


Summer 2024 Community Seminar  
Dostoevsky's *Brothers Karamazov*  
The Grand Inquisitor



**Thursday, July 11  
7pm-9:30pm**

Read This Text Before Attending The Community Seminar:

 [DostoevskyF-Grand-Inquisitor-text.pdf](#)

We will discuss [The Grand Inquisitor](#) section of The Brothers Karamazov for this Community Seminar. Here is an introduction to this section from this [site](#):

*“The Grand Inquisitor,” is told by Ivan Karamazov to his younger brother Alyosha. The two brothers had just been discussing the problem of evil—the classic problem of Christian theology: if God is really all powerful, all knowing, and truly loving, then why does evil exist? If God could not have prevented evil, then he is not all powerful. If evil somehow escapes his awareness, then he is not all knowing. If he knew, and could do something about it, but chose not to, then how can he be considered a loving God? One solution to this problem is to claim that evil does not really exist, that if we were to see the world from God’s perspective, from the perspective of eternity, then everything comes out well in the end. Another response is to claim that it really isn’t God’s fault at all, it is ours. God gave us free-will and evil is the result of our misuse of that gift. Ivan will have none of these arguments. He brings up the particularly troubling case of the suffering of innocent children—how can they be blamed and punished if they are innocent? Ivan cannot accept that the suffering of an innocent child will be justified in the end. He refuses his ticket to heaven if the price is the suffering of one innocent child. The devout Alyosha then reminds his skeptical older brother of the One who gave His blood in order to forgive the sins of all. Ivan then counters with his story, “The Grand Inquisitor.” In this story, Christ comes back, not at the end of the world, but during the worst days of the Inquisition, the day after a hundred heretics have been burned at the stake. The Grand Inquisitor, who presided over the burning of the heretics, has Christ arrested, and thrown into the dungeon. The story recounts the Inquisitor’s interrogation of Christ. The Inquisitor claims that despite his good intentions, Christ misunderstood human nature, and that the Church has corrected his mistake. The story raises profound questions about human existence, the relationship between faith and the examined life, and the problem of freedom.*

Please consider these questions as you read this story, which you can find here: [!\[\]\(529949c2c3dadbaa4e538e8c643454bc\_img.jpg\) DostoevskyF-Grand-Inquisitor-text.pdf](#)

1. What sort of “heresies” do you think the hundred were burned for by the Inquisitor before the arrival of Christ, given what the Inquisitor has to say to

him in the prison cell? What is the “Roman faith” that the Inquisitor defends and punishes the transgressors of with public burning?

2. What does a “happy life” look like for the people who have given up their freedom for it? What freedom did they need to give up to be happy in this way? Do you think that happiness was worth this sacrifice?

3. In his discussion of the difference between earthly and heavenly bread, the Inquisitor tells Jesus, “In this you were right. For the mystery of man’s being is not only in living, but in what one lives for. Without a firm idea of what he lives for, man will not consent to live and will sooner destroy himself than remain on earth, even if there is bread all around him.” What are the different ways freedom is understood in this story? Consider the freedom from hunger and guilt, which the Inquisitor offers, against the freedom that he notes Christ desires for human beings. What do you want to be free from, and what do you want to be free for? Would you sacrifice the latter for the former?

4. According to the Inquisitor, what kinds of beings are human beings? What does he think most of us are like? Does he think he is different from that, and if so how and why?

5. The Inquisitor claims that he, and *not* Christ, offers the people “miracle, mystery and authority.” People often associate religion with miracles, mysteries and authority. What is not “religious” in this way about Christ, according to the Inquisitor?

6. The Inquisitor explains that his cause, the “universal union” and “universal happiness of mankind,” is just beginning to be successful in the world, but that there is still a long way to go. What does the culmination of that vision look like for him and what needs to be done to get there? Do you find that future he works for to be one in which you would want to live?

7. Why does the Inquisitor declare himself an enemy of Christ? Why has he decided to, “follow the directives of the intelligent spirit, the dread spirit of death and destruction?”

8. Notably, the only thing which leaves the lips of Christ during his encounter with the Inquisitor is a kiss. How is this kiss a response to what the Inquisitor has said in this story? What is the meaning of this wordless response?