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Two Paintings and a Sceptic Transcript

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TWO PAINTINGS AND A SCEPTIC

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Good evening, welcome to Gresham College. Normally when I say that, I then have the comfort of someone else to give the lecture, but tonight there is no supporting cast; I am afraid you have got to put up with me! The lecture is 'Two Paintings and a Sceptic', and, to be up front, I am the sceptic. That is my standard pose, trained in Philosophy, that was what I used to do for a living.

The two paintings we are to be concerned with are *The Burial of the Count of Orgaz*, by El Greco, and *Guernica*, by Picasso. They could hardly be more different.

What do Sceptics do? They ask questions, and the question I want to ask and try to answer, with the help of these two paintings, is: do we still have room for the language and thought forms of religion? Is there still a place where they play a role in our contemporary culture, or have we effectively sidelined them once and for all?

Many would certainly say the latter. If you were to hear and accept the words of militant contemporary atheism, as if so popular in some circles now, then the response is clear: there no place for religion, no place for that kind of language, no place for the thought forms, no place for the questions which it raised, and the answers which perhaps, at one time, were more widely accepted than now. We have grown up - the militant atheist would say - we have shed the longings of the childhood of civilisation, and we have moved on to newer and better things; there is no place for religion, as Ivan Karamazov described it, 'miracle, mystery and authority'. - That is the one side.

On the other side, if you accept the words and thoughts of muscular religious belief, then religion is still alive and well. The great monotheistic religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) claim many adherents in many parts of this world and preach the belief that we live as mortal, finite creatures in the greater context of eternity. If you were lucky, you might encounter someone with a hotline to God that would give you the answers to the questions that you might want to pose, and that I believe are posed in these two paintings.

We have now grasped the question, I hope: do we still have room for a religious dimension to things, or do we not, and does it depend on you either rejecting completely the lot, as the muscular atheist, or on the other hand, accepting what the traditional Christian or indeed muscular religious believer today might say?

To be facetious for a moment - because all that sounds terribly heavy - you can illustrate this problem if you go into St Paul's Cathedral or Westminster Abbey. There are two ways you can take any such place: it is either a place of worship, or it is a tourist venue. If it is a place of worship, the eyes grow wide as you see the symbols of the religion round about you; if it is a place of being a tourist, then actually it is the lens on your camera that grows wide. There is a wide gap between these two very different reactions you might have to this place.

I had a similar reaction to a visit to Mount Sinai, which is a very dramatic mountain and a very important place in the history of the great monotheistic religions. You will remember that is where the tablets of stone were laid down and Moses brought them down the mountain. It is a very impressive mountain and it is evidently a very important or holy place for these religions. There is a remarkable community lives there, but alongside this, of course, there are tourists - thousands of tourists - and there are the two completely different reactions. The religious order that live there, who run the library, who look after the buildings, who tend the bush that was the Burning Bush; and there are the tourists. The mountains are much as they were in the time of Moses so the accepted response might be to expect what Rudolph Otto, the great German thinker, described as 'the sense of the numinous', the sense of awe, the sense of wonder, that might overtake you in this great holy place.

But just think of a bunch of 21st Century British visitors, who weren't quite tourists but were part of Moses' entourage, what kind of things might they have said to Moses, if they were not following the path of true religion as the others did? Perhaps on of the following: 'Moses, we've been on this trek for forty years! When are we going to get there?', 'What's the business plan you are operating to? What outcomes will show that it's been a successful move?', 'Will my investment in two camels and a tent pay off?', 'We're sorry about our lapses, but did you really have to destroy the golden calf? It might have been quite useful as barter

when we get back home!', 'Did you take out a patent on the technology of the Burning Bush?' - These present a completely different range of reactions to what you might regard as a religious and holy place.

When Tony Blair went there and visited it, when he came down at the end of his trip, someone said to him, 'Well Mr Blair, have you brought the tablets down with you?' His response, allegedly, was, 'No, I was delivering them!'

