

## **POLYPHONY IN *THE BROTHERS KARAMAZOV*: CHRISTIAN DIALOGICAL TENSION IN ALEXEI FYODOROVICH KARAMAZOV'S INTERACTIONS**

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**ABSTRACT.** This work's aim is to analyze polyphony in *The Brothers Karamazov*, a novel written by Fyodor Dostoevsky, focusing on ideological confrontations that take place between characters, especially between the Karamazov's family. More specifically, I try to understand how Alexei Fyodorovich Karamazov interacts in a dialogical way with his family and friends, and how Alexei's interventions – marked by a religious ethical behavior – contribute to the conflicting discourses. To do so, the main concept on which this paper is relied is the polyphony, developed by Bakhtin in order to understand that each character in the book has a strong and distinct ideology, which helps creating tensions of immense proportions. Finally, this study is also based on Nietzsche's theories about religion, because it is argued that some characters are guided by a Christian ethical thinking, which is – although shown as good most of the times – surrounded by an oppressive fundamentalism.

**Keywords:** Dostoevsky; Russian literature; *The Brothers Karamazov*; polyphony

### **1. Introduction**

It is widely known that Dostoevsky's writings are considered one of the most important works of art in the whole world. With its complex characters and intricate plots, novels written by the Russian writer reunite plenty of changes and innovations to the traditional novel. At the nineteenth century, pieces of literature were all based on a traditional and canonical concept of novel, in which the entire narrative should revolve around a single ideology, or rather around a single voice. Indeed most of the characters were not build with a different perspective from the author, for they were simply objects of his discourse, that is, the characters did not stand out for themselves; each of them remained subordinated to the author's opinions.

Bearing this concept in mind and being against novelties, in order to understand Dostoevsky's works, the traditional criticism, "... enslaved by the content of individual heroes' ideological views, have attempted to reduce these views to a systemically monologic whole, thus ignoring the fundamental plurality of unmerged consciousnesses which is part and parcel of the artist's design."<sup>1</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, a Russian philosopher, literary critic and semiotician, countered this thinking, by perceiving that Dostoevsky has made a great break from most of that paradigm. Indeed, in his writings the most important, new and revolutionary tool used is the so-called "polyphony." This literature device was very first noticed and meticulously theorized by Bakhtin in his famous book *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. In fact, Bakhtin, wonderstruck with the greatness of Dostoevsky's novels, decided to write this book so he could analyze the novelist's main works in order to systematize and thus comprehend the means by which he has written those narratives.

According to Bakhtin, Dostoevsky, in opposition to what most critics from that time believed, created the polyphonic novel, in which "A *plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices ...*"<sup>2</sup> is part of a text. Indeed, a polyphonic novel is characterized by being a narrative in which the protagonists have great and strong ideologies that are able to surpass the author's voice. In fact, heroes' voices are so powerful that they are considered fully independent from other characters and from the author himself. Thus, characters are seen as "... not only objects of authorial discourse but also subjects of their own directly signifying discourse."<sup>3</sup> This independency helps in the creation of a tense environment, in which the main characters have to face serious and contentious ideological confrontations with each other.

Regarding the affirmation made by Bakhtin that Dostoevsky is the real creator of polyphony, it is possible to perceive that there are many other writers, such as Shakespeare and Cervantes, who made use of similar structures. However, the Russian philosopher defends that solely through the novels written by Dostoevsky this literary device reached its most developed state. Bakhtin presents that "... certain elements, embryonic rudiments, early buddings of polyphony can indeed be detected in the dramas of Shakespeare."<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, alongside Cervantes, Rabelais, Grimms-Hausen and others, none of their writings were able to reach the level of Dostoevsky's novels.

The polyphonic speech is present in most of the works written by Dostoevsky, being characterized as an essential element of the Russian novelist's speech. Nonetheless, the novel in which polyphony is most highlighted is *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880). In this narrative, Dostoevsky has elevated polyphony to a level in which ideological conflicts faced by characters are constant and frequent. Besides that, each and every protagonist has a strong

profile and a deep urge to gain a voice and a moment in the narrative. In fact, although Dostoevsky's narrator has said that "... I do call Alexei Fyodorovich my hero ...,"<sup>5</sup> in *The Brothers Karamazov* there are other characters who – for being extremely independent – “steals” numerous moments from the narrative, such as Dmitri's monologue, which lasts three chapters (The Confession of an Ardent Heart. In Verse; The Confession of an Ardent Heart. In Anecdotes; and The Confession of an Ardent Heart. “Heels Up”); and Ivan's monologue, which also lasts three chapters (The Brothers Get Acquainted; Rebellion; The Grand Inquisitor).

