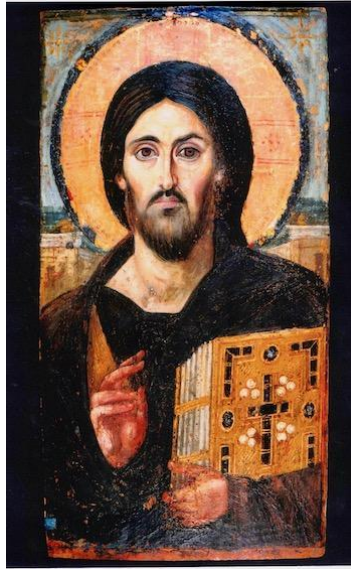


Incarnation and the Russian Novel

Application for Newell Innovative Teaching Award, Spring 2020



Eastern Orthodox icon of Christ “Pantocrator” (6th century) representing the dual nature of Christ

Newell Innovative Teaching Award Proposal for ENG 325: Literature and Faith

A Note on COVID-19: This is not a proposal about how I designed an innovative online course in response to the pandemic. In fact, this course is based on the presupposition that matter matters, especially when it comes to human bodies interacting in proximity with one another. So, at the risk of sounding hopelessly backwards, I don't believe any virtual substitute for the gathering of human persons in the same location will ever be an adequate replacement for in-person classes when it comes to education. I believe our necessary move to online classes has only served to reinforce the importance of the traditional classroom for professors and students alike.

All that being said, I have tried several adaptations of our classroom procedures that attempt to maintain a sense of "embodiedness" among the students while we are socially distancing. I have a brief (one page) write up of these methods that I would be happy to send to the committee on request, but adding them here would make my proposal too long.

I. Project Description

This spring I taught ENG 325, Literature and Faith, for the first time. I focused on several Russian novels which some students had requested a few semesters ago, but the overall theme for the course was incarnation. I wanted to use the course as a way to think through how the fact of Christ's incarnation challenges and changes the way we are often invited to think of words, language, and our academic pursuits at Union. Remembering that St. John calls Christ the Word, and that God's word is what speaks creation and humanity into existence, I invited the class to explore the ways in which our human language may still be a means by which we can participate in creation, through stories and poetry, but also as we try to build up one another in Christ.

In various ways, all of the authors studied in the course grapple with the issue of incarnation and embodiment. In *Dead Souls*, Gogol asks what the value of a human soul might be. His satiric work condemns the aristocratic and governmental forces in Russia that dared to assume that a peasant's life could be purchased and sold, or that even a peasant's soul could be a commodity after his passing. In a similar way, Raskolnikov in Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, believes his powerful intellect and force of will can free him not only from the consequences of his crime but even from the basic morality of everyday people. Despite Raskolnikov's reason and intelligence, however, he is constantly brought low by his own body. It sometimes even seems to move without his conscious thought. He reacts reflexively, feels fear, falls faint, endures a fever, and much more in the aftermath of his act of murder. His body is in

many ways wiser and nobler than his mind, and may eventually even be a means by which he is restored and redeemed.

Authors like Dostoevsky also write in a style that can be considered incarnational. The Russian critic Mikhail Bakhtin describes how some authors choose to relinquish their “authority” as creators of characters and worlds and allow their characters to think and act on their own. The author of such worlds does not offer judgements or critiques. He allows characters their contradictions and paradoxes without requiring that they “mean” anything or gesture toward some deeper truth or social commentary. One of the upshots is that our understanding of Dostoevsky the author does not come to us readers directly, but indirectly through the characters he breathes life into and then sets free in his world.

These themes of embodied participation, material value, and incarnational authorship informed my design for the course. I wanted to create a class that would allow students to participate in these ideas as well as learning about them, and I hoped to develop a classroom experience that would provide avenues for practicing the virtues of hospitality, humility, and patience that our embodied natures call for.

II. Methods

I wanted to invite students to participate in a more embodied fashion in our academic pursuits in and out of class. To that end, I imbedded several requirements throughout the course designed to invite students to share space both physically and mentally.

I asked students to sign up to bring something to class that was, for them, a way to participate in the physical world. We called these presentations “Incarnation in the classroom,” and I left the actual contribution open-ended, but suggested some ways in which students might demonstrate to the class how “matter matters” to them. Students were all requested to speak for a few minutes about how their contribution to the class put them in the way of beauty or reality, or enabled them to experience their own embodiment in some unique way. As an example, I brought a piece of scrap wood from my garage workshop and a hand plane. I invited students to experience the feeling of planing a feathery thin curl of wood from the edge of a plank. One student shared her hobby of pressing flowers by bringing in some

freshly picked daffodils for the class to press into their textbooks. Another student shared a full El Salvadorian meal as a celebration of her heritage and culture.

I also invited students to find a time and place to read together. I told them all that I would spend the same hour every day in the Reading Room on the second floor of the Logos and invited them to join me. I didn't feel I could make this a requirement of the course, and our own class time is too limited to spend much of it simply reading together, but I hoped with this invitation to push back against the tendency of academic work to be solitary and individualistic.

Next, I asked students to present their academic papers to the class in a unique way, by giving their paper to another student and having that second student summarize and present the paper to the rest of the class. I did this in order to try and participate in a trinitarian and incarnational understanding of identity and personhood by asking students to allow their words to be spoken by others. A student's paper would be summarized by a peer who would then lead a short discussion on the paper's topics and the questions that flow from it. During this time, the author of the paper can only listen and not participate, allowing others to interpret and comment without correction or judgement. If nothing else, it is an exercise in humility and patience on the part of the author, but I also hoped that students might get a taste of how thoughts and ideas take a life of their own when they are committed to writing for the benefit of others.

As a way of having students engage with the academic literature surrounding our novels while incorporating our incarnational theme, I also asked students to deliver short research presentations about a particular novel. Their assignment was to find 7 journal articles that all focused on a similar element of the novel and then present their findings as a sort narrative of ideas. Rather than a dry recounting of authors and arguments, I asked students to weave together a story of the various arguments being made so that the class could appreciate the way in which academics converse with one another and respond to one another. This presentation is essentially practice for the kind of literature review often found in academic papers, but it also works well with our theme of practicing hospitality and humility in an academic

context as it requires students to read the work of others and transmit it faithfully and in its proper context.

III. Results

As a whole, I was pleased with the student's incarnational presentations. In addition to simply sharing some way in which matter mattered in their own lives, their comments on their particular hobby or interest were usually insightful and sometimes profound.

I plan to ask students for some feedback about having their papers presented and discussed by the other members of the class without their involvement at the end of the year. My own impression is that this is going well, with the presentations and discussions being both thoughtful and respectful.

I am less pleased with the research presentations from students. Despite my instructions, these presentations tend toward a simple run-through of authors and key points with minimal attention paid to the ideas or arguments authors have in common. In hindsight, I think I need to give an example of what I'm looking for as well as clearer instructions. It may also help to lessen the number of required articles so that students can focus more narrowly on a theme and spend more time developing the scholarly narrative.

Finally, the reading hour in the library turned out to be more beneficial to me than the students. I enjoyed the change of location and the structure of having a dedicated hour for reading in the library every day. I saw very few of my students, and only a few came more than once. I still think there is a value in sharing space while working separately, so in future iterations of this course, I may try harder to find a good time or set up smaller reading groups among the students that can commit to reading together all semester.