

# Adam Drozdek

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# Fonvizin: from fate to providence

Adam Drozdek

Duquesne University in Pittsburgh  
drozdek@duq.edu

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**Abstract:** This article traces the spiritual development of Denis Fonvizin, an eminent literary personality in Russia. He had a religious upbringing, however, in St. Petersburg he was strongly influenced by freethinker Feodor A. Kozlovskii. He abandoned his views under the influence of Ivan Elagin and his sister, which led him to an intense study of the Bible and to an experience of spiritual conversion. His beliefs have been reflected in his literary work, in particular, in his plays and in some of his political essays. In spite of his crippling illness, Fonvizin believed in the benevolent providence of God to the end of his life.

**Streszczenie:** Artykuł prezentuje rozwój duchowy Denisa Fonvizina, wybitnej postaci literackiej osiemnastowiecznej Rosji. Choć wychowany w religijnej atmosferze, Fonvizin przyjął wolnomyślicielskie poglądy pod wpływem księcia Fiodora A. Kozłowskiego. Porzucił jednak te poglądy pod wpływem Iwana Jelagina i swojej siostry co doprowadziło do intensywnych studiów biblijnych i do doświadczenia religijnego nawrócenia. Jego poglądy religijne znalazły wyraz w jego pismach, szczególnie w sztukach dramatycznych i w esejach politycznych. Mimo paraliżującej choroby do końca życia głęboko wierzył w boską opatrzność.

**Keywords:** Fonvizin, prawosławie

**Słowa kluczowe:** Fonvizin, Orthodoxy

Denis Ivanovich Fonvizin (1743-1792) is one of the most celebrated literary figures of the eighteenth century Russia in spite of his rather modest literary output: over two hundred short versified fables, some poetry, some political articles, and a few plays. However, he also left many letters, particularly from his journeys abroad, and several translations of plays. Today, he is primarily remembered for his two plays, *The brigadier* and *The minor*.

## Toward spiritual awakening

Fonvizin was first educated at home in a religious atmosphere: he remembered his father was “a virtuous man and a true Christian” (2.82).<sup>1</sup> However, when he moved to St. Petersburg to become a translator in the College/Ministry of Foreign Affairs, he associated himself briefly with a group that surrounded a freethinker, prince Feodor A. Kozlovskii, which had a strong although not lasting impact on him. As he wrote in his *Candid confession* written at the end of his life, “I joined a society about which until today I cannot think without horror since the best pastime consisted in blasphemy and sacrilege. At first, I took no part in this and I shuddered on hearing the curses of the atheists, but my role in the sacrilege was not the smallest since it is most of all the easiest to mock at the sacred and turn into ridicule what should be respected” (2.95). A lasting trace of this encounter is *An epistle to my servants Shumilov, Van’ka and Petrushka* (1763).

The *Epistle* is a versified answer given by the three servants to a philosophically portentous question, “why this world has been created” and how one should live in it,

which is “a mystery hidden from us by fate.”<sup>2</sup> A pretended seriousness is already in the title of the poem: *Epistle*, not *Letter*. As Fonvizin explained his *Attempt at the Russian dictionary* (1783), “epistle” refers to old letters, such as epistles of the apostle Paul (1.234), whereby Fonvizin put side by side his *Epistle to my servants* and Paul’s epistles.<sup>3</sup> The first servant immediately answered that he did not know why the world and people were created (1.209). The second servant said that the world is absurd and vain, full of stupidity and falsehood (1.210);

{Priests try to deceive people,  
Servants [try to deceive] the manager, managers the masters,  
One master another, and eminent boyars  
Want frequently to deceive the monarch.}  
And everyone, to stuff their pockets even more,  
Decided to apply deception for gain.  
Greedy for money are city-dwellers, courtiers,  
Judges, scribes, soldiers, and peasants.  
{Humble shepherds of our souls and hearts  
Are pleased to collect rent from their sheep.  
The sheep get married, multiply, die,  
And in all this, the shepherds stuff their pockets.  
They forgive any sin for pure money,  
For money do they promise plenty of delights in paradise.  
But if one can tell the truth in this world,  
I’ll speak my mind to you without lying:  
For money, both shepherd and the sheep

<sup>1</sup> References are made to Денис И. Фонвизин, *Собрание сочинений*, Москва: Государственное Издательство Художественной Литературы 1959, vols. 1-2.

