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Evil Enemies: The Convergence of Religion and Politics

An analysis of political violence and religion should require a very long book, perhaps a series of very long books. Within the context of a very short paper, my purpose here is merely to describe a point of view that I have found helpful. Rather than expound and defend a theory, I will indicate where such a theory might begin. I hope to point to the critical issues that seem to really matter.

In this paper, I will first identify and describe the political categories of friend and enemy and the religious notions of holy and evil. Secondly, I want to explore their intersection because different combinations of these categories will promote either deadly or peaceful interactions. I then want to suggest that US policy makers are confusing religious and political categories with alarming consequences. This development encourages an overly militaristic outlook on US foreign policy and a corresponding neglect of more collaborative and cooperative approaches. I will end by outlining some very difficult challenges confronting theology concerning the role of violence.

My perspective emerges from over ten years of involvement in Northern Ireland. I am currently engaged in a research project exploring the dynamics of political and social reconciliation with Community Dialogue, a well-established grassroots dialogue project that has extensive outreach throughout the region. My principal colleague in this endeavor is Fr. Brian Lennon, a prominent Jesuit who has an impressive history of political and social efforts to reduce destructive conflict between the alienated and polarized communities of Northern Ireland. I should also add that I am an ordained Presbyterian minister, which helps assuage to some degree the charge of nationalist bias that many unionists in Northern Ireland feel about Americans.

Over the past ten years, I have experienced the complex interplay of religion and politics in Northern Ireland for both good and ill. Rather than trying it recount the various personal experiences that provide the basis for the observations presented in this paper, let me merely say that I have encountered the hurt and pain of this conflict through many close friends and have experienced on a few occasions the personal fear that this conflict has aroused in many others. I have also been heartened and inspired by the courage and fortitude of many who have worked tirelessly for peace and who find strength in their religious convictions.

When thinking about religion and violence, I turn to the work of two important scholars: Carl Schmitt and Rene Girard. Both give prominence to the role of violence, yet they address different, albeit deeply related, questions. Schmitt is concerned with political theory, which he thinks has roots in religion, while Girard is interested in religion and maintains that religion and politics are two sides of the same coin. In my mind, these two thinkers are drawn together like magnets.

Friends and Enemies

In *The Concept of the Political*, Schmitt identifies what he thinks are the essential categories of the political. These categories represent the criteria upon which everything else rests. According to Schmitt, all realms of life employ binary classifications to define the particular scope and the special content of their domain. In the moral, it is good and bad. In the economic, it is profitable and unprofitable. In the aesthetic, it is beautiful and ugly, and so on. In the political, it is friend and enemy, and all politically significant concepts arises from this binary distinction.

The categories of friend and enemy have to do with degrees of association and dissociation. They are the poles of a spectrum along which political entities can be placed. On this spectrum, enemies represent the most extreme form of dissociation. While there are many types of friends – some of which might involve intense competition and entail deep conflicts of interest – that form the other pole, there is only one kind of enemy. Enemies are the kind of people who try to kill us.

I prefer to think of enemies as those who seek our destruction. Schmitt uses fancier language. He writes of enemies as representing the negation of our being and our way of life. They are so alien, so distant, so strange that only extreme conflict is possible. Every conflict is pushed to the utmost limits because even the smallest dispute is ultimately about our existence as individuals and as a community. Enemies must be repulsed because even their proximity is a fundamental threat to our survival. Even their mere existence is cause for the gravest concern. Thus, within the notion of an enemy, the possibility of real killing arises because enemies must be eliminated. When the prospect of killing fades, we move out of the realm of enemy and into some other form of conflict relationship.

Between enemies, there is really nothing to talk about. It is hard for me to imagine what a conversation that is premised upon my destruction might look like. I have nothing to say except perhaps *don't* or *stop*! In this sense, the concept of the enemy signifies the end of politics as we normally conceive of the term. Drawing on Schmitt, Chantal Mouffe warns that benign differences always contain the potential to become the negating identities that signify enemies. She uses these insights to explain the agonistic nature of politics and the ever-present danger that political relationships, which are fundamentally about talking, could break down into violence.

