
GOD AND MAN IN AN AGE OF UNBELIEF

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The 2019 Edward Cardinal Egan Lecture

Union League Club
New York City,
April 27, 2019

A friend of mine likes to say that every life comes down to a choice between happiness and comfort. You can have one or the other, she says, but not both. Sometimes they coincide, but not very often, not very congenially, and rarely for very long. At the end of the day, as the organizing appetites in a life, they're mutually exclusive. Period.

In a consumer economy of material comforts with the highest standard of living in history, that can sound pretty implausible. And annoying. But I suspect she's more right than wrong. And here's why.

Happiness, real happiness, is tied to a kind of wisdom, and wisdom grows out of risk and suffering; the beauty and hard edges of experiencing the real world. It's never the result of commerce. We can't own it. We can't buy it. It's also never solitary. Happiness needs other people. The joy of a young mother is linked to the gift of life she makes to a new and unrepeatably soul in the act of birth; to the pain and effort she experiences in bearing her child. Happiness is either made and shared with others here and now, or remembered as moments shared with others in the past. Which is why, even as he was beaten and starved in a death camp, Viktor Frankl could know happiness and the interior freedom it brought when he remembered the love of his wife.

Comfort is a different thing. It's the emollient we place between ourselves and the facts of everyday life. It's our insulation. Our analgesic. The world can

be nasty and unforgiving. Nobody wants to be cold in the winter when we can be warm; or hungry when we can eat steak; or sick when we can be well; or dress in rags when we can look sharp; or walk to California when we can fly. Comfort isn't a bad thing in its place. Quite the opposite. But comfort becomes "happiness" in only one circumstance: when we provide it to another person; when we ease someone else's suffering or burden.

We like comfort and we want comfort because we're creatures with bodies that experience pleasure and pain, but we *long* for happiness. And down deep we all know which is which, and which is more important. We were made for something more than anesthetics. This is why a culture of pleasure, a culture focused mainly on the pursuit of material well-being, is never really a culture of joy. Comfort is about the self, about making things easier or escaping inconvenience. And when it's the main course of a life and a civilization, it first dulls the appetite for happiness and then replaces it altogether.

The point here is simple. Comfort diminishes hardship, but it also lowers our horizons to the here and now. It's a costly habit to feed and a demanding habit to maintain. To borrow a thought from the great French theologian, Coco Chanel, the best things in life are free; the second-best things are very, very expensive. The greater a man's need for comfort, the more he has to lose, the greater his fear of losing it, and the more firmly cemented he is to this world.

Thus a culture committed to, and organized around, the pursuit of things that make a life comfortable can never really value nobility, honor, courage, or magnanimity—the qualities that distinguish us as human—because these very different things demand self-denial, and risk, and a belief in something or Someone greater than ourselves. Comfort lived as a guiding appetite produces mediocrity. It sedates the soul. The result is a disinterest in, or a resentment

of, the transcendent as an unwanted distraction—or worse, an intrusion. This may explain why beauty can seem so rare in the world we now inhabit. Beauty disarms us; it points us to higher things visible only to the soul; and while the transcendent can be exhilarating or moving or alarming, or even comforting, it's rarely *comfortable* because it drags us outside of ourselves. Beauty is unsettling. Therefore, it can be unwelcome.

I say all this as a preface to the main points I want to suggest tonight. I want to talk about our present and future, but I need to begin with the past.

I've always had an interest in history because history is to a culture or a Church as memory is to each of us as individuals. A man with amnesia is a man without an identity. The same applies to a civilization. The past grounds us. It also shapes us. We make the future with our intellects and free will. But the past is implicit in our choosing and acting. It teaches us with its achievements. It also cautions us with its failures. This is why losing one's memory is so perilous, and deliberately ignoring or subverting the memory of a culture is a special kind of theft.

Earlier this spring I reread the William Butler Yeats poem, "The Second Coming," and it has stayed in my memory ever since. This year, 2019, is the poem's centenary. "The Second Coming" was published in 1920, but Yeats actually drafted it in 1919, with the First World War still fresh in Europe's memory. It's a powerful piece of writing. So powerful that it's been quoted nearly to death. *The Paris Review* once called it a gold mine of apocalyptic clichés and "the most thoroughly pillaged piece of literature in English." I'm not going to add to the pillage here. But I do encourage you to read it if you haven't already because it foresaw with great clarity the course of the 20th and early 21st centuries—the rejection of Christianity, the appetite for violence and anarchy, the paralysis of the good, and the passion of the wicked.

Yeats was a complex, conflicted man. He loathed the smug optimism of the Enlightenment. But he also despised what he perceived as the vanilla pi-

ety of Christianity. He was deeply into the occult. He married a woman who claimed to channel spirits. He was a fan of Friedrich Nietzsche and the will to power. In his own words he "felt a sort of ecstasy at the contemplation of ruin." And had he lived just one more year—he died in 1939—he would have witnessed ruin and desecration on a global scale, dwarfing the First World War with a second.

