

Human Evil

NOW THIS IS REAL EVIL," a close friend told me after reading an account of the beheadings of two American hostages by the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). The hostages had been tortured before they were killed. ISIS has openly celebrated its murderous and at times genocidal intentions and actions, particularly aimed at Sunni Muslims but also at Christians and others whom they deem not "real" Muslims. Young women are captured and forced to "marry" ISIS fighters, who then repeatedly rape them. Meanwhile, a continent away, members of Boko Haram, an Islamic fundamentalist group based in northeast Nigeria, have been kidnapping and raping young girls as well. The stories about both these groups have intertwined to form a picture of fundamentalists on a rampage of evil intent.

I too have been horrified by these accounts. The willful infliction of pain and murder on other human beings, an act that denies the humanity of the "other," rightfully evokes outrage and a desire to stop the violence. To the extent that anyone is motivated by this desire, they deserve praise and support.

Yet when this motivation leads people or countries to engage in counterviolence, I confront a difficult truth: that the reactions to this kind of evil are often wildly disproportionate and result in the deaths of many more civilians than were caused by the original evil that was committed. And I also confront the reality that we Americans participate, both directly and indirectly, in a complex of societal and economic relationships that cause incalculable suffering, pain, poverty, illness, starvation, and death. That we willfully ignore, repress, and deny the evils committed in our name does not exempt us from responsibility.

I certainly do not mean to suggest that the activities of ISIS or Boko Haram are one bit less horrendous in light of the atrocities committed by the implementation of American foreign policy, but we don't live in an ahistorical vacuum (despite what the rabid twenty-four-hour news cycle would like us to believe). And, in the case of ISIS, its members indicated that they are killing Americans and Britons because of our direct involvement in the war in Iraq and our holding and torturing of prisoners at Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo. To underscore these links, ISIS members even put their victims in orange suits when beheading them, as a mirror image of the orange suits worn by prisoners at Guantánamo. What goes around, some people say, comes around.

Evils Committed by the United States Government

I first became aware of the evil committed by our government in the 1960s as I watched the United States intervene in country after country in Central and South America to establish dictators who supported our corporations, and I protested as the United States engaged in a near-genocidal war in Vietnam, in which we eventually were responsible for the deaths of over one million Vietnamese people.

Though the antiwar movement of the 1960s and '70s had a lasting impact in forcing our government to stop drafting young people to serve its militaristic agenda, the movement did not succeed in uprooting the military-industrial complex or diminishing its power to convince Americans that the best solution to foreign problems is to bomb first and ask questions later. To be fair, there are some in the Pentagon who resist military interventions because they fear a reawakening of antimilitary sentiments that might impose severe cutbacks of the Pentagon's huge annual budgets, and there are some who genuinely worry about the cost in human lives caused by war. But the overwhelming role of the military in American life has nevertheless been to legitimate force and violence as a solution to problems. This attitude has been adopted wholesale by most mainstream movies, television shows, and video games, which in turn provide the backdrop for the high rate of violent activity in the United States. This attitude is particularly evident in violence toward women, but it also manifests politically in the willingness to follow leaders of both major parties into wars or warlike interventions, whether in the form of drone attacks or massive bombings, as long as these attacks do not involve the loss of American lives.

The U.S. intervention in Iraq, launched for the manufactured reason of wanting to eliminate nonexistent weapons of mass destruction, proceeded in spite of the millions of us who marched in protest against such a war. In overthrowing the Sunni leadership, the intervention disempowered a large swath of Sunni Muslims who would later become the mass base for the emergence of ISIS as a significant military force (armed with the sophisticated weapons that the United States had brought to Iraq). Over a million people were killed in the subsequent civil war, and several million more were made homeless.

