

The Soft Nihilism of John Lennon's 'Imagine'

In 1971, John Lennon asked us to [imagine](#) a world with “no heaven,” “no hell,” “no religion,” and “nothing to kill or die for.”

Thirty-six years later, the piano on which he wrote that iconic anthem embarked on a [“symbolic road trip for peace”](#) that took it to sites of violence and persecution around the world. Like a holy relic, the instrument travelled from Ford's Theatre to Waco to Auschwitz to the Tower of London, as if its mere presence could somehow heal the world and usher in Lennon's utopia.

Today, “Imagine” has all but replaced the Nicene Creed as the official statement of faith of the Western world. The great virtue is tolerance, defined not in the classically liberal sense of non-aggression, but as an imperative to confess with your mouth and believe in your heart that all beliefs and lifestyles are equally valid. Except, of course, those that are labeled “judgmental.” Anything that impedes the progress of personal self-expression as an end in itself must go.

In Lennon's world, you can believe anything you want as long as you don't believe it too sincerely. Anyone within whom the [“dogma lives loudly”](#) will soon find out, as Judge Amy Coney Barrett did during her confirmation hearings, that they are viewed as a threat to the bland hodgepodge of the pluralistic society. The denial of all dogmas is the only dogma left, and it will have its Inquisition.

What the former Beatle failed to realize is that a world with “nothing to kill or die for” is a world with nothing to live for. He would have us subordinate our individual creeds to an amorphous “brotherhood of man,” but that concept is not as

simple as it seems. First we must ask things like, “Why is human life valuable?” and “What does human flourishing look like?” Surely these are theological questions that can only be answered by some sort of transcendent ideal—call it “heaven” if you want—that is, by definition, more valuable than any human life. A belief for which one is unwilling to either kill or die is a belief too weak to provide the vital energy necessary to sustain civilization. One commentator insightfully calls the song [“the antithesis of a call to arms.”](#) How long does Lennon imagine his utopia would last if none of its citizens were willing to take up arms and risk their lives to defend it?

In his 1953 play [The Crucible](#), Arthur Miller depicts religious dogmatism at its worst, but even then, he has wisdom enough to reject Lennon’s brand of soft nihilism. Near the end of the play, Rev. Hale, horrified by the suffering his former zeal has caused, uses language that eerily anticipates “Imagine” when he urges John Proctor’s wife to save her husband’s life by convincing him to make a false confession of witchcraft:

[C]leave to no faith when faith brings blood. It is mistaken law that leads you to sacrifice. Life, woman, life is God’s most precious gift; no principle, however glorious, may justify the taking of it... It may well be God damns a liar less than he that throws his life away for pride.

Thankfully, Miller refuses to give credence to this massive overcorrection. Proctor’s wife dismisses Hale’s words as “the Devil’s argument,” and Proctor goes to the gallows bravely and with a clear conscience.

In her *Letters to a Diminished Church*, [Dorothy L. Sayers reveals](#) how truly infernal this “Devil’s argument” is when she writes of the deadly sin of sloth—or “acedia”—that “[i]n the world it calls itself tolerance; but in hell it is called despair... It is the sin that believes in nothing... hates

nothing... lives for nothing, and remains alive only because there is nothing it would die for."

Everlasting peace requires the absolute triumph of a transcendent good—a.k.a. "heaven"—over evil. A world that refuses to ["hate what is evil \[and\] cling to what is good,"](#) will be populated by men without chests and plagued by acedia. If we follow Lennon's advice and "imagine there's no heaven," we will soon find ourselves in hell.

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