

EVIL IS STILL A FOUR-LETTER WORD

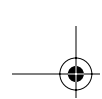
The New Problem of Evil



In the new heaven and new earth, according to Revelation 21, there will be no more sea. Many people feel disappointed by this. Looking at the sea, sailing on it and swimming in it are perennial delights, at least for those who don't have to make a living by negotiating its treacherous habits and untimely bad moods. As a regular sea watcher and occasional swimmer, I share this sense of surprise and disappointment. But within a larger biblical worldview we can begin to make sense of it.

The sea is of course part of the original creation. Indeed, it appears earlier in Genesis 1 than the dry land, and both the land and then the animals come out of it. It is part of the world which God says, at the end of the six days, is "very good." But already by Genesis 6, with the story of Noah, the rising waters of the flood pose

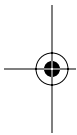


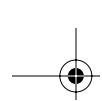


a threat to the entire world that God has made, from which Noah and his floating zoo are rescued by the warnings of God's grace. From within the good creation itself, it seems, come forces of chaos harnessed to enact God's judgment.

We then hear no more of the sea until we find Moses and the Israelites standing in front of it, chased by the Egyptians and at their wits' end. God makes a way through the sea to rescue his people and once more to judge the pagan world; it is the same story, in a way, though now in a new mode. And as later Israelite poets look back on this decisive, formative moment in the story of God's people, they celebrate it in terms of the old Canaanite creation myths: YHWH (the biblical name of the God of Israel) is King over the flood (Ps 29:10); when the floods lift up their voices, YHWH on high is mightier than they are (Ps 93:3-4); the waters saw YHWH and were afraid, and they went backwards (Ps 77:16; 114:3, 5). Thus, when the psalmist describes his despair in terms of being up to his neck in deep waters, as in Psalm 69, this is held within a context where YHWH is already known as the one who rules the raging of the sea and even makes it praise him (Ps 69:1, 34).

But then we find in the vision of Daniel 7, a passage of enormous influence on early Christianity, that the monsters who make war on the saints of the Most High come up out of the sea. The sea has become the dark, fearsome place from which evil emerges, threatening God's people like a giant tidal wave threatening those who live near the coast. For the people of ancient Israel, who were not for the most part seafarers, the sea came to represent evil and



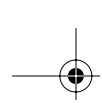


chaos, the dark power that might do to God's people what the flood had done to the whole world, unless God rescued them as he rescued Noah.

It may be (though this might take us too far off our track) that one of the reasons we love the sea is because, like watching a horror movie, we can observe its enormous power and relentless energy from a safe distance. Alternately, if we go sailing or swimming on it, we can use its energy without being engulfed by it. I suspect there are plenty of Ph.D. theses already written on what's going on psychologically when we do this, and I haven't read them. We would, of course, find our delight turning quickly to horror if, as we stood watching the waves, a tsunami were suddenly to come crashing down on us, just as our thrill at watching a gangster movie in the theater would turn to screaming panic if a couple of heavily armed thugs came out of the screen and threatened us personally. The sea and the movie, seen from a safe distance, can be a way of saying to ourselves that, yes, evil may well exist—there may be chaos out there somewhere—but at least, thank goodness, we are all right, we are not immediately threatened by it. And perhaps this is also saying that, yes, evil may well exist inside ourselves as well—there may be forces of evil and chaos deep inside us of which we are at best only subliminally aware—but they are under control: the sea wall will hold, the cops will get the gangsters in the end.

Of course in the movies of the last decade or two, things may not work out so well, which may tell us something about how we now perceive evil both in the world and in ourselves. That percep-



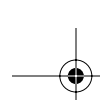


tion, and the Christian attempt to understand it, to critique it and to address it, is the subject of this book. I began by wanting to write something about the meaning of Jesus' crucifixion; having written at length about Jesus' resurrection, it seemed the appropriate balancing subject. But the more I thought about that, the more I realized that in order to speak meaningfully about the cross one must say at least something about evil, the problem which, in classic theology, the cross has decisively addressed.

But as soon as I thought of speaking about evil, I realized that this is a timely, not to say urgent, topic. Everybody is talking about evil. As I said in the preface, after September 11, 2001, President Bush and British Prime Minister Tony Blair both spoke of "evil" as the attack's main cause and declared their intention of dealing with it. British Prime Minister Tony Blair declared ambitiously that we should aim at nothing short of ridding the world of evil. The day I drafted this chapter, I glanced sleepily at a newspaper being read in the seat in front of me in an airplane and saw an enormous headline inviting us to look at "the evil faces" of two members of the so-called Real Irish Republican Army. The public and press cried "Evil!" at the terrible murder of two little girls in the English town of Soham in 2003, and we say the same about the sudden rise of gun crime in the streets of our cities or the violence which followed the devastation of New Orleans by Hurricane Katrina in August 2005.

