

FIGHTING TROLL-DEMONS IN VAULTS OF THE
MIND AND HEART – ART, TRAGEDY, AND
SACRAMENTALITY: SOME OBSERVATIONS FROM
IBSEN, FORSYTH AND DOSTOEVSKY

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BY WAY OF AN IN

One of the more noxious facets of modern society is its treatment of “the arts” as something to be harnessed and exploited, prostituted by the world of marketing. More often than not it is consumerism rather than revelation that sets the agenda for arts’ value and usefulness. There is also a view today that the arts ought to be isolated from the broader texture of our lives. Art belongs in galleries, concert halls and cinemas, and in the invented “world” of a text, those privileged purlieus of our society into which we can escape the “real” world.¹ According to this latter view, there is a thing called “life,” and then there is “art.” The real stuff happens in “life.” Art is merely escape from or, even worse, denial of life. Art is what we pursue in our “spare time” or it is what people do who can not “get a real job”! Such notions have not always been with us, however. Renaissance scholar Paul Oskar Kristeller has shown that prior to the eighteenth century, writers and thinkers “though confronted with excellent works of art and quite susceptible to their charm, were neither able nor eager to detach the aesthetic quality of these works of art from their intellectual, moral, religious and practical function or content.”²

My contention in this paper is that the Christian community in general, and its theologians in particular, cannot afford to embrace, consciously or unconsciously, any demarcation between “the arts” and “life.” All we have is of God. All life, therefore, is to be received with thanksgiving, and embraced with an appropriate anticipation of seeing the Giver’s signature not merely in the bottom right corner, but all over – the front and back and sides of life. Moreover, art takes life and does something with it that nothing else does. This paper shall seek to identify something of what that “something” is.

Beginning with a brief exploration of the labyrinthic relationship between art and sacrament, we proceed, with the help of Scottish theologian P. T. Forsyth, to engage some themes in Henrik Ibsen and Fyodor Dostoevsky, who both serve as theologians who illustrate and critique the role of the arts, particularly arts’ tragic elements, and offer valuable voices for a proper understanding of grace – and so of nature and life.

1 See the forthcoming, Trevor A. Hart, *A Poetics of Redemption Volume 1: Creation, Creatureliness and Artistry* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007).

2 Paul O. Kristeller, *Renaissance Thought and the Arts* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 174.

ACTIONEM: THE MATRIX OF NATURE AND THE SACRAMENTALITY OF ART

Frank Brown befittingly asserts that “the art that has the greatest religious significance is not necessarily the art of institutional religion but rather the art which happens to discern what religion in its institutional or personal forms needs most to see.”³ Art creates an experience of mind and heart that compares in kind, though not in measure, to the Beyond itself. Insofar as it does this, it is “sacramental,” not unlike prayer or preaching. As Flannery O’Connor penned, “The artist penetrates the concrete world in order to find at its depths the image of its source, the image of ultimate reality.”⁴ All art is sacramental in its nature. The artist is given, consciously or unconsciously, a certain vision, a truth (true or otherwise), a word (graced or otherwise), which strains to be embodied materially⁵ in such a way that that initial givenness is communicated, heard, and known as the creation, in Rowan Williams’ phrase, “moves from and into a depth in the perceptible world that is contained neither in routine perception nor in the artist’s ... purposes.”⁶ Art is more, therefore, than memorial or symbol. It is icon. It is incarnation. More than ideas or associations of feeling, there is a transubstantiation that takes place in matter. Flesh is not thrown over the idea like a blanket. Rather, the idea itself finds embodiment and completion, indeed finds itself, in sinews, tendons, steel, oil, clay, semibreves and words. This enfleshment directs us not merely to the creation itself, but through it to its makers.⁷

Human making – “the characteristic common to God and man”⁸ – is sacramental insofar as God elects to create graced occasions of encounter between humanity and himself.⁹ It is all that Farrow describes of the Church’s twin sacraments: “a movement from absence to presence ... from chaos to order, darkness to light, death to life. It is an inventive, ordering event on the same plane as the act of creation, though its actual results are largely withheld from our view.”¹⁰

3 Frank B. Brown, *Religious Aesthetics: A Theological Study of Making and Meaning* (Houndmills: Macmillan, 1990), 111.

4 Flannery O’Connor, *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose*, ed. S. Fitzgerald and R. Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1987), 157.

5 Art, at least that art which names itself “Christian,” can have no place for Manichean or semi-Platonic ideas.

6 Rowan Williams, *Grace and Necessity: Reflections on Art and Love* (Harrisburg: Morehouse, 2005), 149-50.

7 There is also a sense in which artists themselves are “sacraments,” mediating meaning in their very vocation, its costliness and misunderstanding.

8 Dorothy L. Sayers, *The Whimsical Christian: 18 Essays* (London: Macmillan, 1978), 114.

9 God may or may not elect to make himself known through art. Art does not show us God. God alone can do that; but sometimes God uses art, among many other human pursuits and loves, to begin the showing. What art does do is to open up (and sometimes close) the door to Reality/Creation.

10 Douglas Farrow, *Ascension and Ecclesia: On the Significance of the Doctrine of the Ascension for Ecclesiology and Christian Cosmology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999), 5.

As O'Connor notes concerning novelists, the real artist is the one who "knows that he cannot approach the infinite directly, that he must penetrate the natural human world as it is."¹¹ Whilst art can never mediate the gospel itself, grace so works that art may mediate some word about the gospel, a half-gospel (or more), some shadows to a fallen world. To be sure, art cannot "explain" or "prove" the mysteries of God, nor does it usually seek to, but it does re-present, re-make, and re-create those (revealed) mysteries materially. Thus, in the celebrated preface to his 1897 novel, *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"*, Joseph Conrad rightly defines art as "a single-minded attempt to render the highest kind of justice to the visible universe, by bringing to light the truth, manifold and one, underlying its every aspect. It is an attempt to find in its forms, in its colours, in its light, in its shadows, in the aspects of matter, and in the facts of life what of each is fundamental, what is enduring and essential – their one illuminating and convincing quality – the very truth of their existence."¹²

Whether called "bad" or "good,"¹³ "high" or "low," "skeptical" or "faithful," art is never neutral. It is, in Picasso's words, "never chaste."¹⁴ Art is dangerous, risky. It not only demands to be heard, even if mis-heard, but in its "hearing" brings about a new situation. One is, as it were, "changed" by it, even "transported" by it. As Barth describes listening to Mozart: "Whenever I listen to you, I am transported to the threshold of a world which in sunlight and storm, by day and by night, is a good and ordered world."¹⁵ In arts' sign-making, its proclamation activity, something "new" happens – the kind of "newness" which is "new" precisely because we have been there before, or were made to be there in the future. In Browning's oft-quoted words from *Fra Lippo Lippi* (1855):

For, don't you mark? we're made so that we love
First when we see them painted, things we have passed
Perhaps a hundred times nor cared to see;
And so they are better, painted – better to us,
Which is the same thing. Art was given for that.¹⁶

Browning asserts that the point of painting something is not to reproduce it exact-

¹¹ O'Connor, *Mystery*, 163.

¹² Joseph Conrad, *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'* (ed. C. T. Watts; London: Penguin, 1989), xlvii.

¹³ By "bad" I mean that art which seeks to debunk, dismantle and deconstruct all that creation speaks to affirm – beauty, goodness, truth, honor, justice, purity, love and commendability (Phil 4:8) – and replace it with shallowness, ugliness, kitsch and ephemerality. In other words, "good" art opens up Reality to us, that is, whatever God wills us to experience in the world.

¹⁴ Pablo Picasso, cited in Brassàei, *Conversations with Picasso*, trans. J. M. Todd (Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 223.

¹⁵ Karl Barth, *Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart*, trans. C. K. Pott (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2003), 22.

¹⁶ Robert Browning, *Robert Browning's Complete Works*. ed. W. L. Phelps (New York: Fred DeFau & Co., 1910), 33.

ly (which is impossible), but rather to re-present it in such a way that others might “see” the reality of that which is represented for the first time. Like death, art interprets and expands life. The Aberdeenshire theologian, Peter Taylor Forsyth (1848–1921), notes that for the Victorian English Symbolist painter and sculptor, George Frederick Watts (1817–1904), “Art is interpretation. It is a branch of sacred hermeneutics.” He goes on: “Let natural beauty be what it may, artistic beauty is higher. And why? Because it is spiritual. Because you have in Art the finished product of which Nature is but the initial stage. Nature runs up into the artist. He crowns Nature with the miracle of living, conscious spirit.” Nature “rises to Art.” Art is nature “born again,” born anew of that “soul which is above Nature.”¹⁷ It is not a question of artists somehow imposing themselves on Nature, or representing Nature. Rather, Art is Nature uttering, completing and coming to itself “through the artist. That is real imagination.”¹⁸ Insofar as art contributes to our participation in God’s perfecting of creation, we can say that art perfects creation.¹⁹

In our own day, Nicholas Wolterstorff has reminded us that one of the purposes of poetry (“the most spiritual and least sensuous of all the arts,”²⁰ as Forsyth defines it) is not to impose illusion on reality, but rather to do the opposite. Poetry’s “hazy words”²¹ intimate a world, indeed a reality, both within and beyond the life of the poem, functioning not unlike a doorway through which the hopeful sojourner is invited to enter “the path of longing”²² and explore the land of life as it really is, not simply as it appears. Arthur Miller articulates that “while there are mysteries in life which no amount of analyzing will reduce to reason, it

17 Peter T. Forsyth, *Religion in Recent Art: Being Expository Lectures on Rossetti, Burne Jones, Watts, Holman Hunt, and Wagner* (New York: AMS Press, 1972), 88-90.

