A book with a title such as this one necessarily invites a question: is it going to be a theological work using examples from the stated body of fiction, or an exercise in literary criticism confined mainly to religious themes – just as other critics might focus their discussion on political or psychological issues? Most authors would of course protest against this crude either/or proposition and assert that the strictly literary aspects of a novel, as distinct perhaps from non-fiction, are inseparable from any intellectual issues it might raise. Neither approach should play Christ to the other’s St Christopher.

However, when the author in question is the Archbishop of Canterbury and sometime Lady Margaret Professor of Divinity at Oxford University, one may be justified in expecting his interest in Dostoevsky to stem from a desire to vindicate or polemicize the novelist’s theological position. Rowan Williams certainly marvels at Dostoevsky’s stance in regard to matters of faith, but the subtlety of his, Williams’s, insights and his meticulously text-based arguments (that is, Dostoevsky’s texts, not the church’s) reach a level beyond categorization. Williams is passionately in-
terested in this writer precisely because of Dostoevsky’s differences from, rather than conformity to, either conventional theology or conventional novel writing.

Scrupulous then in eschewing didacticism, he sets out as early as page 3 what is for him one of the most crucial characteristics of Dostoevsky’s “position”. Never mind that it is one that any attentive reader, all on his or her own, can discern, and one also consonant with Bakhtin’s influential theory of polyphonic dialogue: the main characters in these novels are essentially in a state of moral transience, of becoming, of being on a road between heaven or hell. Not only have they not yet arrived, it is not at all clear, sometimes even at the end of the book, which of the two options they will choose. How convincing, really, is Raskol’nikov’s “repentance,” regardless of the comfort it has afforded critics more “religious” than the Archbishop of Canterbury? Williams’ task is to show how faithfully the text enacts their ongoing uncertainty: “Instead of imagining a deeply divided authorial mind, half-consciously struggling with contradictory conviction or emotions and betraying this inner division in a confused text, we have a text that consciously writes out the to and fro of the dialogue, always alerting us to the dangers of staying with or believing uncritically what we have just heard.”

If the text is wilfully indeterminate, the individual characters also veer from one pole to another, as does Stavrogin in The Devils when he virtually ‘tries on’ virtue before discarding it, or they represent a set of alternative positions, as exemplified by the Karamazov family. Raskol’nikov commits his murder within the first few chapters of Crime and Punishment, but this is not the beginning of a mere police procedural, but rather of a series of debates, philosophical, political and personal, that keep him in a state of moral flux. Stavrogin’s return to his home-town, which triggers both the hilarious and the disastrous events in The Devils, is preceded by rumors of his shocking depravity, accompanied by his acts of barbaric insolence, and followed up by interactions with the other characters that are vital to their fates. Yet the scales are not inexorably weighted; the outcomes for several people hang on a hair’s breadth, and we have no idea which way they will go.

Perhaps this state of being always on some uncertain brink is best illustrated by Shatov (his name comes from the verb to waver) who, when asked by Stavrogin whether he believes in God, claims rather wildly that he believes in Russia, in Orthodoxy, in the Second Coming. “But in God?” persists Stavrogin. “I – I shall believe in God,” whispers Shatov into the empty darkness. He is not sure, we are not sure, and certainly Dostoevsky is not going to force him either way, the question posed, typically, by the most amoral character in the novel.

Williams correctly insists that Dostoevsky is not interested in depicting Russian Orthodoxy, or in distinguishing it from other religious systems, but joins with him in taking its centrality for granted. This does not make him a proselytizer any more than a historian of the Soviet Russia must be a Communist. Orthodoxy plays many dynamic and necessary roles in the