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Enemies arise because we live in a "pluriverse" rather than a universe. The world is awash with boundaries, and this fact alone draws attention to the role of the "constitutive other." Mouffe and others argue that groups receive unity from the reference point of what they are not. Any group could serve as an illustration. Inside, there is nothing but diversity. Only a difference – large or small – invested with some significance can conceal the almost infinite variation that exists within any group. Indeed, even an inconsequential point of distinction, if made salient, can act as the foundation of a group as the minimum group paradigm of social identity demonstrates. My point is that every group that strives to be a group as opposed to a meager assembly creates, rather than discovers, its unity. More importantly, it fashions this unity through division – namely, the difference it imposes between itself and other groups.

Mouffe thinks that politics is the struggle to move the inherent divisions of social and political life away from the violence of enemy relationships. Still, there is no way to remove violence permanently because, as Schmitt saw most clearly, politics rests upon a distinction that is intrinsically violent. However, I depart from Schmitt and side with Mouffe at this point. Schmitt argues that the essential character of the political actor is the right to designate and kill its enemies, and only groups that seek this authority are political.[1] It seems to me that the right to designate an entity as a friend – to render real difference benign – is equally political and carries consequences equally significant.

Evil Enemies and the Militant Fundamentalist Content

The thought of Rene Girard intersects the political at the point of violence. The convergence occurs within what Girard calls the scapegoat mechanism. Girard argues that religious sacrifice is the way that communities channel violence away from themselves. In killing a scapegoat, sacrifice directs internal violence toward an external object. In doing so, communities divide a peaceful inside from a violent exterior that it labels as profane and evil. The sacrifice of the scapegoat, because it creates and supports this division, brings peace. At the same time, this division gives rise to the separations that create enemies and war.

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[1] According to Schmitt, there is no way to transcend the political. States that give up this right have just conceded this authority to someone else. Schmitt uses the example of the church. When the Pope had armies, the Roman Catholic Church was a political entity. It ceased to be political when it gave them up – and thus correspondingly the right to designate enemies. Likewise, states that joined the League of Nations did not banished warfare as many wanted to believe. They had instead only abdicated the rights and responsibility of the political and transferred the authority to name its enemies to the League itself.

I am avoiding even a sketchy elaboration of Girard's mimetic theory because going into more detail would explicate, but not necessarily clarify, the point I want to make. The chief idea is that sacrificial violence introduces the differentiations that make up our social and political life. The expulsion of the scapegoat victim establishes key in-group/out-group distinctions that maintain the community's structure and cohesion. Girard maintains that the boundaries Schmitt saw everywhere are always laced with violence – as Schmitt would also. However, Girard grounds the Schmittian notion that we create ourselves principally through our hostility to our enemies in the religious itself. Moving to the Schmitt side of this intersection, the essential categories of the religious – the distinction upon which all other distinctions rest – are holy and evil.

It is important to note that Girard is exploring a form of religion that he calls the primitive sacred. This type of religion would not allow the separation of religion and politics in the way that Western thought does through the creation of the "secular." The violence of the sacred and the violence of the political are one and the same. Thus, within the primitive sacred, the enemy and evil are indivisible. Nevertheless, I need to make this separation to understand better the relationship between political violence and religion today.

The demarcation I want to make is that the religious designates what is evil and the political designates who are enemies. Accordingly, the religious can justify violence, but only the political can authorize and direct it toward specific targets. Thus the convergence of the religion and violence becomes significant when the political identifies enemies and the religious judges them evil. However, other combinations are also possible. During the Reagan years, the administration's foreign policy toward Central America was restrained because many church groups refused to label the Sandinistas and the FLMN evil. Similarly, many religious groups denounce the conduct of many dictators and despots as evil but the US government refuses to identify them as enemies and thereby treat them accordingly.

The point of view I am developing calls for paying close attention to what religious leaders say is evil and to whom political entities say are enemies. The juncture of the two is deadly. However, it also underscores what in religion and politics might prevent or impede this convergence. There is as much hope in the latter as there is despair in the former. They both require our dedicated study and prayerful reflection because neither religion nor politics is going away any time soon.

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Of course, the separation between the religious and the political is not quite the same as the separation of religion and politics. The division that I make is analytical while the separation of church and state represents an institutional, but not a conceptual, split between religion and politics. The overlap of religion and politics is perhaps most clear in militant Islam, which does not distinguish between mosque and state on theological grounds. Indeed, the conjuncture of religion and politics in this form of Islam is almost complete. However, the prominence of the principal of church and state separation in Western thought should not blur the fact that even liberal moderate US religious circles – Christian, Jewish, and Muslim – find this intersection legitimate. The most well-known and positive example of this interplay is probably the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s.

