FORDHAM CENTER ON RELIGION AND CULTURE
Taking Offense: When Art and the Sacred Collide

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Pope Auditorium | 113 West 60th Street

Moderator
Matthew Maguire
Director, Fordham Theatre Program

Panelists
Camille Paglia
University Professor of Humanities and Media Studies
University of the Arts, Philadelphia

Dana Gioia
Former Director, National Endowment for the Arts
Judge Widney Professor of Poetry and Public Culture, University of Southern California

PETER STEINFELS: Greetings and good evening. Welcome to “Taking Offense: When Art and the Sacred Collide,” a forum organized by the Fordham Center on Religion and Culture.

I am Peter Steinfels, one of the Co-directors of the Center, along with Margaret O’Brien Steinfels and Jim McCartin. All of us have worked together, along with our Program Manager, Patricia Bellucci, to organize this evening’s exceptional program, with two exceptional speakers, Camille Paglia and Dana Gioia.

The igniting spark for this event really began when a reporter from The Washington Post called me in 2010 asking for a comment on the removal of David Wojnarowicz’s video Fire in My Belly from an exhibit at the National Portrait Gallery. The struggle to formulate some kind of intelligent sound bite in response to his request — and that may itself be an oxymoron — underlined for me a sad fact about these controversies over disturbing artistic treatments of religious imagery or of topics that are deeply, in some sense, sacred to people, to their identities or to their histories: Namely, these controversies are mired in clichés, in stale, reflexive, and often self-righteous reactions.

That was the immediate spark, but I have to say that my interest in this topic goes back to my childhood. My parents studied at the Art Institute of Chicago, and for over forty years my father worked as a liturgical artist. His oil on wood panel work, his murals and frescos, ceramic tile, and mosaics can be found in churches and in Catholic institutions around Chicago and Detroit. In this work, art and the sacred mostly converged. But we were always aware that collision might be just around the corner, whether from an unhappy pastor or whether from denunciations of ungodly, not to say communist, contemporary artists, or in the kitschy, mass-produced output of standard religious goods manufacturers, who, in some sense, were my father’s competitors.

Like other parochial school students, I often earned holy cards, which I brought home. My hard work in school met parental approval; those holy cards, considerably less so. I think I was the only second-grader who knew the meaning of the word “insipid.”
Time, however, would teach me that the religious world was not alone in pieties and prejudices. High culture and artistic monitors were hardly free of taboos and conformities, some of them paraded as freedom and rebellion. I learned, too, that consistency about free expression often fell victim to exactly whose sacred ox was being gored.

So I still look for enlightenment and certainly expect it from tonight's speakers, both of whom are known for defying stereotypes and preconceptions. But before I turn this podium over to Matthew Maguire, who will introduce them in turn, I would like to ask all of you to please silence your cell phones or any other devices that could possibly disturb the speakers or your fellow audience members.

Second, let me encourage you to write questions on the index cards that you found at your place at any time in the evening and just hold them up for the student assistants at either side of the auditorium to collect. They will bring them forward so that we can pass them up later in the evening to the moderator for that segment of the evening's forum.

Please let me also encourage you to write your questions, make them brief and, above all, legible. Many good questions have gone unasked because the moderator could not read them.

The moderator this evening is a playwright, director, actor, teacher, the founder of a production company that has staged forty-nine original works in the U.S. and Europe. He is a winner of two OBIEs and too many major fellowships, commissions, and appointments to juries to and panels to possibly list. To us, it is of the greatest importance that he is the director of Fordham's outstanding Theatre Program, and the Center on Religion and Culture is delighted to have collaborated with him twice in the past and again this evening on public forums.

Please welcome Matthew Maguire.

MATTHEW MAGUIRE: Good evening. It is indeed my honor and privilege to be the moderator tonight. This is the third time I've worked with the Center for Religion and Culture, and it's always at the highest possible level. I expect tonight to be the same. So thank you.

It's my honor to introduce Camille Paglia. She holds the University Professorship in the Humanities at the University of the Arts in Philadelphia. She is a critic and scholar of renown, with a longstanding record of treating controversial topics directly and incisively. She has approached issues across a wide spectrum that embraces seventeenth-century poetry, contemporary feminism, Italian-American Catholicism, cinematography, jazz and rock music, drug laws, the economy, the quality of higher education, and the politics of race. Nearly always challenging settled opinion, she has advocated perspectives that make it difficult, even impossible, to classify her according to the ordinary categories of right and left, conservative and liberal, or, for that matter, pop culture commentator and highbrow intellectual.

Paglia is the author of six books, the first of which was an iconoclastic study called *Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson*, originally published in 1990. Her most recent publication, to be released by Pantheon in October 2012, is titled *Glittering Images: A Journey Through Art from Egypt to Star Wars*, a study that ranges over 3,000 years of art, treating architecture and sculpture, painting and conceptual art, as well as cinema and high-tech digital imagery.

Please welcome Camille Paglia.
CAMILLE PAGLIA: Good evening. I'm delighted to be here to talk about this subject that has been obsessing me for over twenty years.

My book that’s coming out this fall, which I have spent five years on, is actually an attempt to try to heal the divide in the United States between the art world and people of faith. My own teaching career has been spent almost entirely at art schools since my first job at Bennington College in 1972 — so for a few years. I have been at the University of the Arts, teaching apprentice artists, since 1984.

I should also perhaps say that I feel that the legacy of the 1960s has been misunderstood or distorted in the way that retrospectives of the 1960s often focus on the political legacy and not on the kind of mystical opening-up toward religious consciousness. I have written about this extensively in various lectures and essays, and these will be collected in my next essay collection. Most of them are on the Web.

But as a professed atheist, ex-Italian Catholic — but once Catholic, you’re Catholic for life; it’s so deeply ingrained in you — I feel that respect for religion and interest in religion should be absolutely basic to any educated person. I have argued repeatedly that comparative religion should be at the heart of the curriculum, that this is the true multiculturalism. I have absolutely no patience for the kind of cynical, snarky atheism that has become popular recently. I think it’s juvenile; it’s adolescent.

In order to understand the history of art, you need to have respect for religion. At the same time, to understand the history of art, you need to be able to appreciate sex and eroticism. We have this terrible divide where the left can appreciate the sex in art, but not the religion, and then the religious people can appreciate the mystical, metaphysical side of art, but block when it comes to depiction of the nude.

My feeling is that the art world has been in a state of kind of embalmed arrogance for a number of decades. It keeps on borrowing parasitically from the great achievements of the avant-garde. The avant-garde is dead. Andy Warhol, my hero, killed the avant-garde. There hasn’t been anything particularly major, in my view, in the art world since Warhol, since pop art. We have had a series of smaller movements, which I chart in my forthcoming book, but there are no great artists left anywhere in the world in the visual arts.

One of the reasons for this is the suffusion of a very callow and clichéd political ideology everywhere — words like “transgressive” and “subversive” applied to a group-think that is now forty years old. Artists, particularly in America, have no idea of the general audience. They live in a very enclosed world. It’s an echo chamber. They hear only their own voices bouncing back at them. The reason for the attenuation of our art is this kind of spiritual poverty that I see everywhere.

At any rate, what I’m trying to do in my forthcoming book is remind the art world that there was often a spiritual principle at the heart of great art works and even of great careers, including even Mondrian, including even Jackson Pollock. In the over-concern with form and with avant-garde gestures, this has been forgotten.

At the same time, my book is directed toward the vast American audience out there that thinks of artists as hoaxsters, as con men. I listen to talk radio a great deal, and I have been absolutely horrified over the past twenty years at the disrespect with which art and artists are held by the majority of the American population. At the same time, this series of provocations by the art world, with artworks that have not been first-rate, with artworks that have been third-rate, fourth-rate, the art world has
been staking its own exclusivity, its own prestige on works of mediocrity. It's about time people wake up. These provocations that make people who live in Manhattan very proud of themselves have resulted in the gutting of art programs nationwide. American schoolchildren, as I say in my book, are paying the price for Manhattan arrogance about these issues.

I have twenty-one images to show you. I want to go rather quickly, because we must get Dana Gioia up here, a person I admire enormously. We're ending with six images from a scandal that just occurred in Spain two months ago. I daresay few of you are even aware of it.

