

## Evil, Race, and Us John A. Buehrens

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"Tell me," inquired Dr. Tang, after saying that the mole in the middle of my chest, though "interesting," isn't cancer, at least not yet, "You're a man of the cloth. What's your theory of evil?"

I stammered inane things about suffering - how some destroys, some integrates; about natural evil, like earthquakes, for example, that from our point of view only destroy,

but from God's point of view may also enhance. Before I could talk about Mount Pinatubo, however, he told me a tale about his younger daughter, who had thrush as a child, became reclusive,

hard to reach, even strange, until one day while visiting friends, when his wife, who is blind in one eye, weak in the other, had Tarot cards cast saying ominous things. On the way home in the car

the little girl woke from a sleep, and with a deep voice, like a man's, clawed at her mother, saying, "I'm going to kill you, tear your eyes out!" "I grabbed her," said the doctor, "took her outside the car,

and said the only real heart-felt prayer I've ever prayed: 'O God, protect this child! Protect her from evil!' Then she threw up, projectile vomiting, looked at me, and said, 'Thank you, Daddy!' She's been fine ever since. Now what, Reverend, do you make of that?"

I wrote this poem, which I call "Ash Wednesday at the Doctor's," a year and a half ago. Around the same time, I was wrestling, theologically, with issues related to anti-racism, while corresponding with some ministerial colleagues on the subject. Tonight I want to share with you a few of my reflections on evil, race, and us - with the conviction that the Universalist side of our heritage may prove spiritually useful.

Let me begin by saying that I don't pretend to understand my dermatologist or his story! For me, it's a symbol. It stands for the difficulty we have, as modern, privileged people, acknowledging that *any* evil - especially a social evil - might be

*within us*, and not just *out there* - in efforts to roll back affirmative action, or in people burning Black churches.

Perhaps the Doc half-believes, on the basis of the story he told me, in demonic possession, in the Devil. I say *half*-believes. Because it wouldn't be modern to do so *fully*, of course. We moderns haven't understood evil under mytho-poetic forms since the Enlightenment.

Andrew Delbanco, the cultural historian and Channing scholar, traces this development in his recent book, *The Death of Satan: How Americans Have Lost the Sense of Evil* (FSG, 1995). What we have lost, he fears, is a common language about evil. In our attempts to be scientific about it, we have become almost schizophrenic. We use a sociology of evil, in this brutal century, to analyze the forces out there. Yet in our psychologizing, the very ideas of objective moral values, transgression, and an accountable self are fast receding.

As a result, it has become easy for the privileged to accept that racism or oppression exist, objectively, while denying any psychological, internal involvement with the evils attendant. Some sense the problem. In a moving memoir called "Us and Them," Fran Peavey writes: "Time was when I knew the racists were the lunch-counter owners who refused to serve blacks, the warmongers were the generals who planned wars and ordered the killing of innocent people, and the polluters were the industrialists whose factories fouled the air, water and land. I was a good guy, boycotting, marching, and sitting-in to protest the action of the bad guys. But now, no matter how much I protest, an honest look at myself and my relationship with the rest of the world reveals ways that I, too, am part of the problem." <sup>1</sup>

J. Robert Oppenheimer once said in an address that "When we deny the evil in ourselves, we dehumanize ourselves, and we deprive ourselves not only of our own destiny but of any possibility of dealing [effectively] with the evil of others." <sup>2</sup>

Yet it isn't easy. Here are a few excerpts from a correspondence that provoked this talk. The idea that racism is not just prejudice, but prejudice plus power, and therefore a White problem, offended a colleague whom I deeply respect. He called it "Calvinist," like his own upbringing. After hearing this idea from two outside speakers on oppression and anti-racism, one Lutheran, one from the United Church of Christ, he wrote that their perspectives seemed "wedded to the doctrine of original sin - that if you are white you are evil (racist), if you are male you are evil (sexist), if you are heterosexual you are evil (homophobic), etc."<sup>3</sup> He asked for an approach to anti-racism more deeply grounded in our own Unitarian Universalist theology.

I took his theological concern seriously, and replied, "What I want to find is a humbler approach. The problem with an anti-racism rooted in an optimistic anthropology is denial. (Who, me? racist?) The problem with one rooted in blame

is despair. We need hope... But can't we talk about confession, sin & redemption - or their functional equivalents - without being Calvinists? I hope so."<sup>4</sup>

His reply was simple: "I have no problem talking about 'confession, sin & redemption.' Sin is one thing, original sin is quite another. Original sin means that my evil is innate, and there is nothing I can do to change it. Original sin is outside of my power to control it. In Calvinism, only God can redeem sin. By grace. I can do nothing about it."

