

NEXUS INSTITUTE

# Nexus Conference 2020

## A New Age of Anxiety



*The Scream, by Edvard Munch, 1910.*

November 14, National Opera & Ballet Amsterdam

Nobel Prize Laureate Wole Soyinka — Nobel Prize Laureate Sir Angus Deaton  
Christiane Amanpour — Leïla Slimani — Anne Case  
Ambassador Omar Saif Ghobash — Abbot Primate Gregory J. Polan, O.S.B.  
Dita Kraus — Igor Levit — Kate Brown — Laura Spinney — Edward Skidelsky  
Theodore Dalrymple — Leon Wieseltier — Thomas Chatterton Williams

# Programme Nexus Conference

Saturday 14 November 2020  
National Opera & Ballet, Amsterdam

- 9.30 AM Welcome *Rob Riemen*
- 9.45 AM Keynote lecture *Wole Soyinka*
- 10.45 AM Intermission
- 11.15 AM I. APOCALYPSE NOW? CAUSES OF ANXIETY IN OUR AGE  
Roundtable conversation with *Wole Soyinka, Christiane Amanpour, Kate Brown, Anne Case, Omar Saif Ghobash, Theodore Dalrymple, Edward Skidelsky*, moderated by *Rob Riemen*
- 1.15 PM Lunch with complimentary refreshments
- 2.00 PM II. AMOR MUNDI. HOW TO END THE AGE OF ANXIETY?  
Roundtable conversation with *Angus Deaton, Dita Kraus, Igor Levit, Gregory J. Polan, Leïla Slimani, Laura Spinney, Leon Wieseltier, Thomas Chatterton Williams*, moderated by *Rob Riemen*
- 4.00 PM Reception

*The conference will be held in English.*

*A livestream will be available at [www.nexus-institute.com](http://www.nexus-institute.com)*

The programme may be subject to change. For the latest information on the conference and its speakers and for terms and conditions, please see our website.

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## Nexus Conference 2020

# A New Age of Anxiety

You don't need to be a psychologist to know that anxiety is the dominant human emotion, nor do you need to be a historian to realize that there has never been an era in which people lived without fear. There was always the fear of fate, of the coming of the barbarians, of hunger, poverty, hell, and the eternal fear of death. Nevertheless, in 1947 poet W.H. Auden perfectly summed up the twentieth-century zeitgeist when he published his major prose poem entitled *The Age of Anxiety*. Exactly a year later, Albert Camus published a short essay with essentially the same title, *Le siècle de la peur*, which he begins with the following observation: 'The seventeenth century was the era of mathematics, the eighteenth the era of physics, the nineteenth the era of biology, but the twentieth century is the century of fear.'

For Auden and Camus, the age of anxiety was distinct from previous eras because in their day, after two world wars, something fundamental had been destroyed: the *value* of human beings, of humanity itself, of faith in humanity. The human individual has come face-to-face with the nakedness of human existence, its desolation and emptiness. Centuries-old traditions are broken and there seems to be nothing left from which anything can be derived that would give some meaning to life beyond merely the blows of fate. Human existence has become absurd. This was the position Camus had defended in 1941 with his essay *The Myth of Sisyphus*, in which he frankly states, 'There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy.'

That an age of anxiety would dawn in which the spiritual values and meaning of human existence would be lost, was foretold decades earlier by Nietzsche, with his prediction of the arrival of nihilism, and before him by Danish thinker Søren Kierkegaard. In 1844 Kierkegaard published his treatise *The Concept of Anxiety*, in 1848 *The Sickness Unto Death*, and in those years he noted, 'For I feel like a poor lodger who has little room in the attic of a huge building that is still being expanded and remodelled and with horror thinks he detects that the foundation is crumbling.'

The essence of being human has been lost and what remains is an existence overwhelmed by an awareness of an endless nothingness: there is no meaning, no significance; you are entirely free – but what are you to do with that freedom?

The First World War marks the start of the age of anxiety. The roaring twenties that followed were an attempt to allay, with a great deal of noise, the demons of fear, but in fact they were nothing other than a masquerade, or in the words of writer and philosopher Herman Broch, who did want to look the new reality in the face, a ‘Gay Apocalypse’. A new art movement emerged, Expressionism, which attempted to show all facets of the now dominant anxiety. The new philosophy of Jaspers, Heidegger and Sartre, existentialism, followed on from the thinking of Kierkegaard as the philosophy of this anxiety, the experience that all individuals are as free as they are lonely, and in that desolation need to go in search of their self and the meaning of their existence.

Nietzsche had already predicted that a person would have to be an *Übermensch* to carry out this superhuman task of finding meaning in an absurd world and in an existence that is never without tragedy. Nietzsche also foresaw that ‘ordinary people’ (academics and the wealthy bourgeoisie above all) – beyond all reason and full of resentment at what had been taken from them, or might yet be taken from them – would cling on to the presumed certainties from which they derived their identity. Thus a culture of anxiety becomes political. One of the first to analyse the psychology of this was Wilhelm Reich, with his *Die Massapsychologie des Faschismus*, published in 1933, a book that was immediately banned in Nazi Germany. Reich shows that there is no idea at all underlying fascism (the belief that there is such an idea is a misconception that persists to this day in the academic world) and that fascism is nothing other than ‘the organized political expression of the character structure of the average person who longs for authority, wants to be subsumed into the crowd and has no desire to think for themselves let alone to accept their own responsibility’. In 1941 another of Freud’s former pupils, Erich Fromm, summed up the psychology of fascism in a single phrase: *fear of freedom*.

