

Struggling For Good Against Evil

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Abstract

This paper charts my quest for 'good', and my struggle for 'good' against 'evil', growing up in an evangelical tradition. In the process I particularly distinguish the category of 'evil' from the categories of 'bad' and 'sin' and reflect on some of the dominant manifestations of this 'evil' during the 20th century in which I grew up. I specifically explore what it has meant for me, in my personal struggle for 'good' against 'evil', to deal in ever expanding concentric circles of concern, starting with the 'evil in ourselves' through to the 'evil in our communities', the 'evil in our institutions', the 'evil in our nations' and the 'evil in our religions'. And the struggle goes on....

Of Good and Evil

I was brought up by my dear devout Baptist pastor-father to believe that God was 'good'.¹

My Dad would pray to God, saying, 'You are good, and what you do is good; teach me your decrees'. (Ps 119:68) He would say to me, 'The Lord is good to all; he has compassion on all he has made'. (Ps 145:9) He would encourage me to: 'Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good'. (Ps 107:1) After all, 'everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving'. (1 Tim 4:4) My Dad told me God created us 'good', (Gen 1:31) to 'be good' (Matt. 5:48) and 'to do good' (Matt 6:33). And, as my nearest-dearest God-figure, my Dad embodied that 'goodness' of God in his life, demonstrating it in his dignity, integrity and strong-yet-gentle touch. And, as his son, I learnt about the goodness of God in the embrace of my pastor-father.

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As I grew older I encountered difficulties reconciling my primal experience of God as a good God, who created everything good, with a reality that seemed anything but good.

¹ Indeed, I would like to dedicate this paper to my father, Rev. Frank William Andrews. An earlier version of this paper was published in in *Zadok Papers* S226 (Autumn 2018) 1–9. This paper is adapted and updated. Edited by Armen Gakavian then James Hurst.

One way someone encouraged me to reconcile these difficulties was to understand that in reality there is nothing but God: 'the Lord is God, there is nothing else' (Deut. 4:35), though this might be better rendered 'there is *no one* else'. And, as God is good - 'the Lord is good' (Ps 145:9) - everything that doesn't seem good must be an illusion, a kind of 'bad dream' from which I will eventually 'awaken' to the realisation that 'pleasure and pain, loss and gain, fame and shame, are all the same'.² Certainly 'there is only One who is good' absolutely (Matt. 19:16) - in that sense, there is no duality between good and evil beings. However, I have also always believed that the One has created the Many in his image, with the capacity to choose either 'the good' or the 'not good'. In that sense, there is, in reality, an existential moral duality of choice and consequence that is not an illusion.³

But the moral duality is not a simple binary. The 'good' is One, but the 'not good' may be Many. The 'good' is the One and Only, holy, holistic, healthy will of God; but a scriptural spectrum of the Many options that are 'not so good' may include 'bad', 'sin' and 'evil'. I define 'bad' as 'anything other than the holy, holistic, healthy will of God'; 'sin' as a conscious choice to do 'bad', contrary to what we know to be the 'holy, holistic, healthy will of God';⁴ and 'evil' as 'the callous resolve not to accept our sin and repent of our sin, but instead to deliberately project the blame onto an "other" and pitilessly scapegoat them'.⁵

Philip Zimbardo says in *The Lucifer Effect* that evil is 'knowing better and doing worse'. It is 'intentionally behaving in ways that harm, abuse, demean, dehumanise or destroy innocent others – or using one's authority to encourage or permit others to do so on your behalf'.⁶ In Christianity, this 'evil' is personified in the 'devil' (1 Pet. 5:8), represented by a 'serpent' and a 'dragon' in the *Book of Revelation* (20:2), and sometimes referred to as 'Lucifer' (Isa. 14:12).

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² Richard Alpert, *Be Here Now* (San Cristobal, NM: Lama Foundation, 1971), 107.

³ God gives his people a choice with life and death consequences. If we choose that which is good, God says it will result in prosperity and salvation. If we do not choose the good, God says, it will result in tragedy and destruction. He says: 'I have set before you life and death... Now choose life, so you and your children may live!' (Deut. 30:15-19).

⁴ James says 'anyone who knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, commits sin'. (James 4:17) So if the 'wrong' we do is not a conscious choice to go contrary to what we know is the 'holy, holistic, healthy will of God', our action may not be 'the right thing', but it is not 'sin'. Jesus says 'if you were blind' - that is, if you didn't know the difference between 'right' and 'wrong' and didn't 'see' your choice was 'bad' - 'you would have no sin' - it would be 'bad', but it would be a mistake, not a 'sin'. 'But now', Jesus says 'you say, "we see" - that is, you say you know the difference between 'right' and 'wrong', you can see what is 'good' and what is 'bad' - and you still choose what is 'bad' - so 'your sin remains.' (John 9:41)

⁵ Many words in Hebrew are used for 'evil'. The words '*ra*', '*roa*', and '*raa*' denote 'evil' as 'harm or harmful'. In Gen. 44:16, the word '*awon*' is used most pointedly and most poignantly by the brothers to describe the 'evil' of the 'pitiless scapegoating' of Joseph.

⁶ Philip Zimbardo, *The Lucifer Effect* (London: Rider, 2007), 5.

I am a child of the 20th century, the bloodiest century in history. More people were slaughtered in the 20th century than in all other centuries that preceded it put together. And, as a child of the 20th century, I needed to force myself to face ‘the great evil’ visited upon millions of innocent men, women and children.

At the beginning of the 20th century was the Armenian Genocide. In 2002 I visited the Armenian Genocide Museum in Yerevan with my good friend, Armen Gakavian, whose own family were forced to flee the slaughter. There we were reminded that the total number of Greeks, Assyrians and Armenians killed has been estimated at between 1.5 and 2.5 million – including one half of the entire Armenian population.

Towards the end of the 20th century was the Cambodian Genocide. The Khmer Rouge killed between 1.5 and 3 million people. In 2009 I visited the Cambodian Genocide Museum, based at Tuol Sleng, the site of a former school, which was used as Security Prison 21 (S-21), the most notorious of 150 torture centres round the country. Torture, forced labour and mass executions led to the deaths of an estimated one-quarter of the total Cambodian population.

At the heart of the 20th century was the Jewish genocide. In this Holocaust - ‘the greatest and most horrible crime ever committed in the whole history of the world’⁷ - Jewish men, women and children were systematically tagged with yellow stars, then dragged out, beaten up and shot, or rounded up like animals, thrown onto cattle trucks and herded into concentration camps, where the ‘productive’ were put to work in slave battalions and the ‘unproductive’ to death in gas chambers. Six million Jews, representing about two-thirds of the nine million Jews who had resided in Europe at that time, were killed. Over one million of those deaths occurred in Auschwitz.

The sky was crying as I silently walked in and around and about the buildings in Auschwitz. I saw pages filled with the personal names of each of the individual six million Jews who were killed, along with millions of others; I saw partitions filled with photos of the faces of Jews, Poles, Russians, Romani and Sinti, religious leaders, political dissidents, prisoners of war, people with disabilities and gay men who were all killed there.