The only point I am making here is that there is a huge difference between a religious perception of a place, of an event, of a book, of a story, of a person, and a non-religious perception of it, and it can be facetious or it can be seriously atheistic - muscular atheism is alive and well also.

So that is the sceptical question: is there still a place for these things? And if there is, then somehow, you must look for a link between time and eternity, between mortality and immortality, between the finite and infinite. Is there any way of pulling these together in our culture? - That is the question of the sceptic.

The first painting I will speak about in order to address this issue is *The Burial of the Count of Orgaz* by El Greco. - What is special about it? Why is it significant?

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El Greco was in exile looking for a living and only moved to Spain in 1576 after a long detour. He was born in Crete and had spent time in Venice, Rome where he was given the nickname El Greco, the Greek. In fact, El Greco was only something of a nickname, even though we now know him as that - his real name was Doménicos Theotokópoulos. His Cretan roots were very important to him and he was happy to use his nickname, and indeed he signed his own name in Greek on some of his paintings.

The Burial of the Count of Orgaz was commissioned (by someone who is in the painting) to go above the altar in the Church of St Thomas in Toledo. In fact, it was there that I first came across it and I was just staggered by the painting: looked at it, thought about it, and tried to find out more about it. It still hangs in the original church, though not in its original resting place, and so it is on a side altar rather than in the main body of the church. El Greco was commissioned to do it in 1584 and finally he signed the contract in 1586. From this we get the idea that it was a piece of work - he was making a living doing this kind of thing.

The painting is of a miracle - that is what it is meant to be. The miracle is portrayed in the bottom half of the picture and it is the burial of the Count of Orgaz. The Count of Orgaz died in 1323, and this is a picture of his funeral. It is thought to be a miracle because, according to the story, two great saints came to deposit his body in the grave. Their appearance was the miracle, and they were the recognition of the extreme generosity of the Count. The picture is an attempt to commemorate that, some 250 or 260 years later - so it is essentially a picture of a burial of this man, the Count of Orgaz, who was a great philanthropist whose funeral took place in 1323.

I would like to make one other general comment about the picture before I go onto some of the details, and this concerns what is staggering about the painting: the image of the burial is entirely confined to the lower half of the painting, so the burial set in the much wider context through what lies in the other half of the picture - it is a picture in two halves. On the lower half of the canvas is the burial, and of course, on the upper half is the heavenly host. Now, if imagine the painter being given the task of commemorating this very important miraculous story from the history of Toledo, we can ask ourselves whether it is a convincing depiction of the event? It was also a question at the time - was it convincing then? My line will be that the picture is the statement of a question - Can I bring about this unity? It is the question of what a miracle means, in the Sixteenth Century - rather than a statement of a clear and sure answer of that question.

The bottom half of the picture is the picture of the miracle. The two men laying the body down are St Stephen and St Augustine, who are both very important figures in the history of the church. The story is that they came down and appeared at the funeral to pay the great tribute of depositing this man in his grave. The painting is such that El Greco emphasises for us that this is very much our place, our time and our day. It was very much a painting set clearly in the Sixteenth Century, and that was a primary statement. For example, if you see how the painting is presented in the church, and it was the same in the original position, it sits on the altar. The feet of the participants are with us - they are not in the picture. Thus we are drawn into it as part of this crowd. They are standing outside the picture that is presented to us, and you do not see the feet of those at the very forefront. There are a whole string of these ways in which El Greco tried to earth this painting and pull it into our current situation, to be part of here and now, this space and this time.

There is a lot else in the picture which tells us of that. For instance, at the front left, there is a portrayal of El Greco's son, as a

little boy standing right behind St Stephen. The citizens of Toledo would have recognised him as El Greco was very well-known in the community, so his son would have been quite recognisable. Not only does he put his son in quite so deliberately, but it is on the boy's handkerchief that El Greco signs the painting. So he is saying that this is an important feature of the painting; it is my son. This is an event in 1323 he is trying to portray to us, but this is a little boy from the late 1580s. There is also another point in the little boy, but we will come back to that one later.