The odd thing about this new concentration on evil is that it seems to have taken many people, not least politicians and the media, by surprise. Of course they would say that there has always

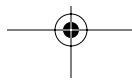


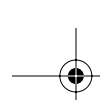


been evil, but it seems to have come home to the Western world in a new way. The older discussions of evil tended to be abstract, with so-called natural evil (represented by the tidal wave) and so-called moral evil (represented by the gangsters). Just as Auschwitz posed the problem in a new way for the previous generation (at least for those who allowed themselves to reflect on it), September 11, 2001, and the “natural” disasters of the tsunami in the Indian Ocean and the hurricane on the American Gulf Coast, have now jumpstarted a fresh wave of discussion about what evil is, where it comes from, how to understand it and what it does to your worldview, whether you’re a Christian or an atheist or anything else. And, not least, what if anything can be done about it.

From the Christian point of view, there will be in that sense no more sea in the new heavens and new earth. We are committed, within the worldview generated by the gospel of Jesus, to affirming that evil will finally be conquered, will be done away with. But understanding why it’s still there as it is, and how God has dealt with it and will deal with it, how the cross of Jesus has anything to do with that, how it affects us here and now, and what we can do here and now to be part of God’s victory over evil—all these are deep and dark mysteries which the sudden flurry of new interest in evil opens up as questions, and to which many of us, myself included, have not been used to giving much attention, let alone to offering answers.

I put it like this because (if you see what I mean) I am not an expert on evil. There are those who do engage in that dubious specialization. I have learned from them already and I hope to do so



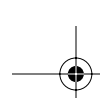


in the future. I am, to this extent, standing in the noble tradition of continuing my theological education in public. I am in implicit dialogue at various points with some recent writing on the subject, though I make no pretense to have mastered the field. What I want to do can be seen in three stages, each of which subdivides into a further three.

First, I will try to lay out the problem as it appears in our contemporary culture (chapter one) and to place beside it the classic statements of God's saving justice in the Jewish and Christian traditions, focused particularly on the cross of Jesus Christ (chapters two and three). Then I will propose a way of speaking Christianly and creatively about the problem of evil and about what, under God, Christians are supposed to be doing about it (chapter four). At that point I shall raise three areas of great contemporary interest in each of which the problem of evil, if not articulated and addressed, will cause terrible difficulties and dangers: the questions of global empire, of criminal justice and punishment, and of war. In the final chapter I shall continue to examine these by considering the corporate as well as the deeply personal meaning of forgiveness.

In this initial chapter, then, I shall try to describe some ways in which the problem of evil presents itself today in a new form; or, to put it another way, I shall argue that politicians and media have tried to live as though evil weren't so much of a problem after all, and that they are having to wake up to the fact that *evil* is still a four-letter word. I will then suggest that the new ways in which the problem of evil has been articulated within postmodernity—and





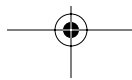
postmodernity is, importantly, precisely a restatement of the problem—are deficient in certain important respects. I then want to propose that if we are to see more clearly what is going on, we need to factor certain things into our understanding which are normally screened out. Finally, I shall suggest ways in which this question impinges on Christian thinking.

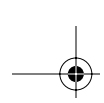
THE NEW PROBLEM OF EVIL

So to my first and longest section: the new problem of evil. Why “new”?

The older ways of talking about evil tended to pose the puzzle as a metaphysical or theological conundrum. If there is a god, and if he is (as classic Jewish, Muslim and Christian theology all claim) a good, wise and supremely powerful god, then why is there such a thing as evil? Even if you’re an atheist, you face the problem the other way around: is this world a sick joke, which contains some things that make us think it’s a wonderful place and other things which make us think it’s an awful place, or what? You could of course refer to this as the problem of good rather than the problem of evil: if the world is the chance assembly of accidental phenomena, why is there so much that we want to praise and celebrate? Why is there beauty, love and laughter?

The problem of evil in its present metaphysical form has been around for at least two-and-a-half centuries. The earthquake that shattered Lisbon on All Saints’ Day 1755 shattered as well the easy optimism represented by the previous generation. Think of Joseph Addison’s great hymn, “The Spacious Firmament on High,” with

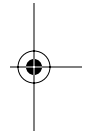


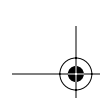


its repeated affirmation that all who look at the sky, the sun, the moon, the stars and the planets are bound to realize that they are the good workmanship of a good creator:

In reason's ear they all rejoice,
And utter forth a glorious voice,
For ever singing as they shine,
"The hand that made us is divine."