To show you how far back controversy began on the question of art versus religion, Michelangelo's *Last Judgment* in the Sistine Chapel — this dates from 1536 to 1541 — there was a great to-do on the part of the cardinals of the church at that time, advisors of the Pope, about the presence of nudity in this depiction of Doomsday. Christ appears in the heavens with one arm raised, sends the saved to Heaven, while the damned are being cast downward, with this tremendous rotational movement on his left hand. There was controversy over the fact that Jesus is shown unbearded, as if he's a Greek Apollo figure. But the appearance of actual genitalia in this fresco caused a great deal of controversy. The moment that Michelangelo was dead in 1564, a painter was dispatched to cover up the genitalia with the drapery. More and more drapery was added over the centuries.

Finally, during the restoration project of the Sistine Chapel in the 1980s and early 1990s, I think half of the drapery was removed.

But we have to remember that that was a century when the Council of Trent was raising issues about the excess of paganism in Church art that was coming down from the Renaissance. Michelangelo himself was a Neoplatonist who believed that physical beauty mirrored spiritual beauty. But the Council of Trent took the position that Church art should in no way pander to the lascivious instincts; it should not incite lust. There was a back-and-forth. There were cardinals of the Church who felt one way — and popes, too — and those who felt the other way. It went back and forth, actually, between rather puritanical popes, who ordered even Jesus hanging on the cross to be covered up, and others who had no problem whatever with the nude figures. So now let me go forward.

Here's another controversy. This is Caravaggio, who was commissioned to do portraits of Saint Matthew. This particular picture was rejected because it presents Saint Matthew as if he was a peasant. It was thought to be too homely. This picture was not put into the chapel for which it was commissioned in Rome. This particular painting was destroyed in the bombing in Berlin during World War II. We only have it in a black-and-white version. It has been color-enhanced.

Let me show you the picture that was accepted. Caravaggio did another one that would show a far more elegant and highbrow Saint Matthew. There are issues about how the Bible should be treated, realistically or in this kind of idealistic manner.

This is, of course, one of the great works of the Baroque. This is Bernini's *Ecstasy of Saint Teresa of Avila* in the Cornaro Chapel in a small Church in Rome. This work apparently incited controversy even at the time. We don’t know how much, but one remark has come down to us, that “what Bernini has done is to take that most pure virgin, turned her into a Venus, and prostituted her.” Obviously, people were picking up the fact that this episode from Saint Teresa of Avila’s autobiography, in which an angel appears to her and pierces her heart with a dart — in some way, there is a kind of miming here of sexual ecstasy.
Even when I was in college, the way this work was taught was that Bernini was drawing on the conflation of the physical and the spiritual in the biblical Song of Songs and that there’s a biblical basis for it.

If you could see a close-up of the angel’s face, which we have in our collection at the University of the Arts — I’m sorry, I couldn’t find a good one to show you — the angel’s face, shall we say, is distinctly carnal. There’s an extremely flirtatious and voyeuristic look on the face of the angel, which people presumably can’t see from the altar side.

There’s another voyeuristic aspect, because in this chapter there are stone theater boxes there, where the Cornaro family is shown watching this.

What you see is Saint Teresa being carried up to Heaven on these clouds of glory and experiencing what most observers have described as an orgasm. Again and again you have people describing it in that way. It’s simply spiritual ecstasy.

This is a work by George Grosz. He was a tremendous German satirist and one of the great assailers of German militarism in the period following World War I. This is called Christ with Gas Mask. This caused Grosz’s indictment for blasphemy, a trial that dragged on for a number of years and was finally resolved in his favor when the judge decided that it was not an offense to religion, but actually was an attack on militarism. The implication is that, from Grosz’s point of view, religion was being used as essentially an opiate of the masses to encourage soldiers to die for the state. “Shut up and obey,” was the rubric associated with this.

By the time this case was resolved, it was 1933, and Grosz escaped Germany eighteen days before Hitler became chancellor. He probably would have been shot. He got out with his life.

That’s another thing. Grosz’s work as a whole is phenomenal, his attack on the great powers of German finance, of war, of politics. He shows them as contorted by greed and self-interest and lust — all the deadly sins. Grosz was doing these things in an environment in which it could cost him, in which he would suffer materially. He could die.

This is another thing that irritates me about the provocations in the American arts of the last twenty-five years or so. Absolutely nothing was lost by anyone, except perhaps government support for them to show their work in a large museum. There are plenty of private galleries around that will show provocative, avant-garde art. Far from anyone actually suffering from their work being censored in this country in the last twenty-five years, you get The New York Times praising you, you get The New Yorker, you get the applause of the entire art elite. There is no cost to be paid whatever for the sorts of things that would have cost Grosz his life.

Let me show you an example of what I think is a first-rate work of blasphemous art. This is the level that we should demand that our avant-garde art rise to. This is a fairly unknown work. Salvador Dali, a work that is not much known because it was in the possession of Hugh Hefner at the Playboy Mansion in Los Angeles. It has now gone into private ownership.

I looked around the Web for any kind of response to it, and it’s pretty clear that no one seems to realize that this is a fantastic parody of the Annunciation. It’s absolutely amazing. Salvador Dali in this period was doing religious art of various sorts, of Christ on the cross and so on. It is, to me, one of the most — I would have loved to use it in my
book, but it’s impossible. I’m trying to reach the general audience that’s alienated from art, and this is not the way to do it.

What you see here is a woman in the 1940s — you can see her seamed stockings, her loafers — bored, looking over the edge of a balcony, in a parody of the way Mary is shown in so many late medieval and early Renaissance paintings, just sitting alone in her room and suddenly the angel appears with the Annunciation, to say, “You are going to bear the Son of God.”

What we see is the angel’s trumpet, the angel’s announcements. Everything is coming down, these blasts. They resemble very much the kind of rhinoceros horns that Dali was using in this period. It’s a wonderful conflation of the announcement from Heaven, as well as jostling sperm trying to get at her. You see this whole vision of — what can one say? — a kind of invasion coming down from Heaven.

It’s extremely witty. And it is, to me, a first-rate work of imaginative art. If we’re going to have blasphemous art, let it be done with imagination and some sense of artistic history.

Now we’ll move on to the works that really have caused so much trouble in the U.S. in the past decades.

This is Andres Serrano, Piss Christ, at a 1989 exhibit. It was at the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. Through letter-writing campaigns and through the intrusion of Christian groups, it came to the attention of Congress. It was also Senator Jesse Helms’s home state, so it was a further provocation.

What we’re seeing here is a plastic crucifix that is submerged in a Plexiglas tank of the artist’s urine. Now, no one would have known that this five-foot print had urine involved in it at all, except for the fact that Serrano called it Piss Christ. From the start, it was highly controversial. For example, Senator Alfonse D’Amato of New York called it “filth and garbage” on the floor of the Senate and then ripped the exhibit catalogue into pieces and threw it, with an Italian gesture, to the floor of the Senate, and went on and on because of the National Endowment for the Arts money that was involved in the original exhibition. And, although the reports are contradictory, I believe that Serrano himself may have won an award for it of $15,000 that possibly also came from such funds. But again, it is contradictory.

At any rate, this work remains controversial. It has been attacked repeatedly when it has been shown around the world. In Australia and I think in Scandinavia it was attacked. Finally, last year, in Avignon, France — I assume it was the original print — it was destroyed. Someone put a screwdriver through the head of Christ, actually, to try to destroy it.

My problem with this work is the kind of mealy-mouthed explanations given by the artist afterward. He would not admit that there was any intentional blasphemy or sacrilege involved. Instead, he tried to make all these statements — “Oh, I’m just trying to show the way the image of Christ is so commercialized and the way it’s so degraded in our culture.”

I thought, is this the way an avant-garde artist talks? If you’re going to commit blasphemy, cop to it. Salvador Dali would admit that what he was doing was sacrilegious. It was all this humanitarian, philanthropic stuff, which, to me, is the automatic signal that we’re dealing with a third-rate artist.

This is not an interesting work. If, for example, he had said, “This is actually a satire of
the kinds of kitsch that you find in souvenir shops down South” — oh, that's good. You're making a reference to some art historical tradition. Does anyone really think this is a good work of art? No. It has gained importance because it causes big political dustups. So we're looking at it in political or sociological terms, not in artistic terms.

Again, Serrano is nowhere near the level of a Dali. It is foolish for the art world to go the mat for these things again and again and again. Now let me move on to an artist I do admire.

And that is Robert Mapplethorpe. This is not one of my favorite of Robert Mapplethorpe's photographs. He was a Catholic. Catholics make the best pornographers — this is a well-known fact — because they have a sense of taboo.

