

chapter seven evil's lie

“Anyone who kills you will think he is doing a holy duty for God.”

—John 16:2

The Bible, as I will continue to say, is a “text in travail,” struggling toward its conclusions, and only getting the point step by step, and frequently stepping backward. The important thing is to stay in the process, stay with the unfolding text and allow it to lead you forward.

You can prove anything you want from a single verse or passage in the Bible. It is a dangerous document, as history has shown, and nowhere has this more been true than its continual usage to legitimate hatred, prejudice, violence, killing, punishing and exclusionary systems, even at the highest levels of church. The very things that Jesus consistently and outrightly opposed we have righteously justified. This alone should tell us that we are not reading the Bible correctly.

The human delusion seems to be this: We seem to think someone else is always the problem, not me. We tend to export our hate and evil elsewhere. In fact, this problem is so central to human nature and human history that its overcoming is at the heart of all spiritual teachings. What mature spirituality tries to do is always keep your own feet

to the fire—saying, just as Nathan said, in convicting David, “*You are the one!*” (2 Samuel 12:7).

Human nature always wants either to play the victim or to create victims—and both for the purposes of control. In fact, the second follows from the first. Once you start feeling sorry for yourself, you will soon find someone else to blame, accuse or attack—and with impunity! It settles the dust quickly, and it takes away any immediate shame, guilt or anxiety. In other words, it works—at least for a while. So for untransformed people, there is no reason to stop creating victims or playing the victim.

Most history books could give you the impression that who-killed-whom has been the very story line of history. Even history, however, has been usually written from the side of the victors! In that sense most history is probably “revisionist history,” revised so it could be heard by whatever the local people were prepared to hear. Only very recent movies like Tim Robbins’s *Dead Man Walking* (about Sister Helen Prejean’s fight against the death penalty) and Clint Eastwood’s *Flags of Our Fathers* (about the World War II Battle of Iwo Jima) have dared to present Americans a script from the side of the losers. Doesn’t that reveal something quite significant? And neither of these films were big hits at the box office.

Read today’s paper and you will see the pattern has not changed. Hating, fearing or diminishing someone else holds us together, for some reason. The creating of necessary victims is in our hard wiring. Rene Girard calls “the scapegoat mechanism” the central pattern for the creation and maintenance of cultures worldwide since the beginning.

The sequence, without being too clever, goes something like this: We compare, we copy, we compete, we conflict, we conspire, we condemn and we crucify. If you do not recognize some variation of this pattern within yourself, and nip it in the early stages, it is almost inevitable. That is why spiritual teachers of any depth will always teach simplicity

of lifestyle and freedom from the competitive game. It is probably the only way out of the cycle of violence.

It's hard for us religious people to hear, but the most persistent violence in human history has been sacred violence, or more accurately, "sacralized violence." Human beings have found a most effective way to legitimate their instinct toward fear and hatred. They imagine that they are fearing and hating for something holy and noble, like God, religion, truth, morality, their children or love of country. It takes away all guilt, and one can even think of oneself as representing the moral high-ground or being responsible and prudent, as a result. Good American "soccer moms," along with many other "normal" Americans, seemingly bolstered the charge against terrorism after the September 11, 2001, attacks. It never occurs to most people that they can become what they fear and hate. It is a well-kept secret. Without wisdom, it all appears like a wonderful and moral thing, like "protecting my children."

Scapegoating or sacralized violence is the best possible disguise for evil. We can concentrate on evil "over there" and avoid our own. Evil is never easily recognized as evil by those who do it; or as Paul so wisely says, "Satan disguises itself as an angel of light" (2 Corinthians 11:14). We all choose "apparent goods" inside of our own unrecognized frame of reference. *Your* violence is always bad and evil. *Mine* is always necessary and good.

Notice also that when some murder or other heinous thing happens, sometimes people will say, "Oh, he seemed so normal," or "He was nice to animals." Statements like these show our inability to recognize the real character of evil. The Holocaust happened in a culture that considered itself Christian for centuries. Truthfully, we're not very good at the discernment of true good and real evil, which Paul lists as one of the necessary gifts of the Holy Spirit for the church (1 Corinthians 12:10).

I've met many holy people around the world, but I've also encountered people that I'd have to describe as evil. If I would try to describe the evil people and evil events that I've encountered, they're invariably

characterized by a sense of certainty and clarity. They suffer no self-doubt or self-criticism, smirking at people who would dare to question them. They own no shadow from their side, which is always a sign that their evil has been projected elsewhere. Often they are overtly religious. Remember, the very word *satan* means “the accuser.” Be careful when you see yourself accusing or as Jesus says “throwing stones” (John 8:8). It is the satanic disguise, a marvelous diversionary tactic.