<sup>2</sup> In the *Epistle*, there is a “discrete but indisputable” allusion to Voltaire, in particular, to his famous poem on the 1755 earthquake in Lisbon, André Monnier, *Un publicist frondeur sous Catherine II: Nicolas Novikov*, Paris: Institut d’études slaves 1981, p. 249.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Михаил Ю. Люстров, *Фонвизин*, Москва: Молодая Гвардия 2013, pp. 41-42.

Are ready to cheat the Most High Creator himself!}<sup>4</sup>

Moreover, everyone knows that the world is stupid and no one knows why the world exists. According to the third servant, the world is a child's play (211); it is better to live and be merry than to pray to God for entering the paradise. "The creator of all creation for his own glory / Threw us into the world like a puppet onto the table"; no one knows why the world is the way it is. Finally, all three servants turned to the poet for an answer, but he closed his poem with the line, "I myself don't know for what [purpose] this world was created!" (212).

The *Epistle* has a very strong anticlerical and deistic ring. Fonvizin put expressions of such sentiments in the mouths of his servants, but, in a way, he agreed with them by giving a profoundly unsatisfactory answer. In criticizing a low level of morals among the clergy, Fonvizin was not alone, and even prominent ecclesiastics of the eighteenth century lamented over this problem (e.g., Dimitrii Rostovskii and Tikhon Zadonskii).<sup>5</sup> However, the statement about God who sent people, like puppets, into the world to some unknown fate and for His glory at that, could hardly be reconciled with prevailing religious sentiments of Russians of the time. An influence of the libertine circle of Kozlovskii is fairly clear. In a 1763 letter to his sister, Fonvizin stated that he renounced writing satires because she brought him back to his senses and as an offering to Apollo, he "burned it in the oven" (2.326). What "it" was can only be guessed. If it was the *Epistle*, it was not its last copy since it was later published as an appendix to his translation of François-Thomas-Marie de Baculard d'Arnaud's *Sidney and Silli*, even twice, in 1769 and 1788, and also in 1770 on the last pages of Novikov's *The Tattler*.<sup>6</sup> Fonvizin was surely aware of how his poem, circulated in numerous copies, was viewed: "Certain verses reveal my error at that time so that because of this work I became famous among many as an atheist. But, Lord! You know my heart; You know that I always reverently worshiped You and that this work was not an act of unbelief, but of my thoughtless witticism" (2.95).<sup>7</sup> Apparently, the witticism component of the poem prevailed in Fonvizin's mind over its thoughtlessness when he decided to publish it more than once even though it tarnished his reputation in the province of beliefs.

Fonvizin's friendship with Kozlovskii was quite intense – his name repeatedly appears in 1763 letters, always in the context of socializing – as it was short: Fonvizin did not mention Kozlovskii afterwards, and he passed in silence Kozlovskii's death in the naval battle of Chesma in 1770.<sup>8</sup> Fonvizin's departure from the libertine worldview of

Kozlovskii can be attributed, at least partially, to his sister whom he thanked very briefly that she brought him back to his senses (2.326). It is also possible that there was some influence of Ivan Elagin. Elagin was then a minister of the empress' cabinet and since 1766, a director of court theaters and orchestras. In 1763-1769, Fonvizin was his secretary and remembered Elagin very warmly (2.95), considering him "a noble and honorable man" (a 1776 letter to parents, 2.342-343) with "reason enlightened by knowledge" and "good heart" (2.343-344, but cf. 347, 349). In his quest for spiritual fulfillment, Elagin became a mason with religious views strongly influenced by Saint-Martin. It seems quite possible that Elagin discussed spiritual matters with Fonvizin directly or indirectly influencing him out of Kozlovskii's circle. Incidentally, Fonvizin did not become a mason and referred to it rather disparagingly by the then-used name, Martinism (2.62, 564). Fonvizin's sister and Elagin may have induced Fonvizin to investigate the religious issues thoroughly by himself.<sup>9</sup> This came during his stay in Tsarskoe Selo, possibly in 1766 or 1768.<sup>10</sup>

Fonvizin set out there "with strong intention to occupy himself with theology" by studying the Bible to "draw from it the principles of faith"; he used Russian, French, and German editions to find "the most precise understanding" of the text. During his studies he encountered these verses (which are a part of the Jewish *Shema*): "May these words that I give you today be in your heart; impress them on your sons, talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up" (Deut. 6:6-7). These verses made a great impression on him, since, in his words, they "imposed on me the obligation to devote each available minute to investigate [the problem of] the Supreme Being. The timing was great and I set aside each morning for walks in the garden to reflect" (2.101). This led to his conversion or rather to his spiritual awakening to seriously embrace the beliefs in which he was brought up.

