

## NEWS & OPINIONS

---

# Ecce Homo: Behold the Anthropological!

Lindy Backues

---

*Then Jesus came out, wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe. And Pilate said to them, "Behold the Man!" (John 19:5)*

Echoing (and transforming) the title of Friedrich Nietzsche's last book, *Ecce Homo: How One Becomes What One Is*,<sup>1</sup> I believe that anthropology must become what it is—it must more deeply explore what it means to study humans. This might seem a strange admonition since, on the surface, anthropology has long appeared to embrace such a focus. But, as we will see, the task has not been so thoroughly handled.

So, our question is: what does it mean to be human? And, though anthropology has historically confessed this vocation, we must also recognize that, for an even longer time, the same quest has been a central question for theology (after all, anthropology was originally a theological term). I believe that anthropology's take on the question has long overlooked the Church's take. If truth be known, the Church, itself, has often not probed the question very well—nor has it consistently done so from the many angles available to it. Just below I would like to explore a deeply theological angle, one that I take to be fruitful for the anthropological task. First, some preliminaries.

Many of us are quite familiar with Athanasius of Alexandria's famous phrase put forth in the 4th century CE:<sup>2</sup>

He [God] *became human*<sup>3</sup> that humans might *become divine*.<sup>4</sup>

---

**Lindy Backues** is Associate Professor of Economic Development at Eastern University. His research focuses on the theology of development, community development, epistemology, and theology of culture. Author email: lbackues@eastern.edu.

Theology has historically focused upon God, often linked to questions such as "What does it mean for humans to become holy?" "What does it mean to be worthy of communion with God?" or, as Athanasius put it, "What does it mean to become divine?" (in the sense of spiritual formation, not strictly in an ontological sense). Answers to these questions are very important and significant—they have rightly occupied a prominent place in ecclesial circles for millennia. As hinted at above, though, within this short essay I wish to flip these questions on their heads.

Theologically, what does it mean to be human? Given the image we have of Christ in the scriptures, what are we doing when we attempt to do anthropology? How should we who seek to do anthropology, ethnography, linguistic analysis, archaeology, and physical anthropology, view the creature homo sapiens? What does it mean to "behold humanity", to "behold the man?"

We can bring these issues into clearer focus by rephrasing Athanasius's statement:

In Christ, God *became human*<sup>5</sup> in order that humans might know *what it means* to be *human*.<sup>6</sup>

If this proves true—if we were to accept this assertion—it would have significant bearing upon how we envision the anthropological task since, in the image of Christ, we would be brought face-to-face with the ideal picture of what a human should be.

But, I am getting ahead of myself. Before directly exploring this idea, I must first till the soil a bit, returning in earnest to the questions above after we get a few necessary considerations before us.

---

<sup>1</sup>I will briefly examine Nietzsche's thinking in this book below.

<sup>2</sup>The statement in Greek is αὐτός ἐνηθρώπησεν, ἵνα ἡμεῖς θεοποιηθῶμεν.

<sup>3</sup>ἐνηθρώπησεν: enēthrōpēsēn.

<sup>4</sup>θεοποιηθῶμεν: theopoiēthōmen.

<sup>5</sup>ἐνηθρώπησεν: enēthrōpēsēn.

<sup>6</sup>ἄνθρωπος: anthrōpos.

## Ecce Homo: Becoming What One is, Nietzschean Style

Philosopher, cultural critic, poet, and philologist Friedrich Nietzsche penned his last original written work, *Ecce Homo: How One Becomes What One Is*, just before his descent into insanity (the work was published 8 years after his death, in 1908). In this book, Nietzsche, who later inspired such diverse thinkers as Ayn Rand, Jacques Derrida, and Michel Foucault, attempted a sort of memoir, encapsulating his overall philosophy by way of insight offered into his prior writings. In keeping with his body of work up to that point (including *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, *The Gay Science*, *Beyond Good and Evil*, and *On the Genealogy of Morality*), Nietzsche postulated that the human “will to power” must be the driving force for human existence. Such a will to power offers fundamental understanding into what it means to be human. Nietzsche envisions a “master-morality” that is juxtaposed against an escapist and weak “slave-morality”. In previous works, he had postulated the image of the *Übermensch* (the superman or overman), a final goal or image for humanity that arises to counter the passionless Apollonian image (as persons of apathy), people entrenched in traditional morality and overtaken by an obedient herd-instinct. In the wake of the “death of God” (brought on by the secularization of Western society and the conceptual inadequacy of the notion of an Abrahamic deity) as well as the demise of traditional morality coupled with increased nihilism, Nietzsche postulates a need for the overman image to rise up in contrast to the “last man” of egalitarian modernism, allowing this new breed of person to become what he is: by way of will, passion, and vital impulses of the self and art. In keeping with his prior writings, Nietzsche emphasizes strength and power in *Ecce Homo*, pitting these qualities against weakness and listlessness. He places himself on trial as a philosopher and as a person, largely finding himself correct in theory and philosophy, while also wanting in relation to his ability to carry out his ideals. Nevertheless, he continues to embrace those ideals, championing them so that others might adopt them. This final work seems a precis of sorts—the philosopher looking back over his life and work.

