

THROUGH GEORGE ORWELL'S EYES: THE ROAD TO TOTALITARIANISM

1. The Ministry of Truth: Words as Slogans (February 1)

2. Big Brother and the Worship of Power (February 8)

3. Love and the Breaking of the Human Spirit (February 15)

1. The Ministry of Truth: Words as Slogans

1. Theme of the 2025-26 Saint Thomas Theological Education Program: *The Eucharist as an Antidote to Idolatry*
 - 1.1. The inspiration is taken from the works of the theologian William Cavanaugh, who will give the *Saint Thomas Spring Theology Lecture* on May 16: "Idolatry and The Eucharist: How to See God in Things without Making a God of Things".
 - 1.2. We will explore this theme and Cavanaugh's book in detail in a series of Sunday Theology Talks in March.
2. Cavanaugh's main argument is that secularization does not mean that people do not worship any more, but that they transfer their worship on other things.
 - 2.1. Worship (in a general sense) means dedication to something that provides a framework for my life where
 - i. I find answers and safety,
 - ii. I assuage my fears and anxieties,
 - iii. I look for worth.
 - 2.2. We think that we rely on reason and science to achieve these goals. The truth is that
"we are driven by pictures, stories, myths, and narratives more than by concepts."¹
 - 2.3. We rely on rituals where
"my story is located against the backdrop of another and supposedly broader narrative"²
 - 2.4. We are constantly exposed to narratives (stories) and rituals embraced by people around us that shape our lives even without us being fully aware of this process.
3. Take for instance social status

a. _____

¹ William Cavanaugh, *The Uses of Idolatry*, 105.

² Rowan Williams, *The Edge of Words* 85.

- 3.1. We grow up hearing **stories** telling us that our worth depends on success, recognition, and comparison with others. These stories promise security and happiness if we ‘measure up’, and fear or failure if we do not.
 - 3.2. They are reinforced through everyday **rituals**: moments such as graduations, promotions, and public recognition do not merely mark personal milestones; they situate individual lives within a larger narrative of progress and upward movement. They imply that a life is meaningful insofar as it advances, accumulates, and is publicly affirmed.
 - 3.3. Sometimes social status can begin to function like an object of **worship**. It shapes our desires, demands sacrifice, and influences how we treat others, often leading to competition, exclusion, and indifference toward the those who do not match the status we achieve.
4. There are degrees of course in how far this form of dedication (‘worship’) can go, and how misdirected it can become.
- 4.1. People can become obsessed with social status.
 - 4.2. They start to value others only according to usefulness or visibility rather than human dignity.
 - 4.3. What starts as a longing for worth, security, and meaning ends up feeding pride, greed, and search for power.
5. In this way status becomes an idol, that is (to start with a working definition) something that
- 5.1. feeds narcissism and self-referentiality.
 - 5.2. breaks the bonds of communion and empathy for others.
 - 5.3. and extreme forms becomes anxious, paranoid, and violent.
6. Interestingly, idolatry in the prophetic literature in the Old Testament is not so much the worship of false gods but the breaking of communion with others
- “For Jeremiah, breaking the covenant was not simply a matter of offering prayers to a god with the wrong name. It was a matter of not acting justly with one another, oppressing the alien, the orphan, and the widow (7:5), stealing, murdering, committing adultery (7:8), oppressing the poor, and being deceitful (9:4–6).”³
7. George Orwell’s *1984* describes a form of absolute totalitarianism and is often read as a political novel. In these three talks instead we are going to pursue a theological angle – and see whether this novel helps us to understand idolatry.
8. **George Orwell** (1903-1950) was one of the most influential writers of the twentieth century, admired for his moral clarity, political honesty, and plain yet powerful prose.
- 8.1. He wrote out of lived experience (poverty in England, imperial policing in Burma, and revolutionary conflict in Europe) which gave his work a rare combination of intellectual rigor and personal integrity.
 - 8.2. In *Homage to Catalonia* (1938), he recounts his experience fighting in the Spanish Civil War. The book reveals his deep commitment to justice as well as his disillusionment with propaganda and ideological manipulation, even among

movements he initially supported. This work is key to understanding Orwell's lifelong suspicion of totalitarian thinking in all its forms.

