

# **Dostoyevsky's Inquisitor: The Question of Evil, Suffering and Freedom of Will In Totalitarian Regimes<sup>1</sup>**

**Tine Blom**

## **Introduction**

The legend of the Grand Inquisitor is a chapter in Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* (Dostoyevsky 1992). The Grand Inquisitor argues against our culture's most basic taken-for-granted humanitarian, Christian and democratic values such as human rights, dignity, freedom and the right to expression and opposition, and he makes a strong case for the defence of his brutal religious-totalitarian regime. Since its publication in Russia in 1880, the legend and its inclusion in the novel have disturbed and challenged many of its readers (Kjetsaa 1985: 347).

Even though it should not be overemphasised, there are some parallels between the time of the Spanish inquisition in the 16<sup>th</sup> century and the Russia of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Both were characterized by poor societies and authoritarian political regimes with a growing underground-opposition and, in both places, religious-philosophical issues such as human nature, freedom, nihilism and the problem of evil were debated. In such times of poverty,

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<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this paper was presented at the seminar Cultures of Marginality: Confessions, Dialogues and Narratives, held on the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> of September 2001 in Lillehammer, Norway, and later printed as a college working paper. The seminar was a co-operation between Lillehammer College and the Centre for Urban and Cultural Research (CUCR) at Goldsmiths' College, the University of London.

suffering and oppression, it is understandable that doubts arise about whether there can be a good almighty God.

Dostoyevsky's way of responding to the Grand Inquisitor in his novel is not based on presenting counter-arguments, but upon producing the counter-narrative of Sosima, a monk, who shows us another way of responding to human suffering. To make sense of this story, the roles, worldview and confession that take place will be analysed through two main analytical perspectives. One is rooted in an understanding of political power and institutions and, by way of contrast, an alternative perspective based upon an a-political emphasis on empathy and compassion in personal relations will also be employed.

The analysis presented here to some extent risks breaking with Dostoyevsky's intentions. The idea is that the thoughts and actions of individuals cannot be fully understood by referring just to their personal lives and thoughts, or solely as moral-religious speculations, but they should be seen in relation to the political and institutional context in which they develop and to which they refer. And these belong to the topics of political science.

The first part of this paper constitutes a short reflection on the use of narratives and counter-narratives. It is followed by three sections on the main topics developed by the legend. The first is about the universal human questions of evil, suffering and the price of harmony. The second is about the role of mysteries, authority and the idea of a perfect world, all seen as instruments of power and as part of political-religious utopias. The third section is about human nature and what in the Legend of the Inquisitor is considered to be the contradiction between happiness and freedom of will.

The next part deals with some theoretical aspects of religious-totalitarian regimes. It starts out with a discussion of two political thinkers who emphasise that power is marked by inherent instability. There will be a short presentation of Max Weber's ideas about values and legitimacy and of Niccolo Machiavelli's focus on how strategic power-politics influences those who take part in it and their use of values to maximise power, followed by a short comparison between some basic institutional elements of totalitarian regimes and democracies.

The paper then moves to a discussion of Hannah Arendt's perspective on the relationship between politics and individual morality. She contrasts strategic and logic-argumentative behaviour to that of compassion and empathy. Her point is that Dostoyevsky's Inquisitor is trapped into a game of power that engenders a way of thinking in which people are reduced to abstractions. The only possible way out is by love and compassion. This is also the theme in the counter-narrative about the monk Sosima. The last part of the paper discusses the Inquisitor's confession to Jesus, as another way of illustrating the points made above, followed by a conclusion that wraps up the argument and argues for the kind of politics that is necessary to fight totalitarianism and fundamentalism.

### **Dostoyevsky and *The Karamasov Brothers***

Dostoyevsky (1821-1881) is among the world's greatest authors, his main works being *Crime and Punishment*, *The Idiot* and *The Karamasov Brothers*. In his youth, he was part of a group of intellectuals who wanted to publish forbidden literature on the need for social reform in Russia. They were caught and sentenced to death, but while on the scaffold, they were pardoned and sent to Siberia. There, Dostoyevsky spent four years in a prison camp and four years under hard labour. This marked the end of his active participation in socio-political movements. Throughout the rest of his life, he watched from the sidelines the omens of the coming Russian revolution, and wrote about consciousness, thinking and his doubts about the social modernisation movement of his time.