Using the religious and the political as a lens, I want to approach the interplay of religion and politics from a theological point of view. As a religious person, I maintain the right to make theological judgments about what is evil and what are permissible responses to it. On the latter question, I struggle to be decidedly pacifist although I recognize all too clearly the strength of the challenges that other moral traditions present to my ideal. Mine has always been a troubled pacifism at best. The obligation to protect the "innocent" weights heavily on my mind and hopefully saves me from some of the smug self-righteousness that I find sometimes irritating in pacifist stances. In this regard, I stand somewhat but not completely apart from the traditions of just war theory and Christian realism (Reinhold Niebuhr) that are more conventional Christian positions. I want to remain in tension with these schools of thought because I think that each, in its own way, seeks to limit or reduce violence. Thus, our goals are similar if not precisely the same.

On this point, militant fundamentalists start with claims that are not significantly different from my own since we both maintain the right to identify what is evil and to endorse appropriate ways of responding to it. However, we quickly and dramatically part company over the role of the secular – the gap between religion and politics that prevents their complete convergence. Militant fundamentalists see no theological reason to grant the secular any independent license because the realm of God's authority is ultimately all encompassing. From their perspective, the tolerance and accommodation that I value in secular life fades in comparison to the way of life offered by God or some other divine authority. In fact, the secular is fundamentally oppressive from their viewpoint since it enslaves human beings to laws enacted by other human beings. The only alternative to the subjugation of humans to other humans that the secular represents is obedience to divine law. From their perspective, I have simply removed God and replaced him with human mandates.

While the rise of the secular in Western thought has many sources, a prominent one was the reaction against the religious violence of the 16th and 17th centuries. The secular was a way of living with the religious differences that had produced so much horror. Under secularity, political entities have a warrant to make decisions independent from the need to enforce particular versions of religious orthodoxy. Indeed, they may run counter to certain strongly held beliefs if made in the interest of common welfare. Thus, one of the important goals of the secular is to limit violence. As I follow this line of reasoning, I am left with a disturbing question: is the difference between my response and those of militant fundamentalists more than simply a matter of my theological struggle to reject violence? To be honest, I am unsure of the answer to this question.

Taking my own fundamentalist co-religionists, I don't care if they want to teach creationism, think school prayer is important, denounce abortion, etc. What I mind is that they blow up buildings, shoot doctors, and use violence to coerce me into practices to which I object. As far as I am concerned, they are entitled to pursue their objectives politically as long as they adhere to rules and procedures grounded in secular documents like the US Constitution and the conventions of human and civil rights. For my part, I favor the teaching of evolution, oppose school prayer, and support choice with regard to abortion, and I do so for religious as well as secular reasons. The dividing line for me is violence.

A Challenge to Theology: Questioning the Role of Violence

The language of peace these days is democracy, human rights, and free markets. The combination of these three comprises the right upon which states claim legitimacy within the increasingly global structures that some are calling empire. The recent US National Security Strategy (September 2002) proclaims these ideals "true for every person, in every society" and calls upon "freedom-loving people" everywhere to "protect these values against their enemies." At one level, I have no problem with these statements although I might want to be a bit more humble about making a one-to-one equation of these ideals with US embodiment of them. However, when these ideals are placed in the overall context of this document, they become bathed in blood. Those who stand against US dominance in the emerging global structure of empire become the enemies of these ideals. And because enemies, as Carl Schmitt noted, seek our destruction, we kill them.

I find disturbing the ease with which this current constitution of the political identifies enemies to be destroyed. The neo-conservatives who dominate foreign policy are no doubt right that we face a new and daunting challenge in militant fundamentalism. However, their political discourse transgresses into the religious when they called those who oppose their ideals evil. Strictly speaking, their language represents an infection of the political because the fact that a regime is evil does not make it an enemy. Nevertheless, under the present reign of neo-conservatives, this appears to be the overriding reason for calling them enemies rather than the Schmittian notion that they seek our destruction. First they are evil, then, because they are evil, they become enemies. I am not saying that enemies can't also be evil or that militant fundamentalists aren't sometimes both. I am instead suggesting that we are better served when politics focuses on protecting us from enemies rather than on saving us from evil. This corruption of political and religious language has an effect that is more than merely muddled thinking. It means that enemies proliferate because states that are not particularly known for their exemplary moral behavior are legion.

