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The Empty Throne: A Biopolitical Reading of Dostoevsky's "Rebellion" and "The Grand Inquisitor"

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Abstract

"Rebellion" and "The Grand Inquisitor," two adjoining chapters in Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, are usually read as a contest between two theologies: theodicy and anti-theodicy, freedom and obedience, Christ and institutional power. This article reads them instead as a contest between two forms of power over human life, what Foucault called biopolitics: power directed at the life of populations rather than at territory or law. Using Foucault's account of pastoral power as a vocabulary for care exercised over each soul and the flock as a whole, and Agamben's analysis of how modern government inherits its structure from theological models of providence, the article argues that Ivan's rebellion treats suffering as a scandal no providential plan can absorb, while the Inquisitor's program turns vulnerable life into the object of administration. Ivan's tortured children do not literally fit the Roman category of *homo sacer*, the figure who could be killed but not sacrificed; they occupy a structurally analogous position as lives included in creation as the price of "eternal harmony" yet excluded from any justice adequate to their suffering. The Inquisitor's three temptations, bread, miracle, and authority, function as pillars of biopolitical rule: managing material needs, capturing consciousness, and deciding who belongs to the community. Christ's silent kiss neither refutes nor replaces the Inquisitor's regime; it briefly suspends the apparatus by treating the speaker as a body rather than as a function of power. Building on Solovieva's reading of the Dostoevsky–Agamben relation, this article shifts attention from the Inquisitor as a corruption of Christianity to the Inquisitor as the limit case of pastoral care when care becomes total administration. The result is a revaluation of the Grand Inquisitor legend: Dostoevsky presents Christianity as internally exposed to the risk that solicitude, compassion, and the promise of happiness may become techniques for governing life.

Keywords: Dostoevsky; Agamben; Foucault; biopolitics; pastoral power; political theology; bare life; Grand Inquisitor; *oikonomia*; inoperativity



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1. Introduction: Why Biopolitics?

The chapters "Rebellion" and "The Grand Inquisitor" (Dostoevsky 2002, Book V, chaps. 4–5) have produced a durable interpretive tradition in Dostoevsky criticism. For more than a century, they have been read as a confrontation between two theologies, or more broadly, between two philosophies of history: theodicy and anti-theodicy, Russian Orthodoxy and Roman Catholic institutionalism, the freedom of faith and the security of obedience, the silent Christ and the eloquent Inquisitor.¹ These readings remain indispensable, but they often share one assumption: that the Legend's central conflict is primarily a conflict of ideas, doctrines, beliefs, or metaphysical commitments. On that assumption,

the suffering body, the tortured child, and the hungry crowd become illustrations of a theological argument rather than the ground from which the argument begins.

This article draws on a central insight of Dostoevsky studies that Ivan's discourse cannot be treated as a simple authorial thesis. Bakhtin's account of Dostoevskian polyphony is indispensable here because it prevents the Legend from being reduced to a detachable philosophical manifesto (Bakhtin 1984). Frank's intellectual biography situates the novel's final form within the late religious, political, and moral pressures of Dostoevsky's career (Frank 2002). Williams, in turn, shows how Dostoevsky's theological language is inseparable from dramatic encounter, freedom, and the refusal of coercive closure (Williams 2008). The present essay builds on that tradition by asking what happens when the bodies that Ivan and the Inquisitor discuss are read not as examples within an argument but as the site where theology becomes a technique for governing life.

I propose a different reading. Drawing on Michel Foucault's genealogy of pastoral power, Giorgio Agamben's account of bare life and sovereign exception, and Agamben's theological genealogy of economy and government, I read the two chapters as a confrontation between two forms of power over life. This is the domain Foucault called biopolitics: power that takes as its object not territory or property but human life itself, its hunger and survival, its beliefs and conduct, its populations and singular souls. In this argument, Foucault supplies the vocabulary of pastoral governmentality, Agamben supplies the theological-political architecture of sovereignty, economy, glory, and inoperativity, and Dostoevsky supplies the literary scene in which these categories are tested against suffering, freedom, dramatic embodiment, and ethical responsibility. Ivan's rebellion treats suffering life as a scandal; the Inquisitor's program turns vulnerable life into an object of administration. This biopolitical lens does not displace the chapters' theological content. It shows how their theological vocabulary also performs a political operation. Ivan's catalogue of tortured children is not simply an appeal to pity. It isolates exposed life at the limit of guilt, agency, and legal protection. The analogy with Agamben's *homo sacer* must therefore be understood structurally rather than literally: Ivan's children do not reproduce the Roman juridico-sacral status of sacred man, but Dostoevsky imagines in them a form of life included in the order of creation as the price of "eternal harmony" and yet excluded from any justice adequate to its suffering. That same regime, in turn, formulates the three central operations of pastoral governmentality: the management of subsistence, the captivation of consciousness through spectacle, and the sovereign discrimination between those who belong to the flock and those who burn.

A biopolitical reading makes visible a structural homology that standard readings often obscure. Ivan and the Inquisitor are not simple opposites. Both begin from the suffering body as an irreducible remainder that no theodicy can absorb. Ivan discovers this remainder in the tortured child and concludes that the providential plan, the *oikonomia* through which suffering is administered and harmonized into a final good, must be refused. The Inquisitor discovers the same remainder and reaches the opposite conclusion: human weakness becomes the condition that makes total government possible and, in his view, necessary. In Agamben's terms, Ivan's rebellion targets the governmental machine itself, while the Inquisitor's program perfects its operations by absorbing the Kingdom into the Government. The shepherd no longer awaits the return of an absent sovereign; he governs in the sovereign's place. The empty throne at the center of the Inquisitor's city, the throne of the Christ he claims to serve but has displaced in practice, is the symbol around which this political theology turns.