- 8.3. Orwell is best known to many readers for *Animal Farm* (1945) and *1984* (1949), both searing critiques of power, corruption, and the betrayal of truth.
- 8.4. Yet his reputation as one of the greatest essayists in English is equally important. In essays such as "Politics and the English Language," Orwell insists that clear language is a moral duty, because distorted language enables distorted thinking.

1984

- 9. *1984* is a dystopian novel set in a totalitarian state called Oceania, ruled by the Party and its symbolic leader, Big Brother.
 - 9.1. The story follows Winston Smith, a minor government employee who works at the Ministry of Truth, where his job is to rewrite historical records so that the past always matches the Party's current claims. Through this work, Winston becomes painfully aware that truth itself is being systematically destroyed.
 - 9.2. Although outwardly obedient, Winston secretly despises the regime. He commits acts of quiet rebellion by keeping a diary, thinking forbidden thoughts, and eventually entering a love affair with Julia, a woman who shares his desire for personal freedom. Their relationship becomes a fragile refuge of intimacy and resistance in a world dominated by surveillance, propaganda, and fear.
 - 9.3. Winston also places his hope in O'Brien, a high-ranking Party member whom he believes to be part of an underground resistance.
 - 9.4. This hope proves false. Winston and Julia are arrested, brutally interrogated, and psychologically broken. Tortured by O'Brien, Winston is forced to betray Julia and abandon his last attachment to truth and love.
 - 9.5. The novel ends with Winston's complete submission. He no longer resists the Party but learns to accept its lies and, finally, to love Big Brother.

Quotations

- 10. 'Who controls the past,' ran the Party slogan, 'controls the future: who controls the present controls the past.' (39)
 - 10.1. This process of continuous alteration was applied not only to newspapers, but to books, periodicals, pamphlets, posters, leaflets, films, sound-tracks, cartoons, photographs—to every kind of literature or documentation which might conceivably hold any political or ideological significance. Day by day and almost minute by minute the past was brought up to date. (44)
 - 10.2. The past is whatever the records and the memories agree upon. And since the Party is in full control of all records and in equally full control of the minds of its members, it follows that the past is whatever the Party chooses to make it. (232)
- 11. 'Don't you see that the whole aim of Newspeak is to narrow the range of thought? In the end we shall make thoughtcrime literally impossible, because there will be no words in which to express it. (58)
- 12. 'Orthodoxy means not thinking—not needing to think. Orthodoxy is unconsciousness.' (59)
- 13. In a way, the world-view of the Party imposed itself most successfully on people incapable of understanding it. They could be made to accept the most flagrant violations of reality,

because they never fully grasped the enormity of what was demanded of them, and were not sufficiently interested in public events to notice what was happening. By lack of understanding they remained sane. They simply swallowed everything, and what they swallowed did them no harm, because it left no residue behind, just as a grain of corn will pass undigested through the body of a bird. (170)

14. Applied to a Party member, [CRIMESTOP] means a loyal willingness to say that black is white when Party discipline demands this. But it means also the ability to BELIEVE that black is white, and more, to KNOW that black is white, and to forget that one has ever believed the contrary. This demands a continuous alteration of the past, made possible by the system of thought which really embraces all the rest, and which is known in Newspeak as DOUBLETHINK. (231)
15. DOUBLETHINK means the power of holding two contradictory beliefs in one's mind simultaneously, and accepting both of them. (232)
16. Ultimately it is by means of DOUBLETHINK that the Party has been able—and may, for all we know, continue to be able for thousands of years—to arrest the course of history. (233)
17. The Party is not interested in the overt act: the thought is all we care about. (274)
18. We are not content with negative obedience, nor even with the most abject submission. When finally you surrender to us, it must be of your own free will. We do not destroy the heretic because he resists us: so long as he resists us we never destroy him. We convert him, we capture his inner mind, we reshape him. We burn all evil and all illusion out of him; we bring him over to our side, not in appearance, but genuinely, heart and soul. We make him one of ourselves before we kill him. It is intolerable to us that an erroneous thought should exist anywhere in the world, however secret and powerless it may be. Even in the instant of death we cannot permit any deviation. (276)