In his writings, Nietzsche had long denounced Western European philosophy and religion as devoid of essential honesty, something that he felt exhibited cowardly failure when faced with a need to follow on toward logical conclusions. Much of this failure, in Nietzsche’s view, could be laid at the feet of the pitiful Christian ethic and the accompanying image of Jesus that is generally embraced both by “masters” as well as by “slaves”. He saw Christianity serving as simply another configuration of the master-slave morality

system, one that reduced passion to passivity and mollified the will to power we need for change. We can see this emphasis simply by way of the title of his book—*Ecce Homo*, the Latin version of the phrase uttered by Pilate in John 19:5: “Behold the Man!” While such a borrowed phrase points to obvious parallels to the scene of Jesus before Pilate, most believe that Nietzsche does *not* here frame himself (nor his endorsed hero figure) as a type of Christ. Instead, it seems more likely he chooses this language to contrast his preferred image of humanity with the biblical picture of Jesus. This can be seen at the close of Nietzsche’s *Ecce Homo*, where he signs the book, “Dionysus versus the Crucified” (for Nietzsche, Dionysus represented impulse, emotion, and instinct—in contrast to Apollon, representing herd-instinct rationality, control, stoicism, and heartless logical thinking). Nietzsche takes emotions and an assertion toward power to be the antidote to submissive, sheep-like passivity, the latter best represented by the crucifixion. The reader is called to behold the Dionysian man—humans should become this, he says, since this is who humans truly are. Behold this man! Nietzsche adjures us: eschew the other man, the Crucified One, the one who stands passively before Pilate!

For Nietzsche, the figure of Jesus illustrates much that is wrong with the world’s present configuration. He saw the picture of Jesus encouraging us to believe that being human is simply not enough—it urges us to rely upon a sort of *Deus ex Machina* rescue, with God swooping in and snatching victory out of pathetic defeat. The image of Jesus before Pilate emphasized for Nietzsche the fact that human betterment obligates a fictive supernatural fix, a move that denigrates what it truly means to be human. In the end, what is necessitated is a noumenal solution, a remedy inaccessible to the senses because it arrives from another realm, a heavenly other-worldly domain, an answer beyond the reach of flesh-and-blood individuals. For Nietzsche, such a possibility is a dangerous fabrication, the result of wishful thinking and passive, impoverished human imagination. Being human—being a man—should be enough, he asserts, provided the hero in question is a certain sort of person. Instead of the Crucified One, what we need is the Overman—the *Übermensch*—an overcomer who possesses a here-and-now fearless will toward power. This, suggests Nietzsche, is what all our strivings—including those anthropological—should aim for. This is the sort of human we need to behold. This is the sort of human we need to become. This, in incubus, is who we truly are.

## Ecce Homo: “Behold the Man!”, After the Pattern of the Gazed-Upon Jesus

So, we need now to look more closely at the passage from which the original *Ecce Homo* phrase was taken: John 19:1-16 (NKJV):

1 So then Pilate took Jesus and scourged Him. 2 And the soldiers twisted a crown of thorns and put it on His head, and they put on Him a purple robe. 3 Then they said, “Hail, King of the Jews!” And they struck Him with their hands. 4 Pilate then went out again, and said to them, “Behold, I am bringing Him out to you, that you may know that I find no fault in Him.” 5 Then Jesus came out, wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe. **And Pilate said to them, “Behold the Man!”** 6 Therefore, when the chief priests and officers saw Him, they cried out, saying, “Crucify Him, crucify Him!” Pilate said to them, “You take Him and crucify Him, for I find no fault in Him.” 7 The Jews answered him, “We have a law, and according to our law He ought to die, because He made Himself the Son of God.”

