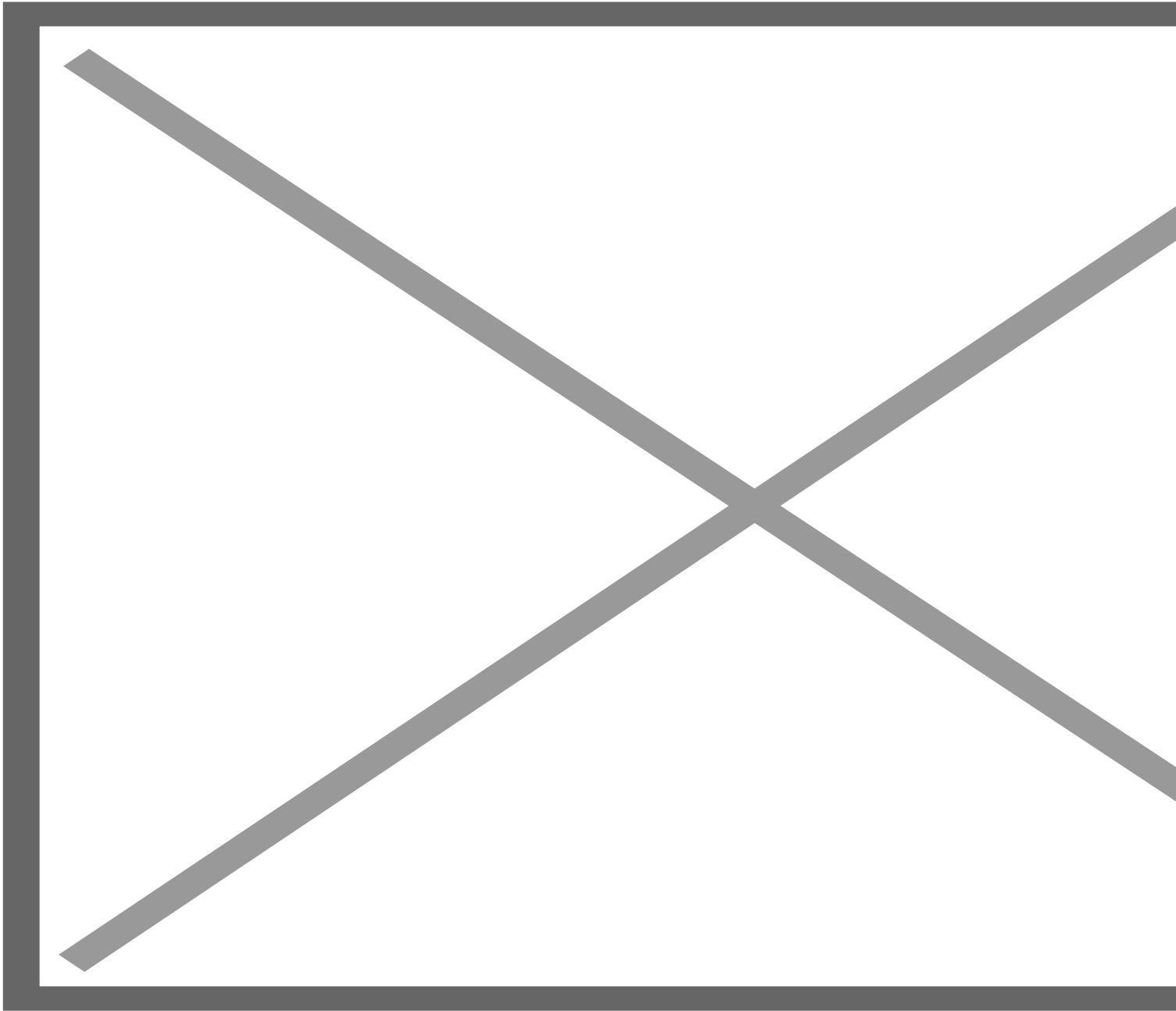


Why ICE agents hide their faces

Genesis 3 and Emmanuel Levinas can help us make sense of masked violence.

by [Colton Bernasol](#) in the [March 2026](#) issue

Published on January 9, 2026



A US Customs and Border Patrol agent looks on during a protest outside the Federal Building on Friday, June 13, 2025, in Los Angeles. (AP Photo / Wally Skali)

We are becoming more familiar with this threatening figure. He was in Los Angeles, then in DC. He was in Chicago for nearly all of fall. He was sent to New York. He has been spotted in North Carolina, too. He is tall, broad-shouldered, and foreboding. He dresses in black, camouflage, and military green. He straps on a bulletproof vest. His pants are cargo, and his baseball cap has no logo.

In Minneapolis, he shot and killed Renee Nicole Good.

And he is hardly alone. There are three or four just like him, and they travel together. Foreboding, camouflaged, bulletproof.