Remarks

19. One of the characteristics of all the major forms of totalitarianism especially in the 20th century was the claim that *history ended with them*: both fascism and communism had devised the perfect form of society that provided the answer to all the problems once and for all. No more political, societal, and cultural change was needed.
20. Undergirding this claim there was the idea that all human problems can be solved through absolute control – initially over the economy, the purity of the nation, but inevitably as a consequence over every aspect of human life and society: biological reproduction, and hence sexuality, culture, religion, hobbies.
21. Both these ideologies could achieve an unprecedented degree of success because their propaganda could benefit from unprecedent means of mass communication, especially powerful sound systems, radio, images (still mostly in cinemas). It was not the desire of control that was new, but the means at its disposal that had become more powerful and effective than ever.
22. Cf. Anna Harendt's observation about Eichman⁴ that
“Despite all the efforts of the prosecution, everybody could see that this man was not a “monster” (90f)

a.

⁴ Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*.

“Officialese became his language: he was genuinely incapable of uttering a single sentence that was not a cliché.” (84)

“The longer one listened to him, the more obvious it became that his inability to speak was closely connected with an inability to think, namely, to think from the standpoint of somebody else. No communication was possible with him, not because he lied but because he was surrounded by the most reliable of all safeguards against the words and the presence of others, and hence against reality as such.” (84f)

23. The best way of suppressing empathy and moral compass is feeding people with clichés and slogans, that is *words* that do not function any more as *language*.
24. Let us think about the way we speak and why – what is the role of language.
 - 24.1. We do not use it simply to communicate information
 - 24.2. But to try to represent the world as well as possible
 - 24.3. To *others* – in such a way that others recognize, understand, and *respond* to what we try to communicate to them, thus helping us to refine our words.
25. In this sense language always is a work in progress, always an approximation, always looking for new ways of expressing what we experience (what sometimes we call ‘reality’).
26. Even when confronted with a ‘fact’, something that many people have seen with their own eyes, we keep describing it to each other, interpret it in such a way that *others* can recognize and respond to. Only language that remains open to this interpersonal process can progressively *represent* more accurately of what is being talked about.
 - 26.1. In many ways rather than *describe*, language ‘re-presents’, that is ‘presents again under another form’ that which is talked about
 - 26.2. Even when we ourselves talk about the same thing we do not ‘re-present’ it in exactly the same way.⁵
27. It is this aspect of language that any form of coercive power or any attempt to impose a final version of reality (or of history) is afraid of. Anyone who wants to impose one version of reality and one only needs to destroy language, and therefore relationality, exchange: there has to be no evaluation, no need for recognition and response, only total assent. Thus language becomes a collection of slogans, that is something that spreads not by *argument* but only by *repetition* and *emotional appeal*, and sometimes sheer coercion.
28. 1984, and Arendt’s portrayal of Eichman, show that a slogan really works not only by being repeated but also by severing interpersonal relations (and empathy) and interrupting thinking.
29. How does this account of language help us to understand idolatry? We find in it the same traits of the working definition given above:
 - 29.1. It feeds narcissism and self-referentiality
 - 29.2. It breaks the bonds of communion and empathy for others
 - 29.3. In extreme forms it becomes anxious, paranoid, and violent.
30. In which sense is the Eucharist and antidote to this form of idolatry, namely the destruction of language?

a. _____

⁵ Cf. Rowan Williams, *The Edge of Words*.

- 30.1. Is it not true that, for example, the Creed can become a collection of slogans?
- 30.2. Are there not forms of Christianity that spread by maximizing emotional appeal and denying that Scripture needs to be interpreted (fundamentalism)?
- 31. And yet there is something in the Eucharist that despite these deviations resists this destruction of language, namely
 - 31.1. the constant listening of Scripture, that is of a voice that calls, challenges, warns, and sometimes 'judges' us (in the biblical sense of judgment, that is the revelation of what really lies in our heart)
 - 31.2. the preaching that proposes an interpretation (and invites recognition and response),
 - 31.3. the *containing* of the emotion through certain forms of singing and the wording of the hymns
 - 31.4. the renewal of the bonds of communion between worshippers
 - 31.5. the invitation to constantly verify our tendency to turn aspects of our life into forms of idolatry.