If "Rebellion" and "The Grand Inquisitor" form a single dialectical unit, the first posing the ontological problem and the second staging the governmental solution, then Christ's silence and kiss mark a countermovement that neither answers the Inquisitor on

argumentative terms nor installs a rival program. The silence withholds the recognition the monologue solicits, whether approval or condemnation, and thereby refuses participation in the apparatus of glory. The kiss, equally non-argumentative, restores contact at the level of the body and briefly suspends the circulation of power without founding a rival regime.

This reading extends Olga Solovieva's influential account of the relation between Dostoevsky and Agamben. Solovieva first identified the structural parallel between the Ivan/Alyosha dialogue and Agamben's movement from *Homo Sacer* to *The Open*. She argues that Ivan's discourse operates as an instance of the anthropological machine (the operation by which the human is produced through the exclusion of the animal or the not-yet-human), while Alyosha embodies what Agamben calls "great ignorance" (Solovieva 2016, p. 524), the openness of a non-anthropological relation. She also suggests that Dostoevsky constitutes the "unsaid" of Agamben's philosophical project (Solovieva 2016, p. 529, citing Agamben 2011, p. 7): the literary subtext that *Homo Sacer* and *The Open* partly elaborate. What her essay does not pursue, and what the present article develops, is the extension of this Dostoevsky–Agamben nexus into the apparatus of *The Kingdom and the Glory* and Foucault's *Security, Territory, Population*. The Legend of the Grand Inquisitor formulates, in literary form, the problem that Agamben's theological genealogy of economy and government later addresses philosophically: how the Kingdom and Government became separated, how pastoral care became sovereign administration, and how glory and acclamation came to legitimate the governmental machine. Dostoevsky's text is therefore not a literary example applied to theory, but an interlocutor that anticipates and, at key points, exceeds its later philosophical formalization.

This analogy has limits. Ivan's rebellion does not simply expose bare life; it also risks repeating the exclusionary logic it denounces. The child becomes the decisive counterexample to theodicy because Ivan isolates childhood as a limit case: not less than human, but placed outside the adult economy of guilt, responsibility, exchange, and retrospective justification. That placement gives the argument its ethical force, but it also reproduces the logic of exception at the level of critique. The chapter already contains the impasse that will later overtake Ivan: critique that begins from bare life risks returning to the same machine it seeks to unmask.

The argument proceeds in four stages. Section 2 reads "Rebellion" as the discovery of bare life and as the refusal of the providential economy that distributes suffering as collateral for a promised harmony. Section 3 reads "The Grand Inquisitor" as the consolidation of governmental power over life, from the three temptations to pastoral care and its rituals of legitimation. Section 4 turns to Christ's silence and kiss as gestures that deactivate the apparatus without replacing it. Section 5 returns to Ivan within the novel to show how the gesture he imagines exceeds the critical position from which he speaks.

2. "Rebellion" as the Discovery of Bare Life

2.1. The Child as Paradigm of Bare Life

Theodicy-centered readings have rightly treated Ivan's catalogue of suffering children as one of the novel's most forceful challenges to providential justification. Sutherland and Neiman, for example, help clarify the philosophical stakes of Ivan's refusal: the suffering child cannot be reconciled with any moral economy that would convert pain into the price of harmony. The present reading builds on that tradition but shifts the emphasis from the logical problem of evil to the political and theological status of the suffering body.

Ivan Karamazov's catalogue of tortured children in "Rebellion" is often read as the emotional crescendo of the novel, the sentimental case against divine justice. Yet the chapter functions as more than an appeal to pity because Ivan constructs his examples with striking ontological precision. He does not merely claim that suffering is terrible. He isolates a

category of being at the point where the usual justifications of suffering, guilt, discipline, punishment, moral education, or historical necessity, no longer hold. The children he describes are not sinners; they are below the age of guilt. They are dependents whose legal and social representation is radically mediated by others: parents, masters, courts, generals, or institutions. Ivan insists that children are “terribly remote from grown-up people, as if they were different beings, of a different nature” (Dostoevsky 2002, p. 238). This remoteness names an ontological and moral threshold. In Ivan’s discourse, the child occupies a zone between innocent humanity and exposed bodily vulnerability, between the juridical person who should be protected and the life that institutions fail to protect. This is the point at which Dostoevsky’s scene can be brought into structural relation with what Agamben calls bare life.

Solovieva identifies the structural logic of this positioning. Ivan begins not with a child but with an animal: Nekrasov’s horse, flogged “on its meek eyes” by its drunken owner (Dostoevsky 2002, p. 241). The movement from beaten horse to tortured child is more than rhetorical escalation. It works the threshold between species from below, placing the child where human and animal categories become unstable. Children “stand close to animals in Dostoevsky’s world” (Solovieva 2016, pp. 527–28), Solovieva writes, because their innocence excludes them from the adult order of guilt, responsibility, and juridical personhood, the very order within which suffering might be made meaningful. The tortured child has no political voice, no social identity, and no recourse. It is exposed to the violence of parents, generals, and the “educated” without being sacrificeable in any redemptive sense.

In Agamben’s terms, the tortured child becomes structurally analogous to *homo sacer*, the figure who “may be killed and yet not sacrificed” (Agamben 1998, p. 8). The analogy is not juridically exact, since Ivan’s children are not literally placed outside law in the Roman sense. Its force lies elsewhere: they are included in creation as the price of “eternal harmony” while excluded from any possible justice adequate to what they undergo. Agamben gives this structure a precise name: the “relation of exception,” through which “something is included solely through its exclusion” (Agamben 1998, p. 18). Ivan’s children occupy an analogous position within the moral economy of theodicy. The little girl flogged to death by her educated parents is acknowledged by the court only to have the violence against her absorbed into legality through forgiveness. The boy torn apart by the general’s dogs dies before his mother’s eyes as an exercise of sovereign prerogative. In each case, the child is not simply outside the political order. It reveals what Agamben calls “the original—if concealed—nucleus of sovereign power”: the bare life upon which sovereignty is erected (Agamben 1998, p. 6).

