

## SUNDAY THEOLOGY TALKS - JULY 2025

DATE	SERIES	SPEAKER	TITLE
July 6 2025	SHARP FAITH: "ART AND SPIRITUALITY"	The Rev. Dr. Luigi Gioia Theologian In Residence, Saint Thomas Church	MICHELANGELO'S LAST JUDGMENT: CHRIST THE ALL-POWERFUL JUDGE
July 13 2025	SHARP FAITH: "ART AND SPIRITUALITY"	The Rev. Dr. Luigi Gioia Theologian In Residence, Saint Thomas Church	CHAGALL'S WHITE CRUCIFIXION: CHRIST THE CRUCIFIED JEW
July 20 2025			NO SUNDAY THEOLOGY TALK
July 27 2025	SHARP FAITH: "ART AND SPIRITUALITY"	Dr. Travis LaCouter Postdoctoral research fellow at the Catholic University of Leuven (Belgium).	"LOVELY IN LIMBS": POISE, POSSESSION, AND PRECARIETY IN JULIEN NGUYEN'S THE TEMPTATION OF CHRIST (2020)

### Talks by The Rev. Dr. Luigi Gioia, Theologian In Residence, Saint Thomas Church

#### 1. Michelangelo's Last Judgment: Christ the Powerless Judge



Painted in a time of religious upheaval, Michelangelo's Last Judgment reflects a world unmoored—where people act as if God is absent. Towering over the Sistine Chapel's altar, where popes are elected, the fresco becomes a silent witness to centuries of political ambition and spiritual compromise. Though often read as a vision of fearsome judgment, its unsettling, even farcical imagery hints at a deeper critique. Michelangelo challenges us to reconsider where true divine presence lies—and how power blinds us to it.

#### 2. Chagall's *White Crucifixion*: Christ the Crucified Jew



Although Jewish, Mark Chagall used the crucifixion of Jesus—a central Christian symbol—to portray Jewish suffering during the Holocaust in his painting *White Crucifixion* (1938). Surrounding the crucified Christ are scenes of burning synagogues, fleeing refugees, and antisemitic violence. Chagall challenges Christians to recognize ongoing suffering through a symbol familiar to them, reframing Jesus not as unique in his agony but as emblematic of broader human persecution. The *White Crucifixion* calls for empathy across faiths and warns against theological isolationism that can blind believers to the "crucifixions" still occurring in the world today.

Talk by Dr. Travis Lacouter, Postdoctoral research fellow at the Catholic University of Leuven (Belgium).

3. “Lovely In Limbs”: Poise, Possession, and Precarity in Julien Nguyen’s *The Temptation of Christ* (2020)



The Gospel scene of Christ's temptation in the wilderness is given new life by the contemporary artist Julien Nguyen, whose daring work mixes elements of Renaissance virtuosity with distinctly modern sensibilities. In Nguyen's version, a jagged, beastly Satan stands opposite a lithe, youthful Christ—their two contrasting bodies telegraphing an implicit and eternal tension. The painting's bold visual language, which is both beautiful and terrifying, manages to communicate Christ's simultaneous poise and precarity, and in this suggests rich avenues for theological and spiritual reflection. Join us for an exploration of this painting and discussion of its defining features.