I just want to show you this, because I think this is a neglected area in discussion of Mapplethorpe — that is, his deliberate profanation of Catholic iconography. This is clearly an allusion here — a pair here, a top and a bottom — to the crucifixion of Saint Peter upside down. Michelangelo's last fresco actually had that topic, and Caravaggio did it. But it's actually Masaccio's version of it that I think Mapplethorpe is alluding to in this. It looks exactly like this.

Now, Mapplethorpe I've spoken about. In 1989 he died of AIDS. The same year as the Serrano scandal, the Mapplethorpe thing started up. There was a traveling show. I believe $30,000 came from the National Endowment for the Arts. It appeared, first, at the ICA in Philadelphia. I saw the show. There was absolutely no problem whatever with it there. The real problem came when the show went to the Corcoran Gallery of Art. There was a huge dustup. Here is an institution only a few blocks from the White House. The director canceled the show, and then she resigned under fire a few months later. But the show then went to the Washington Project for the Arts, where it was a great success. There was a wonderful protest, actually, against this, where images of the Mapplethorpe photos were projected at night against the walls of the Corcoran, which I thought was exactly right.

My attitude toward this — no one seemed to have my attitude — my attitude was — and I wrote a whole piece on it — I'm a great admirer of Mapplethorpe, but I do not believe he belonged in the Corcoran Gallery. The way the media handled this, it was so dishonest. They went on and on, and they would show images of his nude black men to try to imply that there was a racist reason for the reaction against these photographs.

I saw this exhibit. There were photographs in that exhibit, which I saw in Philadelphia, that I could hardly bear to look at. They were bloody, gory scenes of sexual torture. I'm interested in that subject as a historian of sexuality. I'm very interested. I don't think it belonged in the Corcoran Gallery. I do not think it's censorship to say that there's an appropriate place for it. There are plenty of venues in our culture for provocative material of this sort.

Let me go on to one other image. This is not a particularly good image that we're looking at here.

This one is a great image. This is Mapplethorpe pretending to be Satan. It draws on all kinds of medieval devil imagery. I could go on and on, to show it to you. How he managed to do this I have no idea. Just even technically, it's extraordinary.

I think this is a brilliant image, one of the great self-portraits of an artist in the whole history of the Western arts. I could go on and on. I'm a fan of Mapplethorpe.
This particular period — it was full of provocation. Here he has Madonna dancing in front of burning crosses in her *Like a Prayer* video, 1989, which led to the cancellation of her Pepsi-Cola contract. In this video she receives the stigmata and she makes love to a statue of a black saint. So there was that going on.

That same year is when ACT UP invaded St. Patrick’s Cathedral while the mass was going on and threw the host to the floor, which I think was a foolish act, which many people seem to think is in the past. It isn’t. I listen to talk radio, and I know that that has not been forgotten. I think that it was a completely inappropriate thing to do to the consecrated host, even though I’m an atheist. I think that it did not show any kind of courage. I think it was cowardly. You have these parishioners taking communion. I think the courageous thing would have been to harass the hierarchy. I’m all for harassing the hierarchy. Harass the bureaucracy. Go after the cardinal, for heaven’s sake. Go after the monsignors. Send a conga band with drag queens to harass the hierarchy of the Church. But what does this invading of a sacred space and throwing the consecrated host — how did that help the image of gay men, suffering gay men, in our culture? I think it’s just absurd — again, trafficking in the language of the avant-garde without authentic courage.

Here’s Madonna in 2006, when she toured on a mirrored cross. Who knows what that must have cost? She’s on it with a crown of thorns and singing.

I’m sure she hoped for a bigger dustup than there was. NBC refused to show this when they televised her concert. The Church of England protested against it.

But here’s the thing. She cloaked it in — and I’m a Madonna fan and wrote about her from the start — she cloaked in this whole pretense of philanthropy. Behind her, projected, were photos of African children, orphans, whose parents had died from AIDS. *The New York Times*, gullibly, said, “It is a plea for AIDS relief.”

Give me a break. Is this the best way to plead for AIDS relief, putting yourself onto a cross, a glam cross, like a disco ball cross? It’s illogical. Why people are allowing Madonna and other figures to get away with it I have no idea.

At the same time, you have an incident that occurred in 1992, which has Sinead O’Connor tearing up the Pope’s picture on *Saturday Night Live*. She did not do that in rehearsal. The network had absolutely no idea that she was going to do it. She was singing a song, Bob Marley’s “War,” and she was intending to protest child abuse in the Roman Catholic priesthood. At the word “racism,” she substituted “child abuse.” She suddenly produced this picture and, on live camera, tore it into pieces and said into the camera, “Fight the real enemy,” and threw the pieces at the camera.

Two weeks later, she was in Madison Square Garden at Bob Dylan’s anniversary concert, and the crowd booed her because of it. She was in tears and had to be removed from the stage and so on.

Yesterday she canceled her tour, you know, because of bipolar disorder. Let me go on.

This is from Chris Ofili, *The Holy Virgin Mary*. This is from the 1999 *Sensation* show at the Brooklyn Museum of Art. This was show that had been mounted two years earlier in London at the Royal Academy of the Arts. This picture escaped any notice. The real controversy over there was a giant blowup of the face of a child murderess composed of tiny little pictures of children or something. Once this came here, in New York, with its heavy population of ethnic Catholics, there was a big to-do about it.
Chris Ofili is Nigerian-British. He has in other pictures used elephant dung from the London Zoo as a material for his work. This is a mixed-media work. It’s a painting, but there is actual lacquered elephant dung used for the two pedestals and also one breast.

There was a controversy over this picture. Mayor Giuliani went on and on about it — in fact, had not seen it — and threatened to cut off the city funding of the Brooklyn Museum of Art and to evict it from its lease, which is obviously unjustified and dictatorial behavior on his part. He had no business importing his private views into these issues.

Nevertheless, I was very critical of the Brooklyn Museum of Art for failing to provide any kind of curatorial support for that exhibit, which was just passively mounted from London. All kinds of things could be said about this work, all kinds of comparisons to Ethiopian art, to the tradition of the Black Madonnas of Southern Europe, to African tribal fertility rituals. One could go on and on with things that could have and should have been said about this.

But the media, once again, the mainstream media, was complicit in trying to portray the Catholics’ resistance to this image by saying it was racism. One fact that was never printed in the media of that period — I was delighted to see it in the advertisement for this particular event — was that what look like butterflies surrounding the Madonna here are actually cutouts of genitalia from pornographic magazines. Once again, I feel it could be defended in terms of some reference to fertility cults in ancient Africa and so on.

But nevertheless, to try to describe why people are offended and to admit that this was a provocation, to appropriate images from pornographic magazines — clearly Ofili meant to create a stir, and he did.

Again, I consider this a second-rate, if not third-rate, work of art. Why has this become such a — I don’t think that the artist has thought through the degree to which he means to be showing as a caricature — is he showing as a caricature racial stereotypes? Is he endorsing the racial stereotypes? None of these important issues about it artistically were ever raised at the time.

It’s not that I would have wanted the painting to be withdrawn from the exhibit, but I felt that the museum had behaved utterly irresponsibly in actually milking the controversy, not providing any explanations of cultural context about African history, in order to get a better box office. I thought the whole handling of it by the museum was corrupt from beginning to end.

Here is Renée Cox. This is one of the last big controversies. This is a 1996 work that created a huge story in 2001 — again, another show at the Brooklyn Museum of Art, a show of black photographers. Mayor Giuliani again went crazy about it and created a decency panel to oversee the showing of art in public institutions. It went nowhere. I think it kind of just withered away. But Renée Cox is an important black photographer and a performance artist, who uses herself. What you’re seeing here is Leonardo’s — I’m sorry, it’s a little bit blurry. It’s a large work. These are thirty-one-inch-square photographs, panels, featuring members of her family. She was born in Jamaica.

She presents herself as a nude Christ in the middle of Leonardo’s Last Supper. All of the apostles are black, except for Judas, who’s white.

I actually have another work by Renée Cox in my forthcoming book, a beautiful image, a photomontage. She has done remarkable things.
This, I think, is a serious statement, this work. It might be shocking to have a nude black woman in the position of Christ, but I think, as a whole, the work had some dignity, it had gravitas. I would make great arguments for it artistically over the other things we have been looking at, especially *Piss Christ*, which I think is a work of schlock.

Here is the image that caused the pulling of this video called *A Fire in the Belly* from a show at the Smithsonian, the National Portrait Gallery. This occurred in late 2010. What we're seeing is a plastic crucifix with ants running all over it. Once again, in my view, how did this get by the directors of the Smithsonian to begin with? I don't understand what kind of vetting was done. I think it’s an embarrassment to the Smithsonian that this happened. It suggests some sort of a breakdown in organization.