Dostoyevsky's years in prison left him with a compassion for society's outcasts. He gained an insight into the wider spectre of the human soul and its passions, and a belief in the individual human being's ability to develop through personal transformation. Within every individual, there was a small "sparkle of the spirit of God". Dostoyevsky himself had gone through "the purgatory of doubt" and believed in "refinement through suffering". His Christianity was neither a naive belief in God nor an abstract morality, nor was it a belief remote from life (Waage 1984). With the courage of thinking every thought to its end, Dostoyevsky filled his books with revolutionaries, atheists and criminals voicing heavy and apparently

overwhelming arguments against God. This enabled him to reflect upon the spiritual tensions of his time.

*The Brothers Karamasov* is a criminal novel, with the murder of father Karamasov as its plot. There are three brothers – Dmitrij, Ivan and Aljosha, and their stepbrother. Although one of them did it, should the responsibility be shared? The murder of father Karamazov also symbolises a cosmological revolt against God. In the Legend, the Grand Inquisitor himself is a spokesman for this revolt. The legend is introduced in a conversation between the Karamasov brothers Ivan and Aljosha. Aljosha is a monk and is regarded as Dostoyevsky's hero. Ivan is a free spirit, a socialist and a rebel.

## **On narratives and counternarratives**

Narratives contribute to raise consciousness about particular topics. They may be seen as supra-rational creations of the imagination; sometimes they take the form of pictures of art, providing a common focus, along with novels, for analysis and discussion. Instead of responding with precise arguments against the Grand Inquisitor, Dostoyevsky lets Aljosha answer with the counter narrative of the monk Sosima (Dostoyevsky, F.M. 92 II, p. 5-60). Sosima represents an alternative ideal, the anti-thesis of the Grand Inquisitor. Suffering demands other answers to the meaning of life than those given by the Grand Inquisitor. Sosima's emphasis is not on the weakness or slave nature of man; instead he draws attention to the centrality of refinement through suffering, to the fact that suffering can also have a meaning (Kjetsaa 1985: 351-2). But Sosima did not want to take political responsibility and did not suggest any political advice. Rather, he taught people how to endure, thereby protecting their dignity.

A main theme of *The Brothers Karamasov* is that love and empathy are conditions for the true comprehension of the meaning of life. Dostoyevsky's goal is to use this story to tell us about the conditions for belief and how to awaken belief against all odds. Still, there is a political dimension to the story. The goal is of a highly questionable character, and believing against all odds is not sufficient for those who strive for justice.

## The thoughts and values of the Grand Inquisitor

The themes of the legend include evil, suffering and freedom of thought, along with authority and political responsibility. The dimension of freedom discussed here is largely about whether individuals should have the right to decide for themselves what to believe.

*On the question of evil, suffering and the price of harmony*

Ivan asks Aljosha<sup>2</sup>: “If God is almighty, why is there so much evil and so much suffering on earth”. Ivan thinks there is a deep evil and immoral perversion behind the belief that an almighty good God has created humans. This good God is supposed to have endowed people with the ability to differentiate between good and evil, and has at the same time promised the coming of eternal harmony. The ability to choose between good and evil as a prerequisite for freedom was also confirmed when Jesus only wanted followers of their own free volition. As long as people are free, they will also be able to choose evil, and thereby cause suffering to others<sup>3</sup>.

The central critique of this freedom is that someone has to suffer in order for “the chosen few” - those that choose the good - to gain salvation. Aljosha explains the Christian idea of the apolitical “refinement through suffering” and forgiveness as a way of gaining harmony. One thing is to choose one’s own suffering, but quite another thing is to accept the suffering of others. Ivan says:

“For if we accept this creation of the almighty God, and then we are of course winning the crown of insight, then everything will come clear to us and we will be refined. This is what I cannot accept. For if the child’s suffering is needed to fill the sum of sufferings that was needed to buy the truth, then I declare on forehand that the whole truth is not worth its price.”

He then continues:

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<sup>2</sup> The quotations from the Legend are taken from the end of chapter 4 and from chapter 5 of the novel (Dostoyevsky 1992, p. 311-35).

<sup>3</sup> The German philosopher Immanuel Kant (Kant 1998) disagrees with this in his *Groundworks of the Metaphysics of Morals*. According to Kant, the free person will always choose the good. Else he is blinded, not free.

