

The Religious Subtext in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Creation*: From the Union of All Mankind to Polyphony / *O subtexto religioso em Problemas da criação de Dostoiévski: da união de toda a humanidade à polifonia*

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ABSTRACT

Mikhail Bakhtin's book *Problems of Dostoevsky's Creation*, published in 1929 and republished in 1963 with considerable changes under the title *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, presents, as an artistic innovation brought by the Russian classic, polyphony – a term borrowed from the musical sphere. Alongside dialogism and carnivalization, it is one of Bakhtin's most remembered concepts, when it comes to his theoretical legacy. By transferring it to the field of literary studies, Bakhtin gives it a broader philosophical-aesthetic sense. The Bakhtinian discovery regarding Dostoevsky's work appeared as a result of a comprehensive study of the bibliography on the Russian writer, but it also had the Russian philosophical thought among its origins. However, already in the 1920s, certain references could not be made openly. The danger of repression was real: Bakhtin's participation in the philosophical-religious group *Voskresenie* led to his arrest in 1928, just when *Problems of Dostoevsky's Creation* was in preparation. Therefore, we assume that Bakhtin's book has explicit references, as is the case of Vyacheslav Ivanov, Dmitri Merezhkovsky, Akim Volynsky, Vasily Rozanov, Lev Shestov, directly cited, and hidden references, such as, for example, Vladimir Solovyov and Nikolay Berdyaev.

KEYWORDS: *Problems of Dostoevsky's Creation*; Mikhail Bakhtin; Polyphony; Russian philosophy

RESUMO

O livro de Mikhail Bakhtin Problemas da criação de Dostoiévski, publicado em 1929 e republicado em 1963, com alterações consideráveis, sob o título Problemas da poética de Dostoiévski, apresenta, como uma inovação artística trazida pelo clássico russo, a polifonia: termo emprestado da esfera musical. Ao lado do dialogismo e da carnavalização, é um dos conceitos mais lembrados quando se trata do legado teórico de Bakhtin. Ao transferi-lo para o campo dos estudos literários, Bakhtin lhe atribui um sentido filosófico-estético mais amplo. A descoberta bakhtiniana acerca da obra de Dostoiévski nasceu como resultado de um estudo abrangente da bibliografia sobre o escritor russo, mas também teve, entre as suas origens, o pensamento filosófico russo. No entanto, já nos anos 1920, certas referências não podiam ser feitas abertamente. O perigo de repressões era real: a participação de Bakhtin no grupo filosófico-religioso Voskressiênie motivou a sua prisão em 1928, justamente no momento em que o livro Problemas da criação de Dostoiévski estava em preparação. Partimos, portanto, do princípio de que o livro de Bakhtin possui referências explícitas, como é o caso de Viatcheslav Ivánov, Dmitri Merejkóvski, Akim Volýnski, Vassíli Rózanov, Liev Chestov,

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citados diretamente, e referências ocultas, como, por exemplo, Vladimir Soloviov e Nikolai Berdiáev.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Problemas da criação de Dostoiévski; Mikhail Bakhtin; Polifonia; Filosofia russa

Introduction

The book *Problems of Dostoevsky's Creation* (1929) remained for a long time in the shadow of its second edition, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (1963), seen as an updated and expanded version of it. However, the study of the first version of the book, as well as the comparison with its second version, provides precious sources on the formation of Bakhtinian thought in the years 1910-1920, as well as on the origins of the concept of polyphony. Thus, one of the crucial differences between the first and second edition is the transfer of emphasis from sociology to poetics and, in this sense, even the change in its title is quite revealing. It is also evident that among the sources of *Problems of Dostoevsky's Creation*, in addition to Russian religious philosophy, there is also the European philosophical and sociological tradition and, more precisely, the works of Kant, Nietzsche, Henri Bergson, Wilhelm Dilthey, Max Scheler, Georg Simmel, Otto Kaus (whose book on Dostoevsky is quoted and praised by Bakhtin), among others. However, in this article I intend to focus on the influence of Russian theology and, more precisely, of those philosophers who dedicated themselves to Dostoevsky's work.

When *Problems of Dostoevsky's Creation* was published, Bakhtin was in prison for his participation in the philosophical-religious circle Voskresenie (Resurrection, 1917-1928), whose members were accused of anti-revolutionary activity: a fact that further evidences that certain references could not be done in an open way. The leader of the circle, Aleksandr Meier, was one of Bakhtin's interlocutors. Together with Nikolai Berdyaev, Dmitry Merezhkovsky and Vasily Rozanov, Meier participated in the discussions of the St. Petersburg Religious-Philosophical Society, which later continued within the Voskresenie circle. In one of his lectures, whose summary was recovered by Yuri Medvedev, Meier, in seeking approximations between religion and socialism, defends the ideal of *collective creativity* (MEDVEDEV, 1999), which dialogues with Bakhtin's philosophical and aesthetic view.