After the Second World War, anxiety, far from disappearing, became even greater. The Cold War stirred up fears of a nuclear holocaust. The greatest anxiety of all, however, manifested itself in a shutting out of fear and uncertainty, a refusal to acknowledge them, by means of a surrender to spiritlessness, since anxiety can exist only in those who are aware of themselves and the world.

Kierkegaard, the philosophical grandfather of existentialism, was the first to identify this social phenomenon: ‘In spiritlessness there is no anxiety, because it is too happy, too content, and too spiritless for that. [...] Surrounded by hordes of men, absorbed in all sorts of secular matters, more and more shrewd about the ways of the world – such a person forgets himself, forgets his name divinely understood, does not dare to believe in himself, finds it

too hazardous to be himself and far easier and safer to be like the others, to become a copy, a number, a mass man. [...] They use their capacities, amass money, carry on secular enterprises, calculate shrewdly, etc., perhaps make a name in history, but themselves they are not; spiritually speaking, they have no self, no self for whose sake they could venture everything, no self before God – however self-seeking they are otherwise.'

But, Kierkegaard warned, 'Even though there is no anxiety in spiritlessness, because it is excluded as it is spirit, anxiety is nevertheless present, except that it is waiting.' Anxiety lies in wait, hidden to consciousness. As soon as an individual is confronted by a crisis in one form or another that erodes their presumed certainties, that suppressed anxiety will manifest itself, exploding forth. Depression, panic, resentment, feelings of impotence or aggression, can then quickly assume immense proportions.

In the second half of the twentieth century, a hundred years after the work of Kierkegaard, this phenomenon of the spiritlessness intended to shut out anxiety was also observed by psychologists such as Rollo May, Erich Fromm and Ronald Laing, and by philosophers like Herbert Marcuse and Alan Watts.

What ought to have become, after the horror and destruction of two world wars, a 'sane society', as Erich Fromm put it, with individuals who wanted to develop their minds, to dare to be themselves, to make their own well-considered choices, to love nature and their fellow human beings, and to use their creative abilities to make their existence meaningful and their society harmonious, had not. 'Up to now we have failed,' Fromm concluded in 1955. He and the others saw that people are afraid above all of being themselves and tend to behave like perpetually adaptable robots rather than as autonomous individuals. Their self-worth is not determined by who they *are* but rather by what they *have* in the way of success and social prestige. Personal value has become market value; self-esteem has more to do with how much you earn than with your capacity to love, to think and to be creative. The shortest route to success of this kind involves adjusting to 'what people think' and ignoring as far as possible your own emptiness – and the anxiety that goes with it – with the aid of consumption and entertainment. Until that becomes no longer possible and anxiety, ticking away like a time bomb, finally explodes.

In that same period a reaction occurred in the form of a counterculture. It was a culture of protest, the revolt of the young, the beat generation, who adopted an attitude to life that represented a rebellion against the existing social norms and authorities, against the existing spiritlessness, and against the existing politics and economics. It was a way of life that welcomed the philosophy of existentialism, since that meant no longer denying anxiety but instead articulating it and thereby striving to be as authentically oneself as possible. This inevitably involved cultivating narcissism and hedonism, as Christopher Lasch points out.

One example of how this protest against society was expressed is the 1956 film *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, based on the eponymous science fiction story by Jack Finney that was published the year before. Planet Earth is conquered by extraterrestrials who take over the bodies and brains of sleeping humans. These new creatures in the shape of people are mere empty shells, puppets without any emotion or personality. The film was so popular that new versions of it were released in 1978 and 1993.

The loudest protest, in every sense, against the age of anxiety was heard in rock music. Pete Seeger and Bob Dylan became the troubadours of the beat generation; in the late 1960s and early 1970s, The Doors, Pink Floyd and the Patti Smith Group voiced their dissent. The feelings of that time were beautifully expressed in 1979 by Elvis Costello with the Nick Lowe song *Peace, Love and Understanding*, which includes the following stanzas:

As I walk through  
This wicked world  
Searchin' for light in the darkness of insanity  
I ask myself  
Is all hope lost?  
Is there only pain and hatred, and misery?  
[...]  
And as I walked on  
Through troubled times  
My spirit gets so downhearted sometimes  
So where are the strong  
And who are the trusted?  
And where is the harmony?  
Sweet harmony

In 1981 David Bowie and Queen combined their creative powers and together composed a song that will be timeless, since it brilliantly gives voice to the age of anxiety: *Under Pressure*. As David Bowie and Freddy Mercury sing 'It's the terror of knowing / What this world is about [...] Insanity laughs under pressure we're cracking', the accompanying video includes images of a mindless crowd, explosions, collapsing buildings and bridges, hypnotized individuals, poverty, unemployment, demonstrations, walking skeletons and terrifying creatures. In sounds, words and images, this is *the age of anxiety*.

