

*My Good, your Evil?*  
*The Question of Position in Judging Religious Violence*

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When U.S. President George W. Bush placed Iran, along with Iraq and North Korea, in a so-called Axis of Evil,<sup>1</sup> he was delivering a multi-layered assault on that country. At the political level, he was recalling the Axis Powers of the Second World War, in which the democratic Allied nations, including the United States, United Kingdom, Canada, and others were arrayed against the Nazis of Germany, the Fascists of Italy and the militarists of Japan. At another, religious, level he was calling to mind his deeply held Evangelical Christian conviction that there is good on one side, and evil on the other, and he was staking a claim for the United States being on the side of good.

A similar dynamic is at work when the clerics of Iran refer in their turn to the United States as “the Great Satan.”<sup>2</sup> In that instance, the United States is being placed on par with the source of all evil against the righteous Islamic world.

Those two positions illustrate what I want to discuss here today, the question of whether, from a religious perspective, one’s idea of what evil is depends on one’s hermeneutic starting point, whether it is possible to come to an understanding of evil that is independent of that starting point, and how the ‘good’ actions of one can become the ‘evil’ of another.

I mention only in passing that when selecting examples to serve as illustrations for this paper, I was unfortunately faced with an embarrassment of riches from the recent past. It was not necessary to delve into the annals of distant history to find religiously motivated evil, even without bringing such major events as 11 September 2001 into the discussion.

Further on, I shall be discussing three cases of religiously motivated evil, so-called: the assassination of Israeli Prime Minister Rabin in 1995, the violent anti-abortion campaigns in the United States, and the recent murder of Dutch cinematographer Theo van Gogh, representing Jewish, Christian and Muslim examples, respectively. I am explicitly *not* discussing, although there is much to say on the subject, well-known instances with a geo-political focus in which religion plays a major role, such as the Israeli settlements in the West Bank, the Northern Ireland situation or the ongoing attempts to establish an Islamic state in the Indonesian province of Aceh, in all of which the good of one side is felt to be evil by the other.

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<sup>1</sup> Bush, George W., “State of the Union Address”, delivered to the United States Congress, 29 January 2002.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Haeri, Safa, “Khameneh’i says no to dialogue with the Great Satan,” Iran Press Service, ([http://www.iran-press-service.com/articles/khamenehi\\_1619816.html](http://www.iran-press-service.com/articles/khamenehi_1619816.html)).

### ***Good and Evil: a search for clarity***

In common usage, 'good' and 'evil' appear to be the antitheses of each other. 'Good' is *inter alia* "possessing desirable (...) moral qualities; virtuous, righteous, dutiful, pious or religious"<sup>3</sup> while 'evil' is *inter alia* "having bad qualities of a moral kind; wicked, corrupt, perverse, wrong, calamitous. (...) Anything that causes injury, pain or suffering; corruption of heart, or disposition to commit wickedness (...) The negation or contrary of good."<sup>4</sup>

Difficulties begin to arise, however, when examining the application of these definitions in practice.<sup>5</sup> To use an innocuous, non-religious analogy for the moment: amputation of a limb clearly causes injury and may cause pain or suffering, and should therefore fall under the classification of 'evil'. When applied to combat the onset of gangrene, however, the greater good it serves generally leads it to be categorised as a good.

Moving, however cautiously, onto more dangerous ground: the use of corporal punishment by parents is clearly categorised as evil – to greater and lesser degrees -- by a great many people. More than a few, however, are of the opinion that a 'corrective slap,' often supported by religious teaching,<sup>6</sup> prevents a greater evil by ensuring that the child grow into a disciplined, moral individual and member of the community.<sup>7</sup>

Nor, to the surprise of many, do holy writings, provide much clear guidance on the subject. In addition to the example just given, and such clear statements as "Thou shalt not kill"<sup>8</sup>, even when more accurately translated as 'Thou shalt not murder,' the Jewish and Christian scriptures are replete with examples of so-called justified violations, including in the latter case, homicide.