According to Russian editors, Bakhtin worked on the book on Dostoevsky throughout the 1920s. In August 1922, a small note was published in *Zhizn' iskustva* journal in which the book was announced as ready, along with the treatise *Aesthetics of Verbal Creation* (BOCHAROV *et al.*, 2000, p.431), “information that was probably brought to the editorial board by P. N. Medvedev and that could have been exaggerated” (BOCHAROV *et al.*, 2000, p.432).¹ As the notes by Pumpyansky and Mirkina show (BOCHAROV *et al.*, 2000, pp.431-434), in the years preceding the publication of the book on Dostoevsky, Bakhtin gave several lectures on Russian philosophy, religion and literature. Thus, his attention was focused on both the philosophical-religious and literary spheres, which is not surprising, since, in a way, Russian philosophy was born out of literature. In fact, in the 19th century, the main philosophical questions were raised precisely by literature. Likewise, in Bakhtin's work, philosophy and literary studies are interconnected (BONETSKAYA, 2002, p.3),² since philosophical issues are solved in literary material: the artistic world serves as a model of real life (BONETSKAYA, 2002, p.24).³

Echoed and Veiled Voices in Problems of Dostoevsky's Creation

The book on Dostoevsky, conceived in the context of Bakhtin's philosophical-literary and linguistic studies, has a “deep and, in many cases, hidden genealogy” (BOCHAROV *et al.*, 2000, p.434),⁴ which is represented in part by dialogue with Russian theologians and literary critics who wrote about Dostoevsky. The period in which the book was conceived was marked by an intensification of debates about Dostoevsky's work, which occurred, among other reasons, on the occasion of the writer's centenary, celebrated in 1921 (BOCHAROV *et al.*, 2000, p.434). Obviously, this does not mean that discussions started only in that period: their beginning is simultaneous with the creation

¹ In Russian: “сведение, которое, вероятно, доставил в журнал П. Н. Медведев, могло быть преувеличено.”

² BONETSKAYA, N. Bakhtin in the 1920's. (Bakhtin v 20-ie gody). In: *The Russian Way*. Pro et contra. (Russki put': pro et contra), 2002. Available at: <http://russianway.rhga.ru/upload/main/07_Bonezkaya.pdf>. Accessed on April 22, 2020.

³ For reference, see footnote 2.

⁴ In Russian: “имеет глубокую и во многом скрытую генеалогию.”

of Dostoevsky's works and, from the beginning, they aimed at its relationship with the sphere of religion, a theme suggested by the very content of the writer's work.

Vladimir Solovyov, one of the greatest Russian theologians, had a direct influence on both late Dostoevsky and all later Russian philosophy. In *Three Speeches in Memory of Dostoevsky*, Solovyov reestablishes the relationship between art and religion by stating that “artists and poets must again become priests and prophets, but now in another, even more important and supreme sense: not just the religious idea will own them, but they themselves will own the religious idea and guide its earthly personifications” (SOLOVYOV, 2013, p.515). Dostoevsky, according to Solovyov, was a theurgist-prophet, whose work glorifies universal brotherhood:

[...] he understood, first of all, that isolated people, even if they were the best people in the world, did not have the right to coerce society in the name of personal superiority; he also understood that social truth is not invented in isolated intelligences, but is rooted in the sentiment of the people; and, finally, he understood that this truth has a religious meaning and is necessarily related to faith in Christ, to the ideal of Christ (SOLOVYOV, 2013, p.520).⁵

The ideal of universal brotherhood that Solovyov envisions in Dostoevsky's work refers to the concept of *sobornost*, which can be translated as “conciliatory spirit.”⁶ Solovyov sees the mission of the Russian people, as well as of Russian literature, in expanding this union to all mankind: an ideal that he defines as *vsechelovechestvo* (the union of all people). Thus, as we can see, Solovyov's reflections remain in the ethical-religious field, not being applied to the structure of literary works.

Solovyov's idealized vision was immediately questioned by Nikolay Mikhaylovsky, who condemned Dostoevsky as a *cruel talent*. According to Mikhaylovsky, the writer found a certain pleasure in plunging the reader into a sea of incongruities and suffering (MIKHAILÓVSKI, 2013, p.427). The reading of Dostoevsky as a *cruel talent* generated many controversies, but he also found supporters, such as, for

⁵ In the Portuguese translation consulted: “[...] ele compreendeu, antes de tudo, que pessoas isoladas, ainda que fossem as melhores pessoas, não tinham o direito de coagir a sociedade em nome de uma superioridade pessoal; compreendeu também que a verdade social não se inventa em inteligências isoladas, mas está enraizada no sentimento do povo; e, finalmente, compreendeu que essa verdade tem um sentido religioso e está relacionada, obrigatoriamente, com a fé em Cristo, com o ideal de Cristo” (SOLOVYOV, 2013, p.520).

⁶ The concept of *sobornost*, understood as the spiritual union of people both in and outside the church, was formulated by Slavophile philosopher Aleksey Khomyakov (1804-1860).

example, the philosopher Lev Shestov – according to him, the great discovery of Dostoevsky (followed by Nietzsche) would have been the courage to recognize and to show, even though through his characters, the deeply dark and selfish subsoil of the human psyche (SHESTOV, 1911). Bakhtin also looks at Mikhaylovsky's controversial definition:

The epithet *cruel talent*, given to Dostoevsky by Mikhaylovsky, has a foundation, although it is not as simple as Mikhaylovsky considered it. A kind of moral torture - to which Dostoevsky submits his characters in order to obtain the word of self-awareness from them and through it reach their ultimate limits – that allows to dissolve everything that is material and objective, everything that is stable and immutable, everything that is more external and neutral in the representation of man in the pure medium of his self-awareness and self-announcement (BAKHTIN, 2000, p.50).⁷

Thus, the epithet *cruel talent* is transferred from the ethical to the aesthetic field: Bakhtin sees in this *cruelty* an artistic procedure used by Dostoevsky to put the self-awareness of his characters in the foreground.