From this fact I cannot help noticing that, although Dmitri, Ivan, Smerdyakov, Zosima and even Agrafena (Grushenka) reach a high level of relevance in the narrative, the perspective present in the novel is from Alexei, also called Alyosha, who actually functions (or tries to function) as a mediator, striving to appease conflicts and a strong tension created by them. In fact, behind this behavior there is an ideology heavily influenced by Hebrew-Christian ethic, around which Alexei has spent most of his life. Besides that, according to Nietzsche, all kinds of religion, mainly the Hebrew-Christianity, are surrounded by numerous elements related to a robust and oppressive dogmatism, which is highly present in Alyosha's behavior throughout the story.

Therefore, bearing all these topics in mind, in this paper I will analyze how polyphony contributes in ideological conflicts' construction, in order to comprehend the effects of this new literary device in Dostoevsky's novel. Besides that, and most importantly, I will try to understand how the character Alexei Fyodorovich Karamazov is placed in the narrative and what is his role regarding ideological confrontations, examining religious ethical influences in his dialogical discourse. Far away from seeing this character as a simple naive young man, our main aim is to prove that he is way smarter than he is externally described by Dostoevsky; that is, that he is indeed aware of all the conflicts happening in the narrative and that he is capable of helping reducing them considerably.

## 2. Development

Since the narrative very beginning, Alexei Karamazov is treated as the novel's hero, that is, the character by which conflicts and major events revolve around. In the author's notes, before the novel begins, Dostoevsky confirms this fact by saying that *The Brothers Karamazov* would be the first part of Alyosha's biography, in which it is shown "... just one moment from my hero's early youth."<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, the author also reveals to us at the beginning that the protagonist is not a great man, which consequently would lead us to think "What is notable about your Alexei Fyodorovich that you

should choose him for hero? What has he really done? To whom is he known, and for what? Why should I, the reader, spend my time studying the facts of his life?"<sup>7</sup>

Indeed, with this speech, Dostoevsky is making a subtle critique to the traditional and contemporary criticism from that period, which thought that a hero or a protagonist of a great novel should have a strong purpose and importance to the narrative. In accordance with Bakhtin, a monologic hero should not only have a great reason to be called hero but also have to be

... closed and his semantic boundaries strictly defined: he acts, experiences, thinks, and is conscious within the limits of what he is, that is, within the limits of his image defined as reality; he cannot cease to be himself, that is, he cannot exceed the limits of his own character, typicality or temperament without violating the author's monologic design concerning him.<sup>8</sup>

By using a high level of ironic humor, the author also seeks to call the readers' attention, instigating them to discover why such a main character is in the story. With this, I am not saying that Alyosha is not relevant in this book or that the other characters are of a bigger importance; on the contrary, his role is as important as Ivan's, Dmitri's, Fyodor's and all the others.

According to Cosinschi,<sup>9</sup> there is an effacement dynamics related to Alexei's role in the novel, which, as we have already seen, start by the author's statement of Alyosha's lack of greatness. Subsequently in the narrative, it is possible to perceive that this protagonist is treated as an insignificant character whose actions involve only meeting the requests made by his family and friends. Cosinschi defends that, most of the time, "Alyosha tends to play the role of messenger running back and forth between various parties involved, reporting to the next person what he learned in the previous meeting or transmitting messages around."<sup>10</sup> Thus,

His father tells him to leave the monastery after the meeting there, Katerina Ivanovna calls on him to talk about Dmitry, later Dmitry sends him to Katerina Ivanovna, Alyosha goes to the Kholkhlov's, meets Ivan, runs to Grushenka and back to the monastery, to mention only very few instances.<sup>11</sup>

Although we might think Alyosha's role is indeed being simply a messenger, it is possible to perceive that his relevance to the narrative surpasses this first picture. By Alexei's actions we can see that not only he makes efforts to deliver messages to his friends and family but also he believes that it is his duty to mediate and appease any conflict experienced by them. In fact, it seems that Alexei's destiny is to mitigate the tension between his family. In a conversation between him and Zosima, this fact is seen very clearly:

“Go, my dear, go. Porfiry is enough for me, and you must hurry. They need you there, go to the Father Superior, serve at the table.”