Even the words are a problem. While the translation of the word 'evil' in English from the Old Testament books is relatively straightforward from *ra'* or variants, several words serve as source text in the New Testament books for the single word 'evil' in the translations. They include Πονηρος,<sup>9</sup> Κακος, Βλασφημεω (speaking evil), φαυλος. In addition to not keeping faith with the original writers' intentions, and directing readers' understanding along a path

<sup>3</sup> *The New Webster Dictionary of the English Language, 1980 Edition.*

<sup>4</sup> Op cit.

<sup>5</sup> Readers will please note that all examples presented proceed on the basis of sincere conviction by the participants that what they are doing serves a just cause. Although the cynic may criticise this as a philosophical cheat on the part of the author, I believe that even if some of the participants in an action may have ulterior motives, there are always some who act sincerely, in full confidence of their 'right'.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Proverbs 23:14: "Thou shalt beat him with the rod, and shalt deliver his soul from hell." KJV

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Fugate, J. Richard, *What the Bible says about Child Training: Parenting with confidence*, Second Edition, Chs. 16, 17 & 20. (Elkton, MD: Holly Hall Publications) 1999.

<sup>8</sup> Exodus 20:13

<sup>9</sup> 1) full of labours, annoyances, hardships; a) pressed and harassed by labours; b) bringing toils, annoyances, perils; of a time full of peril to Christian faith and steadfastness; causing pain and trouble: 2) bad, of a bad nature or condition; a) in a physical sense: diseased or blind; b) in an ethical sense: evil wicked, bad. Strong's Concordance.

that owes as much if not more to the interpretation of the translator as it does to the intention of the author, grouping them all under the single translation, also muddies the waters in respect of defining what 'evil' is.

### The root of the problem

The lack of clarity in establishing what constitutes evil has led religious philosophers and theologians to attempt to trace the question back to first causes and to make inquiries into the *source* of evil in the world. The answers they have formulated have not led to a resolution of the question that is satisfactory to all concerned.

Among the solutions proposed, the most difficult has been that Evil emanates from God in some way. Thus, the Holocaust was a divine punishment according to, among others The Kaballah Centre.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, following the Boxing Day 2004 tsunamis in the Indian Ocean, many people, especially but not exclusively in the affected region, found a divine motivation behind that natural event.<sup>11</sup> For those religions that posit an omnipotent God, capable of doing anything, a God concerned with the trials and tribulations of humankind or at least of His own adherents, and not averse to intervening in history, this solution makes perfect sense. It does, however, require one to find a positive meaning in Evil, that God intends something Good to come forth from the Evil. The Holocaust, for example, thereby becomes a positive, perhaps corrective or disciplinary act that was set in motion by God for a particular purpose. Such a definition falls under what the Roman Catholics would call a Mystery and has been applied throughout the centuries to explain both personal and national catastrophes.

Such a solution is opposed by those for whom God is the ultimate Good and therefore incapable or, because of His omnipotence capable but unwilling to do Evil. For those people, a secondary source, outside of God, must be responsible.

For polytheistic religions, this is a low hurdle, easily cleared, with the existence of gods who are responsible for Evil. The monotheistic religions have found a variety of solutions to the question.

Zoroastrians, for example, have created a second level, just below the level of the Supreme Divinity, Ahura Mazda, occupied by Spenta Mainyu, which can be translated as Good Spirit, Holy Spirit, etc., who works for Good, and Angra Mainyu, the tempter. Later Zoroastrianism sees Spenta Mainyu as merely a divine attribute of Ahura Mazda, but Angra Mainyu is a separate being.<sup>12</sup> Angra Mainyu is considered as "the demon of demons, a tyrant, doer of evil deeds, inveterately wicked and the one who introduces discord and death."<sup>13</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Cf. BBC television broadcast: The Kaballah Center, January 2005

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, "We are all one" in *Daily News*, (Colombo, Sri Lanka) 28 December 2004; and, "Disaster" in *Reformatorisch Dagblad*, 27 December 2004 (Netherlands)

<sup>12</sup> Nigosian, S.A., *The Zoroastrian Faith: Tradition & Modern Research*, (Montreal, Kingston, Canada: McGill-Queen's University Press) 1993, p. 71-74.

<sup>13</sup> Op cit. P. 85.