Among the works on Dostoevsky written by Vasily Rozanov, also mentioned in passing by Bakhtin, the best known is *Dostoevsky and the Legend of the Grand Inquisitor*, written in 1891, in which he defines Dostoevsky as the “deepest analyst of the human soul”⁸ and shows the unfinished and unresolved nature of his characters (ROZANOV, 2014, p.41) – an idea that has become one of the dominant ones in Bakhtin's interpretation. In addition, Rozanov is attentive to the primacy of human individuality in Dostoevsky's work, which, according to him, has religious roots, as the individual is valued as an image of God (ROZANOV, 2014, p.43).

At the threshold of the century, a book by another influential thinker and one of the founders of Russian symbolism, Dmitry Merezhkovsky, was written: *Lev Tolstoy and Dostoevsky* (1898-1902). The very title of the book, in which the two classic writers appear side by side, suggests a theme that has become recurrent in the critical

⁷ In Russian: “Эпитет «жестокий талант», данный Достоевскому Михайловским, имеет под собою почву, хотя и не такую простую, какою она представлялась Михайловскому. Своего рода моральные пытки, которым подвергает своих героев Достоевский, чтобы добиться от них слова самосознания, доходящего до своих последних пределов, позволяють растворить все вещное и объектное, все твердое и неизменное, все внешнее и нейтральное в изображении человека в чистом medium'e его самосознания и самовысказывания.”

⁸ In Russian: “Признают Достоевского глубочайшим аналитиком человеческой души.”

bibliography dedicated to Dostoevsky's work: his comparison with Tolstoy and, at the same time, the insertion of both writers in Russian philosophical-religious tradition. Dostoevsky is interpreted by Merezhkovsky from the perspective of Nietzsche - both admired and criticized by the author - and this comparison will also become one of the commonplaces in the bibliography on the writer. Thus, he finds a surprising “coincidence of a European man, the youngest and most extreme of extremes, and a Russian man, the most Russian of the Russians” (MEREZHKOVSKY, 2000, p.10)⁹ and concludes, making use of Dostoevsky's own expressions, that his philosophy sought the God-man [*Bogochelovek*], while that of the Western thinker idealized the Man-God [*Chelovekobog*] (MEREZHKOVSKY, 2000, p.11). In an attempt to resolve the crisis of faith that marked the work of Tolstoy, Dostoevsky and Nietzsche, Merezhkovsky seeks to combine paganism and Christianity, the flesh and the spirit, the Old and the New Testament. According to him, in Russian literature this split found its expression in the work of Tolstoy, pagan and priest of the flesh, and Dostoevsky, Christian and priest of the spirit (MEREZHKOVSKY, 2000, pp.148-149). For both Russian literature and religion, a resurrection would be possible if the opposing principles were combined, intertwined:

Indeed, modern European mankind will have to make an inevitable choice between one of these three paths: the first one would be the complete recovery from the disease that people would have to call “God” [...]; the second path is death due to that same disease in a decline, a degeneration, a final decay, in the madness of Nietzsche and Kirilov, the preachers of the Man-God who supposedly destroyed the God-man and, finally, the third path: the religion of the last great union, of the great Symbol, the religion of the Second Advent that would no longer be hidden as the first, but open, in style and glory, the religion of the End (MEREZHKOVSKY, 2000, p.181).¹⁰

As we recall earlier, Bakhtin includes Merezhkovsky among the thinkers who monologized Dostoevsky's work. In fact, when highlighting *Anna Karenina* and *The*

⁹ In Russian: “И чудесным, почти невероятным было для нас это совпадение самого нового, крайнего из крайних европейцев и самого русского из русских.”

¹⁰ In Russian: “В самом деле, современному европейскому человечеству предстоит неминуемый выбор одного из трех путей: первый - окончательное выздоровление от болезни, которую людям пришлось бы назвать ‘Богом’ [...] ; второй путь - гибель от этой же болезни в окончательном упадке, вырождении, ‘декадентстве’, в безумии Ницше и Кирилова, проповедников Человекобога, который будто бы уничтожил Богочеловека; и, наконец, третий путь - религия последнего великого соединения, великого Символа, религия Второго, уже не тайного, скрытого, как первое, а явного Пришествия в стиле и славе - религия Конца.”

Brothers Karamazov as the culminations of European literature (2000, p.187-188), Merezhkovsky observes the presence, in both works (sic), of the phenomenon of bifurcated consciousness of the characters (p.373 and following)¹¹ and its dialectic, that is, he does not make a distinction between the style of Tolstoy's and Dostoevsky's novels. In addition, his aspiration to resolve issues of religion in literary material received criticism from contemporary interlocutors, for example, Lev Shestov (1911).