## MARC CHAGALL'S *WHITE CRUCIFIXION*: CHRIST THE CRUCIFIED JEW

### Marc Chagall (1887-1985)

1. Marc Chagall (1887–1985) stands as one of the most distinctive and visionary artists of the 20th century
  - 1.1. His work bridges the traditions of Jewish life and the innovations of European modernism.
  - 1.2. Born Moishe Shagal in the shtetl<sup>1</sup> of Vitebsk, in present-day Belarus, Chagall grew up in a deeply religious Hasidic<sup>2</sup> Jewish family.
  - 1.3. The spiritual and folkloric rhythms of that world never left him. Even as he moved through the major cultural centers of his time — St. Petersburg, Paris, Berlin, and eventually New York — his work remained rooted in the metaphysical landscapes and symbolic language of his childhood.
2. Chagall's art defies easy categorization.
  - 2.1. Though associated with several movements<sup>3</sup> — including Cubism, Fauvism, and Surrealism — he was never formally bound to any school.
  - 2.2. Instead, his work is marked by a deeply personal visual language: floating figures, dreamlike villages, Jewish characters, animals, angels, lovers, violins, candles, and Torah scrolls drift through skies in a weightless, poetic logic all his own.
  - 2.3. This “Chagallian” aesthetic often blends the sacred with the everyday, the tragic with the whimsical, and the real with the fantastical.
3. One of the defining characteristics of Chagall's art is its spiritual dimension.
  - 3.1. Even when not overtly religious, his compositions often evoke a sense of transcendence or metaphysical longing.
  - 3.2. Figures frequently float, defying gravity and earthly constraint.
  - 3.3. Light, often supernatural in tone, breaks through darkness.
  - 3.4. His use of color — lush blues, burning reds, radiant greens, white — creates an emotional intensity that echoes mysticism, memory, and lament.
  - 3.5. His canvases often feel like visual psalms.
4. Another hallmark of his work is the integration of Jewish identity and iconography, especially during times of persecution.
  - 4.1. In response to the rise of Nazism and the horrors of World War II, Chagall created a series of crucifixion paintings — most notably *White Crucifixion* (1938) — in which he used Christian symbolism to depict Jewish suffering.
  - 4.2. This complex use of the crucified Christ, portrayed as a Jewish martyr, reflected Chagall's efforts to awaken Christian Europe to the tragedy unfolding around it.

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<sup>1</sup> Yiddish word meaning "little town"

<sup>2</sup> Hasidic (or Hassidic) refers to a branch of Orthodox Judaism characterized by its emphasis on mysticism, joy, and close connection with a charismatic leader known as a Rebbe. Emerging in the 18th century in Eastern Europe, Hasidism is marked by its unique blend of Jewish law, Kabbalah, and mystical practices.

<sup>3</sup> See at the end the note on the artistic influences detectable in Chagall's paintings.

- 4.3. This work reveals his ability to harness symbolism in morally urgent and politically poignant ways.
- 5. Chagall was also a prolific illustrator, designing stage sets, stained glass windows, and public murals across Europe and the United States.
  - 5.1. Despite the many media he explored, his work remained unmistakably his own: lyrical, emotionally charged, and suffused with memory.
  - 5.2. He managed to blend tradition and innovation, exile and belonging, sorrow and celebration — often within a single image.

## THE WHITE CRUCIFIXION<sup>4</sup> (1938)<sup>5</sup>

- 6. Christ on the cross.
  - 6.1. He is depicted wearing
    - i. a short headcloth rather than a crown of thorns,
    - ii. and a fringed garment in lieu of the traditional loincloth. This garment is a variety of the Jewish ritual prayer shawl. It has two black stripes near its fringed edge and a longer fringes in the corner.
  - 6.2. Above Christ's head, just over the limits of the upper bar of his T-shaped cross, appears the traditional INRI sign ("Jesus of Nazareth King of the Jews") which is translated on the cross-bar itself into Aramaic: *Yeshu HaNotzri Malcha D'Yehudai*.
  - 6.3. Christ is lit by a ray of white light from on high.
  - 6.4. The Christian halo around his head is balanced at his feet by the halo surrounding the menorah,<sup>6</sup> one of the oldest symbols of Judaism.
- 7. The Jewish context is also echoed above the crucifixion in four figures:
  - 7.1. three biblical patriarchs and a matriarch - probably Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Rachel (the eternal Jewish mourner).
  - 7.2. who are dressed in Jewish garments:
    - i. the man in white wears phylacteries and a prayer shawl,
    - ii. while the others cover their heads either with a skullcap, a mantle, or a kerchief.
  - 7.3. They hover above the cross floating out of the darkness into the ray of light that illuminates him.
  - 7.4. Their presence here stems from the popular Jewish legend that, after the destruction of the First Temple (586 BC), God summoned Moses and the Patriarchs to share his grief, for they knew how to mourn.
  - 7.5. The prophets described matriarch Rachel as mourning the exile and destruction of her children, refusing to be comforted (see Jeremiah 31:15).<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> On view at the Art Institute in Chicago.

