

The Alternative

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Dear Reader,

This issue of the Newsletter is on the topic of evil. It is a topic with more questions than answers, as it should be. The most dangerous people are those who think they know what evil is and how to eliminate it.

The first essay is one of Peter Steinfels' gems from *The New York Times*. As he often does, Steinfels subjects an overlooked bit of news to careful scrutiny. The contrast between John McCain and Barack Obama is profoundly revealed in the way each man spoke of evil.

The second essay by Gabriel Moran begins as a commentary on the Steinfels essay and extends its scope. The essay becomes a wide ranging discussion of the history of "evil": its origin in ancient myths, its near disappearance in the modern West, and its restoration in reflections on World War II. The re-appropriation of the idea of evil was on the whole helpful, but unless it is carefully used it can drive us back to the most primitive dualisms of good and evil.

The third essay is by the Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams. It is excerpted from his recent book, *Wrestling with Angels*. Rowan is concerned with the evil of suffering, which is the chief way most people raise the question of evil. He refers to "theodicy," a genre of literature that arose in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The term refers to "justifying God," a project hopelessly unsuccessful. The faithful are not looking for justifications; the nonbelievers cannot be convinced by any rational discourse on the subject.

The Archbishop offers no pietistic explanation of evil or an apologetics based on suffering. His theme is similar to one in a recent book by David Burrell: *Deconstructing Theodicy: Why Job Has Nothing To Say To the Puzzle of Suffering*. The significance of suffering, Williams and Burrell offer, is that it can bring us to listen to other perspectives than our own. What is significant in the Book of Job is not any supposed explanation but the fact of a continuing conversation. In his commentary on the Book of Job, Thomas Aquinas asks if Job should have been arguing with God. Aquinas answers that if you are in the right keep arguing even if it is with God. Ultimately, Williams converges with the shocking premise of Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologiae* expressed in article one: "Since we cannot know what God is but only what God is not, let us proceed to investigate the ways that God does not exist."

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FIGHTING EVIL

By Peter Steinfels,

One of the most revelatory moments of the presidential campaign occurred on August 16 when Rick Warren roped both parties' nominees into a "civil forum" at his Saddleback Church in Lake Forest, California – the closest they had come, at that point, to a genuine debate. In back-to-back interviews, Mr. Warren asked the candidates the same questions.

By most accounts, it was a winning day for Senator John McCain. Mr. Obama, in the view of his supporters, was careful and thoughtful; in the view of his critics vague and unsure. Everyone, on the other hand, agreed that Mr. McCain was direct, crisp and clear-cut – to the point that the conspiracy theorists in the Obama camp were convinced that Mr. McCain, who was interviewed second, had not really been kept out of earshot of the questions, as Mr. Warren had announced.

The questions covered the waterfront, although with conservative evangelicals heavily represented in the Saddleback audience - another McCain advantage – there was a tilt toward issues like abortion, same-sex marriage and financing religion-based community services. The candidates' answers to such policy questions, although hardly free of campaign boilerplate, were the ones most widely reported.

Mr. Warren did, however, throw in one question going far beyond any specific policy. "Does evil exist?" he asked each candidate, and if so, "Should we ignore it, negotiate with it, contain it or defeat it?" One really has to quote the transcript extensively to get the full flavor of the two replies.

"Evil does exist," Mr. Obama began. "I mean, I think we see evil all the time. We see evil in Darfur. We see evil, sadly, on the streets of our cities. We see evil in parents who viciously abuse their children. And I think it has to be confronted. It has to be confronted squarely.

And one of the things that I strongly believe is that we are not going to, as individuals, be able to erase evil from the world. That is God's task. But we can be soldiers in that process, and we can confront it when we see it.

Now the one thing that I think is very important is for us to have some humility in how we approach the issue of confronting evil because a lot of evil has been perpetrated based on the claim that we were trying to confront evil."

And when Mr. Warren interjected, "in the name of good," Mr. Obama agreed, saying "just because we think our intentions are good doesn't always mean that we are going to be doing good.