The period between the two world wars is called the *interbellum*, so we might refer to the period between 9 November 1989 and 15 September 2008 as the '*interanxietas*'. On the first of those dates the Berlin Wall fell, marking the end of the Cold War and of communism in Europe. Practically the entire Western world was convinced that the future would be one of global liberalism, capitalism and democracy. The economy boomed, until that second date, 15 September 2008, when Lehman Brothers Holdings, with investments of around 600 billion dollars, applied for bankruptcy. It was the beginning of the end of globalization, the end of blind faith in financial forces, and the start of the rise of what became known as 'populism'. For almost twenty years the West had experienced a kind of reprise of the roaring twenties in which anxiety appeared to have vanished, until panic broke out and a new age of anxiety dawned.

That final postulate is not universally shared. Most prominent among the dissenters is President Donald Trump. At the annual meeting in Davos of all the rich and powerful, and those who aspire to join them, President Trump told his willing listeners on 21 January 2020 that there was no new age of anxiety. On the contrary: 'America is thriving, America is flourishing, and yes, America is winning again like never before. [...] This is not a time for pessimism; this is a time for optimism. Fear and doubt is not a good thought process because this is a time for tremendous hope and joy and optimistic action. But to embrace the possibilities of tomorrow, we must reject the perennial prophets of doom and their predictions of the Apocalypse.'

The renowned American scientist Steven Pinker, a man who is the opposite of Trump in almost every sense, agrees with his president entirely on this point. In his book *Enlightenment Now* (2018) he, too, takes up arms against all 'prophets of doom', because in so many ways (poverty, hunger, disease, war) things have never been better. Pinker is convinced that with 'science, technology and money', humanity can cope with all future challenges.

In all the places that thrive on innovation, Silicon Valley first among them, Pinker's conviction is universally accepted: humans and the world are malleable in every respect and there is no problem for which — in due course at least — science and technology will not use the means available to provide a solution.

Exactly one day after President Trump's ode to America and to the optimistic spirit of enterprise, however, the internationally respected Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, whose board of sponsors includes thirteen Nobel Laureates, made it known that it had moved its Doomsday Clock forward to *100 seconds before midnight*. It was a way of expressing how acute the threat of nuclear holocaust and climate catastrophe had become. If humanity does not make changes, an apocalypse awaits, and without the prospect of the New Jerusalem promised in the last book of the Bible.

Exactly seven weeks later, the director general of the World Health Organization, Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, informed the world that the coronavirus spreading COVID-19 is now a pandemic. And it is just as if, still unexpectedly, we are already facing apocalyptic times now: mankind, confronted with an invisible, deadly enemy, is now living with mortal anxiety.

And there were already so many other red lights that characterize our new age of anxiety. Technological developments will abolish all forms of privacy – an elementary precondition of freedom – and visible or invisible forces will gain complete control of our lives. Algorithms will determine (in fact manipulate) the information we receive and a new generation of robots may well cause mass unemployment. The dystopia of the film *The Matrix* (1999) – which does not differ greatly from *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* with its spectre of humans losing their personalities – is gradually becoming more science than fiction. Symptoms of anxiety such as depression, burnout and stress are assuming epidemic proportions. In the United States, which regards itself as a ‘peaceful country’, 50,000 people are killed by armed violence every year, 177 die of an overdose daily and suicide is the second most common cause of death among young people.

It’s no coincidence that forty years on, Francis Ford Coppola is reissuing his film *Apocalypse Now* and Sam Mendes has a hit on his hands with *1917*. Both films brilliantly depict war’s madness and fear.

In his classic *The Meaning of Anxiety* (1950), psychologist Rollo May warns us to always take seriously the signals given off by anxiety and never to ignore or suppress them. Only then can the causes be found and measured against reality, enabling us to overcome fear and deal with existing threats.

Is technology, like Pandora’s Box, a threat and a cause of anxiety? Heidegger believed it was. He felt there was no room for doubt that if philosophical thought had to make way for calculating technological thinking, technology would destroy our world. People were once slaves and now, without noticing, they are becoming robots, reduced to a function of technology. The indomitable desire to control nature, along with an obsession with economic gain, will destroy the natural world. See the atom bomb; see the climate crisis; see *The Matrix*. But if all this is true, is it unavoidable or can we imagine an alternative? If so, then what?

Not long after the First World War that marked the start of the age of anxiety, a debate took place in Davos in 1929 that soon became famous, between the elderly Jewish philosopher Ernst Cassirer and Martin Heidegger, ten years his junior, as part of the *Davoser Hochschulkurse* in the stately Grand Hotel Belvédère. It concerned an ancient question: What is a human being? At stake in that duel was nothing less than what Kierkegaard had merely suspected: does our worldview, or the European ideal of civilization – from which we derive the values that give meaning to life and enable us to live

together in freedom – still have a foundation or has that vanished and will our ideal of civilization disappear along with it?

Heidegger, who with his *Sein und Zeit*, published in 1927, is the epitome of the modern philosopher for countless intellectuals, states, in line with Nietzsche, ‘No, there is no foundation. What passes for a foundation, traditional metaphysics with its transcendent values, is a sham. There is only naked existence; humans are doomed to freedom and will have to find the courage to embrace their anxiety and be more authentic.’