Ivan’s examples acquire biopolitical force through their insistence on non-sacrificial suffering. The children in his catalogue do not die for a purpose. Their suffering produces no redemption, illustrates no moral, and serves no providential end. It is, as Solovieva emphasizes, “non-sacrificial and unredeemable” (Solovieva 2016, p. 528). This distinction is central to Agamben’s account of *homo sacer*, whose death has no liturgical, legal, or redemptive value. Ivan’s catalogue performs the same reduction. The child’s suffering is not a sacrifice to God, a cost of progress, or a test of faith. It is the residue of a creation that includes bare life as the material on which the machinery of harmony is built. Ivan’s refusal of the architects’ bargain denies that such life can serve as the legitimate foundation of any theological or political order.

2.2. *The Rejection of Theodicy as the Rejection of the Oikonomia*

Ivan’s rebellion does not take the simple form of metaphysical atheism. He returns the ticket. This distinction, often weakened by readings that treat “Rebellion” as a chapter

of modern atheism, is essential to the biopolitical argument. At the decisive moment, Ivan grants God hypothetically, or rhetorically, in order to refuse the providential plan through which the suffering he has described is administered and harmonized into a final good. “It’s not that I don’t accept God, Alyosha, I just most respectfully return him the ticket” (Dostoevsky 2002, p. 245). The ticket grants admission to the eschatological concert, the final harmony in which suffering will be revealed as the necessary cost of divine order. Ivan’s gesture is therefore less a simple metaphysical denial than an ethical withdrawal from an economy that justifies present suffering by appealing to a future reconciliation.

Agamben’s *The Kingdom and the Glory* clarifies the stakes of this refusal. The book distinguishes two paradigms derived from Christian theology. Political theology grounds sovereign transcendence in the figure of the single God. Economic theology, by contrast, replaces transcendence with oikonomia: an immanent ordering of divine and human life, domestic rather than political in the strict sense (Agamben 2011, p. 1). For Agamben, modern biopolitics derives primarily from the second paradigm, the paradigm of economy, government, and administration. Oikonomia manages, distributes, arranges, and optimizes. Its logic is not law but plan, dispensation, and the administration of life toward an end known fully only to the administrator.

In his account of the providential machine, Agamben traces this paradigm from Stoic cosmology through patristic theology to its explicit secular resumption in German idealism (Agamben 2011, p. 5). Hegel, he notes, still understood the equivalence between his thesis on the rational government of the world and the theological doctrine of providence. His philosophy of history presented itself openly as theodicy, the justification of God in history. Schelling similarly summarized his philosophy through the figure of oikonomia. Agamben’s genealogy shows that theodicy is not separate from government. It is one of government’s deep logics: the framework in which present suffering becomes the collateral effect of a rational administration of the whole. Modern governmental reason reproduces this structure whenever it treats damage as the necessary side effect of a plan whose final rationality is claimed in advance.

Read through this genealogy, Ivan’s rebellion becomes more than a moral protest against undeserved suffering. It becomes a structural refusal of the governmental machine. His target is the oikonomia itself, the dispensation through which suffering is administered and justified by a future harmony. The “eternal harmony” he rejects is the eschatological *telos* that legitimates the administration of present life. The children’s tears are the collateral damage of a providential machine whose “architects” compute suffering as the acceptable price of a plan whose rationality only they can discern. To return the ticket is to withdraw from this economic-theological paradigm and to refuse the subordination of singular life to any schema of administration, salvation, or optimization.

2.3. *The Anthropological Machine and Ivan’s Paradox*

This reading cannot end by celebrating Ivan’s critique. It must also identify the paradox on which that critique depends: Ivan constructs the child as the paradigmatic victim by isolating the child from responsibility, guilt, and historical agency. The child is not rendered less than human; rather, childhood is treated as a limit case that exposes what adult moral and political categories cannot absorb. Ivan’s humanitarian protest therefore depends on an operation akin to the one it condemns. His catalogue requires the child to stand outside the adult economy of sin, citizenship, agency, and exchange so that the child’s suffering can function as the irreducible counterexample to theodicy. Ivan needs exposed life as his foundational figure in the way sovereignty needs the exception: as the excluded inclusion on which the structure depends.

Solovieva identifies a second dimension of this paradox. Ivan is not only a critic of the machine; he is also the artist who invents the Legend. As a philosophical poem, the Legend becomes his attempt to imagine a non-instrumental relation to the object of critique, a form of *désœuvrement* akin to what Agamben, following Kojève, associates with the remnant of “art, love, and play” at the end of history (Solovieva 2016, p. 527, citing Agamben 2004, p. 9). Yet the attempt is undermined by the chapter that precedes it. “Rebellion” establishes premises—the irreducibility of bare life, the refusal of *oikonomia*, and the impossibility of accepting the price of harmony—that the Legend cannot overcome. Dostoevsky stages the relation between the two chapters as dissonance: the refusal of reconciliation in lived reality set against the attempt to imagine reconciliation in aesthetic form (Solovieva 2016, p. 528).

The consequence is that Ivan can expose the governmental machine, catalogue its victims, and refuse the economy of justification; he can even invent, in the aesthetic space of the Legend, a figure of interruption. Yet he cannot inhabit that interruption. Solovieva’s emphasis on Ivan’s radical honesty clarifies the point: his compulsion to follow critique to its end leaves him without a practice of deactivation. The gesture that interrupts its operation, however briefly, belongs not to Ivan but to the silent figure at the center of his poem. It is to that figure, and to the apparatus it confronts, that we now turn.