18 Peter T. Forsyth, *Christ on Parnassus: Lectures on Art, Ethic, and Theology* (New York: Hodder and Stoughton, 1911), 260. Here Forsyth betrays his indebtedness to Hegel, although he does not share Hegel’s belief that art is only the middle stage between the exteriority of nature and the interiority of spirit. See George Pattison, *Art, Modernity and Faith* (London: SCM Press, 1988), 97. Hegel considers the Reformation as a summit, a triumph, of word over art. It is a summit from which we ought not descend to consider again art as an avenue of truth: “No matter how excellent we find the statues of the Greek gods, no matter how we see God the Father, the Christ and Mary so estimably and perfectly portrayed: it is no help; we bow the knee no longer.” Arts’ time is past: “Art, considered in its highest vocation, is and remains for us a thing of the past” and “the peculiar nature of artistic production and of works of art no longer fills our highest need . . . thought and reflection have spread their wings above fine art.” Georg W. F. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 1:10-11, 30-1, 102-3.

19 That there is such widespread distrust of art is directly related to widespread distrust of Nature, and of Nature’s God; a distrust that causes human blindness to creation’s true goodness.

20 Forsyth, *Parnassus*, 60.

21 Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Art in Action: Towards a Christian Aesthetic* (Carlisle: Solway, 1997), 8.

22 Henrik Ibsen, *The Oxford Ibsen, Volume III: Brand, Peer Gynt*, ed. J. W. McFarlane, trans. J. Kirkup and C. Fry (London: Oxford University Press, 1972), 246.

is perfectly realistic to admit and even to proclaim that hiatus as a truth.”²³ The significance of this truth for the Christian theologian should be obvious: faith lies nearer to the aesthetic and the dramatic than to the intellectual sphere of life. It is a grave crime that Christian theologians should ever demand that artists choose between two worlds – as if the Word is not still flesh, albeit uniquely his flesh – or vice versa. Both the calls to sacrifice or resist human artistry in favor of “belief,” and to sacrifice the imperative scientific discipline of theology in favor of human inventiveness, are invitations to cliché and vacuity and an unmooring from the truth.²⁴

INTRARE: THE REALISM OF THE TRAGIC

One place where arts’ sacramental nature finds a morally realistic voice is in the amphitheatre of the tragic. To flesh out whether our claim that faith lies nearer to the aesthetic and the dramatic than to the intellectual sphere of life can be defended, we could do little better than to turn to the work of the popular Norwegian poet and dramatist from Stockmannsgården, Henrik Ibsen (1828–1906).²⁵ Ibsen’s contradictory vision of life is fundamentally one of struggle – the “pathos of disillusioned idealism,” as Hermann Weigand put it.²⁶ That said, there remains in Ibsen’s worldview a confession that life, even tragic life, has value. Ibsen identifies this value in life’s struggle itself. Life is but a tragic journey towards the “heart-nook of the hidden.”²⁷ For him, struggle is good, vitalizing and wholesome. “To live is to – fight troll-demons in vaults of the mind and heart.”²⁸ As one reviewer of Ibsen’s *Brand* put it, “it is not liberty and truth, but rather the

23 Arthur Miller, “Ibsen and the Drama of Today,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Ibsen*, ed. J. McFarlane (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 227.

24 Art can never be separated from fideistic concerns, or from other human pursuits such as philosophy or science. There may be a primacy in one, but there can be no independence. See Forsyth, *Parnassus*, 4.

25 See Jason Goroncy, “Bitter Tonic for our Time – Why the Church needs the World: Peter Taylor Forsyth on Henrik Ibsen,” *European Journal of Theology* 15/2 (2006): 105-118.

26 Hermann J. Weigand, *The Modern Ibsen: A Reconsideration* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1953), 125. Jürgen Moltmann writes: “Is not every unbeliever who has a reason for his atheism and his decision not to believe a theologian too? Atheists who have something against God and against faith in God usually know very well whom and what they are rejecting, and have their reasons. Nietzsche’s book, *The Antichrist*, has a lot to teach us about true Christianity.” Jürgen Moltmann, “Godless Theology,” n.p. [cited 28 June 2006]. Online: <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=2007>.

27 The line “the heart-nook of the hidden” is taken from Ibsen’s poem, “The Miner,” written in 1851. Henrik Ibsen, *Lyrics & Poems from Ibsen*, trans. F. E. Garrett (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1912), n.p. Michael Meyer translates the line as “the heart-chamber of what lies hidden.” Michael Meyer, *Henrik Ibsen: The Making of a Dramatist 1828-1864* (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1967), 84.

28 Henrik Ibsen, “The Verse.” Originally written in German in 1877. Quoted in Ketil Jensehaugen, “Henrik Ibsen as a poet,” n.p. [cited 1 July 2006]. Online: <http://www.newagebd.com/2006/jan/27/lit.html>.

struggle for them that matters. The struggle for ideals is more important to [Ibsen] than ideals themselves ... In fact Ibsen believed more in struggle than in any permanent improvements. All development hitherto has been nothing more than a stumbling from one error into another."²⁹

Ibsen has no heroes or villains in his plays. Betraying his commitment to depicting reality, he once wrote, "I do not write roles, but represent human beings."³⁰ Characters are portrayed as real, with all their strengths and weaknesses. While abandoning any hope of a graced-finale of life, Ibsen's affirmation of struggle remains essentially an affirmation of life: life is good because it harbors the possibility of tragedy,²⁷ and so of growth, process, and maturity. And for Ibsen, it includes a kind of eschatology, a forward momentum in which the entire seemingly apathetic and impotent mass is slowly moving forward. Weigand notes that by conceiving life as "a rhythmical process and pronouncing it good," Ibsen here deprives himself "of any philosophical basis to fume in indignation against the whole universal process."²²

ACT 3: FORSYTH – ASSAYING IBSEN

While some adjudge tragic pessimism as a sign of arts' moral decadence and faithlessness, Forsyth considers art as not merely part of the "great dialectical movement which is to bring all things into union with God,"³³ but as a truth-teller that holds up a mirror that abets its age to see what it does not want to, calling us to see, hear, feel, smell and touch something of Nature's moral catastrophe. To be sure, Forsyth identifies the source of this tragedy as humanity's sin, and the triviality of its sense of sin: "It is not a world out of joint that makes our problem, but the shipwrecked soul in it. It is Hamlet, not his world, that is wrong."³⁴ Forsyth's probing analysis of human personhood, born of intense theological and psychological reflection that twenty-five years in pastoral ministry brings, equals that of Pascal, Bonhoeffer, and particularly Kierkegaard, "in whom he found a kindred spirit."³⁵ He maintains that the solution to this problem, the world solution, is in what destroys its guilt, and that nothing can do this except "the very holiness

29 Janko Lavrin, "Ibsen and His Creation: III – The Strength of his Weakness," *The New Age: A Weekly Review of Politics, Literature, and Art* 24/9 (Thursday, 2 January, 1919), 140.

30 Cited in Archibald Henderson, *European Dramatists* (Cincinnati: Stewart & Kidd Co., 1913), 168.

31 For Ibsen, tragedy and comedy stood very closely together. See Robin Young, "Ibsen and Comedy," in *Cambridge Companion*, 58-67; Bjørn Hemmer, "Ibsen and the Realistic Problem Drama," in *Cambridge Companion*, 68-88.

