

Honors Colloquium: Literature of Spiritual Crisis

Course Description

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The rationale of this course is encapsulated in its title. If a spiritual crisis is imaginable, it must be by a being that can take the self in hand, that transcends the limits of the immediate environment or the sum of its sense impressions. Such a being can truly utter the pronoun “I,” and can view himself or herself as both dwelling in time and yet not bound by time; as being more than the body alone. We will then examine what it means to possess “spirit,” which then implies the possibility of crisis, of a decision not simply within one's life but about one's life, its entirety, its meaning, its journey, and its goal.

We will begin the course with one or two foundational texts from the long tradition of western spiritual autobiographies and highly theological novels. Most of our students will have read at least part of Augustine's *Confessions*; some of them will have read Boethius' *Consolation*. We will read Boethius again, since you can hardly read him too often, and one other ancient work, from Plato, Cicero, or Seneca.

Those works should set the stage for those to follow, as we broach the crucial questions: What is the role of the human will, enfeebled by evil or grief or confusion, in a crisis that seems to arrive from without? Are there times that are singularly charged with meaning, with terrifying consequences? What happens to the soul that declines the offered gift? Is a spiritual crisis in a human being even conceivable without the call of love?

If, as Aristotle says, the human person is essentially social, then it is impossible to speak about a spiritual crisis without speaking about its implications for the people among whom we are placed, or even for the whole of humanity. So we will examine whether it makes sense to suggest that an entire society may undergo a spiritual crisis or at least be led, spiritually and intellectually, by a remarkable exemplar of accepted grace, and inner transformation, and holiness. Is the crisis for Dostoyevsky's Raskolnikov only his? These questions ineluctably touch upon matters which much of contemporary thinking lacks the resources to understand in their fullness, because of our habit of thinking of persons as individual atoms of will, and of societies as aggregates of the self-willed, compromising with one another but always strangely alone.

Books:

Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations*

Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy* (tr. R. Green)

The Cloud of Unknowing (Penguin)

Shakespeare, *King Lear* (Signet Classics)

Manzoni, *The Betrothed* (Penguin)

Guardini, *The End of the Modern World* (Ignatius)

Boll, *The Clown*

Mauriac, *Vipers' Tangle*

Lagerkvist, *Barabbas*

Flannery O'Connor, *Collected Short Stories*