



Reading

“Evil and the Examined Life,” from *Unspeakable: Facing Up To the Challenge of Evil*, by Os Guinness

“Where was God when the towers fell?” The ABC reporter’s question to me, only two days after the horrific slaughter of the innocent thousands in the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, went straight for the jugular, and it was meant to.

With television making the atrocity a local event for untold millions around the world, questions like that must have been asked in countless ways that day – sometimes with heartbreak, sometimes with anger, and sometimes with mute incomprehension. But the concern was surely the same. The deadly terrorist strike laid bare the two deepest issues of human life: the raw evil of the inhumanity of humanity and the agonizing question of the place of God in human suffering.

These two issues lie at the heart of our human existence. Each requires the other for an adequate response, and both are surrounded by a dangerous ignorance and confusion today. The first can be expressed, “Why do bad things happen to good people?” And the second: “What does it say of us as human beings that the worst atrocities on planet earth are done by our own species – in other words, by people like us?”

These issues and questions are far older and have far wider application than the events of September 11. While thousands died at Ground Zero, thousands of others across New York and hundreds of thousands of others across the world also died that day – of cancer, stroke, hunger, accidents, murder, AIDS, suicide, and for many other tragic reasons, not to mention old age.

While the televised attack on two of the world’s most famous buildings was shockingly extraordinary ... far more people in the world suffer today under the heel of grinding evils that are numbingly ordinary and will never make the newspaper headlines. And, countless human beings live in abject daily fear of evil and the brutal people who abuse power and oppress them. For much of the world, evil is – and always has been – a daily fact of life.

Facing up to human evil is disturbing. Some forms of evil strike us dumb with fear. Others leave us speechless. Finding the words to come to terms with the unspeakable is crucial to facing up to it and to overcoming the fear that is so widespread in today’s world. But exploring the challenge of evil need not be depressing; indeed, it may even be bracing, even inspiring. We [can] encounter what has finally made the difference for countless people weighed down by evil: the contrasting mystery of goodness, which outweighs even the mystery of evil.

Evil could happen anywhere. Equally certainly, it does not happen everywhere. What we must make certain is that it does not happen wherever we each call “here.”

Sermon

You’ve probably all seen some version of this advertisement on tv. A woman with modestly styled hair, dressed in spotless light coloured casuals stands in her large sunny kitchen, one hand holding a mop, the other a cleaning product. Suddenly the camera pans into her kitchen floor, which is alive with dark menacing beings, identified as grim, dirt, germs and bacteria. But, her cleaning product is more than prepared for the task. In a dramatic flourish, all that impurity is washed away. The ad ends with a camera shot of the woman’s fresh, perspiration free face, the product clearly displayed next to her wide perfect smile.

How many of you look like that when you’re washing your kitchen floor! My mother would never consider wearing freshly washed pants to clean her house. Even my grandmother, who scrubbed the corners of her kitchen floor with a tooth brush, sweat when cleaning. But the ads obviously appeal to something in us because I don’t think they’ve changed much in 60 plus years, except that more of the housewives are women of color. Whether the product is meant to clean floors, kitchen counters, stovetops, sinks, toilets, bathtubs, carpets, or laundry, you can pretty much depend on the formula. The impurity is defined as an invader encroaching into the sanctity of your home. The product is going to save your home, cleansing it of this dangerous foreign impurity. The result is that moral order is restored and you and your family are safe from danger once more.

It is said by many that our society has become obsessed with purity. There are so many ways for us to disinfect our bodies, our clothing, our homes. And yet, we are discovering the shadow side of that obsession. Children with dangerously weak immune systems, diseases that manifest years later, allergies and food intolerances, not to mention the environmental impact of all these cleaning products and their containers. We’re learning that a little bit of dirt may not be all that bad. In fact, it may be



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absolutely necessary for our health. Some supplements now even contain the enzymes found in soil because some believe we need them for intestinal balance.

We're talking about soteriology today. Soteriology is the theology of salvation, or in plain English, the evil we think we need to be saved from and how we go about saving ourselves from it. Every religion has its own soteriology. Every society and culture has a soteriology, it's own way of defining evil and protecting yourself from evil. Our society's obsession with cleanliness and purity is a form of soteriology. We have identified an enemy and created a system to eliminate it, all with the goal of returning to some kind of harmony.

But clearly soteriologies are tricky things, because it's easy to get off track or to get carried away. Your attempt to protect yourself from evil as you understand it can become evil itself and then you are part of the problem rather than part of the solution. And worse yet, as in the case of our obsession with cleanliness, you may even become more vulnerable to what you were trying to protect yourself from.

Another soteriology that many Americans believe has gone off track is the soteriology of national security. After 9/11, the enemy seemed pretty clear, and a clear path to destroy it was engaged. The problem is that in their zealotry to stamp out the threat of terrorism, our leaders stepped outside of the constitution, outside of the Geneva Conventions regarding torture, and further destabilized the Middle East. Not only has this country become the perpetrator of human rights violations, but some say we have in fact, jeopardized our national security itself. So there are those who argue that we have joined evil in some way, and made ourselves more vulnerable to evil.

Not all soteriologies get off track. In fact, there are some pretty good ones out there. It's just that the ones that are unhealthy tend to get a lot more attention. For some reason, which would be a whole sermon in itself, we tend to give brokenness more attention than health. There's no doubt that there is evil in the world. There is danger. There are things we need to protect ourselves and our children from. We all need a soteriological roof over our heads. But we have to do it responsibly. We have to always keep in mind that we live in an interdependent web of life and every decision we make has consequences for someone else. This is as true for decisions we make in our personal lives as it is for decisions we make nationally and globally.

