

Teaching Complexities: God, Evil, and Peacemaking in the 21st Century

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In light of the current U.S. administration’s war on terror, movements to preserve human rights and secure peace around the globe have become increasingly complex. The Patriot Act, the war in Iraq, and looming wars against other nations on the axis of evil are proof of that complexity. One dimension of the Bush administration’s war on terror is a war of rhetoric, in which the President and his supporters speak of God, justice, and evil in easily defined categories, devoid of gray areas and without lingering difficult questions. This paper begins with the assertion that George W. Bush’s rhetoric about evil is inadequate, even dangerous, in a decidedly complex world. Then, it moves on using resources from the Jewish and Christian traditions to construct a response to this danger, considering the pedagogical and vocational challenges that political rhetoric about theological and philosophical issues pose in the global community. I suggest that philosophical and theological analyses of the reality of evil and the work of teaching come together to form one response to the present political moment.

The Rhetoric and Reality of Evil

Why does evil exist in the world? A rough summary of President Bush’s response to this might be: because people do evil. What are we to do in response to evil? Again, a likely Bush response: rid the world of evildoers. Who can do this? Bush: The United States of America. Why? Bush: God is on our side. These likely responses have been gleaned from studying several major Bush speeches since September 11, 2001. Addresses like the State of the Union

speech in 2002 and 2003, and the speech to the nation as bombing of Afghanistan commenced on October 7, 2001 have been crucial, but the first and most significant was the address to a joint session of Congress given on September 20, 2001. It was in this speech that Bush first named an enemy, al Qaeda, and first declared that: “Either you are with us or you are with the terrorists.”¹ Setting up two and only two sides led to significant implications for future foreign policy and military decisions, to which we now stand witness. In addition to this either/or world, where anyone who is not with us is against us, Bush began to invoke the trump card that ultimately brought my work in this direction:

“The course of this conflict is not known, yet its outcome is certain. Freedom and fear, justice and cruelty, have always been at war, and we know that God is not neutral between them.”²

Building on the dualistic worldview he establishes as a generality, Bush specifically insists that ultimately God is only on one side. Implications are clear – it is our side, and God is not on the other side. The embedded insistence that freedom and fear are at war, that freedom does not in any way involve fear, provides another layer for later discussion. I conduct a thorough analysis of this speech in my article, “A Religious Response Veiled in a Presidential Address,” concluding that the presidential rhetoric about the war on terror is characterized by a thirst for retribution, claims that America is the favored nation under God, and contains an implicit justification of violence. It ultimately equates patriotism with faith in a God who is not neutral.³

What is wrong with this clear, seductively simple and theoretically possible logic? The problem is this: the nature of evil cannot be isolated to the acts of a few evil individuals, and the

¹ Our Mission and Our Moment: President George W. Bush’s Address to the Nation Before a Joint Session of Congress, September 20, 2001. (New York: Newmarket Press, 2001) 13.

² OMOM, 23.

³ Caryn D. Riswold “A Religious Response Veiled in a Presidential Address” Political Theology 5:1, January 2004.

world does not fall neatly into categories of either good or evil; in fact, even a very brief consideration of theodicy, the philosophical and/or theological justification of God in light of the reality of evil, highlights the fact that there has never been one satisfactory response to the question about why evil exists in the world, especially if a good and powerful God is presumed or desired. Further, there has never been one solution posed that satisfies all persons, religions, cultures, or ideologies. A brief glance at a few classic sources confronting the reality of evil shows this.

In the Hebrew book of Job, Job's extensive sufferings are responded to in turn by his wife and his friends. Each of them tries to provide him with an answer, an explanation, and perhaps some comfort. Eliphaz insists, "Think now, who that was innocent ever perished? Or where were the upright cut off? As I have seen, those who plow iniquity and sow trouble reap the same" (Job 4:7-8). It's the good old "you get what you deserve" response, one that Job does not accept based on his "upright" and god-fearing life. It is an instinct that we often fall back on, but almost immediately reject when confronted with the suffering of small children, with the overwhelming magnitude of evil in the world, or with the apparent injustice of seeing who suffers and who does not. Zophar asks Job, "Can you find out the deep things of God? Can you find out the limit of the Almighty?" (Job 11:7). This response also is familiar – we can't understand the mystery and justice of God, who are we to presume to know what the divine has planned. However, Job again does not accept a friend's response: "Look, my eye has seen all this, my ear has heard and understood it. What you know, I also know; I am not inferior to you. But I would speak to the Almighty, and I desire to argue my case with God." (Job 12:1-3).

