

Unitarian Universalist Views of Evil

Paul Rasor, Editor

Unitarian Universalists and other religious liberals have always emphasized the positive aspects of the divine and human nature. As a result, critics sometimes charge that liberals don't truly understand the reality of evil. Yet liberals are not naïve about evil; they just have a different framework for understanding it.

For religious liberals, evil is not a supernatural force locked in a cosmic struggle against the forces of good. Liberals also do not worry much about the traditional “theodicy” problem—how evil can exist if God is both all-loving and all-powerful. For liberals, evil is neither a demonic spirit nor a philosophical dilemma, but a reality to respond to and confront.

As these essays show, Unitarian Universalists are fully aware of the profound evil we face today, including unnecessary human suffering, rampant environmental degradation, and destructive systemic structures such as racism, sexism, homophobia, and violence. Yet none of these are inevitable. Religious liberals live with hope grounded in the belief that the world can be nudged toward the good. Our choices matter: We can either enable (or ignore) the evil around us, or we can help overcome it.

Paul Rasor, editor

Victoria Safford

Sometimes I use a very subjective, almost subconscious barometer when reading the news of the day and deciding whether some action bears the weight of the word evil. It's not the magnitude of an event, nor the cold-heartedness of those involved, nor even the historical impact. It's the degree of heartbreak that I feel: beyond sorrow or horror, a sense that something has been blasted apart, a shattering of hope, the collapse of what I thought or wished were true about the world and human nature. There are some truths, some news, that break the heart—not permanently, but utterly, for a while, as the realization forms perhaps for the thousandth time: this, too, is part of our humanity.

Evil is the capacity, within us and among us, to break sacred bonds with our own souls, with one another, and with the holy. Further, it is the willingness to excuse or justify this damage, to deny it, or to call it virtue. The soil in which it flourishes is a rich compost of ignorance, arrogance, fear, and delusion—mostly self-delusion—all mingled with the sparkling dust of our original, human being.

Victoria Safford serves as the minister of White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church.

Patrick O’Neill

Radical fundamentalism casts human existence as an epic, ongoing, still-undecided battle between the forces of good and evil, of the divine versus the demonic. This is the most primitive human myth of all, and the most powerful. Wherever humanity has walked, wherever it has gathered to hear fables at firesides or offer ritual around altars, good versus evil is the story at its most elemental and descriptive.

We UUs do not have the “easy” solution of a theology that blames all evil on the workings of some devil. But many of us have witnessed unspeakable human acts that can only be described as evil: in Auschwitz, Cambodia, Dresden, Rwanda, and in the barbarity of biological germ warfare. Some formalists would argue that the very existence of evil in the world would seem to negate our humanist valuing of dignity and worth in every person, expressed in the first Principle of Unitarian Universalism. But it seems to me that just the opposite is true. Our cherishing that Principle leads us to live by a view of human nature that is antithetical to radical fundamentalism.

The witness and mission of liberal religion have always been to seek the liberation of the human spirit—in the words of the hymn, from “the bonds of narrow thought and lifeless creed.” We stand willing to testify for a religious approach grounded in human possibility rather than pathology. Our starting place is the exaltation of the human spirit, rather than its denigration.

People are almost equally capable of both good and evil, but most of the time—say, three times out of five—people choose the good. The seesaw tilts just a few degrees toward the good in this tentative world, but those few degrees are the difference between peace and Armageddon. The job of the church is to put the few stubborn ounces of our weight on the side of goodness, and press down for all we’re worth.

Patrick O’Neill serves as the minister of First Unitarian Congregational Society of Brooklyn, New York.

Elizabeth Lerner

We tend to forget that our universe does not operate on the merit system. We live and work and commit ourselves to aspirations as though living honorably is rewarded. Sometimes it is. Sometimes it isn't.