The people stood behind the burial in the crowd are the good burghers of Toledo. They are dressed, not as in the Fourteenth Century, but as in the Sixteenth Century. Perhaps flattery played a part, but he was also making a point as many of these would have been recognised as the senior officials and burghers and councillors and rich people of Toledo at that time. So he is again grounding this miracle of 250 years before the time in what for him was the present day. This is also reflected in the fact that the priest holding the book in his hand is Andrés Núñez, and he was the priest who actually commissioned the painting. That is a picture of him, I should say. He would be recognised as the priest in our parish now.

So in every possible way, this lower section of the painting is being hauled into the current community for whom it was painted, even though the event took place 250 or 260 years before that. There was not an attempt to go back and say, 'I'll paint this miracle and they'll all be wearing Fourteenth Century costumes,' - he pulled it right into the present day. You get this in modern drama: people do Shakespeare in contemporary dress, as if they were doing a film about Elizabeth I and they had her wearing Dior clothes and jewellery. That is what he was doing, and very deliberately. It must have struck those who saw the painting very fiercely when they first saw it.

So the miracle is set within the parameters of space and time of the current situation. That is half of the painting however - what about the rest?

The other half of the painting is of the heavens above. In it there are a whole range of saints around the figure of Christ at the top. You can clearly see St Peter and St Paul, and anyone who is an expert in iconography can do the exposition to distinguish the other saints.

A striking feature is how this is clearly the heavenly host when we compare it to the Count of Orgaz's body below. It is a dead weight, literally, and there was no attempt to fashion the portrayal of the body as if there were some ethereal entity there, or that there was some very unusual event going on. That is a dead body, but it is in the context of heaven. In this context there is an attempt to give a different direction. You can see this in how all the eyes of the saints in heaven point towards Christ at the top. There is a unity in the single focus on the figure of Christ at the top. However, it is not quite clear whether there is a unity in the lower portion of the painting, or whether there is a unity between the upper and lower parts of the painting. If it is a miracle, it is got to be religious, but is it the best we can do to add on another section at the top that has got quite a lot of religious symbolism in it, or is there a better way of proceeding?

The puzzle, for me, in this painting, this attempt to portray a miracle, really is crystallised in the line of the eyes and heads of the people of Toledo. These eyes separate off heaven from earth. They are the barrier, if it is a barrier. They certainly divide the picture in two, and if anyone represents us, earthbound creatures that we are, it is these people of the crowd who are in the costume of their time, and yet it is they who seem to put a division into the picture. It is this division made by the crowd's eyes that make it difficult to see this as a unified picture of a miracle. So it is that these eyes provoke a question in me: where and what is the unity? Has he succeeded in showing us where the unity lies? This is of great importance in this painting because the concept of a miracle is the idea of something that is both temporal and eternal; it is an earthbound event, but somehow, it has infinite or eternal perspective to it. But seemingly the best El Greco can do is to give us a picture in two halves, with a line of his contemporaries splitting the one half from the other.

The interesting thing is that these contemporaries, if they represent us, were not doing a great job. They do not seem all that impressed with the miracle that is going on. They do not seem overpowered, and in fact, most of them seem to be either chatting amongst themselves or gazing into the distance. They are not riveted on this remarkable miracle that is part of the mythological and real history of Toledo. They are chatting and looking around, and they are very much hardly taking any note. There is one exception to this in that there is one of the characters who is looking up - we will come back to him shortly - but the rest seem completely unaware of the heavenly host and, even if mildly interested by the burial, certainly not absolutely overpowered with this miracle that is happening in front of them.

Has El Greco, the exile, given us an answer to the question of whether there is a unity between earthly events and heaven or not? I would suggest that instead of doing that, he seems to have put a barrier between these two.

There have been various suggestions of possible lines of unity by a number of critics and historians. One is to say that there is a line from the head and eyes of Orgaz straight up the middle to the figure of Christ, that there is a single perspective there in the painting and which would be deliberate. It is suggested that there are lines of unity in the heaven above, as they all gaze up to the figure of Christ, but that does not include the earthly activities. There is another suggestion which points to the cross being held in the lower half, which is the only thing that transcends earth and heaven, so there is a religious symbol there that is giving some sort of link from the one to the other. These various ideas have been suggested.