Yeats wasn't unique. Literature and art contribute to the poisoning or ennoblement of an age as surely as politics and philosophy. One of the common marks of many artists and writers of the last century was their eagerness—their real delight—in celebrating the act of destruction, especially of all things Christian. In a sense, it's not hard to understand why. Breaking things is fun. Smashing things feels good. It's exhilarating, especially if you feel free from any duty to put things back together. Disassembling the human form on canvas like a piece of machinery is interesting. Fracturing the human face into cubes is arresting in its disorder. Ugliness has its own peculiar magnetism. Deliberate ugliness has a defiant kind of purity.

The curious thing is the ferocity of the hatred that was directed at the Christian past. Speaking for artists of the French Surrealist movement in 1949, one of their leaders—Jean-Louis Bédouin—set a goal of "bring[ing] forever to ruin the abominable Christian notion of sin, of original fall, of redeeming love, [and] to replace them without hesitation . . . [with a] morality based on the exaltation of pleasure" and thus to "sooner or later wipe away the vile morality of suffering and resignation preserved" by the Catholic Church. Bédouin wrote those words in a kind of frenzy, panicked by the brief Christian revival that swept Europe in the wake of World War II.

For something as dead as Christianity was supposed to be, it had a remarkable frightfulness for those who detested it. The question is: *why?* I think the an-

swer is both simple and obvious, but also vigorously ignored.

The central drama of Western societies for the last three hundred years has been the effort to construct a harmonious moral life through human reason alone, without God. It doesn't work, because it can't. And the more we try, the more catastrophic the results, as the record of the 20th century clearly shows.

For all our modern tools and cleverness, we've arrived at a point where human reason itself is the target of our cynicism. Human nature is seen as raw material for the will; and the will is stuck inside the flawed instrument and inefficient piece of carbon we call the body. We double down on our refusal of limits. We will not accept the indignity of being creatures. We will not acknowledge a Creator, much less serve him. Our hatred of transcendence, and the obligations we owe to Someone or something greater than ourselves that it implies, grows in direct proportion to our failures to create perfection here and now.

We want to be gods, and we're not. We want to create ourselves and our world, and we can't. And every piece of evidence or shred of memory suggesting a system of truth that exists outside ourselves, and to which we need to conform, is seen as a threat to our human sovereignty. This, despite that fact we can no longer really articulate why being human is unique or sacred.

Sexuality freed from a higher meaning, freed from the tyranny of a *telos*, was supposed to be a liberation for the body. Instead we have desecrations like transgenderism.

Christianity is despised because it's true. It's hated because, despite its age, despite the many sins of its leaders, despite its teachings that can seem so incomprehensible to the world, *it knows the human person more profoundly than the world knows itself*. Christianity speaks the truth, and the world does not. To borrow a thought from Roger Scruton, our capacity to speak the truth about our own fallen condition, with simplicity and elegance, offers us a kind of re-

demption from it. And clinging to falsehoods does the opposite. Clutching at lies about who we are and why we're here is exactly why so much of modern art refuses to sanctify human life with anything like a hope of redemption, and instead thrives on cynicism and transgression, "matching the ugliness of the things it portrays with an ugliness of its own."

To put it more simply, much of modern art is a flight from beauty just as much of modern life is a flight from truth. If I can share with you a few more words from Scruton before we move on to some concluding thoughts, they're these:

"[Today's art of desecration] is a kind of defense against the sacred, an attempt to destroy its claims. In the presence of sacred things our lives are judged, and in order to escape that judgment we destroy the thing that seems to accuse us . . . The human form is sacred for us because it bears the stamp of our embodiment. The willful desecration of the human form, either through the pornography of sex or the pornography of death and violence, has become for many people a kind of compulsion. And this desecration, which spoils the experience of freedom, is also a denial of love. It is an attempt to remake the world as though love were no longer part of it. And [surely that's] the most important characteristic of postmodern culture: . . . It is a loveless culture, which is afraid of beauty because it is disturbed by love."

If God is love, as Scripture says and we Christians believe, then it can be no surprise that a Godless world is also a loveless world. And since human beings need love as much as we need food to eat and air to breathe, two questions then follow: How can we sustain the presence of God and his love in our own lives, and how can we rekindle it in an unbelieving world—a world that doesn't know God, and also, too often, also doesn't *want* to know him?

Which brings us finally to our theme and the painting that accompanies it tonight—"God and man

in an age of unbelief.” And I’ll start with a caveat. There’s really no such thing as an age of unbelief. I mean that in two ways.

First, and more obviously, the portion of the world that styles itself as “developed” is a veneer on a global population that remains very largely religious and grows in number every year. The future is never predetermined, but it likely belongs to religious believers. The reason is simple. They have children.