He is the agent through which Ahriman, the "inveterate foe of the supreme God, Ahura Mazda," works.<sup>14</sup>

Christianity chose a similar, though not identical, solution in the role of Satan, who partly via scripture, especially the Gospel of John, and partially through traditions, some of which were based on apocryphal writings, such as the Gospel of Enoch, was designated as the source of evil as far back as the Fall from Grace. Satan operates primarily through temptation, leading the weak astray. This, of course, presents a problem of culpability in a legal sense, of autonomous responsibility of the sinner. That problem has not yet been satisfactorily resolved.

Christianity also had a third solution, and one which has become increasingly popular: evil arises as a natural consequence of the Free Will which was either granted by God when creating Man in his image, or when Adam and Even sinned by eating from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, allegedly the first disobedient and sinful act. That does reintroduce the responsibility and culpability of the individual, but does not resolve the problem of a God who intervenes in the world and yet allows the freedom to sin to harm the innocent.

The solution one chooses to serve as the paradigm of evil in the world depends on one's upbringing, religious tradition and, increasingly, personal inclination.

### **Is this evil?**

On 4 November 1995, Israeli Jew Yigal Amir assassinated Israeli Prime Minister Yitzchak Rabin to "stop the peace process."<sup>15</sup> Amir, who opposed moves Rabin had been making which could have led to a Palestinian state on the West Bank and Gaza and would have required Israeli settlements in those territories to be dismantled, based his defence on religious law:

"According to the Halacha, you can kill the enemy. My whole life, I learned Halacha. When you kill in war, it is an act that is allowed."<sup>16</sup>

Specifically, Amir – a former Yeshiva student and a graduate of Bar-Ilan University -- was referring to the Talmudic "law of the pursuer" (din rodef) and the "law of the informer" (din moser). As set out by the Executive Director of the American Council of Judaism, Allan Brownfeld: "The first law commands every Jew to kill or wound severely any Jew who is perceived as intending to kill another Jew. According to halachic commentaries, it is not necessary to see such a person pursuing a Jewish victim. It is enough if rabbinic authorities or even competent scholars, announce that the law of the pursuer applies.

<sup>14</sup> Op cit. This paper does not offer the scope to conduct a detailed inquiry into whether Zoroastrian properly belongs among the monotheistic religions. For this purpose, I am taking the position proposed by the adherents of the faith themselves.

<sup>15</sup> Extract from court testimony in Tel Aviv. Reported by Associated Press on 7 November 1995.

<sup>16</sup> Op cit.

The second law commands every Jew to kill or wound severely any Jew who, without a decision of a competent rabbinic authority, has informed non-Jews about Jewish affairs or has given them information about Jewish property or who has delivered Jewish persons or property to their rule or authority.”<sup>17</sup> The assassination was therefore, from the position of Yigal Amir and the many orthodoxim who support his view of the Greater Israel, a ‘good thing’. For many others, however, not least Rabin and his family, but also those Israelis who see trading land for peace as necessary, it was clearly an ‘evil deed.’

On 2 November 2004, Mohammed Bouyeri, a muslim with dual Moroccan and Dutch citizenship was arrested on suspicion of the murder on the same day in Amsterdam of Dutch filmmaker Theo van Gogh. A letter left on the body explaining the motivation of the murder began with the Koranic formulation “In the name of Allah, the Compassionate, the Merciful” and is addressed to member of parliament, Ms Ayaan Hirsi Ali, an outspoken critic of Islam. In the letter, Hirsi Ali is referred to as “a soldier of Evil” who is assisting in a “crusade against Islam”. In addition to several inaccurate references to the Jewish Talmud,<sup>18</sup> the letter implies that the murder was an act against those who are attacking Islam.<sup>19</sup>

Bouyeri was also carrying a letter when he was captured that implied that he did not expect to survive the pursuit. It contained the text: “And Allah gives you room to operate...He gives you the Garden...Instead of the Earthly rubble.”<sup>20</sup>

Clearly, Van Gogh’s assassin was operating from a perspective that he was working for the good of Islam, the Ummah (religious community) and Allah. From that perspective, his act could only be interpreted as good. For the larger society, however, in addition to Van Gogh’s family and friends, it was clearly an act of religiously motivated evil.