8 Therefore, when Pilate heard that saying, he was the more afraid, 9 and went again into the Praetorium, and said to Jesus, “Where are You from?” But Jesus gave him no answer. 10 Then Pilate said to Him, “Are You not speaking to me? Do You not know that I have power to crucify You, and power to release You?” 11 Jesus answered, “You could have no power at all against Me unless it had been given you from above. Therefore the one who delivered Me to you has the greater sin.” 12 From then on Pilate sought to release Him, but the Jews cried out, saying, “If you let this Man go, you are not Caesar’s friend. Whoever makes himself a king speaks against Caesar.”

13 When Pilate therefore heard that saying, he brought Jesus out and sat down in the judgment seat in a place that is called The Pavement, but in Hebrew, Gabbatha. 14 Now it was the Preparation Day of the Passover, and about the sixth hour. And he said to the Jews, “Behold your King!” 15 But they cried out, “Away with Him, away with Him! Crucify Him!” Pilate said to them, “Shall I crucify your King?” The chief priests answered, “We have no king but Caesar!” 16 Then he delivered Him to them to be crucified. So they took Jesus and led Him away.

In these verses we witness Pilate attempting to exonerate Jesus (*ex*—from; *onus*—burden). Pilate seems to want to lift the legal burden from Jesus, whereas those in audience just a few verses later will insist on

placing a heavier and more deadly burden back upon him, in the form of a cross.

What we have in the picture of this one—this soon to be crucified one—is a human disgraced and humiliated, objectified and manipulated, one who has little will to power available to him. He stands before the state and the crowd, utterly without control in terms of shaping his destiny. This is the one whom René Girard called the “*victime émissaire*”: *the religious scapegoat* (literally, the “scape victim”). Jesus stands before Pilate as the icon of a god who is suffering, of a god soon-to-be crucified. In respect to this man who later will be celebrated as the image of God incarnate, *prima facie* there seems little that is powerful, little that is god-like, little that is omnipotent. If ever there was a human standing before Pilate, this is a human. Nietzsche is right to contrast him to the take-charge and fate-controlling Dionysius. Jesus, before Pilate, exhibits scarce emotive impulse, little passion, and he seems exceedingly self-controlled, with a firm lock on his instincts. In the master-slave coupling, Jesus is clearly positioned toward the slave end of the spectrum; therefore, Nietzsche despises him so.

Jesus, before Pilate, becomes the human disgraced. He is ironically crowned with injury (signified by his crown of thorns), derided by way of mocking emblems and regalia (his robe and the “King of the Jews” placard at the top of the cross), and he is the arrested man disempowered by way of enhanced interrogation techniques (a beaten and bloody face and back). In the end, he winds up flogged and tortured.

In this story, Jesus is a human objectified. In accordance with Pilate’s invitation, Jesus stands here as one beheld, one gazed upon, one under surveillance. This, of course, easily recalls the emphasis Michel Foucault (seemingly inspired by Lacan 1981) placed upon the *medical gaze* (1994), a notion that, in his later writings, transformed into the *panoptic gaze* (1977). The scrutiny of the panoptic gaze—the sort of surveillance that is always and everywhere present—finds its locus in the power of an all-seeing state (cf. Scott 1998), a configuration that Foucault describes as “the system of power relations,” and Lacan designates “the symbolic register” (Krips 2010:97), the examining, all-seeing eye over the body, over education, over law, over sexuality. “For Foucault, the modern gaze has joined forces with technology and technocracy. ‘The gaze that sees is the gaze that dominates and masters’” (Morin 2001: 323).

So, before Pilate Jesus becomes the surveilled human, the one dominated, the one mastered. Oddly enough, given Jesus’ god-man ontology as depicted in the New Testament, Jesus appears here as the gazed-upon god, not the god who gazes upon others, who sees all. Before Pilate, Jesus becomes the judged and condemned human—condemned both by religion and

by the state. As opposed to being the regnant judge, Jesus is the god disciplined and the god punished. Before Pilate, Jesus becomes the silent, non-testifying human, not the one who must be listened to, but the god who listens, who lets others speak and stands silent while others create definitions and issue verdicts (this is the central point of the novel *Silence* by Shusaku Endo 2016). Jesus, before Pilate, becomes a victim, which is a fitting result given this is the god who empties (cf. Philippians 2:5ff). Jesus is God who embraces weakness, God who submits to manipulation, to handling, and to the panoptic gaze of others—come, let us behold him!

