

What the Devil?

Given the line of work I'm in I like to keep myself reasonably well informed as to some of the trends and currents in our society when it comes to who holds what kinds of religious beliefs. It gets me out of my UU bubble and gives me a wider perspective on the range of beliefs that are out there.

So I paid particular heed to a Harris poll that came out about three or four years ago which revealed that 58% of Americans believe in an actual Hell and the Devil. I doubt much has changed since then. The Devil, in this poll, didn't do as well as God who rated considerably higher. But according to Harris' numbers Satan still out paced the Theory of Evolution which only 47% of those surveyed said they accepted. I'm not sure what to make of the fact that we live in a country where the Devil has more cred than Darwin, but that's what these numbers say.

The Western World's image of the Devil is most likely rooted clear back in the Zoroastrian religion of ancient Persia—now Iran. In that culture, some 500 years prior to our Common Era, the world was seen as a battleground between the Forces of Light and Wisdom, led by the god Ahura Mazda; and the Prince of Darkness named Arichman. This gets us to your trivia factoid for today: The Mazda automobile takes its name from this Zoroastrian god. Just in case you ever need to know that.

Many of the images of God and the Devil that later came to be found in the Judaic and Christian faiths draw on this earlier, Zoroastrian influence. While that may help explain *how* we got some of our images of the Devil, it still begs the larger question of *why* such images, and why belief in the Devil, persist.

I found part of the answer to that question back in an article that ran in *Newsweek* as the 20th century was coming to an end. It also dealt with the topic of the continuing belief in the Devil. After citing some of the really horrible events of the 20th century—the Nazi Holocaust, the mass murders of the Stalin era, a number of ethnic cleansing types of genocides, and the like, it ended on this note: “Wherever we turn, the century has witnessed evil on a scale unmatched by any other. In an earlier America evidence such as this would have immediately evoked a name, a face, and explanation: Satan's powerful domination over a fallen, sinful

humanity. Today evil is experienced as random and ordinary, devoid of any cosmic significance.”

While I think *Newsweek*'s take on various 20th century evils is on the mark, and could have just as easily been written last week, I think the persistence of the image of the Devil is because there is a part of us that cannot, contrary to the claim in this article, accept the idea of evil as “random and ordinary and devoid of any cosmic significance.” If 58% of Americans still believe in an actual Devil then that “earlier America” referred to in this piece is actually still very much present today.

When we witness some horrible, human-generated event, sometimes it's hard not to feel that maybe there's something bigger going on here than that of human beings behaving in unthinkably horrible ways towards other human beings. It not unusual to grasp for some kind of an explanation when one feels overwhelmed by certain events, however rational or not the explanation may be.

For some, perhaps, the only way to articulate such overwhelming feelings is to speak of someone or something called the Devil. I wonder how many of those 58% of the responders to the Harris poll who said they believed in the Devil were really searching for some greater, cosmic explanation for the unspeakably terrible, and human generated, deeds that defy any kind of rational or reasonable explanation.

I'm not sure how I would have responded if the Harris poll people had approached me. Had they just asked do I believe in an actual, literal creature called Satan or Lucifer who is the source of all evil, then my answer would have been a flat “no”. I believe that human beings are at the heart of all human evil, just as I believe that human beings are at the heart of all human good. I call that humanism—both for better and for worse.

But I am also aware that human language sometimes fails us on a literal level. At times we need a way, beyond the literal, to give voice and meaning to something we have a hard time grasping. So, as a *metaphor* for ungraspable evil, I can see how a reference to “The Devil” can work on that level; just as I accept that the term “God” works as a *metaphor* for that which we sense is greater than we know, but cannot adequately name.

Had I said all that to a pollster he or she would have most likely looked at me funny and moved on to find someone from whom they could at least get a straight answer. This is why I find these kinds of yes/no poll questions to be of limited value. They do not leave much room for nuance or deliberative thought.

So, to pick up on a metaphorical, instead of a literal, take on the Devil, I go to a book by the late UU minister Rev. Forrest Church. He playfully titled it *The Devil and Dr. Church*. One of the key lines in it gives us our quote for today: “The Devil’s trademark is not evil dressed as evil but evil dressed as good...The Devil’s most successful ruse is to cloak himself in virtue.”

Some of the most terrible deeds that human beings have ever done to one another are those that have been, in Forrest’s words, “cloaked in virtue.” In order for evil to be perpetuated, a sense of unquestioned “rightness” or virtue needs to prevail.

The one caveat to Forrest’s words I would offer is that they do not adequately explain certain kinds of horrific and seemingly random acts of cruelty and violence, often committed by psychopaths and sociopaths. We may never know the nature of the demons residing deep in the souls of those who commit such wanton acts.