‘Yes,’ is Cassirer’s answer. ‘There is a foundation, there must be a foundation, and that’s what art, culture, *Bildung* offer us. There we find spiritual values and our capacity to conquer ourselves so that we are more than what we also are: animals. Without this metaphysical-cultural foundation we cannot be free, nor will a liberal democracy be able to survive.’

Cassirer politely but firmly leaves no room for doubt that the philosophy of his distinguished opponent will always lead to fatalism and irrationalism, and can evoke a dangerous political mysticism. In the view of those present, however, who include Emmanuel Levinas, Cassirer loses the debate. The elderly Jew is behind the times. Has the First World War not shown incontrovertibly that Heidegger was right? There are no essences; there is only naked existence and anxiety, nothingness and our freedom.

All philosophy has political consequences, because ultimately politics is nothing other than the social reflection of the world of ideas. So it has become a social fact that without the metaphysical foundation that Cassirer defends, contemporary liberalism has been eroded to become nothing more than the political defence of human rights and the economics of the free market.

Can liberal democracy, as we have come to cherish it in the West since the Second World War, continue to exist if the liberal institutions that are the foundation of our democracy no longer have any foundation themselves? In other words, what if the existence of absolute moral and spiritual values is denied and questions about the meaning of life are regarded as socially irrelevant because they are a matter only for individuals?

All political developments in this new age of anxiety point to a negative answer. Because why is it that more and more countries unswervingly support ‘the strong man’ and ‘our own people first’? What anxiety is driving people? Where does the aversion to existing liberalism come from?

Two prominent liberal politicians in the United States, Joe Biden and Nancy Pelosi, both believe that if Donald Trump wins the presidential election in November 2020 the character of America will change for ever. They fear that the leading liberal democracy will become the leading anti-liberal democratic nation. If that is the case, what will the geopolitical consequences be? Will the politics of ‘our own people first’ fuel the fear of a ‘clash of civilizations’ or will it remove anxiety among populations and

create more of a sense of community – naturally excluding all those who are not regarded as part of that community? And how can it be that liberalism, once a source of hope and freedom, is now actually reinforcing the fear of freedom among large numbers of people?

Something similar is going on with capitalism. Until the Great Recession of 2008, global capitalism was generally accepted as the only economic model that would serve the prosperity of peoples and liberate all human beings from poverty. Fewer and fewer people remain convinced of this. Among them the fear prevails that maintaining ‘Wall Street capitalism’ as the dominant economic ideology will only increase social inequality, economic uncertainty and the climate crisis. These will inevitably be followed by even more resentment, even more xenophobia, even more anxiety and despair. But what is the alternative that makes both wealth and wellbeing possible for all, and what kind of politics has the power to make it a reality?

The generation known as the millennials seems to be most susceptible to the fears that torment our era. Or at least they are aware of their own anxieties, in contrast to those Kierkegaard described as ‘successful, well-adjusted egotists who have hidden away their fears’. Having grown up with the fantasy world of Disney films and the mantra *Hakuna Matata*, and coming of age in a time when the film *The Matrix* was released, they more than anyone come ‘under pressure’ when confronted with the subject of Queen and Bowie’s song: ‘It’s the terror of knowing / What the world is about / Watching some good friends screaming / Let me out!’

What Hermann Hesse wrote in his 1927 novel *Steppenwolf* applies to a great degree to the millennials too: ‘Now there are times when a whole generation is caught between two ages, two modes of life, with the consequence that it loses all power to understand itself and has no standards, no security, no simple acquiescence.’

The world in which they have grown up is bureaucratic, technocratic and amoral. They are confronted with student debt, unaffordable housing and a constant pressure to perform. All too often they need to adjust to the uniformity of a spiritless organization. Social media (a perfect contradiction in terms) causes the fear not be ‘liked’ enough. With climate change on the way, it looks as if their ‘sunny bright future’ will mean a mercilessly scorching sun in a desert. They will rightly ask, with Elvis Costello, ‘So where are the strong? And who are the trusted?’, being only too well aware that the age of anxiety in which they are fated to live is the consequence of both the decisions and the indecisiveness of existing elites. Why have those elites, who with the knowledge of two world wars should have known so much better, not removed the causes of fear but allowed them to remain, blind to the consequences?

This is also the era of selfies. The most important thing people see in their mirror each day is the question of their own identity: Who am I? When am I myself? What will make my life meaningful?

The values, traditions and political ideologies that moulded their parents and grandparents no longer exist. They have become too corrupted and too implausible. So is the nihilism that Nietzsche predicted the reason why, instead of finding an answer to the most existential questions, to the human heart's cry of distress, so many young people become depressed, killing themselves or others?

Apocalypse is originally a Greek word, meaning 'revelation'. What does our anxiety caused by the coronavirus pandemic reveal about the human condition and our worldview?

## II. AMOR MUNDI. HOW TO END THE AGE OF ANXIETY?

During the First World War, in the winters of 1915-16 and 1916-17, on Saturday evenings at the University of Vienna, Prof. Dr. Sigmund Freud gave a series of public lectures entitled 'Introduction to Psychoanalysis'. These talks by the founder of an entirely new science soon became hugely popular. It was a difficult time for everyone, and the need for insight into what human beings are and what they are capable of was greater than ever. Furthermore, Freud was a born teacher. He spoke calmly, his line of argument was clear, and he did not leave a single facet of the human psyche out of account.

