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What is evil?

Views of four Calgarians

Bev Longstaff, alderman

When Calgary alderman Bev Longstaff thinks about evil, what immediately comes to mind are people who pay for sex with children and teenagers.



"That is evil," she says.

Yet evil is not a simple concept. Many people commit evil acts because evil acts were committed against them, she says.

"I don't think a child is born as an evil person," she says. "I think it's the experiences of life that create that."

In turn, there are so many examples of good—simple acts of kindness like shovelling a senior's walk for free, buying groceries for an invalid, giving a neighbor a hand with a chore.

Children need to be taught good behavior.

"In my household, our parents expected us to help others," she remembers.

"It's each person's responsibility to encourage acts of goodness through example."

Art Hanger, MP

Calgary Reform MP Art Hanger evaluates evil against the standards established by the Golden Rule and the Ten Commandments.

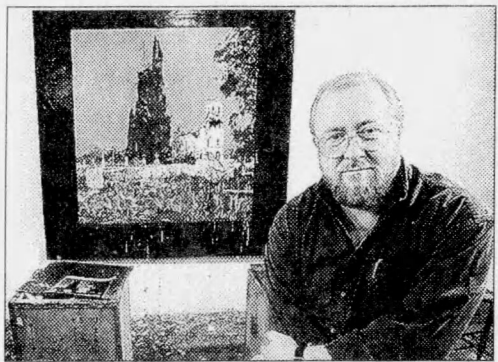
"To lie, to kill, to steal—all are the basis of our laws," says the MP for Calgary North-east. "Any violation falls into the realm of evil."

As a conservative Christian, Hanger believes all people are born with evil in their hearts.

"Whatever a person can devise in his mind, he can do," he says.

For goodness to prevail, a person must have a personal relationship with God.

"I don't believe man, as such, is capable of doing all that much on his own. He requires that spiritual presence to establish him."



William MacDonnell, artist

Most of the pictures painted by Calgary artist William MacDonnell deal with the mass destruction of the Second World War and recent atrocities in Europe.

"When I looked at the sight of a massacre, I wasn't quite sure what was good or evil," he says.

In military terms, much of what is described as evil can be regarded as acts of self-preservation, he says.

People will commit atrocious acts under duress that they would never imagine committing during the course of ordinary day-to-day lives.

Former East German leader Erich Honecker emerged from the war a hero after being imprisoned for 10 years by the Nazis and then went on to build the Berlin Wall.

Hero or a villain? asks MacDonnell.

Sigmund Sobolewski, Nazi death camp survivor

Sigmund Sobolewski, a Polish Catholic imprisoned in a Nazi death camp during the Second World War, says "I saw a lot of evil in Auschwitz."

In fact, Auschwitz—where an estimated two million people were murdered, mostly Jews—is synonymous with evil in the 20th century.

There, the guiding philosophy was the notion that the strong rule the world, he says.

Yet in the midst of the horror, goodness was also evident. People who sacrificed their lives so others could live; guards who refused to indulge in the murderous mayhem.

"I think man is inherently good when he is born," says Sobolewski. "But through life and circumstances, especially war, man can become evil very quickly."

"For society to become more humane, we really have to concentrate on what is happening to the underprivileged, to people who are suffering."

"When you pick on people who are weak, who don't have much clout, by accusing them of being the reason for our troubles, we lose some of our humanity."

"You have to love your neighbor; you have to be tolerant."

'I saw something wrong and I wanted to fix it'

"I've thought about this a lot this past year," says Boyd, who has been pressing federal Justice Minister Allan Rock to amend Section 745 of the Criminal Code—the "faint-hope" clause that gives killers a chance at early parole.

"Whenever you mention the word 'evil,' the first person who comes to mind is one of the men who murdered my daughter."

Her daughter's murderer, Jim Peters, is now eligible to apply for early parole.

Until the tragedy 15 years ago, Boyd's life seemed untouched by evil, she says today.