“Give me your blessing to stay here,” Alyosha spoke in a pleading voice.

“You are more needed there. There is no peace there. You will serve and be of use. If demons raise their heads, recite a prayer. And know, my dear son” (the elder liked to call him that), “that from now on this is not the place for you. Remember that, young man. As soon as God grants me to depart, leave the monastery. Leave it for good.”<sup>12</sup>

Through Zosima’s saying, Alyosha had to face an unfortunate eminent destiny: Zosima’s death, his departure from the monastery – which would make Alyosha more independent and capable of helping others from outside that place – and a “supervision” of his brothers and his father.

Regarding Alexei being in charge of mediating characters’ conflicts, this was an extremely difficult task, since – due to the device of polyphony created by Dostoevsky – every single character presented in the novel had an inner urge to speak out for themselves and not to let anyone silence them. Because of that, Alexei had to, unstopably, rush from one side to another, solving (or rather trying to solve) one problem at a time. Alongside this fact, a strong ideology and personality carried by them helped in the creation of tense moments and numerous conflicts, being the greatest one the murder of Fyodor Pavlovich Karamazov, the brothers Karamazov’s father.

There is an intense religious ideology – inputted in Alyosha during the period when he lived in Zosima’s monastery – behind the behavior related to the conflicts’ mediation. Alexei’s moral and ethical beliefs were part of many ideological confrontations amongst the characters. In fact, it is possible to perceive that in this narrative the main ideological conflict is between religion and atheism. To be more specific, Dostoevsky’s intent in writing *The Brothers Karamazov* was to counterpoint an Orthodox Christianity, which according to Gibson (*apud* White) was defended by the Russian author, with atheism, based on the philosophical doctrine called Nihilism. Thus, in accordance to White, there are

... two major conflicting belief systems in *The Brothers Karamazov*. The first – represented by Alyosha, Zosima, and Ivan’s Christ – seems to represent the Christian belief that Dostoevsky wants to vindicate ... In contrast, the second – represented most obviously by Ivan’s Grand Inquisitor – calls into question Christian love as powerful enough to accomplish its goals.<sup>13</sup>

Focusing on the ideology behind the attitudes of Alexei, as I have already said, they are based on a Hebrew-Christian ethic, which was transmitted to him while he lived in the monastery. The main basis to this ethic comes from

a Christian religion, which discusses the relation between men and God, and some ways men can achieve salvation. As we can recall from men's History, at the moment Christianity was defined as the official religion of the Roman Empire, every citizen should abide by the Christian's ideals and rules. This means that a person who decides to dispute that religion would therefore be challenging the government itself, something unimaginable for that time. Indeed, those who venture not to accept or agree with what is advocated by the Christian religion would be considered heretic and doomed to receive a heavy punishment, which would possibly be death.

Thus what started as precepts on how to live correctly, a model of life to be followed, became after some time a tool of power and repression. According to Matos, over the centuries, Christianity's history was based in the creation of

... dogmas, confissões e doutrinas que, acreditou-se, representava a 'verdade absoluta acerca da existência e de toda a realidade'. Aderir à religião cristã só era possível após a aceitação irrestrita de seus dogmas, como verdades inquestionáveis e absolutas.

... dogmas, confessions and doctrines which, it was believed, represented the 'absolute truth regarding existence and whole reality'. To adhere to Christian religion was only possible after the unrestricted acceptance of their tenets, as unquestionable and absolute truths.<sup>14</sup>

These facts all happened centuries ago during the Roman Empire; however the situation still remains particularly the same in some parts of the world, that is, people cannot criticize religious precepts without being oppressed, rejected, repelled and criticized back. In this regard, a philosopher named Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche has theorized much about topics related to religions, mainly because he grew up surrounded by religious ideas – his father was a Lutheran pastor. After years studying, Nietzsche came up with powerful and memorable criticisms to the Christian religious empire, which can be summed up to two main positions: the first one referring to absolute and undeniable truths sustained by the Church; and the other referring to the authorities who preaches a morality of weakness or a necessity of sacrifices.