Both Unitarianism and Universalism came into existence in this country by challenging soteriologies that were out of control and seemed to be hurting rather than helping human beings to live moral interconnected lives. Unitarianism responded to a soteriology that said we were all depraved and sinful and that the only way to save ourselves from evil was to throw ourselves at the mercy of God. Universalism responded to a soteriology that said God was a stern judge ready to punish all wrongdoing and that the only way to save ourselves was, again, to throw ourselves at his mercy.

Both Unitarianism and Universalism saw this as fear-based and shame-based religion that actually stood in the way of living religiously. Good does not come out of fear. Good does not come out of shame. In fact, people filled with fear and shame are more likely to be vulnerable to evil and to do evil themselves because fear and shame create moral weakness and the inability to know right from wrong. Fear and shame stand in the way of reasoned and careful thinking. They blind us to the possibilities in our lives. They hold us back from trust and love and hope. Any of you who carry fear and shame and struggle with fear and shame will know the truth of this from what you have experienced in your darkest moments.

Fighting evil using fear and shame just creates more evil. Which is why breaking those Geneva Conventions on torture has left us more vulnerable. Terrorism is based on the tools of fear and shame, and when we took those tools as our own, we continued the cycle and became part of the problem.

Our Unitarian and Universalist foremothers and forefathers sought to take the poison of fear and shame out of religion, Unitarianism by saying we didn't have to fear ourselves, and Universalism by saying we didn't need to fear God. Even as Unitarianism and Universalism have evolved in the last two hundred years, even when they merged in 1961, and even as we moved from a purely Christian basis to a theologically diverse religious fabric, this has remained the basis of our soteriology. We are saved from evil and from doing evil by cultivating our god-given goodness and by choosing love and trust over shame and fear. Whether we call that larger love and trust God, or the spirit of life, the essence of humanity, or the mystery of an ever-expanding universe, this is our soteriology.

Unitarian Universalist soteriology is not about being helpless to our own nature or about being helpless before a higher power. Our soteriology is about human possibility and human hope. It is about human responsibility. Our Savior is not some larger than life person transformed into a god. We are the hearts and hands of the holy and thus we are each other's saviors. It is up to us and no one else to save this world and its people from the powers of evil.



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This is a pretty powerful soteriology and one that distinguishes us from most of the religions that surround us. For hundreds of thousands of people in the last two hundred years, this soteriology has freed them from shame and fear. It has freed them into a this-worldly salvation where they were free to do good simply for the sake of doing good, not because of some promised reward in an afterlife or because of the threat of eternal punishment.

But remember, soteriologies can get dangerously off-track. Even ours.

One of the things that really bugs me about those cleaning commercials, is that evil is out there. It is nasty, dirty, inhuman, foreign. The woman cleaning her kitchen has no dirt under her fingernails, no grime on her freshly pressed pants, not a drop of sweat on her brow. She is completely pure, and completely unreal.

I'm sure that many of you heard on the news in the past weeks that writer John Updike died recently. Did you know that his first wife was the daughter of a Unitarian Universalist minister. He spent many Sundays in a Unitarian Universalist pew, but he never became a Unitarian because he thought we didn't take evil seriously enough. Our theology focused so much on goodness, on our goodness, God's goodness, the world's goodness, that we really weren't looking seriously at our own potential for evil or reckoning with the truth of how serious and real and embedded evil is in our lives. We had turned away from atonement and sin and forgiveness in favor of self-congratulation. We may have turned away from a superhuman god who could save us, but we turned ourselves into those superhumans. In our well-intentioned pursuit of freeing people from the woundings of a misguided Christianity, we ended up becoming an unfocused, feel-good, fluffy kind of buffet-style religion, kind of like that blissful woman in the advertisement, defining evil as something completely alien to who we are. Our soteriology, where we save the world with our own goodness, separated us from a true reckoning of our part in systems of evil.

Unitarian Universalist theologian Rebecca Parker says this is true not only of Unitarian Universalism, it is endemic to western culture. We want to be the ones who are pure, without blemish, without blame for any of the bad things that happen in the world. This is why those cleaning ads still work 60 years later. This is why there was such moral outrage when some suggested that we examine American foreign policy to understand the context of 9/11. Evil had to be an us and a them, with us clearly on the right side.

My theory is that our fear of Unitarian Universalism's Christian heritage causes us to see things in a similar black and white way. We are so afraid of those shame and fear based religions that wounded so many of us that we threw out the truthful things about evil, atonement, and sin. Remember, fear and shame are the tools of evil. Has our fear of this heritage made us brazen and prideful, causing us to throw away things that we need to continue our search for wholeness?

Evil is not something that is out there. Evil is right here. It is in you. It is in me. It is in this sanctuary. It has the potential to emerge in our most precious relationships. We need to be saved every single day because evil is like a poison that leaches into the ground water from which we all drink. Especially in this global economy, no one is pure. No one is without blame. So, our salvation cannot be about an idealistic retreat into goodness. Our salvation is about a loving daily engagement with the struggle that goes on inside each of us to choose trust and love over fear and shame. Our salvation is about constantly forgiving each other, ourselves and perhaps even God for when we go off track. It's about rejoicing with and for each other for the many ways we try to heal. It's about having faith in humanity's unquenchable thirst to get back up and keep living. Our salvation is about honoring each other for our sincere attempts to bring beauty and justice to this life. Our salvation is about celebrating the dirt under our fingernails, and the grime that works itself into the knees of our once perfectly clean pants.

We need a theology of salvation that can hold all the complexities of that interdependent web of all existence, of which every single one of us is a part. It refuses to define us solely by our failings. It holds us back from taking our goodness for granted.

This is what I wish for myself, for each one of you, for this church, and for this precious world we live in and serve.

Amen and blessed be.