<sup>5</sup> See Ziva Amishai-Maisels, "Chagall's *White Crucifixion*", *Art Institute of Chicago Museum Studies* 17/2 (1991), pp. 138-153, 180-181.

<sup>6</sup> The Hanukkah menorah, also called a *hanukkiah*, is a nine-branched candelabrum used during the eight-day Jewish festival of Hanukkah. It symbolizes the miracle of the oil in the Second Temple, where a one-day supply of oil miraculously burned for eight days. The hanukkiah is a central part of the Hanukkah celebration, with one candle lit each night to commemorate the holiday's central miracle.

<sup>7</sup> Jeremiah 31:15: "Thus says the LORD:

"A voice is heard in Ramah,



8. To Christ's left (on the right side of the painting), Chagall depicted
  - 8.1. a synagogue, whose Torah ark goes up in flames,
  - 8.2. while a booted soldier with baggy trousers, who may be responsible for the fire, opens its doors to reveal the scrolls within.
  - 8.3. Below the soldier lie other objects from the pillaged synagogue:
    - i. an overturned chair,
    - ii. the torn remnants of a prayer book,
    - iii. a menorah with a tall backstand,
    - iv. and what appears to be a lamp, perhaps the Eternal Light that once hung before the ark.
    - v. Further below, but still part of the same scene, an open prayer book and a smoking Torah scroll lie violated on the ground.
  - 8.4. The fire and the scattered objects document the pogrom that has taken place in the synagogue.
9. It is from this scene of destruction that the Wandering Jew (a symbol of Jewish homelessness through the ages) attempts to escape to the right, carrying his sack on his back.
10. Below him, a mother shields her baby as she too runs away, this time toward the bottom of the painting. She represents vulnerability and generational trauma.
11. This scene continues on the other side of the cross, where three more bearded Jews escape toward the bottom left.
  - 11.1. One wipes away his tears as he flees;
  - 11.2. another, in torn garments, wears an unreadable sign on his chest - originally the sign read "*Ich bin Jude*" ("I am a Jew") before Chagall painted over it;
  - 11.3. while the third, who looks back in horror at the burning synagogue, escapes wearing only one shoe, but clutching a Torah scroll in his arms, saving it from destruction.
12. Above these three refugees, houses lie overturned, broken open, or burning in the snow.
  - 12.1. To the left, a Jew, seemingly consumed by the flames, lies dead and unburied amid the tombstones of the cemetery.
  - 12.2. Above him stands his empty chair, attended by his faithful goat, who appears to wait for him to return to it.
  - 12.3. Other former inhabitants of the village sit outdoors on the snow-covered ground amid the destruction, with a basket and a fiddle beside them, too dispirited either to eat or to console themselves with music.
13. Below them, other dispossessed inhabitants of the town try to flee in an overloaded boat,
  - 13.1. but since it has only one oar, it seems stuck in the waters, unable to move.
  - 13.2. Despairing, the refugees lean over the side of the boat, trying to figure out a way to get it to move, or raise their hands to the heavens, seeking salvation.

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lamentation and bitter weeping.  
 Rachel is weeping for her children;  
 she refuses to be comforted for her children,  
 because they are no more."

14. Above the village, a crowd enters, waving red flags and carrying swords and farm implements as weapons.
  - 14.1. They resemble the fleeing villagers, and it is at first not clear whether they are the perpetrators of the pogrom or the defenders of the village.
  - 14.2. In the latter case, their meager weapons seem inadequate to effect the hoped-for salvation