“I do not want harmony, out of love for mankind, ...I want rather to be left with sufferings that are unavenged. ...It isn't God that I don't accept, it is just the ticket that I most respectfully return to him”.  
“That is mutiny”, Aljosha said quietly, his eyes lowered and Ivan continues: “.... I challenge you, reply: Imagine that you yourself are eradicating the edifice of human fortune with the goal of, at the final, making people happy, of at least giving them peace and quiet, but in order to do it, it would be necessary and unavoidable to torture to death only one tiny little creature, the same little child that beat its breast with its little fist, and on its unavenged tears to found that edifice, would you agree to be the architect on those conditions, tell me and tell me truly?” No, I would not agree”, Aljosha said quietly.

Aljosha refers to “the One without sin”, to Christ who is the only one who has the right to judge. But according to Ivan, it is the striving for eternal harmony as such that is destructive and is by itself the source of evil. Then he tells Aljosha the Legend of the Grand Inquisitor, of which he himself is the author.

### *On mysteries, miracles, authority and the perfect world*

The legend takes place in Seville in Spain in the 16<sup>th</sup> century in the time of the counter-reformation and the inquisition. The Grand Inquisitor is 90 years old, and had on the previous day burnt one hundred heretics. Jesus returns and performs miracles, like waking a child from the dead and giving a blind man his sight back. The crowd recognises him, but then the Grand Inquisitor arrives.

“Behind him at a certain distance follows his surely assistants and servants and the Holy Guard. He extends his index finger and orders the guards to arrest him. And so, such is his power, so accustomed, submissive and trembling obedient to him are the people that the crowd immediately parts before the guards ... instantly, place their hands on Him and march Him away”.

Thereafter, he visits Jesus in prison and convicts him for betraying mankind with his lofty ideals of human freedom. He makes a strong defence for why mutineers must be executed, and says “tomorrow I shall find you guilty and burn you at the stake as the most wicked of heretics...” The Grand Inquisitor then presents his visions of the world and its ideological base that gives rise to his totalitarian horror regime. He thereafter gives his reasons as to why Jesus is a threat and a criminal.

He accuses Jesus for denying the three temptations - or better put, “opportunities” - given to him by the Devil. “You were given warnings and instructions, but you did not obey them - the

Great Spirit spoke with you in the wilderness, and we are told in the Scriptures that it tempted you”. The first temptation was that Jesus was called to show his Godliness by creating a *miracle*: he was asked to throw himself from a cliff and trust that God and his angels would save him. The second temptation was that Jesus was called to produce a *mystery*: he was asked to give people what they wanted by changing stones into bread. The third was that Jesus was called to command *authority*, to take over political power, opposing Roman rule and creating his own empire with his own rules. He refused, explaining: “My kingdom is not on earth”. He did not want unfree slaves that were attracted to a power because of fear.

According to the Grand Inquisitor the only forces capable of making people obey and conquer their conscience were *miracles, mysteries and authority*. He accuses Jesus of not having created enough miracles and for not building, once and for all, an empire according to his own taste when he had the opportunity. He argues that Jesus’ refusal of political power is also a denial of responsibility. He says “Had you accepted the world and the purple of Caesar, you would have founded a universal kingdom and given men universal peace”. In other words, Jesus had had his chance to create a perfect world and missed it. Therefore, argues the Grand Inquisitor, he and the Roman Church had to do the job for him, to construct a perfect world. He thereby argues for the primacy of authority and political power over Jesus’ a-political teachings.

With the assistance of the Roman Church, the Grand Inquisitor wanted to make a harmonious and perfect world in keeping with the nature of mankind. As long as people only believe in miracles, mysteries and authorities, such a world must be based on submission and illusion. Any opposition that questions the authorities and mysteries will be a threat, both to the peoples’ illusion-based happiness and to the regime. The Grand Inquisitor does not believe in God, illusions or happiness, but thinks that this is what is best for people.

### *On human nature, happiness and freedom of will*

That people are unable to rule themselves – and therefore inherently need authority - is an ancient eastern topic<sup>4</sup>. Freedom just doesn’t work; neither for individuals nor for those who hold themselves responsible for their rule.

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<sup>4</sup> Even Scandinavian Viking-kings were invited to do the job for them.