We may venture to doubt whether Addison could have written that after 1755 or, if he had, whether anyone would have been quite so willing to sing it. We who have heard of so many further disasters, both natural and man-made, can only perhaps continue to sing it either because we have learned a hard-won natural theology in the teeth of the negative counterevidence or because we have not stopped to think. But my point is that from 1755 on, as Susan Neiman has shown recently in her brilliant book *Evil in Modern Thought*, the history of European philosophy can best be told as the history of people trying to come to terms with evil. Lisbon precipitated the now standard distinction between natural evil (the tidal wave, the earthquake, the hurricane) and moral evil (the gangsters, the terrorists), and that has remained a feature; but the wrestlings of the great enlightenment thinkers like Voltaire and Rousseau, and the massive schemes of Kant and Hegel themselves, can be understood as ways of coping with evil. And when we come further forward to Marx and Nietzsche and to the twentieth-century thinkers (not least Jewish thinkers) who have wrestled with the question of meaning following the Holocaust, we find a

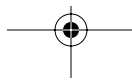


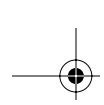


continuous thread of philosophical attempts to say what has to be said about the world as a whole and about evil within it.

Unfortunately (in my view) the line of thought which has emerged from this, and which has characterized the popular understanding of the Western world as a whole, and of Britain and the United States perhaps in particular, is very unsatisfactory. I refer to the doctrine of progress, as expounded loftily by Hegel and as we find, in watered-down forms, as a constant in much contemporary thinking. Hegel suggested, more or less, that the world was progressing by means of the dialectical process: first (A), then its opposite (B), then a synthesis of the two (C) and so on. Everything was moving toward a better, fuller, more perfect end; and if there had to be suffering on the way, if there had to be problems as the dialectic unwound, so be it; such things are the broken eggs from which delicious omelets are being made.

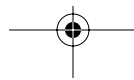
This belief in automatic progress, which we find at the same time in poets such as Keats, was in the air in the pantheism of the Romantic movement and in the philosophy of Malthus which was so influential in generating and sustaining the Western belief that Europe and North America were on the leading edge of human development, and that this justified the imperial economic expansion which was such a feature of the nineteenth century. This belief, already well established in the prevailing culture, was given an enormous boost by the popularization of Charles Darwin's research and its application to fields considerably more diverse than the study of birds and mammals on the Galapagos Islands. The heady combination of technological achievement, medical ad-

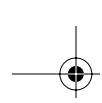




vances, Romantic pantheism, Hegelian progressive Idealism and social Darwinism created a climate of thought in which, to this day, a great many people—not least in public life—have lived and moved. In this climate, the fact that we live “in this day and age” means that certain things are now to be expected; we envision a steady march toward freedom and justice, conceived often in terms of the slow but sure triumph of Western-style liberal democracy and soft versions of socialism. Not to put too fine a point on it, when people say that certain things are unacceptable “now that we’re living in the twenty-first century,” they are appealing to an assumed doctrine of progress—and of progress, what’s more, in a particular direction. We are taught, often by the tone of voice of the media and the politicians rather than by explicit argument, to bow down before this progress. It is unstoppable. Who wants to be left behind, to be behind the times, to be yesterday’s people? The colloquial phrase “That’s so last-year” has become the ultimate putdown: “progress” (by which we often simply mean a variation in fashion) has become the single most important measuring rod in society and culture.

This belief in progress has received at least three quite different challenges, and it is remarkable that it has survived them all and still flourishes. For many, the First World War destroyed the old liberal idealism. When Karl Barth wrote his first commentary on Romans in 1919, his main message was that it was time to listen for the fresh word of God coming to us from outside instead of relying on the steady advance of the kingdom of God from within the historical process. Fyodor Dostoyevsky, in *The Brothers Kara-*

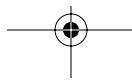
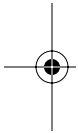


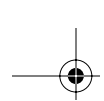


mazov, has a haunting passage in which he considers the possibility that the world might advance toward perfection at the cost of torturing a single innocent child to death, and he concludes that the price is already too high. Auschwitz destroyed, one would have thought forever, the idea that European civilization at least was a place where nobility, virtue and humanizing reason could flourish and abound. The deep roots of the Holocaust in several strands of European thought—not least Hegel himself, who regarded Judaism as a manifestation of the wrong sort of religion—have to be unraveled and deconstructed.

Thus, as I said, it seems remarkable that the belief in progress still survives and triumphs. The nineteenth century thought it had gotten rid of original sin; of course, it had to find replacements, and Marx and Freud offered some, producing explanatory systems and offering solutions to match: new doctrines of redemption which mirror and parody the Christian one. And somehow, despite the horrific battles of Mons and the Somme during World War I, despite Auschwitz and Buchenwald, despite Dostoyevsky and Barth, people still continue to this day to suppose that the world is basically a good place and that its problems are more or less soluble by technology, education, “development” in the sense of “Westernization,” and the application, to more and more regions, of Western democracy—and, according to taste, of either Western social-democratic ideals or Western capitalism, or indeed a mixture of both.

This state of affairs has led to three things in particular which I see as characterizing the new problem of evil. First, we ignore evil



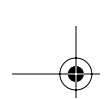


when it doesn't hit us in the face. Second, we are surprised by evil when it does. Third, we react in immature and dangerous ways as a result. Let me unpack each of these in turn.

