

# A Brief Analysis of the Figure of Elder Zossima in “The Brothers Karamazov” in the Light of the Neo-Anthropology of Asceticism

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## Abstract

For Sergey Khoruzhy, Russian philosophy, which is characterized by religiosity, takes the perfect expression of the Orthodox truth as the ultimate pursuit. He believes that the Russian philosophy that truly embodies the “Russian mind” is hidden in the practice of the Russian Orthodox ascetic tradition, which contains not only the image of an ascetic Christian but also reflects the ontological state of being and the ontological intuition of being human in a universal sense. On the basis of the ascetic practice, Khoruzhy constructs three anthropological forms shaped by different forces at different levels: 1) the person who unfolds to another being (God), the ascetic, 2) the “average” person who unfolds in the unconsciousness (the Freudian person), 3) the person who is shaped by modern technological trends such as computer technology, genetic engineering, and other technologies. Such a unique anthropological framework also offers the possibility of reinterpreting and analyzing the role of Elder Zossima, a typical figure in Dostoevsky’s masterpiece “The Brothers Karamazov”.

## Keywords

Neo-Anthropology of Asceticism, Ontological Anthropological Form, The Brothers Karamazov

## 1. Introduction

In the course of the historical development of world philosophy, it can be seen that from its birth, Russian philosophy set out on a very different path from Western philosophy. On the contrary, it was deeply influenced by the classical German idealist philosophy at the very beginning of its development, and the

sharp criticism directed against Western rationalism and individualism by the Russian religious philosophers of the Silver Age, such as Berdyaev, N. Lossky, itself was not without color of Western rationalist philosophy. But what really constitutes the uniqueness of Russian philosophy and determines its way forward is the “Russian mind”—a profoundly religious and messianic spirit that does not focus on speculative thinking but on philosophical narration, using the system of Orthodox discourse, leading Russian philosophy back to the original Christian experience. Today, Russian philosophy has been further developed, and one of its representative theories is Khoruzhy’s ascetic anthropology, which maintains the unique style of Russian philosophy while innovatively cutting into the spiritual core of Russian Orthodoxy from an anthropological perspective. He thinks that just as ordinary phenomenology and ordinary anthropology speak of everyday experience in ordinary conditions, so asceticism, schools of spiritual practice also speak of human experience, but they declare that in addition to ordinary areas, there are also extraordinary areas of this experience, which, according to some parameters, extremely remote from that ordinary everyday experience with which ordinary anthropology works (Khoruzhy & Dimitrov, 2021). Although based on the traditional foundations of Russian religious philosophy, Khoruzhy “never deified the object of his study, but calmly contemplated its fate” (Zhang, 2016), and drew extensively on all theological resources that could serve the new anthropology, attempting to integrate the religious experience into a philosophical context, describing it in a phenomenological way and through this means further constructs the generative being of man. He found that in the practice tradition of asceticism in Russian monasteries, there is a paradigm of human ontological unfolding. People need to deny and abandon worldly life and expand to another being—the divine being, the being of God revealed by Christianity as personality, with consciousness, emotion and will. The purpose of the ascetic practice is deification, that is, participation in God, communion with God’s personality, in which one feels God’s energy to the full and responds to God’s call, acquires God’s personality in the process of dialogue and communion with Him and shapes oneself in this way, becoming a person in the sense of ontological existence (Jesus Christ is the most complete personality) (Khoruzhy, 2008). In addition, Khoruzhy is not satisfied with describing the ontological man shaped by ascetic practices, but he tries to present the anthropological image of the “ordinary man” in the same anthropological paradigm and succeeds in constructing two other main anthropological forms: the existential or Freudian man and the infinite man or the man of technological trends. The former is characterized by the influence of popular culture or masscult, especially by the virtual practice of computer networks; this is a person dominated by the Freudian “unconsciousness”, retaining the sensory intuition passed from the classical society, i.e., the ontological period, he would not believe in religion and has no desire for God, but pursued non-religious extreme experiences, believing that the self can only be realized in the extreme experience of the counter-conventional; the latter

was dedicated to the use of science and technology to shape a new man, so that man could become a virtual being combined with cyber and genetic technology, and even completely detached from reality (Khoruzhy, 2016).