On the very day I visited Auschwitz, Elie Wiesel, one of its most famous survivors, had died. For Wiesel, a deeply religious Jew brought up with the Talmud and eager to be initiated into the Cabbala, the ‘evil’ he

⁷ British Prime Minister Winston Churchill’s comments to the Foreign Secretary on the actions of Nazi war criminals, July 1944; “Situation of Jews in countries under Nazi rule and in German-occupied Hungary. Code 48 file 3 (papers 210–300)” UK National Archives Catalogue ref: FO 371/42809, <https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/education/resources/holocaust/churchills-reaction/>

encountered at Auschwitz became the defining moment of his life. As I looked around Auschwitz I listened to Wiesel's chilling Nobel prize-winning book, *Night*:

Never shall I forget that night, the first night in the camp, which has turned my life into one long night, seven times cursed and seven times sealed. Never shall I forget that stroke. Never shall I forget the little faces of the children whose bodies I saw turned into wreaths of smoke beneath a silent blue sky. Never shall I forget those flames, which consumed my faith forever. Never shall I forget that nocturnal silence which deprived me, for all eternity, of the desire to live. Never shall I forget those moments, which murdered my God and my soul and turned my dreams to dust. Never shall I forget these things.... Never.⁸

Wiesel never forgot and neither should we. For Auschwitz confronts us with the truth that, whenever we allow great evil to overwhelm us, we not only kill one another, but we also kill all that is good, all that is of God, in ourselves.



My Baptist pastor-father urged me to love God, to struggle for good against evil with God. He said, 'Dave, you need to "abhor what is evil but hold fast to what is good"'. (Rom. 12:9) He told me not to 'be overcome with evil, but overcome evil with good'. (Rom. 12:21).

If we're going to fight for 'good' against 'evil' we need to be prepared to engage with individuals who are 'evil', 'who refuse to face their own sin, project blame on to others, and scapegoat others to such an extent that they will use whatever power they have at their disposal to destroy the objects of their blame'.⁹ When we think of 'evil' people we tend to think of the infamous psychopaths of the 20th century: Hitler, Stalin, Mao, Pol Pot and Ratko Mladic, the 'Butcher of Bosnia'. But not all 'evil' people are psychopaths or sociopaths in a classical pathological sense.

One of the clearest illustrations of how ordinary people can be induced to engage in a terrible 'evil' is the case of Reserve Battalion 101. In March 1942, 80 per cent of the future victims of the Holocaust were still alive. In February 1943, 80 per cent were dead, with the help of the death squads from Reserve Battalion 101,¹⁰ a reserve unit from Hamburg made up of elderly men from lower middle class and working

⁸ Elie Wiesel, *Night*, trans. Stella Rodway (London: MacGibbon & Kee, 1960).

⁹ M. Scott Peck, *The People of the Lie* (Melbourne: Rider, 1983) 69–76.

¹⁰ Zimbardo, *The Lucifer Effect*, 285.

class backgrounds, with no military experience, too old to be drafted by the army. The task they were assigned was the total extermination of all Jews in rural villages in Poland. To begin with, 50 per cent of the men refused to fully comply, and police reservists had to kill the Jews they captured. But after a while they were persuaded to 'do their bit', and by the end 90 per cent of the unit were personally involved in the shootings of Jews. In just four months they shot to death 38,000 Jews at point blank range.¹¹

Many people who do 'evil' are like me. 'I have the desire to do what is good, but ... what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do - this I keep on doing'. (Rom. 7:17-19) What makes us do the evil we do? Is it inner determinants or outer determinants? Often, it's both.

CS Lewis says that humans have a 'basic need to belong, to associate with and be accepted by others central to family bonding and community building'. And 'the basic desire to be "in" and not "out" is a powerful force, that can transform human behaviour, pushing people across the boundary between "good" and "evil" just to feel like they are "in" rather than "out"'.¹² The 'terror of being left outside... [the] 'fear of rejection when one wants acceptance... can negate personal autonomy.... The imagined threat of being cast into the out-group can lead some people to do virtually anything to avoid their terrifying rejection'. It makes people willing to suffer painful initiation rites and/or commit horrendous crimes.¹³ CS Lewis said in "The Inner Ring": 'of all the passions, the passion for the Inner Ring is the most (powerful factor) in making a man (*sic*) who is not yet very bad do very bad things.'¹⁴

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn once said wistfully, 'If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. *But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being*'.¹⁵ So, if we are to effectively engage the evil *in our world*, we need to deal in ever-expanding concentric circles of concern with the evil *in ourselves*, the evil *in our communities*, the evil *in our institutions*, the evil *in our nations* and the evil *in our religions*.

1. Dealing with the evil in ourselves

I am a strong, resourceful, assertive, confronting person. My ancestors on both sides are Scots and I'm told that our Scottish family motto is '*mak sikkar!*' or 'make sure!' So when I hear the challenge of Jesus to be 'perfect' (Matt 5:48) - to be 'more righteous' than the 'most righteous' I know (Matt 5:20) - I am inclined to

¹¹ Ibid., 286.

¹² C.S. Lewis, "The Inner Ring," in *The Weight of Glory* (London: Macmillan, 1980), 258.

¹³ Ibid. 259.

¹⁴ Ibid. 258.

¹⁵ Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*, trans. Thomas Whitney (New York: Harper & Row), 1974.

martial my determination in all its never-say-die bloody-mindedness to *'mak sikkar'* or 'make sure' I 'winnow' the 'wheat' - separating the 'wheat' from the 'tares' in my world. (Matt. 5:8)

How can we prevent 'righteousness' from morphing into malignant 'evil' self-righteousness? I think part of the answer is in being clear about what Jesus meant by being 'perfect'. The adjective used here is *telios* - which is derived from the noun *'telos'* - which means 'purpose'. Thus, it is clear what Jesus is expecting in terms of 'perfection' is that we 'realise our potential'. 'God is love.' (1 John 4:8) We are created 'in the image of God' to reflect the love of God in our lives as fully and as faithfully as we can. Jesus said,

You have heard that it was said, "Love your neighbour and hate your enemy". But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect (in realising your capacity to love), therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect (in love). (Matt. 5:43-8)

What does it mean for us to realise our capacity to love in a world of poverty and violence? Jesus says we can only realise this capacity if we practice the spirituality of compassion embodied in the Be-Attitudes and choose to be:

1. *Poor, or the poor in spirit* - who identify with the poor 'in spirit'.
2. *Those who mourn* - who grieve over the injustice in the world.
3. *The meek* - who get angry, but who never ever get aggressive.
4. *Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness* - who seek justice.
5. *The merciful* - who are compassionate to all people in need.
6. *The pure in heart* - who are whole-hearted in the desire to do right.
7. *The peacemakers* - who work for peace in a world that's at war.

8. *Those persecuted for righteousness - who suffer for just causes.*

We can only be the change we want to see in a world of poverty and violence by:

1. Practicing humility - *by focusing on the poor (not status or riches).*
2. Practicing empathy - *by grieving over the injustice in the world.*
3. Practicing self-restraint – *by getting angry, not getting aggressive.*
4. Practicing righteousness – *by seeking for justice (not vengeance).*
5. Practicing mercy – *by extending compassion to all people in need.*
6. Practicing integrity – *by being whole-hearted in the desire to do right.*
7. Practicing non-violence – *by working for peace in a world at war.*
8. Practicing perseverance – *by suffering for just causes (patiently).*

My daily prayer is my own version of the Serenity Prayer:

Lord, give me the serenity

to accept the people I cannot change,

the courage to change the one I can,

and the wisdom to know it is me!