3. “The Grand Inquisitor” as the Governmental Machine

3.1. *The Three Temptations as the Three Pillars of Biopolitical Rule*

Readings centered on Russian Orthodoxy, Roman Catholic institutionalism, and spiritual freedom have often treated the Inquisitor as the figure of ecclesiastical betrayal or as the spokesman for obedience against faith. Mochulsky, Hackel, and Guardini remain important in this respect because they locate the Legend within Dostoevsky’s religious critique of institutional power. The biopolitical reading proposed here does not reject that tradition. It changes the emphasis: the danger lies in the way solicitude, protection, and the promise of happiness become mechanisms of obedience.

The Grand Inquisitor’s monologue, set in sixteenth-century Seville, is organized around his reading of the three wilderness temptations: bread, miracle, and authority. He accuses Christ of having refused them and claims that he and his Church have accepted them in Christ’s name. Standard readings treat this sequence as a philosophical dispute about freedom and happiness: Christ chose freedom; the Inquisitor chose peace. Freedom here should not be narrowed to political autonomy alone. In Dostoevsky, freedom is also ethical responsibility, existential exposure, and the metaphysical burden of choosing without coercive guarantees. The Inquisitor’s regime is biopolitical precisely because it promises to relieve human beings of that burden at every level: bodily need, moral anxiety, communal belonging, and spiritual uncertainty. A biopolitical reading shows that the temptations also function as instruments of governmental rationality, the pillars on which the pastoral management of populations rests.

The first temptation, bread or “earthly bread” (Dostoevsky 2002, p. 253), concerns the management of *zoe*: biological life, hunger, and bodily need. The Inquisitor’s formulation is direct: “Feed them first, then ask virtue of them!” (Dostoevsky 2002, p. 253). Christ refuses to turn stones to bread because he will not purchase obedience through the satisfaction of need. The Inquisitor accepts the temptation because he understands that control over subsistence grounds all other power. The shepherd feeds the flock, and that act establishes the pastoral relation. Whoever controls the distribution of bread controls the threshold between life and death, inclusion and abandonment. The regime begins where biopolitics begins: with the capture of life through the administration of its basic needs.

The second temptation, miracle, concerns the management of meaning and captivation. The Inquisitor knows that “Man seeks not so much God as miracles” (Dostoevsky 2002, p. 255). Miracle absorbs attention, stabilizes obedience, and prevents the governed subject from encountering freedom as a burden. Agamben’s account of animal captivity (*Benommenheit*) in *The Open* offers a structural parallel: miracle functions as a political disinhibitor, holding consciousness within an administered milieu (Agamben 2004, pp. 50–63). The Inquisitor offers mystery and miracle in place of freedom because captivation is more durable than consent. The subject does not simply choose obedience; he inhabits it as an environment.

The third temptation, authority, concerns obedience and the sovereign decision about who belongs to the flock. The Inquisitor has accepted “the sword of Caesar” and declared himself the sole ruler of the earth (Dostoevsky 2002, p. 258). Here the pastoral and the sovereign converge: the shepherd becomes judge, and the minister becomes king. Bread and miracle gather the flock; authority sorts it. The auto-da-fé that opens the Legend, where nearly a hundred heretics are burned before the king, the court, the knights, and the cardinals (Dostoevsky 2002, p. 249), displays the sovereign ban in liturgical form. The community is defined by the exclusion of those who refuse its terms.

Together, the temptations form a single governmental apparatus. Bread captures biological life; miracle seizes consciousness; authority excludes those who resist that capture. The Inquisitor understands these instruments as interdependent. His regime manages life from hunger to belief to communal order. This is the literary form of what Agamben, following Foucault, calls the introduction of economy into political practice: government as “nothing other than the art of exercising power in the form of economy” (Foucault 2007, pp. 93–95; Agamben 2011, p. 109).

3.2. Pastoral Power and the Care of the Flock

Foucault’s analysis of pastoral power in *Security, Territory, Population* supplies the vocabulary for describing the Inquisitor’s mode of care. In Foucault’s genealogy, pastoral power differs from sovereignty over territory. It rules through care rather than primarily through law. It operates through knowledge, solicitude, and the individualized management of each member of the flock. The shepherd must know the interior life of those he governs and address each weakness in particular (Foucault 2007, pp. 126–35). Agamben extends this account by tracing its theological root to the *oikonomia psychon*, the “economy of the souls” (Agamben 2011, p. 17). Pastoral authority therefore governs *omnes et singulatim*, all and each at once.

The Inquisitor embodies this paradigm. His monologue is addressed to one prisoner in a cell, the singulatim; his auto-da-fé governs the multitude who kiss the ground beneath his feet, the omnes. His rule operates on both scales simultaneously. He promises not justice but happiness: “We shall give them quiet, humble happiness, the happiness of feeble creatures, such as they were created” (Dostoevsky 2002, pp. 258–59). This is the happiness of administered life, produced by a regime of care that claims to know each subject’s weakness better than the subject knows it himself. The Inquisitor presents his rule as a labor of love: “We love mankind more than you do” (Dostoevsky 2002, p. 257); “we will allow them to sin, too—they are weak and powerless, and they will love us like children for allowing them to sin” (Dostoevsky 2002, p. 259). He governs through knowledge of weakness, converts subjection into solicitude, and frames domination as sacrifice on behalf of the flock.

The Inquisitor should therefore not be read simply as a failed or degenerate shepherd. He is pastoral power carried to its limit. Readings that treat him as a corruption of Christianity, as an institution’s betrayal of Christ’s message, remain within a moral framework

that the biopolitical analysis complicates. Pastoral care in Dostoevsky's theological universe remains larger than domination; the Inquisitor reveals the point at which care, when institutionalized as total administration, becomes indistinguishable from rule over life. He has not abandoned the shepherd's vocation; he has completed its governmental tendency. If the shepherd's charge is to care for the flock in its totality and individuality, to know and manage each soul's weakness, and to exercise authority as solicitude, then the Inquisitor's regime becomes the limit case of this paradigm. Care expands until it absorbs judgment, punishment, administration, and theology into the single operation of tending the flock. The genealogy Agamben traces from Trinitarian *oikonomia* through medieval angelology to modern governmentality finds here its literary anticipation: the shepherd who absorbs the Kingdom into the Government.

