

Transfiguration

Listen to Him

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*Exodus 34:29–35, Psalm 99, 2 Peter 1:13–21, Luke 9:28–36*

In the late Victorian era, something strange began to emerge among the upper and middle classes of the Anglo-phone world; an explosion of secret fraternal clubs and supposed mystical societies. Having their origins in the curious combination of insurance companies and blood curdling oaths against revealing the secrets of the group, these societies became the bedrock of social interaction up until the mid-20th century.

Some of these groups were occupational, like the Order of the Knights of St. Crispin, who served cobblers and shoemakers. Or the Railway Conductors of America who served, well... Railway conductors of America. Others were based on a burgeoning immigrant population during post-Civil America, with grand names such as the Swedish Independent Order of Vikings or the still-existing Irish-American Ancient Order of Hibernians. They all served, to some extent, as a combination of insurance and social interaction at a time when government aid such as Social Security, Medicare or social welfare programs were simply not available. A member would pay dues and receive aid-in-kind, frequently life insurance or the payment of burial fees and final expenses, costs that would frequently bankrupt widows and orphans. Additionally, during a time of heightened segregation and discrimination against African Americans and other minorities, these organizations allowed minorities to organize themselves as parallel mutual aid and educational institutions.

There were other organizations that were simply fun fraternal organizations, such as the Knights of Pythias or the Oddfellows; while both of these organizations had burial or insurance programs, these often focused primarily on fraternal fun. Parties and dinners between members were the plan for the day, though lip service was paid to the ideals revealed to the new member during elaborate initiation rituals. In the case of the Ancient Order of the Mystical Chain, the initiation seems mostly geared for the amusement of the members, requiring the initiate to dip his hand in a bowl of water, which was then electrified by a footswitch by the presiding officer. The directions in this particular ritual read: *The candidate now dips his hands into the Mystical Bowl, and is surprised by receiving an electric shock. The suddenness with which he will withdraw and the look of astonishment upon his face will be positively ludicrous.*

Still others, like the elaborate system of the Freemasons, promised personal development through revealed, ancient teaching. The candidate is compared to a stone, and the tools of the stonemason likened to the ethical rules of masonry, forming and chiseling away the extra stone until a perfect cornerstone is made.

But at the same time, another, darker current in these fraternal groups made its way into the scene. Promising spiritual development and the exploration of extraordinary powers, initiatory occultic groups also enjoyed a revival. The Ordo Templis Orientalis, or the Order of the Eastern Temple, promised initiates the tools for magical powers and communion with ancient spirits, while the Ancient Mystical Order of the Rosy Cross gave the supposed path to develop one's latent psychic and projective abilities through meditation. Transformation of the human soul, rather than parties or insurance for tragic life circumstances became was their reason for being.

Today we see these occult groups as either eccentricities of a less enlightened age or dangerous attempts to interact with spirits beyond our understanding, but it's worth saying that the underlying idea of transformation of humanity also underlines much of the 20th century. Whether through scientific advancement or industrial might, through military conquest or the spread of liberal democracy, we have convinced ourselves that we can transform and transfigure ourselves our souls our bodies into something that we are not; our true form is still hidden by ignorance... or by conspiracy from people not like us... or through the historical conditions of our economic structure... If we can simply create a new human, if we can simply change our spiritual and ensouled DNA into something different... Well, then there's real progress to be made. IF there is a myth of the 20th century, it's the idea that a human can create humans.

The danger here, whether we see it on the mustard gas burned faces of soldiers in Ypres in 1914, or the skeletal walking dead of Dachau, or the dangling black body on the lynching tree, is that if we decide that we can create a new human... we can also decide who \*isn't\* human. Our desire to transfigure ourselves, to change ourselves into something more than human get's its fullest and most ironic form at the gates of Auschwitz: work makes you free. A perversion of the Christian sacrifice, where in order to "live" we sacrifice not ourselves, not relying on the sacrifice of a God who comes to earth, but the sacrifice of others for our own transfiguration.

The transfiguration of Christ is a self-revealing, it a snapshot in time, a foretaste of what it truly means to be made in the image of God... Not the result of our own effort, not the result of progress or of revealed ethical principles, but by the direct intervention into history by the divine Son of God, the one who is transfigured on Mount Tabor by his own existence. This is my son, says the Father. Listen to him.

This is the Gospel. This the good news. This is my son. I am sending him to you. Listen to him.

To David, who says, "I am a worm," the father says... "This is my son... Listen to him." To Job, who says, "I have no hope..." the father says, "This is my Son... Listen to him." To Moses, who says, "I cannot speak..." The father says, "This is my son... Listen to him."

To Jonah, who says, “I cannot see any good...” the Father says, “This my son... Listen to him.”

To Peter, who says, “I cannot stand...” The father says... “This is my Son... Listen to him.”

To you, who say, I am a worm, I have no hope, I cannot speak, I cannot see any good, I cannot stand... The father says... “This is my son... Listen to him.”