Through the ancient text, we find struggle, complexities, no easy answers, and a refusal to be placated. We find a questioning mind, a confused soul, and one who desires to understand. We hear questions and themes that echo to the present day. And, despite the "happy ending" of

the story, scholars argue that the point of the text is not found there, but is found in the process, in the messy conversations, questions, and frustrations of the main character. The point of the text as I read it is to engage in the dialogue, to argue with God, and to seek to understand. Whether or not we will fully understand is not the point. The point is found in the struggle, the lament, and the protest.

As one of the first Christian theologians to reflect systematically on key existential questions like those raised by the author of Job, St. Augustine, fourth century Bishop of Hippo, provides an early Christian example of one who sought intellectual answers and formed the best questions he could. Augustinian theodicy is built on the notion of the depraved will, where Augustine saw human creatures as having a will turned not toward God but toward the inferior world. Maintaining God's ultimate love and omnipotence, Augustine opts to blame the fallen will and its bad choices for the reality of evil, and forms the basis for what comes to be known in Western Christianity as the free will defense – that evil is a result of choices made by fallen humans and their free will. However, it is his definition of evil that is chiefly worth brief review here. He defines evil as the privation of good – evil “has no substance at all, for if it were a substance, it would be good.”⁴ He constructs a philosophically complex understanding of the nature of evil as it is inextricably related to good:

“A good that wholly lacks an evil aspect is entirely good. Where there is some evil in a thing, its good is defective or defectible. Thus there can be no evil where there is no good. This leads us to a surprising conclusion: ... This is because every actual entity is good [*omnis natura bonum est.*] Nothing evil exists *in itself*, but only as an evil aspect of some actual entity. Therefore, there can be nothing evil except something good. Absurd

⁴ “Evil is Privation of Good” St. Augustine, in *Philosophy of Religion: Selected Readings*. (New York: Oxford University, 2001) 251. from *Augustine: Confessions and Enchiridion*, trans. and ed. Albert C. Outler.

as this sounds, nevertheless the logical connections of the argument compel us to it as inevitable.”⁵

Therefore, things can not be wholly evil, rather everything that is evil is actually parasitic on something good. To exist is to be good, and to cease to have goodness is to cease to exist. Thus, any evil thing is in fact just a defective version of a good thing.

After the witness of Job makes real the existential questions that suffering leads a person to ask of God, Augustine further complicates the intellectual problem of evil, inextricably linking it to good. We can already see that for him, most things and persons are not all good, and could not be all evil, and that there is again no easy answer to the why or whence of evil.

We don't need to spend much time in the modern era to discern the complications it brings to bear on the problem of evil. The most powerful and widely read personal account of the Holocaust during World War 2 is found in Elie Wiesel's autobiographical text *Night*. Throughout the small book, we see the teenage Wiesel as he encounters evil, questions God, and brings a powerful case against the goodness and power of God that modern Jews and Christians continue to confront. Wiesel particularizes the mass horror with a single scene that I see most often reprinted in discussions of theodicy – it has come to be known as the “god on the gallows” scene, where a young boy takes a longer time to die by hanging than the others being put to death that day.

“For more than half an hour he stayed there, struggling between life and death, dying in slow agony under our eyes. And we had to look him full in the face. He was still alive when I passed in front of him. His tongue was still red, his eyes were not yet glazed.

“Behind me, I heard the same man asking:

‘Where is God now?’

⁵ St. Augustine, 254.

“And I heard a voice within me answer him:

‘Where is He? Here He is – He is hanging here on this gallows.’⁶

The meaning of the passage has been debated: whether it speaks of God’s presence with those who suffer, whether it symbolizes the death of any concept of a good and powerful God in light of this horror, or whether it is something more banal and stark – just a boy dying slowly and painfully on the gallows. The struggle and rebellion that Wiesel moves through is expressed in another passage where, as a resident of the concentration camp at Buna, he defies the fasting tradition of Yom Kippur:

“I did not fast, mainly to please my father who had forbidden me to do so. But further, there was no longer any reason why I should fast. I no longer accepted God’s silence. As I swallowed my bowl of soup, I saw in the gesture an act of rebellion and protest against Him.”⁷

The text is one man’s story that embodies the anger, sadness, loss, frustration, and horror that the 20th century brought to millions. To this day, any philosophical or theological discussion of evil must deal in some way with the reality of genocide, seen not only in Europe in the 1930s and 1940s, but again and again in places like Cambodia, Rwanda, Bosnia, and today in the Sudan. What Wiesel’s reflections starkly show is that it is not at all clear where God is in the midst of human atrocity. Presumptions about faith and living according to religious tradition are shattered in the face of great evil.