In his ninth lecture, on 'dream censorship' – the fact that even in our dreams we can suppress our most disturbing desires – he examines in more detail the illusion that most people are good. Freud regards this as nonsense taken seriously only by the naive, who have trained themselves to bury their heads in the sand. As Freud puts it, 'You will promise now, perhaps, to disregard the repellent character of the censored dream-wishes and will withdraw upon the argument that after all it is unlikely that such a large space should be given to the evil in the constitution of human beings. But do your own experiences justify your saying this? [...] Or do you not know that all the transgressions and excesses of which we dream at night are daily committed in real life by waking men? [...] And now turn your eyes away from individuals and consider the Great War, which is still laying waste to Europe. Think of the vast amount of brutality, cruelty and lies which are able to spread over the civilized world. Do you really believe that a handful of ambitious and deluding men without conscience could have succeeded in unleashing all these evil spirits if their millions of followers did not share their guilt?'

Evil exists, Freud is eager to make clear, and fear of evil is more than justified. The only question is how to deal with it.

A year later, in the next winter term, Freud delivered two lectures about anxiety, because 'there is no question that the problem of anxiety is a nodal point at which the most various and important questions converge, a riddle whose solution would be bound to throw a flood of light on our

whole mental existence'. And along with our spiritual lives, we might add, would throw light on the world in which we live, because ultimately we are, together, that world.

Anxiety in the age of anxiety is the fear of existence, the fear of nothingness, the thought that you amount to nothing, that this world has nothing to offer you or that your existence is under threat from all the evil forces in the world.

This age of anxiety will come to an end only if we can once again love the world: *amor mundi*. That will happen, however, only if we first learn to know ourselves again and discover meaning in our existence. Only then can we avoid the chaos of a society of separate individuals with no shared moral foundation, regularly overwhelmed by attacks of anxiety. The paradox, according to both Freud and Kierkegaard, is that for precisely this reason the anxiety must not be ignored. You must not let it control you, but neither must you brush it aside. You must get a grip on the fear by confronting it.

Our age of anxiety is characterized in part by a mass denial of fear, by escapism in the form of material success, by absorption into the crowd, amusements, drugs, noise... Heidegger puts it even more succinctly: 'What fear today is greater than the fear of thinking?' Thought, self-consciousness, always involves an awareness of anxieties, uncertainties and death. Only on his deathbed, unexpectedly struck down by cancer, does Tolstoy's good bureaucrat Ivan Ilyich discover that because he has always adjusted to what family and colleagues expected of him, because he always focused on the next step in his career and never found it difficult to live as he should, to be pleasant and correct, because of all this, his entire life has been nothing but a huge lie in which everything that was supposedly important turns out to be a sham.

Too many forces in politics, the media and commerce have a distinct interest in the preservation of this unthinking, spiritless mass society. How can the denial of fear be counteracted so that anxiety can truly be overcome?

Freud detected another danger, something that causes fear to remain hidden so that it can never be defeated: religion. To Freud religion was nothing more than the presentation of an illusion, a relic of the childhood of humankind that had no truth in it at all. In fact Freud wanted nothing to do with any kind of worldview, whether religious, philosophical or political, since none of them make us any the wiser: 'When the traveller sings in the dark, he denies his anxiousness, but thereby does not see any more clearly.' He believed that only science could provide truth. Even if the truth about yourself and your existence is sometimes painful and never comforting, it is the only true knowledge that can give you the power to bring the suffering that anxiety causes to an end and make something of your life. When Carl Jung, once his best-loved disciple, linked his own psychology to a divine figure and so, in Freud's view, reduced psychoanalysis to a kind of

semi-religious therapy, Freud regarded the transgression as unforgiveable. Freud saw psychotherapy as a treatment that all too often triggered patients' narcissism, or satisfied them with an 'I'm okay, you're okay' instead of telling them the truth.

Not being afraid, confronting fear, knowing that you are condemned to total freedom because there are no essences to give you guidance – this is the philosophy of existentialism that caused such a stir in the twentieth century, the first age of anxiety. But from what, then, does existence derive its value? If there is nothing, why would you go on living and not commit suicide? Furthermore, why was it that two of the most famous existentialist philosophers, Heidegger and Sartre, proved unable to resist the temptation to become supporters of totalitarian politics, Nazism and Stalinism respectively? Two political religions that were born out of the fear of freedom!

Perhaps we have more to learn yet from the beat generation, who tried to combat the age of anxiety in their own way in the second half of the twentieth century.

First of all through creativity. They caused a new culture to flourish, full of poetry, music, painting, films and literature. They saw the arts as the best way of creating something meaningful and of exploring all possibilities, far beyond their own lives. Our society, however, and therefore our education, is more attached to innovation than to creation, more to economics than to culture, more to artificial intelligence than to the life of the mind.

Secondly through love. It's no accident that the chorus to Elvis Costello's song is 'What's so funny about peace, love and understanding?' Nor that, in the final verse of *Under Pressure*, Bowie and Queen sing:

Can't we give ourselves one more chance?  
Why can't we give love that one more chance?  
Why can't we give love give love give love?  
Give love, give love, give love, give love, give love, give love  
Cause love is such an old-fashioned word  
And love dares you to care  
For people on the edge of the night  
And love dares you to change our way  
Of caring about ourselves  
This is our last dance

Well, why not? Why does our capacity to love and thereby banish anxiety seem like a kind of alchemy that few people truly manage to practice? Is it fear that makes love impossible?