## Spirituality in Fonvizin's work

*The brigadier* was written and privately read briefly before the spiritual experience of the Tsarskoe Selo and some religious sentiment can be found in there. Fonvizin expressed his strong dislike of hypocrites, particularly in the person of Councilor who, in words of Councilor's wife, "misses neither mass nor matins and thinks, my joy, that God is so *complaisant* that for [attending] vespers, He will forgive him for what he stole during the day" (1:3).<sup>11</sup> The

<sup>4</sup> The two parts in curly brackets have been excised from the 1902 edition of Fonvizin's works (p. 151).

<sup>5</sup> A low level of education of the clergy was also a concern of many authors in this time; as Fonvizin himself expressed it in a 1778 letter, "ignorance of priests often brings shame to the entire nation" (2.485).

<sup>6</sup> As a poem written by "the Russian Voileau," *Пустомеля, сатирический журнал 1770*, Москва: Селивановский 1858, p. 104.

<sup>7</sup> For a brief history of reception of the *Epistle*, see A[lexej] Alois] Strycek, *La Russie des lumières: Denis Fonvizine*, Paris: Librairie des Cinq Continents 1976, pp. 141-143.

<sup>8</sup> Vasilii Maikov wrote a versified *Letter to Vasilii Il'ich Bibikov on the*

*death of the prince Feodor Alekseevich Kozlovskii* (1770) in which he praised Kozlovskii's patriotism and Kheraskov mentioned him in his long poem, *The battle of Chesme* (1771). Cf. Люстров, *op. cit.*, p. 40.

<sup>9</sup> Elagin himself studied the Scriptures very intensely, И[ван] П. Елагин, *Повесть о себе самом, Русский архив* 1864, no. 1, col. 107.

<sup>10</sup> П. А. Ефремов, *Примечания*, in: Денис И. Фон-Визин, *Сочинения, письма и избранные переводы*, Санкт-Петербург: П. И. Глазунов 1866, p. 668.

<sup>11</sup> Act 1, scene 3. Cf. a characterization of Iazvin in the *Tale of a pretended deaf and mute* (1783) (2.15).

very same Councilor summarizes the message of the play in its closing words directed to the audience: “They say it’s hard to live with conscience, but now I have recognized myself that to live without a conscience is the worst of all in the world” (5:5). The emphasis is placed on conscience and the leading principle in human life. This was Fonvizin’s belief before his spiritual conversion, but it also remained, even strengthened, after conversion. This is clear in *The minor* which has a very strong preachy component in the speeches of Starodum (Oldthinking, we would say today, Oldschool) and in the mindset of Pravdin (Truth), Milon (Lovable), and Sophia.

Starodum repeated his father’s teaching, “have a heart, have a soul, and you will be a human being at all times” since without the soul, even “the most enlightened sage is a pitiful creature. An ignoramus without a soul is a beast. The smallest deed leads him into all sorts of crimes. He has no scale [to weigh] what he does against [the reason] for which he is doing it” (3:1). The statements should not be taken literally: Fonvizin would agree that just as everyone has a conscience, so everyone does have a soul, i.e., there is no one without a conscience as *The brigadier* claims just as there is no one without a soul in words of *The minor*. Fonvizin in all three cases (conscience, heart, soul) meant the same thing: moral standing, moral dimension, inner moral sentiment which can be positive or negative. A man without a conscience is a man whose morality is unacceptable, corrupted, warped, antisocial, even psychotic. Therefore, when Starodum states that “the conscience always, like a friend, gives warning before it punishes him like a judge” (4:2), we should understand the conscience filled with uncorrupted moral principles prompting a person to lead a virtuous life, which even has a self-serving component, since “the rules of virtue ... are the means to happiness” (4:1). Then, as Starodum assures Sophia, “everyone will find sufficient strength in himself to be virtuous. One has to firmly desire this and then it’ll be easier not to do what caused conscience pricks” (4:2). Everyone? Even someone without conscience? That is where it is clear that everyone does have conscience, but because of its degeneration, conscience pricks may become weaker and weaker and thus desire to live virtuously may diminish, which leads to unhappiness in this life and thus transformation or purification of conscience is needed, which presumably comes with the divine help.<sup>12</sup> Starodum is silent about the afterlife consequences. However, in the age of enlightenment, in the age of reason, Fonvizin/Starodum, although not at all opposed to reason, did give priority to moral dimension over rational dimension: “We see bad husbands, bad fathers, bad citizens with cunning minds. Rectitude gives the mind real value. Without it an intelligent man is a monster. It is immeasurably greater than all sharpness of mind. This can easily be understood by anyone who thinks right [about it]. There are many minds and many different [at that]. It is easy to excuse an intelligent man if he does not have certain

quality of mind. An honorable man can never be excused if he does not have a certain quality of heart. He must have them all. The dignity of the heart is indivisible. An honorable man must be perfectly an honorable man” (4:2). This is quite a tall order. How can such perfection be accomplished even for a perfectly willing person? How about a person whose heart/conscience is corrupted to some extent, which pretty much includes all people?