Another one of Bakhtin's "monologizing" interlocutors, Akim Volynsky, as well as Merezhkovsky, claims that Dostoevsky's work, unlike Tolstoy's, engages the reader in the chaotic and contradictory depths of the human soul (2011, p.45). Tolstoy is also associated by him with the Old Testament and is criticized for showing the immovable Christ, as a starting point for moralizing conclusions, while in Dostoevsky the Christ is a "symbol of the eternal flame of the soul and its passions" (MEREZHKOVSKEY, 2000, p.46).¹²

Volynski is a passionate reader of Dostoevsky: he looks into each of the protagonists of his best-known novels, and that attention to the individual is one of his most important observations:

Furthermore, in Dostoevsky no human figure seems small to us, with a limited interior content or an established and closed character. Each human being is portrayed by him as a geological enormity, with inevitable psychological fogs and whirlwinds of crazy passions (VOLYNSKY, 2011, p.45).¹³

As the central drama of Dostoevsky's work, he highlights the agonizing struggle of the principles of good and evil, of the theophilic and theophobic traits in the human soul, as an artistic experience in which the psyche of a living human being is taken to the extreme (VOLYNSKY, 2011, pp.48-49). This split, according to Volynsky, occurs as a result of the loss of faith:

The dream about the Man-God, the superman, arises from the tears of a truly religious despair when another great dream was dissipated, when

¹¹ In Russian: "раздвоенное сознание."

¹² In Russian: "символом вечного горения души, символом духовных страстей."

¹³ In Russian: "При этом ни одна человеческая фигура не кажется вам у Достоевского мелкою, с ограниченным внутренним содержанием, с неподвижно установившимся замкнутым характером. Каждый человек является в его изображении какою-то геологическою громадою, с неизбежными психологическими туманами и вихрями безумных страстей."

the human being, with all his conscience, finally understood the futility of his rational pursuits in the ancient direction. He broke with God without being able to dominate him and, in an impetus of immeasurable offense, he indulged in demonic fantasy (VOLYNSKY, 2011, p.344-345).¹⁴

The dialogue with Nietzsche is expressed here, as well as in the work of Shestov, Merezhkovsky and Ivánov, in the reading of Dostoevsky's work as tragic. It is assessed by Volynsky as a dividing line that marks the beginning of a new era in Russian art (2011, p.452). The crisis of faith that is at the heart of this tragedy will result, in an optimistic prediction by the author, in the birth of a new human being:

A new human being is born with a new will, directed to life, but acting under the impulse of a conscious, individually thought out religion. And, to embody his elevated ideas, this new human being will use an old, but secure lever: solidarity with society, with humanity. And he, this new human being, will create a new wave in literature: not an one-sided and analytical creation in the field of personal psychology, but a synthetic creation, in which the individual, with all the richness of its psychological and philosophical tendencies and needs, it will be a living cell of the collective organism. Many significant processes are taking place in life; a very significant work in literature must begin, or rather, be reborn. It's coming, it's coming a new wave in Russian art! (VOLYNSKY, 2011, p.658).¹⁵

Although Volynsky recognizes Dostoevsky's work as a starting point for a new era in Russian art, marked by solidarity with society and humanity, he does not include that writer in these new times yet.

The need to rethink the concepts inherited from the Russian orthodox tradition is one of the central issues of Russian religious philosophy at the threshold of the 20th century. Among the most curious manifestations of this period is *Correspondence from*

14 In Russian: “Мечта о человекобоге, о сверхчеловеке рождается в слезах истинно религиозного отчаяния, когда рассеялась другая великая мечта, когда всем своим сознанием человек окончательно уразумел тщетность своих умственных исканий в старом направлении. Он разрывает с Богом, который не дается ему, и в порыве безмерной обиды ударяется в сатанинскую фантазию.”

15 In Russian: “Рождается новый человек с новой целью волей, направленной в жизнь, но действующей под импульсом сознательной, индивидуально продуманной религии. И этот новый человек для воплощения своих высших идей вновь возьмет в руки старый, но вечный рычаг— солидарность с обществом, с человечеством. И он, этот новый человек, создает новую волну в литературе: не односторонне-аналитическое творчество в области личной психологии, а творчество синтетическое, в котором личность, со всем богатством ее психологических и философских настроений и потребностей, представится живою клеткою массового организма. Происходят многозначительные процессы в жизни, должна начаться или, вернее сказать, возродиться многозначительная идейная работа в литературе. Идет, идет новая волна в русском искусстве!”

one Corner to Another [*Perepíska iz dvukh uglov*], which collects letters exchanged literally from one corner to another by Vyacheslav Ivanov and Mikhail Gershenson while sharing the same room in a sanatorium in Moscow, in summer of 1920. They discuss the possibility of cultural memory and religion surviving the twilight of the idols and the decline of the West, declared, respectively, by Nietzsche and Spengler. Thus, the reflection on the concept of sobornost, so intrinsic to Russian culture, in the context of the new century, leads Ivánov to suggest that the current epoch, dismembered and spread, would be unable to sustain an awareness of sobornost due to the “sin of individuation” that poisoned the whole of human culture, but, unlike his correspondent, still shows some optimism:

We try to overcome this deadly principle every day and every hour with the uninterrupted creation of cults - large and small - each cult already has a hint of *sobornost* while it is alive, even if it unites only two or three priests: the *sobornost* is inflamed by a moment and goes out again, and the many-headed hydra of culture, torn apart by intestinal conflicts, fails to turn into a harmonious cult. [...] In the deepest depths - beyond our reach - we are all a system of universal blood circulation that nourishes the one heart of all mankind (IVANOV; GERSHENZON, 1921, pp.73-74).¹⁶

According to Liudmila Gogotishvili (2014, p.6), in this discussion with Gershenson, Bakhtin's position is close to that of Ivanov regarding the criticism of cultural nihilism.¹⁷ Although these notes sound optimistic at the end of the excerpt, the very way in which the correspondence between Ivanov and Gershenson took place demonstrates a certain impediment to a union, to simultaneous and direct communication. As for the interpretation of Dostoevsky's work, Vyacheslav Ivanov's contribution is one of the most important open references in Bakhtin's book (BOCHAROV *et al.*, 2000, p.434)¹⁸ and is

¹⁶ In Russian: “Мы си́лимся преодолеть это смертно́е нача́ло вседневно́ и всечасно́ непрерывным творчеством больших и малых культов, —каждый культ уже соборен, пока жив, хотя бы соединял троих только или двоих служителей, — и соборность вспыхивает на мгнове́нье и гаснет опять, и не может многоголовая гидра раздираемой внутренним междоусобием культуры обратиться в согласный культ. [...] В глубине глубин, нам не достигаемой, все мы — одна система вселенского кровообращения, питающая единое всечеловеческое сердце.”

¹⁷ According to Gogotishvili, Bakhtin visited Vyacheslav Ivanov twice in the sanatorium and in the room where correspondence with Gershenson took place, in the summer of 1920 (2014, p.6).

¹⁸ BOCHAROV, S.; MELIKHOVA, V.; MAKHLIN, B. Comments. *Problems of Dostoevsky's Creation* [Komentarii. Problemy tvorchestva Dostoevskogo]. In: BAKHTIN, M. *Collected Works* (7 volumes). Moscow: Russkie slovari, 2000, pp.428-543.

highlighted as such by the author himself. (BAKHTIN, 2000, p.16). Bakhtin referred to Ivanov's essay, *Dostoevsky and the Novel-Tragedy* (1911), but the implicit influence of Ivanov's thought on Bakhtin's work is even greater (BOCHAROV *et al.*, 2000, p.436). Among the indirect references is, for example, the article *Two Elements in Modern Symbolism* (1909), in which the concept of polyphony arises, extended to the entire artistic sphere. Ivanov establishes the principles of art that emerged with the Renaissance: unison, monologue and polyphony:

In the polyphonic chorus, each of the participants is individual and subjective, but the harmonic reconstruction of the order of consonances completely approves the objective rationality of this apparent contradiction. The choir and the polyphony, the orchestra and the church organ serve as a formal defense of musical objectivism and realism against the invasion of the forces of lyrical and subjective free will. The aesthetic pleasure caused by them is related to the tranquility of our, if we can say so, musical awareness, through a conciliatory authority supported, in a consonant manner, by the voices and instruments of general liveliness (IVÁNOV, 2005, p.207).¹⁹

In Ivanov's conception, which evidently refers to that of Solovyov, the artist is seen as a theurgist who, by contemplating the essence of existence (Soul of the World), creates a new, more spiritual and elevated existence. However, Ivanov denies the idea of the “artist-tyrant” that Nietzsche dreamed of, an overwhelming artist who will reevaluate all aesthetic values and break the ancient taboos of beauty (IVÁNOV, 2005, p.199). His artist-theurgist is, above all, a contemplator:

We think that the theurgical principle in art is a principle of least violence and most susceptibility. Do not impose your will on the surface of things, but prophesy and announce the sacred will of essences: this is the artist's supreme teaching. [...] He will tune his ear and will start to hear 'what objects (things) say' (IVÁNOV, 2005, p.199).²⁰

¹⁹ In the Portuguese translation consulted: “No coro polifônico, cada um dos participantes é individual e subjetivo, mas a reconstrução harmônica da ordem das consonâncias de maneira completa aprova a racionalidade objetiva dessa contradição aparente. O coro e a polifonia, a orquestra e o órgão da igreja servem como uma defesa formal do objetivismo musical e do realismo contra a invasão das forças da vontade livre lírica e subjetiva. O prazer estético causado por eles é relacionado à tranquilidade da nossa, se podemos assim dizer, consciência musical por meio da autoridade conciliadora apoiada de maneira consoante pelas vozes e instrumentos de animação geral” (IVÁNOV, 2005, p.207).

²⁰ In the Portuguese translation consulted: “Nós achamos que o princípio teúrgico na arte é um princípio de menor violência e de maior suscetibilidade. Não impor a sua vontade na superfície das coisas, mas profetizar e anunciar a vontade sagrada das essências: este é o supremo ensinamento do artista. [...] Ele afinará o ouvido e passará a ouvir ‘o que falam os objetos (as coisas)’.”

There is certainly a striking resemblance here to Bakhtin's polyphonic perspective, within which the author is imperceptible and dissolves among the characters.