Why do we have these endless controversies? Exactly for what? This happened to be a show. It was called *Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture*. Wojnarowicz died of AIDS in 1992, at the age of thirty-seven. He was a well-known, kind of downtown New York artist. But I don't consider him a major artist. This particular video, the one that caused the problem, was edited down from a longer version. It was like a four-minute version. Apparently the guest curator of this exhibit edited it down. It's out on the Web.

I think that the artist’s images are interesting, they're provocative, but I think he was inept. I think it’s an inept video. I think it’s a mediocre video. I think it traffics in shock. It borrows imagery from the great surrealists, like Buñuel and Dali, their scandalous films of the early 1930s.

But again, why is it there? Here’s the thing. Once this got out that there was this video showing ants running around a crucifix, there was political pressure brought to bear and the thing was pulled. It was on exhibit from October 30 to November 30, for one month. People felt that it was insensitive to have it there during the Christmas holidays, as so many families are coming into town and so on.

My opinion about this is, was this necessary? Why aren't people thinking that the image of the artist in the United States needs reclamation? The status of art in this very practical nation needs strengthening. What is the point of showing this? Because the artist died of AIDS, died of a certain disease, it automatically confers an importance on his third-rate work. Again, I'm not sure how long the art world wants to keep on pursuing this again and again and again. It’s like a replay of the same old arguments, over work of low quality.

Here is an artist, Bruce LaBruce, who is a Canadian gay photographer and filmmaker and provocateur, who I think is totally honest about his blasphemies. This is a scandal that erupted in Spain two months ago. I'll go very quickly over my last six images here.

This is the poster of it. These are instantly recognizable figures in Spain. That’s Alaska, a very famous Mexican-born singer, and her husband. His name is Mario Vaquerizo, and he is a punk and glam rock star over there. Here they are, miming the *Pietà* on this poster. It is a gallery, La Fresh Gallery, in Madrid that is owned by Topacio Fresh, who is an Argentinean transsexual, male-to-female transsexual, who is married to a Spanish man.

At any rate, let me show you some of the images in it that created this storm.

Here is Mario Vaquerizo in the Christ pose. Why I like this is because it is, to me, so suggestive, not only of the history of the depictions of Christ, going all the way back to the
medieval period, to the Gothic Christs, but also it has to do with punk rock, with heavy metal. There are all kinds of issues — Iggy Pop opening up his chest with shards of glass. All kinds of ideas flood to mind, to me, looking at Bruce LaBruce’s pictures.

Let me go forward.

Here’s Rossy de Palma, who is a famous actress of the Almodóvar films. Here she is playing a lascivious nun, with a rosary.

But it really was the appearance of the communion host that caused the problems in Spain. There were protests at the gallery night after night after night.

Here is, ostensibly, a rabbi with the host. These are not consecrated hosts, but they actually are real hosts bought at a religious goods store. He is, again, a recognizable figure in Spain, Carlos Díez Díez, a fashion designer.

This is a nun. You see how the hosts have been — actually, it was done with magic marker — turned into evil chocolate wafers. Can you see the allusions to the history of fashion? There’s a long tradition of lascivious nuns, going all the way back to Diderot’s La Religieuse in the eighteenth century.

This is Maria Forqué. She’s the daughter of a famous Almodóvar star, Verónica Forqué.

My final image is kind of tarnished boy angel, again a very recognizable figure in Spain, the actor Pablo Rivero — kind of, to me, in the Mapplethorpe line.

I think these images are strong. Bruce LaBruce isn’t pretending to some extraneous philanthropy. He’s not saying, “This is good for you. I have wonderful, good intentions.” He’s saying, “No. I have a sense of taboo. I’m going to violate your taboos.”

Oh, I should tell you, the headlines went out, “Kinky Nuns, Tattooed Christ Spark Protests in Spain.” That was the headline of the Agence France-Presse. Then the signs of the protesters were saying, “No more blasphemy,” “Spain — Catholic and United.”

Part of the motivation for the protests was that pro-Franco organizations took the position that they must monitor any kind of deterioration in the prestige and status of the Catholic Church in Spain.

So I’m going to stop here. This was a little quick overview. I hope I haven’t gone terribly over time.

Thank you very much.

MATTHEW MAGUIRE: Next I’m going to introduce Dana Gioia. Dana Gioia is currently the Judge Widney Professor of Poetry and Public Culture at the University of Southern California. From 2003 until 2009, he served as Chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts. During his NEA tenure, he was responsible for expanding congressional support and rebuilding the internal morale of an agency that had been the target of political controversy for over a decade. BusinessWeek magazine dubbed him “the man that saved the NEA.”

Among his initiatives was a program known as Shakespeare in American Communities, an effort to support local productions of Shakespeare plays. Responding to the national decline of the culture of reading, Gioia also began an annual celebration called The Big
Read that has taken off in some 500 cities across the country.

Before entering public service, Gioia earned a national reputation as a critic and scholar. He is the author of a long list of reviews, essays, translations, and anthologies.

But he is, of course, best known as a distinguished poet, the author of four full-length collections of poetry, as well as eight chapbooks. In 2002, he won the American Book Award for his collection *Interrogations at Noon*. Only a matter of days ago, his newest collection of poems was published under the title *Pity the Beautiful*. In fact, tomorrow at 11:30 a.m., he will be reading from *Pity the Beautiful* at the Duane Library on Fordham’s Rose Hill Campus. Later tomorrow, at 6:00 p.m., he will be reading at the Corner Bookstore, located at Madison Avenue and 93rd Street.

In 2008, President George W. Bush awarded him the Presidential Service Medal. In 2010, he also was awarded the Laetare Medal, given annually by the University of Notre Dame to an American Catholic who has demonstrated outstanding service to Church and society.

Dana Gioia.

**DANA GIOIA:** Good evening. There are so many ways that you can take this topic. When I began to write out a few introductory remarks, I looked up and had about a hundred pages of random notes. What I want to do is make a couple of general observations, starting with this sentence:

The relationship between art and the sacred is one of the central themes, the abiding arguments, and the unsolvable problems of culture, because it forces us to consider the relationship between ideology and art; or, to put the matter more accurately, it forces us to consider the relationship between our moral, religious, and political ideologies—which are usually less consistent or logical and more contradictory than we might admit—and our experiential knowledge of art, which usually refuses to be simplified into neat conceptual categories, despite the pressure on us from various constituencies, left and right, to reduce it to political or conceptual statement.

I offer that long Teutonic sentence, with many qualifying phrases and sub-clauses, reminiscent of a car-rental contract or a typical MLA article, as my starting point because most of the public discussion on the conflict between art and the sacred is simplistic, partisan, shrill, and sublimely dopey. If we want to accomplish anything interesting tonight, we must avoid the slogans and clichés, the ignorant assumptions, the expedient mendacities which Camille Paglia documented with such good humor that have dominated the public debate.

I could spend all of my time talking about First Amendment issues and basically the strategy of working these things through Congress. But that strikes me as dull and extraneous. I don’t want to talk about prefabricated conclusions or the way that both sides see art and the sacred. I want to begin with a few general observations that I think are about art that may help clarify the real issues.

First, and most centrally, art is not conceptual language. It is experiential, speaking simultaneously to our intellect, our emotions, our physical senses, our intuition, our imagination and memory, without asking us to separate them. It speaks to us in the fullness of our complex and contradictory humanity. For that reason, the same work of art can be seen by different people in different ways, and by the same person differently at different moments in his or her life. Art communicates to us as a kind of preconceptual holistic knowledge that we have to unravel with the same subtlety and only gradually
unfolding intelligence that we bring to every aspect of life.

Real art cannot be reduced to promotional material for a particular lifestyle or ideology, although the philistines would like it that way — the philistines occupying now most of the high and low positions in society. I love the poetry of Charles Baudelaire, which is dark, tortured, doomed, satanic, and deeply Catholic. I do not read him either as an endorsement or warning for a particular lifestyle consisting of drugs, booze, prostitutes, sex, and syphilis. I read him for the experience of life filtered through his sensibility and extraordinary genius of language. I see him as a prophet of the complexity of being alive, exploring ecstasy, delusion, and damnation, in alexandrines. He is the sort of writer that neither side in our current public debate would know what to do with.

This leads me to my second observation. Nearly all of the controversy about art and the sacred is about visual art, usually a single image or a brief moment of film that can be conveyed electronically to a public — not necessarily on network TV, but via the Internet — without context or history. One can say nowadays anything in a book without stirring up controversy, because controversy would require someone to read it. But in our society everyone feels qualified to comment on a single image.

