

Dostoevsky and Bulgakov, separated by half a century and by the cataclysms of revolution and terror, respond to different forms of ideological absolutism. For Dostoevsky, the encroachment of Western philosophical systems-Kantian ethics, utilitarian social theory, the "rational egoism" of the intelligentsia-threatens to dissolve the organic bonds of Russian life. Dostoevsky's answer, dramatized through Raskolnikov's torment, is not a nostalgic return to the past but a radical insistence on the necessity of Christian pity as the basis of all true community. "Dostoevsky posits pity as essential for social cohesion, arguing that without it, both

scientific and political theories are ineffective," as Lyudmila Parts observes in her article "Christianity as Active Pity in Crime and Punishment" (Parts 62).

The narrative's structure itself resists rationalization: the most "reasonable" actions-Raskolnikov's murder, Lebeziatnikov's reformist schemes-lead only to isolation, degradation, and despair. Redemption comes through suffering and, crucially, through accepting the "irrational" demands of compassion and self-sacrifice. Sonia's willingness to bear Raskolnikov's shame and read him the story of Lazarus is no mere act of passive endurance; it is an assertion of a truth that lies beyond calculation, a truth that subverts the instrumental logic of modernity (Dostoevsky 382–384).

Bulgakov, on the other hand, faces a different adversary: the totalizing machinery of Stalinist bureaucracy, with its atheistic positivism and relentless campaign to control the language, space, and imagination of its subjects. In this context, the very assertion of religious or mystical possibility becomes a gesture of defiance. As Geoffrey Westgate puts it in his essay "The Control of Semantic Space: Bulgakov's Challenge of the Stalinist Vision," Bulgakov constructs "semantic spaces" where "the state's totalizing logic is suspended and the miraculous, the parabolic, the otherworldly, can break through" (Westgate 3). The fantastical mischief of Woland and his retinue, the uncanny return of Christ as Yeshua, and the ultimate refuge of the Master and Margarita together create a "blueprint for resisting ideological confinement" (Westgate 7).

For both writers, Christianity and its attendant myths are not passive inheritances but active, creative resources. Nevertheless, their approaches differ in method and and the degree with which they draw from Christian sources. Dostoevsky's faith is fundamentally moral, grounded in the communal and redemptive capacities of the Orthodox tradition. Bulgakov, by contrast, deploys a more ironic, carnivalesque, and, at times, even Gnostic sensibility. The miracles in *Crime and Punishment* are always inward-transfigurations of the heart, whereas in *The Master and Margarita*, the miraculous disrupts not only psychology but the very fabric of social and political reality.

At the same time, both novels stage the limitations of secular and socialist models of redemption. In Dostoevsky's world, utopian schemes that attempt to "replace spiritual meaning" with material well-being collapse into moral anomie; in Bulgakov's, the project of rationalizing and collectivizing all human experience ends in absurdity, fear, and violence (Fiorella, "Unmasking the Impostors or a Tale of Two Doubles" 3–4). As Alina Fiorella's revisionist reading suggests, both Zosima (in Dostoevsky) and Margarita (in Bulgakov) function as ambiguous figures-neither pure saints nor simple victims, but doubles who expose the "impostor" nature of both religious and secular utopias (Fiorella 4–5).

The two novels also reveal a paradox at the heart of Russian religious subversion. If the state seeks to control meaning, then faith becomes not just a matter of belief but a strategy—a way of holding open a space for freedom, ambiguity, and the refusal of final closure. Bulgakov's ambiguous ending, in which the Master and Margarita are granted "peace, not light," is a testament to the impossibility of absolute resolution in this world (Bulgakov 383). Dostoevsky's epilogue, similarly, leaves Raskolnikov poised between worlds, his regeneration not yet complete but already underway (Dostoevsky 551).

What unites these texts, finally, is a shared conviction that the struggle for meaning, whether waged in the prison cell, the bureaucratized city, or the hidden chambers of the heart, is inseparable from the struggle for freedom. In this vision, religion is not a source of authority to be resisted, but a ground from which resistance itself can be imagined and enacted. As Parts concludes, "Dostoevsky's view of pity is strikingly relevant to this project: it is not against science or law that he directs his argument; rather, he perceives them as ineffective without a Christian foundation" (Parts, "Christianity as Active Pity in Crime and Punishment" 62).

Conclusion

The enduring power of Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* and Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita* lies in their ability to transform the very terms of what constitutes resistance, subversion, and critique. Against the presumption that critical or revolutionary literature must necessarily take the form of secular rationalism or anti-religious skepticism, both novels demonstrate that faith-authentically lived and reimagined-can serve as a wellspring of intellectual, ethical, and aesthetic opposition.