As far as the first critique is concerned, Nietzsche had realized that in his period, that is, with the advances of Renaissance, Enlightenment and, mostly important, Modernity, scientific thinking had started to grow in large scale – Sigmund Freud, Charles Darwin and Nietzsche himself were thinkers who contributed with those advances. Before them, most things and events in the world were explained based on a blind or impressionist belief. Eventually, theories created by all of these great thinkers became a menace to religions, particularly Christianity, for it was and still is one of the most influential. Scientific and rational thinking indeed destabilized the Catholic Church,

which for a long period of time ruled the world, politically, economically and religiously.

As a reactionary attitude, the Catholic Church continued to behave as the holder of universal truth in the western world, preventing that the faithful could question religious precepts. A synonym to this fact is the word *dogmatism*, which makes people believe in something without questioning and reflecting, that is, without using *reason*. In fact, as Nietzsche affirms, the real intent behind Christians' actions would be to control citizen's minds.

Regarding the second critique, Nietzsche was against any religious leader who encourages people to feel lowered, smaller, unworthy of having any expression of happiness or personal gain. In fact, he argues that, by making people think that they are insignificant and not worthy of pleasure – only suffering and guilty – they would be once again in control of their followers. According to Matos, for Nietzsche:

... o que se operou no Cristianismo foi um mecanismo de sujeição de mentes, através da doutrina do pecado: condena-se a busca pelo conhecimento e a ciência, deturpa-se a imagem de razão, atribuí-se ao ser humano uma doença para a qual só o líder religioso tem a cura ...

... what has happened in Christianity was a mechanism for subjecting minds, through the doctrine of sin: it condemns the search for knowledge and science, it misrepresents the image of reason, it attributes to the human being an illness for which only the religious leader has the cure ...<sup>15</sup>

Returning to Alexei and his role in the novel, it is possible to perceive that his actions as a conflict mediator are based on a Christian ethical behavior, highly influenced by Christian philosophy. However, his discourse counterpoints a great number of elements discussed by Nietzsche, such as dogmatism and the doctrine of sin.

According to Daines,

Nietzsche or the *Übermensch*, of course, would find this ridiculous and pointless, even dangerous. There is nothing to love in the lower type of man that Zossima believes are the future, because greatness is what is good in man, and for Nietzsche it is found in the exception, not the general rule. To glorify the mediocre and hopeless is to condemn ALL of mankind. In this glorification of the mundane, Nietzsche would have nothing but scorn for Zossima's philosophy.<sup>16</sup>

Thus there is a clear discrepancy between the beliefs from Alyosha and Nietzsche regarding the moral virtues of a man. For the German thinker, to develop love for all things would mean to stimulate all kind of things in people, even the ones who are considered ethically bad, such as stealing,

killing, raping. This apparent “glorification of the mundane,” however, does not work as plain as Daines considers. As I will discuss further neither Alyosha nor Zosima defends the acts made by the “mundane;” instead they allow those people to change, to repent their acts and to realize what would be the morally good thing to do from the moment on.

Against the common Christianity’s elements, Alyosha doesn’t see himself surrounded by a dogmatic thinking, in which he would force his ideologies against other people, even though according to Nietzsche religion is inevitably surrounded by such element. Far away from controlling the narrative’s ideology, Dostoevsky made sure to create a polyphonic novel in order to allow all those different ideologies (atheist, Christian...) to coexist in a non-dogmatic way. This main character, on the contrary, never tries to convince his family or friends of his beliefs; which also does not mean he complies with them. As it will be discussed, Alyosha develops his own techniques in order to help people around him to realize how morally wrong they are acting; he does not need to preach, fight, argue or even talk much.

In order to understand how Alyosha acts through a religious ethical behavior in the narrative aiming to help and assist his family and friends, I am going to analyze a few ideological conflicts between the main characters in which those elements are visible.