"I was young. We had the perfect family. I just thought everything was good. Until something bad happens to you, you never really think about good or evil."

For years, she maintained a low profile and nev-

er talked publicly about what happened to her family. Then a year ago, she began leading a crusade to totally repeal the "faint-hope" clause, gathering 68,000 signatures on a petition to repeal it.

Taking a public stand has solidified her views. Moreover, she feels it's a way to do some good.

"When I saw what the (parole) process was doing, not only to us, but to other families, it was time to speak out publicly," she says.

"I saw something wrong and I wanted to fix it."

For Boyd, evil is not a "word" upon which actions can be blamed.

"Wherever there is evil, there is somebody behind it."

People are responsible for their actions and must be held accountable. If they allow evil to ex-

ist in their lives, it will grow.

"It's something you can fix if you choose," she says. "If you choose to follow the evil path, you must be prepared to accept the consequences to the fullest possible extent."

God or Satan cannot take the rap. "It's not God's fault. It's the evilness in man. I don't think you put the blame on a phantom or ghost that is evil."

"I've seen some pretty wicked people. I've never seen Satan."

So how would someone like Darlene Boyd foster goodness?

Families are the first place where the evil is fought and good is fostered, she says.

"We spend time with our kids," says Boyd. "We teach them good values. Don't give up on the kids."

Religions seek to understand

The dark side of the force



GORDON LEGGE
Herald writer

Among the reasons for the astounding commercial success of Star Wars, some observers cite its supernatural message of Good triumphing over Evil.

In fact, University of Calgary religious studies professor Eliezer Segal says the trilogy's epic struggle between the cosmic forces of Good and Evil evokes some well-known themes from Jewish mystical lore.

Christian David Buckna, a school teacher and sci-fi fan, takes it a step further by noting that in his duel with Darth Vader, Obi-Wan Kenobi brought his light saber to a neutral, formal position, offering himself as a sacrifice in order to save those he loved.

This weekend, Christians around the world celebrate Easter, the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Many believe that by doing so, Christ defeated evil for all time.

Yet evil and its origins remain a mystery that all religious traditions have struggled to understand through the centuries.

Some view evil as simply turning away from the divine energy that imbues all of creation; others see it originating with unseen demonic forces and the "fall" of humanity.

Segal says that to understand evil, the Jews, like Christians, go back to the Garden of Eden and the story of how Adam and Eve, the first humans, were deceived by the serpentine tempter, Satan.

Yet while Christians regard Satan as being outside God's command, a rebel against divine authority, the Jews see Satan as "a cosmic prosecuting attorney."

"Satan is entrusted with the jobs of testing, entrapping and testifying against us before the heavenly court," Segal said in a recent guest sermon at St. Cyprian's Anglican Church.

"It's a dirty job—and sometimes strikes us as performing it with excessive zeal—but it must be done to maintain order in the world."

The ancient rabbis, he says, equated the primordial serpent and Satan with a force known as "yetzer ha-ra", translated as the "evil urge." Implanted in every human, it combines features of ambition, greed and sexual desire.

It is not evil in an absolute sense, says Segal, except when it's allowed to trespass beyond its legitimate domain.

"Sexuality is a wonderful gift when invested in a loving marriage and family, but it can be perverted into a force for hatred and abuse," says Segal.

"And ambition can be an admirable quality when it is channelled towards spiritual creativity and service of humanity, but is a fiery scourge when it is twisted into unrestricted covetousness."

Therefore, humanity's task is not to eliminate the serpent but to keep it under control and direct it to a productive course.

For Jews, that is achieved by following the values and way of life set out in the Jewish scriptures.

Holiness is achieved through perfecting a person's humanity, not denying it or transcending it. In order to live in harmony with nature and the community, people are called to reverse their human nature.

"The image of the bronze serpent can serve us as a reminder that those basic drives to improve our lot and to provide material comfort for our families are not in themselves evil," he says.

"However, they possess a formidable potential to be turned to evil if they are permitted to exceed their legitimate spheres of activity, when they are emptied of compassion and social or environmental responsibility."