Together with the ontological sense of man mentioned above, Khoruzhy uses these three main anthropological forms to establish a complete framework of an anthropological system, within which he believes that any person's existence can be unfolded and described, of course, a mixed form shaped by all these forces together could also be realistic. Thus, the whole ascetic anthropology program provides an innovative and universal philosophical language and means for describing, constructing, and analyzing human beings, which allows not only a real person but also typical images in realist literature to be analyzed and examined in this paradigm. In turn, since there is always a close connection between philosophy and literature, figure analysis in literature can also support the relevance and validity of the philosophical concepts or analytical methods of the ascetic neo-anthropology, especially for Russian literature, because not only "good Russian literary works are always philosophical" (Nikolsky, 2015), but also solution offered by Russian literary to the human problems is often inseparable from the answer of religious faith. Russian philosophy has developed into a world outlook, cosmology, and values that have a wide range of propositions and can reflect the characteristics of Russian national thought. It is not limited to traditional Western philosophical discourse methods but also resides in various types of literary genres such as novels, poems, fairy tales, and folk stories. Especially in the Russian literary world in the second half of the 19th century, a cultural-philosophical turn has taken place, focusing on "under what cultural context we express the nature of the world we understand" (Bykov, 1990). There are many Russian writers who could be regarded as religious philosophers. They used literary works to discuss the development path of world history and Russian history, debate the social value of individuals and their influence on history (Evlampiev, 2019), express repentance for the common sins of all mankind and the heavy religious feelings, in short, the profound philosophical thought system is integrated into the narrative of the literary story. The spirituality of the Orthodox faith has always been a great concern of Russian literature (Kolkunova & Malevich, 2014). Therefore, when reading Dostoevsky, it is not difficult to find the "person" or "the man" in the ontological sense described by Khoruzhy's anthropology; his image even forms the spiritual core of Dostoevsky's literary works. On this premise, the analysis of the figure of Elder Zossima in "The Brothers Karamazov" also has the importance of applying and verifying the neo-anthropology of asceticism.

## 2. The Role of Elder Zossima in Shaping Believers

Since the time of the Desert Fathers, the ascetic practice has gradually transformed the accumulated experience into a complete program of practice, a "ladder" path of ascent, through which the practitioner is constantly renewed with

different elements at each stage, but it is obviously at the same time a path full of “hardships”, with various spiritual crises and tests along the way, one can “go off the deep end” if not be careful enough. Therefore, it is necessary to practice under the guidance of an experienced elder, which means that in the early stages of ascetic practice, the practitioner should be integrated into the will of the elder and behave as if the two people share the same will. The tradition of ascetic practice was newly developed after the introduction of asceticism from Byzantium to Russia, where the elders became not only practitioners of asceticism and leaders of novices but also engaged in social activities, public works, and provided spiritual comfort and healing to the faithful, seemingly playing the role of psychiatrists and psychics in contemporary terms. They “interact with many people, understand their problems, and advise them on spiritual matters... Even the elders are consulted for general daily life matters, as they are very popular...” (Khoruzhy, 2010). In Dostoevsky’s writing, Elder Zossima clearly transcends not only the traditional meaning carried by the ascetic himself, but also rises to the level of a uniquely Russian sociological and even anthropological phenomenon. He repeatedly receives the reverent worship of a large number of laymen as “God’s ambassador” on earth, preaching before them the power of faith, praying for them and thus working magic to relieve them of their fears and calamities. Obviously, receiving blessings from the Elder Zossima was a shortcut for the secular masses to circumvent the ascetic practice and obtain its achievement—communion with God; they are of unconscious anthropological type but are also shaped by ontological forms in another way. The spiritual authority of the elder Zossima, described in “The Brothers Karamazov” is so great that he is popular with the lay faithful, and the believers had flocked from all parts of Russia on purpose to see the elder and obtain his blessing (Dostoyevsky, 2009). But the meeting is often not a peaceful one but is often accompanied by frenzy, weeping, convulsions, and tears of the faithful.

