

The Cloaking of Evil

Jesus vs. the Beast of the Apocalypse

By GLEN MARTIN

Recently, I have been reading the gospels of Jesus Christ once again (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John). The teachings of Jesus about how to live our lives are astonishing. Essentially, Jesus says that all our worldly values must be turned upside down, for God's judgment is on the rich, on "the nations" and on the powerful of the world. God's love and mercy are for the poor, the downtrodden and the oppressed.

In this spirit, Jesus condemns the Pharisees, the respectable religious people of his day, for they perform the empty rituals of worship but do not live authentic lives of service to the kingdom of God. Jesus says he has come to bring the kingdom of God to Earth. But the respectable religious and civil leaders of his day do not care for the poor, the downtrodden and the oppressed. They prefer to be seen as respectable, as upholders of the established social, economic and religious order.

As a professor who teaches philosophy of religion at my university, I have read extensively in the theology of Latin American Christians who have produced much wonderful Christian thought since the Second Vatican Council of 1962-65. One theme that emerges again and again in this literature is the deceptive nature of the great beast of the apocalypse (the Antichrist), symbolically described in the Book of Revelation. For evil in our world does not present itself as evil.

Evil presents itself as "respectability," as the established way of doing things, as the accepted social morality of a society. Evil hides, they say, in everydayness, in business as usual, in what is given honors and the highest praise. Evil poses as its opposite, for the goal of the Antichrist is to prevent the realization of God's kingdom on Earth, to destroy the possibility of human beings living together in love and peace upon the precious planet granted to us as our home by God.

If one thinks about it, this is fairly obvious. Evil could not be successful in preventing people from living together in peace and harmony on the Earth if it appeared to us as a hideous monster (the traditional image of the devil). We would see it for what it is and

turn away in horror. But if evil can cloak itself in the image of good--if it can appear as its opposite--then the destruction of God's kingdom on Earth can proceed unhindered.

This cloaking of evil is all the more necessary given the simplicity and clarity of Jesus' teachings. He sums up his teaching with astonishing focus in the "great commandment" of Matthew 22. All of the law and the prophets (including the Ten Commandments), he says, are summed up in the most fundamental command from God: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and mind. ... And like unto it, You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

When his critics asked him, "And who is my neighbor?," he again answers with great clarity through the story of the good Samaritan. A man is beaten and left for dead on the side of the road. A priest and a Levite pass by the man on the other side, for they don't want to take risks and this might be a trap laid by the thieves. These are the respectable religious and civic leaders of Jesus' day.

But Jesus says a Samaritan stops and helps the wounded man. To the respectable ears of Jesus' day, this was outrageous. The Samaritans were foreigners. They were not Jews (who considered themselves the true disciples of God in Jesus' day). They were considered dirty, ignorant and deluded foreigners not worthy of mention. They were heathens, not followers of the true religion. Yet Jesus says a Samaritan loved his neighbor as himself. And he says that all people, like Samaritans, are our neighbors who must be loved as we love ourselves.

One wonders where the followers of Jesus are today. St. Paul tells us that the early Christian communities were persecuted by the respectable established system of their day (the Roman Empire), for they refused to serve in the military and refused to recognize the established religious orthodoxy and social morality of their society. The early Christian communities were not about to send their children into the military to destroy the lives and countries of Samaritans and others who were their neighbors on this precious Earth.

Who are the Samaritans of today that we should love as ourselves? I'll bet they are the good people of Iraq, Afghanistan, Vietnam, Cuba and North Korea. I'll bet they are people of the Muslim faith, or people of no faith at all. Who are the followers of Jesus today that are persecuted in his name by the dominant system of evil that cloaks itself in the appearance of goodness and respectability?

I'll bet they include the founder of the Christian group Voices in the Wilderness, who was recently brutalized by U.S. military personnel

at Fort Benning, Ga., for doing nonviolent civil disobedience against the U.S. Army School of the Americas. This top secret "school" trains foreign military in methods of torture and repression. Like economic exploitation, training in repression is another gift that our country gives to our "neighbors" in Latin America.

I see among the followers of Jesus today the three Catholic nuns in their 70s recently sentenced to federal prison for painting Christian symbols on the tip of a nuclear warhead in the Midwest. They are resisting the respectable building of more and more hideous weapons of mass destruction by the great beast of our day. I'll bet there were also many Christians among those brutally attacked by police recently in Miami. They were shot with rubber bullets, sprayed with cruel pepper spray and beaten with clubs for nonviolent witness to the evil system of economic exploitation being pushed on Latin American countries by the United States. This system is called "free trade," for evil presents itself with the appearance of respectability.

I see among the followers of Jesus the priest in New Mexico who has been preaching in his church against the U.S. invasion of Iraq. He is author of many books on Jesus' teaching of nonviolent resistance to evil and injustice. This priest recently had a platoon of military recruits jog to the street in front of his house and stand there shouting at him, chanting "kill, kill, kill."

If we want to find the followers of Jesus in our day, we need to look in the prisons, to those in shackles, to those being beaten and brutalized.

We don't have far to look. They are from all sects and churches within Christianity, but they have one thing in common: They are nonviolently resisting the system of respectability and evil. If one has any doubts about who is who, just read the gospels. Read the teachings of Jesus about how his followers are to lead their lives.

If we want to discern the great beast hiding under the cloak of social morality and respectability, look to a country that spends nearly \$400 billion a year on weapons, bombs and mechanisms of destruction. If we want to discern the evil built into business as usual, look at the U.S. corporations exploiting the labor of starving people in horrible sweatshops to produce the clothing that you and I purchase as "Christmas gifts" in our local superstores. Look at the corporations firing millions from their jobs in the United States so they can move overseas to increase their profit margins.

If we want to see the apocalypse in action, look at the invasion and destruction of the Iraqi people, or the nightmare of chaos and

suffering our government has forced upon the good people of Afghanistan. Evil is a system, not a person. As the Christians of Latin America say, it is a "system of sin." It is a system of people wearing suits and ties, driving fine cars and giving the appearance of the highest respectability.

In reality, it is a global system of economic and military domination and exploitation, just like the Roman Empire. Evil is a system designed to prevent us from loving God and loving our neighbors as ourselves. Our neighbors include every person on this Earth. The purpose of evil is to prevent the realization of the kingdom of God on Earth. For the simple command of Jesus was to "love one another as I have loved you" and to live together in peace and harmony on our common home.

There is a fitting bumper sticker that reads "God bless the whole world. No exceptions." If we are to follow the teachings of Jesus, we need to change the system that prevents this from happening.

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