Yet, oddly enough, behold him we should, since—per the story—Jesus is not trapped in this spot nor is he confined to state surveillance. Jesus willingly ends up here, since it is by way of such a willing surrender that he turns the effects of the panoptic gaze upon its head. In his passivity, Jesus remains the one who acts—despite his quiescence. He arises as the deft discourse archaeologist, upbraiding Pilate, warning him that he would have no power had that power not been given him. Jesus also is pictured as an agent who overturns power allegiances swirling about him, “causing” the Jews in the story to apostatize in response to his silence and to Pilate’s wish to release him (these observant Jewish religionists end up confessing Caesar as their one and only king!), thus exposing them for who they really are (cf. Colossians 2:13-15). Even in the face of the panopticon, Foucault saw that those suffering under its hegemony can still fight against it: “...By driving a wedge between power relations and relations of domination, Foucault leaves open a space for creative acts of resistance—what he calls ‘practices of freedom’” (Krips 2010: 96). “The idea that power is a system of domination that controls everything and leaves no room for freedom cannot be attributed to me”, Foucault claimed (ibid). Thus, fighting against systems of domination is precisely what we see Jesus doing as he stands before Pilate (Scott claims this is what the “weak” often do: they up-end power structures by way of skillful, “passive”, semiotic manipulation and well-placed “foot dragging”. See 1987 and 1992). Behold the man!

It appears from the sweep of the story that all of this constitutes Jesus’ true vocation, his authentic *amor fati*: his “embrace of fate” or his “love of fate” (*amor fati* was a favorite Latin phrase of Nietzsche’s. Cf. Romans 8:28). We hear Jesus praying in the garden just before his trial, “Not my will, but Thine be done!”

But, returning to Nietzsche, this is not a type of *amor fati* for which he had much sympathy. Remember that Nietzsche had had little time for Christian ethics, funded as he took them to be by the sniveling image of Jesus. Nietzsche viewed Christianity as devoid of

honesty, exhibiting cowardice in the face of the very implications it kicked up.

But, now that we have managed to explore the notion more deeply, such a conclusion might not be as self-evident as Nietzsche took it to be. By embracing his vocation in this way, Jesus did not retreat from honesty, as Nietzsche thought he did. Standing before Pilate, Jesus was humiliatingly, even dangerously, honest. And, in so doing, he also proved he was no coward—he did not submissively surrender in defeat, recoiling from his responsibility while passively awaiting divine rescue. Instead, in the face of the political might of Pilate and a mob screaming for his death, Jesus relentlessly pursued his goal, courageously being willing to sacrifice to see his vision come to fruition.

In the end—as a result—we are treated to a sublime image of what humans can and should be.

Jesus who is suffering, scorned and humiliated is for the first time in the Gospel presented as the “man”, “*Ecce Homo*”, “*Behold the man.*” Man in his suffering, man wounded and tortured, at this moment more than any other, reveals the mystery of his humanity which makes him the image of God. Let us not forget that it is as the Suffering Servant that Jesus chose to reveal his humanity to us. (Pichon 2012)

As the Suffering Servant Jesus is presented at his most human—and, at the same time, we there too catch glimpses of deity. Pichon goes on to elaborate:

Through the disfigured features of the Suffering Servant we begin to see the mystery of man, “*Ecce Homo*” “*Behold the man.*” Jesus chose to be presented by Pilate as the “man” at the mock tribunal, in all his derisory finery, so that we would discover the secret of this man. He offers us this secret so that we would have the possibility to enter his Kingdom. But are we able to see behind the mask of the Suffering Servant the beauty of his heart? (Ibid.)

