

ARTISTS, MYSTICS, AND CLOWNS

Fyodor Dostoyevsky passionately believed that he had embodied the soul of the Russian peasant in Marmeladov, the discharged town clerk and disgraced town drunk of *Crime and Punishment* – a clown, a buffoon, and the father of Sonia, a prostitute.

In a tavern in St. Petersburg, besotted with booze, Marmeladov engages the young rationalist Raskolnikov in conversation. Though the object of derision and mockery by the locals, Marmeladov insists that he is not to be pitied:

But He will have pity on me Who has pity on all men, Who has understood all men and all things. He is the One. He too is the judge. He will come on that day and He will ask, "Where is the daughter [Sonia] who had pity upon the filthy drunkard, her earthly father, undismayed by his beastliness... He will forgive my Sonia, He will forgive, I know it.

Then He will summon us. "You too come forth," He will say. "Come forth, ye drunkards, come forth, ye weak ones, come forth, ye children of shame!" And the wise and those of understanding will say: "Oh Lord, why dost Thou receive these men?" And He will say: "This is why I receive them, oh ye wise, this is why I receive them, oh ye of understanding, that not one of them believed himself to be worthy of this." And He will hold out his hands to us and we shall fall down before Him... and we shall weep... and we shall understand all... and all will understand... Lord, Thy kingdom come!"

Dostoyevsky maintained that at the heart of the Russian peasant life existed an unshaken trust in the unrestricted mercy of God... The author's contemporary, Leo Tolstoy, published his classic novel *War and Peace* three years after *Crime and Punishment*. In a dialogue between the saintly Princess Mary and her brother Prince Andrew, she echoes Dostoyevsky's ethos. Quoting a haunting French proverb, she says, "We should enter everyone's situation. *Tout comprendre, c'est tout pardonner*" – to understand all is to forgive all.

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And what of the human heart's capacity to understand God? Here we need the help of passionate visionaries such as Dostoyevsky. Sacred scripture is too important to be left exclusively to biblical scholars. **Theology is too vital to be consigned solely to the province of theologians. To explore the depths of the God who invites our trust, we need the artists, and mystics.**

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They whet our appetite for the Infinite... They imply that our awe of God is limited by our impoverished imagination. They intimate that beyond all the words we use about God – *transcendence, kabod divinity, even God* – lies a mysterious Reality that we cannot name.

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To artists and mystics we must add the category of clowns – those who let God out of the box of our predetermined propriety. Clowns are instruments of grace, imploring the voice of God... Their somersaults, back-flips, and unpredictable high jinks tinker with our straitlaced logic, which alleges that ultimate significance can be found in the tangible, the visible, the perishable...

As we stare at their outlandish costumes, we recognize a lighthearted, whimsical stance toward life. As we respond to their offer of unaffected graciousness and sincere friendliness, our inflated sense of self-importance rushes out of us like air from a pinpricked balloon. They invite us to reclaim the child we once were, to suspend temporarily our mortal seriousness about the image we project to the world...

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...their unexpected presence encourages us to re-examine our priorities, and does so with far greater effect than the apocalyptic threats of the doomsday preacher on the street corner.

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This unlikely trio of artists, mystics, and clowns serves the ministry of the Word by expanding our understanding of the *kabod Yahweh* through their original and startling insights; they deepen our trust by reminding us to submerge the enormous difficulty of suffering and evil in the borderless sea of infinite wisdom and absolute love; they force us to pose the question, "Is God different from what we perceive?" They lay bare an incandescent truth long concealed by ignorance, myopia, an inauthentic tradition: our perceptions of God, of our fellow ragamuffins, and of ourselves are flat-out wrong.

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Send in the artists, mystics, and clowns. Their fertile imagination pours the new wine of the gospel into fresh wineskins. With fresh language, poetic vision, and striking symbols, they express God's inexpressible Word in artistic forms that are charged with the power of God, engaging our minds and stirring our hearts as they flare and flame.

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Their beauty is the voice by which they announce God... The poets, singers, songwriters, novelists, musicians, clowns, and mystics enable the voices to creation to shout, "How beautiful is the One who made us!"

... John Henry Newman... as the foremost theologian in England... wrote... "It is God Himself who can be discovered in the beauty of sensible things."

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Those who look beyond the literal see the world as a metaphor for God... They dare us to dream of our homeland, where eye has not seen, neither has ear heard, nor has the imagination conceived of the beauty that awaits us.

Excerpts from Chapter 5 of *Ruthless Trust: The Ragamuffin's Path to God* by Brennan Manning.

"Glory" is one of the most common words in scripture. In the Torah the word is used to translate several Hebrew words, including *kabod*, originally meaning "weight" or "heaviness." The same word is then used to express importance, honor, and majesty. *Yahweh* is the proper name for God, so *kabod Yahweh* is the glory of God.