Rev. Doug Craig, a biker turned minister of a New Age church, believes there is only one Power and that power is God.

"Evil in itself isn't an opposing power of God," says the minister for the Crowchild Centre for Positive Living. "It is a misdirection of the power of life in a negative direction through the expression of the human being."

"We label that negative expression 'evil.' Evil is 'live' spelled backwards."

What is evil in one society may not necessari-

ly be evil in another. For instance, he says, Libyan leader Moammar Gadhafi views the West as satanic and evil, while the West regards him as a satanic dictator.

"Who's to say who's right? Is God the crazy one or are we?"

The key is to realize there's only one power and it's unity. Humans are given the freedom as to how they will direct it, he says.

However, what if you're the victim on the receiving end of misdirected power?

"There's not much we can do when it happens," he says. "All we can do is take it upon ourselves not to direct it at another and... help others."

The challenge, then, is not to feed on collective evil but rather draw on the natural flow of goodness that is inside each person.

"Humans are intrinsically good. If we weren't we'd cease to exist. We'd kill each other off," he says.

"Sometimes we get a little warped and let our negativity out. To overcome evil, stay centred in God and goodness."

Christian theologian and newspaper columnist Christopher Levan says people sometimes confuse "evil" and "darkness."

God created day and night, life and death, the earth and heavens, and said it was good.

So when people suffer, it is not necessarily evil. "We must be careful not to confuse being

human with the darker sides of evil," says Levan, principal of St. Stephen's College, an Edmonton-based United Church college with a campus in Calgary.

That said, Levan views evil as a power to "non-being" that runs counter to the natural rhythm of life. It's a cancer produced by human greed and the inclination to pollute the environment, an unwillingness to care about others and the world around them.

He sees it manifesting itself through the structures of society where people are victimized by faceless bureaucracies. For instance, when he worked with the welfare system, Levan observed it was prone to ultimately "humiliating" people.

As for humanity, it was "fallen" before creation.

"We are, from birth, broken by our Creator. Life is finite because of that brokenness."

"As human creatures, we are naturally quite anxious because of that consciousness of the finiteness of life. Anxious creatures are capable of great evil or great nobility."

People choose the direction they take according to their ability to accept and receive love in their lives.

"I think we're prone to evil on the basis of being unable to accept our being loved," he says. That works itself out as the sins of pride or lust.

"Goodness arises when we accept we are creatures and become happy with that. We're not God but we're not insignificant biological creatures."

Goodness is then affirmed through humility and service, and by identifying and resisting the powers of injustice at work in the world.

Levan believes there is an agency for evil that exists outside the individual that usually manifests itself collectively through the structures in society.

Levan doesn't view Christ as having defeated evil on the Cross, as much as he "absorbed" it, like a boron rod in a nuclear reactor.

"Evil is still present, still active," he says. "The Cross gives us time to get our act together so we can defeat it. I still have a role to play in vanquishing evil."

Yet Charles Nienkirchen believes Christ, considered by Christians to be the Son of God, overcame evil with his perfect life and defeated evil on the Cross through his resurrection.

"What humanity lost in the Garden, Christ regained," says Nienkirchen, professor of Christian history and spirituality at Rocky Mountain College—A Centre for Biblical Studies.

While the Bible teaches that evil originated with satanic rebellion against God, it remains a mystery, he says, because there is no clear understanding of how evil can originate from a perfect God.

Evil exists inside people and outside them, he says.

"It's a problem in the human heart."

He adds, "If we don't believe Satan exists, we have become naive about evil."

When that happens, people either lapse into utopianism, or are oblivious to what they're up against and are easily deceived by it.

Nonetheless, people must resist the temptation to blame their selfish actions on "the devil."

"We're co-conspirators. We're all responsible for our actions. There's a difference between saying 'The devil exists,' and saying 'The devil made me do it.'"

"There is a conspiracy of evil in the universe and human beings must decide whether they will stand against it or be co-conspirators."