The first and most important characteristic presented in Alyosha’s discourse regarding Christian ethic is the notion that everyone is good (or at least that everyone have some goodness hidden inside their soul). The thinking that all bad things does not matter if the person is repentant and that a small sign of goodness can erase the worst of crimes reaches Alexei directly from Zosima, who is the main representative of the Christian Church in the novel. In one of his consultations with people in need, Zosima says:

Just let repentance not slacken in you, and God will forgive everything. There is not and cannot be in the whole world such a sin that the Lord will not forgive one who truly repents of it ... If you are repentant, it means that you love. And if you love, you already belong to God... With love everything is bought, everything is saved. If even I, a sinful man, just like you, was moved to tenderness and felt pity for you, how much more will God be. Love is such a priceless treasure that you can buy the whole world with it, and redeem not only your own but other people’s sins. Go, and do not be afraid.<sup>17</sup>

From Zosima’s saying it is clearly a Christianity’s position regarding people and their “sins:” everyone is bound to be forgiven if they are open for repentance and redemption through love. The exact same position is carried by Alyosha, who tries to pass on Zosima’s teachings and also his religion. During a meal in Fyodor Pavlovich’s house, Alyosha, Ivan and Fyodor en-

gage in a great discussion, in which Alexei's sayings express the unconditional love and trust in all people. After Fyodor Pavlovich had made numerous provocations, driven by drunkenness, to Alyosha concerning religion ("But still I'd put an end to that little monastery of yours. Take all this mysticism and abolish it at once all over the Russian land, and finally bring all the fools to reason. And think how much silver, how much gold would come into the mint!"<sup>18</sup>), Alyosha respectfully answers his father's questions:

"Wait, wait, wait, my dear, one more little glass. I offended Alyosha. You're not angry with me, Alexei? My dear Alexeichik, my Alexeichik!"

"No I'm not angry. I know your thoughts. Your heart is better than your head."<sup>19</sup>

Thus, by saying that Fyodor's heart is better than his head, Alexei is retrieving and echoing Zosima's words, while advocating that passion and love in his father would compensate any atheistic and nihilistic idea. Through this characteristic, Alyosha shows an incredible amount of respect and comprehension for the entire situation, by not criticizing or making any judgments. Although it may seem that he is blind to all provocations and insults made by his family, and to the severity of the ideological conflicts, the protagonist – on the contrary – perceives that the only way he can affect his family is by giving the example of good attitudes. Indeed, by sustaining his thinking and behavior in a Christian ethic, Alexei comprehends that other characters are in a lower evolutionary stage than his own and that he has a duty not to directly argue with them, which would only lead to more conflicts and arguments, but simply set the example.

Besides that, there is another excerpt in which Alyosha demonstrates the same behavior exposed, this time while he speaks with Agrafena. At this moment, Agrafena had just told Alexei and Rakin, another seminarist from the monastery, the story of her life and explained how she has forgiven the man who left her for another woman. This makes Alexei see goodness in her:

"Who am I compared with her? I came here seeking my own ruin, saying: 'Who cares, who cares?' because of my faintheartedness; but she, after five years of torment, as soon as someone comes and speaks a sincere word to her, forgives everything, forgets everything, and weeps! The man who wronged her has come back, he is calling her, and she forgives him everything, and hastens to him with joy ... No, I am not like that. I don't know whether you are like that, Misha, but I am not like that! I have learned this lesson today, just now... She is higher in love than we are..."<sup>20</sup>

The second characteristic presented in Alexei's discourse is some constant worries in mediating and solving conflicts related to his family. A Christian ethic ideology is presented here, since religious figures tend to mitigate

ideological clashes and to establish normality and peace. In order to do so, Alexei tends to comprehend and forgive everyone's mistakes and "sins," instead of contradict and criticize their actions. As we can see, Alyosha tries to set a good example to people surrounded him, exposing not by his words, but mostly by his actions that what he sees and witness is different from what he does and, therefore, wrong.

Bearing this thought in mind, Alyosha contributes much in reducing the tension between his brothers and father, because, as I have already said, while Alexei sends messages from one to another, he is able to showcase which attitudes people should maintain. It is possible to notice such element while Alexei witnesses an intense argument between Katerina Ivanovna Verkhovtsev, who are Dmitri's fiancé, and Agrafena:

"Get out, bought woman!" screamed Katerina Ivanovna. Every muscle trembled in her completely distorted face.