Of particular relevance to this discussion are the U.S.-created prisons in Abu Ghraib, where Iraqis were systematically tortured, and in Guantánamo, which continues to function today, force-feeding prisoners who attempt to commit suicide by starving themselves. Nor are these the only torture centers. The United States worked out covert deals with a variety of other countries to send suspected terrorists to them for incarceration and torture. Though some of the details of the torture were revealed publicly and others became known when whistle-blowers like Chelsea Manning revealed classified documents, the United States has never brought President George W. Bush, Vice President Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld, or any of the other officials who ordered or supervised torture to trial for human rights violations. The United States has also failed to prosecute the perpetrators of the war in Iraq for crimes against humanity, just as it failed to prosecute Henry Kissinger for his role in overthrowing the government of Salvador Allende in Chile and installing the murderous Pinochet regime in its place. Instead, these criminals continue to publish books, give high-priced lectures, and shape public opinion on contemporary foreign policy issues.

But all of this pales when compared to the global impact of Western corporations and the effects of the economic, political, and cultural conditions they impose on the rest of the world. In countries across the globe, corporations concentrate wealth in the hands of local elites around the world, who in turn prevent democratic processes, resist environmental measures, and use brutal and murderous force to produce maximally at minimal cost, often through the use of sweatshops and slave labor. The Western parent corporations that profit from these sweatshops often hide behind subcontractors, refusing to take responsibility for what these subcontractors do to workers or to the environment in order to enable Western corporations to pay dirt-cheap prices for goods. The corporations then sell these goods

in Western stores at a cost much lower than the lowest cost at which domestic workers can produce them (because Western workers demand closer to a living wage, safer working conditions, and less pollution of the environment). Many Western corporations also do everything they can to sustain a global economic system in which the UN estimates that some 1 to 3 million children die each year of malnutrition or related diseases (at least 1,200 children a day). This tragedy could easily be avoided if we had a set of priorities other than propping up the ultra-rich and the largely Western corporations that benefit disproportionately from this oppressive system.

A fuller essay on the topic of evils committed by our government would have to discuss the immense suffering caused to the millions of Americans who are currently incarcerated (mainly for nonviolent crimes), as well as the suffering caused by our global economic treaties, which undermine subsistence-level farming, forcing millions into megacities in the Global South and forcing others to live in fear of deportation as economic refugees in Europe and the United States.

Defining Evil

Evil must be understood as the inability to see the humanity of the “other.” Once we are unable to see the humanity of the other, we are capable of great harm and violence. This inability is the key to understanding racism, sexism, homophobia, anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, and every other form of hatred, which in turn enable people to engage in emotional or physical abuse, torture, and murder.

“OK, sure, there’s lots of this horrible treatment going on,” you might object, “but isn’t there something more barbarous and disgusting about the face-to-face torture or raping that these Muslim fundamentalists impose?”

Well, I agree that there is something particularly repulsive about these acts because it is harder for those engaged in them to gloss over the pain they are imposing on other human beings. So yes, the torturers of ISIS and the rapists of Boko Haram see what they are doing and the pain they are imposing, making their experience different from the experience of President Obama and his crew of drone operators and pilots dropping bombs that quite frequently kill noncombatant civilians. Similarly, the Hamas operatives who launched rockets last summer onto a known-to-be-effective Iron Shield in Israel and the Israeli bombers who flattened thousands of apartment buildings, in the process killing over two thousand Palestinians and wounding thousands more, did not experience their own cruelty as personally as did the American allies in Saudi Arabia who beheaded eighteen civilians in the weeks before ISIS so brutally murdered their American captives, or as did the two Palestinians who butchered with hatchets and knives four orthodox Jews at prayer in the over-the-Green-Line settlement of Har Nof, which Israel claims to be part of Jerusalem.



No Exit Strategy by Khalil Bendib.

Yet the question remains, why should we not apply the term “evil” to all of us who have supported governments that engage in these kinds of practices, when they result in massive human suffering and death?

I do not mean to create some kind of “moral equivalence” here—the very notion of moral equivalence is morally offensive. Every act of violence, every imposition of hurt on other human beings, is a distinct act or set of actions that should not be treated as subject to mathematical ideas like “equivalence,” because they involve the violation of the sanctity of human beings who themselves should not be reduced to numbers. Every experience of suffering is unique. When a family finds its infants, or young children, or teenagers suddenly murdered by a bomb falling on their apartment in Gaza or in Syria or in Iraq or in the Israeli city of Sdeyrot; or when parents realize they must force a child into prostitution to raise enough money to prevent the starvation of a younger child; or when ten-year-old boys are kidnapped and forced into an army to fight in a civil war—these instances of suffering all result from acts of evil, and those who perpetuate these realities are to that extent evil.