Similarly asked about whether to ignore, negotiate with, contain or defeat evil, Mr. McCain gave a reply that was as warmly greeted as it was unhesitating:

Defeat it (Applause). A couple of points. One, if I am the president of the United States, my friends, if I have to follow him to the gates of hell, I will get Osama bin Laden and bring him to justice (Applause). I will do that, and I know how to do it. I will get that guy. (Applause). Of course, evil must be defeated. My friends, we are facing the transcendent challenge of the 21st century – radical Islamic extremism.”

He spoke of “two young women who were mentally disabled” being used as suicide bombers. “If that isn’t evil, you have to tell me what is.” (Applause). The central battleground, Mr. McCain said, was “Baghdad, Mosul, Basra and Iraq. And we are winning and succeeding,” he continued, “and our troops will come home with honor and with victory, not in defeat. And that’s what’s happening.”(Applause)

“We can face this challenge,” he concluded, “and we must totally defeat it. And we’re in a long struggle. But when I’m around the young men and women who are serving us in uniform, I have no doubt.”(Applause).

Mr. Obama located evil overseas but also on American streets and even in American homes. It had to be “confronted squarely,” he said but with humility because “a lot of evil has been perpetrated based on the claim that we were trying to confront evil.”

By contrast, Mr. McCain immediately took the question of evil as referring to Al Qaeda, Iraq and a long struggle against Islamic extremism. He emphasized giving no quarter and achieving total victory.

The two candidates made only fleeting religious references. Mr. Obama warned that erasing evil from the world was “God’s task,” a process in which humans could at best be “soldiers.” Mr. McCain invoked not God but “the gates of hell” to which he was sworn to pursue Osama bin Laden.

Mr. McCain’s remarks found admirers last August. Certainly his approach to evil has deep roots in American culture. Had it not been burdened by association with a host of increasingly questioned administration policies, it might well have carried the day. The transcript records no applause interrupting Mr. Obama’s emphasis on humility, ambiguity and the evil within as well as without.

The discussion of evil at the Saddleback forum gave Americans a valuable glimpse into the new president’s soul – and quite possibly into their own.

DOES EVIL EXIST?

By Gabriel Moran

I agree with Peter Steinfels' assessment in the above essay that the two questions asked of McCain and Obama reveal the depth of difference between the two men, as well as the difference between the last eight years and Obama's intention. McCain's answers show no change of attitude from that of the Bush-Cheney administration.

One of Bush's most fateful lines was spoken at Washington's National Cathedral on Sept. 18, 2001: "Our responsibility to history is already clear: to answer these attacks and rid the world of evil." The last phrase "rid the world of evil" is breathtaking in its naivete and arrogance. If history is clear about anything, it is that attempts to rid the world of evil unleash death and destruction. The subsequent tragedies of the Bush years followed inexorably from this attitude. That Bush learned nothing from his experience is shown by one of his many exit interviews in which he pronounced: "Good and evil are present in the world, and between the two of them there can be no compromise." Dick Cheney, Bush's enabler or master, said with less naivete and more arrogance: "We do not negotiate with evil; we defeat it."

It is not surprising that McCain won the debate at Saddleback and that he drew all the applause. The largely Evangelical audience were especially receptive to McCain's decisive attitude to conquering evil but I think his answers would play well with most of the country. Fortunately, this exchange was buried in news releases. What is surprising and still hard to believe is that the country elected Obama whose attitude to evil and most other things is humility, thoughtfulness and self-criticism.

Steinfels does not comment on the fact that there were two questions asked and that both men gave an affirmative answer to the first: Does evil exist? They immediately turned their attention to the second question of a strategy to deal with evil. I think one should at least give pause on the question of whether evil exists. "Evil" is a philosophical and religious idea for describing the world. Whether it is a helpful word, and if so, how it should be used are issues worth pondering.