For better or worse, I am a strong, resourceful, assertive person. My ancestors are Scots on both sides of my family, and I'm told that our Scottish family motto was *mak sikkar!* or "make sure!" One of the challenges for a '*mak sikkar*' personality like me has been to consciously seek to prayerfully practice humility, empathy, mercy and self-restraint in order to overcome my tendency to exert coercive control over those closest to me.

An embarrassing example of my tendency to exert 'self-righteous' coercive control in the name of 'righteousness' was in the way I tried to manage 'the matter of a fridge'. When my wife Ange and I lived in India, we tried to have a standard of living similar to the standard of living for our Indian friends. Since at that time most of our friends didn't have a fridge, we decided not to have a fridge. But over the years, as each successive summer brought the searing heat that left our fridge-less fresh food rotten, Ange suggested we revisit our decision about the fridge. Each year, I vetoed the decision in the name of "sacrificial involvement," which I said meant "sacrificial identification" with our friends who had no fridge.

Then one year, when I vetoed the decision to get a fridge in the name of "sacrifice," it was too much for Ange. She asked me why I could have a motorbike, but she couldn't have a fridge. I answered that I needed the motorbike for my "ministry." She countered by saying that she needed a fridge for her "ministry." Then she said something I will never forget. She said that if I was radically committed to sacrificial involvement and identification, I shouldn't sacrifice something that was important to her, but should sacrifice something that was important to myself. She said that for me to take something that was important to her and sacrifice it was not radical, but hypocritical. *Kyar kare?* What to do? I sold the motorbike and bought the fridge.

2. Dealing with the evil in our communities

'Evil' occurs in our communities when people 'intentionally behave in ways that harm, abuse, demean, dehumanise or destroy innocent others'.¹⁶ One example of widespread evil in our society is domestic violence. 'A survey of domestic violence data revealed that 1 in 3 women and 1 in 5 men have experienced at least one incident of violence from a current or former partner since the age of 15'.¹⁷ More than one woman each week is killed by a man she knew.¹⁸

For many years, my own community had the highest rate of murder and attempted murder in my state. Even though we had locks on our doors and bars on our windows, people wouldn't come to visit us at night-time for fear of the violence that used to erupt in the suburb. Frequently when my wife Ange and I went to bed

¹⁶ Zimbardo, *The Lucifer Effect*, 5.

¹⁷ Wikipedia, "Domestic Violence in Australia" https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Domestic_violence_in_Australia (updated Oct. 11, 2022).

¹⁸ Daisy Dumas, "Counting dead women and domestic violence in Australia: How did we do in 2016?" *Sydney Morning Herald*, December 30, 2016. <https://www.smh.com.au/lifestyle/counting-dead-women-and-domestic-violence-in-australia-how-did-we-do-in-2016-20161230-gtjqkf.html>

we would hear the screams of people being beaten nearby, and we would ask ourselves how we were going to respond to the abuse.

Ange and I know that 'the only thing necessary for evil to triumph is for good (people) to do nothing'.¹⁹ So we lie there in bed listening to the screaming. If it sounds like it's a fair fight, and each person is giving as good as they get, we don't intervene. But if it sounds like it's uneven, and someone is giving someone else a pretty bad beating, we usually intervene. Especially if the perpetrator is a man (or a group of men) and the victim is a woman, Ange will push me out of bed, tell me to put on my pants and 'go and do something!', promising that, if I get into trouble and I'm not back in ten minutes, she'll call the cops as back up.

Now I've intervened enough in my life to know that, when you intervene to save someone from a beating, chances are you'll end up getting a beating yourself. And at times I've been beaten so badly I've had to be taken away in an ambulance. So, I'm always scared when I'm faced with the challenge of having to 'go and do something'. And the only reason I end up going is because the fear of 'what will happen if I don't I do something' is greater than the fear of 'what will happen if I do' - not because I am fearless.

Typically, the situation I find myself in is characterised by 'violence', 'a re-active direction combative people take to bad situations that leads to further escalation of aggression manifesting in insults, curses, threats and acts that do harm'. As a follower of Jesus, committed to practicing the Be-Attitudes, I try not to react to the 'evil' with 'evil' and inflame the 'violence' with 'violence', but to respond to the 'evil' with 'good' and defuse the 'violence' with 'nonviolence' - 'a pro-active direction responsive people take to bad situations to prevent more escalation, maximise calm and minimise harm'. (Rom. 12:21)

Usually when I try to intervene non-violently in a violent situation, I take the following steps:

1. Take a deep breath.
2. Assess degree of risk.
3. Don't react to provocation.
4. But act and/or ask for help.

¹⁹ Edmund Burke, quoted in Zimbardo, *The Lucifer Effect*, 313.

5. Approach, keeping distance.
6. Attend to the antagonist/s.
7. Listen empathically to complaints.
8. Speak peacefully to their concerns.
9. Deflect and diffuse their aggression.
10. Try to work out a way towards a 'win-win' solution.
11. If necessary, take a deep breath and go round again.
12. If I can't de-escalate the aggression, Ange calls the police.

(In my experience, even if the police do come, it's often late.)

One time I came across a huge white man beating his partner. a fragile black woman, with a lump of wood in the middle of the road. I walked up to them (I walk, not run), stopped two meters away (to not to get into a perpetrator's face) and greeted the man (I address the perpetrator, not the victim, because he has the power), saying, 'G'day mate. Can I help you?' (I present as polite, respectful and helpful). He turned to me (already distracting him) and said, 'The bitch stole my purse'. (Now he's talking to me, not beating her.) I said, 'If you let me speak to her, maybe I can help you sort that out'. (I try to get him to see my intervention as an option for him to solve his problem – as well as hers.) He nodded, stepped back to give me space to approach the woman (who lay bleeding on the road) and said, 'She can keep the purse. I just need my puffer'. (Apparently, he'd had an asthma attack from beating the woman.) I asked her for the puffer, she opened the purse, gave it to me and I gave to the man. (Playing a mediating role). He grabbed the puffer, took a puff and stomped off. (Now the immediate threat was neutralised). So, I was able to help the woman up, walk with her to the side of the road and start to tend to her wounds. I then asked her what she wanted me to do. (Restoring her power.) 'Call a cab, so I can go to my relatives', she said. So, I called a cab and waited with her on the side of the road until the cab arrived (just in case the man came back). She then jumped in a cab and drove to her relatives' house (where she felt she would feel safe).

In the Waiters Union, our community of faith in Brisbane's West End, we seek to create safe, hospitable, accepting and respectful therapeutic spaces for both victims and perpetrators of physical and sexual violence - people who have been stabbed multiple times and the people who have stabbed them; people who have been seduced, drugged and raped and the people who have raped them. We try to provide lots of options to help people to deal with the 'evil' in their lives.