32 Weigand, *Modern Ibsen*, 126.

33 Pattison, *Art*, 87.

34 Peter T. Forsyth, *The Church, the Gospel and Society* (London: Independent Press, 1962), 94.

35 A. F. Simpson, "P. T. Forsyth: The Prophet of Judgment," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 4 (1951), 152.

that makes guilt guilt” in the first place.²⁷ In Tolkien’s terms, the ring can only be destroyed in the very fires of Mount Doom from which it was forged.²⁷ That destruction takes place in the Crucified Man. There in his Cross, and there alone, it finally penetrates into us that, morally, all the great tragedy and history of the world, including our own history, is tied up with its guilt. Forsyth cites Aeschylus, Shakespeare, Goethe, and Ibsen as examples of those who see this.²⁷

Forsyth’s reference to Ibsen is no passing one, for he sees in Ibsen one who painstakingly identifies the problem with humanism as lacking “moral realism.”²⁷ Ibsen sees “a different world” from Thomas Hardy’s “impressive unfaith,”²⁷ although Hardy, too, in his own way, “does a real service to the Christian.”²⁷ In words that seem to suggest that Forsyth sees Ibsen’s work functioning not unlike the “natural” conscience, he writes: “[Ibsen] has not ‘found Christ,’ but he has found what drives us to Christ, the need Christ alone meets. [Ibsen] unveils man’s perdition, and makes a Christ inevitable for any hope of righteousness.”²² Here Forsyth sees Ibsen as an ally. Forsyth laments not only that Ibsen never read Kierkegaard more closely, but also that while critics with the judgment such as Ibsen do not grasp the revealed answer to the questions that plague the human heart and conscience, “the Church with the revelation does not critically grasp the problem, nor duly attend to those who do.”²² Of the Church he says,

We are unreal, sentimental and impressionist ... with our Gospel. We handle the eternities, yet we cannot go to the bottom of things ... We do not dwell beside the remorseless reality of God in His saving work, and so we do not reach with the final and conquering word the core of man and his need. We look on the world and say, “Ah! The pity of it.” We do not delve in our own hearts, as Matthew Arnold complained, and say, “Oh! the curse of it.” In a word, we do not grasp the moral tragedy of the race’s suicide, and we do not

36 Peter T. Forsyth, *Positive Preaching and Modern Mind: The Lyman Beecher Lecture on Preaching, Yale University, 1907* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1907), 228.

37 I am indebted to Trevor Hart (in private correspondence) for associating this metaphor with the atonement.

38 Forsyth, *Preaching*, 227-8. To be sure, as Forsyth insisted, neither art nor the Church can prescribe a morality. Only faith can do that. Forsyth, *Parnassus*, 280, 289, 293.

39 Peter T. Forsyth, “Ibsen’s Treatment of Guilt,” *Hibbert Journal* 14 (October 1915): 106; cf. Peter T. Forsyth, “Henrik Ibsen.” Review of *The Life of Henrik Ibsen*, by Henrik Jaeger, trans. Clara Bell, *Independent*, literary supplement (6 March 1891): 1.

40 See Peter T. Forsyth, “The Pessimism of Mr Thomas Hardy,” *London Quarterly Review* 118 (October 1912): 193-219; Forsyth, “Treatment,” 105-6.

41 Robert M. Brown, *P. T. Forsyth, Prophet for Today* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1952), 134.

42 Forsyth, “Treatment,” 112.

43 *Ibid.*, 115; cf. John W. De Gruchy, *Christianity, Art and Transformation: Theological Aesthetics in the Struggle for Justice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 15-6.

grasp the Gospel ... So much of our religious teaching betrays no sign that the speaker has descended into hell, been near the everlasting burnings, or been plucked from the awful pit. He has risen with Christ – what right have we to deny it? – but it is out of a shallow grave, with no deepness of earth, with no huge millstone to roll away.⁴⁴

God's remedy for creation does not involve a gentle wooing. It is not at all like so much of the Church's sickeningly sweet cough elixirs. God's medicine "burns as it goes down."²⁷ The sickness is too dire, and too much is at stake for anything less potent. Ibsen knows something of this. In *Peer Gynt*, the old man of the mountain says to the young Peer, "Human nature's a funny thing. Hard to get rid of. The more you pick at it, the faster it heals ... I thought Old Adam was gone for good – but here he is again. It's no good, son in law. You've got chronic human nature. You need the operation."⁴⁶ To which the young man replied, "You're drunk ... You're out of your mind."⁴⁷ Too few in Christian history have been able to articulate the severity of the human scene that the old man paints here. Too often, Peer's words are taken as the final word, even as "good news." If he does anything, Forsyth joins the old man, but goes even further: "Human Nature is a good fellow enough – when you don't cross him, or meddle with his bone. Then he is less divine than canine."⁴⁸ What God in Christ was up against was to meet head-on "the conscience that resents its easy forgiveness."⁴⁹ Hence not only does Forsyth identify the "chronic human nature" and the cruciality of the need for "the operation," but he announces that we live now in a post-operation world. Like too few others, Forsyth asserts that the locus of this eucatastrophic operation is the human conscience (which needs life more than light⁵⁰) – that locale in which "we are mastered but not concussed."⁵¹ To be healed here is to be made whole. To leave conscience untouched, uncured, or to hope that the necessary antibiotics might be enough to "do the job" is to be blinded to the veracity of the moral (real) situation. Redemption and regeneration, not schooling in culture or piano tuning for the soul, are what we truly need, and they are secured by God through the crucible of judgment.

Forsyth identifies artists like Wagner, Schopenhauer and Ibsen as those who "get it," at least in part; those who "distrust the easy optimism of the merely happy

44 Forsyth, *Society*, 100.

45 Forsyth, "Treatment," 115.

46 Henrik Ibsen, *Peer Gynt*, trans. K. McLeish (London: Royal National Theatre/Nick Hern, 1990), 34.

47 Ibid.

48 Peter T. Forsyth, *Socialism, the Church and the Poor* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1908), 28.

49 Peter T. Forsyth, *Theology in Church and State* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1915), 28.

50 Peter T. Forsyth, *The Preaching of Jesus and the Gospel of Christ* (Blackwood: New Creation Publications, 1987), 92.

51 Forsyth, *Preaching*, 43.

creeds.”⁷² To be sure, Christianity is not, as Schopenhauer believed, ultimately pessimistic. But while pessimism may be “foreign to our crowning Christian instincts and our final Christian truth,” it is not alien to Christ, or to his secret or method.⁷² Thus in the face of the Church’s shallowness and obsession with trivialities, Forsyth entreats his North American hearers to “read Ibsen” who, more than most dramatists, carries us “closer to life’s moral realities.”⁷² Forsyth identifies that theology, which when done well is itself theo-dramatic reflection on *the* drama, has more to do with grasping reality as moral, as tragic, as an answered-problem to be lived in, rather than as a riddle to be solved by human acumen. And he identifies in the tragic poets and dramatists those who seem to understand something *like* holiness, “something like a sense of sin,”⁷⁷ and that life’s real question, “the psycho-moral dilemma,”⁷⁷ is not “How do I feel about God?” but “What dealings have I with Him?,”⁷⁷ not as a concept but as *the* lead character in the drama. Forsyth sees in Wagner, for example, one whose “laden heart” cries for “more than a scheme from [a] vigorous mind. It rises from a burdened world, from a disjointed time, from lands where thought is too much divorced from action, and where the pressure of militarism upon industry co-operates with the ecclesiastical destruction of vital faith to reduce the vale, the reasonableness, the sanctity of life.”⁷⁷

Likewise, Ibsen’s drama is embodied tragedy yearning for a beyond. Like Nietzsche, Ibsen discerns that life culminates in its experiences of tragedy. But just as neither art nor life can have spectators, Ibsen is not a spectator in this tragedy. He is an actor. He is part of the reality. It “unhinge[s] his mind”⁵⁹ and tears at his very being as it does for any who feel the question so deeply but do not know God’s resolve in the tragedy of the Cross. (Is this not why Ibsen’s master builder fears not death but judgment and retribution?) Ibsen must be read, Forsyth says, because of his “unsparing ethical realism” and his sensitivity to life’s fundamental questions. “To save your soul from sunny or silly piety,” Forsyth tells preachers, “to realize the deadly inveteracy of evil, its dereliction by God, its sordid paralysis of all redeeming, self-recuperative power in man, its incurable fatal effect upon the moral order of society, read Ibsen. Yea, to realize how it thereby imports the element of death even into the moral order of the universe read Ibsen.”⁷⁷

CONTINUE: FORSYTH – APPRAISING IBSEN

Forsyth identifies in Ibsen the cataclysmic despair of the analyst who,

52 Forsyth, *Art*, 221; cf. p. 235.

53 *Ibid.*, 220.

54 Forsyth, *Preaching*, 103.

55 Forsyth, *Art*, 221.

56 Miller, “Ibsen,” 231.

57 Forsyth, “Intellectualism and Faith,” 319.

58 Forsyth, *Art*, 220-1.

59 Peter T. Forsyth, *The Justification of God: Lectures for War-Time on a Christian Theodicy* (London: Independent Press, 1957), 210.