"Evil" used as a noun is highly suspect; as an adjective, it might have a useful if very limited, purpose. McCain immediately jumps from saying evil exists to naming who and what are evil. Obama was more restrained in naming places where we can "see evil." That phrase is misleading. What anyone can see who looks at Darfur, Baghdad, or the streets of many U.S. cities is broken bodies, horrible suffering and devastated minds. Perhaps the word evil helps us to see better but how does it apply?

Somewhere behind the terrible scenes are human beings who bear varying degrees of responsibility. The tendency to attribute the destruction to some embodiment of evil credits too much foresight, control and effectiveness to someone. Behind the horrors of war's massacres often stand a few faceless bureaucrats cut off from everything except their own delusions of greatness. I would not deny that the word evil might characterize the decisions and behaviors that are horrendous in effect, but that is different from identifying evil with some monster or genius.

Among Allan Bloom's many complaints in *The Closing of the American Mind* was the answer he got from college students to his question, what is evil? Bloom said that he always got the same one word answer: Hitler. And since we all know that Hitler was an aberration, there is no more to be said about evil. Of course, whenever we are supposed to hate and destroy another evil person the comparison to Hitler is inevitable. Saddam, Kim Jong Il, Ahmadinejad, the 1980's Qaddafi or fill in the blank as to who is the reincarnation of Hitler. If the person is a head of state, even if unelected, the people of that nation are included in the condemnation of the evil monster.

One of Bush's famous and outrageous phrases is "the axis of evil," the brainchild of speechwriter David Frum who slipped it into Bush's 2002 State of the Union Address. The connection to Hitler was clever. The countries cited (Iraq, Iran, North Korea) had no obvious connection except being countries Bush disliked. He seemed surprised the next day when there was riotous protest in Teheran. The Iranian students took his words more seriously than he did.

Ronald Reagan must be given credit for using the word evil more precisely when he called the Soviet Union's outreach an "evil empire." I never understood the liberal outrage at Reagan's phrase. If the word evil has any appropriate use it surely applied to the Soviet empire. Reagan did not call Gorbachev or the Russian people evil. He was describing the corruption and inhumanity of a system that had begun with great hopes but deteriorated until its collapse in the 1980s.

What I found objectionable in Reagan's speech was the other half of it that received almost no comment. The opposite of the evil empire was the goodness of "America." There was no criticism of the United States and its worldwide empire. A large part of why the Soviet empire could be described as evil was simply the fact that it was an empire. There is a built-in arrogance to the reality of empires. The Romans or the British may have been more benign than the Soviets, but they could not escape self-deception and delusion. Cecil Rhodes, when he was virtual dictator of southern Africa said: "We Britons are the first race in the world, and the more of the world we inhabit, the better it is for the human race."

People may wince today at the gall of Rhodes' statement but Reagan's rhetoric and Bush's naïve proclamations are only slight variations on every leader of an empire. The United States, since World War II, has had one of the most powerful empires in history. Like all empires it has had its share of incompetence, corruption and unintended destructiveness. Bush kept asking, "why do they hate us"? If he could have listened, most of the other 190 countries could have told him.

The reason why Bloom's students knew only Hitler as evil is not surprising. Hitler or the Nazi empire brought back the word evil after it had nearly disappeared. In the secularization of the West from the eighteenth century onward, "evil" was generally shunned. Its religious connotations made it an unnecessary idea. In religious history, the opposite of good is evil; in secular history, the opposite of good is bad. The religious origin of "evil" is due to the problem of trying to explain conflict, suffering and death. Some religions posit two gods, one good, one evil, and the humans in between. By contrast, Jewish, Christian and Muslim religions agreed that there is only one God who of course is good and the source of all good. The three religions were then faced with the difficulty of explaining why the world is a mess.

Christianity developed an elaborate back story of spiritual beings who revolted in heaven and established a counterforce in hell. Evil was personified in a character variously called Devil, Demon, Satan, Beelzebub. He was not a co-god but as the story developed he became a worthy opponent for the good God. As the Christian story lost its controlling power, Satan became a mere comical figure with red tights and a pitchfork. As the devil seemed no longer credible and human autonomy was celebrated, the idea of evil seemed outdated.