He continued: "Let's say racism is sin. I can accept I'm a sinner. But please tell me what behavior, speech, or attitude I have that is racist, and I'll do my best to correct it. However, if I'm told I'm a racist because I was born to a privileged race, there is nothing I can do to change my evil nature. (All I can do is atone - give up privilege. But this still will not cleanse me from the stain of my sinful nature)."<sup>5</sup>

It's often said, "Scratch a Unitarian, and you find a Calvinist," and my friend still reasons, certainly, like a thorough determinist. He went on to object that if all people of privileged races are racists, then both Hitler and James Luther Adams were racists, the only difference being one of degree; that Nelson Mandela, as leader of a majority race now with power, became a racist the day he was elected; and that whites are inherently morally inferior the way the authors of *The Bell Curve* argue that blacks are inferior intellectually.

What seems at stake here is a process that might be called "demonization." Commenting on Elaine Pagel's book, *The Origins of Satan* - which is something of a mirror image to the Delbanco book, tracing where our Western symbolism for evil came *from* - reviewer Jenny Schuessler says something very relevant: "While examining the harm that has come to those stigmatized [over the ages] as 'demonic,' Pagels takes care to acknowledge the positive aspects of [symbolically seeing struggles with evil as both 'out there' and within]: [Pagels writes:] 'This sense of being among God's people fighting against an overwhelming evil force can be very powerful. I think it was for [Dr.] King. But he never demonized his enemies. Instead, he prayed for them. I don't think he liked them, and he had no illusions about them. One of them killed him. But he [never] preached hatred.'"<sup>6</sup>

Reading Pagels, one is reminded that dualism in religion has as many sources in pagan myths and Greek philosophy as in the Biblical tradition. History shows that the temptation to demonize, or to feel one is *being* demonized, begins first *within* families of faith. Synagogues cursed pacifist Christians who wouldn't fight the Romans, calling them betrayers. The later gospels blamed not the *goyim* but Jesus' own people for his death. Soon heretics from orthodoxy are both demonized and martyred the most.

"Demonology is the shadow of theology," said Emerson, in a lecture on the subject.<sup>7</sup> Even a modernist theologian like Tillich found it necessary, in a century

like ours, marked by such radical evils as the Holocaust, to make 'the demonic' a major category of thought. In his book, *The Devil and Dr. Church*, my former colleague at All Souls, New York, Forrester Church, argued, along with Tillich and Chesterton, that evil's *most* demonic modern trick is to try to convince us it doesn't exist, or has nothing at all to do with us.<sup>8</sup>

What the UUA Task Force on Racial and Cultural Diversity has said is not that anyone is to be demonized, but that when it comes to desiring diversity, what we first have to deal with is not others, but ourselves. Racism isn't just out there. Neither is homophobia or sexism, or any other form of oppression. Pogo said, "We has met the enemy and they is us!" But are we irredeemable? Must we go looking in our own ranks for folks to demonize? I hope not.

What will determine how we do, more than anything, I believe, is how clearly and deeply we practice a spirituality rooted in the Universalist side of our heritage. For Starr King was not just wise-cracking when he said that the difference between the Universalists and the Unitarians was rooted in two different reactions to Calvinism: "The Universalists believe that God is too good to damn them, whereas the Unitarians believe they are too good to be damned." The latter, being quite privileged, had a Brahmin sense of *noblesse oblige*, to right the wrongs - *out there* - while the Universalist side of our heritage was considerably more humble, in both its average social standing and in its approach to reform. For one thing, their reforms typically began as a spiritual exercise, first inside. Take the story even of a relatively prominent early Universalist, like Dr. Benjamin Rush. In many ways, it's a story of coming to universalist theology after repentance from sin. Rush was a slave-owning Presbyterian in his youth. But by the time he became such a prominent Philadelphia physician as to be a signer of the Declaration of Independence, Rush had become an ardent advocate of abolishing slavery. He attributed it to a dream had after reading an essay on the slave-trade.