This situation, I think, is at least one reason why the public debate is so dumb, so easily exploited by the media, by politicians, and so dependent on political debates on altogether different issues.

This leads me to my next observation. When we hear the terms “offensive art,” “controversial art,” we all think we know what those terms mean. But controversy and offense are mostly — not always, but mostly — extrinsic rather than intrinsic aspects of art. Over the past decade, some of the most controversial works of art in the United States include the concrete cross that has stood on Mount Soledad in La Jolla, California since 1913, nativity crèches put up in small American towns, and Christmas carols sung in public places. None of these works give offense to Catholics or Christians, nor were they created to give offense to anyone. But offense is in the eye — or the ideology — of the beholder. As our artistic culture, as part of our political culture has become vehemently antireligious, and specifically anti-Catholic, these have been deemed controversial works.

If you go to Washington and walk on the side of the Supreme Court Building, which is now very difficult, for reasons you’re about to learn, to see, you will see a series of statues of the great lawgivers of humanity. One of those statues is a very respectful representative image of the Prophet Muhammad. It was built to show the inclusivity of American democracy, to honor the Muslim tradition, and certainly to give honor rather than offense. Yet if a certain kind of Muslim saw it, it would seem a sacrilege, perhaps even an incitement to violence.

But more often, the same work of art, set in a different location, does not give offense, or at least publicly respectable defense. Location, location, location is meaningful in art, as well as in real estate. A nativity crèche on church property means something, in political terms at least, different from one in a public space, just as a Mapplethorpe exhibition in a private gallery has a different civic meaning than the same photos displayed in a public middle school.

This leads me to my penultimate observation. Having seen so many, having had to debate, privately or publicly, about so many of the celebrated cases of provocative art over the past two decades, I have been struck mostly by how negligible most of them are — not all, but most of them — in artistic terms. They seem to me almost too dull to talk about, if I were an arts critic. They are made interesting only because other people are imbuing
them with political and social meaning.

They seem interesting to me mostly as symptoms of a deeper cultural issue. There they are more meaningful than as objects of aesthetic contemplation.

Chris Ofili’s famed elephant dung Madonna may not be quite as awful in artistic terms as the typical crèche scene, but it seems, alas, closer to kitsch than what I would think of as a great provocative modernist masterpiece, let’s say Picasso’s Guernica.

If the work of art itself doesn’t hold my attention, it does make me wonder about the combined forces that created it. These works — indeed the whole controversy about the soi-disant controversial art reflects a great cultural chasm. On one side of this chasm — and I’ll speak in most parochial terms here — sits the Catholic Church (you could say all religions, but let’s simply talk in the club right now), which historically was a patron, promoter, and conservator of arts. If you go to the Vatican Museum, a surprising amount of the artwork preserved there is not Christian. In fact, it’s pagan, or pre-pagan even. They felt the need to preserve and document the entire human relationship with beauty.

The Catholic Church was once sophisticated, in both theological and artistic terms, to recognize that when God created man, he did not simultaneously create trousers. But for a variety of historical and social reasons, the Church has abandoned artistic culture and retreated mostly into sentimental kitsch.

On the other side of this chasm sit the American arts. This would require a whole lecture even to summarize this sentence, so I’m going to do it telegraphically.

During the last part of the twentieth century, the American arts, for a variety of reasons, grew increasingly isolated, not only from society, not only from a broader audience, but even from each other. Composers didn’t go to galleries. Writers and composers never listened to contemporary music. The public audiences of these things grew smaller and smaller, and more and more specialized. It has been dominated by an arteriosclerotic avant-garde, a kind of corpse or near-corpse basically held alive by machinery surrounding it. It has been completely cut off from the original impulses that drove the avant-garde in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The arts world is full of talent. It’s full of energy, of ambition. But somehow, collectively, it now feels remote, exhausted, and increasingly irrelevant. The audiences grow smaller each year, and the arts feel starved — starved for something.

Let me ask if this hunger is not spiritual, if the materialism and the obsession with stylistic novelty, the increasing professionalism and commercialism of the avant-garde and the larger artistic enterprises hasn’t led to an emptiness in artistic culture, just as the philistinism, the kitsch of our churches has diminished, and perhaps even insults, our spirituality.

Needless to say, for Catholicism — now, this would be different if I was speaking to a Protestant group that came out of an iconoclastic culture, the Protestant movements that whitewashed the frescos, that shattered the statues — for Catholics, this cultural retreat, this virtual surrender, represents a radical departure from the Church’s traditional role, not merely as the patron and mentor of the arts, but of a faith which recognizes the incarnate existence of humanity, that has celebrated and explored the complicated relationships between body and soul, temporality and eternity.

This schism between Christianity and arts — and I will close with this — has had two profound consequences, two vast impoverishments, one for the arts world and the other
for the Church.

First, for the arts world, the loss of a transcendent religious vision, a refined and rigorous sense of the sacred, the breaking and discarding of 2,000 years of Christian symbols, mythos, and tradition has left American art spiritually impoverished. The shallow novelty, the low cost of nihilism. I think that’s something we agree on. To be transgressive while having a dental plan seems to me contradictory about the avant-garde. This shallow novelty, this low-cost nihilism, and vague and sentimental spiritual pretensions of so much contemporary art, in every medium, are the legacy of this schism, as well as the cynicism that pervades the arts world.

Let me clarify this observation, because I think it can easily be misunderstood. I am not saying that all art should be religious. Absolutely not. That would be a nightmare. What I am suggesting is something more subtle and more complex — namely, that once you remove the religious as one of the possible modes of the art, once you separate art from the long-established traditions and disciplines of spirituality, once you remove 2,000 years of religious symbols, ritual, language, and mythos that have animated Western art, once you separate these two traditions, you don’t remove the spiritual hungers of either the artist or the audience, but you satisfy them more crudely, with vague, pretentious, and sentimental substitutes.

The second consequence of this schism affects the Church. The loss of the aesthetic sensibility in the Church, its disengagement with the broader artistic culture, has weakened its ability to make its call heard in the world. Dante and Hopkins, Mozart and Palestrina, Michelangelo and El Greco, Bramante and Gaudí brought more souls to God than any preacher. The loss of great music, painting, architecture, poetry, sculpture, fiction, and theater has limited the ways in which Americans can engage with spirituality in their culture, in their society. Nowhere is this loss more painfully evident than in our churches, which often rank, I think, with the Whitney Biennial — their graceless architecture, their banal and formulaic painting and sculpture, their awkward and ill-conceived music, and even the liturgy itself, which is not seraphic, but pedestrian.

As the Church has lost touch with the arts and gradually lost its ability to reach the corporal side of human nature, the passionate, emotional side of human nature, and its traditional capacity to address us in all of our humanity, it has become diminished. You see this reflected nowhere more than in the flight of artists and intellectuals from the Church.

I look forward to our conversation.

MATTHEW MAGUIRE: The next phase of our evening will be a conversation between our two speakers. I invite one of you to kick it off. Then, after a brief run of conversation here, we’ll open it up to your questions.

CAMILLE PAGLIA: I love what you’re saying about Church art. I’ve often written that my very first aesthetic impressions, the very first works of art I ever saw, were in church as a small child in Endicott, New York, Upstate New York, St. Anthony of Padua, my baptismal church, with beautiful stained-glass windows and statues of the saints. I was obsessed with these statues — where I first had that intuition which Bruce LaBruce did also in this exhibition in Spain of the strange mix of the sacred and the sensual in so much Southern European Catholic art. For example, there was a statue of Saint Sebastian near the altar, and I would just stare at it, this pretty nude youth, just a tiny little loin cloth twisted back, with an unconcerned expression on his face, but with arrows all over his body and a little blood coming out — a kind of fashion pose.
DANA GIOIA: I’ve been there.

CAMILLE PAGLIA: You’ve been there.

It took me decades to understand that, to understand that that’s part of the Bernini Saint Teresa of Avila tradition and so on.

This was a period, of course, in which Church doctrine was embodied in statuary. It dates from the medieval period, when literacy was minimal. You have Saint Lucy holding her eyes on a platter, Saint Michael the Archangel. They’re absolutely gorgeous.

I began protesting against the modernization of American Catholic churches decades ago. I think part of it was a kind of snobbery, trying to keep up with the Joneses, as it were. The Protestant establishment in the U.S. was Presbyterian and Episcopalian and so on — the captains of industry, the country club. As churches began to renovate, there was a kind of embarrassment about the ethnic, the religiosity, all these S&M motifs — the crucified Christ, the gory crucified Christ. All this was going down to the cellar, those plastic statues. And you get this horrible — just what you’re talking about — this sanitized, kind of airport-terminal look.