One more shared feature has become a symbol of their threatening anonymity: the face mask. Behind the cap and mask his gaze, the curve of his mouth, and the imperfections of his face are lost. He has given up his face. He has given up his identity. He'd prefer not to have a face for the work he does. His victims cannot really look at him. And he—having effaced himself—need not really look at his victims. This is his symbolic power materialized in his self-alienation. Behold the faceless agent of ICE.

Once, the mask was a symbol of social obligation and solidarity. During the COVID-19 pandemic, wearing a mask was not merely courteous. It was a politically responsible act, a moral duty, a life-saving social contract. When the first mask mandates were instituted, COVID had already claimed thousands. The trauma and terror I felt five years ago has kept that moment in time close. I recall feeling constant vigilance, the soreness in my throat, the oncoming of cold symptoms—fever, watery eyes—the fear that COVID had entered me and that I could spread it to my grandma or my immunocompromised father. I masked because in that moment of vulnerability the full scope of another person's life came into shocking clarity: COVID could pass through me to them and kill. Knowing this shared vulnerability, I masked out of love.

The face is always and everywhere one place of a person's vulnerability. As a site of vulnerability—in this case the site of infection—it was a place of potential and imminent harm. Then, to wear a mask was not to efface oneself, but to recognize and respect the lives of others. To wear a mask was to recognize that the other whom you encounter has a face, and that because they have a face, they are a body, and because they are a body, they too are vulnerable to the deadly virus. Wearing a mask was a matter of attending to the vulnerability and particularity of persons, persons whose faces might open their bodies up to death. Where vulnerability meant severe illness, to respect and attend to the face of the other meant wearing a mask. This was not to be celebrated, but endured and suffered, in the name of a commitment to the other's life.

But most masks we see today are not salves. They are weapons. This is not new in US history. Just after the Civil War, and at various times since, members of the Klu Klux Klan wore masks to terrify and terrorize Black communities. Masks anonymized these agents of racial violence then as they do today—a fact some people, such as federal judge [William Young](#), have been keen to observe.

But the weapon of the mask inevitably depends upon alienation. Alienation from others, alienation from oneself, and alienation from God. In his book [Totality and Infinity](#), the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas argues that the face is the site of ethical encounter, vulnerability, and transcendence. "The face resists possession, resists my powers," writes Levinas. The face represents an otherness that cannot be possessed and opens up a moral relationship. "Less, for the face summons me to obligations and judges me." In a face-to-face encounter, the Other transcends me, and yet here I stand with the Other, in a vulnerable relation of "equality" and "fraternity," called to discern how our lives shall unfold in the company of one another.

In Levinas's description, I can't help but recall the story of the fall in Genesis 3. After disobeying God, the first man and woman disappear into the shadows of Eden, hiding their faces—their vulnerability, their

disobedience—from the “sound of the Lord God.” The evening breeze rushes through paradise as God walks about in search for them, but they flee into the trees full of fear and the newfound knowledge of their nakedness and vulnerability. Levinas’s philosophy of the face helps flesh out the contemporary theological and political relevance of this biblical passage. In his bid to dominate the other, the masked ICE agent reenacts this creation myth by attempting to overcome the face-to-face encounter through the weapon of the face mask. He, like Adam and Eve, hides and seeks never to be found. He hides and thus avoids the ethical obligation summoned by standing before another, vulnerable to them as they are vulnerable to him.

Because the face is a site of transcendence, some see it as *the* mark of the image of God. Conservative politicians such as Ohio state representative [Nino Vitale](#) made such an argument at the height of the pandemic in early May 2020. “We are all created in the image and likeness of God,” he wrote in a Facebook post. “That image is seen the most by our face. I will not wear a mask.”

This argument strikes me as theologically shallow, as if God’s image doesn’t reside within the whole scope of a person’s embodied life, but only on the surface of one’s skin. But it also misses the fundamentally moral dimension to God’s image, that part of what it means to bear the divine trace is to be morally responsible to others. During the pandemic, serious political and ethical reflection upon the image of God would therefore mean bearing the cost of masking if it meant social safety, the possibility for more people to live than to die. But representative Vitale seemed not to take his theology in this direction, moving rather from a discussion of the image of God to personal freedom and liberty. It’s a theological sleight of hand that places the biblical language within a framework for individual religious rights. Of course, we know the consequences of this, having endured the pandemic’s deadly waves. By the end of May 2020, the month of Vitale’s post, the US COVID-19 [death toll](#) stood at over 100,000.

The masked ICE agent resurfaces this debate about covering faces but in a new context. The agent who wears a mask denies their responsibility to the face in front of them. They want to escape the vulnerability of obligation in order to maintain a social hierarchy: the faceless actor lording over the terrified faces of so-called migrants. The masked ICE agent offers no name. Shows no smile. Establishes only distance. They harken not the beginning of ethics, but its end. Its breakdown. The cost is a genuine encounter. A disregard for the moral demand of bearing the image of the divine.

This article was updated on January 9 to correct an editorial mistake: There is no verified footage of Renee Good’s killer removing his mask at the scene, only AI-generated images purporting to show his face. We regret the error.