From the ancient author of the Hebrew book of Job, to the early Christian theologian St. Augustine, through 20th century Jewish Holocaust survivors, volumes of texts reflecting on the existential as well as academic problem of evil point at least to one undeniable reality: humanity

⁶ Elie Wiesel. *Night* (New York: Bantam, 1982) 62.

⁷ Wiesel, 66.

has never found one answer for the origin of evil, nor has it agreed on one solution to the problems that evil poses. In fact, we gain from this brief perusal of these texts a basic sense of the complications involved whenever evil, injustice, and God are experienced and discussed.

Based on this review, it becomes clear that we ought not accept the simplistic answer and solution proposed by President Bush. What then is our responsibility and response?

Ethically Constitutive Stories and Theodicy

In a July 2003 article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Rogers M. Smith describes Bush's ideology as an "ethically constitutive story," and maintains that communities of people inevitably have stories that define and unite them. However, members of the populace also have a responsibility: Smith suggests that "those who disagree with stories like Bush's must contest those narratives with, among other things, rival ethically constitutive stories of their own." He suggests that the task is to "multiply and diversify" these stories, and "set them against one another."⁸

This is where the link between theodicy and pedagogy begins. One key feature that makes Bush's rhetoric of God, justice, and evil deeply problematic is the absence of what Howard Fineman, in his March 10, 2003, *Newsweek* "faith portrait" of the President, calls "the intellectual avatars of complexity and doubt."⁹ Bush as a student at Yale is described as loathing the gray areas, and Bush as a president is rumored to require summary memos to be limited to one page. Presumably, this is to simplify and consolidate eminently complicated issues that daily confront the office of the President. While this efficiency may be praised in corporate

⁸ Smith, Rogers M. "The Next Chapter of the American Story," *Chronicle of Higher Education* (July 11, 2003) B10. See further his book, *Stories of Peoplehood: The Politics and Morals of Political Membership*. (Cambridge, 2003).

⁹ Fineman, Howard. "Bush and God" *Newsweek* (March 10, 2003).

America, and perhaps has its place in a multileveled administration, it seems that the leader of the most powerful nation in the world ought to be giving more in-depth attention to issues with titles like “Bin Laden determined to strike in US.”¹⁰

The aversion to doubt and complexity found in this president is also linked to his personal experience of being a Christian. George W. Bush describes himself as recommitting his life to Christ as an adult, who names Christ as his favorite philosopher, and who maintains strong personal and political ties to the evangelical right wing in the U.S. Mark Noll examines the issue of anti-intellectualism within evangelical Christianity in his book, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*, and notes in an interview with PBS that “evangelicals do sometimes show anti-intellectual traits, or traits that use the intellect in an unsatisfactory way.”¹¹ Noll argues that this does not have to be the case. However, Bush embodies the anti-intellectualism that is often an issue and perhaps a stereotype for evangelical Christians. Whether or not it can be applied to the movement as a whole, it seems to apply to George W. Bush.

In addition to the anti-intellectual component that allows Bush to maintain a simplistic view of good and evil, God and the enemies, the religious component is also at work here. He does not reflect the fact that there are particular resources within a Christian theological understanding of the nature of evil that can equip citizens to understand the world and construct their ethically constitutive accounts. George W. Bush does not seem to rely on any intellectual background for his personal faith claims, or for his political use of God’s preferential option for the U.S. Before I move to a targeted consideration of pedagogy and the vocation of the teacher, I will simply note that from Job, Augustine, and Elie Wiesel we see the outlines of the Jewish and

¹⁰ “Transcript: Bin Laden determined to strike in US.”
<http://www.cnn.com/2004/ALLPOLITICS/04/10/august6.memo/>

¹¹ “Interview: Mark Noll, April 16, 2004.” <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/week733/interview.html> .
See also Mark Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995).

Christian traditions perennial struggle with the problem of evil, and can derive from them the beginning of ideas about how to approach our complex political situation.

My argument is that what Bush lacks with his inability to bring the intellect to bear on complex issues of faith and cosmology has had disastrous consequences for global security, economic stability, and international relations. This is precisely where educators teaching undergraduates at extremely crucial stages of intellectual and moral development come in to play.