The Grand Inquisitor argues that because most people choose “bread for the body” before “bread for the spirit”, one must introduce rules to match people’s real nature, rather than seek to impose unrealistic ideals. Only the strong give priority to “bread of the spirit“. According to the Grand Inquisitor, people are wretched and miserable slave creatures that want to be subjected. Jesus’ ideals are destructive because people’s real nature is not spiritual. Jesus demands utopia, and his ideals are too high for the average human being to live up to. Therefore, Christianity is for “the chosen few”, only the chosen ones are able to believe in this way. Since salvation is only for the few, it is unjust. He argues that he has concern for the weak, those who cannot think and rule for themselves and that his regime is the best, because it takes away the pain of freedom.

The Grand Inquisitor argues that freedom is unbearable and painful for most people. He says: “You rejected the only path by which people could have been made happy”. Therefore, he and his regime will take away the burden of free choice. He scorns Jesus for wanting people to believe in him on the basis of their own personal conviction, by free volition. He argues that rebels are never happy and will only cause doubts, uneasiness, confusion and unhappiness. Therefore, less freedom will create more happiness for the many by freeing them from responsibility, doubt and the agony of choice. The point the Inquisitor is making is that there is a contradiction between belief based on individual freedom and equal opportunities for salvation. He asks what freedom is if their obedience can be bought by bread.

“There is freedom enough for everybody and bread enough, but people’s nature is that they never understood how to share. Therefore, freedom must be fought for the sake of people’s own happiness. And when the rebels realise their failure, they will despise and deny God, and this is all that Jesus gets in return for his suffering for the human free will.”

In this way, the Grand Inquisitor defends his “perfect” political regime and explains why Jesus must die for the sake of harmony. This defence forms the main content of the confession in the Legend.

## **Some structural aspects of religious-totalitarian regimes**

The concept of totalitarianism originates in modern times (Arendt 1951; Barber 1993: 615). Dostoyevsky's *Legend* was written in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century in the context of the coming Russian revolution. The topics are similar: all-encompassing control, the total mobilisation and co-ordination of citizens' lives and thoughts through the coercion of terror or seductive persuasion. Here the concept of totalitarianism refers to regimes that are characterised by monolithic power structures, hegemony of thought, no freedom of expression or opposition and rulers who, in order to stay in power, are dependent upon coercion and persuasion.

Spain in the 16<sup>th</sup> century was dominated by the Pope and the Catholic Church, and they had the monopoly of interpretation of religious scriptures. The renaissance was *the* main threat and was countered by a bloody counter-reformation of which our Grand Inquisitor was a central and enthusiastic actor and spokesman. The religious leaders in power maintained that they were the only legitimate interpreters of the Bible. Since the departure of Jesus one and a half millennium years earlier, the Pope and his priests had placed themselves in God's position. They became the almighty and uncontested judges of good and evil, ruling over people's consciousness and over their right to live or to die.

Jesus was seen as God's son and he was therefore superior to the Pope in the religious hierarchy. As such he was the only one with the power to undermine the legitimacy of the regime. The scriptures promised that Jesus should return some day, and in this *Legend* he does. But when he did, he was treated as an enemy.

### *Theories of power*

The works of the German political scientist Max Weber (1864-1929) and the Italian Niccolò Machiavelli (1469-1527) are central classics in theories of power. Both of them emphasise that power also traps the ruler. Because their power-base is always unstable, the rulers are vulnerable and may never rest in their position. A basic topic for Machiavelli is that you

cannot free yourself from power without creating it – as a counterpower – and you cannot create power without becoming its prisoner (Machiavelli 1998; Ehnmark 1987: 173).

And a similar topic for Weber is that all types of political leadership – no matter their power-bases (traditional, charismatic, bureaucratic) - are restricted by their various principles of legitimacy of authority. All rulers are dependent upon some kind of support from their followers. Power must be organised, sources of power must be renewed over time, and political rulers have to perform in order to maintain their support (Weber 1990).

The two primary analytical concepts in the Weberian approach are *interests*, which can be material or immaterial, and *organisational* structures, through which groups further their interests. Power exists within a political order, and this political order may be dissolved – it will not last forever. Ideology, religion and cultural values are immaterial or ideal interests that may be used as weapons in political struggle. Ideals may justify behaviour, for example rulers saying that their authority comes from “the will of God”. But ideals are only useful as political weapons as long as other people are convinced about them.