In the dream, he was transported to Africa, where walked up a beach to a group at worship. The Africans panicked at the sight of a white man. An elder said that white, meant as a universal sign of innocence in all of God's creatures, has in humanity become a sign of guilt, and told Rush that he was standing in the paradise that God had given to Africans who had been taken from homeland and families, shattered and brutalized by slavery. Then down the beach Rush saw approaching an older white man, "grave, placid and full of benignity," carrying a petition in one hand and a pamphlet against slavery in the other. The throng of blacks ran toward him, applauding a Quaker abolitionist with whom Rush was acquainted. He awoke from this dream to become an ardent abolitionist himself. "I love even the name of Africa," Rush wrote, "and never see a Negro slave or freeman without emotions which I seldom feel in the same degree towards my unfortunate fellow creatures of a fairer complexion... Let us continue to love and serve them, for they are our brethren not only by creation, but by redemption."<sup>9</sup>

Or as he put it in the *Articles of faith, Plan of church government and Recommendations* which he prepared for the Universalist Convention of 1790, "We believe it to be inconsistent with the union of the human race in a common Savior, and the obligations to mutual and universal love which flow from that union, to hold any part of our fellow creatures in bondage. We therefore recommend a total refraining from the African trade, and the adoption of prudent measures for the gradual abolition of the slavery of the negroes in our country, and for the instruction and education of their children..."<sup>10</sup> Another early Universalist who had a conversion experience was George De Benneville, who served as a youth in the navy off the coast of North Africa. When he was captured by Muslims, and was treated humanely, he shed his prejudices against Islam, and became convinced that God's love expresses itself through people in every culture, everywhere.

Yet today, it seems to me, there are several ways to misconstrue or misuse Universalism. Not long ago, for example, on a visit to one of our growing congregations, a staunch humanist member told me loudly, "I joined here thirty years ago. I don't come any more." She then went on to decry what she called "the Universalist influence."

"This church no longer stands for anything!" she said. "It accepts everyone, everything, in the name of 'spirituality.' But when I dialogued with her for a while, taking her seriously, she was able to add, "It's not just that it has lost intellectual rigor. What bothers me most is my church has lost its sense of evil!" Though I could tell that her spiritual struggle was to do something other than point the finger of judgment at others, I could also empathize.

When I was first in the ministry, it was at the Tennessee Valley Unitarian Church in Knoxville, Tennessee, which for years was the only racially integrated church in that city. Deeply involved in the desegregation struggle, they had voted, in 1961, against Unitarian merger with the Universalists, out of a similar misapprehension. Some folks knew and had reported on the few remaining Universalist churches in the South, all white and rural, calling them "just country Methodists with the hell scared out of 'em!" Or as one older Black member put it, "Those folks say there ain't no hell. Well, I'm here to testify, on the basis of my personal experience: the hell there ain't."

But of course, authentic Universalism never denied the reality or universality of suffering. Or of sin. It knew that all of us must wrestle with evil, out there, in here. Rather than denial, it affirmed the scriptural realism that "there is none without sin, no, not one."<sup>11</sup> And "if we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us."<sup>12</sup> While I was in Knoxville, in the '70s, one of the most painful parts of my pastorate was to see the Black leaders of city - many of whom had joined the Unitarian congregation during the civil rights struggle, to form common spiritual cause with White liberals - dropping out, partly from the political

pressures of Black nationalism, partly because the Whites were acting out in what was aptly called the 'Me Decade.'

Part of what we are up against, in matters of racial and cultural diversity, I then began to believe, is what might be called "the universality of human narcissism." We are all more comfortable looking in the pool of personal experience, with others in whom we can find ourselves reflected. To be 'wholly other' is both frightening and fascinating; a *mysterium tremendum and fascinans*, as the theologian Rudolph Otto put it, with all that implies.<sup>13</sup>

When scoffers object to old theological language about redemption or salvation, saying "What do we need to be saved *from*?" I believe the answer is quite simple: from ourselves; from harm our self-involvement may unconsciously, but cruelly, perpetrate on others. Bill Jones says all oppression is a survival mechanism. We all depend for life on other life. What is evil, however, is not holding ourselves accountable to life, to others, and to God, if you will.

I think it is important to remember that our Universalist forebears were products of the Enlightenment. They were not the sloppy relativists the angry woman was mad at. And we mustn't be either. They took good and evil as great universals. Yet today, as Susan Sontag has recently written, "the general decline in universalist moral and political standards - of Enlightenment values" has created an increasing reluctance to apply a single standard of political justice, of freedom, of individual rights, and of democracy.

What does it mean then, to be both anti-racist, in a universalist sense, and multi-cultural

Sontag points out that while people on the left criticize human rights universalism as 'colonialist,' or 'Euro-centric,' that label is increasingly being used not only by academics, but by business leaders to say that it is 'unrealistic' to expect or want non-European peoples to have 'our' values about human dignity and worth. "My own view," she writes, "is that it is precisely the reluctance to apply these standards - as if 'we' in the European and the neo-European countries need them, but the Chinese and peoples of Africa don't - that is colonialist and condescending."<sup>14</sup>

The great historian of Islam, Bernard Lewis, makes a similar point. "Imperialism, sexism, racism are words of Western coinage," he points out, "not because the West invented these evils, which are, alas, universal, but because the West [through the Enlightenment] recognized and named and condemned them as evils and struggled mightily, and not entirely in vain, to weaken their hold and to help their victims."