But who among these people (including you and me, to the extent that we participate in one of the systems that perpetrate these evils) can be reduced simply to this dimension of our realities? Were any of these people born “evil,” with an evil gene or a personality that was automatically attracted to hurting others?

Hatred for the “Other”

My experience as a therapist and a social theorist leads me to see a much more complicated reality of hurt, pain, poverty, hunger, and violence. In this context, alternative ways of thinking are forcibly closed off, loving emotions are quashed, and loved ones meet untimely deaths. Or perhaps there is the systematic experience of being demeaned, disrespected, and treated as though we don’t really matter. These experiences lead some into communities where they are finally given the respect they’ve been denied within the capitalist marketplace or within the communities in which they grew up. Denied the human recognition that almost everyone needs to flourish, many people become depressed, dysfunctional, or criminal, seeking some other way to meet this need.

No wonder, then, that others who have been similarly denied will find emotional nurturance in fundamentalist communities—whether they be Christian, Islamic, Jewish, or associated with another religious or national group. However, most of the communities that offer this recognition do so at a price—the demeaning of some “other” as the cause of all suffering. In some places this other is a Jew, a Christian, a Muslim, a Buddhist, a Hindu, or an atheist or “nonbeliever.” In other contexts the other is a communist, a capitalist, a Western imperialist, a Zionist, a Palestinian, an undocumented immigrant, a homosexual, or a suspected terrorist.

The list goes on. It has worked this way for thousands of years and the list of maligned groups grows rapidly in the modern world. And it is in this context that the continuum of violence-producing behaviors exists, including everything from passive participation in global capitalist arrangements to videotaped beheadings.

This is not meant to reduce our outrage at all this violence, but it is meant to get us off our high horses, to help us recognize how deeply we are also implicated in a world of violence, and to encourage alternative responses to violence. It is in this context that I invite you to read two pieces on the Network of Spiritual Progressives website: the essay “Our Yearning for a Loving World” (tikkun.org/covenant) and our proposal for a Global Marshall Plan (downloadable at tikkun.org/GMP). While these pieces do not of course provide a full strategy for creating a different kind of world, they offer some important steps in that direction.

Responses to ISIS and Boko Haram

It is true that there is a pressing need for immediate intervention. Perhaps by the time you read this, ISIS will have been militarily neutralized and many lives will have been saved. But I doubt that any approach relying primarily on violence and led by the United States, with its long history as a human rights abuser, will do more than temporarily stop the killing. New killing fields will emerge in Syria and Iraq, other forms of fundamentalism will emerge, and the story of evil will continue. The violent folks—be they ISIS or the Israeli settlers in Hebron or Hamas militants or the militarist-oriented sections of the U.S. ruling elites—will breed more violence.

ISIS and Boko Haram are best understood as the consequence of the dehumanization of whole populations, but they are nevertheless manifestations of a ruthless, intentional violence and madness that is different from the dispersed alienation that produces the dehumanization of liberal capitalism, including its wars. The vast majority of people within capitalist culture are good, caring people lost at sea, struggling to connect and to get to land somehow.

Many of the young men in ISIS and Boko Haram, however, have become serial rapists and killers, reinforcing each other’s insanity. Their violence is less similar to the violence of the U.S. politicians who send our troops into battle or to the violence committed by the many U.S. voters who allow our government to continue waging wars, and more similar to the sexual abuse, torture, and murder committed by U.S. military personnel at Abu Ghraib. In both cases, the violence is a staged display crafted to assert power through a kind of brutal spectacle. The behaviors of ISIS and Boko Haram fighters also seem more consistent with the behaviors of U.S. soldiers who—deranged by their own personal experiences of trauma and violence in war—start to rape or kill indiscriminately. The murder and mutilation of sixteen civilians

in Kandahar, Afghanistan, in 2012 by U.S. Sergeant Robert Bales is a recent example of this.