Lastly, and this is no surprise in spite of Freud's objections, there was a real revival of spirituality among the beat generation. The book *The Courage to Be* by theologian Paul Tillich became a classic almost immediately after

it was published in 1955. Tillich describes the age of anxiety and discusses the relevance of existentialist philosophy and all new art in opening people's eyes to the reality in which they live. He argues that the main cause of twentieth-century anxiety is the meaninglessness experienced everywhere, which is nothing more than a consequence of the death of God in the century before. This god, he goes on, is the image, beloved of conservatives, of an authoritarian, all-powerful, all-knowing magician, who allows us to see less and less of his magic. Fear, Tillich says, can be defeated only if everyone has courage again, which is to say: have faith that there is a transcendent moral force that we must dare to make a reality on earth once more.

That was also the message, exactly a year previously, of a preacher who can be counted among the heroes of the twentieth century: Dr. Martin Luther King. On 28 February 1954, he gave a sermon in Detroit in which he said the following:

'I want you to think with me this morning from the subject: rediscovering lost values. Rediscovering lost values. There is something wrong with our world, something fundamentally and basically wrong. [...] The trouble isn't so much that we don't know enough, but it's as if we aren't good enough. The trouble isn't so much that our scientific genius lags behind, but our moral genius lags behind. The great problem facing modern man is that, that the means *by* which we live, have outdistanced the spiritual ends *for* which we live. So we find ourselves caught in a messed-up world. The problem is with man himself and man's soul. We haven't learned how to be just and honest and kind and true and loving. And that's the basis of our problem. [...] This is a moral universe. It hinges on moral foundations. If we are to make of this a better world, we've got to go back and rediscover that precious value that we've left behind. [...] All reality has spiritual control. In other words, we've got to go back and rediscover the principle that there is a God behind the process.'

But can faith, once lost, ever be regained? In our secular world will we be any more receptive to the advice presented to us by the son of a clergyman, Kierkegaard: 'Popular opinion maintains that the world needs a republic, needs a new social order and a new religion – but no one considers that what the world, confused simply by too much knowledge, needs is a Socrates.'

That is no doubt true, but where is the new Socrates? And how much influence can he or she have if the old Socrates, because of cultural illiteracy, is barely known any longer?

In our efforts to end this age of anxiety before it's too late, it may be most practical to start by listening to the words of a great statesman in the dark days of the first age of anxiety. On 4 March 1933 President Franklin

D. Roosevelt gave his first inaugural address, which begins with advice as simple as it is wise: ‘The only thing we have to fear is [...] fear itself.’

That might be a place to start, loving this world again by opposing all the politics and forces that are only trying to make us afraid. Next, we can ask the great questions: Who am I? What makes my life worth the trouble of living? How can we rid ourselves of threats and defeat the anxiety of this age?

‘It is wrongly assumed that simple questions involve answers that are no less simple,’ wrote Albert Camus in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, his own search for the meaning of life. But that is no reason not to pose all those questions. Because even if they make life more difficult, they also make it more meaningful. Is that not the first step towards a new age without fear?

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*Founder & President, Nexus Institute*

# Speakers

## Keynote



NOBEL PRIZE LAUREATE WOLE SOYINKA (Nigeria, 1934) is a playwright, poet and essayist. He played an active role in Nigeria's struggle for independence from the United Kingdom and in opposing oppressive governments in Nigeria and elsewhere. As a result of his struggle for freedom, he was put in solitary confinement for two years and later had to escape from Nigeria by motorcycle. He was Professor of Comparative Literature at the University of Ife, and has also taught at Cornell University, Emory University, Harvard, Oxford and Yale. In plays such as *Death and the King's Horseman* (1975) and *The Beatification of Area Boy* (1995), Soyinka skillfully fuses Western influences with subject matter and dramatic techniques rooted in Yoruba folklore and religion. In 1986 Soyinka was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature; he was the first author from sub-Saharan Africa to win the award.

After his keynote lecture, Soyinka will join the first roundtable conversation.

## First roundtable

### APOCALYPSE NOW? CAUSES OF ANXIETY IN OUR AGE



CHRISTIANE AMANPOUR CBE (United Kingdom, 1958) is considered one of television's leading news correspondents. After first gaining notice for her 1985 report on Iran, which won the DuPont Award, Amanpour has received multiple Emmys and countless other honors for her work. After having worked for CBS' *60 Minutes* and ABC News, she became the Chief International Anchor of CNN. Her program 'Amanpour' is CNN International's flagship global affairs interview program. Amanpour is one of the best

Photo: David Vintiner-Variety

informed people on the planet about global power politics.

KATE BROWN (United States, 1965) is Professor of Science, Technology and Society at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. She is the author of several prize-winning histories, including *Plutopia: Nuclear Families in Atomic Cities and the Great Soviet and American Plutonium Disasters* (2013). Her latest book, *Manual for Survival: A Chernobyl Guide to the Future* (2019), translated into nine languages, was a finalist for the 2020 National Book Critics Circle Award.