First, we ignore evil except when it hits us in the face. Some philosophers and psychologists have tried to make out that evil is simply the shadow side of good; that it's part of the necessary balance in the world, and that we must avoid too much dualism, too much polarization between good and evil. That, of course, leads straight to Nietzsche's philosophy of power and by that route back to Hitler and Auschwitz. When you pass beyond good and evil, you pass into the realm where might is right, and where anything that reminds you of the old moral values—for instance, a large Jewish community—stands in your way and must be obliterated.

But we don't need to look back sixty years to see this. Western politicians knew perfectly well that Al-Qaeda was a force to be reckoned with; but nobody really wanted to take it too seriously until it was too late. We all know that chronic national debt in many of the poorer countries of the globe is a massive sore on the conscience of the world, but our politicians—even the sympathetic ones—don't really want to take it too seriously because from our point of view the world is ticking on more or less all right, and we don't want to rock the economic boat. We want to trade, to build up our economies. "Choice" is an absolute good for everyone; therefore if we offer both Coca-Cola and Pepsi to starving, AIDS-ridden Africa, exploiting a huge untapped market while adding tooth decay to its other chronic problems, we are furthering its well-being. We all know that sexual licentiousness creates



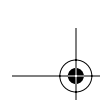


massive unhappiness in families and individual lives, but we live in the twenty-first century, don't we, and we don't want to say that adultery is wrong. (We should perhaps note that only two generations ago many communities regarded adultery the way they now regard pedophilia, which is worrying on both counts.)

I grew up at a time when censorship was being dismantled right, left and center. Censorship, we were told, was the only real obscenity. Whatever people wanted to do or say was basically good; we should celebrate whatever instincts we found inside ourselves; people shouldn't be allowed to control what other people did. Indeed to this day the word *control* is spoken with a sneer, as in the phrase "control freak," as though the basic moral norm was for there to be no control—just as the basic slogan of large Mc-World-type companies is that there should be "no boundaries." We live in a world where politicians, media pundits, economists and even, alas, some late-blooming liberal theologians speak as if humankind is basically all right, the world is basically all right, and there's nothing we should make a fuss about.

So then, second, we are surprised by evil when it hits us in the face. We think of small towns as pleasant, safe places and are shocked to the core when two little girls are murdered by someone they obviously knew and trusted. We have no categories to cope with that; but neither do we have categories to cope with the larger renewed evils, with renewed tribalism and genocide in Africa or the renewed "Balkanization" of the Balkans themselves. We like to fool ourselves that the world is basically all right, now that so many countries are either democratic or moving that way and now



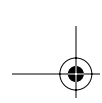


that globalization has in theory enabled us to do so much, to profit so much, to know so much. Then we are puzzled as well as shocked by the human tidal wave that crashes on our shore, the seemingly endless tragic wall of humanity that comes to Western countries seeking asylum, bringing with it several (though not, we may suppose, more than a small fraction) who are looking not for safety from persecution or tyranny but rather for the secrecy necessary to further their terrorist intentions.

Indeed terrorism itself takes us by surprise, since we have become used to imagining that all serious questions should be settled in a round-table discussion, and we are puzzled that some people still think that doesn't work, and that they need to use more drastic methods of getting their point across. And ultimately we are shocked again and again by the fact of death. That which our forebears took for granted (having large families because a sudden epidemic could carry off half of them in a few days) is banished from our minds, except in horror stories. Similarly, death is banished from our societies, as fewer and fewer people die in their own homes and beds. And it is banished, too, from our deep-seated societal imagination, as the relentless quest for sexual pleasure—and sex, of course, is a way of laughing in the face of death—occupies so much energy and enthusiasm, and dulls the aching reminders that come flooding back with every funeral we see, every murder the television brings into our living rooms. We ignore evil when it doesn't hit us in the face, and so we are shocked and puzzled when it does.

Third, as a result, we react in immature and dangerous ways.

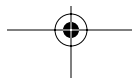


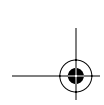


Having decreed that almost all sexual activity is good and right and commendable, we are all the more shrill about the one remaining taboo, pedophilia. It is as though all the moral indignation which ought to be spread more evenly and thoughtfully across many other spheres of activity has all been funneled on to this one crime. Child abuse is of course stomach-turningly disgusting, but I believe we should beware of the unthinking moralism which is so eager to condemn it simply because we hate the thought of it rather than on properly thought-out grounds. “Morality” like that can be, and often is, manipulated. Lashing out at something you simply know by intuition is wrong may be better than tolerating it. But it is hardly the way to build a stable moral society.