<sup>17</sup> Brownfelt, Allan C., “Israel Shahak (1933-2001) A prophetic voice is stilled” in *Issues*, (American Council for Judaism) Summer 2001. Other commentaries disagree. The respected commentator Moses ben Maimon, known as Maimonides or Rambam, stated that the pursuer must be about to kill someone. (Mishne Torah, Murderers and Preserving Life, 1:1). That was clearly not the case with Rabin. See also, Haim Cohen, “Dangerous Halakhah” in <http://www.come-and-hear.com/supplement/free-judaism-cohen.html>.

<sup>18</sup> “What do you think of the fact that [Liberal parliamentary fraction leader] van Aartsen (who is not Jewish. DS) holds to an ideology in which non-Jews are seen as non-human?

“Baba Mezia 114a-114b: Only Jews are people (“Only you are called human”). See also Kerithoth 6b under sub-head (“Oil of anointing”) and Berakoth 56a, in which Gentile (non-Jewish) woman are called asses (‘she-asses”).

“Yebamoth 92a: All non-Jewish children are animals.

“What do you think of the fact that Amsterdam has a mayor who follows an ideology in which Jews may lie to non-Jews?

“Baba Kamma 113a: Jews may use lies (“tricks”) to deceive a Gentile.

“What do you think of the fact that you are part of a government that supports the State with an ideology that calls for genocide?

“Sofarim 15, line 10 (Minor Tarcctates [sic]): This is the statement by Rabbin Simon ben Yahai: Tod shebe goyyim herog [sic] (“Even the best of the Gentiles should be killed.”) “Unsigned letter found on the body of Theo van Gogh, 2 November 2004. Translation mine.

<sup>19</sup> Op cit.

<sup>20</sup> Unsigned letter found in the possession of Mohammed Bouyeri on 2 November 2004. Translation mine. Released by the Public Prosecution Service.

Between 1989 and 2004, 24 murders or attempted murders<sup>21</sup> were carried out in attacks by anti-abortionists<sup>22</sup> on those who carry out or facilitate abortions. In the same period there were 179 incidents of bombing and arson or attempts,<sup>23</sup> 3,349 incidents of home and office invasion, assault & battery, vandalism, trespassing, death threats, burglary, stalking, and other offences,<sup>24</sup> and thousands of blockades, hate mail, etc.

The late Paul Hill<sup>25</sup> is an example of an activist who took his attacks on abortionists to their ultimate conclusion. On July 29, 1994, Hill shot and killed Dr. John Griffin and Griffin's bodyguard, James Barrett. Griffin had recently begun working at the Ladies Centre abortion clinic in Pensacola, Florida, replacing Dr. David Gunn who had been similarly killed in 1993.<sup>26</sup> Hill, who claimed he had been ordained in both the Presbyterian and Orthodox Churches but had turned his back on both of those because of what he calls inconsistency in giving infant baptism without infant communion, defended his action, as a logical consequence of the sixth Commandment, which he interprets as not only a prohibition on killing but a command to prevent killing.<sup>27</sup>

"Most people don't realize that legal abortion requires a sin of omission by forbidding people to intervene as mass murder is taking place. By legalizing abortion the government has robbed you of your right to defend your own relatives, and neighbors, from a bloody death. It's as though a machine gunner is taking aim on bound peasants, huddled before a mass grave, and you are forbidden to stop him. In much the same way, the abortionist's knife is pressed to the throat of the unborn, and you are forbidden to stop him. It's as though the police are holding a gun on you, and forcing you to submit to murder— possibly the murder of your own child or grandchild."<sup>28</sup>

<sup>21</sup> National Abortion Federation, *"Incidents of Violence and Disruption Against Abortion Providers"*, 2004. Cited in B.A. Robinson, "Violence and Harassment at U.S. Abortion Clinics" ([http://www.religioustolerance.org/abo\\_viol.htm](http://www.religioustolerance.org/abo_viol.htm)) November 2004.