This does not mean that the Inquisitor should be reduced to an administrative function or treated as a mere allegory of biopolitical rule. Dostoevsky gives him a literary density that exceeds the theoretical scheme: he is old, exhausted, severe, wounded by the burden of human unhappiness, and tempted by the paternal desire to spare others the anguish of freedom. His monologue is therefore not simply the speech of an institution. It is also the confession of a man who has converted compassion into domination. The biopolitical reading is strongest when it preserves this dramatic doubleness: the Inquisitor is both an operator of pastoral government and a suffering figure trapped inside the logic he defends.

3.3. *The Oikonomia of the Inquisitor: Sovereignty in Name, Government in Practice*

Agamben's distinction between Kingdom and Government provides the decisive framework for the Inquisitor's confession. The Inquisitor separates Christ's formal authority from actual administration. His declaration, "We corrected your deed and based it on miracle, mystery, and authority" (Dostoevsky 2002, p. 256), preserves Christ as the name of sovereignty while transferring government to the institution that claims to serve him. Agamben's figure of the *roi mehaignié*, the wounded king who "reigns but does not govern" (Agamben 2011, p. 87), clarifies this partition. In the Legend, this arrangement is not inverted so much as radicalized: Christ remains the absent name of sovereignty, while the Inquisitor exercises government in that name and renders sovereignty functionally inoperative. The medieval distinction between *potentia absoluta* and *potentia ordinata* offers a precise vocabulary for this split: Christ is affirmed as absolute power, while the Inquisitor monopolizes ordered administration. The Kingdom remains as legitimating fiction; the Government is real.

Christ's return to Seville disrupts this arrangement. The vacancy at the center of the apparatus is briefly filled; the absent sovereign appears. The Inquisitor's response is immediate. He imprisons Christ, visits him at night, and delivers the monologue that constitutes the Legend. The urgency of the scene follows from the structure of this order. The governmental machine must restore the separation between Kingdom and Government by sending Christ away. The final command, "Go and do not come again . . . do not come at all . . . never, never!" (Dostoevsky 2002, p. 262), is therefore not merely personal rejection. It is the condition of the Inquisitor's rule: the minister can govern only while sovereignty remains absent.

3.4. *Glory and Acclamation: The Auto-da-Fé as Doxological Event*

The auto-da-fé that opens the Legend is usually treated as an image of the Inquisitor's cruelty or as the dramatic setting for Christ's reappearance. It also functions as a doxological event, a ceremony in which the population's acclamation is directed toward the Inquisitor and helps constitute his power. In *The Kingdom and the Glory*, Agamben traces acclamation from early Christian doxology through Byzantine ceremony to modern public opinion and

consensus (Agamben 2011, pp. 177–83). Following Schmitt, he identifies consensus as the modern form of acclamation, whether expressed by a physically gathered multitude or by communicative procedures. The auto-da-fé is the Inquisitor's acclamatory apparatus. The hundred thousand who "kiss the ground" under the old man's feet (Dostoevsky 2002, p. 249) validate sovereign-pastoral authority through public submission. The heretics who burn are the excluded exception through which the unity of the flock is displayed. Spectacle is therefore not accessory to power; it is the glory through which the governmental machine sustains itself.

The Inquisitor's secret is managed consent rather than terror alone. Agamben's account of contemporary democracy as a regime in which *oikonomia* is resolved into glory and doxology helps clarify the structure of the scene (Agamben 2011, pp. 242–46). The flock obeys because it has received bread, miracle, and mystery, and in return it renders glory: acclamation, ritualized submission, and gratitude performed in public. The auto-da-fé completes this economy of consent. As the sovereign exception displays what the juridical order excludes, the burning heretic displays what the acclamatory order consumes. The heretic burns so that the flock may acclaim.

At the center of this arrangement stands the void that Agamben identifies as the ultimate structure of governmental power: "The apparatus of glory finds its perfect cipher in the majesty of the empty throne" (Agamben 2011, p. 211). The Inquisitor's city is organized around precisely this absence. Christ's throne is empty; the Inquisitor governs in his name; the flock acclaims without fully knowing what it acclaims. *Oikonomia* runs the machine, glory sustains it, and at the center, where the sovereign should sit, there is absence. Christ's return threatens to fill that void and collapse the separation between Kingdom and Government. The threat is not a rival ideology or a counter-revolution but the sovereign's presence itself. The next question is what form Christ's response takes and why it escapes the logic of the apparatus.

4. Christ's Kiss as Messianic Inoperativity

4.1. *The Silence as the Refusal of the Doxological Circuit*

Literary and aesthetic readings of the Legend have often emphasized the opposition between the Inquisitor's speech and Christ's silence. Belknap and Miller are especially useful here because they treat the scene not as a detachable philosophical thesis but as a dramatic structure built from voice, silence, gesture, and narrative framing. The present reading follows that literary emphasis while asking what kind of power Christ's silence refuses. Silence is not only a theological mystery or a narrative technique; it also interrupts the demand that power be answered on power's own terms.

Christ does not speak during the Inquisitor's monologue. In the biopolitical frame developed here, that silence has a specific function: it refuses acclamation. The Inquisitor's monologue demands a response. Approval would sanction the governmental machine; condemnation would still recognize its terms. Either response would enter the circuit of glory that sustains the apparatus.

Christ gives neither. He does not approve, condemn, argue, refute, or offer a counter-program. His silence is not defeat. It withdraws from the logic within which defeat and victory become meaningful. The doxological circuit requires participation: the governed acclaim, the governor returns recognition, and the exchange closes. Christ's silence leaves the circuit incomplete. The Inquisitor asks the sovereign to acknowledge the minister's work; Christ's refusal leaves glory without reciprocity.