In the essay *Dostoevsky and the Novel-Tragedy* (1911),²¹ Ivanov takes up the concept of *sobornost* (conciliatory spirit) and explains the crisis of modernity that was expressed in the romanesque genre precisely because of the loss of that ideal:

In the Middle Ages, the individual did not conceive of himself in any other way than within a hierarchy of conciliatory subordination to the general structure that should reflect the hierarchical harmony of the divine world; during the Renaissance, he broke with this celestial-terrestrial agreement, felt alone and, in that arrogant solitude, saw himself as his own beginning and his own end (IVANOV, 1916, p.405).²²

Although the concept of polyphony is absent here, there is a relationship between the musical sphere and Dostoevsky's work which represents, for Ivanov, a renewal of the novel as a genre:

Similar to a symphony creator, he [Dostoevsky] used its mechanism for the architecture of the tragedy and applied to the novel a method corresponding to the thematic and contrapuntal development of music, the development through curves and transformations of which the composer leads us to the perception and psychological experience of the whole of the work as a certain unit (IVANOV, 1916, p.410).²³

The idea, inspired by Nietzsche, that Dostoevsky's novel is reminiscent of the tragedy is rejected by Bakhtin, but he highlights Ivanov as the “first to grasp the structural peculiarity of Dostoevsky's artistic world” (BAKHTIN, 2000, p.16).²⁴ Ivanov's great discovery, according to Bakhtin, consists in affirming that Dostoevsky's realism is based

²¹ SHESTOV, L. *Dostoevsky and Nietzsche (Philosophy of Tragedy)*. [Dostoevsky i Nietzsche. *Filosofiya tragedii*]. In: Shestov, L. *Collected works [Sobranie sochinenii]*, v. 3. Saint Petersburg: Shipovnik, 1911.

²² In Russian: “Личность в средние века не ощущала себя иначе, как в иерархии соборного соподчинения общему укладу, долженствовавшему отражать иерархическую гармонию мира божественного; в эпоху Возрождения она оторвалась от этого небесно-земного согласия, почувствовала себя одинокою и в этом надменном одиночестве своеначальною и самоцельною.”

²³ In Russian: “Подобно творцу симфоний, он использовал его механизм для архитектоники трагедии и применил к роману метод, соответствующий тематическому и контрапунктическому развитию в музыке, — развитию, излучинами и превращениями которого композитор приводит нас к восприятию и психологическому переживанию целого произведения, как некоего единства.”

²⁴ In Russian: “Впервые основную структурную особенность художественного мира Достоевского нащупал Вячеслав Иванов.”

on the method of penetration,²⁵ thanks to which the alien self is affirmed, not as an object, but as another subject. Bakhtin refers to the following passage:

The symbol of this penetration is an absolute affirmation, with all will and reason, of the existence of others: “you are.” Under the condition of this completeness of the affirmation of someone else existence, which seems to exhaust the entire content of my own being, the existence of others ceases to be alien to me, “you” becomes for me another designation of my own subject. “You are” does not mean “you are conceived by me as someone who exists,” but “your existence is experienced by me as if it were mine” or “through your existence, I know myself as someone who exists.” Es, ergo sum. It is clear that altruism, as a morality, does not contain the integrity of this inner experience: it takes place in the mystical depths of consciousness and all morality is just a phenomenon that derives from that experience (IVANOV, 1916, p.418).²⁶

However, despite recognizing Ivanov's discovery, Bakhtin concludes that this theme is also possible in a novel of monological type, therefore the affirmation of other people's conscience as an ethical-religious premise or theme of the work does not create a new form, a new type of construction of the novel (BAKHTIN, 2000, p.16).

The ideal of union of all mankind, suggested by Solovyov and taken up by Ivanov, was also dear to the philosopher Nikolai Berdyaev. Like Solovyov, Berdyaev is not mentioned by Bakhtin, and probably for political reasons: in *Dostoevsky: An Interpretation* (1921), there is an entire chapter devoted to the critique of socialism. The book was published abroad in 1923, while its author was expelled from Soviet Russia a year earlier, on one of the so-called philosophers' ships.

Berdyaev defined Dostoevsky's work as a Christian anthropology in which the human being is the “sun of the world” (BERDYAEV, 1923, p.36).²⁷ Like Mikhaylovsky and Shestov, critics of Dostoevsky, Berdyaev points out *Notes from Underground* as a watershed in the writer's work: “Starting with *Notes from Underground* a dialectic of ideas

²⁵ In Russian: “проникновение.”

²⁶ In Russian: “Символ такого проникновения заключается в абсолютном утверждении, всюю волею и всем разумением, чужого бытия: ‘ты еси’. При условии этой полноты утверждения чужого бытия, полноты, как бы исчерпывающей все содержание моего собственного бытия, чужое бытие перестает быть для меня чужим, ‘ты’ становится для меня другим обозначением моего субъекта. ‘Ты еси’ — значит не ‘ты познаешь меня, как сущий’, а ‘твое бытие переживается мною, как мое’, или: ‘твоим бытием я познаю себя сущим’. Es, ergo sum. Альтруизм, как мораль, конечно, не вмещает в себе целостности этого внутреннего опыта: он совершается в мистических глубинах сознания, и всякая мораль оказывается по отношению к нему лишь явлением производным.”