One event of the twentieth century, the Holocaust, occasioned the rediscovery of evil. Wars of the twentieth century killed up to 150 million people, but it was the killing of the six million Jews, the near elimination of European Jewry, that seemed demonic. That it occurred in Germany, the seat of secular enlightenment, was inexplicable to Jew and Gentile. Was there some force beyond the humans that caused the catastrophe?

At first there was silence. A change began with publication of Hannah Arendt's *Origins of Totalitarianism*. In the preface, Arendt says that "comprehend" does not mean "deducing the unprecedented from the precedented," but rather "facing up to...reality – whatever it may be." Her work can be seen as a reflection on evil or more exactly on totalitarian systems that breed evil actions. The monstrous results are not the doings of one evil person. A complex organization is needed to pull off the horrendous destruction produced by modern warfare. In the nineteenth century Carl von Clausewitz's classic, *On War*, could describe war as "nothing but a duel on a larger scale." World War I changed that by being a total war, involving the whole population. In today's wars more than ninety percent of those who are killed are "noncombatants." The "casualties" of war now make linguistic sense: the people who are casually present.

Hannah Arendt is most famous for her book *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, a report of the trial of Adolf Eichmann, said to be the architect of the Holocaust. The book caused a furor, especially among her fellow Jews who were expecting a portrait of an evil monster. Instead, what Arendt described was a civil servant doing his job of keeping the organization functioning smoothly. He was proud of his "objectivity," absent of hatred or any other emotion. Arendt used the phrase "banality of evil," an irony that many people harshly criticized.

Far from trivializing the question of evil, she was actually saying something frightening. Evil is not the doing of some mad, impassioned monster. It is instead in the impersonal workings of large systems governed by small-minded people. While the world does have to watch out for psychopaths who attract followers, the more pervasive problem is the interlocking economic and political system fueled by a lust for money and celebrity when there are no controls on the petty greed and willful ignorance of key players.

Arendt had brilliantly analyzed the workings of bureaucracy in which people obey the person at the next level. One might expect that the authority would be at the top. The really frightening thing, said Arendt, is that at the top you find "no man, neither one nor the best, neither the few nor the many, can be held responsible, and which could be properly called rule by Nobody." The president or CEO of a large organization does not understand the system which, without anyone's evil intention, is causing havoc in people's lives.

Future historians may see Bush War I and Bush War II as a single event; they might forget there was a Clinton interlude which the French called the era of the hyper-power, a distended and unhealthy growth of an empire. Until 1989 the U.S. had an empire whose meaning and stability derived from being anti-communist. When the Soviet empire crumbled from within it marked the end of both empires. Almost immediately in the early 1990s, the U.S. amassed 500,000 soldiers and unimaginable technological firepower to begin a war without end. Whereas the U.S. Constitution says that the president during war will act as commander in chief of the army, the U.S. is now routinely referred to as electing a commander in chief. One great advantage that the U.S. has over the Soviet Union is that it has almost the whole world as a co-dependent. The U.S. is too big to be allowed to fail; it is the AIG of nation states. Even those who hate it do not wish to see it fail, at least not immediately.

The appearance of Barack Obama is a phenomenon no one could or did predict. He seems to have arrived from another planet, unscathed by a personal beginning and many circumstances that have turned other people bitter and self-deceived. Has any human being ever arrived with not only the hopes of a country but most of the world on his shoulders? If evil is a description of a system run by a greedy few with the complicity of many, the odds against Obama succeeding are astronomical. His support in the U.S. and even more in Europe was that of a religious rather than a political movement. His “inauguration” (a word whose root is religious prophecy) was the greeting for a savior. Obama himself has tried to tamp down expectations but this is not a patient country. He needs some luck, along with a team of thoughtful advisers. And the greedy few who are still ripping off the system for obscene amounts of money somehow have to be restrained.