DANA GIOIA: It was not just the modernization. It was modernization in the way that our suburbs are modern, modern as a strip mall is modern — these kinds of almost prefabricated spaces that may have felt comfortable, but not spiritual.

For me also — we haven’t talked much about literature tonight — one of the things that was most accommodating about the Catholic artistic tradition was its capacity to bring in very funny sinners — Evelyn Waugh, John Kennedy Toole, Muriel Spark — these novels that really were ruthlessly funny and perceptive about what it’s like to live in a fallen world, and the tremendous sophistication of something like *Brideshead Revisited* or *Girls of Slender Means* by Muriel Spark or *A Confederacy of Dunces*, which has to be one of the greatest America comic novels, period. It seems we have lost this sophistication.

I feel — and pardon me, Monsignor, if this sounds like Catholic triumphalism — I think we have something to teach the Southern Baptists: that culture is not something that you run away from, that culture is the language with which humanity converses. When that conversation gets dumb, society, politics, art all suffer.

CAMILLE PAGLIA: Of course, the U.S. was so strongly Protestant for a long time. I can still remember, as a child in the 1950s, when Catholics were still marginal. In politics, business, education, the highest posts were held by Protestants. Jews also were excluded at that time. In the United States there has been this longstanding difficulty of the arts really getting rooted. It really is because of the Protestant legacy in the United States. The iconoclasm — the Protestant reformers were quite correct about the pagan intrusion of so much imagery and Mariolatry, of course, in medieval culture.

DANA GIOIA: They objected to the catholicity of Catholicism, the ability, in a sense, to take human perceptions, human festivals, pagan art things, and to assimilate those things as instruments of meaning and expression. The catholicity is, to me, one of the most impressive and attractive things about Roman Catholicism.

In this country, Catholicism — I won’t ask for a show of hands, but how many of us were raised by grandparents who didn’t speak English as a native language? It probably includes a lot of the Irish. This is the religion of poor immigrants. We have always been looked down upon by the mainstream of society. Anti-Catholicism, which is never really reflected in textbooks, is a constant theme of American social and political history.
CAMILLE PAGLIA: It really burns me up, the double standard in the art world, where any kind of desecration of Catholic images is permitted in museums coast to coast, but do the same thing to a symbol from Judaism or from Islam and there would be an enormous storm.

Even though I’m a lapsed Catholic and left the — I cannot bear authoritarian structures of any kind, so I left the Church — I just think that that’s intolerable, an intolerable standard. It’s hypocritical.

DANA GIOIA: An altogether different way of looking at the same issue is that when you look at the artistic culture right now, it doesn’t seem to be working. There have never been so many artists in any country in all of human history as in the U.S. today. There has never been so much money lavished on the arts in any country. People always complain about government support of the arts, but the U.S. government supports the arts in a way that is the envy of every other country in the world. It’s called the tax deduction. It’s sort of a partnership.

You have thousands of universities, museums, symphony halls. We have created this tremendous artistic infrastructure, which I think reflects the noblest impulses of our culture and our society. But at the same time — and this is not a matter of opinion; this is a matter of statistical measure — every year the attendance goes down. There seems to be a gap between — now, you can blame it on television, on Hollywood, on the Internet, on American education. But it seems to me that one of the abilities that we would want our artists to have is the ability to take whatever historical challenge, social-cultural challenge of the moment, and leap over it and to create a conversation.

You see great artists doing this. Great artists have a genius for creating their own audience, as well as creating their own art. There seems to be a failure of this at the moment. You can see a few people that are doing it, but, in general, if you look at the size of our cultural establishment, it seems that we’re facing a kind of cultural breakdown. I do believe that at least part of the reason is that we have turned our backs on each other.

I would make the same argument, as I indeed have, about American Christianity. The religions have turned their backs on culture. It’s like a dysfunctional family. Since all we can do is argue, we’re not talking to each other.

CAMILLE PAGLIA: One thing I’m advising is that art history needs to be installed at the primary school level. What’s called arts education in the U.S. is basically a do-it-yourself thing, where small children are just handed construction paper and glue and put together Mother’s Day cards and so on. That, to me, is not introducing children to the arts in the way that is expected for schoolchildren in Europe, let’s say. Of course, the European art tradition is part of their cultural legacy.

But I want actual art history, actual exposure of children to great works of art, starting in the earliest grades. This will solve a lot.

Now, of course, there’s going to be a crunch if we’re going to have to deal with the issue of Greek sculpture and the history of the nude. What I argue is that conservatives, Protestant conservatives, have to get over their phobia about the nude. The nude emerged — it was the male nude — it is the great symbol of Western individualism. It rose at exactly the same time as the creation of democracy.

DANA GIOIA: But even in theological terms, does it make sense to object to the body as God created it? It seems to me there’s a —
CAMILLE PAGLIA: It’s going to be a hard sell to get that into middle school classrooms.

DANA GIOIA: Yes. But even if we were able to go as far as the loin cloth, I think we could make progress.

But what I tried to do at the NEA, very simply, was to bring tens of millions of students into direct contact with great works of art. We had a hundred companies touring Shakespeare. We had tens of millions of people involved in The Big Read. Poetry Out Loud, the national poetry recitation contest — almost unfunded, we have a half a million high school kids memorizing and reciting poems in competition. The traveling art exhibits — I think it’s direct contact with something of real substance and preferably something that wasn’t done yesterday, something that brings you back and you see some of the continuities and dislocations and changes in terms of cultural history.

CAMILLE PAGLIA: Right. One of the big problems in American education, even at the university level, is what’s called “presentism” — that is, obsession with the present. It has been a trend that has been accelerating. People’s exposure to ancient cultures is really diminishing.

Ten years ago, in fact, I was giving a lecture on religion in America at Yale, and the chairman of the History Department — later the dean of the graduate school — told me, in terms of what I was saying, that it was absolutely right, that he was having tremendous difficulty recruiting faculty for the Yale History Department in American history for anything before the Civil War. Everything was post-Civil War. He said the possibility of finding an able, young medieval historian — it was almost impossible.

Now, there’s something really wrong. Our culture’s going to collapse if we lose such — let me make one other point.

People who are very religious, including Southern Baptists who dropped out of school at age fourteen, I discover, have a greater historical sense than many of the intellectuals that I encounter from American academe. Anyone who studies the Bible is automatically trained to think in very long terms. Things that happened 2,000 years ago, to someone who reads the Bible, are present.

DANA GIOIA: They’re ignorant of ancient art. At USC — and I don’t think this is special; I think it would be typical — I would define knowledge of the ancient world starting in about 1952. Anything behind this is lost in the haze — but we’re agreeing so much that we should probably take some questions so people can tell us where we’re wrong.

CAMILLE PAGLIA: All right, sure.

MATTHEW MAGUIRE: Our first question is to Camille: Shouldn’t you address the fact that all of the artists you discuss come from Catholic backgrounds and use Catholic iconography?

Following on from that is a question that seems exactly a cousin: Please comment on the idea that some “controversial” Catholics and former Catholic artists stay obsessed with religious iconography — James Joyce, Luis Buñuel, Robert Mapplethorpe, Madonna, Lady Gaga, Martin Scorsese, and others.

CAMILLE PAGLIA: In order to get the thrill of sin or transgression, you have to have a strong sense of taboo.
Just to make a parallel to popular culture, in current movies anything goes. You can show the body in the nude — there’s a real slackness to contemporary movies. There’s not much interesting sexually in Hollywood movies, general-release films. If you go back, however, to that period as the studio production code started weakening in the 1950s, toward the 1960s, there’s an incredible erotic intensity that comes from the sense of the borderlines which are in place. You get many more naughty sexual innuendos and heat in some of those Beach Blanket Bingo movies from that period. There’s a kind mad sexual frenzy going on in the early 1960s films to mid-1960s to late 1960s.

Then, once the taboo was broken — when anything goes, things become boring.

I do think that, yes, if you’re raised Catholic, you have what I would call a metaphysical view on the cosmos. There’s a metaphysical consciousness that comes from Catholic training, indoctrination that I found so difficult in being tutored by rather dictatorial Irish nuns.

The Irish Catholics were always so much more fanatical than the Italian Catholics. The Italian Catholics were kind of relaxed. The Italian immigrant women went to church — the cult of the novena and all kinds of things. It really was a kind of pagan worship. The men hated the priests, wouldn’t go to church — would go on Easter, Christmas — and were very contemptuous of it.

