

God Is.

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Salad ‘n’ Study 2011

Our sixth summer study series

Animated by Canon Jim Irvine

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Session 1

People do believe that evil is always about the big deeds. And sainthood is almost always pious and absurd, with the accent on “absurd,” and most often caricatured or lampooned, with the accent on “lampooned.” As a general rule, this trivializing of religious edicts on good and bad is considered just because of some unknown personal injury that we manufacture continually within the hubris of moral relativism. ... For the most part, we accept our opinion about ourselves, and not only believe it, but on a daily basis seem to prove it out. And by this, I mean, that it might be Stalin who is evil, not us. P. 11

Still most of us, myself included, have a little faith left. It clings to our deepest hopes, just a tad. But that is okay. For any degree of faith, any at all, tells us in so many ways that it is false not to think of faith as relevant. Faith tells us that the quagmire we are in has nothing to do with faith. Even bad religions have nothing to do with faith.

Then what does faith provide that helps us to make a start on achieving what we say we want to achieve? Anything? Well, maybe just one thing.

Faith allows us peace only from the active, complicit role of wrongful injury. That does not allow us much, it seems. Very little. But still, that is just about the only thing it promises. And I might add this: that guarantee is a good thing, even if we have to work at it on a daily basis. And even if we see many who give up faith and become complicit in wrongful injury. So my contention is that those of us who want to maim

or kill in the name of faith have in fact given it up, and put their faith, even for a limited time, in their own hubris or in mimicking the hubris of others they admire. P. 13

We make up reasons why we don't need to have faith. We have continuous self-explanations as to why our faith no longer matters. But if faith does not matter, no matter if we are conservative or liberal, our ideas and ideals (which in many respects are the same) cannot be achieved. If they could be achieved without faith, they would have been by now. We continually make the same mistakes, hoping for different results. P. 14

The mocking of belief is really a disapproval of one person's belief, and a public display and certitude of that disapproval by those who have sanctioned another kind of belief. And it is this certitude of disapproval which is often more than mildly sanctimonious. And it is the same sanctimony many of those who ostracize belief are themselves pretending to deride. That to me was not a little problem, but indeed a very grave one. P. 28

The one thing I re-learned at university I had learned in my adolescence when I was rolling a car at 110 miles an hour. And it was this—the only time man pretends he does not need God is when he thinks or she thinks they are themselves God or are in a position of such comfort that God cannot trouble them or touch them. Once the man or woman finds himself or herself in deep trouble or despair, they search for

what was always there. P. 31

I simply will question how many ... go a day, or even a moment, without wishing, and hoping, for things to turn out their way? That is, for what they themselves consider justice, or their due, to come their way.

If you placed this theory in front of them—that is, that they wish and hope (nay, pray) for things to go their way—some will castigate you for reminding them of their fallacy. Or at least contravene you by saying it has an irrelevance in literature. It is childish. But if they are childish in so spectacular a way, hoping and dreaming (praying) for their lives to change every day, and in all times of crisis, then is nothing else they think and do childish as well?

Or is everything? Most likely their lives are much more childlike than they assume. This is important in many respects, for perhaps one should not consider it a bad thing. One might remember that God asks us in the Gospel to seek Him as little children do, “become as little children.”

I think this is meaningful. It is so meaningful we might become embarrassed by it. Why should we, especially those of us who are strong as oxen or as learned as Erasmus, go to anyone like “little children.” The very thought can make us squirm.

But my idea is not that we don't do this, but that in point of fact we do—and that whenever we do seek Him, in whatever way, no matter how thickly veiled to us who it is we seek, we are, as He asks us to be, little children. And any hope or wish for the better of others, for our relatives or friends, or ourselves, is done in this way, like

children.

Even if we do not want to be. Because of one thing—the faith we have put in our request being answered. None of us would make a request, in any way, if we did not have faith; not that it would be fulfilled, but what is more startling and important, that it *could* be. And to have faith is to be like a child, for faith is never determined by ourselves but by something outside of ourselves. And so we come to that Something like a child.