## Context

15. The book-burning and the labeling of Jews may refer to events that happened while Chagall was working on the painting in Germany:
  - 15.1. the first Jewish census (May 17, 1938),
  - 15.2. the registration and marking of Jewish businesses (June 14, 1938),
  - 15.3. the forced adoption by Jews of the names Abraham and Sarah (August 17, 1938), and
  - 15.4. the stamping of the letter "J" ("Jude") into Jewish passports (October 5, 1938).
  - 15.5. The burning of the Torah ark and the desecration of the scrolls in the *White Crucifixion* could be inspired by the destruction of the synagogues in Munich and Nuremberg on June 9 and August 10, 1938,
  - 15.6. The pogrom on the left side of the painting can be linked with those that occurred throughout the year, reaching their height on Kristallnacht (Crystal Night, November 9-10, 1938).
  - 15.7. The attempts of Jews during the 1930s to emigrate from Nazi Germany are represented in the painting by the Jews who try to escape the destruction.
  - 15.8. The armed peasants at the upper left have historical meaning, as their red flags indicate that they are Russian Communists. They could thus be read not as attacking the village but as coming to relieve it, for, in 1938, Russia was in the vanguard of resistance to Nazi plans for the domination of Europe.

## GOLGOTHA (1912)<sup>8</sup>

16. The painting was executed when it was feared in the West that pogroms were about to break out again in Russia because of the Beilis affair.
  - 16.1. Mendel Beilis, a Jew, had been arrested in July 1911, accused of murdering a Christian child in order to use his blood for ritual purposes, in accordance with medieval blood libels.
  - 16.2. The two years he spent in jail before his trial in the fall of 1913 called forth displays of anti-Semitism in Russia, and a strong outcry in the West against these abuses and against the very idea of the blood libel.
  - 16.3. This revival of the blood libel that had also been a leitmotif of the pogroms of 1904-06, of which Chagall had been only too aware, helps to explain the depiction of the crucified child.
  - 16.4. Reversal of the blood libel:
    - i. it is the Jewish child, Chagall-Jesus, who is killed for ritual reasons by the Christians;

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<sup>8</sup> At the Moma Museum, NYC, not on view.

- ii. it is the Jewish child from whom the ladder of the descent from the cross is removed in the painting, so that he must remain crucified forever.
  - iii. The blood has drained out of the blue child into the brilliant red ground.
- 17. At the foot of the cross, are the child's Jewish parents.
  - 17.1. His bearded father wears a fringed stole, which recalls the traditional prayer shawl and is visible below his hands,
  - 17.2. while the mother exposes her breast to succor her suffering child.
- 18. Yet the blue child is no longer suffering.
  - 18.1. Drained of his life's blood, he slowly becomes detached from his brown cross,
  - 18.2. absorbed into a green and golden halo as though he were soaring heavenward in an apotheosis.
  - 18.3. He moves away from his parents, as does the equally blue-garbed figure in the boat with a blue sail.

## INTERPRETATION

### Chagall's use of the cross

- 19. How can the symbol most closely associated with Jewish persecution — the cross — be used to express Jewish suffering itself?
- 20. Chagall reclaims the crucifixion from the hands of oppressors and returns it to its roots — not as a theological victory, but as a symbol of unjust suffering, specifically Jewish suffering.
- 21. The cross, in Chagall's hands, becomes a mirror: it reflects not redemption, but betrayal, exile, and grief
- 22. The cross becomes a universal container for grief, a "frame" for mourning
  - 22.1. Despite its violent legacy, the crucifixion is one of the few visual languages in Western art that holds space for public lament.
  - 22.2. Chagall uses the crucified body not to convert or to accuse, but to say: "Look. This is what has happened *to us*, not once, but again and again."
  - 22.3. It becomes a therapeutic frame, a way of speaking the unspeakable, of giving Jewish mourning a place within the dominant visual culture that had erased it.
- 23. The cross exposes Christian complicity
  - 23.1. By putting a Jewish Jesus on the cross amid modern pogrom imagery, Chagall draws a devastating moral link: "You revere the crucified Christ, but you are crucifying him again in every Jew you persecute."
  - 23.2. The symbol of Christian identity is turned against the perpetrators.
  - 23.3. This makes the painting an act of mourning and an indictment, both therapy and prophecy.
- 24. The cross connects past, present, and eternal mourning
  - 24.1. In Jewish thought, especially in midrash, mourning is often shared across time:
    - i. Rachel mourns her children in exile.
    - ii. The patriarchs weep after the destruction of the Temple.

- 24.2. The cross becomes a ritual site: it doesn't glorify suffering; it represents it as immemorial, so that it won't be lost.