This deactivation differs from both revolution and resignation. A revolutionary Christ would seize the institution, overthrow the Inquisitor, and install a new government. A resigned Christ would accept the Inquisitor's argument and depart as a defeated sovereign.

Christ does neither. His presence is neither a claim to power nor a concession of power. It occupies a zone the Inquisitor's regime cannot process. Agamben names this zone inoperativity. The apparatus of glory captures inoperativity as its internal motor (Agamben 2011, pp. 243–47), but Christ's silence presents it in a form this order cannot absorb: a presence that occupies the throne without operating it.

4.2. *The Kiss as Profanation*

If the silence deactivates the doxological circuit, the kiss profanes the apparatus of power. For Agamben, profanation reverses sacralization by restoring to common use what the sacred has separated and captured (Agamben 2007, p. 82). The sacred is not simply the holy in a devotional sense. It is the operation by which a practice, object, or life is removed from common use and confined to a separate sphere, where access is mediated by ritual or institution. The Inquisitor's Church has sacralized Christ in this sense: it has separated him from common life and administered access to him through spectacle and ritual. The kiss undoes this separation. Christ touches the Inquisitor not as sovereign, judge, or priest, but as one body touches another, "on his bloodless, ninety-year-old lips" (Dostoevsky 2002, p. 262).²

Dostoevsky's detail is pointed. The kiss falls on the lips, the organ of speech and the instrument through which the Inquisitor has just articulated the governmental machine. The kiss does not answer the speech; it touches the organ that produced it. It treats the Inquisitor not as shepherd, minister, sovereign, or functionary, but as a mortal body capable of being kissed. This is profanation in Agamben's sense: the restoration to common bodily use of what the apparatus had separated. For an instant, the Inquisitor ceases to appear only as an operator of power and appears as a person exposed to contact.

The kiss does not convert the Inquisitor. Dostoevsky is careful on this point: "The old man shudders. Something stirs at the corners of his mouth" (Dostoevsky 2002, p. 262), but what stirs is not repentance or illumination. The machine is not destroyed. It is held suspended. Solovieva's formulation captures the register of the scene: the kiss produces "a melancholy, disenchanting disengagement, a 'mastered relation,' between them" (Solovieva 2016, p. 527). This is not reconciliation in a redemptive or dialectical sense. It is inoperativity, the operation that renders other operations inactive by exposing the void on which they depend.

The Inquisitor's response confirms the gesture's force. He "walks to the door, opens it, and says to him: 'Go and do not come again . . . do not come at all . . . never, never!'" (Dostoevsky 2002, p. 262). He releases Christ rather than burning him, imprisoning him further, or absorbing him into the institution. Faced with a gesture it cannot process, the governmental machine expels the sovereign presence, restores the vacancy at its center, and resumes its work. The city, the auto-da-fé, and the obedient multitude remain. Yet the circuit of glory has been interrupted, and the lips that voiced sovereign-pastoral power have been touched by a gesture that belongs to no administered order.

4.3. *The "Saved Night" and the Messianic Remainder*

The kiss releases Christ into the night. He leaves for "the dark squares of the city" (Dostoevsky 2002, p. 262), a space outside the walls of the governmental city, the institution, and the apparatus. Solovieva reads this departure through Agamben's Benjaminian figure of the "saved night," a messianic remnant saved not from its unsavability but as unsavable (Solovieva 2016, p. 527, citing Agamben 2004, p. 82). The "saved night" names a relation to what cannot be recovered by any economy of redemption.

For Solovieva, the saved night of the Legend does not restage Christ's redemptive sacrifice and does not recover a lost object. It enters a forgiving relation with Christ's own

failure to save and redeem, his “unsavable” death as bare life (Solovieva 2016, p. 527). The distinction matters. The kiss is not a second Crucifixion and not a second redemption. It acknowledges the persistence of the regime, the continuation of the auto-da-fé, and the Inquisitor’s unshaken power without conceding that this order exhausts life. Christ enters the night not as victor but as the “unsavable saved,” a figure of life that withdraws from governmental totalization without transcending the world it inhabits.

This is the minimal messianic event that Agamben repeatedly describes: not the end of the machine, but its suspension. In Paul’s messianic vocabulary, as Agamben reads it, Christ at the parousia “renders inoperative [katargesei] every ruler and every authority and power” before handing the Kingdom back to the Father (1 Cor. 15:24; Agamben 2005, pp. 109–13). The Christ of the Legend performs this katargesis in miniature. He does not destroy ruler, authority, or power; the Inquisitor keeps all three. He renders them inoperative for the duration of a kiss, the span of a night, the instant in which the machine idles and shows its empty center. Agamben asks at the end of *The Kingdom and the Glory* whether inoperativity can be thought outside the apparatus of glory (Agamben 2011, pp. 246–47). The Legend offers a figure rather than a doctrinal answer: the night into which Christ walks after the kiss, the darkness outside the governmental city.

The Inquisitor’s command, “Go and do not come again,” is therefore not Christ’s defeat. It is the resumption of rule after interruption. The Inquisitor is not converted, and his power remains, in Solovieva’s terms, “unchallenged, maybe even blessed” (Solovieva 2016, pp. 526–27). But the text leaves a residue that cannot be integrated: the kiss “burns in his heart” (Dostoevsky 2002, p. 262). What remains is not a conviction or a new doctrine, but a trace. The city remains intact. The auto-da-fé can continue. Yet the kiss leaves behind a bodily memory that cannot be translated into obedience, doctrine, or public acclamation. Ivan, the author of this scene, cannot inhabit the gesture he has imagined. That limit becomes the subject of Section 5.