One of the most obvious and worrying instances of this phenomenon was the reaction to the events of September 11, 2001, in the United States (and to a degree in the United Kingdom as well). That appalling day rightly provoked horror and anger. But the official response was exactly the kind of knee-jerk, unthinking, immature lashing out which gets us nowhere. Let me not be misunderstood. Thousands of innocent victims met, of course, a tragic, horrible and totally undeserved death. The terrorist actions of Al-Qaeda were and are unmitigatedly evil. But the astonishing naivety which decreed that the United States as a whole was a pure, innocent victim, so that the world could be neatly divided up into evil people (particularly Arabs) and good people (particularly Americans and Israelis), and that the latter had a responsibility now to punish the former, is a large-scale example of what I’m

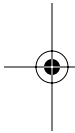


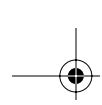


talking about—just as it is immature and naive to suggest the mirror image of this view, namely that the Western world is guilty in all respects, and that all protesters and terrorists are therefore completely justified in what they do. In the same way, to suggest that all who possess guns should be locked up or that everyone should carry guns so that good people can shoot bad ones before they get to their tricks is simply a failure to think deeply about what’s going on. The second-stage horror of the flooding of New Orleans—the violence of those with nothing to lose and the eager buying up of guns by those who wanted to protect themselves and their property—should, but may not, teach us a lesson.

Lashing out at those you perceive to be “evil” in the hope of dealing with the problem—say, dropping copious bombs on Iraq or Afghanistan because of September 11—is in fact the practical counterpart of those philosophical theories that purport to “solve” the problem of evil. Various writers have suggested, for instance, that God allows evil because it creates the special conditions in which virtue can flourish. But the thought that God decided to permit Auschwitz because some heroes would emerge is hardly a solution to the problem. In the same way, the thousands of innocent civilians who died in Iraq and Afghanistan bear mute testimony to the fact that often such “solutions” simply make the problem worse—and I don’t just mean because they harden and indeed generate opposition. Just as you cannot eliminate evil by act of Congress or by a philosophical argument, so you cannot do so with high explosives.

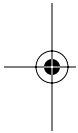
The immature reactions to evil can perhaps be seen close up if

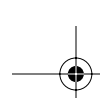




we ask ourselves how we react to evil in our own lives or immediate circumstances. What are you angry about right now? Who has done something which you feel is unjust or unfair? How do you cope with it? How do you come to terms with it? We react so often in one of two ways. We can project evil out on to others, generating a culture of blame: it's always everyone else's fault, it's society's fault, it's the government's fault, and I am an innocent victim. Claiming the status of victim has become the new multicultural sport, as people scramble for the moral high ground in which they can emerge as pure and clean, and everybody else is to blame.

Alternatively, we can project evil onto ourselves and imagine we are to blame for it all. This is one of the normal causes of depression; but the issue is wider than just psychological states. Politically we oscillate between those who tell us that all the ills we face are the fault of someone else—terrorists, asylum-seekers, drug dealers, criminals—and those who tell us, in the classic pop psychology of the 1960s and 1970s, that we are all guilty, that the terrorists are terrorists because of what we've allowed to happen in their countries, that the asylum seekers are fleeing the effects of our previous foreign policies, that the drug dealers deal in drugs because we've destroyed their other indigenous livelihoods, and that the criminals are the victims of the affluent society. The fact that there is more than a grain of truth in both caricatured sides of this equation doesn't help. The culture of blaming everyone else (resulting in lawsuits, victim exaltation and self-righteousness) and the culture of blaming oneself (resulting in depression and moral and social paralysis) are likewise immature and inadequate





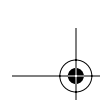
responses to the problem of evil as it presents itself, not so much in our metaphysical discussions as on our streets and television screens. This is the current new problem of evil. We have discovered that *evil* is still, after all, a four-letter word; but we don't have a clue what to do with it or about it. And, let me add, ignoring it isn't an answer either.

I shall discuss a little later the question of how we begin to grow up in our reaction to evil: how we take account of it in every dimension and arrive at a more mature worldview which will allow us to address it more satisfactorily. But I now want to turn to look at the attempt to address evil, indeed in a sense to base a worldview on it, that we know as "postmodernity."

THE NEW NIHILISM: POSTMODERNITY

I have spoken and written elsewhere about the postmodern turn in literature, culture and theology, and there is no space here to develop this in any depth. Suffice it to say that there have been many movements in contemporary European and American culture since World War II in which all claims to truth, all claims to power and all claims to disinterested action or thought are deemed to be motivated in fact by selfish desires into which they can be translated or "deconstructed." "It's all about money," said Marx; "It's all about sex," said Freud; "It's all about power," said Nietzsche; and, though much of Europe scoffed at them for the first half of the twentieth century, the second half saw them come into their own in areas as diverse as literary criticism, architecture and sociology. Truth is under attack on all sides, even as we insist more and more

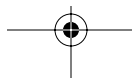
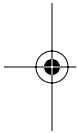


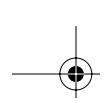


on truthfulness in terms of record keeping and checking up on one another. As Bernard Williams showed in his book *Truth and Truthfulness*, this self-contradictory state of affairs—increased demands for truth and increased difficulty in discerning it—is the result of a slow-growing but now all-pervasive culture of suspicion.