²⁷ In Russian: “христианский антропологизм,” “солнце мира.”

begins. He is no longer just a psychologist, he is a metaphysician, he studies in depth the tragedy of the human spirit” (BERDYAEV, 1923, p.24).²⁸ However, if for other readers Dostoevsky would have created the religion of suffering, for Berdyaev his religion was freedom, since “Dostoevsky is interested, first of all, in the fate of man in freedom that turns into self-will. That is where human nature is manifested” (BERDYAEV, 1923, pp.42-43).²⁹ According to Berdyaev, this nature is polar, antinomic and irrational (1923, p.47) and in this he certainly comes close to Bakhtin's reading. However, his view of the structure of Dostoevsky's work is entirely different. It is not a polyphonic construction, it is centralized:

There is a great centralization in the construction of Dostoevsky's novels. Everything is directed towards a central person and that central person is directed towards everyone and everything. That person is a mystery that everyone decipher (BERDYAEV, 1923, pp.37-38).³⁰

Like Merezhkovsky, Volynsky and Shestov, Berdyaev places Dostoevsky beside Nietzsche in stating that both would have seen the crisis of humanism, after which only two paths would remain: God-man or Man-God (1923, p.60). At the same time, he questions the definition of Dostoevsky as being a *cruel talent*. For Berdyaev, this cruelty results from the freedom that Dostoevsky gives his characters. Freedom that, taken to the extreme, turns into voluntariness and results in a dubious and split character: “The extreme of the split must result and personify itself in another 'I' of the human being, in his inner evil, as a devil. The end of this split is revealed with genius force by Dostoevsky in Ivan Karamazov's nightmare, in his conversation with the devil” (BERDYAEV, 1923, p.111).³¹ Returning to Solovyov's thought, he affirms that Christianity is the religion of love and true love is always directed towards others. When it is self-directed, the individual suffers from mortal loneliness (BERDYAEV, 1923, p.125). Although in some

²⁸ In Russian: “С ‘Записокъ изъ подполья’ начинается гениальная идейная діалектика Достоевскаго. Онъ уже не только психологъ, онъ — метафизикъ, онъ изслѣдуетъ до глубины трагедію человѣческаго духа.”

²⁹ In Russian: “Достоевскаго прежде всего интересуесть судьба человѣка въ свободѣ, переходящей въ своеволие. Вотъ гдѣ обнаруживается человѣческая природа.”

³⁰ In Russian: “Въ конструкціи романовъ Достоевскаго есть очень большая централизованность* Всѣ и все устре млено къ одному центральному человѣку или этотъ центральный человѣкъ устремленъ ко всѣмъ и всему.”

³¹ In Russian: “Въ предѣлѣ раздвоенія должно выдѣлиться и персонифицироваться другое ‘я’ человѣка, его внутреннее зло, какъ чортъ. Этотъ предѣлъ раздвоенія съ гениальной силой обнаружень Достоевскимъ въ кошмарѣ Ивана Карамазова, въ разговорѣ его съ чортъ.”

points these reflections resemble Bakhtin's interpretation, in Berdyaev's analysis they remain in the ethical-religious field.

Plurality of Voices at the Beginning of Bakhtin's Philosophical Thought

We have presented here some of Bakhtin's main interlocutors with regard to the analysis of Dostoevsky's work from the perspective of religious philosophy. In addition to this dialogue, one of the most important sources of the polyphonic idea in Bakhtin is his moral philosophy formulated mainly in *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*, written between 1918-1924 (GOGOTISHVILI, 2014, p.2). As is well known, this book remained unfinished, in manuscript fragments in which there are unreadable passages. According to the book's plan, outlined in the text itself, it should consist of an introductory part and four more chapters, and the last (conclusive) part of which should deal with religion. (GOGOTISHVILI, 2014, p.1).

According to Liudmila Gogotishvili, thanks to the efforts of L. Deryugina and S. Bocharov, it was possible to decipher some passages previously considered unreadable, including the final part of the manuscript that contains a formulation that more comprehensively expresses the primordial moral principle of Bakhtinian ethics. It is the “‘absolute self-exclusion’ of the ethical subject of existence as a coexistence” (GOGOTISHVILI, 2014, pp.3-4),³² which in turn takes up Christian motives since, quoting Bakhtin's own words, “the world from which Christ departed will no longer be the world he was never in, it will be fundamentally different,” that is, the Bakhtinian principle of absolute self-exclusion can be similar to the departure of Christ (GOGOTISHVILI, 2014, p.4).³³ The idea of sacrificing the self for the sake of others, although only outlined in Bakhtin's first philosophical work, refers to the specific authorial position described in the manuscript *The Author and the Character in Aesthetic Activity* (1923-1924) and developed in the book on Dostoevsky.

³² GOGOTISHVILI, L. On a Possible Source of Bakhtin's Polyphonic Idea. [O vozmozhnom istoke polifonicheskoy idei Bakhtina]. In: *Electronic Philosophical Journal Vox. Gólos*, v. 71, dezembro, 2014, pp.1-18. Available at: <https://vox-journal.org/content/vox17/Vox17-Gogotishvili.pdf> Accessed on April 22, 2020. In Russian: “Эта формула предусматривает «абсолютное себя-исключение» этического субъекта из события бытия.”