The question of how the religious within a secular context responds to this development is a paramount issue for theological reflection. Earlier, I claimed the right as a religious person to identify evil and specify appropriate ways of responding to it. The invasion of the neo-conservatives into the religious occurs at the point of determining a violent response to evil by making evil rather than threat the deciding factor in identifying enemies. How we should respond to evil is a question that theological reflection needs to claim as its own. The issue fundamentally concerns means rather than ends, and I have also indicated that I think embrace of violent means is the deciding factor distinguishing militant fundamentalism from other more moderate forms of religious expression. Taking the matter one step further, the critical problem becomes the role of violence in addressing evil.

The West has been virtually unanimous in its condemnation of militant Islam, but it has been largely and notably silent about its own violence. This may be because the case for a just war against al Qaeda and the Taliban was deemed self-evident, and other approaches seemed to offer no credible alternative. However, the justification for the war on Iraq as opposed to pursuing what were legitimate ends by alternative means was anything but apparent. Moreover, the violence of US armed forces in Iraq was remarkably similar to the violence of militant Islam in the formal sense that both rested their argument on the premise that the ends justify the means. What seems lacking is a serious examination of whether our embrace of violence as a response to evil is based upon anything more than our conviction that our ends justify it. I recognize that this exploration will probably not lead to the pacifist ideal that I struggle to embody. If it is true – and it may not be – that what separates us from militant fundamentalists is our stance on violence, then we need to be very sure upon what this separation rests.

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The neo-conservative appropriation of the religious has another dire consequence. I mentioned earlier that, from a Schmittian perspective, the identification of friends is just as political as the designation of enemies. However, the composition of friendship is left completely unexplored in Schmitt's work. As a result, Schmitt gave us few markers for thinking about what political friendship might be. Aristotle identified friendship – *philia politikē* – as the ingredient that held the city together. It emerged as private individuals moved into the commonality of interests that forms the foundation for human associations. For Aristotle, friendship was more than mutually beneficial interactions because friendliness rested upon the fundamental respect that we have for one another as human beings. He thought friendship consisted of a willingness to regard another with the same attitude as one has toward oneself. Schmitt would have dismissed this type of interaction as concerning merely administration because it has to do with the internal workings of a political unit rather than the interface between political entities.

To fill this void in the political, I can only offer a rough and largely negative starting point. Friends are those who do not seek our destruction. Within in this large domain, friends come in many varieties ranging from those with whom we share common values and interests to those who merely recognize our right to exist despite serious disagreement about values and deep conflicts of interest. The Schmittian realm of political friends would include all who are not enemies. This notion stands in marked contrast to the neo-conservatives who seem to think of friends as a kind of "coalition of the willing" who will join with us in doing our political bidding. This orientation draws our attention away from the far more difficult and important political task of creating friends of those who could become our enemies.

The religious brings to this task a complex and difficult question. The religious is concerned with what is holy and evil. Our experience of the holy imparts a sense of human communion that expresses a commonality we feel toward and with other people. However, if this human commonality takes form solely around agreement, then it is not much more than a coalition of the willing. Human community is simply limited to the lucky few or, more religiously, the elect. The much more difficult question is how to live with difference without succumbing to the temptation to see difference as an indication of evil. This is the religious version of the political problem of creating friends.

I have struggled with the issue of living with differences in divided societies since I began my involvement in Northern Ireland. Space does not allow me to do more than briefly state some of my conclusions. I have found two meta-questions to be at the heart of the matter:

1. Given our past history and common future, what do we think we owe the other side?
2. Given our past history and common future, what do we think we need from the other side?

To address these questions, I think that the parties must come to some common understanding around four issues:

1. A mutually tolerable vision of the future (This vision may encompass rival or competing views provided that they include the other as a willing rather than coerced partner.)
2. A balance of safeguards (trusted resolution of certain issues) and political participation (active engagement on other issues)
3. A shared respect for loss
4. A means or process of addressing the issue of justice

Perhaps the most important contribution that religions can make to politics today is to engage these hard questions and complicated issues. Because they are difficult, the answers will require much dedication. Still, what is religion about if not dedication?