60 Forsyth, *Preaching*, 103.

crushed by the quagmire of the reality he has unearthed, is unable to find his way back to a synthesis. He praises Ibsen (and other “tragic poets”) for his recognition that what lies at the nucleus of the human problem is guilt. But Forsyth is not uncritical of these “apostles” for not recognizing what it is that makes guilt guilt, that is, holiness, and *that* as unveiled in God’s cross. This analysis leads Forsyth to say to these budding preacher-listeners, “Preach to Ibsen’s world, and there are few that you will miss. Only do not preach his word.” For while Ibsen “reads one book with uncanny penetration, the book of Man, Church, and Society, he has never turned the same piercing eye on the other book, the New Testament, and never taken Christ as seriously as he takes man. He is grimly, ghastly interpretive but not redemptive – like his analytic age.”⁷⁷ And lest there be any who doubt the veracity and power of such a New Testament word to reach Ibsen’s world, Forsyth reassures his hearers that “Christ’s Gospel has the same radical, unsparing, moral realism, tearing to the roots, and tearing them up with relentless moral veracity. It has the note of *thorough*.”⁷²

Ibsen’s prophetic exposé, his “moral and religious genius,”⁶³ his ability to unmask the “hypocrisy, self-deception, and sham with which contemporary society clothe[s] itself,”⁶⁴ and to identify and ask the right questions, is imperative; even though, in Forsyth’s view, no answer comes. Forsyth contends that Ibsen “has enough conscience to know the nature of the true human burden; but he had not enough to bear it, still less to roll it upon another ... He had the conscience to feel the sin of the world, but not the power of remedy ... Like his age, he knew what a redemption should be better than he knew the Redeemer that has been ... he understood the psychology of Redemption more than its power, the way it should take more than the way it did ... He had the moral vision to feel the need of [the Christian Messiah], but not the spiritual power to recognise the gift of him through the hulls of his Church.”⁶⁵ What Ibsen lacks is a gospel adequate to meet the cataclysm he so critically sees. His proficiency is that he is ever “aware of the rodent with sharp eyes and teeth, living in fierce terror behind the grubby walls of life,” but he is “never taught by any competent mind to haunt the spot where absolute ethic and infinite mystic meet in Christ.”⁶⁶ He grasps life’s fundamental moral realities, but life is not a seductive puzzle to be solved by human acumen, but a “tragic battle for existence, for power, for eternal life.”⁶⁷ As we shall see, what Ibsen fails to grasp, the Russian writer Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky (1821–1881) embraces with both hands, as though life depends on it.

61 *Ibid.*, 104.

62 *Ibid.*, 105.

63 Forsyth, “Treatment,” 120.

64 George Hall, “Tragedy in the Theology of P. T. Forsyth,” in *Justice the True and Only Mercy: Essays on the Life and Theology of Peter Taylor Forsyth* (ed. T. Hart; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), 81.

65 Forsyth, “Treatment,” 121.

66 *Ibid.*, 122.

67 Forsyth, *Justification*, 209; cf. Hall, “Tragedy,” 95.

ARRIVAL: THE MATRIX OF GRACE AND THE ARTISTRY OF THE SACRAMENT

God's creational mandate involves a lot more than breeding. It involves the Edenization of creation – taking the life of Eden, of grace, to the ends of the earth. As a grace, therefore, art is not an “optional extra” of human being, or of the telling of good news, but it is part of the constraining means of that being and telling. Artists live out the reality of that blessing through adding value to the created order, the “very good” of God. So human artistry is constituted in God's covenant with creation, but because of the grace of God revealed in the economy of God's action in Jesus Christ, and notwithstanding that the arts do indeed find theological grounding in the action of divine enfleshment, art finds its final meaning in the cross where the Triune God creatively answers himself from humanity's side.

The language of “sacramentality” and art must, therefore, be approached with caution. Specifically, it must be approached christologically and christocentrically. For if we seek to understand sacramentality in terms of creation alone, we will inevitably flatten out all sacraments; that is, if everything is sacramental, then nothing is. The uniqueness of the Church's sacraments, whether one, two, or more, lies in the fact that they are proclamations of *specific (divine) historical activities*, specifically the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and are to be practised as those activities that “proclaim the Lord's *death* (and, presumably, resurrection) until he comes” (1 Cor 11:26). We may, in the absence of another term, speak of arts' “sacramentality” whilst affirming that art can never be a “sacrament” as such. It has a sacramental nature, but it is not a sacrament. Whilst it can proclaim the truth, it can never proclaim the whole truth and nothing but the truth.⁶⁸ It is not art, but Jesus Christ, the truth of God, who is the one Mediator between God and humanity, and who speaks the whole truth – that is, the truth of the Father. Art can never usurp this place and is only being idolatrous when it tries. The Church has one Sacrament, and his name is Jesus Christ.⁶⁹

Thus just where one might be tempted to utilize Natural Theology to bridge the gap between the question and the answer, between sin and redemption, Forsyth introduces something noticeably absent from Ibsen's corpus – the priority of grace. For while “nature cannot of itself culminate in grace, at least it was not put there without regard to grace. Grace is Nature's destiny.”⁷⁰ Apart from grace, nature becomes abstruse, unreal and inhuman. Apart from nature, the physical stuff of the world too dust-bound to satisfy metaphysical enquiry, grace tends toward despair and absurdity. “Nature, if not the mother, is the matrix of Grace.”⁷¹ But

68 See Aldous Huxley, *On Art and Artists* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1960), 60-8.

69 Baptism and Holy Communion are sacraments in so far as they “proclaim” the Sacrament (Word) of Jesus Christ. It is also important to note here that the sacraments (and preaching) do not actualise Christ, but are only possible as “real presence” because of the actuality which precedes the possibility. See Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/1, trans. T. H. L. Parker, et. al. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1985), 55.

70 Peter T. Forsyth, *This Life and the Next: The Effect on This Life of Faith in Another* (London: Independent Press, 1946), 69; cf. Forsyth, *Art*, 98.

71 Peter T. Forsyth, *The Christian Ethic of War* (London: Longmans, Green, 1916), 171; cf. Eberhard Jüngel, *Christ, Justice and Peace: Toward a Theology of the State*,

that grace is bloodied, despised and rejected, crushed for the iniquities of, and laden with punishment for those who hide their faces from it. Grace is never an abstract thing. Nor is it cheap. Grace is a man groaning on a cross, dying, as Gerd confesses, on a “bitter tree,”⁷² not only for his friends but also for those who would wish him and his Father dead. Grace is a person redeeming in holy love. Grace is God in eucatastrophic action in the face of Nature’s catastrophe. Grace is God taking seriously the scandalous nature of sin’s offence, and himself going down into the experience of nothingness and dread, into hell, into death, into the furnace of God’s own wrath, into the radical depths of its wound, in order to save.⁷² There can be no higher gift. Moreover, such grace alone satisfies the human (and divine) conscience, which requires not merely an *explanation* of the Cross, but its revelation. This grace alone, the grace of the initiating Father, carries humanity home and brings peace to the human spirit.

God’s love is impotent if it is not holy – and holy is the one thing Ibsen cannot afford his God to be. This is revealed in the final scene of *Peer Gynt*. After Buttonmoulder’s challenge, the wayward Peer has opportunity to know the gift of repentance, to grow up, to know forgiveness, to come home. Clinging to Solveig and hiding his face in her lap, he squalls, “My mother; my wife; purest of women! Hide me there, hide me in your heart!”⁷⁴ But here, pietà-like, in Solveig’s arms, in the one place he might know freedom and come home, she robs him (and he allows himself to be robbed) of his one hope of forgiveness, of redemption, of life, of homecoming. And this is precisely because there is no confession of holiness, and no recognition of guilt. There is not even remorse, even while he was in the far country.

Glossing over the depth of Peer’s tragedy, Solveig offers cheap, although sincere, grace as she softly sings,

Sleep, my boy, my dearest boy!
I will rock you to sleep and guard you.

The boy has sat on his mother’s lap.
The two have played the livelong day.

trans. D. B. Hamill and A. J. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1992), 26-7.

⁷² Ibsen, *Brand, Peer Gynt*, 248. Significantly, these words come out of the mouth not of the priest Brand, but of Gerd, the mad gypsy girl who tries to talk Brand into going with her to the “ice church” in the mountains. But just when the Christian reader might get excited that Ibsen may have perceived something of an answer to the questions he identifies through the mouth of Gerd, she turns around and confesses that the “tree of the cross ... this thing [that] was done long years ago” is all a lie taught to her by her father when she was little, and that Brand himself is really “that Man ... the Saviour” (ibid.).

⁷³ Nietzsche saw something of this. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for Everyone and No One*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin, 1969), 278-9.

⁷⁴ Ibsen, *Brand, Peer Gynt*, 421.

JASON GORONCY

The boy has lain on his mother's breast
The livelong day. God bless you my sweet.

The boy has lain so close to my heart
The livelong day. He is weary now.