In both *The brigadier* and *The minor* Fonvizin was focusing on morality and its importance for personal and social life. A moral person was helpful to others; a moral person was a good citizen and a loyal subject. Fonvizin was interested in this civic message rather than in a discussion of the theological basis which would make it possible. There are quite numerous references to God in these plays, but they are inconsequential (“my God,” “thank God,” “God willing,” and the like). Fonvizin could count on the audience steeped in the Orthodox upbringing to supply such a background. When Nelstetsov (Nonflatterer), a prospective tutor, is quizzed in *The selection of a tutor* (1790) about what a young son of the prince Slaboumov (Feeblemind) should be taught, he answered: “first of all, the principles of the faith in which he was born” (3:3). The principles of the Orthodox faith, the principles of Christianity should be the foundation of what follows in the educational process. Teaching languages, mathematics, etc. is important for the development of the mind, but this development has to be founded on the development of the heart so that the knowledge gained during the education process will be used properly and usefully.<sup>13</sup> This, however, was not just cut-and-dry memorization of religious principles. Fonvizin firmly believed that learning these principles is really learning the closeness and assistance of God. Therefore, speaking about virtue without theological underpinnings is well nigh impossible. As he stated in a 1778 letter, in France, philosophers believe that all people should be virtuous regardless of their religion: “but do they who don’t believe in anything show the possibility of such a system? Who from among the wise of this age, having defeated all assumptions, remained an honorable man?” “It is enough to look at messieurs philosophers here to see what a man without religion is and, therefore, to conclude how strong human society would be without it!” (2.482).<sup>14</sup>

Fonvizin ventured rarely into theological territory. However, he realized very well that the understanding of who God is is important in other areas of human endeavor and this is most clearly indicated in his *Discourse on permanent laws of state* (1782).

In the *Discourse*, Fonvizin wanted to substantiate the political principle that “supreme power is entrusted to a monarch only for the good of his subjects”; therefore, “all

<sup>12</sup> The New Testament speaks about “sprinkling our hearts from an evil conscience” (Heb. 10:22).

<sup>13</sup> “For Fonvizin, a correct education did not mean simply the acquisition of knowledge or the cultivation of the intellect but something far more complex, the inculcation of virtue and the elevation of the soul,” Marvin Kantor, *Dramatic works of D. Fonvizin*, Bern: Herbert Lang 1974, p. 37.

<sup>14</sup> In words of Starodum, “today’s wise men” whose works he studied “forcefully uproot prejudices, but they also turn virtue over from its roots” (*The minor* 4:2).



the brilliance of the throne is an empty splendor if virtue does not sit on it along with the monarch" (2.254). This political principle is based on the theological foundation that states that "God is almighty because He cannot do anything else than good; and in order that this inability could be an infinite sign of His perfection, He determined for Himself unalterable principles of eternal truth by which He governs the universe, and which He Himself cannot violate without ceasing to be God. A monarch, the likeness of God, the recipient on earth of His supreme power, cannot signify his power and worth except by instituting in his state unalterable rules, based on the common good, which he himself could not violate without ceasing to be a worthy monarch" (2.254-255). The question is what to do if the monarch is evil, abusive? Prokopovich earlier in the century argued that because a monarch is appointed by God (the claim repeatedly made by all the poets in the century who wrote odes to the tsars or tsarinas; cf. Fonvizin's own claim that Paul is God's chosen (2.192)), the tsar is above the law and is accountable only to God. Subjects can only pray to God for Him to touch the monarch's heart.<sup>15</sup> Not so Fonvizin. In his view, "righteousness and meekness are rays of divine light, proclaiming to people that the power which rules over them has been established by God, and that it deserves their reverent obedience; consequently, every power that is not characterized by the divine qualities of righteousness and meekness, but causing injuries, violence, and tyranny, is a power not from God but from people, whom the woes of times caused, by subduing to force, to humble their human dignity. If a nation in such a fatal situation finds the means to break its shackles by the same right by which they were put, it acts very intelligently if it breaks [them]" (2.259). Precisely because the monarch is appointed by God, God should be his model of how to rule over his subjects because the monarch in an image of God in respect to ruling. If "rays of divine light" fade away and darkness takes over in the monarch's heart, the subjects have every right to overthrow him, which was quite a revolutionary thought in Russia with its institutionalized autocracy.