Weber considers ideals and values among the primary resources of political action. But ideals are also a source of vulnerability, restricting the ruler’s room for manoeuvre: the ruler must live up to his own ideals and promises or else he will lose support. The rulers find themselves in a structural dilemma between the need for free strategic use of various instruments of power on one side, and their dependence upon upholding the ideology of the regime, on the other (Collins 1973: 48ff). The contradiction between secular power and spiritual power is particularly significant for religious regimes and expressed by the Grand Inquisitor: “Well, we took the sword of Cesar, and, of course, in taking it rejected You and followed Him” [the Devil]. When religious people go into politics, they also choose to take part in the worldly politics of compromises and strategic games.

Machiavelli’s works analyse politics in Italy in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. In his time, the Pope considered him a rebel because he portrayed politics only as a secular game. He wrote about “the new secularised, that measured themselves with God and didn’t give a damn for other laws than those they had themselves created” (Ehnmark 1987). Ideals are political instruments only to be judged by their strategic capability of providing support. Machiavelli shows how the position of rulers depends on their skills in the strategic game played out between rivals

(Machiavelli 1998). Here, ideals must be used strategically according to the situation. Other aspects of the strategic game are the struggle to develop and maintain one's prestige in a social structure of hierarchies and changing alliances and the ability to use threats and successfully spread illusions.

The Grand Inquisitor accords with these power-theories when he admits that religion is deception and that people are betrayed and given to accept lies. He says: "accept deceit and falsehood ... so they do not notice whether they are being led." And, "the only ones to rule over people are those that are the rulers over their consciousness and hold their bread in his hands". The best way of maintaining people's support is by securing control over people's consciousness and by making them economically dependent. But, as mentioned above, he justifies this by asserting that it is "best for the people".

In his regime, the base of legitimacy is God, with the Pope as His "deputy" on earth, and the Grand Inquisitor as the Pope's "deputy" in Spain. Since Jesus is considered the Son of God, he is the only one who has a higher position than them, and is therefore their most dangerous rival. According to the Bible, Jesus is the ultimate commander and judge. The Grand Inquisitor must justify his dominant position and counter the threat. He argues: "[The Scriptures were] all told by you to the Pope and so it is now all of it in the Pope's possession... You have no right to add anything, no right to return".

This threat to the monopoly of interpretation may reveal a mistaken interpretation of the Bible and thereby the corrosion of the institutional legitimacy of the political regime itself. The Grand Inquisitor says: "You handed over the task to us. You gave your promise, you sealed it with your word, you gave us the right to bind and choose, and so of course you cannot even dream of taking that right from us now". Jesus is a threat because he is above the Grand Inquisitor in the religious hierarchy and is therefore able to ultimately judge his acts as evil and undermine his position of superior power.

### *Theories of institutional structure*

The institutional framework of the Grand Inquisitor also contributes to the explanation of his thoughts and behaviour. In the institutional structures of modern democratic political regimes, there are several mechanisms that are constructed in order to curb tyrannical rule and restrict

the ruler's ability to misuse power. Examples are arrangements that delay implementation of orders, making time for discussion, instituting checks and balances in power, through the separation of juridical, legislative and executive power, and the rule of law. A crucial institutional mechanism is that the opposition is institutionalised, enabling the promotion of decision-making based on deliberation (Rasch 2000: 84). Moreover, it makes it possible to remove rulers without military force. Furthermore, freedom of speech, cultural pluralism and religious freedom all reduce the possibility of totalitarian hegemony. These institutional mechanisms also tend to make the political system more flexible and able to adapt to change.

A main characteristic of totalitarian regimes is that there is no real separation of power. The political, cultural and military powers are merged or closely interdependent, and there are no effective restrictions on the use of violence other than the normative and strategic calculations made by individual rulers or ruling groups. Rigidity makes them more vulnerable to threats, and they tend to respond in a reactionary manner<sup>5</sup>.

The merger of power leaves no room for political opposition. Power sharing is not an institutional option, and therefore, opposition is by definition a crime. When the opposition cannot become legitimate actors of the political system, there is no public space to exchange views and it will be difficult for them to organise and develop concerted strategies. Opposition becomes either the sum of the actions of single individuals or must go underground and take on clandestine and often violent operations.