That’s the way the word “pagan” — paganus actually meant people of the countryside, the people who resisted the influx of Christianity.

I would just say that once your brain is structured by Catholicism, it remains that way for life. There’s no leaving the Church. You can’t, ultimately, leave the Church if you’re raised Catholic.

MATTHEW MAGUIRE: Here’s a question that follows on that: All the images this evening have been of Christian-themed art, nothing about artistic treatment of the Holocaust, nothing about freedom struggles of oppressed peoples around the world, nothing about Islamic art. Aren’t we being too easy on ourselves in addressing the collision between art and the sacred in the widest sense?

DANA GIOIA: Time is short and life is fleeting. This subject is so vast. I made the one reference in terms of the Supreme Court Building. It seems to me that the most profitable thing we can do, as a — I would think you’re a largely, if not entirely, Catholic group — is to figure things out as to where the hell we are and then use that to build up. One of the problems, I think, with multicultural education is that you have a smorgasbord. You do one little thing of everything. Nothing has context. Nothing has historical perspective. It becomes a little pixilated view of knowledge.

I think you can actually draw some general principles by studying your own tradition in depth, having some historical perspective.

One of the pages I didn’t talk about was a very simple observation: All art was originally religious. The history of art is inseparable from the history of religion. It began as ritual and worship. The history of art is also the separation between the sacred and the secular. It’s not simply a binary thing, where one day secular art said, “I’m different.” It’s this continuous dance between the two. Art doesn’t simply come from other art; it comes from humanity. As long as these things are present, either at harmony or at war, within humanity, it will come through that.
But I think it's just a matter of how much you can do in a fifteen-minute opening statement.

CAMILLE PAGLIA: Right. In fact, if I had had more time, I would definitely have shown photographs of the destruction of the Buddhas, the dynamiting of the Buddhas of Bamiyan in 2001 in Afghanistan, authorized by an edict of the Taliban. That was a huge issue. These were carved out of a sandstone cliff in the sixth century, works of archaeological significance, as well as religious import — just destroyed, in pieces. They can’t be reconstructed.

DANA GIOIA: We didn’t talk about the First Amendment. We didn’t talk about censorship. The topics we’ve ignored are legion.

CAMILLE PAGLIA: Right, only so much time.

MATTHEW MAGUIRE: Question: Am I clear that Mr. Gioia has suggested a wonderful, if tragic, common bond between twenty-first-century art and twenty-first-century Catholicism — the nearly total inability of either to satisfy its adherents’ spiritual hunger?

DANA GIOIA: Yes. I am Italian and Mexican, but I’m very Germanic in the way that I look at *geistgeschichte*, the history of the spirit, history and its dialectic. For example, you can think of it in almost any human circumstance. We are not able in this society to do things unilaterally without it reflecting on something else. As one side of an argument pulls to the other, the other tends to resemble it in some diametrical fashion, some crazy mirror image.

When American spirituality, in the broadest sense, and the American arts began to pull apart, that schism affected both of them in weirdly similar ways. You see it reflected differently, largely because of, I think, socioeconomic things. The Catholic Church is still the church of the poor overwhelmingly. The new arts world is the church of the wealthy, by and large, even if some of the artists don’t do very well and even if some of the bishops do pretty well. These are general things. But they pull apart and they tend, in a sense, to affect each other. It’s like the orbit of the moon and the earth. It’s not that the moon goes around the earth; it’s actually that the two of them go around each other. Their gravity and their mass change each other’s orbits.

MATTHEW MAGUIRE: To the both of you: You have spoken of low-cost nihilism and of an avant-garde that does not risk anything without illustrating how previous artists made risky art. Tell us how you think this might be made now. Is it possible?

CAMILLE PAGLIA: I would just say that one problem with American culture is the way communications have come to be dominated by a very complacent upper-middle class, an upper-middle-class style, and a kind of pretentious pose of ministering to the poor without ever actually having any contact with authentic working-class people.

My own family background is immigrant Italian, my grandparents all born in Italy, coming to work in shoe factories in Upstate New York. I have a very exact sense of the family moving from the working class to upper-working class to lower-middle class to middle-middle class to upper-middle class. I have very little patience with this kind of soggy, gentile, bourgeois style that used to be called “limousine liberalism.” But they are not driving limousines, these people.

There is a monoculture that goes from the editorial pages of *The New York Times* to *The New Yorker*, to Harvard, Yale, Berkeley, Stanford. It’s one ideology, one idea repeated
again and again and again. They’re caught in a certain mindset. To me, that monoculture is the reason for our current intellectual and artistic sterility. There’s not one single interesting new cultural critic, for example, who has emerged in the past twenty years. I keep waiting. But everyone’s brains have been fried with post-structuralism and postmodernism — the pose of nihilism, et cetera, these kinds of distant, cynical, yet foggy notions of the benevolence of mankind, but so removed from it.

There’s a level of inert material comfort that’s going on right now among putative liberals that, to me, is completely the opposite of the authentic leftists that I remember from my college years, who embraced poverty and were closer to a Christian ideal than our current commissars of culture.

**DANA GIOIA:** If you go back to the avant-garde, let’s say, in 1950, 1945, somewhere at the end of the Second World War, you’re talking in the United States of about 500 people. I think of the very great composer Lou Harrison, a very great aesthetic thinker — I don’t think he’s much of a composer — John Cage, a tremendously revolutionary aesthetician, a choreographer like Merce Cunningham, these painters. They lived initially in poverty. Some of them never got out of poverty. What it meant is that they were willing, in a sense, to bet their lives on their vocation. It’s quite saint-like from a Catholic perspective. They based their lives on the premise that it would allow them to create.

Some of them did quite well. Jasper Johns is not hurting. But it was a decision, in a sense, to break away from the middle class, break away from the academics, all of the safety nets of society, and live a life of dedication to art.

The avant-garde as it now exists in the United States is probably somewhere around, I would guess, 80,000 to 100,000 people. Most of them are employed by public institutions, state universities, mostly museums, things like this. They lead, essentially, lives of professional accreditation.

One of the mysteries of art — have you ever heard two singers, both of them with pretty good voices, who sing a similar song, and with one of them you sort of say, “Nice,” and the other one breaks your heart? It’s the jazz musicians who have the perfect phrase for this. They know when somebody’s paid their dues. They know whenever what an artist is doing comes from the center of their humanity.

This sounds terribly soft-minded and sentimental, but it isn’t. It’s actually a strange — all of us, for our entire lives, have been paying attention to other members of the human race. Our intuition has taught us many, many things about this. Part of it is, in a sense, recognizing authenticity. Now, authenticity is not enough for an artist. But when you have all the skill of a great artist but it comes from the center of your humanity, that’s when art really matters most.

I think what has happened with the avant-garde is that it has simply become basically a career path rather than a kind of dedication. It has been greatly subsidized. I don’t think it’s bad for an artist to have a dental plan, but I don’t think that’s the reason they should go into it.

**CAMILLE PAGLIA:** I love what you said about Merce Cunningham. He was at Harpur College, at the State University of New York at Binghamton, where I went to college, in the mid-1960s. I saw him. It’s exactly what you are saying. Afterwards all the students were clustering around him. I had a sense of an aesthetic. He was like a monk. He had an aura, a saintly aura.
Absolutely, I admire that generation, the beat generation. Beat poetry is among my favorite. They put their lives on the line, without any regard at all for social status or for material insurance.

MATTHEW MAGUIRE: How do we know how to take someone else’s sense of the sacred? In The Idiot, a serious Christian Dostoevsky writes of a painting by the Western Christian Holbein and the dead Christ that was so piercing in rendering utter physicality that it caused the character to lose his faith.

CAMILLE PAGLIA: Was that a question?

MATTHEW MAGUIRE: The first part of it, yes. The second part of it supports the question at the beginning. How do we know how to take someone else’s sense of the sacred?

DANA GIOIA: How do you know how to do anything in life? You engage the experience, then you try to be honest with your own reactions. There are some traditions of arts that I love that I’m sort of deaf to.

I don’t know. Dostoevsky I’ve always responded — I think The Idiot is one of the greatest Christian works of art ever created. The notion that they have that beauty will save the world probably should be our motto, which is not to say that beauty alone will save world. Any vision that we have of the just society, of the right life, of the proper government, of proper education which does not include beauty, which in itself is not, in some sense, full of the consonantia, the harmonia, the claritas and integritas of beauty, to borrow some Thomistic terms, will be inadequate. Even the political, educational, social vision has to appeal to us in the physicality of our humanity. I think that’s one of the ways that beauty speaks to us.