There are some more esoteric suggestions. One was by a man called David Davis, who was a very distinguished art critic in University College London, who says that in fact, one of the ways of trying to find unity is to accept the view that El Greco was influenced by a particular philosophy called Neo-Platanism. This philosophy holds the symbol of light to be tremendously important, and the lines of light coming down from heaven in the painting are suggested to be El Greco's way of pointing to that particular philosophy as perhaps a way of rescuing religious belief and theology from very early and perhaps, some might say, more primitive versions of what the link between heaven and earth is. The background historical evidence for this view is that apparently in his library there were lots of books from Christian Platanism in the library that he used.

So there are a number of suggestions that have been made, but my point is that in fact the sceptic looking at this sees the sceptical El Greco trying, but failing, to reconcile the earthly and the heavenly, the temporal and the eternal, the finite and the infinite, and if I can crack a very corny pun, in interpreting the painting, 'the eyes have it'. The eyes across the middle are just a barrier to the comprehension of what the unity is, from the bottom of the picture, from the here and now, from space and time, to heaven. El Greco, willing to accept the commission as he was, tried to paint us a good picture of that miracle that is so important for this town, but in fact produced the division that is right at the core of some of the questions being asked at the time of renaissance and reformation of the Sixteenth Century and, I would suggest, some of the questions being asked today. Maybe it was purely a matter of the fee, but he did not reject the commission. He struggles with it, and he attempts to portray it as best he might. My suggestion is he does not quite succeed, so he has not given us a picture of a miracle, he has given us a picture of the problem of portraying what a miracle is, and that is quite a sophisticated thing to do. But on the other hand, it is a very important thing to do if you are trying to work out what the options for religious belief are. He has not succeeded in solving the intellectual problem because he has not succeeded in solving the artistic problem, which was to make a single painting out of this event.

I will move now to my other painting, and after that I will draw one or two more general points out of that. The second of my paintings could hardly be more different - it is Picasso's *Guernica*. It is not a descriptive painting, but an expression of Picasso's reaction to a particularly horrific event in the Spanish Civil War.

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Picasso was one of the great artistic geniuses of the Twentieth Century, but for many, and certainly for me, this is the most puzzling and most important of his paintings. That is because I am not an artist, but I am interested in content. What was it that he was trying to do and say with this, because he was deeply and profoundly moved by this event?

I do not know if this will help, but I want to quote to you the remark of an American-German theologian, someone who is less fashionable at the moment but his time will come again, a man called Paul Tillich. He held a chair in a German university, but he was too outspoken and so he had to flee to the USA where he spent a number of years as a very distinguished professor in New York and wrote all sorts of books. One of these books was called 'A Theology of Culture' and in that book, there is a chapter in which he looks at Picasso's *Guernica*. He calls it 'Protestantism and Artistic Style'. I hope that the Protestantism bit is not distracting, but that is the context from which he came in the 1930s. He referred to Picasso's *Guernica* as 'a great Protestant painting'. Please do not pay too much attention to the label, because what he meant by that was the following: 'It is not the answer that a theology, a Christian theology, would give, but rather the radicalism of the question which one can find in Picasso's masterpiece.' He sees the genius of this as posing at least a single question, possibly more than one. He said, 'We consider Picasso's *Guernica* as an example, perhaps *the* outstanding example, of an expression of the human predicament in our period.' So Tillich identified Picasso's *Guernica*, and Picasso was hardly a religious man in any traditional sense, as providing *the* expression of what he calls 'the human predicament'. Tillich's account of theology was such that if Christian theology does anything, it attempts to answer the existential questions of human beings, and so to understand 'the human predicament', or whatever expression you might prefer. Therefore, he saw all approaches to these types of question as an attempt to do theology, and he sees this as *the* outstanding way of formulating the question of who we are, what we are, and what our destiny is.