This is what the Grand Inquisitor notes when he describes his opponents as rebellious creatures that are too weak to develop a viable alternative and carry through their project and thereby to contribute to a better world. According to him, they are "feeble mutineers" and "imperfect trial creatures, who were created as a bad joke". Therefore, they should be considered enemies of the Roman Church and fought by any means.

Cultural and religious power is about influencing people's consciousness. When there is no open discussion and deliberation, it will be difficult to develop alternative thinking or world-views within society that are capable of correcting and modifying the hegemony of religion (Arendt 1996: 63). When rulers depend on a monopoly of interpretation, any alternative

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<sup>5</sup> This is a central argument in Parsons theory of political systems' ability to adapt to change (Parsons 1966).

interpretation of culture and religion will be a threat and cannot be tolerated. Rival world-views may reveal the hollowness of the ethos and thereby expose the lack legitimacy of their institutions. Religious fundamentalism gives in particular no room for compromise. As Ivan explains: “The Catholics hate the Masons so much because they see them as rivals, a division of the unity of the idea...”

The Legend shows how the ethos of the religion is an integrated part of the political system. As a young man, the Grand Inquisitor wanted to create the perfect world, but now he reveals that this political system is based on raw power, serving no higher ideals than brutality and self-deception. People follow him either out of fear or because they are fooled by the illusion. Ivan comments: “and note that it is deceit in the name of the One in whose ideal the old man had all his life so passionately believed. “ The Grand Inquisitor must uphold the ethos of the regime, but does no longer believe in it himself. Still, Christianity and the Bible are the main source of legitimacy. This illusion cannot be revealed without undermining the system. The institutional structure gives no room for development – either oppression continues or it breaks down.

### **Political power and a-political compassion**

Dostoyevsky’s Christianity was basically a-political. It does not discriminate between people, it is based on personal beliefs and relations and has no aspirations for political power. His Christianity, as expressed by Aljosha and the monk Sosima, tells you to respond to the suffering of people through personal empathy and compassion. The sign of Jesus’ divinity was his ability to have compassion with all men as individuals, that is, without lumping them together into some such entity as one suffering “mankind” (Arendt 1990: 85).

Arendt contrasts the compassion of personal relations with the political style described by Machiavelli (Arendt 1990: 85-87). She considers politics based on coercion and on dictate rather than convincing as “pre-political”, something for barbarians (Arendt 1996: 44). For her, politics goes on in the public sphere, where speech and deliberation are followed by action, in

this order. This understanding of politics is further developed by Habermas (Eriksen and Weigård 1992).

The legend describes a situation dominated by strategic power politics. There, “good” and “bad” in personal relations are very different from what are “good” and “bad” for political rulers. Norms and demands of political behaviour are of another order and should not be judged by the norms of personal relations. Machiavelli explicitly warns against goodness as a political motive and sees it as strategically foolish and dangerous. If the ruler is “good” and considerate, his appeal to fear will lose its credibility, and he will lose his position to more cynical rivals.

Even though goodness may be the sign of personal strength, it is, unless strategically used, detrimental to political organisation. This is explicitly expressed in the Legend. The Grand Inquisitor dislikes the fact that Jesus does good things like waking up a dead child. He is dissatisfied with his teachings. His advice for the relationship between people (to love thy neighbour as yourself, turn your other cheek, etc.) is not good advice in the context of power politics.

Arendt argues that there is a manifest relationship between goodness and compassion. She makes a distinction between compassion and pity. *Pity* is to be sorry for someone without being touched in the heart. *Compassion* is “co-suffering”- to be stricken with the suffering of someone else, as though it was contagious. One cannot feel compassion - co-suffer - with an abstract entity like “the people”, only with individuals (Arendt 1990: 85).

Since compassion can only comprehend the particular (singular, individual), it has no notion of the general (“mankind”, “the masses”) and entails no capacity for generalisation. It does not concern abstract political concepts such as the masses and groups. In Arendt’s reading, power politics are not about individuals, but about abstractions like groups, systems and institutions. Institutions depend on the general and therefore rather crude rules and regulations that must be independent of personal relations. For this reason, Arendt contends that relations of compassion are incapable of establishing lasting institutions (Arendt 1990: 86).

