

Evil and evildoers: No one is beyond the pale of redemption

by [Miroslav Volf](#) in the [November 14, 2001](#) issue

Nothing is gained and much is lost if we describe the terrorists as evil,” a friend of mine argued recently. I disagree. Our difference can be traced back to a division in moral philosophy. My friend is a moral expressivist. He views moral judgments as expressions of feelings, desires and wants. We add nothing to the description of the situation, he says, when we name our enemies as evil. Instead, we should state what we feel about them and their act, and what we intend to do in response.

I, on the other hand, count myself among the moral realists. We emphasize the reality of value properties such as moral goodness or moral evil. If we drop words like “good” and “evil” from our vocabulary, say the realists, we seriously misperceive the character of some acts and may abandon our response to both the act and the play of power.

Our difference in moral philosophy goes hand in hand with our disagreement about human nature. Humans are good and rational, my friend argues, and we insult humanity if we call some of its members evil. He prefers to explain their evil acts by pernicious influences—a set of nasty genes, abusive parents, unjust structures, manipulative leaders. I agree to a point. But there is no greater insult to a human being than to reduce her to a set of influences. Our condemnation of her deed notwithstanding, we *respect* an evildoer by calling her evil because we are treating her as a responsible being.

My friend and I also disagree about what we mean when we call someone evil and about how we should treat “evildoers.” He says that calling Osama bin Laden “evil” conjures up an image of evil incarnate. “Think of the phrase ‘we have seen the face of evil,’ he says. “It suggests that bin Laden is nothing but wickedness.”

“That may be what people mean when they call a particularly vile person ‘evil,’ but that is not what the Christian tradition means,” I respond. True, the essence of evil is pure negation of the good. But it is a mistake to equate an evil person with evil, even in the case of the devil and his demonic hosts. There are no beings who are pure evil. Evil is privation; it lives off the good. One can be evil only if one is partly good. If one were to do the impossible and become pure evil, one would simply cease to be. To say that bin Laden is evil is precisely not to say that he is evil incarnate. He remains God’s good creature who pursues undeniable goods even as he does evil.

We underestimate an evildoer if we understand him as “a shape-shifting demon, a wild-card moral anarchist beyond our comprehension,” as Stanley Fish recently put it. Evildoers are dangerous to more than just themselves precisely because in their evil schemes they are pursuing important goods, for themselves and for their communities. A person can be *successfully* evil only if he or she can embody a peculiarly nasty blend of vicious evil and laudable good.

My friend’s worry about calling a person evil has an obverse. “Describing bin Laden (or Adolf Hitler or Saddam Hussein or Slobodan Milosevic) as evil serves only to underscore our own goodness,” he argues. I can see why he is worried, especially with his understanding of what it means to be evil. If a person is evil incarnate, then he is qualitatively different from the rest of us. He is evil itself; we are good, with some admixture of evil.

“In my view,” I tell him, “bin Laden remains a good creature of God, his evil notwithstanding. There is no qualitative difference between him and any of us. Most of us may not be as evil as he is, but *we are evil in the same sense as he is*. Even at our best, the scripture teaches, we are not pure goodness; our most lofty ideals are tainted by evil.”

There is reason to worry, I admit, even if one believes that the difference between bin Laden and the rest of us is quantitative, not qualitative. We are prone to take his great evil as a sign of our goodness. This is a foolish thing to do, of course. I have not improved morally when someone else has morally deteriorated. We seem not to mind being foolish, if we can feel superior.

But this is no reason to forego describing egregious perpetrators as “evil.” Instead, our propensity to delight in our own goodness when others are described as evil is a form of sin—a sin of convenient falsehood and pride.

“Doesn’t calling a person ‘evil’ make us go after him with a vengeance, seeking to eliminate or at least neutralize him?” my friend protests. “It all too often does,” I agree.

But it should not. God’s love is broad enough to include evildoers, the worst of them. We know this because Christ died for their salvation no less than for the salvation of the rest of us who are by nature enemies of God. To call someone evil is not to place her beyond the pale of God’s redemption. Similarly, to call her evil is not to exempt ourselves from the obligation to love her. If our enemies are hungry, we should feed them; if they are thirsty, we should give them something to drink. Instead of being overcome by evil, we should overcome evil with good.

I worry when I hear politicians speak of bin Laden as the Evil One Who Hides. But I would worry even more if we were to stop naming morally reprehensible acts, and those who commit them, as evil.