Two of the options we have are the Alternative to Violence Project and Pace e Bene. The Alternative To Violence Project provides experiential workshops that empower people to move beyond violence as a default mode of reaction, by learning how to use simple, practical, alternative, nonviolent methods of conflict transformation.²⁰ Pace e Bene provides a training program to help people find their way from fear to freedom, from despair to hope and from violence to nonviolence, engaging some of the major social and political 'evils' of our times creatively, powerfully and effectively.²¹

Another option we offer is the Grow Group, a 'Twelve-Step', self-help, peer-support group that enables people to struggle more effectively together with issues that cause mental and emotional trauma in our society.²² Grow began in Sydney, when a group of psychiatric survivors decided to use a 'Twelve Step' program as a method for their own rehabilitation. There are now more than 500 Grow groups around Australia, helping people who have had breakdowns put the pieces of their lives back together again, and to develop, maintain and sustain a healthy way of life by showing them how to avoid unnecessary pitfalls in future.

My mates in Grow believe that individual problems require individual solutions, collective problems require collective solutions, and that a 'sick society' like ours desperately needs the kind of 'therapeutic community' that grow groups can offer through the practice of the twelve steps:

1. We admitted we were inadequate or maladjusted to life.
2. We co-operated with help.
3. We surrendered to the healing power of God.

²⁰ Alternatives to Violence Project, <http://www.avp.org.au/avpaus/avpaus5.php?group=AUS>.

²¹ Pace e Bene, <http://www.paceebene.org.au>.

²² The 'Twelve-Step' program was developed by Alcoholics Anonymous in 1935 as a model for people to deal with their addictions, compulsions or dependencies, including nicotine, narcotics, sex, eating and gambling addictions. Today, millions of individuals around the world attend 'Twelve-Step' meetings each week.

4. We made a personal inventory and accepted our selves.
5. We made a moral inventory and cleaned out our hearts.
6. We endured until cured.
7. We took care and control of our bodies.
8. We learned to think by reason rather than by feelings.
9. We trained our wills to govern our feelings.
10. We took our responsible and caring place in society.
11. We grew daily closer to maturity.
12. We carried the Grow message to others in need.²³

In every meeting we make an affirmation together that goes something like this:

May the spirit of friendship

make us free and whole persons,

and gentle builders of a free and whole community.²⁴

3. Dealing with the evil in our institutions

Once people thought institutions were a way to redeem an uncaring community. Over time, people came to realise that our institutions can deliver a service but they cannot deliver care. And, being unable to care for us, they took care of us by taking control of our lives for us. The intentions may have been good, but

²³ Grow (International), *The Program for Personal Growth* (Canberra: Grow (International), n.d.), 5

²⁴ Grow (International), *The Program of Growth to Maturity* (Canberra: Grow (International), 1957), 79

the unintended consequences were often horrendously 'evil', in the sense that they 'imposed their will upon others, by overt or covert coercion, without due regard for love or justice'.²⁵

Those of us who work with vulnerable people are painfully aware of the 'evil' visited upon them by government and nongovernment institutions. Among the most vulnerable Ange and I know in our neighbourhood are people who are mentally and emotionally disturbed. These people struggle to maintain their sanity in the midst of maddening circumstances. Many of the institutions that are supposed to care for them often dehumanise them through the kind of help that they provide.

We have noticed that our friends are quickly categorised. Their identities are readily reduced to labels. And they take on the roles of 'schizophrenics' that they have been given as models for themselves. We have also noticed our friends are quickly stigmatised. Psychiatrically disabled people are considered quite contemptible in a capitalist society. Because they are 'handicapped', they are of 'no use' as producers and, because they are pensioners, they are of 'no value' as consumers. So, in a society that measures worth in terms of production and consumption, they are often treated as totally worthless. Many of our friends have been segregated—put into hospitals, prisons and hostels. In these institutions, separate from the rest of the community, their lives have generally been regimented, medicated and regulated in a manner that would not be tolerated in the rest of the community. But it would seem that these 'abnormal' people do not have the same rights as 'normal' people to fight for their rights. Any complaints they make can easily be attributed to 'paranoia' and any protests can be readily treated as 'psychosis'.

The government and non-government bureaucracies, which relate in such a dehumanising manner toward some of the most vulnerable human beings in our community, might be deemed 'a necessary evil'. But just how intolerable such a so-called 'necessary evil' can become is indicated by the testimony of Trish Vanderwal in the infamous case of Ward 10B:

We lived in fear. We cringed. We cowered. We were prisoners with no rights and no dignity. We were the despised and rejected, subject to beatings and bullying. Were we POWs in some horrific concentration camp during the war? No. We were mental health patients in psychiatric hospitals where the caring component had been eroded away, leaving the way clear for abuse and neglect. I witnessed terrible things in hospital. Due to the nature of our illness, our credibility was low. Staff always managed to write up their

²⁵ Michael Kendrick, "Some reflections on community living, reform and personal conduct," *Interaction* 3, no. 3 (1989), 19–27

notes so that bruises and injuries were accounted for. Some patients were refused visitors until their bruises were no longer obvious, though who would have believed a mental health patient anyway? Intimidation became the norm. If a patient became too assertive, they would be deemed "psychotic" and hustled off to a single room, injected with heavy tranquilisers and locked in. Under the "bully gang", we all kept silent to survive.²⁶

Religious institutions are often no better. This was painfully exemplified for me during the debate around the national same-sex marriage survey in 2017. Through an online discussion I became reacquainted with a friend I hadn't seen in forty-five years who had come out as 'gay' when 'homosexuality' was still regarded by many in the church as a 'mental illness'. We met at the local Coffee Club and he told me his horrifying tale of 'torture' as a 'gay' Christian by 'straight' Christians. I had first met 'Bob' (not his real name) in 1969 at the Baptist Theological College where he was training to be a pastor. Bob told me he already suspected he was 'homosexual'. When he confided in his mentors, they encouraged him to marry, thinking that would 'fix him up'.

It didn't. After years of (very effective) ministry, Bob confessed to the President of The Baptist Union, who at the time was also the Union's psychiatrist, that he still struggled with his 'homosexual' orientation. Bob was persuaded that if he wanted to 'fix' his orientation he would need extended 'therapy', including a course of intensive 'aversion therapy'. Bob endured sixteen years of 'treatment', including ten days of electric shocks, delivered through electrodes attached to his genitals any time he responded positively to a homosexually explicit slide shown to him by the 'therapist'. When Bob told his Baptist psychiatrist that the shock treatment was excruciating, but didn't fix him, the psychiatrist laughed and said, 'Ah that would have hurt you eh?'

Finally, Bob had to admit he was gay. Since the General Superintendent of the Baptist Union of Queensland had put out a paper saying all 'gays', whether practicing or not, were banned from any ministry in the church, Bob had to face 'terrifying rejection' from his church—in spite of the fact that he'd stayed true to his marriage vows and faithfully cared for his wife with a serious degenerative disease for over twenty years. Bob was proclaimed a 'poofter' and a 'faggot' and prohibited from worshipping in Baptist churches. But Bob said that the treatment of his friend 'Odie' (not his real name) was worse. Bob says once it was discovered Odie was 'gay' he was prescribed Cyprostat to 'chemically castrate' him. When that didn't

²⁶ Trish Vanderwal, "Broken Hearts, Broken Minds," *On Being* 18, No. 7 (1991), 12.

fix him, he was excommunicated. His parents put him out of their house and changed the locks on the doors so that he could not return.

