

**The Grand Inquisitor**  
**By**  
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**Discussion Questions and Hints (A)**

**The Three “Karamazov Brothers” represent diverse and often conflicted points of view and beliefs:**

*Alexi (Alyosha) is the youngest, and represents the Christian ideal. He loves life more than its meaning.*

*Dmitri loves life, but its meaning evades him*

*Ivan is the most complex, and he is more concerned with life’s meaning than with life itself. He is an atheist. He is very concerned with those “accursed questions” which motivated Dostoevsky’s own search for faith. (The problems of sin and suffering, and their relationship to the existence of God.) (There is a half-brother, the epileptic valet Smerdyakov, who hates his father for corrupting his mother and for keeping him a serf.)*

**The Grand Inquisitor legend is a story by Ivan, and is designed to be a response to Alyosha’s earlier remarks, and it is the springboard for “The Russian Monk” which follows it. The latter story is more of Dostoevsky’s own view than perhaps the view in “The Grand Inquisitor”.**

- **Ivan asks Alyosha “how a just God could permit the suffering of children, creatures too young even to have sinned.” How do the readings by Bryant and Foltz help you put this comment by Ivan into your “personal faith” context?**
- **When Alyosha is troubled by Ivan’s position, Ivan asks him “if he could accept even a perfect world in which perfection depended on the suffering of an innocent**

- creature.” How does this amplify your answer to the above question? Does Singer’s view of the rights of animals enter in here?
- **Why did Christ kiss the Grand Inquisitor?**
  - **At the end of the story, Alyosha’s comment is: “But the little sticky leaves, and the precious tombs, and the blue sky, and the woman you love! How will you live; how will you love them? ...With such a hell in your heart and your head, how can you?” Ivan’s response is that “there is strength to endure everything.” How does “Faith” help us to answer this?**
  - **The Inquisitor challenges Jesus that by giving humanity free will, he had (in fact) doomed them to misery and despair. Do you agree or disagree? Please explain your answer.**
  - **How does your answer above relate to the various “schools” of ethics we studied earlier?**

### **Discussion Questions and Hints (B)**

- **In the introduction of our book page xix, it refers to *The Brothers Karamazov* on one level as a story about the struggle between good and evil. How do you relate to this comment, and what are the responses to “primal evil”?**
- **We all know about the suffering by Job in the Old Testament, does this relate to the message in our readings? If so. How?**
- **On page xxxii, it refers to the opposition between two types of Christianity—the Roman Catholic interpretation represented by the Inquisitor and the Protestant interpretation imputed to the silent Christ. Explain.**

Perhaps a useful conversation could be had by a class discussion of freedom. The premise in the book is that humans can be divided into two groups, depending on whether they can and do handle freedom. This leads to discussions on whether or not the person can handle freedom, and whether this manifests itself by actions.

The two groups are tens of thousands who can and do handle freedom versus thousands of millions who do not. The Grand Inquisitor looks back in history to make his case. In fact he argues the masses have failed at providing subsistence levels of basic needs, refuse to take responsibility for moral actions, and have been unable to live with differences. Do you agree with this? Discuss your answer.

The Inquisitor believes that the few, who can achieve material needs, take moral responsibility and live with difference can and should take the responsibility for “watching out” for the masses. (Like Plato, the few sacrifice themselves for the many?) As a result, the “few” should be prepared to be cruel or even brutal in order to insure tranquility and provide for the common good. Do you agree? Explain.

Do you believe the greater mass of the population can and will change? Relate your answer to the text.

In today’s world, how does this relate to the current political process, both in terms of politicians, and the conduct of the citizens?

Can the “tens of thousands” numbers be increased? How?

Are there differences in native ability that lead to these two groups?

**Why do you believe that many talk about freedom, but only few about personal responsibility?**

**09/04/2007**