Anyone with access to the web or to a collection of college catalogs quickly finds that mission statements for educational institutions typically share an emphasis on imparting both knowledge and character, faith and reason, personal integrity and academic excellence. I found this when I briefly looked at mission statements for my own institution, Illinois College, Concordia College-Moorhead, Notre Dame University, Hope College, Calvin College, and our host, Samford University (“We nurture persons – for God, for learning, forever”). The way that each institution carries this out is of course according to its own traditions and character. However, they share the attempt to bridge Athens and Jerusalem, the classic seats of intellectual inquiry and religious experience. Standing on this bridge has never been easy, and I am certain that most colleges and universities would maintain that it is still a complex charge.

In my college classroom, we find that there is no end to the approaches to the problem of evil. I routinely use a number of texts, in addition to the ones already cited, that make this clear. For example, Wendy Farley suggests that the world is tragically structured, that evil is simply a part of its fabric, and that divine compassion is the only way by which it may be overcome. The tragic element is that evil is inescapable based on the nature of the world, and sometimes, for a

time, evil triumphs.¹² As another scholarly example, John Hick constructs a theodicy that builds on the work of 2nd century bishop Irenaeus, claiming that the world is a place of soul-making, that humans are created immaturely and through their experience in the world they encounter pain and struggle through which they grow, and through which they come to know and love God. Rather than humans falling from a higher state to a lower state, Hick's proposal has humans climbing a ladder toward relationship with God.¹³

In addition to Job, Augustine, and Wiesel's examples, Hick and Farley continue to reveal the deep and complicated nature of what it means to reflect on the reality of evil in the world. This kind of work is what contributes to an ethically constitutive account of the world – why are things the way they are, and what are we to do when we want things to change? In order to answer those basic questions, which is what the President is claiming to do, individuals need to be equipped with knowledge, integrity, and a sense of community. The point of recognizing the struggle and the complexity involved in such an endeavor is this: By first understanding the nature of the reality of evil in the world, we can become better equipped to work with God to confront it, to transform it, and to resist it. We also gain the humility necessary to engage in struggles against evil in a tragic world. It is this humility and complexity that are missing from the presidential rhetoric at the center of the public sphere. Our question is this: Can it be taught?

Pedagogy and Transformation

In *The Peaceable Classroom*, Mary Rose O'Reilley describes her experiences of teaching and of being trained as a teacher during the Vietnam era, confronted with the question "Is it possible to teach English so that people stop killing each other?" She refers at first to the basic

¹² Farley, Wendy. *Tragic Vision and Divine Compassion: A Contemporary Theodicy*. (Louisville: W/JKP, 1990).

¹³ John Hick. *Evil and the God of Love*. (San Francisco: Harper, 1977).

hope of most teachers, to create “a certain kind of human being: compassionate, balanced, and inwardly mobile.” However, the work of teaching goes beyond that, and O’Reilley identifies a key element: She says that finding voice is a political act. If one of the things that we must do because of the nature of the world and the complex reality of evil is to multiply and diversify our ethically constitutive stories, we must engage in work doing that and enabling others to do that. O’Reilley says that “helping someone to find voice demands a spiritual partnership with that seeker. It’s an exercise of compassion.”¹⁴ She suggests that the work of teaching is an integral part to the ongoing struggle against the brokenness inherent in this world.

We hear O’Reilley crystallizing the desire expressed in college and university missions to impart knowledge and character as she describes “helping someone to find voice.” Questions arise now about this desire of educators and their institutions to transform students – into what? O’Reilley admits, “we expect our students to ‘change’ in the course of a semester.”¹⁵ Into what? There is of course no one answer to this question. The assumption is basically that education transforms. Richard Schull states in the foreword to the 30th anniversary edition of Paulo Freire’s classic text, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, that

“There is no such thing as a *neutral* educational process. Education either functions as an instrument that is used to facilitate the integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity to it, or it becomes ‘the practice of freedom,’ the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world.”¹⁶

These are students who are able, in Smith’s words, to create ethically constitutive accounts that respond to the one offered by the nation’s leaders – to tell their own stories. In Freire’s words,

¹⁴ Mary Rose O’Reilley. *The Peaceable Classroom*. (Portsmouth: Boynton/Cook: 1993). 62.

¹⁵ O’Reilley, 30.

¹⁶ Paulo Freire. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. (New York: Continuum, 2000) 34.

