

Confusing Good and Evil

sermon digest

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Luke 11:14-20

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The grand leader of the 1979 Iranian revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini denounced the United States on November 5, 1979, as “the great Satan, the wounded snake.” His disregard for the Soviet Union earned a slightly adjusted insult, “the lesser Satan.” At least he recognized the superiority of the U.S. over the Soviet Union, even if it was a greater evil. The Ayatollah was the supreme religious leader of Iran. Hatred thus expressed for other nations had both political and religious overtones, inseparable institutions in the Muslim mind.

At the time, most of us were oblivious to the history behind the Iranian revolution. With British and U.S. support, the elected prime minister of Iran was removed by coup in 1953 establishing the reign of Shah Pahlavi, the last king of Persia. The Shah served western interests and received U.S. support for his powerful monarchy in spite of his tyrannical modus operandi. He was a secular Muslim with little regard for the traditions of his religion or his people, and he was an iron-fisted dictator. Khomeini was exiled from Iran in 1964 for criticizing the Shah. By 1978, Iran was holding 2,200 political prisoners. The ground-swell of opposition to the Shah opened the door for Khomeini’s return to inspire the military revolution. The Shah fled. The Ahatollah demanded his return to stand trial and be executed in Iran. The U.S. added insult to injury by allowing the Shah asylum and treatment for cancer in the U.S. Although he finally died of natural causes in Egypt, the United States thus earned the tag “the great Satan,” a charge that became the battle cry of Islamic revolutionaries throughout the Persian Gulf region. The accusation was usually followed by the refrain, “Death to (down with) America!”

After the September 11, 2001, attack on the World Trade Center in New York a question kept rising to the top of the emotional outcry and anger, “Why do they hate us?” Certainly the 2,900-plus victims killed in the airplanes and the Twin Towers were not political or military operatives threatening the lifestyle and values of Islamic nations, and the World Trade Center was not a military installation dedicated to opposing Islamic interests. But on that awful day we were shocked by the logical action that follows the label, Satan. Satan is a religious figure whose existence is sustained and supported by religious world views attributing events and causes in our lives to outside spiritual forces. The Satan is the subhuman, supernatural power of evil in our world behind the destruction of good and innocent people.

Demonizing the enemy justifies destruction. Attributing the power of evil to the actions of others, normally outsiders, has a name—*demonization*. Ironically, the religious concept of Satan was born in Iran, the product of Persian dualism, the location of ancient Babylon. Long before the Jews were forced into Babylonian Exile, the Persian religion had focused on two gods, good and evil, whose struggle for dominance put humanity and history on the front line of the cosmic war. The fifty years of captivity ended in 538 BCE with the Jews returning to their homeland to rebuild their cities and eventually their temple. The Jews came home a changed people with both foreign wives and foreign ideas. In the period between the Old and New Testaments, the Jews increasingly characterized their enemies as devils. Instead of human brothers and sisters, the enemy had been corrupted by evil gods to the point that they deserved death. The Satan was no longer a servant of God bringing down punishment on wayward people. The Satan was the enemy of the People of God, thus, the enemy of God. All evil, then, was identified with the demonic spiritual power driving human thought and action.

Princeton theologian Brian Blount described the situation of Palestine in the time of Jesus as a dark world in which demons were blamed for every kind of human ailment, and the people were helpless victims. Exorcists were in high demand, and Jesus came preaching the rule of God on earth and illustrating his sermon with acts of miraculous healing and exorcism of demons. Early Christians seemed to have no problem with the world view, but they had trouble with the gossip that followed Jesus.

Four places in the Gospels, Jesus is accused of casting out demons through the power of Beelzebul, “Baal the Prince .” The demonic was the commonly accepted explanation, the cause of evil. Belief in the power of demons to cause disease and disability, demon possession transcended religious and national boundaries. It was a cultural aspect of life in the time of Jesus found throughout the Near East. For Jews, however, all demons were viewed as rivals to the authority of God and extensions of the spiritual power of evil known as Satan or Beelzebul. Elaine Pagels, *The Origin of Satan*, describes an evolution of the demonic in Jewish belief. What began as the demonization of outsiders, Gentile invaders, and pagans was eventually applied to fellow Jews who happened to belong to the wrong party or hold to a different theology.