In this, political submission reflects religious submission. "God has the right for our reverent obedience only though His quality of supreme goodness. Reason, admitting that the use of His omnipotence is good, advises us to conform to His will and pulls hearts and souls to obey Him" (2.263). The nature of God is His goodness – God is love, after all – and because of this goodness humans should obey by God's commands. Similarly, subjects should obey their monarch if the monarch is filled with goodness and this goodness is the monarch's guiding principle. This can be accomplished by the monarch as by any other human being, namely by turning to God in all matters, big and small, which is effective since God is concerned about human affairs. In fact, it appears to be fairly clear that the

attribute of God which was most important to him was God's providence.

In the *Discourse on the recovery of prince Paul* (1771), Fonvizin stated that "a terrible cloud was diverted from us by the Hand of the Most High" (2.187), that in the trying time of Paul's illness, "the Heaven itself has sustained you [Catherine] for [the sake of] Paul and the Fatherland!" In this hour, "the Eternal looked from the heights of His throne at the tears of Catherine, at virtues of the ill one, at the wails and moans of numerous people and showed mercy on His people. At His command, the Angel of death, moving toward the Heir to the Russian Throne, stopped in his track. Health, this most precious heavenly gift, began to return to Paul" (2.191-192). The providential element is not brought here just for the occasion of writing about the *tsarevitch*. That Fonvizin firmly believed in God's providence is clear from *An essay on vain human life* (1791) that has some of his last words. Fonvizin had four strokes in one year which left him partially paralyzed. He considered this to be an act of God's mercy since it happened after his voyage abroad when he was proud of his knowledge and there was a prospect of elevation to a high post and when "the All-Seeing, knowing that my talents can be more harmful than useful, took always from me the ability to explain myself in speech and in writing and enlightened me in judging myself. With gratitude do I bare the cross put upon me and will not cease to the end of my life to exclaim: 'Lord! it is good for me that You have humbled me'" (Ps. 118:71) (2.80). He believed that he was accompanied by God in good times and bad and that all was for his own good, for his spiritual development and for his inner peace since "everything happens according to God's providence" as he wrote in a 1772 letter (2.390). And so he could with assurance state in his *Sincere confessions*: "If among many sins I happened in my life to do something good, then I admit and confess that this didn't come from me, but from God himself who sends us all our blessings: to Him alone I attribute my good deeds, to Him alone I give thanks for them and pray to Him to keep me in this good place until the end of my life" (2.82). His belief in God's providence allowed him also to state in a 1773 letter, "I have had trust in God in all my life and my only concern is to live and die as an honorable man" (2.355).

The belief in the providence of God gives a different coloring to Fonvizin's religious views. At first, it was fate, and in the words of Menander from *Korion* (1764), "we should always submit ourselves to fate" (2:2), impersonal fate as it was. This fate acquires some personality in *Epistle to my servants* where people are shown as being thrown into the world by God who seemingly does not care what will happen to them. After his conversion, it was a providential God and Fonvizin could wholeheartedly repeat the Menander's statement, with one change only: "we should always submit ourselves to God." Since God is all goodness, then His plan for someone's life would be better than invented by any human. Such submission to God can only bring peace in life even in the most trying of times. However, the initial question of the *Epistle to my servants* remains unanswered: "why this world has been created?" it is still a mystery, but now, it

<sup>15</sup> [Feofan Prokopovich], *Peter the Great: his law on the imperial succession, the official commentary: Pravda voli monarshei*, Oxford: Headstart History 1996 [1722], pp. 187-197; Hans-Joachim Härtel, *Byzantinisches Erbe und Orthodoxie bei Feofan Prokopovič*, Würzburg: Augustinus-Verlag 1970, p. w91.

does not matter. The belief in the all-good God guarantees that there is a good reason for it, which eventually will be beneficial to humans. Just as Job did not have his questions answered, so did not Fonvizin whose paralyzing afflictions

were on the level of Job's. Job saw finally the majesty of God and it was enough for him as an answer. Fonvizin saw the goodness and providence of God and this knowledge overshadowed all other metaphysical curiosity.

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