Like all addictive thinking, scapegoating shows itself as “all or nothing” thinking, totally either/or with no capacity for paradox and little tolerance for ambiguity. I would call them “split” people; Jesus calls them “actors” at least eleven times in Matthew 23:13–29. It is usually translated as “hypocrite.” The English word has come to mean “malicious” people, but probably it more often means “deceived” people.

“They know not what they do,” as Jesus says (Luke 23:34) of those who kill him, which is probably why he thinks of them as actors more than sinners. They are mostly unconscious—living out of the dominant consciousness—more than directly malicious. Most evil is done by unconscious people, in my opinion. If you were aware and awake you would see right through it all—and never do it!

Do you know that you are never absolutely sure you’re right when you’re living in faith? That’s exactly why it’s called “faith”! At the crucial moments in your life’s decision making, you are always trusting in God’s guidance and mercy and not in your own perfect understanding. You’re always “falling into the hands of the living God,” as Hebrews (10:31) says, letting God’s knowing suffice and God’s arms save.

At some level persons of faith are invariably unsure of their own understanding and are asking God, “Is this the right thing to do?” or like Mary, “How can this come about?” (Luke 1:35). The faith stance is humble about its capacity to know the whole picture, as we said in the last chapter. So there we have it, evil is always sure of itself, and goodness is not. I believe that to be true.

Goodness, however, is accompanied by peace and patience, and even “consolation” as Saint Ignatius taught his Jesuits. That is more than enough payoff for sustaining some doubt and ambiguity.

the nature of criticism

The unconverted ego wants one thing and one thing only: control—and it wants it now. It never wants to change, in fact, it hates change. Perhaps that is why Jesus puts *metanoia* (literally, “change your mind” or even “beyond your mind”!) at the very center of his proclamation. It is very unfortunate that this word has been historically translated as “repent” (Mark 1:15; Matthew 4:17). For moderns this word connotes strict moral stances, usually concerning so-called “hot” sins, instead of any actual transformation of consciousness. That’s quite a loss, I would say.

The genius of the biblical text is that this capacity for course correction, for self-critique, is actually contained in the book itself! That is necessary and good criticism. In other words, the whole of the Bible unlocks itself from within, by showing us both the capacity to get the point and our endless capacity to miss the point, which it calls *sin* (*hamartia*, “missing the mark”).

When you don’t have such an unlocking code, you end up with toxic religion. You have a group that cannot tolerate evaluation or criticism and always thinks criticism is coming from enemies. For example, there actually are bishops who think I do not love the church because I criticize it! That is the way a dualistic mind *must and will* think. Yet stay with the Bible, and you will see that it eventually corrects itself, just as I hope I do. The punitive, petty and vengeful lines might be there, but not for long! The Bible shows a very real patience for the bigger picture.

The interesting thing is that until now, rather than generating its own criticism from within, Christianity has most often been criticized from the outside, by its enemies, who often do not know Christianity’s inner values. When criticism is allowed and encouraged from within, however, that criticism is subject to Judeo-Christian values and criteria.

In other words, it needs to be accountable to the Tradition and criticized by its own accepted values. This is what Moses, Jesus and Paul do from within the text and in their lifetimes, and why they are true reformers.

This internally generated criticism is the only genuine path of renewal and reform, which even our three-pronged American form of government recognizes. The checks and balances need to be structured inside each system itself. When the church makes room for its own prophets, it is always healthy, which is why Paul called prophecy the second most important gift! (1 Corinthians 12:28). When it “kills its prophets and stones those who are sent” (Matthew 23:37), it is always in a state of decline—a state of fear instead of faith.

The second interesting—and ironic thing—is that many of the supposedly outside critics of Christianity apparently believe the very values and criteria that the Judeo-Christian tradition taught them! Things like justice, love, truth and fairness are preached back to us by our supposed critics.

Sometimes they even live our values more authentically than we do, as Jesus often points out when he praises pagans for their faith (Matthew 8:10). We desperately need such truth speaking from without, and I have always suspected that this is what Jesus meant by his line “the children of this world are more astute in dealing with their own than are the children of light” (Luke 16:8).

In fairness, those outside critics are often looking outside of themselves at someone else’s sin. They have usually not benefited from the revelation of the scapegoat mechanism and waste an awful lot of time accusing other people of their faults. That is what I would mean by bad criticism, along with any criticism that is negative in intent, mean-spirited and does not build up anybody or anything. Even negative criticism does not mean, however, that we cannot still use it for our own good and growth, even if it sometimes comes from a bad heart. If it is even partly true, it might be from the Holy Spirit.

the mystery hidden since the foundation of the world

A line from Psalm 78:2, “the mystery hidden since the foundation of the world,” is used by Matthew to describe why Jesus teaches in parables. Rene Girard uses it to describe the hidden nature of the scapegoat mechanism. He believes it is precisely the Bible that blows the cover of the accusing instinct once and for all. “The Accuser has been brought down” (Revelation 12:10).