“teachers and students, co-intent on reality, are both Subjects, not only in the task of unveiling that reality, and thereby coming to know it critically, but in the task of re-creating that knowledge.”¹⁷ Teaching here is an exercise in mutuality as well as compassion. It is what O’Reilly calls a “spiritual partnership.”

Freire specifically rejects a pedagogy that he calls the banking model of education: “the teacher teaches and the students are taught; ... the teacher thinks and the students are thought about; ... the teacher acts and the students have the illusion of acting ...”¹⁸ In Freire’s context, the concern was that this banking model of education for Latin American peasants served the interests of the oppressors and reinforced their base of power. This approach, he says, is designed specifically not to allow students to critically consider reality, to ask questions about it. In an alternative, which he calls “problem-posing education, people develop their power to perceive critically the way they exist in the world with which and in which they find themselves; they come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation.”¹⁹ Ultimately, this is a transformation in which they are called to participate. A similar thing can be said in the present context of undergraduate and liberal arts education: Part of the point of it is to facilitate students’ development of a broader and deeper understanding of the world and their place in it, along with their ability to ask questions of that world – this is done in myriad ways, through physical and natural sciences, art and music, literature, philosophy, religion, social sciences, languages, etc.

bell hooks is one final scholar who reflects on the work of teaching. She builds on Freire’s work and draws on her own experience in the classroom. In the opening chapter of *Teaching to Transgress*, hooks writes:

¹⁷ Freire, 69.

¹⁸ Freire, 73.

¹⁹ Freire, 83.

“To educate as the practice of freedom is a way of teaching that anyone can learn. That learning process comes easiest to those of us who teach who also believe that there is an aspect of our vocation that is sacred; who believe that our work is not merely to share information but to share in the intellectual and spiritual growth of our students. To teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students is essential if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin.”²⁰

Again we find the balance between knowledge and character, between information and growth of the student. Recalling the earlier question, into what do we intend to change our students, we may now reframe the question. The “what,” or the end is not exactly what we can or should control. Rather, the concern is that we empower students, that teaching is done in a way that respects their souls and facilitates their intellectual development. The 2004 election ad campaign aimed at 18-24 year olds captures this: it featured a button flashing different campaign slogans, saying finally, “vote for something!” Anything! The beauty and mess of democracy is that you become more fully human when you vote for what you truly want. The point is that you participate in the process, that you engage as an individual in the community.

O’Reilly, Freire and hooks take seriously the political responsibility of education. Whether it is the political act of finding voice, creating subjects instead of objects, or facilitating intellectual and spiritual growth, teaching is complex and eminently important. This complexity did not seem important to George W. Bush, the student, but I have shown that they are. What these views share is a concern to create individuals through the process of education who are more fully human, who are critical, responsible, creative, and active. Education is a process that always makes a difference – what the specific difference is, is as unique as each student who comes into the classroom. Clearly, it does not always work effectively. But, in an era where

²⁰ bell hooks. Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom. (New York: Routledge, 1994) 13.

individuals are called upon to receive and respond to powerful political rhetoric about why things are the way they are, and what we are to do in order to effect change, critically constructive members of the body politic are something for which we all should work.

Conclusion

This paper began by asserting that President George W. Bush's rhetoric about God and evil is inadequate, even dangerous. A study of some resources from the Judeo-Christian tradition as well as contemporary theological and philosophical analyses of the problem of evil shows first why this is the case: The problem that evil presents in whatever form it takes is endlessly complicated and nuanced, existentially as well as intellectually. If this is the case, we are left with the responsibility to create ethically constitutive stories of our own that challenge and respond to those offered by the Bush administration. Exploring texts and sources from religious traditions is one way to do this. Teaching others about doing it is another way. Teaching complexities is embedded in the broader project of undergraduate and liberal arts education. In light of the renewed need to understand the power of rhetoric about God, justice, and evil, peacemaking in the 21st century demands that individuals and communities take responsibility for understanding and constructing the world in which they live.

The work of teaching is an exercise of compassion by which individuals participate in the public sphere as intellectuals fully capable of engaging complexity and doubt, strengthened and humbled by in-depth knowledge about the nature of the world and a God who struggles with and

within it. As Wendell Berry says, “Authentic peace is no more passive than war. Like war, it calls for discipline and intelligence and strength of character.”²¹

Let us work for, and teach for, authentic peace.

²¹ Berry, Wendell. “A Citizen’s Response to the National Security Strategy of the United States of America.” <http://www.commondreams.org/views03/0209-11.htm>. Also published February 9, 2003, in the New York Times as a full page ad placed by Orion Magazine