P. 35

There is a Portuguese proverb that states: In many crooked ways, God makes a straight line. It is something to think about when thinking of anyone’s prayers being answered or not. P. 36

When we see our loved ones acting not childishly, but childlike we realize why we love. But it is more than just realizing why we love. In fact, these qualities allow us to love both that person and ourselves, for we know that the person exhibiting these childlike qualities loves us, and we can do no less at that moment than love them. And the truth about love, as Saint Faustina said, is that “Love has only one measure, to be measureless.” Yet something within our nature wants to make the child in us fail. To make us forget that we are children. P. 37

Catholicism in a way asks us to live outside the temples of the world. That we see some who live in these temples telling us to do this is disturbing. But not all tell us what to do, and not all live in those temples. Again, it is a transcendent religion, and its grace is a terrible and transcendent one, and if people fail at this transcendence, should they or others not seek to try? In fact, by the very fact others still seek to try, and that some succeed, shows not only the necessity of continuing to try, but the truth of the ultimate quest.

So then if the problem is hypocrisy in Catholicism, I admit it is a known fact I do not dispute, especially with myself. Yet, as I just mentioned, for all its stupidity and blunders, at its best Catholicism refuses to give up its belief. It is this belief, a great transcendent spiritual belief, that is attacked because of people's hypocrisy. And strangely, one has little to do with the other. That is, faith passes all understanding, and as Saint Ambrose said, he did not understand so he would have faith, he had faith so he would understand. This is relevant when dealing with all sorts of issues. Hypocrisy, not the least of them. An agnostic's or an atheist's hypocrisy, as well.

P. 42

There is a terrible story but I will relate it. About a child who was beaten by her stepmother until she was bleeding internally, and then she was ordered to eat her food or be beaten again. She told her older brother she could not eat, could he please protect her. Her brother tried to and could not, and the girl was

beaten and died that night. That happened forty years ago. How in God's name do we still pray that it not have happened. So are we foolish? Not really. We will always relive the moments that we know God must address. P. 45

Over time, you become the perpetrator you are fighting against. This is easily mocked because Nietzsche said it 140 years ago and he is not taken seriously now. Still, it is nonetheless true. If a man fights dragons, he sooner or later becomes one. But it is not only Nietzsche who has warned us against this hardness of heart. We were warned against it three thousand years ago. It would be fine to say it didn't matter that it was said three thousand years ago, if the same problems weren't so manifest today.

That is: "Vengeance is mine," sayeth the Lord." And we must remember this. That Cain killed Abel, and God did not kill Cain.

But what I am saying is something else besides. Very much like Cain, when we take matters into our own hands, part of us knows we are acting to spite and disobey the notion of a far greater justice, and in some ways this very spite proves the fact that the greater justice does exist. Cain knew it existed and we should not forget it does.

In such a strange way, our denying it proves it—at the moment we do so, we know it. That is, most revenge is done in spite of something greater than ourselves. Something God has asked us not to do. You see, we already believe it, for if we really did not believe in a greater justice, more of us would show an intemperate desire to seek

justice on our own. P. 46

Hardness of heart and self-righteousness are, in fact, pretty interchangeable. That is hardness of heart and self-righteousness are bedfellows—and not so strange bedfellows. P. 47

One must realize that the difference in kind has nothing to do with amount, but with substance, or the reason why. The reason why is everything. We know that a woman killing a man in self-defence or to protect a child is not murder at all. Someone who blows someone's head off at a kitchen table—well, that's another matter.

The reason creates a difference in the essence of the action, and is the only way to understand the discrepancy between degree and kind.

Christ's lauding of the widow giving her last farthing while the rich Pharisees gave their allotment is of course a difference in *kind*. And it comes because of the reason in the giving. The self-deception the Pharisees exhibit is in evidence to Christ, and he sees it and comments on it. (The Pharisees are very aware of this deception. That is why they are so angry with Christ.) He tells them they are people who revere the prophets their own ancestors have killed, and indicates they will kill the greatest prophet by his own presence. They, of course, do not see him as a prophet. But he is saying something else. He is telling us that the con rules lives that are stingily correct, who believe they can order God to them. (Or in another way, to tell us there is no God.)