One of Obama’s most creative and daring steps in his first week was to give his first interview on Al Arabia television. Most people in the U.S. had never heard of the network but everyone in the Arab world knows it well. Obama knows he cannot succeed without begging help from other countries. His statement to Arab and Muslim countries that the U.S. is not their enemy will not be believed by most Arabs and Muslims because their experience tells them otherwise. Nonetheless, the fact that a U.S. president would give his first interview on an Arab network could not help but impress them.

I turned on CBS news that evening expecting the interview to be the lead story, accompanied by apoplexy on the right. CBS did not even mention the interview. The only network that gave it top billing was Comedy Central. John Stewart and Stephen Colbert led with the Obama interview. Perhaps there is an ironic logic at work when the best source of news has become a program that calls itself a fake news program. And perhaps future historians will find the best post-election headline to be the satirical Onion’s: “Black man given Nation’s worst job.”

Hardly anyone except Rush Limbaugh says he wants Obama to fail (Even Rush doesn’t want to lose his millions tied to the economic system). It would have been a depressing Jan. 20 for the world if McCain had been installed as the commander with eyes fixed on the embodiment of evil hiding in a cave in Pakistan. Obama at least knows that evil behavior is both within and without. Whether he can do much about it depends on history, circumstances, and people beyond his control. John Updike, in his obituary, was quoted as saying he gave the universe the benefit of the doubt because it is the only one we have. The present world has to give the benefit of the doubt to the U.S. administration. The hope is fragile but things could actually be worse.

THE EVIL OF SUFFERING

By Rowan Williams

Part of the task of a good theology and a candid religious philosophy is to reacquaint us with materiality and mortality. And part of that is the knowledge of suffering as without explanation or compensation and also the knowledge that there are unpredictable, unsystematizable integrations of suffering into a biography in the experience of some. But that is to say that we should be concerned with suffering always in its historical particularity: this, here, for this person, at this moment, with these memories.

This might make us pause before ascribing all the world's pain to God; for if God is compassionate toward the world, this is not self-pity, but the exercise of that radical love which is attention to the other in its difference, not its kinship; thus in its specificity within the world that is not God.

I suspect that it is more religiously imperative to be worried by evil than to put it into a satisfactory theoretical context, if only because such a worry keeps obstinately open the perspective of the sufferer, the subject for whom this is never a question of aesthetics, however imaginatively and discriminatingly pursued

What might be called the mortal knowledge of suffering, the knowledge of it as contingent and thus potentially unconsolated, matters not because our intellectual hubris needs bridling (though it doubtless does) but because it insists that certain things are known by testimony – which means by conversation, exchange, sociality, by attending to a perspective that is not and could never be one's own. This is really an observation about knowledge as such; it is just that some kinds of knowing are less patient of others of reduction to the terms of the ego ambitious for self-sufficiency. And the pain of others is perhaps foremost among such items of knowledge

The suffering of a historically particular other must be a paradigm for the kind of knowledge that will not allow us to stop listening, because we cannot completely internalize or domesticate it. In that sense – and that alone? – knowing about suffering might be a way into knowing about God. But this has to go on avoiding the pietistic reduction of such a vision to the idea that suffering is a “mystery” that teaches us humility, and also the fashionable but deeply questionable notion that suffering offers access to the heart of a suffering God.

The subject's accounts of their pain most basically reminds us that the world is a world of differences and so of conversation, of listening. If I learn this, I may have learned a bit of what classical theology wants to say of God – that it is impossible to give God an essential definition or to map God on a conceptual scheme, because what God is the world isn't. And I shall not know God without acknowledging what my own knowledge is like, historical and situational; so that I know God as supremely what I must listen for and never domesticate.

Even the best and subtlest of theodicies cannot but seem a strategy for evading most of this. “Who is it for?” is a question very close to “In whose presence is it done?” If the answer to that is, “In the absence of the perspective of the sufferer as subject or narrator,” how can it fail to evade – to evade not only humanity but divinity as well?