³³ For reference, see footnote 27. In Russian: “Мир, откуда ушел Христос, уже не будет тем миром, где его никогда не было, он принципиально иной.”

Dina Magomedova (2005, pp.7-8) is aware of the presence of different interpretations of the concept of polyphony in the book on Dostoevsky: the first one is represented by an ideal image of a choir that glorifies God and concerns Dostoevsky's essayism and religious ideology, and the second one, not very peaceful and harmonious, present in his work of fiction. This distinction is made by Bakhtin himself in the following excerpt:

In general, the reconciliation and fusion of voices even within the limits of a single conscience - according to Dostoevsky's project and according to his main ideological premises - cannot be a monological act, but it presupposes the communion of the character's voices with the choir; but for that it is necessary to dominate and drown out their fictional voices, which intermingle with the true human voice and imitate it. In terms of Dostoevsky's social ideology, this resulted in the demand for the fusion of the intelligentsia with the people: "Humble yourself, proud man, and above all dominate your pride. Humble yourself, idle person, and first of all work on your own land." In terms of his religious ideology, this meant joining the choir and exclaiming "Hosanna" with everyone. In this chorus, the word is passed from mouth to mouth in the same tones of glorification, joy and happiness. However, in the context of his novels, the polyphony of these pacified voices is not developed, but the polyphony of struggling and internally split voices. The latter were no longer given in terms of their strictly ideological aspirations, but in the social reality of that time. Social and religious utopia, characteristic of his ideological positions, did not absorb or dilute his objective-artistic vision (BAKHTIN, 2000, pp.152-153).³⁴

Thus, there are two polyphonies: a harmonious one, which represents an ethical-religious ideal of Dostoevsky, and another one, present in his narrative, in which the voices fail to find harmony, but, at the same time, each one is heard and valued.

³⁴ In Russian: "Вообще примирение и слияние голосов даже в пределах одного сознания – по замыслу Достоевского и согласно его основным идеологическим предпосылкам – не может быть актом монологическим, но предполагает приобщение голоса героя к хору; но для этого необходимо сломить и заглушить свои фиктивные голоса, перебивающие и передразнивающие истинный ГОЛОС человека. В плане общественной идеологии Достоевского это вылилось в требование слияния интеллигенции с народом: 'Смирись, гордый человек, и прежде всего сломь свою гордость. Смирись, праздный человек, и прежде всего потрудись на народной ниве'. В плане же его религиозной идеологии это означало – примкнуть к хору и возгласить со всеми 'Hosanna!'. В этом хоре слово передается из уст в уста в одних и тех же тонах хвалы, радости и веселья. Но в плане его романов развернута не эта полифония примиренных голосов, но полифония голосов борющихся и внутренне расколотых."

Conclusion

I tried to show, in this polyphonic panorama of the bibliography on Dostoevsky of a philosophical and religious nature, the origins of the concept of polyphony that is born in the dialogue with several scholars, Bakhtin's explicit and implicit interlocutors, all driven in turn by Dostoevsky's work. There are recurring themes, such as the comparison of Dostoevsky with Nietzsche and Tolstoy, and there are particular discoveries. In each of the aforementioned authors we find ideas that dialogue with the reading made by Bakhtin: the ideal of the universal union of Solovyov, Merezhkovsky, Volynsky and Ivanov confronted with the observation of the dark depths of the human soul in the work of Mikhaylovsky and Shestov; the primacy of individuality and its unfinished character, highlighted by Rozanov; the author's contemplative position, observed by Ivanov, as well as the method of penetrating the alien self; the freedom of choice that Dostoevsky attributes to the characters and which, in Berdyaev's conception, manifests itself in their split character; the idea of extending the musical concept of polyphony to the entire artistic sphere, suggested by Ivanov; the Bakhtinian principle of "absolute self-exclusion of the ethical subject of existence as a coexistence" that originates in Bakhtin's own philosophy. Reflections on the future of culture, religion and literature go hand in hand with these works.

The profound cultural changes and the crisis of faith found expression in other fields of art, in addition to literature. For example, the best-known work of 19th century Russian painting is Aleksandr Ivanov's monumental painting *The Appearance of Christ Before the People*, completed in 1857. Contrary to what could be imagined by the title of the painting, it is not the Christ who is in the foreground, but the people, and each one of them is portrayed in countless details. The Christ, on the other hand, appears in the background, distant, almost imperceptible. In another picture, *Religious Procession in Kursk Governorate* (1883), by Ilya Repin, the spectator is inserted in the middle of a procession composed of several characters taken by contradictory feelings that, in some cases, have nothing to do with a religious devotion. The crisis of faith is also one of the central themes of classical Russian literature, and precisely for this reason many of the authors cited agree to affirm that Dostoevsky and Tolstoy foreshadowed the beginning of a new era in Russian and universal culture. However, Bakhtin transfers this discussion

from the ethical to the aesthetic plane: for him, Dostoevsky's discovery consisted of the creation of a new type of novel in which polyphony is not a religious ideal but a principle of artistic construction.

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