Though postmodernity has roots in thinkers from a century or more ago, the particular way in which it has arisen and the particular form it has taken has a lot to do with the horror of the Holocaust. The philosopher Theodor Adorno declared that one cannot write poetry after Auschwitz, and it may be that, at one level at least, the postmodern theorists were saying that one cannot tell the truth either. If mainstream European culture could produce the Holocaust, surely we should suspect everything else as well. But postmodernity doesn't stop there. The problem of evil which it highlights so remorselessly goes deeper than simply suggesting that all human claims are flawed; it deconstructs humans themselves. There is no longer an "I": just a swirling mass of emotions, of signifiers, of impulses, meaning that "I" am in a constant state of flux. The moral imperative left over from low-grade existentialism (that one should be true to one's deepest self) collides with the postmodern claim that one's deepest self is a fluid, unstable thing: Jazz bassist Charles Mingus says of himself in his autobiography, "I am three. . . . There's all kinds of emotion to play in music, but the one I'm trying to play is very difficult. It's the truth of what I am. It's not difficult to play the mechanics of it, but it's difficult because I'm changing all the time."

This, too, I think, is a kind of response to the problem of evil.

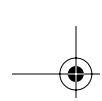




Postmodernism, in recognizing that we are all deeply flawed, avoids any return to a classic doctrine of original sin by claiming that humans have no fixed “identity” and hence no fixed responsibility. You can’t escape evil within postmodernity, but you can’t find anybody to take the blame either. We should not be surprised that one of the socio-cultural phenomena which characterize postmodernity is that of major disasters for which nobody takes the blame, such as when a horrific train crash is traced to faults in the line which were well-known and not repaired months in advance but for which no single company executive, nor even a board, can be held responsible. Postmodernity encourages a cynical approach: nothing will get better and there’s nothing you can do about it. Hardly surprisingly, this has produced a steady rise in the suicide rate, not least among young people who (one might have thought) had so much to look forward to, but who had imbibed postmodernity through every pore. Not that this is new. Epictetus, that hard-bitten first-century philosopher, would have understood, even though he would have scoffed at the intellectual posturing underneath it all.

After this it may come as a surprise to learn that in all sorts of ways I believe postmodernity is to be welcomed. It offers an analysis of evil which the mainstream culture I described earlier still resists; it deconstructs, in particular, the dangerous ideology of “progress.” As I have argued elsewhere, I regard the main function of postmodernity under God to be the preaching of the doctrine of the Fall (the truth of a deep and fatal flaw within human nature) to the modernist, post-eighteenth-century arrogance that sup-



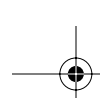


poses it has solved the world's problems. But in addition to the cynicism I just mentioned, there are two particular problems with the postmodern analysis of evil which should drive us to look further and deeper.

First, postmodern analysis is essentially, for the reasons already given, dehumanizing. There is no moral dignity left because there is nobody left to bear the blame. To shoulder responsibility is the last virtue left open to those who have forsworn all other kinds. To have even that disallowed is to reduce human beings to mere ciphers. Most of us, not least the genuine victims of crime and abuse, find that both counter-intuitive and disgusting. Human beings are (within reason and within certain limits) responsible agents and must continue to be regarded as such. Here I find most moving the testimony of George Steiner, who at the end of his intellectual autobiography, *Errata*, declares that though he cannot believe for sure in God, he can be quite sure that there is such a thing as evil and that human beings must take their fair share of responsibility for it. That is a plea for a gloomy but authentic humanism at the end of an inhuman century.

Second, the analysis of evil offered by postmodernity allows for no redemption. There is no way out, no chance of repentance and restoration, no way back to the solid ground of truth from the quicksands of deconstruction. Postmodernity may be correct to say that evil is real, powerful and important, but it gives us no real clue as to what we should do about it. It is therefore vital that we look elsewhere, and broaden the categories of the problem from the shallow modernist puzzles on the one hand and the nihilistic





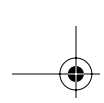
deconstructive analyses on the other. This brings us to the third section of this chapter.

TOWARD A NUANCED VIEW OF EVIL

When we look for larger, broader, more sustainable analyses of evil, we find of course that the major worldviews have all had ways of addressing it. The Buddhist says that the present world is an illusion and that the aim of human life is to escape it. This has several affinities with classic Platonism, though Plato was concerned as well that actual justice and virtue should work their way out into the world of space, time and matter, even though reality lay elsewhere. The Hindu says that evils that afflict people (and indeed animals) in the present life are to be explained in terms of wrongs committed in a previous life and expiated through an obedient following of one's karma in the present—a worldview which attains a deeply satisfying solution at one level at the cost of enormous and counterintuitive problems at other levels.

