



# FACE . . .

## “Evil” after 9/11: The Alien Work of God

WALTER SUNDBERG

**A**braham Lincoln delivered his “Second Inaugural Address” in early March, 1865. The end of the Civil War was near. In a month, on Palm Sunday, General Lee would surrender. On Good Friday, Lincoln would be dead. On that day in March, Lincoln spoke to a people nearly broken by the weight of unending carnage. “Neither party,” he said, “expected for the war, the magnitude, or the duration, which it has already attained.” Why did it happen? What is the meaning? “Both read the same Bible,” said Lincoln, “and pray to the same God.” Then the President bore down, led by the words of Christ:

“Woe unto the world because of offences! For it must needs be that offences come; but woe to that man by whom the offence cometh!” [Matt 18:7]. If we shall suppose that American Slavery is one of those offences which, in the providence of God must needs come, but which having continued through His appointed time, He now wills to remove, and that He gives to both North and South, this terrible war, as the woe due to those by whom the offence came, shall we discern therein any departure from those divine attributes which the believers in a Living God always ascribe to Him? Fondly do we hope—ferently do we pray—that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue until all the wealth piled by the bondsman’s two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said, “the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether” [Ps 19:9].

It is an amazing speech, one of the defining documents of American history. Lincoln’s subject is the holiness and righteousness of the hidden God. God accomplishes his will in the kingdom of the world through the things of the world, even things as terrible and evil as the sword. *God causes this evil*. He wears it like a mask, behind which he does his harsh, alien work. “For the Lord will rise up [says the prophet Isaiah]—strange is his deed, and to work his work—alien is his work” (Isa 28:21). Christ himself bears witness to this alien work in his preaching of the kingdom and takes it upon himself when he drinks from the cup that will not pass.

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# TO FACE

## “Evil” after 9/11: A Consequence of Human Freedom

TERENCE E. FRETHEIM

I'll always remember that 9/11 was a Tuesday. So also will some sixty students and my colleague Paul Sponheim as we met at 10:40 AM that day for our “God, Evil, and Suffering” class. One week into the course, and we had a test case on our hands. Lecture notes were set aside and questions filled the air. As the titles of numerous books, documentaries, and sermons would also show, the primary question was some version of: “Where in the world was God?” Or, truer to the lament form: “Where in the world were you, God, when all that hell broke loose?” In the face of such questions the Christian is not reduced to silence, not least because the Bible forthrightly speaks about evil and God’s relationship to it. While neither Bible nor tradition provides an “explanation” of these realities, many helpful things can be said and done, and many unhelpful things left unsaid and undone.

For one thing, we can bring perspective. In the long history of evil and its ill effects, many events have occurred that we could name “evil.” As Peter Steinfels put it in the *New York Times* (August 31, 2002): “Where was God, after all, on Sept. 10—when tens of thousands of parents, as on every day, watched their malnourished infants expire,...when in Africa, as on every day, more people died of AIDS than were killed in the twin towers, and when traitorous arteries and rebellious brain cells, as on every day, stifled vibrant personalities into silence and stupor?” Moral evil and natural evil are certainly different (and we focus here on the former), but both are descriptive of life in a world full of creatures (human and nonhuman) given freedom by God to be themselves, wherein interrelated individual choices and random events often have devastating consequences. One might fault God for creating creatures with such possibilities, but a world of divine puppetry would deny a genuine relationship between creature and God.

And so we can speak of relationships. We live in an increasingly interconnected world, one effect of which is that any evil act will more immediately and intensely reverberate and affect everyone physically and psychically (witness our increased anxiety). That nineteen men can so deeply continue to affect the life of us all is testimony to just such a world. Among other things, interrelatedness teaches

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These theological ideas have serious names in the tradition: *deus absconditus* (the hidden God), *larvae dei* (the masks of God), *opus alienum* (alien work). Their purpose is not to confuse, but to serve the Holy Bible and its plain meaning. Lincoln did not need to read theology to understand these ideas. All he needed to do was to read the Bible and reflect upon it. It is not as easy as it looks, especially as theology drives towards ethics.

That great theologian of the last century, Rudolf Otto, helped us to see that the Bible teaches us to stand in awe of the holiness of God. He calls this "creature feeling"—to know in the words of Abraham that we are "but dust and ashes" (Gen 18:27) when we speak to the Lord and of the Lord. This devaluing of the self is a necessary religious act. Only when the self is cast aside, gotten out of the way, can we even begin to see the other.