CAMILLE PAGLIA: There’s, of course, another mode of the sacred, from which the personal and the human are excluded, and that is the sublime tradition, the tradition of Pantheism, from Wordsworth through Ralph Waldo Emerson. I think this is a good way, actually, to communicate with students, to reach them. And that’s exactly also what’s missing from this monoculture I just described, this obsession with a certain kind of political ideology and partisan politics.

In my forthcoming book I have a great image done by Caspar David Friedrich, who was a great German Romantic painter, whose work entirely consists of these really chillingly spectral landscapes of mountains. The work I have in the book is The Arctic Sea, where all these ice floes have shattered. You think you’re looking at a mountain. It’s all done in almost metallic colors. Suddenly you notice that there’s a little frail ship — actually, a large ship that has been crushed by the ice there. So there’s a sense there of grandeur.

In the sublime tradition, which is rooted in the philosophy of the late eighteenth century, a poetry of the sublime, like in Shelley’s “Mont Blanc” and so on, gives you a sense of chill, a sense of the smallness of man in comparison to the universe.

I think that that particular sentiment is no longer part of standard education, and it has created this, to me, very limited approach that we find everywhere towards literature and the exclusion of religion as well.

DANA GIOIA: Let me say one other thing. If you’re going to lose your faith by seeing Holbein’s dead Christ, you would probably have lost it otherwise.

I think we have to embrace a conception of spirituality in which you lose your faith, you
gain your faith, you have relapses, you have mystic moments, you have resolutions that lead you to someplace. The thing that has always bothered me about a certain type of American Protestant — they say, “I was born again. I’m saved. It’s settled.”

That is so alien to my Catholic guilt, to my pantheistic moments of the sublime. Maybe I’m the Italian. I like a big dinner with lots of side dishes. Spiritual life should be various and exciting and unexpected in that way. I think we have to accept that as part of the journey of our pilgrimage. We don’t want just a freeway that you get on and it never takes a curve. I want some dangerous turns in my spiritual journey.

CAMILLE PAGLIA: That’s very characteristic of American Protestantism, the Southern Baptist form of it, the evangelical form, where Jesus is imagined as your friend, your personal savior, as an adult man who is walking and talking with you. I’ve often commented how different that is from the Italian Catholic vision of things. There’s no adult Jesus anywhere there. The Jesus is either the baby, totally dependent on the Madonna, or Christ crucified on the cross. There’s a huge gap in the middle. There’s no sense whatever that you’re going to walk and talk with Jesus.

There’s a glad-handing thing there that’s at the center of American Protestantism.

MATTHEW MAGUIRE: I think we probably have time for a couple more.

Since art schools are provocation and pleasure, while religion’s goals are protection and piety, should it be, not just inevitable, but also healthy for the culture and the society that they constantly and creatively collide?

Is the collision that we’re talking about tonight necessary, fertile?

DANA GIOIA: Yes. Culture is a dialectical. They clash, they pull apart, they come together. That’s the natural notion of culture.

The thing we have to make sure of is that it’s not as if there’s just one argument going on at one point that does it and goes back. There is the multiplicity of this. It’s vast. It’s endlessly vast.

I think what Camille and I — I really didn’t know anything that you were going to say — we’re looking for the synthesis. We have seen the thesis, the antithesis, and it’s turning sterile. We’re looking for whatever the next great cultural, spiritual, artistic synthesis is.

But I’ll say one other thing. It’s when religion’s goals become protection and piety that we’re in trouble. The goal of religion should, in a sense, be salvation. It should be the redemption of fallen humanity in every sense that that means.

CAMILLE PAGLIA: I would just say that the same battle can’t go on and on and on. That’s the thing. Art should offer a challenge to religion when religion is a strong force. But what I’m saying is that religion is not such a dominant force today as it was, let’s say, in the 1950s, the very conservative Catholicism of my youth, where religious instruction focused on Saint Maria Goretti and her fighting off her rapist or whatever. She was stabbed to death rather than yield to her rapist. There’s even a school in Philadelphia named after her.

If you look back, for example, the Victorian period was very authoritarian, very pietistic, very militaristic and imperialistic. What you discover in the history of the arts is that the first generation that makes that rebellion is strong because what they are rebelling
against is strong — therefore James Joyce, therefore Virginia Woolf, Gertrude Stein, Picasso. That’s the reason for the great strength of early modernism, its revolt against the very tradition which had formed them.

Today the problem is that our art protest is weak, because several generations now have not been formed by a strong and overarching religious institution.

That’s another thing. We’re in the shallows right now, and it’s really not clear which direction the arts can go, in this age of high tech and mass media. In my experience as a teacher of young artists, the most inventive and creative minds that I have, probing minds, are actually in animation. They are the animation majors, who are like the old cartoonists. They have a very individual kind of satirical, from-the-margin viewpoint.

Then industrial designers, who frankly admit that commerce is at the center of our culture rather than rejecting commerce in a stereotypically ideological fashion, have very probing minds.

But this kind of challenging mind is disappearing from the other genres. Poetry, too, which used to be so central to our culture, is not at the point it was. I can remember a time when there was still a poetry editor in the women’s magazines, the glossy women’s magazines, like Ladies Home Journal and so on. That’s gone, because, of course, popular music from Bob Dylan on has taken the role of being the bards of our time.

I think all of the traditional genres are suffering, all of them.

MATTHEW MAGUIRE: I get the sense from Dana and also from you, Camille, that an infusion of spirituality, at least into the discussion of the history — I get the sense, Dana, that you imagine the possibility that the Church perhaps might get back into the business of patronage. If so, how would the discussion at the highest levels go towards restraint from censorship? The papacy of the Renaissance and the Baroque era was very open.

DANA GIOIA: I think it’s a long shot that the American Catholic Church will prove a productive patron of the arts in the near future. It lacks the sophistication. It lacks the tradition. You can’t really pull a tradition out of thin air. You need continuity and community to develop that.

The best I could hope for — really, two things. First of all, we have had this argument between art and the sacred, which we’re talking about, at least for twenty-five years, thirty years perhaps. It’s really pretty dull. It hasn’t produced great works of art. What it has produced is a kind of disinterest on one side and a kind of cynicism — and, I think, actually bigotry — on the other.

Let’s have a new argument. You could have a really interesting argument between these people.

But I also think that the real solution is if there are some Catholic artists that do it, without patronage, maybe in ways that would offend the hierarchy, but which to them feel authentic to their experience as Catholics.

The history of art shows that it doesn’t take a lot of people to change art. You get Sam Coleridge and Bill Wordsworth on a walk together, they have a couple of pints, and you’ve got English Romanticism. It tends to be small groups that are deeply dissatisfied by what they see around them in culture.

What the Catholic Church could do, what the institutions of the Catholic Church could do
— and this would be my highest hope — is to actually notice versus simply treat it as something outside of their purview. The Catholic Church right now is so caught up in very legitimate issues of worship, of social justice, of education, health care, and things like this that it has really written this off. It thinks that man lives by bread alone. We have been advised differently.

So that’s what I’m really looking for, something within the Church, in the largest sense of practicing Catholics, believing Catholics, lapsed or otherwise — I tend to believe with Camille that if you’ve been raised in Catholicism, you are Catholic. I take a very Jewish attitude towards this. That’s what I’m looking for, a renaissance from within the arts of Catholics, who, in a sense, have been alienated perhaps both from their own Church and from the artistic culture, to reinvent art that interests them, that’s meaningful to them.

**JAMES McCARTIN:** Thank you very much to our distinguished guests this evening. I think we have all been given an education tonight.

I can only hope, and I think we can only hope, that the kind of civility, the kind of intelligence that we have seen this evening will eventually seep into the public conversation about artistic expression and religious belief.

We have come to the end, not only of this evening’s program, but also to the end of the Fordham Center on Religion and Culture’s program schedule for this academic year. Thanks very much to all who have made these events so successful, especially to Patricia Bellucci, our program manager, and to Monica Hanna, our soon-to-be-graduated student assistant. Thanks to all of you for coming to our events this year. Thanks very much. We couldn’t do it without you.

I would urge all of you who aren’t on our mailing list to sign up at the table on your way out. You will receive a full schedule of events that will begin in the fall at some point. You’ll receive that notification of our events.

Before we close, let’s give another round of applause and thanks to Camille Paglia, Dana Gioia, and Matthew Maguire. Have a wonderful night.