The psychological process that has distorted the sensibilities of the young men in ISIS or Boko Haram is distinct of course, occurring through a different set of cultural lenses (Islamic fundamentalism as opposed to the Islamophobia of the Abu Ghraib personnel, etc.), but these young men are still best understood as fighters so broken by violence that they are engaging in psychopathic behaviors. And such people must be stopped.

Only a Global Response Can Stop the Cycle of Violence

I don't fully know how to stop ISIS, but I know some of the necessary conditions:

1. Assemble, either through the UN or outside it, representatives of most of the people of the earth (including representatives of China and Russia, as well as representatives of all the major world religions, including Sunni Muslim religious leaders) to develop a plan to intervene as a world community.
2. Let the United States take the leadership with the other richest countries of the world to launch a Global Marshall Plan, following the lines presented at tikkun.org/GMP, to validate a nonviolent approach to world problems through generosity and genuine caring for the well-being of everyone on the planet and the well-being of the planet itself.
3. Use all means available to the United States to reassure Israel of its safety (e.g., making it a member of NATO) while simultaneously requiring it to immediately conclude an agreement with the Palestinian people that ends the Occupation of the West Bank and the blockade of Gaza. The details of what that accord could look like are presented in my book *Embracing Israel/Palestine* (see tikkun.org/eip). As long as Israel is involved in denying millions of Palestinians their fundamental human rights, both through Occupation and through refusing to acknowledge and find ways to repair the incredible pain caused by the de facto expulsion of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians during the 1947-49 struggle that led to the creation of the State of Israel, and as long as Israel refuses to engage in serious negotiations to create an independent and politically and economically viable Palestinian state, many Arabs and Muslims will feel sympathetic to any force that can match or top Israeli violence with Islamic violence.
4. Reform the United Nations so that it is no longer controlled by the five veto-empowered powers that were the Allies in World War II, and simultaneously require the UN to rely primarily on nonviolent interventions around the world, except in cases of imminent genocide such as we see with ISIS.

With this kind of response, we as Americans could acknowledge that this extreme situation requires a combination

of non-U.S.-led military intervention and stabilization of the region, coupled with a new peace-oriented policy that brings those responsible for the beheadings to justice while establishing self-determination for the Sunnis and atonement and repair for the way they have been demeaned by the U.S.-supported Shia government that we left in place when Obama withdrew our troops. Even if it were led by the people of the world, not by the United States, military action would be an appropriate response if and only if it were coupled with specific healing actions (including but not limited to a Global Marshall Plan) reflecting a new spiritualized foreign policy genuinely based on recognizing the humanity of every person on the planet.

Only a truly global intervention representing the majority of the people of the world—motivated solely by concern for saving human lives, and unsullied by a record of brutalization, torture, and murder of others (e.g., that of the United States in Iraq and Afghanistan, Abu Ghraib, and Guantánamo) and the taint of serving the interests of big oil companies—could possibly change the existing dynamics.

For us in the United States, the path must be one of internal spiritual and ethical cleansing before we can play a useful role. Maybe this is the value of spiritual practices that say we have to look within first! Maybe the message is to stop lashing out at others and to look at how we are acting and begin there. To stop intervening in other places and trying to stop other people and start cleaning up our own house first.

We might start with genuine atonement for what we have done in Vietnam, Cuba, Korea, Chile, and El Salvador; for the training of torturers in what was formerly called the School of the Americas and which continues to operate at Fort Benning, Georgia; and for our blind support of the Israeli government, which refuses to end the Occupation of the West Bank and Gaza. We should continue with atonement for the suffering we caused the Iranian people by our support of the Shah and our failure to support democratic forces there that could have provided an alternative to the Islamic fundamentalists, just as we failed to support the democratic opposition to Syria's Assad dictatorship until the emergence of ISIS. And we should atone for our wrongdoing in Iraq and for engaging in torture at Guantánamo. And, perhaps most important, we need to take democratic control over our corporations and our global capitalist system and, through a Global Marshall Plan and the ESRA (tikkun.org/ESRA), begin to repair the damage we've done to the people of the world and to the Earth, even as we participate in efforts to stop the evil of ISIS and Boko Haram. ■

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