From his viewpoint, there are four dimensions to evil in the world:

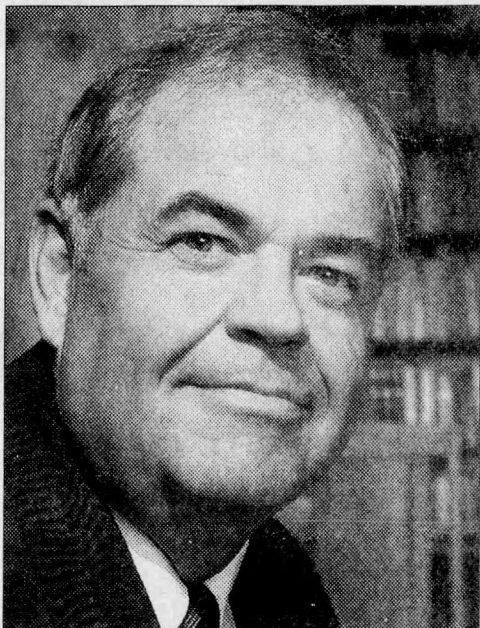
- Theological—it alienates us from God.
- Psychological—it alienates us from ourselves.
- Sociological—it alienates us from society.
- Ecological—it alienates us from the created world.

The Christian gospel, through the power of the resurrection, is a message of reconciliation, he says.

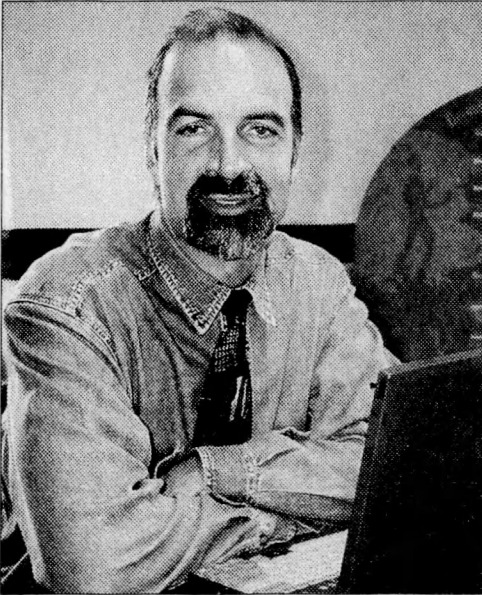
It leads to a relationship with God; brings about personal holiness and integration; makes people proponents of justice and peace in society; and fosters stewardship of the created world.

"Easter is about being reconciled to God, ourselves, society and creation. It's the direction the universe is moving."

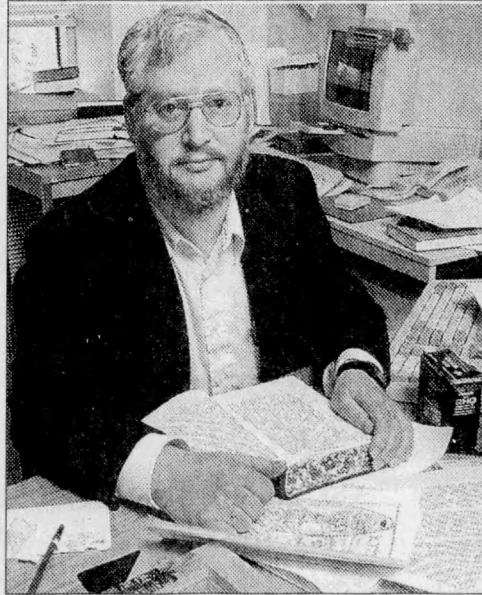
"That's why I believe in the Gospel of Jesus Christ because it has the power to change."



Rev. Doug Craig, minister at Crowchild Centre for Positive Living



Christopher Levan, principal of St. Stephen's College



Eliezer Segal, U of C religious studies professor



Charles Nienkirchen, professor of Christian history and spirituality, Rocky Mountain College.