Hannah Arendt says that we tend to support institutions, in spite of the 'evil' they do, out of a sense of obligation, a habit of obedience, the desire for approval, the hope of reward, the fear of punishment or perhaps just plain laziness - taking the path of least resistance.²⁷

We need to heed the call of Jesus to be 'in the system, but not of the system'. (John 17:18) In fact, it is a clear biblical command that we should 'not conform to the system' (Rom 12:2). We need to ask critical questions of traditions in institutions, like Jesus did. (Matt 15:3, 16)

The questions we need to ask to 'open' up a 'closed' system - one that is not accountable for the 'evil' it does – are ones that challenge the assumptions upon which an unaccountable system operates. We need to:

1. Question the right that a system assumes to rule.
2. Question the monopoly of virtue assumed in the system.
3. Question the tyranny of precedent assumed in the system.
4. Question the concentration of power assumed in the system.
5. Make sure that each and every system knows that they are answerable for the way that they act - not merely to themselves, but also to everyone affected by their activities, particularly adversely.
6. Call 'to account those who maintain oppressive structures, reminding them of the need to judge those structures (not from inside, but outside the system) from the standpoint of those who are oppressed, rather than from those who benefit (from oppression).'²⁸

It is in the answering of such questions, and in the 'answerability' that such questioning requires, that a closed system is opened up to the community and to the kinds of changes the community demands, to deal with the 'evils' in secular and religious institutions alike.

²⁷ Gene Sharp, *Power and Struggle* (Boston: Porter Sargent, 1973), 11–12, 18–24.

²⁸ Charles Elliott, *Comfortable Compassion* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1987), 153–154

A group of our friends in West End, who described themselves as ‘survivors’ of various ‘treatment’ institutions like Ward 10B, wrote a powerful paper challenging the psychiatric system, based on their painful experiences, called, ‘*A Cry For Mercy*’. They trusted their intuition. They drew courage from their group. They stood up for their rights. They reframed their ‘weakness’ as ‘clients’ as their ‘strength’. They refused to allow the ‘professionals’ to silence them. They called ‘to account those who maintain(ed) oppressive structures, reminding them of the need to judge those structures (not from inside, but outside the system) from the standpoint of those (the ‘clients’) who (we)re oppressed, rather than from those (the ‘professionals’) who benefit(ed) (from the oppression)’.

But to deal with the ‘evil’ in our institutions we need to move beyond challenge to change. A change of the ‘first order’ is a ‘vertical strategy’, which enables groups ‘to do what they are doing better’. A change of the ‘second order’ is a ‘lateral strategy’, which enables groups ‘to do better by setting aside what they are already doing and trying to do something else’.

A case of ‘first order’ change was A Place To Belong, a small local agency our friends started that found a ‘better way’ to provide regular, direct, government-funded services, by building networks of connection around marginalised people with multiple disabilities exiting prison and/or hospital to include them in the community, help them access meaningful learning opportunities and enable them to deal with their struggles and to realise their potential.

A case of ‘second order’ change is the Waiters Union, our small local community that has found a ‘better way’ of being ‘church’, by ‘setting aside what we were doing’ as ‘church’ and ‘trying to do something else’ as ‘a radically inclusive non-formal faith community’ who accept, respect and support a whole range of marginalised people in our neighbourhood (including Aboriginals, refugees and people who identify as gay, lesbian and transgender), all of whom are welcome to lead our worship service and take their turn in sharing the Word.²⁹

4. Dealing with the evil in our nations

Australians have a primal historical, often hysterical, fear of ‘boat people’ coming to our country and dispossessing us. Australian anthropologist, Ghassan Hage, suggests that this is because our forebears came to this country as ‘boat people’ and dispossessed the people who lived here before us, and we fear that the next

²⁹ The Waiters Union, <http://www.waitersunion.org/>.

wave of boat people may do the same to us. He says that Aussies have an underlying fear of revenge for the genocide our ancestors committed.³⁰

When Ange and I returned to Australia after years in India we decided we needed to overcome such fears, open our hearts to the First Nations peoples in our country and with them find a way to deal with the evil consequences of Australia's 'Original Sin'.

We settled in the West End. At the heart of West End is Musgrave Park, which as long as anybody can remember, it has been a significant meeting place for Indigenous peoples. People from all over Moreton Bay used to come to *Kurilpa*, the place of the Water Rat, to feast communally on its wild fruits. In spite of dispossession, the community in *Kurilpa* has survived, and their tradition of hospitality has shaped West End.

Aunty Jean Philips, an Aboriginal leader whom we attended the same church with, introduced us to local Aboriginal people. Twice a year, Aunty Jean helped non-Aboriginal people, in the community orientation courses we were to run over the next thirty years, learn about the struggles of Indigenous people. She took them with her to meet her people—some in maximum security prisons, languishing in their cells; others working with human rights organizations, fighting for the release of these prisoners.

Through Aunty Jean, we got involved with a campaign for an Indigenous cultural centre in Musgrave Park, across the road from the Greek Club. Being Greek, Ange thought the Greek community might support the proposal for the Aboriginal community to have a similar centre to their own, but she discovered the Greek Club was circulating a petition against the proposal. They were not inclined to support "the *mavri*" (the blacks).

Ange felt it was unjust for the Greeks, who'd received government funding, to oppose the Aboriginal's proposal to receive government funding. So Ange began circulating a counter-petition in support of the *mavri*. This caused an uproar in the Greek community. Here was "one of their own", a "race traitor", "betraying" them. Ange's relative, who managed the Greek Club, was particularly upset. But Ange, with the support of other Greeks, persisted. Over time, the Greek community changed its attitude to the *mavri*, and supported the Aboriginal community's proposal for a cultural centre in Musgrave Park.

³⁰ Ghassan Hage, *Against Paranoid Nationalism* (Sydney: Pluto Press, 2003), 48–52.

In 1988 Australia celebrated the bicentenary of the arrival of the First Fleet to settle the British colony. On Australia Day, Sydney Harbor hosted a re-enactment of this event, which “triggered debate on historical interpretation, Australian identity and Aboriginal rights. The Uniting Church in Australia wanted people to boycott the event unless Aboriginal rights were recognized. More than 40,000 people, including Aboriginals from across the country, staged the largest march to Hyde Park in Sydney since the Vietnam Moratorium demonstrations.”³¹

We participated in demonstrations in Brisbane and then talked to Aunty Jean about how to respond to the issues of colonialism that the bicentenary raised for the *murri* community. She suggested that we organize a mixed camp of non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal people and invite the non-Aboriginal people to listen to the Aboriginal people talk about what living in colonized Australia has meant to them.

We organized a camp of forty non-Aboriginal people and twenty Aboriginal people to get together for a weekend camp of listening at Mount Tamborine. The Aboriginal people reported it was an extraordinary experience to be able to speak so freely and be taken so seriously. The non-Aboriginal people reported that hearing the stories was an excruciating encounter with the destructive consequences of the neo-colonial regime with which we have been complicit and from which we have benefitted at the expense of these Aboriginal people.