“They fell down before him, wept, kissed his feet, kissed the earth on which he stood, and wailed, while the women held up their children to him and brought him the sick ‘possessed with devils.’ The elder spoke to them, read a brief prayer over them, blessed them, and dismissed them” (Dostoyevsky, 2009).

Elder Zossima, in such a frenzied situation, had obviously gone beyond the image of an ordinary respected elder monk; he was seen as a miracle-working healer, and being an elder meant that he had gained a special experience through ascetic practice—a mystical experience of unity with God, of communion with God. Therefore, Elder Zossima “is not of the flesh, but of the Spirit” (Romans 8:9), and he does what God wants him to do. He is the mediator of the divine personality, and believers believe that in Elder Zossima the image of the Savior of Christ will be manifested. The frantic cry of believers before Elder Zossima for blessing and healing is a manifestation of the ontological unfolding intuition retained by ordinary people. Although they have no intention of devoting themselves to the practice of retreat and still live a secular life, but the personality of God, who is omnipotent and loves all beings, is like a seed hidden in the simple

and pious belief of ordinary believers. Under the combined force of various conditions, it will take root at a certain moment. Suffering is obviously an important stimulus, and Dostoevsky bluntly states that the worship of the elders is a need to soothe suffering, “it was the greatest need and comfort to find someone or something holy to fall down before and worship” (Dostoyevsky, 2009). but Khoruzhy points out that this worship goes beyond suffering itself and makes the elders “an anthropological phenomenon of unique significance”, in the eyes of Russian people, Elder Zossima points beyond the sphere of human existence to the Kingdom of God and association with the Elder means a glimpse of the possibility of heavenly salvation without the need for asceticism, and it is in this dawning that they go to their own limits, unfolding to their heart’s content toward another being. The self “hidden” in the unconscious in daily life is unearthed, and they are influenced and shaped by Elder Zossima. What we see here is the manifestation of what Khoruzhy calls “extreme experience”, a state close to madness. They “go crazy” in front of the elder, “fanatically devoted to him”, “falling in tears at the elder’s feet”, and “kissed the earth on which he stood”. The “crazy” peasant woman, who lost her son, poured out her misfortune to Elder Zossima, and was so comforted by his response and blessing that she cried and promised to stop grieving and return to her normal life. Here, Elder Zossima plays the role of an earthly “propagandist” of God’s personality, who, through his involvement with ordinary believers, strengthens their faith and inspires them to act in an ontologically meaningful way toward God in their secular lives.

### **3. Elder Zossima as an Ontological Anthropological Form in the Ascetic Neo-Anthropology**

Although the shaping of Elder Zossima for the believers who venerate him and thirst for his salvation is evident, Elder Zossima himself does not exactly fit Khoruzhy’s definition of the ontological paradigm of human existence, or there is still “insufficient evidence” to make a positive judgment. The obstacle lies in Dostoevsky’s omission of a specific description of Elder Zossima’s way of ascetic practice, which seems to intentionally avoid the “technical” program of ascetic practice and shift the entire focus of the figure of Elder Zossima to his relationship with others, his influence on others, and even his overall reflection on issues of faith, God, goodness and evilness. And “technical” ascending practice is, for Khoruzhy, at the center of shaping the ontological type of anthropology. Although a monk’s practice is an individual behavior, he still has to practice step by step according to a complete set of plans formed by the accumulation and retention of the entire traditional experience, or a system called ascetic practice tools or “handbook”. This tool system not only contains all the ideological catalogues, corresponding to the possible conscious states and explanations of the monks but also indicates the driving device of the ascending path—concentration and prayer, which are intended to keep the monks’ consciousness in a vertical upward direction. In the prescribed dimension, and following the safe road “escorted” by the practical experience of collectivism, this also defines the general