## The peaceful Christ and the transfigured child

25. In the *White Crucifixion*, Christ's face is calm, almost meditative.
- 25.1. His body is not twisted in agony; his posture is still, bathed in a white, heavenly light.
  - 25.2. The light from above and the hovering patriarchs suggest a heavenward connection, even in suffering.
  - 25.3. Despite the devastation surrounding him — burning villages, fleeing refugees, desecrated synagogues — Christ remains composed, a beacon of endurance and transcendence.
26. In *Golgotha*
- 26.1. The Christ/child's body is rising upward, dissolving into a green and golden halo.
  - 26.2. His expression is not pained, but detached, almost otherworldly.
27. In both works, Christ is not an atoning figure, but a symbol of the Jewish people. The serenity of Christ contrasts with the suffering of those around him, underscoring that he represents spiritual endurance.
28. Chagall doesn't focus on Christ's agony, but on his dignity in suffering.
- 28.1. In both works, Christ is aloof from violence, not in indifference but in defiant peace — a mystical protest against the brutality around him.
  - 28.2. This composure becomes a kind of antidote to violence: not passivity, but moral resistance. The peaceful Christ in *White Crucifixion* says: "*You may destroy our homes, our scrolls, our lives, but our soul is unbroken. We endure.*"

## The dignity of mourning

29. Rather than portraying grief as chaotic, hysterical, or sentimental, Chagall elevates Jewish mourning into a form of spiritual resilience.
30. This dignity in mourning elevates suffering and lament into a form of witness.
31. In *White Crucifixion*
- 31.1. The four mourners above the Cross
    - i. hover in silence, bathed in white light.
    - ii. Their gestures are subdued: raised arms, covered faces, and quiet grief. They are not screaming or collapsing.
    - iii. According to the Jewish Midrash,<sup>9</sup> after the destruction of the Temple, God called the patriarchs to mourn with Him because they knew how to mourn properly.
    - iv. Their presence asserts that mourning is not just emotional, but sacred labor, a covenantal duty.

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<sup>9</sup> Midrash is a Jewish method of interpreting the Hebrew Bible that explores its deeper meanings and applies its teachings to contemporary life. It's a form of biblical exegesis, but unlike more literal interpretations, midrash often uses storytelling, parables, and other literary techniques to fill in gaps, resolve apparent contradictions, and reveal hidden layers of meaning within the text.

- v. Their grief is not hopeless — it is dignified, ancient, and connected to the history of God’s involvement with the history of his people.
- 31.2. The refugees and victims below the cross:
  - i. Even the fleeing figures retain an extraordinary gravity.
  - ii. The man carrying the Torah scroll doesn’t run in panic; he walks with care, protecting it like a child.
  - iii. The woman clutching her baby is a modern Pietà, embodying protective love rather than despair.
- 32. In *Golgotha*, the Jewish parents at the foot of the cross:
  - i. The mother bares her breast to comfort her crucified child — an act of grief, but also nurturing.
  - ii. The father’s hands are clasped in a gesture of contained sorrow.
  - iii. There is no theatrical collapse, only watchful sorrow, rooted in custom and prayer.
- 33. Both paintings show that:
  - 33.1. Mourning becomes sacred protest: a refusal to let memory be erased by violence.
  - 33.2. Chagall affirms that even in the face of pogrom, exile, or genocide, the Jewish people can find resilience in their ability to mourn properly.
- 34. Chagall presents mourning as a form of holiness.
  - 34.1. It is not simply a reaction to violence — it’s a mode of continuity, a way of keeping God, memory, and identity alive.
  - 34.2. Too mourn with dignity is not to accept death, but to sanctify the loss, to insist on the enduring value of what was taken.

### **When do we have the right to move on from mourning?**

- 35. We move on from mourning by carrying forward what the mourning has taught us.
- 36. We have the right to move on when mourning has fulfilled its ethical purpose.
- 37. Mourning an unspeakable loss can become a moral act, that is a way of
  - 37.1. Acknowledging the loss,
  - 37.2. Naming the injustice,
  - 37.3. Protecting the memory,
  - 37.4. And allowing the pain to find an outlet.
- 38. We can begin to walk forward only once mourning has truly honored what was lost, has deepened our compassion, sharpened our conscience, and refused to let horror be normalized.
- 39. We do not have the right move on if mourning hasn’t been honored.
  - 39.1. If the trauma has been silenced, denied, or commodified.
  - 39.2. If the systems that caused the suffering remain unchanged.
- 40. The painting does not end in paralysis, nor resignation. It is grief in motion. It transforms sorrow into witness — into art, testimony, action, and enduring love.