Searching for a heartfelt response to the pain we confronted, the non-Aboriginal people asked if we might wash the feet of the Aboriginal people, and the Aboriginal people, most of whom were Christian, understood the ritual of foot-washing as an act of apology. As we washed the feet of our Aboriginal brothers and sisters, the tears began to flow. But when our Aboriginal brothers and sisters reversed the roles and unexpectedly—and embarrassingly—began to wash our feet, the whole gathering was reduced to tears that could not be stopped. We wept with one another, embraced one another, and prayed for one another. This experience of reciprocal compassion was a counterpoint to the bicentennial celebration of colonisation.

On 4 June 2000, Ange and I joined over 50,000 people in the People’s Walk for Reconciliation in Brisbane which concluded with a wreath-laying ceremony in King George Square. The *Koori Mail* reported, “The march was larger than organisers expected, with only about half of the marchers able to fit into King George Square for the ceremonies. As the marchers made their way to the square, an aeroplane wrote ‘Sorry’ in the sky. Brisbane Lord Mayor Jim Soorley. Soorley told the *Courier-Mail*, ‘We have seen today

³¹ Wikipedia, “Australian Bicentenary,” https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Australian_Bicentenary

thousands of people in Brisbane come out to say we are sorry for the past injustices inflicted on Aboriginal people and we want to be reconciled and able to create a future together.”³²

On 13 February 2008, I went down to Musgrave Park to join the local *murris* who were gathering to watch a telecast of Prime Minister Kevin Rudd make a formal public apology on behalf of the Australian Parliament to First Nations peoples, particularly the Stolen Generations—who had endured immense suffering due to forced child removals. This national apology was recommended by the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal Children from their Families, which highlighted the suffering of Indigenous families under federal, state and territory governments assimilationist First Nations’ policies.

Aunty Jean and many of the older Aboriginal women were standing together around the large screen, listening intently as the Prime Minister said, “We apologise especially for the removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families, their communities and their country. For the pain, suffering and hurt of these Stolen Generations, their descendants and for their families left behind, we say sorry. To the mothers and the fathers, the brothers and the sisters, for the breaking up of families and communities, we say sorry. And for the indignity and degradation thus inflicted on a proud people and a proud culture, we say sorry.”³³ As we heard these words, we all wept together.

On 26 January each year non-Aboriginal people celebrate the day as “Australia Day”- the beginning of the European settlement of Australia, while Aboriginal people commemorate the day as “Invasion Day” - the beginning of the European colonization, dispossession and expropriation of their land. On 26 January, I usually join the Invasion Day rally in Brisbane.

Sometimes supporting a “blackfella” protest against “whitefella” oppression can be complicated. One year I turned up to try to do my bit by carrying the “Always Was, Always Will Be Aboriginal Land” banner, and much to my surprise, I was publicly singled out by Aunty Jean. In front of a very angry mob of “blackfellas,” she asked me, a “whitefella,” to pray for everybody before we started.

I was gobsmacked. I didn’t know what to do. It seemed that I would be on a hiding to nothing, as we say in Australia, no matter what I did. If I didn’t do what Aunty Jean asked, it would prove that I was a

³² Myles Sinnamon, “People’s Walk for Reconciliation (4 June 2000),” State Library of Queensland, <http://blogs.slq.qld.gov.au/jol/2017/05/31/peoples-walk-for-reconciliation-4-june-2000/>

³³ Kevin Rudd, “Apology to Australia’s Indigenous Peoples” (13 February 2008), Parliament of Australia, https://www.aph.gov.au/Visit_Parliament/Art/Exhibitions/Custom_Media/Apology_to_Australias_Indigenous_Peoples

conceited white bastard. But if I did do what Aunty Jean asked and actually prayed for the assembled mob of “blackfellas,” it would prove that I was a condescending white bastard.

I thought it would be better for me to do what Aunty Jean asked, so I said a prayer for the protest, doing my “whitefella” best to voice heartfelt cries of the “blackfellas” who were gathered. When I opened my eyes I was gratified to see fists raised in black power salutes.

On 6 June 2020 there was a Black Lives Matter - Stop Black Deaths in Custody protest in Brisbane. As older people Ange and I had to stay in isolation because of the pandemic, so we were unable to attend. But we were pleased our dear seventeen-year old granddaughter was able to go on our behalf. Lila spent days preparing her placard with the names of many of the 432 First Nations people who have died in custody, which she carried to the protest when she accompanied our friend, Grace Eather, who is one of the famous Stingray Sisters from Maningrida, in the fabled Arnhem Land of the Northern Territory. The Black Lives Matter - Stop Black Deaths in Custody 30,000 plus protest was the biggest that most people had ever seen in Brisbane, and a photo of the large multi-coloured mask-wearing socially-distancing multitude featured in the lead into a story of global protest in *The New York Times*.

As I write it is January 1, 2023. It’s a new year with a new challenge – to help Australians to wholeheartedly respond to the “Uluru Statement from the Heart”. The Uluru Statement represents a historic consensus of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, which engaged over 1200 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander delegates through 12 Regional Dialogues culminating in the First Nations National Constitutional Convention at Uluru in May 2017.³⁴

The Uluru Statement is the most important piece of political writing since colonisation. ‘What makes the Uluru Statement almost miraculous in our time - a time when soulless pragmatism holds sway in our political culture, and representative politics so often proves profoundly unrepresentative - is the way that it brought together the will of the people and the deliberative wisdom of the elders. This pain-staking process not only gives the Uluru Statement the ring of democratic legitimacy, but it also affords the document a unique moral vernacular that is at once practical and passionate.’³⁵

³⁴ From the Heart, “The Journey to the Uluru Statement,” From the Heart, 2022, <https://fromtheheart.com.au/uluru-statement/the-history>

³⁵ Megan Davis and others, “The Uluru Statement from Heart, one year on: Can a First Nations Voice yet be heard?” ABC Religion and Ethics (Jan 21, 2019), <https://www.abc.net.au/religion/the-uluru-statement-from-heart-one-year-on-can-a-first-nations-v/10094678>.

‘The Uluru Statement confronts non-indigenous Australians with the full force of the moral claim that the First Nations rightly have on our attention. It is a demand to be heard, but it is also - generously, even tenderly - an invitation to speak together, to hear one another afresh. It is as though, through some radical act of unmerited hospitality, we are being invited by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to join them at a table they have set, in order that we might learn together what it means to be political companions (in the original sense of the word, as those who break-bread together).’³⁶

So, during 2023 Ange and I will be campaigning for the people of Australia to vote in a referendum in favour of recognising Indigenous people as the “First Nations” people in our constitution, enshrining a “First Nations Voice”, which would be able to speak into Parliament, and establishing a “Makarrata Commission” which would at last lay the foundation for a Treaty between federal and state governments and First Nations.

5. Dealing with the evil in our religions

Christians are not alone in waging so-called ‘Holy Wars’. Many Christians, Muslims and Jews have slaughtered their Abrahamic brothers and sisters, using the violence advocated in the Hebrew Bible or the Qur’an to justify their own violence. After all, they say, Moses says, ‘if there is serious injury, you are to take life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, bruise for bruise’ (Ex. 21:23–4).