5. Ivan’s Breakdown and the Limit of Critical Biopolitics

Many readings of “Rebellion” and “The Grand Inquisitor” treat them as self-contained chapters and leave aside what happens to their author within the novel. Ivan Karamazov, the creator of the Legend, goes mad. The movement from the tavern conversation with Alyosha through Fyodor Pavlovich’s murder to Ivan’s dialogue with the devil and collapse at the trial is not a subplot external to the Legend’s philosophical argument. It completes that argument structurally. Alyosha’s quiet remark at the close of “Rebellion,” “That is rebellion” (Dostoevsky 2002, p. 263; cited in Solovieva 2016, p. 529), names the condition whose consequences Ivan will be unable to survive.

Once the providential oikonomia is refused, the moral architecture that depends on it collapses as well. If the ticket is returned and no scheme of administration or salvation can justify the suffering of a single child, then inherited prohibitions lose their theological ground. Smerdyakov’s murderous corollary, “all things are lawful,” is not simply a misunderstanding of Ivan’s position. It is one possible extension of a critique that dismantles providential order without providing another ground for moral obligation. Smerdyakov kills; Dmitri is convicted; Ivan, who withdrew his protection and reserved “complete freedom” for his wishes (Dostoevsky 2002, p. 143; cited in Solovieva 2016, p. 524), occupies the position Thomas Carl Wall calls “radical passivity” (Wall 1999; Solovieva 2016, p. 524): held responsible for outcomes he did not actively will.

Ivan’s hallucinated dialogue with the devil marks the endpoint of this trajectory. Solovieva describes Ivan as a thinker of “absolute, radical honesty, who knows all about the evil that is present in the human condition” (Solovieva 2016, p. 525). That honesty forces him to pursue his analysis to the point of exhaustion: conversation with the devil, whom

he despises but understands. The devil is the final figure produced by the anthropological machine in its critical mode, the operator of the caesura between human and non-human carried to its vanishing point. Ivan's breakdown is therefore not mere psychological weakness. It is the implosion of critique without a practice of deactivation. He can name the governmental machine, count its victims, and reject its economy of justification, but he cannot interrupt its operation in life.

Ivan's collapse also returns us to the paradox set out in Section 2.3. There, his critique was shown to depend on a figure, the child as exposed life outside the adult economy of guilt, agency, and retrospective justification, that the critique itself could not inhabit. The devil scene is the long working out of that dependence. Having grounded his rebellion on a life reduced to the zone of exception, Ivan finds that his own life, when his protections fail and his wishes are withdrawn, occupies a structurally analogous position: agency without responsibility, presence without intervention, what Wall and Solovieva name radical passivity. The figure he needed for his critique becomes the figure that overtakes him. The anthropological machine produces its operator's collapse not as an external punishment but as the inevitable extension of the operation itself. Ivan does not break down because his diagnosis was wrong. He breaks down because his diagnosis required a figure of vulnerability that no critical position can finally stand outside of. The same operation that made the child available as the irreducible counterexample to theodicy makes the critic available to his own machine.

Against Ivan's collapse, Dostoevsky places Alyosha, whom Solovieva reads as the embodiment of "great ignorance" (Solovieva 2016, p. 524), the openness of the non-anthropological relation. Alyosha does not refute Ivan's catalogue, defend providence, or offer a counter-theodicy. His response to "Rebellion" and the Legend is a gesture: "Alyosha got up, went over to him in silence, and softly kissed him on the lips" (Dostoevsky 2002, p. 263). The gesture repeats Christ's kiss of the Inquisitor. This repetition, from Christ's fictional kiss inside the Legend to Alyosha's embodied kiss in the narrative frame, forms one of the article's central lines of connection. In both cases, the kiss is not an argument or a program. It touches the operator of the machine as a body rather than as a function, suspending the apparatus for as long as the contact lasts.

Ivan's response is revealing: "That's plagiarism! [. . .] You stole that from my poem!" (Dostoevsky 2002, p. 263). He recognizes the gesture because he invented it. But he invented it in the aesthetic space of the philosophical poem, as a fictional resolution he could imagine but not embody. Alyosha performs what Ivan can only narrate. The difference does not lie in intelligence or moral superiority. It lies in each brother's relation to the anthropological machine. Ivan operates it even while criticizing it, producing bare life as his foundational figure and collapsing under the consequences of that production. Alyosha inhabits "great ignorance," not as innocence before evil but as openness that refuses its caesura between human and non-human. In a literary and micro-ethical register, his kiss resembles what Foucault calls counter-conduct (Foucault 2007, pp. 193–226): not the abolition of government as such, but the refusal to be governed in this particular way, according to the principles of the anthropological machine.

Ivan's collapse marks the limit of a purely critical biopolitics: a thought capable of diagnosing the governmental machine but unable to imagine the life that persists beyond it. Solovieva argues that this limit structures Agamben's own trajectory. *Homo Sacer*, with its account of bare life as the concealed nucleus of sovereign power, corresponds to Ivan's rebellion. *The Open*, with its Benjaminian gesture toward reconciliation, corresponds to the Legend's imagined profanation (Solovieva 2016, p. 528). Extending the parallel into *The Kingdom and the Glory* clarifies the apparatus at stake, but it does not remove the problem Solovieva identifies: how to move from diagnosis to profanation, from analysis of the

apparatus to the gesture that deactivates it. The kiss interrupts the machine; it does not dismantle it. The Inquisitor's city remains. Ivan goes mad.

6. Conclusions: The Biopolitical Dostoevsky

Dostoevsky is more than a precursor or illustration of biopolitical theory. The two chapters examined here, "Rebellion" and "The Grand Inquisitor," function as literary interlocutors for the philosophical projects of Foucault and Agamben. Foucault's pastoral governmentality, Agamben's architecture of sovereignty, economy, glory, and inoperativity, and Dostoevsky's dramatized scene converge here; together, they test biopolitical categories against suffering, freedom, embodiment, and ethical responsibility. The Legend casts in narrative form the questions that Foucault's genealogy and Agamben's *Homo Sacer*, *The Kingdom and the Glory*, and *The Open* address in different registers: what form of power governs life in the name of life's good, what life exceeds that governance, and what gesture can suspend the machine without founding a new regime. Solovieva's claim that Dostoevsky forms the "unsaid" of Agamben's project (Solovieva 2016, p. 529) grows sharper once the analysis reaches beyond *Homo Sacer* and *The Open* to *The Kingdom and the Glory*, for the novel stages dramatically the separation of sovereignty and administration that Agamben reconstructs genealogically.