That the Pharisees are aware of this con, in my

estimation, shows how they have negated the very reasons for their offerings. It is, in a way, Christ's spirit of the law, commenting on the law. The law of religion is what Lord Beaverbrook and so many others who I have come to know over the years rebelled against, but he (and others) did not search for the spirit of the law outside his own determinism. What Christ is speaking of, and concerned about, is the con that disables people's trust in the religious spirit, which men and women so desperately need, and allows this determinism to not only rule but to exploit ourselves, so people decry not only the religious law but the spirit of the law. P. 52f.

Slowly I came to believe that a loss of humility was a projection toward sin, and ultimately each one of us wishes to complete sin by committing murder. A strange thought, but nonetheless I think one that might be argued. Perhaps what I am thinking is that there are always many more ways than one to murder. Perhaps I am thinking that all sin strives to become the ultimate one.

Of late, I have been thinking much more about this. Faith in others telling us what we should or should not do even to the point of killing allows us to mimic and become more like others want us to be. But faith in God helps us diminish the mimic inside us, and this alone helps us prevent murder. As Rene Girard has said about the mimic, *Christ knew that no one would throw the first stone, but that everyone would throw the second.* P. 74

Session 3

I also believe that all of us, even those who are atheists, seek God—or at the very least not one of us would be unhappy if God appeared and told us that the universe was actually His creation. Oh, we might put Him on trial for making it so hard, and get angry at Him, too, but we would be very happy that He is here. P. 75

For I have seen the smugness of back-to-the-landers, who were narrow to any idea of God or duty. And in a way that's why they were backto-the-landers. They searched for equality by embracing nature and cutting themselves off from everyone they deemed to be unequal. This search for peace and equality coming on the backs of others *you deem unequal* is the main obstacle to both equality and peace. P. 76

There is another line from an old folk song that the poet Fred Cogswell once said sums up all of man's hopes and dreams: "Over these prison walls I would fly." ...

It is what we all do every breathing day. It is what I did, in Newcastle, when I worked at Sobeys, and later in the woods, and later at the mines. I would continually tell myself that one day I would be free. Over time I became aware of what some prisoners in labour camps in the Soviet Union did (although I know my life was certainly not as harsh)—*the way to be free is to be morally or spiritually free*. The way to be a prisoner is to be morally a prisoner. Once this becomes apparent, freedom means something more, and less, that is, physically a prisoner, morally not so

much.

Man is continually trying to fly over them, the prison walls, and keeping the faith, by hoping that he can fly. And no one can deny this, about himself or anyone else.

The prison walls are I am convinced maintained by something many of us says does not exist, sin. P. 78

After a time sin becomes more self-seeking. It seeks and will seek its own kind. It will do so just by the process of elimination, for we tend to eliminate those around us who do not any longer fit with ourselves. So if one becomes addicted to cocaine, as one of my closest friends has, then the rationale is to seek others who look upon this addiction as normal. None of this is complicated, but it is self-seeking. And self-seeking sin left unabated seeks to become the one ultimate sin—murder.

It was murder that finally made me realize this is what my characters had always sought freedom from. For there is only one great sin—and all other sins seek it. All sins seek one great sin. And it is this: murder. Just like those minions of Stalin had learned to do. We are all mimics, as Rene Girard elaborates, and we mimic those who are more powerful. And power never seeks liberty for those it controls. It only seeks control, and this control leads to sin. Anyone who reads Machiavelli knows this to be true, and *Machiavelli stipulates that the way to keep this control is by instilling fear in others. P.79f.*

Terms

O h, but he's a racist," the fellow said of Solzhenitsyn. I said nothing else. The word was at that time, and still is, a fashionable register of strong personal disapproval, against people we disapprove of. Racist—as if that solves everything. Just as the word “demon” solved everything for the Grand Inquisitor. If someone is a racist, nothing else matters. In fact, you could burn bigots at the stake without a whisper of protest from those agnostics who have invested their lives in protesting inequality. Except I do not, nor did I believe the contention. That is I do not believe why the term "racist" was applied in this case. But it does answer one sticking point. For my former friend, and many others, have never read a page of Solzhenitsyn.