<sup>22</sup> The term 'anti-abortionist' is usually reserved for those willing to use violence in their crusade against those who carry out abortions. They are distinct from the so-called 'pro-life supporters' who eschew violence in the pursuit of their agenda.

<sup>23</sup> Op cit.

<sup>24</sup> Op cit.

<sup>25</sup> Paul Hill was executed on 3 September, 2003 at Florida State Prison for the crimes discussed here.

<sup>26</sup> See Paul J. Hill, "Defending the Defenseless," (2003) on *The Army of God* website ([http://www.armyofgod.com/PHill\\_ShortShot.html](http://www.armyofgod.com/PHill_ShortShot.html)). Revised from Paul J. Hill, "Defending the Defenseless" in Lynette Knapp (ed), *Current Controversies Series: The Abortion Controversy*, 2nd edition (San Diego: Greenhaven Press) 2001. I note in passing the similarity of names between The Army of God organisation supporting the anti-abortionists and *inter alia* Hezbollah (Arabic for The Army of God). So-called 'Armies of God,' have been a regular feature of Christendom and have variously fought Saracens (Muslims), heretics, and other Christians.

<sup>27</sup> Op cit.

<sup>28</sup> Op cit.

Clearly, Hill and the many others who share his opinions and support his actions believe that they are doing 'good' against a resistible 'evil', though millions of others believe that the anti-abortionist activists who are willing to go to criminal lengths to stop abortions are committing evil deeds.

Those who believe that an evil that is committed against someone is a divine punishment for sins ranging from the personal to the collective, the evil-doer becomes nothing more than a tool in the hand of God, rather than a subject of his or her own history. That implies a lack of exercise of free will, and therefore any culpability: The Lord made me do it!

Let us, for the purposes of this paper, consider that most of those who are generally referred to as evil-doers are acting on their own volition. How can their evil deeds be explained?

Within the Christian community, this question has been discussed at length by some of the greatest thinkers the Church has produced. Presenting an exhaustive, or indeed, even complete summary of their thought within the confines of this presentation is not possible. I would therefore like to concentrate on two: Augustine and Pierre Abelard.

Augustine, for example, discussed the question in both his *Confessions* and in *The City of God*. One of his most important conclusions is that "evil has no positive nature."<sup>29</sup> Evil therefore, does not exist as Good exists, but is rather a lessening of Good. Even evil acts therefore have some element of Good in them, according to Augustine: "(...) the loss of good has received the name 'evil.'

The question becomes more complicated with Augustine's realization that only the triune God is 'good' in its purest form. Everything else is a lesser reflection of that Good.<sup>30</sup>

Augustine placed these comments in a section of *The City of God* concerned with the creation of angels, the Devil and humanity. He was concerned with the presence of evil in a universe that God saw "was Good"<sup>31</sup>

"For God would never have created any, I do not say angel, but even man, whose future wickedness He foreknew, unless He had equally known to what uses in behalf of the good He could turn him."

And, in fact, Augustine continues, "no nature at all is evil, and this is a name for nothing but the want of good."<sup>32</sup>

Following that reasoning, the three cases of evil cited above must also be considered as 'good' though is lesser degree than the ultimate Good that is God.

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<sup>29</sup> Augustine, *The City of God*, Book XI, Chapter 9.

<sup>30</sup> Op cit.

<sup>31</sup> Gen. 1:25

<sup>32</sup> August, *The City of God*, Book XI, Chapter 22.

Eight hundred years later, the question was made more complicated by Pierre Abelard in a lecture in which he provided a philosophical defence that could easily be used for the three cases presented above, and many more besides.

For Abelard, no single act was in and of itself good or evil. The intention of the actor was the determining factor. He illustrated this with a controversial examination of whether the Jews who in his and many other people's views killed Jesus<sup>33</sup> sinned. His conclusion was that they had not sinned, had not done evil, because they had sincerely believed that killing him was what was required of them. The sin, according to Abelard, would have been that they believed Jesus needed to be killed and then failed to act.<sup>34</sup>

That view would find little opposition among Muslims, for whom sin and evil constitute disobedience to Allah. If you believe that Allah commands you to do something, and you fail to do it, that is the sin, not the act that others might perceive as evil.<sup>35</sup>

That argument has long provided motivation and solace for religious-based violence<sup>36</sup> and will continue to do so far into the future. It compels us to look at the acts that are perpetrated in the name of faith, God and religion in a different light. It also compels us to seek a proper response to an act which seems to be 'evil' but one that we may not unreasonably find to have been 'good' from a specific perspective, though not, perhaps, our own.