The article's central claim is therefore not that Dostoevsky anticipates modern biopolitical theory. It is that he presses that theory toward problems it cannot resolve on its own. Agamben clarifies the structure of the apparatus; Dostoevsky shows how that apparatus becomes psychologically persuasive, ethically tempting, and dramatically embodied. The Grand Inquisitor is neither an administrative mouthpiece nor a personification of biopolitical rule. He is a wounded figure who has turned paternal concern into management and the desire for human happiness into a system of obedience. Here Dostoevsky's representation of Christianity turns most unsettling. In the Legend, Christianity does not stand opposed to political power from the outside. It is exposed from within to the risk that care, solicitude, forgiveness, and the promise of happiness may become techniques for governing life.

This clarifies the article's relation to the critical tradition of the Grand Inquisitor. Readings centered on theodicy, anti-theodicy, Orthodoxy, Roman Catholic institutionalism, freedom, and obedience remain indispensable. The present reading does not replace them but shifts their emphasis. Ivan's rebellion protests divine justice, yes, but it also refuses the providential economy that asks the suffering child to become the price of harmony. The Inquisitor figures ecclesiastical betrayal, but he marks something further: the limit case of pastoral care once care becomes total administration. Christ's silence and kiss signal transcendence and divine mercy, yet they also suspend the demand for justification, acclamation, and rule. In each case, theological conflict becomes legible as a struggle over the government of vulnerable life.

The text distributes this struggle across four figures. Ivan discovers bare life as the remainder no theodicy can absorb and returns the ticket to providential oikonomia. The Grand Inquisitor builds a perfected pastoral regime, organizing bread, miracle, and authority into a unified apparatus sustained through acclamation and glory. Christ's silence and kiss constitute the messianic gesture of inoperativity, a profanation that interrupts this order without destroying it and withdraws into the "saved night" that discloses the void at the center of government. Alyosha repeats that gesture at the level of the narrative frame. His kiss does not solve Ivan's rebellion, but it carries Christ's non-sovereign response from the invented Legend into the embodied relation between the brothers. These figures do more than dramatize philosophical categories. They test those categories by returning them to voice, gesture, body, and narrative relation.

Freedom proves decisive here. In Dostoevsky it means more than political autonomy or resistance to administration. It also names ethical responsibility, existential exposure, and the metaphysical burden of choosing without coercive guarantees. The Inquisitor's regime is biopolitical precisely because it promises to relieve human beings of that burden at every level: bodily need, moral anxiety, communal belonging, spiritual uncertainty. His offer terrifies because it is humane. He rules not through violence alone, but through the promise that people will be fed, forgiven, protected, and spared the anguish of freedom. Domination, Dostoevsky shows, may speak the language of love, and the deepest threat to freedom may arise from a pastoral desire to protect human beings from freedom itself.

The reading also exposes limits shared by the text and the theory. Negri's question about Agamben, "How can someone like Agamben, who has always borne death in mind in his phenomenological descriptions, positively construe the idea of redemption?" (Negri 2003, cited in Solovieva 2016, p. 529), is also Dostoevsky's question about Ivan. The tension between diagnosis and reconciliation structures both Agamben's movement from *Homo Sacer* to *The Open* and Dostoevsky's movement from "Rebellion" to "The Grand Inquisitor." In each case, the reconciling gesture, the kiss, the saved night, the Benjaminian *désœuvrement*, remains haunted by the diagnosis that precedes it. Bare life persists within the reconciliatory project, as Solovieva's reading of the leopard's skin in Titian's painting suggests (Solovieva 2016, p. 528). The skinned animal beneath the nymph is at once the leopard that Isaiah's prophecy imagined at peace with the kid and the analogue of Ivan's tortured child, the unsavable remainder no reconciliation can absorb.

The biopolitical Dostoevsky is therefore not a Dostoevsky translated into the vocabulary of Foucault and Agamben. He is a Dostoevsky who poses the questions first, in the literary form of the philosophical poem, the unreliable narrator, the dramatic monologue, and the kiss that answers without refuting. Ivan's rebellion insists that exposed life cannot serve as the foundation of any legitimate order, and that the governmental calculation of suffering as collateral damage remains continuous with the theodicies it claims to supersede. The gesture capable of interrupting that logic is not an argument, a doctrine, or a rival institution, but a touch: a kiss on bloodless lips, carried into the dark squares of a Sevillian night, whose warmth the apparatus can neither administer nor extinguish.

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Notes

- ¹ The critical tradition on these chapters is extensive. Representative studies of the theodicy/anti-theodicy problem include Sutherland (1977) and Neiman (2002). For readings centered on Russian Orthodoxy and Roman Catholic institutionalism, see Mochulsky (1967) and Hackel (1983). On the opposition between spiritual freedom and institutional obedience, see Guardini ([1932] 1977). For literary and aesthetic approaches to the opposition between Christ's silence and the Inquisitor's speech, see Miller (2008) and Belknap (1990).
- ² Solovieva, in her summary of the scene, places the kiss "on the cheek" (Solovieva 2016, p. 526). Dostoevsky's text in the Pevear–Volokhonsky translation reads "on his bloodless, ninety-year-old lips" (Dostoevsky 2002, p. 262), which is also consistent with the Russian original ("тихо целует его в его бескровные девяностолетние уста"). The present argument proceeds from the lips reading because it is faithful to the text and because the kiss's force as profanation depends on its falling on the organ that has just produced the governmental monologue. The cheek would mark a gesture of farewell or fraternal recognition; the lips mark contact with the speaking apparatus itself.

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