The friend knew little about Solzhenitsyn, but he knew when to apply the word “racist.” It was a strange and enlightening experience for me.

Still, in the house where I sat for a few moments that faraway day, Stalin was acceptable, or at least benign (and had good ideas), and the writer who single-handedly took on the Soviet system that dehumanized half the world was not. It was an easy transference of moral power.

As well, my friend did not suffer as much as a blemish in saying “racist.” It was virtually painless. Still, his easy summation, in some strange way, blessed the suffering of millions.

But there is something else about the word “racist” used too loosely (and I say too loosely)—it is knowingly championing a falsehood, or an intentional misplaced moral outrage to implicate someone according to your notion of dishonour, for benefits of self-congratulatory pretence. That

is the way ethics are almost always applied at dinner parties. *This is what has replaced religion and faith in much of our secular society.*

Of course I am not saying that there are no racists we have to guard against and at times physically fight. The real problem is where you meet them. P.86f.

Rene Girard tells us that the idea to mimic in order to be the same, in order to set up the scapegoat to be ostracized, is the way not of faith but of religious zealots. Religious fervour of this kind acts in accordance with that other condition—power. The mob becomes religious fervour, no matter what kind. So the mob is there to allow you to hide while still being part of the action. The mob is there to entice one to sin. P. 101

The mob recruits the man or woman in order for them to sin, and therefore must congratulate them on doing so. It is not the sin that is the primary goal of any mob, but the congratulation that comes when *one lessens their own personality to the will of the mob* and is congratulated. The congratulation is never once said to be for doing ill, but for “being a regular guy” and “being one of the boys.” That is what is applauded and actually that is what is sought. What they fear, more than anything else, is to be seen doing something that will not be licensed by the group they rely upon for comfort and support. Nothing lessens humanity more, and nothing in our society is more prevalent. *Gossips are proof of this.* P. 102

Session 4

Every sin is the result of a collaboration,” Stephen Crane wrote.

And to say that this mob does not entice us daily in all environs is not to see clearly. I once said that I saw as much bootlicking malice in the common room of a university as I did on the streets of any town I was in. I was speaking about mob collectivism in thought and action, and how people mistook this for moral duty. The collective approval of a wrong action abrogates one’s responsibility. I simply am saying that it is the same kind of moral duty that attends a lynching or an unfair university department “realignment.” To gang up on a person and make them lose their chance at tenure out of fear of what others will say if we support them is the same as the man who stands back and says nothing when a man is hanged, or a priest and his flock who keep an epileptic away from dances and then bless each other for so doing (even if the lynching is the most ruthless).

There is a will among us to pervert these bullying events into just cause by the one thing all sin, even Stalin’s, falls back on—self-righteousness. And *self-righteousness is in the end the greatest curse man has*. P.102f.

Hypocrisy knows the truth, and acts against it out of self-will, weakness, or desire. Self-righteousness bends the very idea of truth to accommodate a sin we can champion as being justified under the circumstance. There is no place in the world where self-righteousness cannot claim a victim. P. 103

Again you might ask: What has this to do with a need to seek God? And again, the same answer: Everything. Our political nature is first and foremost an individual nature. Throughout much of our lives our own actual politics is often looked upon as benign and even justified, and therefore the duping of others because of being politic is somehow seen in many circles as being warranted (as long as it isn't overtly violent). P. 104

Politics starts in the individual. We are sometimes politic at keeping distances with those out of favour or fashion, sometimes politic with ingratiating ourselves to those who can help us or our family. And often we are politic if we disavow truth for our own benefit. If, for instance, a belief we hold is not shared by those we must impress, we disavow this belief in order to impress those who do not share it.