"Bought, am I? You yourself as a young girl used to go to your gentlemen at dusk to get money, offering your beauty for sale, and I know it."

Katerina Ivanovna made a cry and was about to leap at her, but Alyosha held her back with all his strength.

"Not a step, not a word! Don't speak, don't answer anything – she'll leave, she'll leave right now!"

[...]

"That I will," said Grushenka, picking up her mantilla from the sofa. "Alyosha, dear, come with me!"

"Go, go quickly," Alyosha pleaded, clasping his hands before her.<sup>21</sup>

Before Alyosha experiences such a chaotic scene, he shows his Christian ethical behavior, in which he respects people and comprehend their actions. Although his attitude, his example wasn't as effective as he wishes, because in the end he is not able to prevent a fight between the two women. As a true gentleman, Alexei manages to calm them down and to stop the verbal fight, before it could grew stronger. Besides that, by saying "Not a step, not a word! Don't speak, don't answer anything ..." Alexei tries to teach Katerina that non-violence acts would be the only way to appease the conflict.

Another excerpt in which Alexei attempts to reduce his family's tension is when he had just left Katerina Osipovna (a friend of Katerina Ivanovna)'s house and continued his purpose, which was finding Dmitri and preventing something terrible to happen:

A thought flashed through him as he was saying good-bye to Lise – a thought about how he might contrive, now, to catch his brother Dmitri, who was apparently hiding from him. It was getting late, already past two in the afternoon. With his whole being Alyosha felt drawn to the monastery, to his "great" dying man, but the need

to see his brother Dmitri outweighed everything: with each hour the conviction kept growing in Alyosha's mind that an inevitable, terrible catastrophe was about to occur. What precisely the catastrophe consisted in, and what he would say at that moment to his brother, he himself would perhaps have been unable to define. "Let my benefactor die without me, but at least I won't have to reproach myself all my life that I might have saved something and did not, but passed by, in a hurry to get home. In doing so, I shall be acting in accordance with his great word..."<sup>22</sup>

Here, once again we can notice Alexei's behavior in trying to avoid any catastrophe that was bound to happen in the narrative. Alyosha, in this extract, shows that he feels like he had a duty in mediating the tensions, which he would only do by exposing his good characteristics. After this moment, he tries really hard to find his brother and to prevent any "catastrophe," going from house to house, speaking to his bastard brother Pavel Fyodorovich Smerdyakov, and then speaking to Ivan. Due to conflicts severity and to a strong personality of their family, Alexei does not manage to end all conflicts, but he is able to establish a good example to other characters, helping at least in reducing conflictive tensions, which could have led to bigger and more serious consequences.

Regarding the last characteristic, it is an important element the fact that Alexei believes so much in his religion that he starts nurturing an arrogant and prepotent thinking that everything he believes or knows is good should happen. In fact, Alexei was sometimes so sure of the concreteness of the actions considered by him as right that he forgets other characters' opinions. As an example of this behavior there is a conversation he has with his friend Lise, in which they analyze the actions made by a man, who, despite being in need for money because of family issues, neglected it when Alyosha offered:

"So you didn't give him money, you just let him run away like that! My God, but you should at least have run after him and caught him..."

"No, Lise, it's better that I didn't run after him," Alyosha said, getting up from his chair and anxiously pacing the room.

"How better? Why better? Now they'll die without bread!"

"They won't die, because these two hundred doubles will still catch up with them. He'll take them tomorrow, despite all. Yes, tomorrow he'll certainly take them," Alyosha said, pacing back and forth in thought.

"[...] During the night the thought will become stronger still, he will dream about it, and by tomorrow morning he will perhaps be ready to run to me and asks for forgiveness. And at that moment I shall appear: 'Here,' I'll say, 'you are a proud man, you've proved it, take the money now, forgive us.' And this time he will take it!"<sup>23</sup>

At this extract, Alexei is convinced that the man's action of denying money was led by pride, and that by the next day he would swallow his pride and ask for the money. Alyosha does not err in thinking that the man should have accepted the money because his family desperately needs it; he is indeed totally correct in all his affirmations. However, it is not up to Alexei to determine what a character should or should not do, mainly in a novel in which every character has a strong and independent voice.