Yet Christ once famously cautioned his disciples about making judgments of others:

Why do you see the speck in your neighbour’s eye, but do not notice the plank in your own eye? Or how can you say to your neighbour, “Let me take the speck out of your eye”, while the plank is in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbour’s eye’. (Matt. 7:3-5)

In ‘taking the plank out of my own eye before taking the speck out of Muslim neighbour’s eye’, I was able to clearly see that there have been more devastating wars among Christian states fighting each other than

³⁶ Ibid.

between Christian and Muslim states; and predominantly Christian states have killed more Jews and Muslims than predominantly Muslim states have killed Christians or Jews.³⁷

On 11th September 2001, Osama Bin Laden claimed responsibility for the attack on the twin towers of the World Trade Center, the heart of the American Empire. As the world looked on in astonishment, Bin Laden, invoking the name of God, cried, 'Here is America struck by God Almighty in one of its vital organs, so that its greatest buildings are destroyed'.³⁸ In retaliation George Bush ordered an attack on Osama Bin Laden in Afghanistan – as well as an attack on Saddam Hussein in Iraq (who did not have any weapons of mass destruction, or anything to do with the 9/11 attack, but had tried to kill Bush senior). Bush, a devout, born-again, Bible-believing Christian, claimed: 'God told me to strike al-Qaeda and I struck them, and then he instructed me to strike at Saddam, which I did'.³⁹ Muslims called it 'the tenth crusade'.

The trouble with an eye-for-an-eye policy is that in the end it makes us blind: we are no longer able to see, let alone do, the things that make for peace and love and justice. On the contrary we wage a one-eyed Holy War of Terror Against Terror. We will all remember with horror the reports of the allied 'Shock and Awe Campaign'. Over 100,000 innocent Iraqi civilians have been killed so far and thousands maimed from unexploded cluster bombs. The American military has attacked hospitals. Allied forces have broken into homes with the men taken away, the women humiliated, the children traumatised. Over 50,000 Iraqis have been imprisoned by US forces, but only a tiny portion have been convicted of any crime, with many being subjected to torture and degrading abuse leading to breakdown, death and suicide.⁴⁰

Then there is the associated campaign of 'Operation Enduring Freedom' in Afghanistan. Up to 20,000 innocent civilians have been killed so far by drones, crossfire, improvised explosive devices, assassination, bombing and night raids into houses of suspected insurgents. The war has destroyed lives through the breakdown of public health, security and infrastructure, with under-equipped and over-utilised hospitals treating increasing numbers of wounded.⁴¹ Hundreds of surrendering Taliban prisoners were

³⁷ *New Internationalist*, "Alive and Kicking—the Facts", August 2004.

³⁸ Bruce Lincoln, *Holy Terrors* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002)

³⁹ Greg Austin, Todd Kranock and Thom Oommen, *God and War: An Audit and Exploration* (Bradford: Department of Peace Studies, University of Bradford, 2003),
http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/shared/spl/hi/world/04/war_audit_pdf/pdf/war_audit.pdf

⁴⁰ William Blum, "Great Moments in the History of Imperialism," *News Log* (Jun 25, 2006),

<https://newslog.cyberjournal.org/william-blum-great-moments-in-the-history-of-imperialism/>

⁴¹ Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs, "Cost of War: Afghan Civilians", (August 2022), Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs, Brown University,
<https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/costs/human/civilians/afghan>

asphyxiated en route to prison. Allied troops carried out cruel and inhumane treatment on the prisoners.⁴² And now the Taliban have returned to exact their revenge.

Muslims have lived peacefully in Australia for more than two hundred years, but in recent years, with every act of terror and counter-terror, ancient memories of a thousand years of on-again off-again conflict between Muslims and Christians have exploded into our public consciousness. Muslim Australians have repeatedly been represented as the precursors of an 'Islamic invasion'. Consequently, 'as antisemitism was a unifying factor in the 1910s, 20s and 30s, Islamophobia has become the unifying factor in the early decades of the 21st century'.⁴³

Australian political parties like One Nation intentionally promote an anti-Muslim agenda, and Queensland newspapers like the *Courier Mail* amplify it by quoting the most blood-curdling statements from the most hair-raising extremists they can find, without any regard for the way they misrepresent the views of the vast majority of our Muslim neighbours. In so doing they do the work of the terrorists they quote, frightening us out of our wits and setting neighbours against neighbours, resulting in the scapegoating of our Muslim neighbours.

One of my close Muslim friends is a woman named 'Salam'. 'Peace' by name -. 'peace' by nature. She is an embodiment of the best of Islam I have encountered in her circle of friends – vital, vibrant and alive; soulful, wise and strong; gentle, gracious and engaged. Salam usually wears a brilliant smile wrapped in a brightly coloured scarf, but when I met her some time back there was a tear running down her cheek. One member of her community in a *hijab* (or scarf) had been attacked in the street; another member of her community in a *niqab* (or veil) had been stalked and then assaulted in her own home; and Salam herself had been abused by a complete stranger who threatened to do her serious harm.

At the time I was reading about St Francis's response to the crusades. In his time most Christians understood mission in terms of slaughtering as many Muslims as their armies could, in the name of the Lord. Francis not only refused to take up weapons himself, but he actually travelled to Egypt, where the crusaders were fighting, and begged them to lay down their swords. When they would not listen to him, Francis crossed the lines at Damietta and went to talk with the 'enemy' sultan, Mele-el-Khamil, to tell him about the 'Prince of Peace' and to try to broker a peace deal 'in His name'.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Walker, Peter and Matthew Taylor, "Far right on rise in Europe, says report". *The Guardian*. Nov. 7, 2011. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/nov/06/far-right-rise-europe-report>

So I went to the local mosque and said, 'Christians, Muslims and Jews all believe Abraham is the father of our faith, and we all believe our God is the God of Abraham. So, rather than letting the press play us off against each other, why don't we show our unity by coming together for prayer. And, to start that process, why don't I come and pray with you at the mosque on Friday?' 'Sure', they said. So I did.

About that time, I met Salam's friend Nora Amath and we thought about what we could do to re-build the bridges between our communities that the extremists were blowing up. One of the first things we decided to do was to fast and pray together during Ramadan. At the end of Ramadan we invited Christians and Muslims to break the fast by eating a meal together in the West End Uniting Church Hall to share what prayer and fasting meant to them.

This was the beginning of a series of empathic interfaith engagements we organised on the basis of five shared sacred beliefs: 1. That there is only One God. 2. That God is the God of Abraham. 3. That Our God is a God of Mercy and Grace. 4. That God is bigger than our religions and can speak to us through one another's traditions. 5. And that all truth is God's truth, regardless of who speaks it, and we need to hear it. Many people want to improve relationships between Christians and Muslims. The most common way we try to do that I call the 'problematic approach', which focuses on the problems and tries to fix them. At first glance, this makes sense: if you want to improve a relationship you want to see if there are any problems that need to be resolved and to solve them.

But when you give the 'problematic approach' a second thought you realise that it is actually endlessly 'problematic'. The more you look for problems the more problems you'll find, and the more you look at the problems the bigger, the scarier, the harder they become to deal with, until you find yourself overwhelmed by the problems to such an extent that you are unable to solve them.

In Christian-Muslim engagement we see this happening time and time again. Christians try to fix Muslims, Muslims try to fix Christians, and both sides end up not only overwhelmed by the problems, but also battered and bruised by our cack-handed attempts to solve them. My Muslim colleague, Nora, says she didn't want to meet me to start with because she heard I was a Christian and she was sick of Christians seeing her as a problem and trying to fix her.

