

Many Conflicts Cannot Be Helped, but Should Be Understood

It's a truism these days that our society has become deeply polarized, and that we must guard against demonizing those with whom we disagree. Rather, seek ways to be in dialogue, reach out to those with whom you differ, seek common ground.

In religious perspective, we'd be mistaken to suppose that God is entirely on our side and the other side is wholly evil. The world is not divided between good and bad people. Everyone is capable of good and evil; no one is purely one or the other.

Such observations, while true, are not always helpful or appropriate to the circumstances in which they are made. In a conflicted marriage, for example, it's possible that both parties share more or less equal responsibility. But it's also possible that one party is abusive and cruel, or unfaithful and dishonest, or manipulative and exploitive, while the other party is doing her or his best to make things work, or to dissolve the relationship for the sake of the children or for self-preservation. In short, the facts and circumstances of the relationship have everything to do with where the weight of responsibility for the conflict lies and everything to do with how the conflict must be addressed.

For me as a Christian, the way in which a particular religious tradition regards the human condition is of enormous importance. How are we to understand good and evil? And how are we to understand ourselves, as individuals and in societal contexts, as creatures who are manifestly capable of both?

Human beings can be good and beautiful in all kinds of ways, but there's a reason Christianity has a doctrine of sin. We require a way of understanding that does justice to the full range of human experience and expression, including the very darkest elements that we see in individuals who murder, rape, and torture, and in groups that foment war, commit genocide, and engage in forms of oppression, repression, and exploitation that stifle and destroy the possibilities for their fellow human beings and other life to flourish.

Any religious worldview collapses if it cannot comprehend the American experience of slavery and race prejudice, or what happened in Germany in the 1930s and '40s, or the current machinations in Washington DC. There's such a thing as systemic evil, attributed in Christian scripture to the "principalities and powers," which seems to have a life of its own. We usually identify it as some harmful form of "ism" – racism, fascism, communism we recognize as such. American exceptionalism, fundamentalist capitalism, militarism, corporatism, and white nationalism are present-day manifestations. Such "isms" may be rooted in the laws, customs, traditions, ideologies, and practices of any group, society, or nation. They shape us in ways of which we are often unaware. They challenge and threaten to diminish and destroy us, whether we are oblivious to their presence or knowingly seek to resist their thrall.

Theologian Reinhold Niebuhr wrote a profoundly insightful and influential book titled "Moral Man and Immoral Society" in which he argued that the actions of human beings in groups tend to be both disproportionately more powerful and much less moral than their personal actions as

individuals. It helps to recognize that many not-so-bad people these days are in thrall to ideas, policies, and practices that are pernicious manifestations of systemic evil. What they support is nothing less than demonic.

Refrain from demonizing those with whom you disagree, but do not domesticate or normalize what is cruel, dishonorable, dangerous, and insidiously evil. We are all morally accountable for whatever political and social policies and practices we support.

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