The Union had plenty to blame on the South. The war was their doing; their cause unjust. Why not wave the bloody shirt in their face? No, says Lincoln, cast the self aside. God gave this war to both North and South. Therefore, "With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation's wounds...."

To engage in theological reflection is a high calling. To do it right, one must draw upon the fullness of the tradition, even when the tradition goes against popular notions of the day. I chose Lincoln as my example for a definite purpose. He confesses God in a way that today is often neglected, rejected, dismissed, and derided all across this church.

Why should this be? Because this theology has been misused? It certainly has! But every theology across the centuries has been misused. Why single out this one? Something else is going on. According to Jean Bethke Elshtain of the University of Chicago, one of our problems is that, besotted by the therapeutic mind-set of our culture, we have become fixated by a "quivering sentimental self that gets uncomfortable very quickly, because this self has to feel good about itself all the time" (quoted in Eric Miller, "Alone in the Academy," *First Things* 140 [February, 2004] 32). If this does not describe us directly, we nevertheless believe that it describes the people we know and with whom we work. It is in the air we breathe. It runs the show. And so we accommodate it. Under its spell, the theological ideas that inspired Lincoln are alien to us, impossible for us to employ.

On the evening of his second inauguration, President Lincoln was honored at a reception in the White House. Frederick Douglass, ex-slave, ordained preacher, abolitionist, spellbinding orator, attended by invitation. Lincoln asked him, "What did you think of the speech?"—who would know better than the black man? "Mr. Lincoln," he replied, "that was a sacred effort." ⊕

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us that 9/11 cannot simply be laid at the feet of those hijackers. Their characters had been formed by their education and life experience, and words and deeds having their roots in American life helped shape the individuals they had become. In such an interrelated world, we have increasingly good reason to speak of multiple causes for such events, and each of us in our own way will have made contributions to this reality. At the least, this means that, in such events, we are not simply victims, and we ought not speak and act as individuals or communities in ways that would nurture a sense of victimhood.

Because God will honor commitments made to the creation, this faithfulness will entail constraint and restraint in any related divine action. This divine self-limitation, necessary for the genuine freedom of creatures within the relationship, is a key factor in understanding evil. The world's long story of resistance to the will of God has had deeply evil effects on every aspect of life, and the resultant reality complicates God's working possibilities in the world. Because of God's committed relationship to the world, no resolution will be simple, no "quick fix" available, even for God. One might wish that God would force compliance and stop evil in its tracks, but for the sake of a genuine relationship God has chosen not to micromanage life. Rather, God chooses to immerse the divine life into evil's very heart, supremely in Jesus Christ, and overcome it from within rather than overpower it from without.

We can also help sort out the complex and elusive notion of evil. As in English, the word "evil" in Hebrew (*ra'ah*) can refer to both the wicked deed and its ill effects, which may be named the judgment of God, mediating the effects intrinsic to the deed (*ra'ah* leads to *ra'ah*). Such evil effects may be due to one's own sin or to the reverberating sins of others in an interrelated world (witness Israel in Egypt). In addition, we must speak of evil as more than individual acts and their effects: evil has become systemic, built up over time into the infrastructure of life, whether we personalize it or not (as, e.g., Satan). Yet, we are not so permeated with evil that we cannot name it or act against it. The temptation of an overly dualistic perspective is that we will be reduced to passivity in the wake of a cosmic battle or claim that "the devil made me do it." We have responsibilities to speak and act against evil in individual and community life, and we confess that God has entered deeply into our lives to enable that work to be and to bring good. ⊕

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Human freedom, human sin, and God the creator (eds) The God who acts: Philosophical and theological explorations. K Tanner.  
Arguments for incompatibilism The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy.Â Asymptotic freedom is examined in detail for a simple  
supergauge symmetry model of Yang-Mills type. Although the model of perfect symmetry is asymptotically free, the symmetry limit is not  
realized as a local minimum in every direction in the parameter space of independent coupling constants if one starts with approximate  
supergauge symmetry. In spite of the unstable nature of the perfect [Show full abstract] symmetry limit, breaking due to soft operators  
explicitly or spontaneously does not ruin the asymptotic freedom.