Sleep, my boy, my dearest boy!
I will rock you to sleep and guard you.⁷⁷

Here, Solveig functions as a kind of uncertain Natural Theology whose concern is more for aesthetics and harmony than reconciliation. "She may," Forsyth says of Natural Theology, "hold to her fitful breast her tired child, soothe her fretful sons, kindle her brilliant lovers to cosmic or other emotion, and lend her imagery to magnify the passions of the heart; but for the conscience, stricken or strong, she has no word. Therefore she has no Revelation."⁷⁷ And because she has no revelation, she can neither offer nor bring reconciliation. Indeed, in her eyes, Peer has nothing to repent of, or be forgiven for. He is home now. That is all that matters. Thus Solveig sanctifies Peer in his guilt, leaving him wretched – with Button-moulder having opportunity to again speak, perhaps even have the final word, in spite of Solveig's final hope that Peer had indeed become a "home-returner."⁷⁷

A BREVILOQUENT DETOUR: TWO PRODIGALS,
TWO GIRLFRIENDS, AND VARIATIONS ON THE THEME

The cost of Solveig's relationship with Peer in the play's final scene can be profitably contrasted with that of another epilogue, Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, first published in 1866.⁷⁸ While Solveig has sacrificially waited for her home-returner to reappear from the grave of lostness, the obsequious and unpretentious prostitute Sonya Semyonovna Marmeladova⁷⁹ has followed her beloved and impoverished student-turned-murderer Rodion Raskolnikov⁸⁰ to a Siberian prison, his fortress for eight years.⁸¹

⁷⁵ Henrik Ibsen, *Peer Gynt*, trans. R. F. Sharp (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1921), 241.

⁷⁶ Peter T. Forsyth, "Revelation and the Person of Christ," in *Faith and Criticism: Essays by Congregationalists* (London: Simpson Low Marston, 1893), 100.

⁷⁷ Ibsen, *Brand*, *Peer Gynt*, 421.

⁷⁸ Significantly, the German translation is entitled "Guilt and Expiation." Dostoevsky rates no mention in any of Forsyth's books.

⁷⁹ Sonya is the religious daughter of a drunk, Semyon Zakharovich Marmeladov, who Raskolnikov meets in a pub near the beginning of the novel and continuously finds himself drawn to throughout the novel. Raskolnikov enjoys her graceful support, even though one of his victims (Lizaveta) is her friend. She encourages him to take up faith and confess. He does, and after his confession she follows him to Siberia where she lives in the same town as the prison; it is here that Raskolnikov begins his "rebirth."

⁸⁰ A word play on *raskol*, meaning a schism, or split. The Raskolniki were members of a sect of "Old Believers" who broke away from the Russian Orthodox Church in the seventeenth century.

⁸¹ Dostoevsky himself was sentenced to four years in a Siberian camp (the Peter and

Raskolnikov had once conceived of himself as a great *Übermensch*, as a Napoleon, who wasn't bound by the same tired old moral codes that others recognize, if not obey. Nevertheless, after committing his appalling twin murder and robbery, he finds that he cannot evade his punishment; he cannot silence his sentient and over-encumbered conscience and is subsequently submerged into a hell of bedevilment and tormenting madness. Finally, he is driven, most un-Peer like, to full disclosure, to confession – “without distorting the facts, without forgetting the slightest details. He recounted the whole process of the murder to the last trace”⁸² – and that first to Sonya. To the “great annoyance” of those who wanted to defend him – psychologists, friends, his landlady and maid – Raskolnikov, entirely unlike Peer, “did almost nothing to defend himself.”⁸³ Now in prison, he feels constrained to know why, “what precisely had prompted him to come and confess his guilt.”⁸⁴

What Dostoevsky's work betrays is a fascination, even a “divine-demonic-obsession,”⁸⁵ with the ultimate depths of reality as moral. And like Ibsen, Dostoevsky is concerned to illuminate the value of the tragic in that reality and how this is borne, Macbeth-like, in the human conscience. Thus, after a dream of the flogging to death of an old horse, Raskolnikov asks, “Can it be starting already, can the reckoning come so soon?”⁸⁶ This is no mere “laceration of the nerves,” however.⁸⁷ Rather, here Dostoevsky gives voice to the truth that “whoever has a conscience will no doubt suffer ... That's his punishment – on top of penal servitude.”⁸⁸ So in *The Brothers Karamazov*, he writes, “There is nothing more seductive for man than the freedom of his conscience, but there is nothing more

Paul Fortress) for his involvement with the Petrashevsky circle and their publication of anti-government propaganda. His release was followed by four years of enforced military service near the China border. He returned to society after about ten years in Siberia. William Leatherbarrow suggests that Dostoevsky's contact with criminals in the Siberian camp “disabused Dostoevsky of his earlier utopianism and faith in the essential goodness of man.” William Leatherbarrow, *Fedor Dostoevsky* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1981), 23.

82 Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment*, trans. R. Pevear and L. Volokhonsky (London: Vintage, 1992), 535. Raskolnikov was not the first to confess to the murder, of course. That honor goes to the painter and sectarian, Nikolai Dementiev, who belongs to a sect that believes that it is virtuous to suffer for another person's crime. So he pronounces: “I'm guilty. The sin is mine! I am the murderer!” *Ibid.*, 351.

83 *Ibid.*, 536.

84 *Ibid.*

85 John C. Powys, *Enjoyment of Literature* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1938), 375.

86 Dostoevsky, *Crime*, 91. All references to *Crime* refer to the Pevear and Volokhonsky translation. Other translations will be referenced in full.

87 Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Possessed*, trans. C. Garnett (New York: Barnes & Noble, 2004), 254.

88 Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment*, trans. D. Magarshack (London: Penguin, 1951), 281.

tormenting for him either.”⁸⁹

While later on Raskolnikov briefly attempts to justify his crime to Sonya by asserting that suffering is merely a consequence of extensive intelligence and a feeling heart, he knows that this is merely an eschewal from the truth of things. So when Sonya tells him that atonement is required for redemption, he receives this word as it is – a revelation into the workings of grace – and so confesses his sin and seeks to bear the accompanying punishment.⁹⁰ Sonya here does what Solveig fails to do: call sin “sin.” Raskolnikov becomes convinced that not only must he confess his crime, but that he – he himself – must bear suffering as a means of expiation.⁹¹ He recognises the *must* of repentance – “burning repentance, that breaks the heart, that drives sleep away, such repentance as torments one into dreaming of the noose or the watery deeps!”⁹² – and how it might “herald a future break in his life, his future resurrection.”⁹³ At one point Raskolnikov blamed fate for not sending him such. But now, as a lover of St John’s Gospel, he knows that the grain of wheat must first fall to the ground and die. His fellow prisoners, who had “all come to love Sonya so much,” were right at this point, “You ought to be killed,” they said.⁹⁴ Raskolnikov errs, however, in thinking that this dying is an action that he might perform on himself, a notion reflecting Dostoevsky’s own conviction.⁹⁵

Berdyayev asserts that “Dostoevsky believed firmly in the redemptive and

89 Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. C. McDuff (London: Penguin, 1993), 293. “Man in Dostoevsky’s works, as in Genesis, is a tragic, split creature, excluded from paradise but longing for reconciliation.” Leatherbarrow, *Dostoevsky*, 36.

90 See Richard Swinburne, *Responsibility and Atonement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 81-4.

91 See Geraint V. Jones, “Conscience, Guilt and Expiation: some notes on Dostoevsky,” *The Congregational Quarterly* 30 (1952): 245-52. Joseph Frank observes that Dostoevsky had “long been preoccupied with the question of crime and conscience.” Joseph Frank, “Introduction,” in Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment*, trans. C. Garnett (New York: Bantam Books, 1987), ix.

92 Dostoevsky, *Crime*, 544.

93 *Ibid.*, 545.

94 *Ibid.*, 546.

95 In his preliminary notes on *Crime and Punishment*, Dostoevsky writes: “There is no happiness in comfort; happiness is bought by suffering. Man is not born for happiness. Man earns his happiness and always by suffering. There’s no injustice here, because the knowledge of life and consciousness (that is, that which is felt immediately with your body and spirit, that is, through the whole vital process of life) is acquired by experience *pro and contra*, which one must take upon one’s self. By suffering, such is the law of our planet, but this immediate awareness, felt with the life process, is such a great joy that one gladly pays with years of suffering for it.” Fyodor Dostoevsky, “Appendix, from *The Notebooks for Crime and Punishment*,” in *Crime and Punishment*, trans. C. Garnett (Ware: Wordsworth Classics, 2000), 467. This notion reappears in the epigraph of *The Brothers Karamazov*, preceding John 12:24. Cf. Predrag Cicovacki, “Searching for the Abandoned Soul: Dostoyevsky on the Suffering of Humanity,” in *The Enigma of Good and Evil: The Moral Sentiment in Literature*, ed. A.-T. Tymieniecka (Dordrecht: Springer, 2005), 367-98.

regenerative power of suffering: life is the expiation of sin by suffering.”⁹⁶ Dostoevsky once confessed to his wife: “God gave you to me so that ... I might expiate my own great sins.”⁹⁷ Certainly, he believed that earthly suffering is purgative, regenerative.⁹⁸ But as the Epilogue draws to a close it becomes increasingly evident to Raskolnikov that it is not our penance that holiness demands, but our death. Here Dostoyevsky betrays an insight into the workings of holy grace only hinted at in Ibsen. Unlike Raskolnikov, Peer refuses to die, to enter his grave. Thus there can be no “renewed future” or “complete resurrection into a new life,” as Raskolnikov and Sonya know and which gives them hopeful resolve to “wait and endure” the time in Siberia.⁹⁹ Now, “instead of dialectics, there was life, and something completely different had to work itself out” in Raskolnikov’s consciousness.¹⁰⁰ Despite Solveig’s sincerity and patience, she never knows the love and concern of a transformed human being – one who was dead but is now alive – as Sonya does. The Lazarus Raskolnikov worries, his heart “beating heavily and painfully,”¹⁰¹ after Sonya when she is ill. Raskolnikov is transformed from tormenter to tormented, to death, to resurrected lover. Forgiven, he can now love Sonya and embrace the future with her.