Alyosha's convictions that through his religion everything good is bound to happen led him to create an imaginative and fanciful network, in which religious and utopian miracles are possible. The next excerpt is an excellent example of Alyosha's faith that everything that is good should occur:

Alyosha, too, had unquestioning faith in the miraculous power of the elder, just as he had unquestioning faith in the story of the coffin that kept flying out of the church. Many of those who came with sick children or adult relatives and implored the elder to lay his hands on them and say a prayer over them, he saw return soon, some even the next day, and, falling in tears before the elder, thank him for healing their sick. Whether it was a real healing or simply a natural improvement in the course of the disease was a question that did not exist for Alyosha, for he already fully believed in the spiritual power of his teacher, and his glory was, as it were, Alyosha's own triumph.<sup>24</sup>

At this moment, Alexei expresses his fully and unquestioning commitment and belief in what people surrounded him say, because they were things that he knew deserved to become reality. In fact, most of the time in the novel Alyosha blindly believes that miracles should and would happen if the person really deserved that. However, Alexei is not in control of happenings in the narrative and things in real life not always occur the way we want or the way it seems correct; indeed, sometimes unimaginable things happen and we simply have to envisage them.

Later in the narrative the protagonist has no choice but to face all of his immaturities with the imminent death of Zosima and its consequences. Although Alyosha had heard that a true saint should smell miraculously good, or at least do not present any smell at all, when Zosima died all the fanciful reality lived by Alyosha was torn apart, for the elder had a terrible smell. In order to understand and cope with the real world, Alexei faced a small period of confusion:

“Oho, so that's how we are now! We're snappish, just like other mortals! And we used to be an angel! Well, Alyoshka, you surprise me, do you know that? I mean it. It's a long time since anything here has surprised me. Still, I did always consider you an educated man...”

[...]

“Can it be just because your old man got himself stunk? Can it be that you seriously believed he’d start pulling off miracles?”

Rakitin exclaimed, passing again to the most genuine amazement.

“I believed, I believe, and I want to believe, and I will believe, and what more do you want!” Alyosha cried irritably.

“Precisely nothing, my dear. Ah, the devil! But even thirteen-year-old schoolboys don’t believe such things anymore! Still... ah, the devil... So you’ve gotten angry with your God now, you’ve rebelled: they passed you over for promotion, you didn’t get a medal for the feast day! Ah, you!”

Alyosha gave Rakitin a long look, his eyes somehow narrowed, and somehow flashed in them... but not anger at Rakitin.

“I do not rebel against my God, I simply ‘do not accept his world,’

” Alyosha suddenly smiled crookedly.<sup>25</sup>

At this extract it is noticeable Alexei’s reaction after his world of imagination and fantasy had fallen. When Zosima died and started to smell, Alyosha took some time to comprehend that all of his family and friends were humans, who, moreover, were in a different evolutionary stage than him. As the miracle after Zosima’s death did not occur, Alexei had to understand that, the same as him and the others, his spiritual guide was also a human. When Alyosha says “I do not rebel against my God, I simply ‘do not accept his world,’” at no time he was doubting his faith or religion, he just could not understand at that time why Zosima was the same as everyone else. After a short period, Alexei manages to understand the facts, conquering more maturity and confidence in what he can or cannot believe.

### 3. Conclusion

After all it was analyzed in this paper, there are three main things to be perceived and concluded: the first one is that Dostoevsky has managed to create in his writings an incredible tool, that was never seen before in this completeness, in literature’s history: polyphony. As Bakhtin defends, it is one of the greatest innovations ever made, since it has changed traditional and monologist world of literature completely. With long monologues made by several characters, such as the entire Karamazov family, Smerdyakov, Agrafena, Katerina and Zosima, just to mention some, Dostoevsky was able to create intense ideological conflicts, making religious and atheist ideals collide.

The Russian author made each character so strong and so convinced of what was being defended that he elevated the contrast between those two ideologies to a whole other level using polyphony. What could be a simple discussion became a serious and a dangerous plot, which includes bizarre

arguments, people driven to madness, physical fights and even suicide and murder.