Dostoevsky's Petersburg is a city trembling beneath the weight of imported philosophical doctrines, its inhabitants caught between the promises of rational self-sufficiency and the lingering memory of a more organic, Orthodox communalism. In Raskolnikov's journey, Dostoevsky stages a contest between reason and pity, between "scientific" schemes for human happiness and the redemptive, ungovernable power of Christian love. As Lyudmila Parts has shown, Dostoevsky "privileges an emotion with a rather problematic status, one that many influential thinkers of his day see as Christianity's weakest point" (Parts, "Christianity as Active Pity in Crime and Punishment" 62). Far from a sentimental weakness, pity becomes the very ground of social possibility and the only proper antidote to alienation and despair. The novel's great wager is that without Christianity, social cohesion is impossible; that compassion, born out of faith, is the precondition for any community worth the name (Parts, "Christianity as Active Pity in Crime and Punishment" 62).

Bulgakov, writing under the shadow of Stalinist repression, turns to the subversive force of religious myth, irony, and carnival to re-open the "semantic space" of culture closed down by state ideology (Westgate, "The Control of Semantic Space" 1–3). The suppression of Christ as historical reality in Soviet discourse-exposed in the opening debates between Woland and Moscow's literary elite-becomes, in Bulgakov's hands, an opportunity for the miraculous to irrupt into the everyday. As Alexander Raikin observes, "Bulgakov's answer to this campaign is, characteristically, both playful and profound…The refusal to allow Christ's memory to be extinguished becomes, in Bulgakov's hands, an act of literary insurrection" (Raikin, "The Problem of Christ in The Master and Margarita" 5). By blending satire, mysticism, and spiritual longing, Bulgakov asserts the enduring freedom of the imagination and the irreducible dignity of the soul.

Comparing these two writers, we see that religion is not an

escape from history but a means of intervening in it. In both novels, as Alina Fiorella notes, even the most celebrated figures of faith-Zosima, Margarita-can serve as doubles or impostors, exposing the ways in which utopian or ideological systems, religious or secular, may betray their own promises (Fiorella, "Unmasking the Impostors or a Tale of Two Doubles" 4). Yet this ambiguity is not a weakness but a strength. It is the openness, the refusal of final closure, that allows Dostoevsky and Bulgakov to sustain the very possibility of critique: "The answer to the question of Zosima's religion and Margarita's identifications with Pilate lies not in the binary opposition between socialism and Christianity, betrayal and faith but in their very intersections" (Fiorella 4).

The vision that emerges from these works is thus profoundly Russian and yet universally resonant. As Geoffrey Westgate summarizes, "Bulgakov's challenge to Stalinism rests within the framework of his narrative setting and also within the wisdom and actions of his main characters, who exemplify how we interact with space on a very individual level" (Westgate, "The Control of Semantic Space" 1). Faith becomes not a static dogma but a living resource: a way of making space for the unpredictable, the personal, and the transcendent amid the constricting machinery of modernity.

Ultimately, Dostoevsky's and Bulgakov's religious imagination does not suppress doubt or dialectic, but places them at the heart of its project. Their novels remind us that the struggle for meaning is always unfinished—that, as Woland remarks, "manuscripts don't burn" (Bulgakov 334), and the search for truth, whether through suffering or satire, remains the defining endeavor of literature itself.

References

1. Bulgakov M. *The Master and Margarita*. Pevear R, Volokhonsky L, translators. London: Penguin Books; c1997.
2. Dostoevsky F. *Crime and Punishment*. Pevear R, Volokhonsky L, translators. London: Vintage Classics; c1993.
3. Fiorella AF. Unmasking the impostors or a tale of two doubles: a revisionist reading of Dostoevskii's Father Zosima and Bulgakov's Margarita [MPhil thesis]. Bristol (UK): University of Bristol; c2023. Available from: http://research-information.bristol.ac.uk
4. Parts L. Christianity as active pity in Crime and Punishment. Dostoevsky Stud. 2009;13:61–67.
5. Raikin A. The problem of Christ in *The Master and Margarita* [Internet]. *Plough Q.* 2024 Nov 5 [cited 2025 Jun 23]. Available from: https://www.plough.com/en/topics/culture/literature/the-problem-of-christ-in-the-master-and-margarita
6. Westgate G. The control of semantic space: Bulgakov's challenge of the Stalinist vision [Internet]. *Museum Stud Abroad*. 2013 Sep 3 [cited 2025 Jun 23]. Available from: https://museumstudiesabroad.org/semantic-space-bulgakov-stalin/