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<sup>33</sup> To forestall an uproar, I emphasise that Abelard's statement determination of who killed Jesus is not my own. Using his logic to extrapolate to other situations, however, I side with his reasoning.

<sup>34</sup> Rubenstein, Richard, *Kinderen van Aristoteles. Hoe Christen, Moslims en Joden verlichting brachten in the donkere Middeleeuwen*. Carola Kloos (trans.) (Amsterdam: Anthos/Manteau) 2004, p. 98-103.

<sup>35</sup> This shared view among the fundamentalists and extremists of the faiths confounds those who preach an ethical relativism in which good and evil are determined by the norms and standards of the culture in which one lives. As anthropologist Ruth Benedict reflects in *Patterns of Culture*: "We might suppose that in the matter of taking life all peoples would agree on condemnation. On the contrary, in the matter of homicide, it may be held that one kills by custom his two children, or that a husband has a right of life and death over his wife or that it is the duty of the child to kill his parents before they are old. It may be the case that those are killed who steal fowl, or who cut their upper teeth first, or who are born on Wednesday. Among some peoples, a person suffers torment at having caused an accidental death, among others, it is a matter of no consequence. Suicide may also be a light matter, the recourse of anyone who has suffered some slight rebuff, an act that constantly occurs in a tribe. It may be the highest and noblest act a wise man can perform. The very tale of it, on the other hand, may be a matter for incredulous mirth, and the act itself, impossible to conceive as human possibility. Or it may be a crime punishable by law, or regarded as a sin against the gods." (Benedict, Ruth, *Patterns of Culture*, (New York: Houghton Mifflin) 1934, cited in "Ethical Relativism" (Markkula Centre for Applied Ethics). Those willing to commit such acts of 'evil' from one perspective and 'good' from the other share the same Abelardian view, that obedience or submission to the will of God takes precedence, a tradition that goes back to the Biblical and Koranic stories of Abraham offering his Isaac (Jewish/Christian) or Ismaël (Muslim) in obedience to a divine command.

<sup>36</sup> And the source of much of the anger directed towards all religions which many people see as the greatest source of evil in that it allegedly permits cruel and evil acts with a built-in 'get out of jail' card.



## How to respond?

In the aftermath of the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon in September 2001, many commentators struggled with the problem of the deed itself (“I don’t want to justify it, but...” ) and trying to find the rationale behind the deed.<sup>37</sup> An often-heard comment was that it was the policies of the West in general and the United States in particular that had provoked the 19 terrorists acting with the support of Al-Qa’ida, to attack the infidel West. Calls went up to reform Western practice in the Middle East, to end support of dictatorial regimes and generally to agree that if the West had not behaved so badly, the Muslim youth would not have felt the need to attack the West.

In my view, such a response considers such attacks, and the attacks of the anti-abortionists and the murders of Rabin and Van Gogh to be the beginning of dialogue that will lead to the prevention of similar acts in the future.

I do not believe that to be the case...such attacks are the rejection of dialogue, are not intended as dialogue, and will not succeed as dialogue.

Is there a religiously based response that could lead to a reduction in such attacks? Perhaps, but the likelihood of its adoption is minimal, especially at the activist or fundamentalist fringe. It requires believers to surrender the view that they are totally in possession of the Truth with a capital T. It requires them to surrender their view that other-believers are *a priori* the enemy of their faith and their way of life. It requires them to place humanity above faith.

And for many at the extreme, that is not going to happen.

Derek Suchard  
2005

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<sup>37</sup> One of the least-discussed motivations, perhaps because a recognition of it implies that there is nothing the West could do or could have done to prevent such attacks, was that a particular segment of Muslim believers considers the West simply to be ‘unclean’ and worthy only of expulsion from the lands of the House of Islam.