Lewis points out that other civilizations known to history have all, without exception, seen themselves as self-sufficient, regarding the outsider, and even

the subculture or low- status insiders, with contempt, as barbarians, Gentiles, untouchables, foreign devils, *et cetera*. So it seems to him that the currently fashionable tendency to self-doubt and Western guilt - not in the juridical sense, but as a corrosive and destructive mental condition - is just a new version of the arrogance and self-aggrandizement which is the deepest flaw of our civilization. In claiming responsibility for all the ills of the world, a new form of the 'white man's burden' has now emerged, Lewis writes, which is, "no less flattering to ourselves, no less condescending to others, than that of our imperial predecessors, who with equal vanity and absurdity claimed to be the source of all good."<sup>15</sup>

I say this in memory of a young man from Uganda, Sulaiman Kakooza, a devout Muslim, who came to live with my family for a year when I was sixteen. He was my AFS brother. A teacher, he was killed, along with nearly every other educated Ugandan, by Idi Amin.

It's also in his memory - and because I am a Universalist - that I have taken on a task for which I have very little experience: organizing a Standing Commission on Human Rights for the World Conference on Religion and Peace. This August I'll go to China, to meet with religious leaders there.

Yes, a Universalist. Who hopes. Mind you, I know that relationship to evil is not the same for the privileged and for the oppressed. For the latter, as Toni Morrison puts it about the members of an African American community, "The purpose of evil was to survive it. Without ever knowing they had made their minds up to do it, they determined to survive floods, white people, tuberculosis, famine, and ignorance. They knew anger well but not despair, and they didn't stone sinners for the same reason they didn't commit suicide - [because] it was beneath them."<sup>16</sup>

When the writer Madeleine L'Engle finished a lecture at a college not long ago, a student approached her and accused her of being - guess what? - a universalist. "Your books seem to imply that ultimately God is going to forgive everyone!" he said. She responded, "I don't think God is going to fail with Creation. I don't worship a failing God. Do you want God to fail?"

The student replied, "But there has to be absolute justice."

L'Engle asked, "If you should die tonight, is that what you want? Absolute justice? Don't you feel the need for any mercy at all?"

A reporter then asked her, "But what should religious people do in relation to evil?"

L'Engle ended by saying: "Satan kept tempting Jesus to forgo his humanity. I like the old translation that says we need to 'resist steadfast in the faith.' ...There are powers of evil in the universe. God came as Jesus to feel our pain." <sup>17</sup>

John Murray would have agreed. Then he would have told us not to give one another more pain and hell, but rather more hope and courage. He would have raised up a Universalism that embraces all humanity and battles oppression tirelessly - but begins deep within each individual human heart.

Like Benjamin Rush then, let us look today within our own hearts, confessionally, acknowledging our own sins, both individual and collective, of commission and omission, and be converted anew, to the universalist struggle against evil and racism, without demonizing ourselves, any among us or even those around us. Let us pray for everyone. And may we trust that the grace to do so is available, abundantly and universally, to those who will begin to forgo self-involvement and denial. So may it be.  
Amen and amen.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Sun*, November 1994, p. 11.

<sup>2</sup> *Address*, New York City, March 1963.

<sup>3</sup> Letter of the Rev. Bruce Clear to Wayne Arnason, then UUMA President, Nov. 19, 1994.

<sup>4</sup> John Buehrens, handwritten note to Bruce Clear, undated, late Nov. or early Dec., 1994.

<sup>5</sup> Bruce Clear to John Buehrens, Dec. 9, 1994.

<sup>6</sup> Jenny Schuessler, review of Elaine Pagels, *The Origins of Satan*, *Publisher's Weekly*.

<sup>7</sup> From the course of lectures on "Human Life," read in Boston, 1839-40. Published in the *North American Review*, 1877.

<sup>8</sup> F. Forrester Church, *The Devil and Dr. Church* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1987)

<sup>9</sup> Cassara, *Universalism in America*, p. 182.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Romans 3:10, paraphrasing Ps. 14:3 and Ecc. 7:20.

<sup>12</sup> I John 1:8

<sup>13</sup> cf. Rudolph Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*.

<sup>14</sup> *The New York Review of Books*, Feb. 15, 1996.

<sup>15</sup> excerpted by *NYRB* in Martin Marty's *Context*, recent issue, number uncertain.

<sup>16</sup> from the novel, *Sula*.

<sup>17</sup> reported in a recent issue of Martin Marty's *Context*