The historical occasion of this painting is very well summarised, and I will quote from Anthony Blunt, whose reputation of course

has not soared over the last forty years or so. Whatever else may be true of him, he was a great art critic, and I had the privilege to be present at some lectures he gave on Picasso, and he devoted a single lecture to this painting. He has written this up and he has a small monograph book, 'Picasso's Guernica'. In it he writes:

'On 26th April 1937, the German Air Force, acting under the orders of General Franco, bombed and almost completely destroyed the city of Guernica. Six days later, Picasso began work on the preparation of the great mural which bears the name of the city and which was shown in the Spanish Pavilion of the International Exhibition in Paris in the summer of the same year.'

It happened in April 1937, and he started the painting within a week. He had been commissioned to provide a mural for the Spanish Pavilion, and this is what he produced.

'The bombing of Guernica,' Blunt writes, 'a town without defences or military importance, was one of the most wanton acts of the Spanish Civil War.'

Indeed, you can read today the reports in *The Times* written that week, as correspondents got into Guernica and saw what had happened and spoke to the people who had suffered this onslaught. You can see, if you read those and Blunt's account, why many thought that this was Hitler's first test of the policy and practice of blitzkrieg, because it was German planes that Franco wished in who carried out this atrocity.

Picasso was, of course, from that part of Spain, and as such, he saw the horror of what had been done in a particular way as he was very much grounded in the historical context. I want to suggest to you that it is more than just a remarkable war painting by a war artist of a particular event. It is a puzzling picture, it is an intriguing picture, in some ways, a frightening picture, but if you want more on the history of it, I do recommend the Blunt monograph from which I have just quoted.

In the picture, there are a number of symbols and themes that Tillich, for example, might want to emphasise, as showing what the human predicament is. I will take a moment to mention just a few of these.

The symbols moved around the picture during the time of composition and there is fascinating evidence to show this. But in the final painting, very striking in the middle of the picture, is the head of the horse. Picasso was of course Spanish, and for him, the horse was part of a larger context: it was the context of the bullfight. Many a time, he would see a horse screaming in agony at what happened at the bullfight. This symbol appears quite regularly in many of Picasso's paintings from the previous twenty or so years, and I would want to argue that this is an almost quintessential statement of the agony implied.

Alongside the horse, down at the bottom of the picture, is the horror of human carnage, and we know too much about that in our days. These are bits of bodies, as a result of the bombing. Again, central to the picture is this carnage that took place as part of the bombing that was built into the Spanish Civil War deliberately by General Franco.

The bull is the third symbolic presentation. The bull, as is typical in Picasso's paintings of this period, has its eyes move around so you are not sure if you are looking at the side of it or the front of it. The allusion to the bullfight - that is 'el torro', the bull, the powerful one. The undertones of the imagery again appear in quite a lot of Picasso's other works, because he portrays bullfights in various ways, but the bull comes to symbolise the huge and unrelenting power of Fascism. What is important is this is sheer aggression in this bull, and of course that is what you get in the bullfight, but that was elevated in Picasso's painting well beyond that.

So we have the horse, human carnage and the power of the bull - all symbols that are representing Picasso's reaction to this horrendous historical event. Blunt refers to the painting as 'Picasso's reaction to a cosmic tragedy', not just a tragedy, a 'cosmic tragedy'. This is not just a human event. We all know of horrific things and this city knew terrible bombing, but Blunt calls the bombing at Guernica a 'cosmic tragedy', because it is an event, but it is more than just an event I am talking about here - this is something symbolically horrific.

There are other symbols in the painting, some of them are more puzzling. For instance, there is the lady up on the balcony holding the lamp, and again, you find traces of something like this in some other of Picasso's paintings. She has been seen by some as the symbol of truth - that there is a human truth, but it is a suffering, and so it is a suffering woman who represents that.

There is another example of an attempt to put a symbol in this picture. I think no one quite knows what to make of this, but there is a harsh electric light that illuminates the picture with lines of harsh electric light very different from the illumination in the

El Greco painting. I have thoughts about it, but none of them I think are worth building into this lecture, and many people are puzzled by it.