But Forrest’s words, even with that shortcoming, still go a long way in locating the source of much of the needless destruction and hatred and death that we human beings have foisted upon one another during our time on this planet. Think of all the wars that have been fought because one side or the other thought they were doing the will of God. Think of all those who were tortured and/or put to death in various kinds of inquisitions—whether in Spain or in Salem, Massachusetts—that were carried out by those who truly felt they were being virtuous by enforcing certain supposed “correct” religious beliefs and practices.

If I may recommend one other book—in addition to Forrest’s—on this subject it is one I referred to in a previous sermon here by Dr. Jessica Stern titled *Terror in the Name of God*. Dr. Stern is a writer, researcher, and lecturer at Harvard University. In researching her book she was somehow, rather amazingly, able to gain access to all manner of terrorists—from Al Qaeda operatives to persons in this country

who bomb abortion clinics or kill doctors who perform abortions, or those who think blowing up a federal building is just fine. She wrote the book before the advent of ISIS. If there was one common theme, across all the persons and groups Dr. Stern investigated, both in this country and in various parts of the world, it was their unquestioning belief that what they were doing was being done in the service of righteousness; again, “cloaked in virtue.”

Reading Forrest’s and Dr. Stern’s books has reinforced my contention that the great evil of our day is not moral relativism, as some would have us believe, but moral absolutism. The belief, that is to say, that I am absolutely on the side of God and morality, and any action I take based on this belief is morally justified. “The Devil’s trademark is not evil dressed as evil, but evil dressed as good.”

To take these thoughts in a related direction for a moment: How does one best guard against succumbing to moral absolutism? We all take actions based on what we consider to be the moral rightness of the beliefs we hold; otherwise we wouldn’t take them. Here Dr. Church offers what he called “The 70% Principle.” It goes like this: On an issue or concern that you feel passionately about, if you feel you are at least 70% correct in forming your opinion concerning it, then dive in. Involve yourself in the actions, the non-violent actions to be sure, that you feel will further the cause or concern that drives your passion.

The 30% part means to leave enough space in your thinking and believing and resisting and persisting to be willing to re-examine your position using your capacity for critical thought. This does not mean you go around in a state of indecision or immobilization; you still act. But the “70% Principle” is offered as a way of holding off a sense of absolute moral rightness and righteousness. This is the piece that moral absolutists miss.

All this talk of evil and moral blindness is not the note I want to end on, however. I am still moved by a piece the actor Kirk Douglas wrote on the op-ed page of the *New York Times* some years ago. Douglas’ birth name was Danielovitch. He is the son of Russian Jewish immigrants; immigrants fleeing persecution please note.

Douglas told of being in Berlin to receive a life-time achievement award; and of his mixed feelings—given his Jewish ancestry—about being there given that city’s history within his lifetime. But then he told about how he and his wife had dinner

with a Jewish woman in Berlin whose parents and grandparents had died in the death camps. Mr. Douglas asked his host why she'd stayed in Berlin over the ensuing course of her life. This is how Kirk Douglas described the conversation that followed:

“Smiling, she gave me this answer: ‘I owe it to the little heroes...When the Gestapo came to get them, my parents sent me to a small hotel to save my life. The owner was the first little hero. She kept me safe for a couple of nights. When it became dangerous I met my second little hero. She was our former housekeeper. She hid me for a while and endangered her own life. Then I found a cloister. My little heroes there were nuns who took care of me when I was sick. They never asked questions...I feel I owe it to the little heroes who helped me. Not everyone here was wicked.’”

Mr. Douglas concluded: “Her story had a great impact on me. Of course we’re always looking for a big hero to emulate...How much better to reach for the little heroes in life—and try to be one.”

The rise and onslaught of Nazism was among the greater evils of the previous century. It was an evil cloaked in the so-called “virtue” of creating a “master race” of white Arians. It still stands as a stark and scary example of how the forces of evil can almost overwhelm a society. The operative word there is almost. The “little heroes” spoken of in the woman’s story did not prevent the many horrific expressions of this particular evil; but their lives were remembered and their stories were told after that particular evil had had its day.

I think this is what ultimately keeps evil—for all the horror it can inflict—from having the final word. It is not about some cosmic battle between supernatural forces and their human agents; rather it is about people, often plain and simple people, who do the right thing at the right time; people who can still see the essential humanity in the eyes, faces, and hearts of their fellow human beings whose humanity is being denied or diminished, and respond accordingly. Bear this in mind in the time and place we now live.

We here are called to be a community that affirms “the inherent worth and dignity” of human beings; and one that seeks the attainment of “justice, equity,

and compassion in human relations.” We are called, now more than ever, to be such a community. May it be so.

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