Photo: Annette Hornischer

ANNE CASE (United States, 1958) is Emeritus Professor of Economics and Public Affairs at Princeton University, where she is the Director of the Research Program in Development Studies. She has written extensively on health over the life course, and has been awarded many prizes for her work on the links between economic status and health in childhood, and on midlife morbidity and mortality. With Angus Deaton she published *Deaths of Despair and the Future of Capitalism* (2020).



THEODORE DALRYMPLE (United Kingdom, 1949), pseudonym of Anthony Daniels, is a cultural critic and former psychiatrist. His experiences as a prison doctor convinced him that cultural relativism, multiculturalism and the neglect of personal responsibility have led to a decline of Western culture, a view expressed in books such as *Life at the Bottom: The Worldview That Makes the Underclass* (2001), *Our Culture, What's Left of It: The Mandarins and the Masses* (2005) and *Not With a Bang But a Whimper: The Politics and Culture of Decline* (2009). In *Spoilt Rotten: The Toxic Cult of Sentimentality* (2010) Dalrymple analyzed the danger of replacing reason with emotions. More recent works include *Admirable Evasions: How Psychology Undermines Morality* (2015) and *In Praise of Folly: The Blind-spots of Our Mind* (2019).





Ghobash–Banipal Prize for Arabic Fiction in collaboration with the Man Booker Prize.

AMBASSADOR OMAR SAIF GHOBASH (United Arab Emirates, 1971) is a diplomat and author, who studied Law and Mathematics in Oxford and London. Between 2009 and 2017 he served as UAE ambassador to Russia, and in 2017 he was appointed ambassador to France. He authored the book *Letters to a Young Muslim* (2017), which was written as a series of letters to his son about what it means to be Muslim in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Ghobash sponsors the Saif



intellectual history. He is currently writing a history of the virtues and vices.

EDWARD SKIDELSKY (United Kingdom, 1973) is a lecturer at Exeter University, specializing in aesthetics and moral philosophy. He delivered the magnificent biography *Ernst Cassirer. The Last Philosopher of Culture* in 2008, and in 2012 he and his father Lord Robert Skidelsky published *How Much is Enough? Money and the Good Life*. Skidelsky contributes regularly to the *New Statesman*, *Daily Telegraph* and *Spectator* on philosophy, religion and

## Second roundtable

### AMOR MUNDI. HOW TO END THE AGE OF ANXIETY?

NOBEL PRIZE LAUREATE SIR ANGUS DEATON (United Kingdom, 1945) is Professor Emeritus at Princeton University and Presidential Professor of Economics at USC. He is the author of *The Great Escape: Health, Wealth, and the Origins of Inequality* (2013) and, with Anne Case, *Deaths of Despair and the Future of Capitalism* (2020). His interests span domestic and international issues and include health, happiness, development, poverty, inequality, and how to best collect and interpret evidence for policy. Deaton received the Nobel Memorial Prize in Economic Sciences for his analysis of consumption, poverty, and welfare.



DITA KRAUS (Czech Republic, 1929) neé Polach is a Holocaust survivor. In 1942, she and her parents were deported to Ghetto Theresienstadt, and later to Auschwitz, where her father died. Kraus served as librarian in the block set up for children in Birkenau, with only a handful of books. In March 1944, half of the children living in the children's block were murdered. In May, Kraus and her mother were sent to Hamburg, Germany, where they were put to back-breaking labor. From there they were transported to labor camps, and then in March 1945 to Bergen-Belsen, which was liberated several weeks later by the British Army. In 2012, Antonio Iturbe wrote *The Librarian of Auschwitz*, based on Kraus' story, which became a bestseller, and in 2020, Kraus published her memoirs *A Delayed Life. The True Story of the Librarian of Auschwitz*.





Photo: Felix-Broede

IGOR LEVIT (Russia, 1987) is a master pianist, renowned for his Bach, Beethoven and Liszt recordings. He began playing piano at age three and studied at the Mozarteum in Salzburg and the Musikhochschule Hannover with Karl-Henz Kämmerling and Matti Raekallio, among others. He graduated with the highest academic and performance scores in the history of the institute in 2009, and is currently teaching there. Levit has appeared in major concert halls and music festivals around the world. He was awarded the 5<sup>th</sup>

International Beethoven Prize for his political commitment in 2019, followed by the ‘Statue B’ of the International Auschwitz Committee on the occasion of the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz 2020. He has released several albums, including the 2-CD set *Life* in 2018, including works by Busoni, Bach, Schumann and Bill Evans, and the complete Beethoven piano sonatas in 2019.



DOM GREGORY J. POLAN, O.S.B. (United States, 1950) is the Abbot Primate of the Benedictine Confederation. With its famous 1,500-year-old motto of Ora et Labora (Pray and Work), the Benedictines are the oldest monastic order in the Church. Its headquarters are centered at the Primatial Abbey of Sant’Anselmo in Rome. Located here as well is the Benedictine Order’s University with its Pontifical Institute of Liturgy, and Faculties of Philosophy, Theology,

and its Monastic Institute. Abbot Gregory serves as the Chancellor of this university. Abbot Gregory entered the novitiate of Conception Abbey in 1970, and professed his monastic vows in August 1971. He was ordained to the priesthood in May 1977. In 1984, he completed a doctoral degree in Biblical Theology at the Pontifical Faculty of Université Saint Paul (Ottawa, Canada) with a dissertation later published as *In the Ways of Justice and Righteousness toward Salvation: A Rhetorical Analysis of Isaiah 56-59* (1986). He was invited by the US Conference of Catholic Bishops to do a revision of the Grail Psalter which had been used for the Liturgy of the Hours since 1969. Polan’s revision has received a recognition for use in the liturgy from the Holy See, and has now been published as *The Abbey Psalms and Canticles*. Before entering the monastery, he studied organ at the American Conservatory of Music in Chicago and served as one of the organists of his community while still at Conception Abbey. As Abbot Primate, he holds a mandate of eight years of service, first begun in 2016.