If ignorant killing or warranted violence is the basic moral problem of human history, we become the religion that worships one who was ignorantly killed! The game of smoke and mirrors should be over, at least for us. But the pattern runs deep and is well-hidden from a small self, even a Christian small self.

This accusing and blaming pattern begins to be revealed in the very first chapters of the Bible. Genesis shows Adam blaming Eve (3:12), Eve blaming the serpent (3:13) and then very soon we have Cain envying and then killing Abel (4:6–8). It’s always someone else who has to be punished, accused, eliminated, tortured or killed, until it eventually takes over and “the thoughts in their hearts fashioned nothing but wickedness all the day long” (6:5). That leads to the story of Noah’s flood and God’s seeming destruction of the whole world.

Unfortunately, this picturesque and ancient story that explains God’s salvation of a few, ends up presenting Yahweh as accusing, petty and even one who kills the unworthy and the innocent (Genesis 6—9). God’s love has not yet been received at a deep or reflective level by this biblical author. It is still a very conditional and deserved love, and God is free to drown a whole world of animals and children, even if we can assume all the other adults on the rest of the earth were sinful and “violent” (Genesis 6:11–13). Here God is created in our own punitive image and is made worse than we would hopefully be! But it is a good start, because Yahweh is at least revealed as a “savior” of some (6:19–20).

God loves it seems, but at this stage God’s love is still exclusive and determined by the worthiness of the receiver. We are not yet ready for a

love that is determined by the abundance of the Giver. It is going to take us a long time to get to the point where God's love is self-determined, instead of being determined by our behavior. This is an important story to use to reveal what I mean by a text in travail: *getting part of the point, but not all of it yet, and partly in direct opposition to the tangent that will develop.*

In the book of Deuteronomy we will see at least some evolution of thought. It says, the "Hittites, Girgashites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites" all fall before the Hebrews. The text says, "You must lay them under the ban...show them no pity...deal with them like this: Tear down their altars, smash their standing stones, cut down their sacred poles and set fire to their idols" (7:2, 5). This is certainly not interreligious dialogue, yet within a few verses we will see this dynamic of legitimated violence move toward humility and a lovely recognition of God's nonviolence, which is translated as "graciousness."

The text reveals and creates a problem for us, and then at least partially unlocks it: "Do you think it was because you were greater than the other nations, that Yahweh set his heart on you? No, you were the least of all the peoples... Yahweh was being true to his own graciousness in loving you" (Deuteronomy 7:7, 9). So we still have God justifying violence, it seems, but at least Yahweh is telling them that they are not any better than anyone else, and their election is absolutely free from God's side and undeserved from theirs. Yahweh reveals the Godself as "gracious," and now the hope is that this will rub off on them!

They would never have come naturally to such a notion of a God who is so utterly unlike they are; so a passage like this has all the earmarks of authentic breakthrough and authentic "revelation." It is the three-steps-forward kind of passage. Whereas killing those they fear is their natural pattern, we can rightly assume this killing is *not* revelation at all. It is a two-steps-backward kind of passage. I would like to offer this as a classic self-balancing text, and one that gives us criteria for

determining what is a revelatory breakthrough and what is a mere repetition of the worst levels of ego consciousness.

Remember, what makes you holy can also make you evil. After any real religious encounter, people are normally dangerous for a few weeks or months, because religious experience necessarily makes you think you're the center of the world. God, it seems, has to take that risk every time God chooses us and loves us. We can utterly misuse that ego inflation for self-advancement instead of generative love. *Self-centered people misuse human love, and they will do the same with divine love.* I used to say "Beware of new converts for two years after their altar call or their baptism in the Spirit."

So why do people do such unloving and even hateful things, and worse, why does the Bible appear to teach it, and why does God appear to condone it? *That* is our problem. Unless we resolve that textual conflict, I think the Bible will continue to be one of the most dangerous and, for those who misuse it, unhelpful books in the world. So I will repeat it one more time, because it is at the heart of my message here: The text reveals both the problem and the solution. The statement of the problem is not to be interpreted as spiritual guidance or teaching, although it has been used that way for most of Christian history.

We must learn from those texts that move us beyond our natural desire for ego security, status needs and group idolatry. Only then can we trust that it is God who is breaking into human consciousness—and into the text. But how can we trust that we are following the correct tangent? By noting the trim of the sails! Where is the tack of the text directing us? This is precisely the meaning of the Christian affirmation that Jesus is the fulfillment of the Scriptures. The sails are set for a God of suffering and humble love, as we finally see in Jesus. Only because of him are we totally assured that God is beyond tribalism, violence, hatred and validating the vanities of the small self.