This creates a particularly potent dilemma of legitimacy for Christian-political institutions and political leaders. They are dependent on being associated with Jesus’ demand for compassion

and goodness, but are also, like any other political actors, dependent on making strategic political decisions.

The Grand Inquisitor's lack of empathy and compassion with the people under his rule is clearly evident. He has become a power-politician and is trapped in the power-game; concerned only with power and seeing the people as potential threats. He has de-personalised the sufferers, lumped them together into an aggregate. For him, intellectual abstractions sacrifice the individual personalities of people.

The kind of Christianity that Dostoyevsky presents to us is not that of political control and institutional power, but the individual attitudes of love, compliance and the acceptance of suffering that is impossible to avoid. Maybe this is his warning to the Russian revolutionaries in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. They are building a revolutionary movement with the aim of overthrowing the Tsar and his regime. And, however just their cause is, it may well result in a regime as inhumane and despicable as the one they seek to remove.

This is of course a topic familiar to students of Machiavelli: The power one must create to counter the oppression tends to trap itself in a strategic game that forces the liberators to take on the cloaks of their previous oppressors<sup>6</sup>. The only way to break this vicious circle is to feel compassion and empathy towards individuals and not abstract entities, such as the people

## **The confession**

Arendt also makes a distinction between reason and passion (Arendt 1990: 86). Talkative and argumentative interests in the world are entirely alien to compassion. The silence of Jesus to the Grand Inquisitor's confession reveals compassion in contrast to pity. Compassion is not speechless, but its language consists of gestures and expressions of countenance rather than in words.

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<sup>6</sup> The impossibility of commanding unrestricted power for the sake of the good and without destroying one's personal integrity is also the topic of Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*.

When the Grand Inquisitor is suffering, Jesus shows compassion with him through a kiss. Jesus' silence makes his words fall back on the old man. He ends up realising his actions in the life he has lived. The confession confronts him both with his own betrayal of the ideals he once held high, and with the hollowness of his thoughts and values. His argumentative attack on Jesus is revealed to be nothing but abstractions without empathy.

The argumentation of the Grand Inquisitor is a kind of "logical prison", a kind of reasoning closed to everything that is outside the structure of reason and the area of reference. Ivan's struggle to find a rational solution to the problem of suffering and evil is a long way from the deep insight for which Dostoyevsky struggled. That is, it is only by empathy and loving life that man can grasp the meaning of life. As such, Aljosa or Dostoyevsky's way of responding to the Grand Inquisitor is by leading our attention to another dimension of human relations.

Confessions are about speaking one's mind to a listener without any kind of censorship. This reveals the values and worldview of one's life and actions. In return, one expects affirmation and recognition, and most hopefully, a new start. Speaking to Jesus is politically risky. Jesus is the Son of God and therefore the consequences of arguing with him are unpredictable. Since the Grand Inquisitor is dependent upon his reputation and one of his main instruments of power is fear, he may lose his position as a leader if any signs of weakness are revealed in public. For this reason he wants their conversations to take place in secrecy.

What the Grand Inquisitor may hope to gain is recognition for his superiority and what were once his good intentions. To accomplish this, he tries to convince Jesus that he was mistaken and that he should admit his failure. If he could have achieved this he would have gained personal recognition for his life project and confirmed the basic values of his regime.

The confession reflects the tensions between different types of roles. In the political system, he is the prosecutor and the judge and Jesus is the convict. His aim is to secure the self-understanding that he is a responsible but troubled person who, like Jesus, carries the burden of humanity. The aim is also to make Jesus plead guilty. In the religious system, he is the disciple and Jesus is his spiritual master. Jesus does not respond as a convict is supposed to, that is, to defend himself or accept the trial.

The Grand Inquisitor is prepared for any response but silence: acceptance, counter-argument or condemnation. When Jesus does not respond, he demands a reaction: “Be angry, because I don’t want your love, because I don’t care about you. We are not with you, we are with Him” [the Devil]. But he received no counter arguments, only silence. What he gets is a kiss – suggesting that Jesus feels no anger, fear or regret and that he feels compassion for him. Jesus showed his position as a spiritual master by not passing judgement upon him.