Second, everyone is a believer. There are no exceptions. Not everyone is religious, but even the most committed atheist believes in something. Everyone puts his or her faith in a premise from which to reason, and around which to build a life. No life is sustainable without some kind of grounding that makes sense of the world. The story of the last century is a parade of strong gods—that’s gods with a small “g;” blood and soil nationalism, Marx and Lenin, fascism, and now technology and scientism—that provided such a grounding, and the human carnage they caused.

Technology and scientism are America’s particular hearth gods. They descend from our Puritan forebears. And they’re every bit as zealous. As I was thinking about this talk, a line from George Orwell’s 1984 occurred to me that applies in an odd way here. At one point in the novel, the Inner Party member O’Brien tells the story’s main character that *“If you want a vision of the future, imagine a boot stamping on a human face—forever.”*

That image is so striking because the human face reflects a person’s soul and character in a unique way. Every face bears a kind of sacred intimacy. This is why the violence in Orwell’s line sounds so utterly alien to the American experience. We’re the *good* guys, after all. Though maybe we’re not quite so good, and Orwell’s line is not quite so alien, as we like to think. More than 117 million Americans have their faces in police databases. The FBI has access to more than 412 million facial images for its searches. Facial recognition software is a rapidly expanding business. And facial data can be collected and stored without a

person’s permission. The brutalism of the big murder ideologies is dead and buried. But the wreckage they left behind has created a different kind of inhumanity: a desolation of the spirit; an appetite for social control through technical skill, surveillance, libertinism, and material plenty; and a cynicism about human nature, dignity, and purpose. A society agnostic about God in practice is sooner or later—and necessarily—agnostic about human meaning in practice. Politics becomes a kind of pain management for the soul. This should probably surprise no one. A nation with a mortgage of fifty million abortions on its conscience will have a peculiar sense of humanism.

When Rembrandt did his seven paintings of the face of Jesus in the mid-17th century—all of them versions of the one we see here tonight—the Thirty Years War was just ending. That war, which began between Protestants and Catholics but became a struggle between emerging nation states, remains one of the most destructive in history.

In other words, Rembrandt worked in a world that seemed poisoned with hatred; a world not so different from our own. His longing for the solace of a real encounter with God showed itself in his portraits of Christ, which in their immediacy, realism, and beauty created a revolution in Christian art. As one critic wrote: *“Gone is the Jesus as superman. Gone are the crowds surrounding Jesus. These paintings are a personal, face-to-face encounter between an artist and his Savior, both of whom have tasted human sorrow.”*

There is nothing remote, nothing effeminate, nothing stylized or restless or false in this face of Jesus. It’s the face of a God who loves us; the God who understands human suffering because he took on our flesh and blood himself; the God in whom our hearts can rest, and by whose stripes we are healed.

It’s the face of the God whom John Paul II described exactly forty years ago in his first encyclical,

Redeemer of Man: the God who worked with human hands, thought with a human mind, acted with a human will, and loved with a human heart. This is why Christians can hope: God is not simply real, but close to us here and now, and he knows our fears and our longings *from the inside*. As Benedict XVI wrote in *Spe Salvi*, “Heaven is *not* empty. Life is *not* a simple product of laws and the randomness of matter, but within everything and at the same time above everything, there is a personal will, there is a Spirit who in Jesus [Christ] has revealed himself as Love.”

We live in a time when the Church and her people are under great pressure. The bombings in Sri Lanka on Easter Sunday were a terrible tragedy. But they weren't an anomaly. They were simply the latest bloodshed in a global pattern of anti-Christian violence that Western media tend to ignore.

Even here in the United States, a nation largely founded and built by people of faith, religion is now often attacked or derided or pushed to the margins. The day when a social consensus made being Christian an easy choice is over. That's unsettling. I understand how families can be fearful and lose confidence in the future.

But cheap faith—faith without a cost—is an act of self-delusion. It makes no disciples. It changes nothing about the world. And that's because no one is persuaded by a faith that's indistinguishable from a comfortable form of therapy. So this time of testing that we face today is not a moment of defeat. It's a moment of privilege. We're becoming awake again to the measure of God's love, the price he paid for our redemption—and the happiness, the real *happiness*, his sacrifice makes possible for those who truly believe.

I'll end with just one final thought. Dietrich Bonhoeffer once said that gratitude is the beginning of joy. And so whenever I hear people complain about how hard it is to be a believer or to live a Christian life, I try to turn my own heart and theirs to the pregnant, unmarried teenage girl from Galilee who could say:

*My soul magnifies the Lord,
And my spirit rejoices in God my savior . . .
For he who is mighty has done great things for me . . .
And his mercy is on those who fear him
From generation to generation.*

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Thanks for being here tonight.



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