An alternative way to improve relationships is the 'appreciative approach'. The Apostle Paul writes, 'And now, brothers and sisters, let me say this one more thing: Fix your thoughts on what is true and good and right. Think about things that are pure and lovely, and dwell on the fine, good things in others'. (Phil. 4.8)

The 'appreciative approach' does not focus on problems and fixing them but on 'the good things in others' and acknowledging 'what is true and good and right'. At first glance, this doesn't seem to make sense: you think that if you only ever celebrate the 'good things' people won't make any real effort to get any better. But in reality the 'appreciative approach' is the only approach that will make us want to do better: if you notice 'the good things in others' you enhance those 'good things', encouraging them to do 'what is true and good and right' more often.⁴⁴

This is the approach Nora and I take in trying to improve relationships:

We appreciate the 'good things' we notice in one another's communities;

We analyse why those 'good things' in each other's communities are so good;

We affirm the 'good things' in each other's communities that we could do better in future.

Hence, though I am a Christian, not a Muslim, I have still tried to appreciate the 'good things' in Nora's religion. Like the *Bismillah*. The *Bismillah* stands for the Arabic phrase *Bismillah ir-Rahman ir-Rahim*, a beautiful poetic phrase that Nora says contains the true essence of the Qur'an, indeed the true essence of all religions. The more I have thought about it the more I have come to the conclusion that the *Bismillah* represents the best perspective of God that any religion has got. Both *rahman* and *rahim* are derived from the Semitic root *rhm*, which signifies the *womb and nourishing-tenderness and loving-kindness*. *Rahman* describes the quality of limitless grace with which God embraces the whole world and all who dwell in it, while *rahim* describes the general embracing grace of God as it interacts with us in the particular circumstances of our lives, always proactive, prevenient, responsive. Nora and I have often reflected on how much better both our religions would be if we used the *Bismillah* as a hermeneutic to interpret our sacred texts in the light of God's nourishing-tenderness and loving-kindness.

Of course, it is not enough to affirm the 'good things'; we must also confront the 'bad things'. In Christian-Muslim engagement, either people do not confront the 'bad things' that need to be confronted or

⁴⁴ Bernard Mohr says that when we focus 'on human ideals, peak experiences, and best practices, these things—not the problems—tend to flourish.' Based on Bernard Mohr, "Appreciative Inquiry: Igniting Transformative Action," *The Systems Thinker* 12 (2001), 1–5

they confront all the ‘bad things’ about the other in the name of aggressive apologetics. But in doing so we make things worse by escalating the conflict that already exists.

Nora and I agree with Maulana Wahiduddin Khan, who says there are two ways we can engage our religions. One way is to ‘take pride in our own religion’ and be *critically-projective* of another’s religion. This, the Maulana says, makes us partisan, protective of our tradition and reactive against others who may call our traditions into question. The other way, the one Nora and I have adopted, is to ‘be true to the spirit of our religion’ and be *critically-reflective* of our own religion. This, the Maulana says, can make us more sensitive to the issues we need to deal with in our traditions and more willing to ask serious questions about our traditions ourselves.⁴⁵ Being *critically-projective* makes things worse by escalating the conflict with one another, while being *critically-reflective* helps one another confront the bad things (what Nora calls the ‘ugly bits’) in our own religions, helping us bring about reform in our religions that can make the resolution of the conflict between our religions much more possible.

Nora and I host conversations, in-house, in our own families of faith, to help our co-religionists safely, honestly and vulnerably reflect critically on traditional interpretations of sacred texts that are used as pretexts for violence. Out of these conversations has come my book, *The Jihad of Jesus: The Sacred Nonviolent Struggle For Justice*⁴⁶, the key messages of which are:

- We are caught up in a cycle of so-called ‘holy wars’.
- Though this inter-communal conflict is endemic, it is not inevitable.
- Depending on our understanding, our religions can be either a source of escalating conflict or a resource for overcoming inter-communal conflict.
- To be a resource for overcoming conflict, we need to understand that the heart of all true religion is open-hearted, compassionate spirituality.
- In the light of an open-hearted compassionate spirituality, we can reclaim the word ‘*jihad*’ from extremists who have (mis)appropriated it as a call to ‘holy war’ and reframe it,

⁴⁵ Maulana Wahiduddin Khan, *The Prophet of Peace: Teachings of the Prophet Muhammad* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2009), 10–13

⁴⁶ Dave Andrews, *The Jihad of Jesus: The Sacred Nonviolent Struggle for Justice* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2015).

in *Qur'anic* terms, as a 'sacred nonviolent struggle for justice'.

- In the light of that open-hearted compassionate spirituality, we can also reconsider Jesus as he is in the Gospels, not as a poster boy for Christians fighting crusades against Muslims but as 'a strong-but-gentle Messianic figure' who can bring Christians and Muslims together.
- Many Christians and Muslims have found Jesus and the *Bismillah* that he embodies as the common ground on which they can stand and work for the common good.

In Sri Lanka Muslims are facing persecution from Buddhist extremists. After doing some training with Moulavis (Imams) in Mannar, Northern Sri Lanka, I was commissioned to write, in a Muslim voice, under the guidance of Muslim scholars, a series of simple training modules for Muslim leaders, in the hope of helping them to respond constructively, rather than react violently to the persecution and so avoid another Rohingya-like genocide in South Asia.

In 2023 Bridging Lanka published these training materials, which were vetted by a group of Sri Lankan Muslim Leaders organised by A.B.M. Ashraff, who was the Director of the Department of Muslim Religious Affairs, in consultation with an international *Shariah* expert, Sheikh Nuruddeen Lemu, who is the Director of Research at the *Dawah* Institute of Nigeria, Islamic Education Trust, Minna in Nigeria.

The first book seeks to frame being Muslim in the modern world in terms of practicing a *Bismillah* spirituality of compassion, mercy and grace. The second book seeks to help Muslims to respond constructively to the criticisms Buddhists have of the tendency in many Muslim communities to come across with an attitude of religious superiority, the adoption of militant politics and the oppression and exploitation of women. The third book seeks to introduce Muslims to a contemporary hermeneutical approach to interpreting the *Qur'an* that avoids the pitfalls inherent in a fundamentalist *salafi* approach to their scriptures. The fourth book seeks to encourage Muslims to develop the capacity to create partnerships with people of other religions, including with Christians.

The fifth and sixth books were extra issue-specific requests to encourage young Muslims to think about how best to rethink about music (particularly modern music which is basically banned in *salafist* circles in Sri Lanka) and animals (particularly dogs and donkeys which are sometimes mistreated in Sri Lanka).

A.B.M. Ashraff, who was Director of the Department of Muslim Religious Affairs in Sri Lanka, was so enthusiastic about the materials that he taught Module 1, on 'Being Muslim In The Modern World', himself. Sheikh Nuruddeen Lemu appreciated the materials so much he asked permission to use Module 4, on Muslims Developing Partnerships With Non-Muslims, at his *Dawah* Institute in Nigeria, where he is providing training in *Shariah* Intelligence to discourage young Muslims from joining extremist groups like *Boko Haram*.

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May God grant us all the strength, to fight for love and for justice simultaneously on multiple fronts, to lose many battles, but to never lose hope in the eventual triumph of good over evil, peace over violence.

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