LEÏLA SLIMANI (Morocco, 1981) is a Franco-Moroccan novelist. She studied political science and media studies in Paris, and later worked as a journalist for the magazine *Jeune Afrique*. In 2014 she published her first novel *Dans le jardin de l'ogre*, which was followed two years later by the psychological thriller *Chanson douce*. The latter quickly turned into a bestseller, with over 450,000 copies printed within a year even before the book was awarded the Prix Goncourt. In 2017, Slimani was appointed as presidential representative to the Organisation internationale de la Francophonie by President Emmanuel Macron.

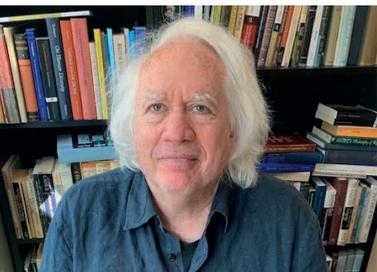


Photo: John-MacDougall

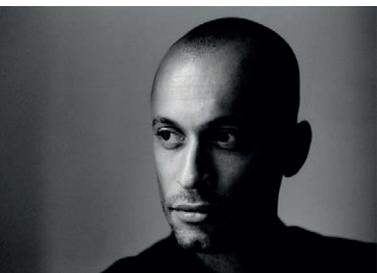
LAURA SPINNEY (United Kingdom, 1971) is a writer and science journalist, whose writing on science has appeared in distinguished publications such as *Nature*, *The Guardian*, *The Economist* and *National Geographic*. Only three years before the current COVID-19 pandemic, she published her non-fiction account of the 1918 influenza pandemic, *Pale Rider: The Spanish Flu of 1918 and How it Changed the World* (2017). It became a worldwide bestseller, and shows that the Spanish flu was the biggest disaster of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, exceeding the death tolls of both World War 1 (17 million) and World War 2 (60 million). Her extensive research for this book made her one of the leading world experts on the impact and consequences of pandemics. Spinney also published two novels, *The Doctor* (2001) and *The Quick* (2007), and a collection of oral history, *Rue Centrale* (2013).



Photo: Dominique Cabrelli



LEON WIESELTIER (United States, 1952) is an American-Jewish thinker and the founder and editor of *Liberties*, a new journal of culture and politics. He was educated at the universities of Columbia, Oxford and Harvard where he was selected to the Society of Fellows. From 1983 to 2014 Wieseltier was the renowned literary editor of *The New Republic*. He is the author of *Against Identity* (1996) and *Kaddish* (1998), which was translated into many languages and has become a classic about love, death, the accursed questions and the quest for wisdom. His essays on culture, religion, and history have been published in many international journals and magazines. He has published many translations of Hebrew poetry into English. In 2013 he won the prestigious Dan David Prize for outstanding achievement in the humanities. Since 2001 Leon Wieseltier has been a regular contributor to the publications and events of the Nexus Institute.



THOMAS CHATTERTON WILLIAMS (United States, 1981) is a cultural critic and author. After his studies in philosophy at Georgetown and graduate work at the Cultural Reporting and Criticism program at NYU, he published *Losing My Cool: Love, Literature and a Black Man's Escape from the Crowd* (2010), in which he portrays the allure and danger of hip-hop culture and evokes the salvation that literature offers. His second book *Self-Portrait in Black and White: Unlearning Race* (2019) made him one of the most prominent voices on race issues in the United States. In 2020, he helped write and organize 'A Letter on Justice and Open Debate'. This defense of freedom of expression in a climate of growing censoriousness was signed by over 150 other public figures (including J.K. Rowling, Salman Rushdie, Margaret Atwood and Michael Ignatieff) and published in *Harper's Magazine* and reprinted in newspapers around the world. Williams is a contributing writer at *The New York Times Magazine*, a columnist at *Harper's*, and the recipient of a Berlin Prize from the American Academy in Berlin. He lives in Paris with his wife and children.

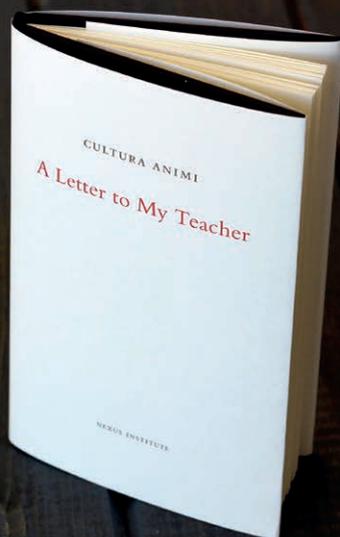
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