The painting should clearly have the effect on you that it has on many - expression of a cosmic tragedy. In Tillich's way of putting it, it is the expression of *the* human predicament in the Twentieth Century. This is why he saw it as the greatest artistic expression of the Twentieth Century.

Now, to pull these two paintings together, Picasso's *Guernica* could not be more different in artistic style to the *Burial of the Count of Orgaz*, but there are certain similarities between these paintings. Both of them are attempts to respond now in space and time to an event which is a part of our history, and both of them are an attempt to react to that in a way that does justice to the profundity of the proposal or event before us.

In Picasso's case, the painting is of a scene of horror, but what is interesting is that it is not a naturalistic - you could do a naturalistic painting of this, you could get the best photographers in the world in to portray this, but would it be greater or less in its impact or in the attempt to summarise what this event meant and what it was? Tillich's argument is that it would not be of greater effect because, for him, *Guernica* is a quintessential presentation of human horror, of 'alienation'. By this speaking of 'alienation' he meant to point to the horror of the wonder at how it came to be that human beings are doing this to each other. These were innocent people; they were mostly women and children. These were not people who were directly involved in the war. They were undefended, they did not have massive military camps around them, and yet it was thought appropriate, in a way that we have become too familiar with since, to carry out this act of carnage, and to be deliberately destructive of something with a historical significance and a cultural significance in Spanish life.

The title of the lecture was 'Two Paintings and a Sceptic', and what the sceptic does is ask questions, but of course the artist here is asking questions also. He is not giving us a resolution of how human beings can do this to each other. He is not implying either a kind of forgiveness or, in the end, a kind of revenge. This is just the sheer stark horror of the reality. He is expressing it and he is asking questions in the painting - the questions that all these symbols ask, and more importantly, as Tillich would argue, that these questions force us to ask ourselves. What is it to be a human being? Is it to be part of the group that does this? Well, I am afraid it is - and who knows where we would have been if we were the ones forced to react one way or the other to an event like this.

So what I am putting to you is what I think Tillich saw in this picture: he saw an asking of very profound questions of what it is to be human. The earlier painting by El Greco, was asking very profound questions of what it is to portray a religious event, and in both cases, scepticism seems to be the outcome.

That may lead you to the conclusion that we should have nothing to do with religious ways of thinking, religious ways of reacting, the context that El Greco tried to put on his picture. Alternatively, and this is what I propose to you, these two paintings actually keep alive the very questions that give religion, and have given religion, their currency. It does not mean to say the answers of the traditional religions are right. By and large, I think I could not say yes to that. But, and this is the strength of Tillich's theology, it is a way of ensuring that we continue to ask those questions. It is not just a question of numbers in space when we think of human catastrophes like *Guernica* - what was the damage, how can we rebuild it, how much money will it take to put this in place, and so on. It is not just a question of how many troops would it have taken to defend this, how many guns we would have needed. It is rather a question which asks what are we human beings like in terms of what we do to each other.

So I am giving to you two paintings, and I am suggesting to you that the issues that religion tries to deal with are actually being encapsulated by two very great artists in two very different ways. The very fact that you can get a reaction like *Guernica* to such a horrific event is a block to any reductionist or staunchly atheistic approaches to life and human beings. One could attempt to sum human beings up, as the reductionists do and as some of the atheists do, as nothing other than a bunch of molecules or a bunch of atoms or apparently or as 90% water - there are various ways in which you can describe human beings and say 'they are nothing but?'. But a painting like *Guernica* suggests to me we are a lot more than that, and that human structures, human life and human creativity, force on us questions to which we may or may not have the answers - mostly not - but that does not mean that they are irrelevant as questions to our condition as human beings.

In summary then, we have two paintings, both forcing us to ask questions, and in forcing us to ask questions, they force us to ask what the resources that our culture has to try and answer those questions are. And I think you will go a bit further than the muscular atheists do when you try to answer that question.