The ancient Greeks viewed order and chaos as part of a series of opposites that balanced the world. Though their system is riddled with misunderstandings and prejudice by our modern standards, their alignment of chaos with evil, in opposition to order and good, reflects my own experience of terrible times and suffering. While some chaos is necessary to keep any system from stagnation, too much chaos keeps any system from the ability to nurture, protect, or cherish. Chaos often ends up aligned with destruction and death. We see this in everything from cancer to natural disasters to willful destruction and infliction of suffering. In the ever-shifting balance between good and evil, evil is the counterbalance to goodness. It attacks or debases goodness and meaning. Although it is tangible, evil is not the devil; it is not a being with intent to destroy us or buy our souls or undermine the kingdom of God.

Elizabeth Lerner serves as the minister of the Unitarian Universalist Church of Silver Spring, Maryland.

James Ishmael Ford

The world as-it-is is just as it is. Bears, cockroaches, mountains, oceans, and tornadoes are not good; they're not evil. We human beings very much belong to this world that just is. In a very deep way this "is" is our true home. Here there is no fault. It is the realm of profound unity. At the same time, there is something else about us that is both beautiful and dangerous. We can divide the cosmos into parts; we can make choices. And we understand the consequences of what we choose. As we make our choices within this world, with each of our actions that follows those choices, we open the gates of good and evil. So, of course, there is evil. Knowing and accepting this is very important. But, there is also something beyond. When we discover that profound unity which is true and the realm of discrimination which is true are actually not two—in that fraction of a second we open something incredible, healing, and compelling.

James Ishmael Ford serves as the minister of the First Unitarian Society in Newton, Massachusetts. He is also a Zen teacher for the Boundless Way Zen network and the Pacific Zen Institute.

Judith Meyer

What is evil? An aspect of human nature. Apply enough pressure to any of us and something ugly will surface. Evil isn't some malevolent power floating around in the universe, waiting to penetrate some unsuspecting soul. We do it all by ourselves.

To acknowledge evil is to see something we don't want to see. We all cultivate an idealized view of ourselves. Self-knowledge takes hard work. Overcoming evil begins with being honest.

Reckoning with evil is more than an internal struggle. Evil surfaces in the cycles of violence we perpetrate as a society, often out of a misguided sense of necessity. It is a studied ignorance that keeps us not only from examining ourselves but also from looking critically at the institutions we create.

The power to overcome evil has as much to do with overcoming our numbness and helplessness about what is wrong in our world as it does with mastering our impulses. Whether humanity will ever be free of the cycle of violence, we cannot say. It doesn't look good. But the change begins only when we are willing to learn the truth, and dedicate that fearful knowledge to the struggle.

Judith Meyer serves as minister of the Unitarian Universalist Community Church of Santa Monica, California.

Abhi Janamanchi

I see evil as the willful separation from, and lack of concern for, the “common good.”

Evil occurs when the capacity for empathy exists and is ignored; when better alternatives for being in right relationship are ignored; when we fail to act on the imperative to correct the discrepancy between what is and what ought to be; and when we resist our powerful impulses to be, and do, good.

Human beings are part of the natural world. Within humanity, an ethical sense arises from out of the natural world, and with it, the capacity for both good and evil. We are products of our evolutionary heritage and our cultural history.

We might transform evil if we recognize our own complicity in the processes which engender and sustain it. We will overcome evil when we refuse to play the game or to be silent, when we make a determined effort to understand evil as a possibility that awaits transformation. Then we might inhabit a safer, more peaceful, and more just world.

Abhi Janamanchi serves as the minister of the Unitarian Universalists of Clearwater, Florida.

The editor, Rev. Dr. Paul Rasor, is the director of the Center for the Study of Religious Freedom and professor of interdisciplinary studies at Virginia Wesleyan College.

For Further Reading

Some of these resources are available from the UUA Bookstore: 1-800-215-9076;
www.uua.org/bookstore.

Brock, Rita Nakashima, and Rebecca Ann Parker. *Proverbs of Ashes: Violence, Redemptive Suffering, and the Search for What Saves Us*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2001.

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Parker, Rebecca Ann. *Blessing the World: What Can Save Us Now*. Edited by Robert Hardies. Boston: Skinner House, 2006.

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Rasor, Paul. *Faith Without Certainty: Liberal Theology in the 21st Century*. Boston: Skinner House, 2005.