The Marxist, selectively elaborating some aspects of Hegel's thought, says that the world is moving in a determined way toward the dictatorship of the proletariat, and the problems on the way, not least the absolute need for violent revolution, are the growing pains which will be justified by the final result. The glorious end will validate the messy means; when you taste the omelet, you will understand why the eggs needed breaking. The Muslim, if I have understood Islam correctly, says that the world is in a state of wickedness because the message of Allah through Muhammad has not yet spread to all people; the solution is for Islam

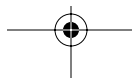


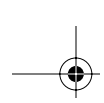


to be brought to the world, generating a sharp distinction between the great majority of Muslims who see this as a peaceful process and the small minority who want to achieve it through *jihad*.

What might a Christian view of evil, or for that matter a Jewish view, look like? How would it differ from any of the above? That is of course the subject of this book, and I defer even the start of an answer to later. But some notes may be appropriate to help us think about what should be included within a serious analysis of evil. There are three elements which need to be factored into our thinking at this point.

The first element is to recognize the flaw in assuming that the Western type of democracy is perfect, complete, the climax of a long process of wise and noble libertarianism stretching back to Magna Carta. Basically this contemporary assumption—a sort of low-grade version of that way of telling modern history which implies that things always automatically proceed in a liberalizing direction—has all kinds of problems, not least that present democratic institutions are themselves in a state of crisis. In the United States, we see a politics of the super-rich and a seemingly unstoppable belief in the right of the United States to rule the world, whether by economic or military means. In my own country of Great Britain, we have an increasingly presidential style of government, a marginalized parliament and a disaffected electorate. In Europe, we have multiple ironies and tensions, corruptions and deceits, which are neither addressed nor solved by phrasing the debates in terms of a simplistic mudslinging match between Europhiles and Europhobes.



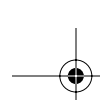


Are we really so sure that Western-style government is the only or even the best type? For myself, I still agree with Churchill that democracy is the worst possible form of government, except for all those other forms that are tried from time to time. I certainly do not want to live under any other system. But I find myself increasingly wondering whether, to some extent at least, it is right to expect, say, Afghanistan or Iraq to adopt a version of it. What I am pleading for is a recognition that simply waving a flag called “Western democracy” doesn’t actually solve the problem of evil as it presents itself in our corporate and social environment.

The second element which must be factored in is the psychological one. The famous American psychotherapist M. Scott Peck was for many years an agnostic. He learned his psychiatry according to the standard model in which there was no such thing as evil. But at around the same time as, to his own surprise, he came into the Christian faith, he came to recognize that in some cases at least it was not enough to regard certain patients, or in some cases the families of certain patients, as simply ill or muddled or misguided. He was forced to come to terms with a larger, darker power, for which the only word was *evil*. He wrote his book *People of the Lie* to articulate this unpopular viewpoint.

Of course, it has been recognized at least since Aristotle that there is such a thing as weakness of will, *akrasia* in Aristotle’s terminology. We all know what it is to intend to do something good and to do something bad instead. What psychiatry, according to Peck, ought to confront is the fact that it is possible for humans to be taken over by evil, to believe a lie and then to live by it, to forget

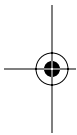


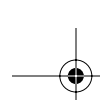


that it is a lie and to make it the foundation of one's being. Whether the difference between ordinary weakness of will and being taken over by a lie so totally that you fully believe it is a difference of degree or quality I cannot say, though I suspect it is the latter. What I think we must come to terms with is that when we talk about evil we must recognize, as neither modernity nor postmodernity seems to me to do, that there is such a thing as human evil and that it takes various forms. These forms include the state in which the people concerned are absolutely convinced, and will often argue very persuasively, that they are not only in the right but are the ones who are leading the way.

In *People of the Lie* Peck argues, against all his traditional liberal education and previous understanding, that there is such a thing as a force or forces of evil which are supra-personal, supra-human, which appear to take over humans as individuals or, in some cases, as entire societies. Using the language of the demonic is so fraught with problems and so routinely sneered at within liberal modernism that it might seem dangerous even to mention it. Yet many of the most serious analysts of the last century have been forced to use this language as a way of getting at, and trying to account for, what happened. The most memorable in my mind is Thomas Mann, in his great and harrowing novel *Doctor Faustus*. His Faust-character, it gradually emerges, is an image of Germany itself, selling its soul to the devil and finding itself taken over by a power greater than its own, a terrible power which would destroy many others but finally would destroy itself.

We have only begun, I think, to work seriously at understand-

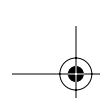




ing this element, this dimension, in the problem of evil. Neither modernism nor postmodernism cares for it, and many Christian theologians, aware of the dangers of an unhealthy interest in the demonic, steer well clear of it, as indeed I myself have done in most of my work. But as Walter Wink has argued strongly in his major work on the powers, there is a great deal to be said for the view that all corporate institutions have a kind of corporate soul, an identity which is greater than the sum of its parts, which can actually tell the parts what to do and how to do it. This leads to the view that in some cases at least, some of these corporate institutions—whether they be industrial companies, governments or even (God help us) churches—can become so corrupted with evil that the language of “possession” at a corporate level becomes the only way to explain the phenomena before us.

