



The Cosmic Battle: Good and Evil

Adapted from Living in the Shadow of the Cross

By Paul Kivel

A major Christian belief, connected to this binary framework, is that everything not associated with good and Godliness is connected to the devil (Satan) and his minions. Being opposite, or the Other, is interpreted as being in opposition to God. The world is understood to be a stage for cosmic struggle. This framework assumes, in the words of Belgium political analyst Jean Bricmont:

Good and Evil exist and do battle in and by themselves, that is independently of any given historical circumstances. The “bad guys” - Hitler, Stalin, Osama bin Laden, Milosevic, Saddam, etc. - are demons that emerge from nowhere, effects without causes. To combat Evil, the only solution is to mobilize what is Good: arouse it from its lethargy, arm it, and send it off to destroy Evil. That is the philosophy of permanent good conscience and of war without end.¹

When evil becomes cosmic, any social conflict or war easily escalates into a crusade. Political leaders can manipulate fear of evil to declare a holy war against a demonized enemy. If one refuses to fight, one’s loyalty to country and God can immediately be challenged.

Acceptance of the cosmic battle leads to a belief in the redemptive power of violence. Regular violence, the kind employed by the evil ones, is cruel and fanatical. We, being morally virtuous, are reluctant to use violence, but since we define our enemies as inherently evil, totally uncompromising and irredeemably dangerous, we have to kill them. We are required to use any means necessary so we can cleanse the world and

¹ Jean Bricmont, *Humanitarian Imperialism*, p. 44.





redeem ourselves as virtuous saviors.

There are many different military metaphors used in dominant Christianity to convey this cosmic battleground, such as *spiritual warfare*, *soldiers for Christ*, *battlefronts for Christ* and *militant discipline*.² Even early academic institutions such as universities and monasteries were described as sites where Christian scholars fought for God on a frontline of the cosmic struggle, using words and ideas as weapons.³

These violent metaphors encourage a militant response to those labeled enemies. The association of difference with darkness and danger - whether the threat is perceived as monsters, aliens, or people with darker skins, different bodies or "foreign accents" - increases the probability of escalation and diminishes the possibility of negotiation.

Moral absolutism insures continuous war, with a shifting series of people and nations standing on an opposing side. The devil is believed to wear many guises, and Christendom is perceived to be constantly under attack. The very definition of the United States as a good, God-fearing country is dependent on its contrast to groups of barbaric and Godless others.

On the interpersonal level, belief that there is a devil actively trying to destroy everything good leads to a somewhat paranoid response to other people. A person expecting ever-present moral danger would naturally have to be wary around anyone not fully and visibly committed to God. Christians may be commanded to love one's neighbor, but they are also socialized to fear and mistrust all those who are members

² The texts of popular Christian hymns such as "Onward Christian Soldiers," "Stand Up for Jesus, Ye Soldiers of the Cross" and "Soldiers of Christ, Arise" translate this martial spirit into song and then reinforce uncompromising militarism.

³ David F. Noble. *A World without Women: The Christian Clerical Culture of Western Science*. Random House, 1992, pp. 149-50.





of suspect and possibly dangerous groups.⁴

Fear can lead people to take an absolutist “you’re either with me or against me” stance. Such binary thinkers demand those around them take a stand, have an opinion, declare which side they are on. They will not accept that a person might be neutral, undecided or simply unwilling to submit to thinking using an either/or dichotomy. In the dualistic mind there are no *both/and* or *and/and/and* options. Those socialized as male in particular are expected to take a strong stand for what they believe in. If they don’t hold and assert their positions aggressively they may well be judged less than a man.

If one views one’s opponent as evil, compromise or negotiation is out of the question. After all, *Faust* is only one better-known moral tale about “making a deal with the devil.” With stakes so high, believers will likely want to determine the two options, find out who stands on either side and charge forward to victory for God with no hesitation, and certainly no mercy.

The cosmic battle between good and evil can play out on a personal level as well. In the fourth century, Augustine urged people to understand good/bad imagery as an allegory for the “moral conflict within each person.”⁵ Therefore, each individual’s struggle to lose weight or to avoid gambling, drug abuse or sexual temptation can take on great moral significance because it mirrors the cosmic battle. Personal struggles may evoke feelings of sinfulness and personal failure - or virtuousness and self-righteousness - because of the moral significance attached to them.

⁴ For example, during the anti-communist McCarthy trials when US Senator Joseph McCarthy was at the height of his influence in January 1954, nearly 50% of the US population believed the threat of communism was so great that they approved of his actions: Richard Hofstadter. *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and other Essays*. 1952, reprint Harvard, 1996, p. 70.

⁵ Quoted in Jonathan Kirsch. *A History of the End of the World: How the Most Controversial Book in the Bible Changed the Course of Western Civilization*. HarperCollins, 2006, p. 119.





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