The second thing I can conclude is that Alyosha has a role of a mediator in the narrative, trying as hard as he can to mitigate and to reduce conflicts mainly created by his family. It is possible to perceive that this role is sustained by a high presence of a Hebrew-Catholic Ethic, constructed by the religion propagated in Zosima's monastery. Thus all Alyosha's actions are surrounded by an ingrained religious influence, which affects the way he treats people.

In fact, Alexei comprehends that his role in the narrative is to appease great and conflictive tensions by not arguing or trying to convince but by setting a good example for the other characters. With actions like this, Alyosha was indeed able to reduce some conflicts, which could be a lot more serious if it were not for his presence. Although it may seem that Alexei becomes smaller than other characters, due to polyphony's complexity, everyone gets a voice, an ideology and a chance to speak in the novel, including Alyosha, who decides that sometimes his own good actions were better and more effective than his words in a discussion.

The last thing to be discussed in this paper is regarding Bakhtin's concept regarding Polyphony. Although it can be considered one of the most important remarks and analysis on Dostoevsky's way of writing, it is still important to acknowledge that ever since he developed such theories many writers both agreed and disagreed with his perspectives, getting a deeper and more complex understanding on the topic. Considering the complex Bakhtinian studies revolving a diverse number of areas, including education, there are a few remarks that could be briefly said regarding the character Alyosha.

Considering the polyphony and dialogism in an educational context, much can be improved in the learning and teaching system. Indeed, we could adapt the polyphonic precepts that in a dialogue there are plenty voices coexisting into an educational situation, in which the students would have strong voices during classes. Opposite to a traditional/monologic class, in which a professor would lead the students into his own ideas and ideologies, through this Bakhtinian perspective the professor would only guide the students into the learning process, that is, they are in control of their own learning, with the assistance of the professor.

As an exemplification of such theory I could easily take the novel *The Brothers Karamazov* and the argument regarding Alyosha being the conflicts mediator. Comparing his situation to a class, Alyosha could be seen as a polyphonic professor and his family and friends as the students. Alyosha, who is in a higher evolutionary process, comprehends the wrong actions and answers given by his students, but, instead of acting like an authoritarian professor, he gives space for his students to learn from his example and from

their own mistakes. Much of such argument could be further developed into a new article, solely devoted to a comparison between *The Brothers Karamazov* and an Educational context.

Therefore, in this paper we could comprehend not only the way Dostoevsky constructed polyphony, but also how Alyosha's discourse, which is highly influenced by ethical religion, functions among the others. Indeed, through polyphony, the Russian writer manages to give voice to a great amount of unimaginable kinds of people, including Alyosha himself who has an extremely important role in the novel. Alexei and the other characters are "... not voiceless slaves ..., but free people, capable of standing alongside their creator, capable of not agreeing with him and even of rebelling against him.",<sup>26</sup> which makes *The Brothers Karamazov* one of the greatest pieces of literature ever written.

## NOTES

1. Bakhtin 1984, p. 53–54.
2. Bakhtin 1984, p. 51.
3. Bakhtin 1984, p. 52.
4. Bakhtin 1984, p. 78.
5. Dostoevsky 2002, p. 4.
6. Dostoevsky 2002, p. 4.
7. Dostoevsky 2002, p. 3.
8. Bakhtin 1984, p. 97.
9. Cosinschi 2014.
10. Cosinschi 2014, p. 8.
11. Cosinschi 2014, p. 8.
12. Dostoevsky 2002, p. 77.
13. White 2007, p. 2.
14. The Portuguese quote is taken from Matos 2014, p. 67; the English quote is my own.
15. The Portuguese quote is taken from Matos 2014, p. 70; the English quote is my own.
16. Daines 2008, p. 10.
17. Dostoevsky 2002, p. 52.
18. Dostoevsky 2002, p. 133.
19. Dostoevsky 2002, p. 134.
20. Dostoevsky 2002, p. 355.
21. Dostoevsky 2002, p. 152.
22. Dostoevsky 2002, p. 222.
23. Dostoevsky 2002, p. 215–216.
24. Dostoevsky 2002, p. 30.
25. Dostoevsky 2002, p. 341.
26. Bakhtin 1984, p. 6.

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