Then, if we are not very careful, the condition begins to manipulate us to allow us to assume and take advantage—or gain advantage—by being dishonest with ourselves. Sooner or later we can take advantage only when we do wrong, because we have brought ourselves to a place that is wrong, and to travel back to the time of truth gets harder and harder to do. P. 106*f*.

Let me tell you what a friend once told me: “A man injured me. I said to myself, if I see him again, I will simply punch him. That was that. I knew I was able to, and felt I had a right to. But as soon as I saw him, I was compelled to shake his hand—I felt vast warmth for him at that moment. I don't know why.”

Well, I might answer, you calculated the punch—but you could not calculate your spontaneous reaction—and that was to be kind in spite of what he did or said against you.

Is all this fuzzy and warm and goody-two-shoes? No, puke that out of my mouth. This ongoing battle is as hard as granite as harsh as a winter storm. But that more people are like that man, and less like the one who would strike out is a good thing for us all.

I remember a line from an old movie by Val Luten (one of the unheralded great directors), where the hip artist who practises Satan worship asks: “How can you say evil is not superior to good?” Of course *it is the wrong question*, isn’t it?

The question should be: Is evil better than good? On this earth evil has the superior hand. The aces and eights. It always has had. It infests every institution that pretends to be good. So evil does seem superior, yet is it better? Generally, the best of anything is never evil—or, to change the term, wrongdoing. So evil to us, even if we act evil, is anathema to “better.” None of us would say a wrong act is better—or very few of us would say so. P. 118f.

God hates a coward,” the saying goes. And it is a truism that goodness cannot be cowardly, while deceit and treachery and malice—those things superior in this life—almost always are. P. 120

Christ’s instruction to us is what his instruction was to Saint Peter: “Upon this rock I will build my church.” It is not the rock of the Vatican or of any other church, but the

human foundation of knowing in our own heart what is good and valuable in the spirit. What is wrongdoing and what is not. ... This is what Christ warns us against. P. 124

The modern atheist ... [blames] our terror on religion, professing to us that getting rid of religion would be the final nail in God's coffin. And he is partially right. He is right to sever the connection between God and the terrible sins of modern religion for a reason he won't imply. It is that God exists independent of what the religion he rails against does or doesn't do. The atheist is like the reverend who takes money for his \$10-million house; he seeks a relationship between God and religion that isn't there. What the atheist forgets is that severing the relationship between God and religion is already done by those who don't seek God while claiming a religion—but this is not really what the atheist is after. He wishes to sever the relationship between God and you, in the same way he believes he has done it between God and himself. P. 141

Session 5

Faith is a door always opened—you can jump in or out at any moment. But if you jump out, when you go back in, you start all over.

In the world of faith, those who could not compromise got far enough away from the door and then found, in the end, that they had nothing else to rely on but faith.

That is the road of Saint Francis—and Saint Francis does not demand we follow him but begs us to realize he cannot compromise. No matter whether we believe or disbelieve, there is hardly a man better. P. 152

Faith is...

Pace which surpasses all understanding” is what faith actually is. It is nothing less than a complete transcending of earth, of geopolitical concerns. That does not make us comfortable, nor can we always achieve this. Yet it is a transcendence of murder and horror, not a participating in it. It is a transcendence of what is not living or life-affirming toward what is. That is all. P. 154

Faith is important simply because all of mankind’s other concerns are actually unsolvable without faith—and great faith.

To say you are going to talk about these other concerns as a surrogate to faith is to miss the point of what Christ intended and only what faith can overcome. This is what I discovered drinking in bars with those who murdered when I was thirty. For many who murdered had all the desires and conceits that I had and were no worse than I was

in many ways. In many ways, their idea of what was good and bad was shared by most people with whom they drank and cavorted. Therefore, if so many attributes are the same—in fact, there is hardly a murderer I have met whom you would not like in some way—what do we need? Well, if nothing really matters but ourselves, then we need nothing else. But if we see these tendencies as an internal war waged against ourselves as well as others, then we need faith to combat these conceits.