96 Nicholas Berdyaev, *Dostoevsky* (New York: Meridian Books, 1957), 95. When Dostoevsky penned his proposal for *Crime and Punishment*, he wrote, “The criminal himself resolves to accept suffering and thereby atone for his deed.” Leonid Grossman, *Dostoevsky* (New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1975), 352. Thus Raskolnikov’s sister Dunya exhorts him to suffer that he might expiate his sin. Later the detective Porphyry suggests that suffering may be God’s means for bringing us to him. In *Demons* the deranged Stavrogin confesses responsibility for a young girl’s suicide: “I want to forgive myself and that is my...whole goal ... That is why I seek boundless suffering.” In reply, Bishop Tikhon advises, “Christ ... will forgive you, if only you attain to forgiving yourself.” Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Demons* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994), 711; cf. Leatherbarrow, *Dostoevsky*, 62, 161; Richard A. Peace, *Dostoyevsky: An Examination of the Major Novels* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), 282; Joseph Frank, *Dostoevsky: The Years of Ordeal 1850-1859* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 307.

97 Anna Dostoevsky, *Reminiscences* (New York: Liveright Publishers, 1975), 67.

98 We must demonstrate care here that we do not read Dostoevsky’s own convictions through the leans of Raskolnikov. For while there is enough evidence in Dostoevsky’s writing to suggest that he may have believed in the unique sin-bearing activity of God in Jesus Christ, what Raskolnikov clearly fails to grasp *at this point* is the truth that the seeking of redemption via self-atonement – what Forsyth calls our “silly notions of making it up” with God – is an act not of repentance but of the greatest pride. Forsyth, *Society*, 94. Few, if any, have given clearer voice to the sinfulness of human flesh seeking to establish its own dignity than Luther. See Gerhard O. Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross: Reflections on Luther’s Heidelberg Disputation, 1518* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997); Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand: Martin Luther* (Tring: Lion Publishing, 1987), 82-3.

99 Dostoevsky, *Crime*, 549-50.

100 *Ibid.*, 550.

101 *Ibid.*, 548.

RE-ENTRY: THE GRACE OF HOLY LOVE

Raskolnikov and Sonya are given to understand that in the face of cosmic defiance and insurgency, grace cannot stop at repentance and suffering. Grace means death. Grace is not about the resuscitation of one in a moral coma, but about the resurrection of a corpse. Unlike Solveig or Peer, what Sonya and Raskolnikov begin, perhaps, to recognize is that their sin threatens the very existence of the moral order, even of God. Atonement, therefore, is not a question of human happiness through agony. That would make it bearable but not necessary. Neither is it a question of equivalent punishment. Rather, atonement is a “must.” In the face of evil, positive holiness – that is, the holy God – *must* exert and express himself as “creative reaction”¹⁰² in holy judgment. There is no question here of Raskolnikov’s sin being ignored or swept under the carpet or even somehow absorbed into the moral structure of creation. But neither is it a question of balancing the scales via suffering. Sin can be given no value by God, nor redeemed or reconciled by him. As the infernal contradiction of holiness, sin must be judged, condemned, vanquished and made naught. More morally astute than Ibsen, Dostoevsky, in *The Brothers Karamazov*, identifies that there is one who “took everything that was exceptional, enigmatic and indeterminate, took everything that was beyond people’s capacity to bear.”¹⁰³ This judging, condemning and vanquishing is borne not in Raskolnikov but in the “God-man, ... ‘the only sinless one’ and his blood!”¹⁰⁴

What Solveig entirely fails to grasp, and Sonya perhaps only barely sees, is that it is holiness rather than compassion that redeems.¹⁰⁵ Indeed, only holiness *can* do. But holiness is not mere process. Nor could it establish itself via such, nor by natural force. It is action, and it is action that God alone can perform, for only God can “answer Himself and meet the demand of His own holiness.”¹⁰⁶ Holiness must find, prove, and establish itself in creation “by its own nature”¹⁰⁷; that is, by its gospel. In the face of sin, divine holiness and righteousness is in conflict for its life. In this conflict, God is either “secured or lost to the world for ever.”¹⁰⁸ It took the reconciliation of the world to save Raskolnikov and Peer.

Creation’s destiny, therefore, is bound up with whatever, or whoever, does most justice to God’s holiness. It is, therefore, bound up with the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Holiness must so die as to put death to death, thus

102 Forsyth, *Jesus*, 87.

103 Dostoevsky, *Brothers*, 293.

104 *Ibid.*, 283.

105 Peter T. Forsyth, *Missions in State and Church: Sermons and Addresses* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1908), 230-1.

106 Peter T. Forsyth, *The Cruciality of the Cross* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1910), 194.

107 Peter T. Forsyth, *The Person and Place of Jesus Christ: The Congregational Union Lecture for 1909* (London: Congregational Union of England and Wales/Hodder & Stoughton, 1909), 227.

108 Forsyth, *Justification*, 147-8.

robbing sin of “its chief servant”¹⁰⁹ and its power to repel. Holiness is then resurrected, a universe reclaimed, in Jesus Christ. There can be no “easy forgiveness,”¹¹⁰ all things considered. The holy nature of divine love is such that “a holy God could not look on sin without acting on it; nor could He do either but to abhor and curse it, even when His Son was beneath it.”¹¹¹ It was *this* Son who called to Lazarus, that embodiment of hope for Raskolnikov, “Rise!”¹¹² Sin is smog, Dostoevsky said, “and the smog will disappear when the sun rises in its power.”¹¹³

The comparison of Peer Gynt and Raskolnikov ought to serve as a warning against the temptation to define God’s love in abstraction from God’s holiness or the economy of God’s work. God is love not because God loves, but because, as Forsyth asserts, “He has power to subdue all things to the holiness of His love, and even sin itself to His love as redeeming grace.”¹¹⁴ God’s love is meaningless unless it goes out in judgment to destroy every enemy of love. To love all is to judge all and subdue all into holiness.

The holy love that defines the perichoretic life of the Triune God has, by the grace of the Father in the action of the incarnate Son and by the mission of the Spirit, overflowed freely towards those outside of God’s community in a simultaneous two-fold movement of divine kenosis and human plerosis in which creatures are graced to enter into the holy communion of love that the Triune God has ever known and spoke creation into being for participation in. Every artist works in this reality, and some are given to see it in part now, even as one day all shall know it fully.

Forsyth observes that the “great dramatists of the day,”¹¹⁵ like Wagner and Ibsen, are able to present us with the problem of guilt due at least partly to their denial of any Hegelian optimism. In this they are not only critics but also poets and theologians.¹¹⁶ Indeed, it is the lack of “moral realism” and “indelible spiri-

109 Ibid., 148.

110 Forsyth, *Preaching*, 201; Forsyth, *Theology*, 28.

111 Forsyth, *Work*, 243.

112 The raising of Lazarus is mentioned seven times in *Crime and Punishment*, the final time in the context of Raskolnikov’s own “restoration to life.” The only book permitted to Dostoevsky in prison was *The Gospels* which he kept until his death.

113 Cited in A. Boyce Gibson, *The Religion of Dostoevsky* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1973), 199.

114 Forsyth, *Cruciality*, 205, 60.

115 Ibid., 105.

116 Ibid., 106. Speaking at Aberdeen University in 1906, Forsyth reflected on his student days saying: “Tones from the solemn masks of the Greek dramatists taught us to vibrate with the shock of man’s collision with fate. We begun to acquire the sense of the world’s tragedy. Shakespeare bore in upon us the connection of tragedy and destiny, the moral nature of doom, the interplay of sin and sorrow ... We stood before the old anomaly of life, the pity, the terror, the mystery, the enormity of it all ... We learned not only the cosmic problem of the savant, but the moral problem of the sage.” Peter T. Forsyth, “Principal Forsyth on Church and University: A Striking Address,” *Aberdeen Free Press* (24 September 1906), 11.

tual instincts” in the Church that drives artists like Ibsen and Dostoevsky – even makes them – to “create a poetic symbolism” capable of giving voice to the reality of the human scene.¹¹⁷ They are also able to point us to a truth that some kind of amnesty and deliverance is indispensable if humanity is to enjoy a future, and even that this calls for some sense of sacrifice, perhaps even death. However, in the final analysis, Forsyth insists, Ibsen and his fellow dramatists of pessimism are unable to reveal to us the true nature of our guilt or give us “what we need most, and at bottom most crave”¹¹⁸: not self-extenuation or evolution beyond ourselves, but our regeneration, our reconciliation, our home-coming, which is found not in sacrificial death alone, but only in that of an atoning kind. This only comes in One who really stands on the earth (something Ibsen’s redeemer never does), who moves into our Siberian prisons, and who dies as the Holy securing holiness through an act that simultaneously hallows God’s name in all the earth.