By way of this peak behind the mask, we catch a glimpse of both a human and a deified heart, a glimpse that urges those of us who follow Jesus to ask anew—given who he was, what he did for us, and what he is willing to do in us—what it truly means to *be* human. Bonhoeffer brings many of these points together when he refuses to accept that Jesus came to rid us of our humanity or was bent on stripping us of our God-given creatureliness. On the contrary, Bonhoeffer viewed Jesus’ vocation as coming to make us well and truly human, first by showing us what a sublimely well-lived life can look like, and then by empowering us to grow

far more than we could were we deprived of his redemptive work. As Bonhoeffer puts it:

To be conformed to the one who has become human—that is what being human really means. The human being should and may be human. All super-humanity [Übermenschentum] [sic], all efforts to outgrow one's nature as human, all struggle to be heroic or a demigod, all fall away from a person here, because they are untrue. The real human being is the object neither of contempt nor of deification, but the object of the love of God. The manifold riches of God's creation are not violated here by a false uniformity, by forcing people to submit to an ideal, a type, or a particular image of the human. The real human being is allowed to be in freedom the creature of the Creator. To be conformed to the one who became human means that we may be the human beings that we really are. Pretension, hypocrisy, compulsion, forcing oneself to be something different, better, more ideal than one is—all are abolished. God loves the real human being. God became a real human being. (2015: 40-41, emphasis added)

As humans, our natural habitat is now sanctified by the fact the Word became flesh and dwelt amongst us. To be human is not only allowed, it is blessed—it is our natural end, our telos. We should not escape it—we should embrace it, diving deeply into what this means in the light of the picture we have of God in Christ. Bonhoeffer again:

Human beings are not transformed into an alien form, the form of God, but into the form that belongs to them, that is essentially their own. Human beings become human because God became human. But human beings do not become God. They could not and do not accomplish a change in form; God changes form into human form in order that human beings can become, not God, but human before God. (Ibid.:42)

All of this being so, we behold here an individual who gives us profound insight into the vocation before persons who take up anthropology in the light of the Incarnation. We now may see that this One, this suffering servant, offers to us a picture—even a normative picture—of what it is that we are studying. Theologically, this is the fulcrum for anthropology in light of Jesus, because he is the ultimate picture of what it means to be anthropos. He came not to make us less human, but to deepen our humanity. In Jesus, we see that God was one of us—a human just like us. Behold humanity! Behold anthropology! Behold our task!

If God had a name, what would it be,  
And would you call it to His face,  
If you were faced with Him in all His glory,  
What would you ask if you had just one question?

...

What if God was one of us,  
Just a slob like one of us,  
Just a stranger on the bus,  
Trying to make His way home?  
(Osborne 1995)

## References

- Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. 2015. *Ethics (Dietrich Bonhoeffer—reader's edition)*. Reinhard Krauss and Charles C. West, translators. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press.
- Endo, Shusaku. 2016. *Silence: a novel*. William Johnston, translator. Hampshire, UK: Picador Classics.
- Foucault, Michel. 1977. *Discipline and punish: the birth of the prison*. Alan Sheridan, translator. New York: Vintage Books.
- . 1994. *The birth of the clinic: an archaeology of medical perception*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Krips, Henry. 2010. "The politics of the gaze: Foucault, Lacan and Žižek." *Culture Unbound: Journal of Current Cultural Research* 2:91-102.
- Lacan, Jacques. 1981. *The four fundamental concepts of psychoanalysis*. Jacques-Alain Miller, editor. Alan Sheridan, translator. New York: Norton.
- Morin, Pauline. 2001. Foucault and Lacan: the gaze and its operation within historiography. In *Paradoxes of progress: architecture and education in a post-utopian era*. Proceedings, 89th ACSA Annual Meeting, March 16-20, Baltimore, Maryland. Pp. 323-328. Washington DC: ASCA Press.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. 1992. *Ecce homo: how one becomes what one is*. Revised edition. London: Penguin Classics.
- Osborne, Joan. 1995. "One of us." *Relish*. Mercury Records.
- Pichon, Xavier Le. 2012. *Ecce homo (behold humanity)*. *On being with Krista Tippett*. 16 August. <https://onbeing.org/blog/ecce-homo-behold-humanity>. Accessed 27 June 2017.
- Scott, James C. 1987. *Weapons of the weak: everyday forms of peasant resistance*. Reprint edition. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- . 1992. *Domination and the arts of resistance: hidden transcripts*. Reprint edition. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- . 1998. *Seeing like a state: how certain schemes to improve the human condition have failed*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.