So where is the miracle and where is the faith?

Well, that is why I wrote this polemic. It is still forever and always all around us.

Where do we find God? Where do we look for Him?

The atheist will say that we cannot, that history has doomed our search. But then I have never really trusted an atheist to tell me the truth about what I should believe; for, by his very nature, he is in constant denial of the wonder found in himself, of the very transmutation of God inside himself. P. 155

This is when faith begins. As one theologian has said: “Faith begins where to the unbeliever proof in the absence of God is substantiated.” That is, faith begins at the cross. I do not know why that is, but I have seen it all my life. When Christ says, “Pick up your cross and follow me,” he is not saying look around and find one, suitable to the journey. He is saying you will have one given to you that is most unsuitable and you will hate to carry it, but you will have to. The fact is, whether or not you believe in him, the cross will still be there. You will, in so many

ways, still carry one. That is the secret. P. 157

Do you know who you are talking to?

Men of my stamp do not commit crimes!”
Yes, they do, in fact, that’s exactly what they do. And the truth is that most of us, at least at certain times in our lives, want to become men of that stamp, in one way or another. It is not that we would commit crimes—hell, no. But we would want to become men of that stamp. And if by chance we do not see this, we confuse the issue of degree and kind, and liberty and power. We do not all become Napoleon, to the degree Napoleon did, or Hitler or Stalin, but we all have a chance to say, in betrayal of others, that we are men of that stamp and our betrayal is not a crime. So it is *not a difference in kind, but only in degree*. We might not wear the pompous hat or cloak, or build the wolf lair.

That is, in our betrayal of others—and betrayal in Dante’s world is the worst of all possible sins—betrayal being the main plank in every sin’s platform—there is a sense, even if a small one, that we are men of that stamp.

To counter the words “men of my stamp,” and a million like it, God shows us that, for all our notions of greatness, *nothing is as important as the immeasurable moment or the smallest of incidents*.

You see, we cannot betray—it is almost impossible to betray when we are doing something for others. And real kindness can only be given with some understanding of childlike faith—that is a secret, too. P. 164f.

Faith has guided me away not from sin or wrong—never that—or from failing with my children, or my wife and I failing with each other—never that either—but away from what I had once believed in, that liberty was bought with power, and toward a more astonishing recognition of the sacred in our midst.

I know from experience that Something we pray to is well worth it. Something has always kept His promise, no matter how strange it comes about.

Made the lame walk, and, yes, the blind see.

P. 166

*Communion under
Special Circumstances*

God Is.

Brothers and sisters in Christ,
God calls us to faithful service
by the proclamation of the word, and
sustains us with the sacrament of the
body and blood of Christ.
[Hear now God's word, and] receive
this holy food from the Lord's table.

Most merciful God,
**we confess that we have sinned
against you
in thought, word, and deed,
by what we have done,
and by what we have left undone.
We have not loved you with our
whole heart;
we have not loved our neighbours as
ourselves.
We are truly sorry and we humbly
repent.
For the sake of your Son Jesus
Christ,
have mercy on us and forgive us,
that we may delight in your will,
and walk in your ways,
to the glory of your name. Amen.**

The priest shall say...

Almighty God have mercy upon you,
pardon and deliver you from all your
sins,
confirm and strengthen you in all
goodness,

and keep you in eternal life;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

Before Communion...

As our Saviour taught us, let us pray,
**Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin against
us.
Save us from the time of trial,
and deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power,
and the glory are yours,
now and for ever. Amen.**

The gifts of God for the People of God.
Thanks be to God.

After Communion...

Glory to God,
**whose power, working in us,
can do infinitely more
than we can ask or imagine.
Glory to God from generation to
generation,
in the Church and in Christ Jesus,
for ever and ever. Amen.**

Dismissal...

Let us bless the Lord.
Thanks be to God.