As Forsyth notes, many of Ibsen’s “successors and imitators like Galsworthy and Shaw” are capable of showing us our inconsistencies. Indeed, “any moral amateur can do that.”¹¹⁹

Their works do not leave us as even the gory close of a Shakespeare tragedy does, with the sense of something far more deeply interfused and dimly rounding all. We have from them the sound in our ears of the frayed surf grinding on the broken shore, and dusted with the driven sand; but we have not the murmur nor scent of the infinite sea, beating upon these ragged rocks, and meeting their hideous cruelty with something higher than the soft, the shining, and the fair – whose cruelty can be worse than theirs.¹²⁰

Forsyth’s challenge to these poets and playwrights is to arrest something final that has taken place by him whose purity we have soiled, whose love we have despised, whose will we have crossed, and whose holiness we have raped. So, Forsyth insists that Christ’s “first purpose was not Shakesperian – to reveal man to man.” It is higher than that. “The relief that He gives the race is not the artist’s relief of self-expression, but the Saviour’s relief of Redemption. He did not release the pent-up soul, but rebuilt its ruins.”¹²¹

It was neither Galahad nor Arthur that drew Christ from heaven; “it was a Lancelot race.”¹²² And in the final analysis, neither Ibsen nor his imitators “really get beyond the notion of each man being his own atoner, the notion of a kind of atoning suicide, in a death that satisfied his nemesis but not as holy judgment or Redemption (*Rosmersholm*), and far less as Reconciliation.”¹²³ In fairness to Ibsen, he himself admits this lack of resolution in a letter to George Brandes in

117 Forsyth, “Treatment,” 106.

118 Ibid.

119 Ibid., 106.

120 Ibid., 106-7.

121 Forsyth, “Revelation,” 112-3.

122 Forsyth, *Society*, 102.

123 Forsyth, “Treatment,” 111.

1875 when he says, “Don’t urge me, friend, to solve these dark equations; I’d rather ask; my job’s not explanations.”¹²⁴ Nevertheless, Forsyth refuses to let him off the hook that easily. Ibsen’s tragedy is true, but not tragic enough, not *real* enough. Peer is no Raskolnikov, nor Solveig a Sonya. This is because Ibsen lacks knowledge of One who can “create in him the repentance which alone must create personality out of such chaotic material as he [finds]. He [has] the conscience to feel the sin of the world, but not the power of remedy.”¹²⁵ His job may not be about explanations, but it could at least partly be. That is Forsyth’s point. Nevertheless, for the sake of identifying and giving voice to the right questions, Ibsen, and those prophets like him, must be read, and re-read. Theology needs them.

IMMIGRATING: LEARNING FROM APOSTLES, MEETING WITH THE WORLD

In his penetrating book, *Grace and Necessity*, Rowan Williams asks, “What is the world that art takes for granted?”¹²⁶ It is an important question, and one with which Christian theologians must engage if we are to understand the relationship between art and creation, and indeed creation (or art) at all. What art does is to help us “understand creation,”¹²⁷ not just its physicality but its morality serving to identify and unmask humanism’s determination to downplay moral realism. The other thing that art affirms about creation is its inherent value, not as a rung to something better, or as the arena for life’s rehearsals, but in creation’s utter freedom to delightfully be all that God calls, keeps, and rejoices in it to be. Whilst heaven arches over the earth, it never weighs it down, or crushes or devours it. In Barth’s words, “Earth remains earth, with no need to maintain itself in a titanic revolt against heaven. Granted, darkness, chaos, death, and hell do appear, but not for a moment are they allowed to prevail.”¹²⁸

Forsyth challenges us to question whether Christian theologians are not too often reluctant, contemptuous or simply lacking in confidence in the truth of the gospel to authentically engage with secular literature and art, preferring instead the (deceptively) safe ghetto of a self-created sub-culture in which the discourse – its language and questions – is so set from the inside that it threatens to spiral in on itself.¹²⁹ In a time when the Christian community is feeling challenged to identify points of contact between the gospel and the culture (to its own sub-cultures as well as to the world’s) to which and in which it is called to articulate its faith, Forsyth reminds us that artists like Ibsen and Dostoevsky are “a gift of

124 Henrik Ibsen, “A Rhyme-Letter,” in *Ibsen Quotations*, n.p. [cited 1 July 2006]. Online: <http://www.ibsen.net/index.gan?id=11121081&subid=0>. This is not to be confused with “Rhyme Letter” written to Fru Heiberg in Dresden, in Easter-week 1871.

125 Forsyth, “Treatment,” 121.

126 Williams, *Grace*, 135.

127 Ibid., 161.

128 Barth, *Mozart*, 53.

129 Käsemann’s words are helpful here: “Theology never grows in the vacuum of abstraction, untouched by contemporary history. While this fact is generally admitted, it is nevertheless frequently deprived of its offending sting.” Ernst Käsemann, *New Testament Questions of Today*, trans. W. J. Montague (London: SCM Press, 1969), 255.

God to us,”¹³⁰ and that we ignore them at our peril. They are, at core, theologians! Perhaps they are not theologians *of* the Church, but they are certainly theologians *to* the Church:

Their bitter is a tonic to our time. They are the protest of a self-respecting conscience against an idyllic, juvenile, sanguine, and domestic tyranny of Life. It is the great dramatists that are the great questioners, the great challengers, the great and serviceable accusers of current, easy, and fungous sainthood. It is not the learned critics that present the great challenge which draws out the last resources of a Gospel. They are too intellectualist. It is the great moral critics like Ibsen, Carlyle, and their kind. They lay bare not our errors but our shams.¹³¹

It is true that Ibsen preaches but a half-gospel and, as we shall see, half-gospels ultimately have no future. However, it is a half we need to hear, especially since it is the half that is omitted so often in the Church’s proclamation. To see the revelation of this front half of the gospel seems to require both feet being in the one place, on earth, and that is where Ibsen stands, albeit he is unable (or unwilling) to look up. If human activity and thought, at its best, reflect something of corporate humanity’s participation in the vicarious ministry of a crucified and risen Christ through the Spirit who gathers up all our questions and tragic groans and offers them to the Father through sanctified lips, then it is imperative that we listen to and learn from today’s prophet-artists – the poets, musicians, sculptors, filmmakers and philosophers – who scratch where people itch – and where they should! We need to remember that the New Testament speaks not only of the kingdom of heaven but also of *parables* of that kingdom.¹³² The work of these prophet-artists is parabolic in its adroitness for articulating ancient theological truths in fresh ways, giving articulate voice to the questions that gnaw at us and to our longings for transcendence. Here reason and empirical engagement alone leave us wanting – indeed dislocated. We need the arts to unveil for us moral realism, “real life in all its discord,”¹³³ and to show us what drives us to the One who alone is the spring of living water who so satisfies our thirst that we will never be thirsty again. People like Woody Allen, George Steiner, Morrissey, David Williamson, Leonard Cohen, Brett Whiteley, Thich Nhat Hanh, a plethora of Sufi poets, and film directors like Ingmar Bergman, Andrei Tarkovsky, and David Fincher all do this well. In this they serve as what older theologians called *ancillae theologiae*, handmaidens of the knowledge (word) of God. Many theologians have been guilty of theological obscurantism and of arrogantly ignoring the insights of what Forsyth might call our “schoolmasters.”¹³⁴ We have been too slow to accept not only that the earth is

130 Forsyth, *Preaching*, 104.

131 Ibid.

132 Barth, *Mozart*, 57.

133 Ibid., 33.

134 Forsyth once referred to the secular university as “a schoolmaster to bring us to the world’s Christ and to leave us with no other refuge than the cross.” Forsyth, “Princi-

God's and the fullness thereof, but also that we live in a world already redeemed, and that is being so.¹³⁵ We have been too slow to hear and receive the eucharistic joy of creation.