## Do we have the right to claim empathy?

- 41. Chagall doesn't offer us an invitation to empathy. Rather, he challenges it.
- 42. To "claim empathy" requires authentic and tested moral reckoning. We have to ask:
  - 42.1. Is my feeling of empathy a way of drawing near to this pain, or a way of clearing myself of it?
  - 42.2. We cannot have access to authentic empathy unless we recognize our complicity and let this experience transform our sense of justice.
- 43. If we approach *White Crucifixion* and *Golgotha* as passive spectators, we fall under the indictment represented by these paintings.
- 44. By claiming empathy without repentance and commitment to justice we risk appropriating suffering rather than witnessing it.
- 45. Chagall doesn't ask for pity. He asks for remembrance, accountability, and action in a world still capable of this same indifference.

## A note on the artistic influences detectable in these two paintings

- 46. In reference to the major artistic movements of his time, Marc Chagall's *White Crucifixion* (1938) and *Golgotha* (1912) reveal a unique synthesis of multiple influences — drawn from both the formal innovations of early modernism and the deeply symbolic traditions of Jewish art and mysticism.
- 47. While Chagall resisted full allegiance to any one movement, his work absorbed and transformed the visual languages of Cubism, Symbolism, Fauvism, Expressionism, and Surrealism, filtering them through the lens of Yiddish folklore, religious iconography, and powerful emotional and spiritual registers.
- 48. Both *Golgotha* and *White Crucifixion* stand as testaments to Chagall's ability to absorb modernist forms without abandoning his own mystical, ethical, and narrative vision.
- 49. Cubism and Modernist Structure (*Golgotha*, 1912)
  - 49.1. *Golgotha* was painted during Chagall's first Paris period (1910–1914), when he encountered Cubism.
  - 49.2. He incorporated geometric fragmentation and tilted perspectives.
  - 49.3. Cubist influence allowed Chagall to juxtapose the ancient (crucifixion) with the modern (Jewish pogrom victims), merging historical trauma with spiritual allegory.
- 50. Symbolism
  - 50.1. Both paintings are deeply indebted to Symbolism, especially in their use of color, mysticism, and dream-like imagery.
  - 50.2. In *White Crucifixion*, the beam of divine light, the hovering patriarchs, and the symbolic menorah create a visionary space that transcends physical realism — characteristic of Symbolist aesthetics.
  - 50.3. This focus on inner meaning over surface form would remain central to Chagall's work, placing him outside the rationalist, formalist tendencies of high modernism.
- 51. Expressionism

- 51.1. *White Crucifixion*, painted in 1938 in response to the rise of Nazism, channels the raw emotional urgency of Expressionism.
- 51.2. Chagall's figures embody trauma, displacement, and sorrow.
- 51.3. However, unlike German Expressionists, Chagall retains lyricism and mystical detachment rather than adopt brutality or grotesque distortion.
- 51.4. His use of expressionism is spiritual and mournful — it unmasks evil through lament.

## 52. Surrealism

- 52.1. Though not formally associated with the Surrealists, Chagall shared their interest in dream states, disorientation, and the irrational.
- 52.2. In both *Golgotha* and *White Crucifixion*, figures float, weep, ascend, and mourn in a landscape that follows emotional truth, not physics.
- 52.3. His dream-logic emerges not from psychoanalysis but from Jewish mysticism and biblical imagination.

## 53. Fauvism

- 53.1. Chagall embraced the emotional power of color.
- 53.2. While the *White Crucifixion* is notably muted compared to his other works, strategic bursts — flames, red flags, golden halos — are charged with symbolic intensity.
- 53.3. In *Golgotha*, the blue skin of the Christ child and the blood-red ground use color to convey psychological and spiritual meaning.