boundaries of the ontological form of human beings. Although Khoruzhy does not clearly state the specifics within the framework of this boundary, the novel's Elder Zossima clearly breaks out of this framework to show a freer, more autonomous consciousness and action. In most of the scenes in the novel, Elder Zossima is seen talking kindly to people, giving them guidance in short, wise and prescient speeches, soothing their pain, exhorting them to believe in God and that he is a delightful man, even joking around, once "making fun" of Lisa, a young girl who has a crush on Alyosha. He was not like the ordinary ascetics who did not care about food, preferred sweets, and loved to eat cherry sauce brought by the ladies with tea. The image of Elder Zossima put together by these pictures is not so much an ascetic monk who refines himself in extremely hard conditions and pursues deification but rather an amiable and compassionate secular elder. It is still worth mentioning Father Ferapont, as antagonistic to Elder Zossima, he is fiercely opposed to the whole institution of "elders". Dostoyevsky seems to have intended to create a certain contrast between the images of the two. Therefore, Fr. Ferapont was deliberately made to appear like a typical ascetic, with a solitary and eccentric temperament, peculiar behavior, and a very mysterious atmosphere. He denounced the institution of "elders" as a "fresh miracle" created by the devil to poison the faith; he stayed away from all worldly life, fasted and vowed to remain silent, lived in a very humble cell, ate only the simplest food—bread and water, kneeled and prayed constantly, and "communed only with the God" and occasionally spoke gibberish that no one could understand. Could it be, then, that Father Ferapont, who practiced the ascetic rule more strictly than Elder Zossima and showed more of an ontological anthropological form, was the one who had truly returned to the ontological state of the being? This is not quite the case. Although Dostoyevsky did not tell us how Elder Zossima practiced penance in detail, he did detail the background that led him to become an ascetic, which is crucial to the formation of Elder Zossima's personality. Elder Zossima experienced a crucial turning point from secular to ontological man, a turning point that occurred to mark the beginning of the ascetic practice that Khoruzhy calls the "conversion event". When he was young, the elder was a noble officer. On the eve of his duel with his rival in love, he lost his temper and beat his orderly Afanasy for no reason. After he woke up, his deep guilt made him give up the duel, and there was no noble officer Zinoviy anymore, replaced by the later elder Zossima, who escaped into the monastery. It was at that moment of repentance that Elder Zossima overturned the whole meaning of his former secular life and turned to the existence of truth and light, going for the being of God. Although Dostoyevsky does not describe in detail the course of Elder Zossima's practice, the very meaning of the title "elder" already indicates the fact and the positive result of his ascetic practice. Obviously, what Dostoyevsky wanted to show was the Orthodox philosophy that Elder Zossima acquired through ascetic practice and practiced himself, that "unfolding to the dimension of God's being" does not mean abandoning the world, but on the contrary, it means accommodating the world in oneself, contemplating the world,

and that all people should be responsible for all human sins. Heaven is originally on earth, all existence is God's creation, blessed with goodness, and if it loses its original image and allows sin to flow freely in it, then everyone will be jointly responsible for evil. Therefore, one should follow the example of Christ and become a servant of men, loving all people, believing that only repentance and love can overcome the barrier of sin that hides the true face of heaven on earth. Therefore, Elder Zossima objected to Alyosha's use of the monastery as a refuge against suffering and sin. He hoped that Alyosha would first return to the secular life to experience all kinds of misfortunes in life, to encounter the blow of "enemies", and then remain the hope for life, bring warmth and faith in god to all, and then realize the essence of asceticism. To a certain extent, Elder Zossima has reached the ontological sense of man constructed by Khoruzhy.

#### 4. Concluding Remarks

If viewed from the perspective of Khoruzhy's anthropology of asceticism, Dostoevsky used the image of the elder Zossima to construct his own type of ontological anthropology. In this paradigm, the leading role is not only the instrumental condition and operation of ascetic practice, but it is to use faith to inquire about the truth of life and to use the power of love and repentance to return to the true ontological state of human beings. From the image of Elder Zossima, we can see Khoruzhy's ascetic anthropology's expression of human beings, especially the expression of a Russian mind, is very profound and authentic.

#### Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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