Trevor Hart is right to suggest that this suspicion of "weavers of fictions and conjurors of illusions . . . can serve only to detract from the truth rather than to illuminate it."¹³⁶ Indeed, Forsyth notes that faith without imagination is incomplete, and imagination baseless without faith. "Neither can stand for the other, or do its work."¹³⁷ Great harm has been done to the Christian faith by neglecting artistic imagination, whether inside or outside the Christian community, and in disregarding such *ancillae theologiae*. There are, encouragingly, many examples of where such positive engagement is taking place, where long-held suspicions are dissolving, where dialogue is mutually edifying, and where art is valued for the contribution it makes "as art" and not simply for how it can be harnessed or "baptised" as a lubricant for what is considered to be of "real" substance, or reduced to a "mere cipher for pre-ordained religious meanings."¹³⁸ In the past, Bach,¹³⁹ Rembrandt, Tolkien, and, perhaps, Mozart served as prodigious examples of believers whose legs seemed long enough to straddle both worlds without dishonoring the dignity of either. Could not the best sermon ever preached on Luke 15:11-32 be that 1668/69 oil on canvas hanging in The Hermitage in St. Petersburg – Rembrandt's *The Return of the Prodigal Son*? And today, many others are also engaged in this courageous quest and tradition. Alfonse Borysewicz, Robert Cording, Makoto Fujimura, Mark Jarman, Les Murray, and Michael Symmons Roberts serve as admirable exemplars.

MONITIONEM: HALF-GOSPELS

To rest here, though, would be to fail to tell the whole story. Worse, merely "listening" to culture would be placing us in danger of selling out the gospel and its "creative, self-organising, and self-recuperative power"⁷²⁷ to a culture that "asks but a half-gospel."⁷²⁷ At its worst, it would be a sell-out to a culture that needs not simply improvement or completion, but judgment and redemption; not fulfillment of its perceived needs, but the forgiveness of its sins. At its best, it

pal Forsyth on Church and University," 11.

135 Ps. 24:1; Jn. 16:33. This does not mean the cessation of the need for discernment. Cf. 1 Cor. 10:23-31.

136 Trevor A. Hart, "Imagining Evangelical Theology," in *Evangelical Futures: A Conversation on Theological Method*, ed. J. G. Stackhouse, Jr. (Grand Rapids/Leicester/Vancouver: Baker Books/Inter-Varsity Press/Regent College Publishing, 2000), 194.

137 Forsyth, *Parnassus*, 232.

138 Pattison, *Art*, 98.

139 David Hart argues that Johann Sebastian Bach is "the greatest of Christian theologians." David B. Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 282-4.

140 Peter T. Forsyth, *The Church and the Sacraments* (London: Independent Press, 1947), 45.

141 Forsyth, *Preaching*, 89.

would be to sell out to a culture which bears the cross, supping its sorrow, but sees no Resurrection. As Forsyth describes Rossetti, “He was familiar with the Angel of Death; but he did not see the Angel of the Resurrection ever close behind.”¹⁴²

In light of the ugliness, and hidden beauty, of the Christian gospel, Eberhard Jüngel warns that “beauty and art are both welcome and dangerous competitors with the Christian kerygma, for in the beautiful appearance they anticipate that which faith has to declare, without any beautiful appearance and indeed in contrast to it: namely, the hour of truth.”¹⁴³ Ibsen too wants to challenge culture. But “the light must come from the fire, not the fire from the light.”⁷²² We must do more than speak society’s gospel back to itself baptised in Christian patois. “It is only the language of the Age that we must speak, not its Gospel.”⁷²⁷

The Christian community must, of course, meet the world. But when we do so we must do more than merely greet it and pose an invitation. A crisis has to be forced, a crisis of the will, a confrontation of will and Will, of conscience and Conscience. And it is a crisis that ends in both the world and the Church being subdued, reconciled and redeemed. More than an invitation, the gospel is a command and an announcement. “We are tempted to forget,” Forsyth says, “that we have not, in the first place, either to impress the world or to save it, but heartily and mightily to confess in word and deed a Saviour who has done both.”⁷²⁷ “Half-gospels have no dignity, and no future,” Forsyth says. “Like the famous mule, they have neither pride of ancestry nor hope of posterity. We must make it clear that Christianity faces the world with terms, and does not simply suffuse it with a glow; that it crucifies the world, and does not merely consecrate it; that it recreates and does not just soothe or cheer it; that it is life from the dead, and not simply bracing for the weak or comfort for the sad.”¹⁴⁷

ACT 10: PURSUED BY A BEAR ... [ENTER] SHEPHERD¹⁴⁸

Roy Attwood befittingly reminds us that the Creator of aesthetics calls his image bearers to be busy doing faithful aesthetic acts: “While the world may be busy pursuing ‘art for art’s sake’ or treating aesthetics like it rested on the bottom of the food chain, Christians should adorn their lives, their homes, their worship with humble acts of aesthetic faithfulness because they know the Creator and

142 Forsyth, *Art*, 29-30; cf. p. 221.

143 Eberhard Jüngel, *Theological Essays II*, trans. A. Neufeldt-Fast and J. B. Webster (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000), 81.

144 Forsyth, *Authority*, 276-7.

145 Peter T. Forsyth, *Revelation Old and New: Sermons and Addresses*, ed. J. Huxtable (London: Independent Press, 1962), 45. I am not suggesting here that the church discard its own language. Indeed, it can not afford to do so. See Karl Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline*, trans. G. T. Thompson (London: SCM Press, 1966), 30-1.

146 Peter T. Forsyth, “The Soul of Christ and the Cross of Christ,” *London Quarterly Review* 116 (October 1911): 193.

147 Forsyth, *Sacraments*, 18.

148 This line is taken from William Shakespeare, *The Winter’s Tale*, ed. F. Kermode (New York: Signet, 1963), 54. Act 3, Scene 3, Line 57.

Lord of Aesthetics delights in them.”¹⁴⁹ In God’s first act of creation, God gave those who bear his image the capacity to also be creators, to offer back to God – everlastingly – faithful, and new, aesthetic acts for God’s glory and for the delight of our fellow creatures. From the very beginning, the Lord of Aesthetics called humanity to be busy aesthetically. This is our sacramental activity. But it awaited the ultimate revelation of God’s creativity, which concerned not the calling forth of creation in an act of creative love but in calling it back as a new creation in grace, to give art its true meaning. In him who is *the* Sacrament of God, Nature’s sacramentality is given its proper dignity and vocation.

Artists like Ibsen and Dostoevsky matter, not because they point upwards, nor because the creation has been inhabited by God, but because creation has been pursued by him, and redeemed by him, in God’s *most* creative and tragic act. “The real incarnation is not in Christ’s being made flesh for us, but in His being made sin for us!”¹⁵⁰ Only a Cross can make sense of an Incarnation. And only that which, above all, hallows God’s name in the creation, enthrones God’s holy love and “destroys guilt in grace”¹⁵¹ can provide any stable footing for society, for the arts, or for communities of faith.

Forsyth is convinced that the Cross is where “all earth’s hues are not mere tints but jewels – not mere purpleal gleams, but enduring, precious foundation-stones.”¹⁵² And he invites us to consider artists like Ibsen and Dostoevsky as such stones. Far from them being external and mechanical products that God could destroy and remake, God has so created that the very existence and certain future of these apostles, their word and their world, is intractably and eternally bound up with God’s own life and joy. The creation is considerably more than merely God’s property. It is God’s eternal delight and the communication partner of God’s redemptive love. It is this loving divine will that forms the basis for the affirmation of creation’s questions, materiality, and cultures, and justifies the Church’s mission in the world.

Art and sacrament, nature and grace, find their proper locus and voice only in the loving will and costly action of the Triune God in whom all creation lives, moves and finds itself. The divine secret, therefore, is neither with the philosopher nor with the poet-prophet.⁷⁷² And so whereas Ibsen can only identify the problem, Forsyth and Dostoevsky point us to Christ – the one Sacrament and Mediator between God and humanity. We would certainly be fools not to listen to and learn

149 Roy Atwood, “Faithful Aesthetic Acts,” *Credenda Agenda* 8/2, n.p. Cited 17 February 2006. Online: <<http://www.credenda.org/issues/8-2cultura.php>>.

150 Forsyth, *Jesus*, 25.

151 Forsyth, *Justification*, 107.

152 *Ibid.*, 47.

153 Forsyth, *Justification*, 139. I am not here suggesting that we abandon philosophical enquiry. Nor am I suggesting that we adopt Sallie McFague’s idea that to do theology poetically means that we must conceive of Scripture not as a revelation of historical facts and theo-historical truth, but as mere human metaphor describing the divine-human relationship. Sallie McFague, *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language* (London: SCM Press, 1983).

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from Ibsen and his ilk. But whereas in Ibsen we see a longing for home, only Forsyth's gospel of blood-soaked grace can finally carry us there, and there to us.

The practical solution of life by the soul is outside life. The destiny of experience is beyond itself. The lines of life's moral movement and of thought's *nisus* converge in a point beyond life and history ... The key is in the Beyond; though not necessarily beyond death, but beyond the world of the obvious, and palpable, and common-sensible. (Yea, beyond the inward it really is.)⁷⁷²

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154 Ibid., 212, 213.