Jesus was demonized. The repetition of nasty gossip by the Gospels must have had a purpose. It seems that Jesus' friends could have waved off the charge by ignoring it. Why should an act of healing draw the charge that Jesus was in league with demons? Early Christians identified a gospel proclaimed by the enemies of Jesus. Even the accusation of being in league with Beelzebul acknowledged that the ministry of Jesus was effective. According to Pagels, the early Christians were also countering the demonization of Jesus by demonizing the Jewish leaders. Thus, the Scribes and Pharisees were not only wrong; they were evil.

The whole matter seems laughable in the modern world. Steven Colbert had fun with an episode on Pat Robertson's 700 Club. A woman asked for spiritual advice. She buys a lot of merchandise from Goodwill Industries and was told that some of the things she brings into her house might be infected with demons. She asked whether she should exorcize the demons before bringing the items into her house. Interestingly, Robertson affirmed the threat of demons attaching themselves to things that come out of other people's lives, but denied that all Goodwill merchandise was demon possessed.

One of my teachers Wayne Ward studied with the German New Testament scholar Rudolf Bultmann, whose controversial approach was called demythologization. He explained that the modern scientific world no longer accepts demons as the explanation of evil. Ward had to acknowledge that Southern Baptists still believed in demons. Walter Wink carried Bultmann's work to the next level. Although he denied that the first century concept of demons accurately describes the source of evil, he found that early Christians and Jews were dealing with a real threat. Evil is not just the simple decision and act of a bad person. Evil becomes personified in communities and movements corrupted by power and devoted to control.

Good and evil are confused in the process of demonizing the enemy. Providing someone the gift of speech is not evil, but somehow the process of demonizing one's enemy loses sight of the distinction between good and evil. Religion is a powerful force in the politics of war. Deliberately taking the life of another human being is universally denounced as murder by every culture, unless the act of killing can be justified. Always there are exceptions to the rule of murder. Ancient justice allowed retaliation, an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, a life for a life. Even when justified in retaliation for violence done to oneself or one's family taking another life has never been easy. Rather than humanize one's enemy it became necessary to demonize them. If they are driven by a supernatural power of evil and if they are less than human, extermination of the vermin is the greater good. Hitler's final solution of the Jewish problem for Germany is the classic example. First the Jews were blamed for the economic and social problems of the nation. Then they were brutally driven from their homes and businesses and their houses of worship were destroyed. Finally, they were taken to the gas chambers.

The world was shocked by the liberation of Auschwitz and the witnesses who survived the Holocaust. How can one human being do this to another? The question was appropriate to the reality of the time. Trials and executions took place as a result of the discovery. Some German theologians found comfort in the early Christian notion of demon possession. The nation was possessed. A German pastor commented, "You cannot understand what has happened in Germany unless you understand that we were possessed by demonic powers. I do not say this to excuse ourselves, because *we let ourselves be possessed.*" Karl Barth interrupted his colleagues, "Why all this talk about demons? Why not just admit we have been political idiots?"

Isaiah of Jerusalem held up a mirror to the behavior of his national family and accused his people of distorted vision: "Ah, you who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter!" More than five centuries later, religious leaders witnessed compassion and healing in the ministry of Jesus and judged that the good he was doing was really evil. But don't be surprised. The world may have given up belief in demons, but it has not given up the convenience of demonizing the people that it wants to destroy. I wish that I could say with a straight face that this is the practice only of bad people and evil powers in our world. Then I would have to ignore much of Christian history, centuries of persecuting Jews, the Crusades and slaughter of Muslims, the Inquisition and the torture and execution of thousands of Spanish Jews and Christians labeled as heretics, Luther's slaughter of the peasants in revolt against their masters, Calvin's order of the execution of Michael Servetus for unitarian theology, the Salem witch hunts, the McCarthy hearings, shall I go on?

People are tortured and slaughtered because they are demonized. The victims of demonization then find justification for revenge by demonizing their enemies. The chain reaction goes on. In the chaos and confusion I hear the voice from the mountaintop in Matthew: "I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for

those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have?"