The roles and the process of the Inquisitor’s confession reflect the structure of his regime. He finds himself in a system where there is a tension between political instruments and a religious system of legitimacy. During the confessional process, there is a change from the first set of political roles to the second set of religious roles. It ends with a sort of personal transformation through self-recognition, but it is hardly a liberating effect because of his age – being 90 years old his failure as a religious leader is revealed and that there is little time left to change. The revelation comes too late for any further self-development. He sticks to his old ideas. Nevertheless, the disparity between his present state and the personal convictions of his youth are clearly apparent. The intention had been affirmation, but the outcome was agony.

## **Conclusion**

Jesus was given the opportunity to take the seat of political power and to shape the world and people in his own image and by doing so, remove evil and suffering. Because his rejection of this challenge, the Grand Inquisitor criticised him. Unlike Jesus, the Grand Inquisitor did not accept an unjust world and was prepared to meet the challenge based upon creating his version of a perfect world.

He argued that Jesus’ failure lay in his insistence in defending people’s free will. Freedom of will implies the right of the individual to choose what to believe, including not believing in God and committing evil acts. This is incompatible with religious fundamentalism that carefully prescribes how people shall live and think. Freedom of will is also incompatible with a political system where opposition is a crime. Therefore, fundamentalist religious regimes cannot be democratic.

Uncompromising fundamentalist religious or ideological values are incompatible with pluralist political institutions, and will in the struggle for political power become totalitarian and oppressive. A regime where the influence over people's consciousness and the shaping of their wills are considered necessary instruments of power cannot be based on a positive view of human nature, value freedom of thought or respect opposition and rivals. The Grand Inquisitor despised Jesus for what he considered his irresponsibility in insisting on people's free will and he also feared his ability to undermine the legitimacy of his regime. Therefore, he was treated as a heretic and a criminal.

The reasoning and practices of the Grand Inquisitor produced the opposite of a perfect world. His own political system, idealistic reasoning and lack of empathy with people acted to constrain and trap him. The institutions and ideals he created for the construction of his perfect world made him dependent upon instruments of power, and produced the very evil and suffering that he hoped to eradicate<sup>7</sup>.

Power structures and roles influence confessional practices. The Grand Inquisitor's confession is characterised by two pair of roles, that of the prosecutor and judge encountering the convict and that of the disciple meeting his spiritual master. The confession starts with the first pair of roles and ends up with the second.

The narrative effect of the legend is that we are made to feel how false the idealistic, high-flown phrases of pity sound when they are confronted with compassion and empathy for other people. These attitudes can never be compensated for by political systems, but the conclusion here is that some political systems give more room for them than others and are therefore a better protection against tyrannical rule.

Because it does not discriminate between people, and because it gives no prescriptions for political action, Dostoyevsky's Christianity can be considered a-political. According to Dostoyevsky's hero Aljosha, enduring life and loving life are two sides of the same coin. The striving for a super-human utopia has been the source of great misery in the course of human history. Still, politics should not be given up. Since people will and should always strive for

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<sup>7</sup> Since the autumn of 2001, there are reasons to doubt there will be a better world when powers claim legitimacy for their use of bombs and destruction by referring to their own god.

dignity and a world according to their own liking, they must also strive for power and counter-power. But if power is not to be destructive, it must be institutionally bounded, shared and separated.

According to Arendt, politics based on public deliberation among equals is not only a precondition for personal development; it is also *the* sign of a vital social and political life. But there are several structural – institutional preconditions, among them the separation of powers, the institutionalisation of opposition, rule by law and cultural pluralism.

## **Coda**

I first read the Legend of the Grand Inquisitor in Dostoyevsky's *Brothers Karamazov* about twenty years ago. I was staying in a cottage in Finnmark, during wintertime, close to the border with the former Soviet Union. That day I had been watching Soviet soldiers standing in their watchtowers observing the Norwegian border. They looked serious, calm and a bit bored. I waved at them, but they did not wave back. I was there for fun, they were there because of an international constellation of superpowers. The legend of the Grand Inquisitor made a deep impression on me. The topic was the confession of the Grand Inquisitor, where he makes a strong defence for his anti-humanitarian policies and horrible totalitarian regime. His way of reasoning was hard to oppose without referring to values that he did not share. I had had a similar experience with a man I met in Kandahar in Afghanistan. What was so disturbing was that he seriously believed in his right to kill women who did not behave and think as he thought they should. There was absolutely nothing that we had in common and, as a consequence, words and arguments were of no use. To this day I haven't been able to forget this man, and this has strengthened my interest in the legend.

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