This leads to the third point, which was made movingly by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn when he returned to his native Russia after long years of exile. He greeted all the people he met on his journey across Russia, including those local bureaucrats who had tyrannized their fellow citizens under the Communist system but who had stayed on in office after 1989. Some objected: what was Solzhenitsyn doing fraternizing with these people who had been part of the evil system? No, he responded, the line between good and evil is never simply between “us” and “them.” The line between good and evil runs through each one of us. There is such a thing as wickedness, and we must distinguish between small and low-grade versions of it and large and terrible versions of it. We must not make the trivial mistake of supposing that a one-off petty



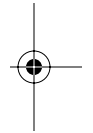


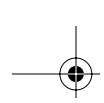
thief and a Hitler are exactly alike, that the same level of evil is attained by someone who cheats in an exam and by a Bin Laden. But nor must we suppose that the problem of evil can be either addressed or solved if we trivialize it in the other way, of labeling some people “good” and other people “bad.”

These three elements—a willingness to concede that we may not have got democracy right, and that it may not be the universal panacea for all ills; a recognition of a depth-dimension to evil, a supra-personal element within it; and the acknowledgement that the line between good and evil runs through us all—are necessary, I suggest, if we are to make any headway with our understanding of evil, whether at a metaphysical, theological, political or personal level. I hope to be able to factor them into the discussion in subsequent chapters. What I want now to do in concluding the present chapter is to say something briefly about the task ahead, not least from the Christian point of view.

CONCLUSION

The big question of our time, I have argued, can be understood in terms of how we address and live with the fact of evil in our world. Growing out of the traditional philosophers’ and theologians’ puzzlement, the problem of evil as we face it today on our streets and in our world won’t wait for clever metaphysicians to solve it. What are we going to *do*? If we are not to react in an immature way, either by ignoring evil, or by declaring it’s all the other person’s fault, or by taking the blame on ourselves, we need a deeper and more nuanced way of answering the question many (not least the politicians) are

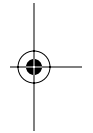


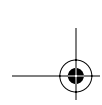


asking: Why is this happening? What, if anything, has God done about it? And what can we or should we be doing about it?

The Christian belief, growing out of its Jewish roots, is that the God who made the world remains passionately and compassionately involved with it. Classical Judaism and classical Christianity never held an immature or shallow view of evil, and it is one of the puzzles of the last few centuries how mainstream philosophers from Leibniz to Nietzsche could think and write about the problem of evil as though the Christian view could be marginalized or dismissed with cheap caricature. Were there no theologians to stand up and take issue? Did the case simply go by default?

In particular, there is a noble Christian tradition which takes evil so seriously that it warns against the temptation to “solve” it in any obvious way. If you offer an analysis of evil which leaves us saying, “Well, that’s all right then; we now see how it happens and what to do about it,” you have belittled the problem. I once heard a leading philosophical theologian trying to do that with Auschwitz, and it was squirmingly embarrassing. We cannot and must not soften the blow; we cannot and must not pretend that evil isn’t that bad after all. That is the way back to cheap modernism. As I said earlier, that is the intellectual counterpart to the immature political reaction of thinking that a few well placed bombs can eliminate “evil” from the world. No: for the Christian, the problem is how to understand and celebrate the goodness and God-giveness of creation and, at the same time, understand and face up to the reality and seriousness of evil. It is easy to “solve” the problem by watering down one side or the other, saying either that the world





isn't really God's good creation or that evil isn't really that bad after all. What I have argued in this chapter is that the problem isn't simply a matter of what we think of as philosophy or theology; the failure to address the question lies at the root of our puzzlement about several complex and urgent problems in the immediate political and social spheres.

The questions that ought to be occupying us as a society, never mind as a church, are these: How can we integrate the various insights about evil which the greatest thinkers and social commentators have offered? How can we offer a Christian critique of them where necessary? And how can we tell the Christian story in such a way that, without attempting to "solve" the problem in a simplistic way, we can nevertheless address it in a mature fashion, and in the middle of it come to a deeper and wiser faith in the creator and redeemer God whose all-conquering love will one day make a new creation in which the dark and threatening sea of chaos will be no more?

Noah's flood, after all, was a sign that even God the Creator was sorry that he had made the world. But, not least through the sign of the rainbow, it becomes the means of a new start—a new covenant. If we can work toward understanding and being the willing agents of both the divine tears over the world's evil and the fresh creativity that sends out the dove to find new olive branches emerging from the waters of chaos, we shall, I think, be on the right track. The sea is powerful, but God the Creator is more powerful still. *Evil* may still be a four-letter word. But so, thank God, is *love*.

