If only it were all so simple! If only there were evil people somewhere, insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?

-- Alexander Solzhenitsyn, The Gulag Archipelago

In his autobiography Gandhi writes that "those who say that religion has nothing to do with politics do not know what religion means" [p. 370]. Perhaps this is more obvious to us after September 11th, but it should always have been obvious--religion is about how we should live, and politics is about deciding together how we want to live. The main reason it has not been obvious is because most modern societies have been careful to distinguish the secular public sphere from the personal, private world of religious belief. This has been essential for creating a multicultural climate of religious tolerance, but at a price: such tolerance effectively "displaces morality" by "asking you to inhabit your own moral convictions loosely and be ready to withdraw from them whenever pursuing them would impinge on the activities and choices of others" [Fish p.41]. Most of us would prefer that Osama bin Laden inhabited his moral convictions more loosely, but the downside of loose convictions has been an increasingly amoral public sphere.

In two other ways, however, Gandhi's comment seems especially important now.

First, the terrorists who attacked the World Trade Center and the Pentagon were engaged in a political act that was religiously inspired, however badly they may have misunderstood their religion. In fact, it is difficult to think of any other motivation that can inspire people to sacrifice themselves, and others, so willingly. (The kamikaze pilots of World War II were not an exception, for at that time the Japanese emperor was a god, so he was a religious leader as much as a political one.) Al-though they left no suicide notes, the September hijackers seem to have understood themselves as engaged in a *jihad* defending Islam against the globalizing West.

And that brings us to a third aspect of Gandhi's statement, the one that I wish to focus on: the intersection of religion and politics in the way we perceive good and evil. Our understanding of good and evil cannot be simply identified with any religious worldview, but the two are intimately related. The new war against terrorism, like the longstanding tension between Israel and the Palestinians, and like many earlier conflicts among Jews, Christians and Muslims, can be viewed as an Abrahamic civil war. These encounters are so violent and so difficult to resolve not only because they draw on old historical tensions, but because the opponents seem to share some very similar views about the
struggle between good and evil. This essay originates in the curious fact that the al-Qaeda understanding of good and evil—the need for a holy war against evil—is also emphasized by the administration of George W. Bush.

Three days after the September attacks, President Bush declared that the United States has been called to a new worldwide mission "to rid the world of evil," and two days later he said that the U.S. government is determined to "rid the world of evil-doers." America, the defender of freedom, now has a responsibility to rid the world of its evil. We may no longer have an "evil empire" to defeat, but we have found a more sinister evil that will require a protracted, all-out war to destroy. Later Bush un-wisely referred to this war as a "crusade," and in his 2002 State of the Union address he identified a new "axis of evil," especially Iraq, Iran and North Korea.

If anything is evil, the terrorist attacks on September 11th were evil. That must not be forgotten in what follows. At the same time, however, we need to take a close look at such rhetoric. When Bush said he wants to rid the world of evil, alarm bells went off in my mind, because that is also what Hitler and Stalin wanted to do.

What was the problem with Jews that required a "final solution"? The earth could be made pure for the Aryan race only by exterminating the Jews, gypsies, homosexuals, mentally-defective, etc.—all the impure vermin who contaminate it. Stalin needed to exterminate well-to-do Russian peasants in order to establish his ideal society of collective farmers. Both of these great villains were trying to perfect the world by eliminating its impurities. The world can be made good only by destroying its evil elements.

In other words, one of the main causes of evil in this world has been human attempts to eradicate evil, or what has been viewed as evil. In more Buddhist terms, much of the world's suffering has been a result of our way of thinking about good and evil.

On the same day that Bush made his first pronouncement about ridding the world of evil, the Washington Post quoted Joshua Teitelbaum, a scholar who has studied the al-Qaeda movement: "Osama bin Laden looks at the world in very stark, black-and-white terms. For him, the U.S. represents the forces of evil that are bringing corruption and domination into the Islamic world."

What is the difference between bin Laden's view and Bush's? They are opposites, of course—in fact, mirror opposites. Let's look at that Teitelbaum quote again, changing only a few names: "George W. Bush looks at the world in very stark, black-and-white terms. For him, al-Qaeda represents the forces of evil that are bringing corruption and domination into the Western world." You're either with us or against us.

What bin Laden sees as good—an Islamic jihad against an impious imperialism—Bush sees as evil. What Bush sees as good—America the defender of freedom and democracy—bin Laden sees as evil. That makes them two different versions of the same holy-war-between-good-and-evil.

This is not to equate Bush's actions with those of bin Laden (although I can appreciate why such an argument might be attempted, because of the large number of civilian casualties in Afghanistan). Rather, I am making a point about our ways of looking at the world, at the spectacles bin Laden and Bush—and we—use to understand what happens in it. From a Buddhist perspective, there is something delusive about both sides of this mirror-image, and it is important to understand how this black-and-white way of thinking brings more suffering, more evil, into the world.

This dualism of good-versus-evil is attractive because it is a simple way of looking at the world, and there will be more to say about that later. Although it is certainly not unique to the Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) I think this dualism is one of the reasons why the conflicts among them have been so difficult to resolve peacefully: believers tend to identify their own religion as good and demonize the other faith or its adherents.

It is difficult to turn the other cheek when the world is viewed through these spectacles, because this rationalizes the opposite principle: an eye for an eye. If the world is a battleground of good and evil forces, the evil that is in the world must be fought and defeated by any means necessary.

I am not saying that this attitude represents the best of the Abrahamic religions. There is another way to understand the war between good and evil: to internalize it and psychologize it, as the struggle that occurs within each of us when we try to live up to the ideals of our own religion. This is the "greater jihad" or "internal jihad" that most Muslims emphasize more than any externalized one. Nevertheless, it is a tragic fact that many religious people—or many people who believe themselves to be religious—have objectified and projected this struggle as a struggle in the external world between the good (most of all, their own religion) and evil (other religions).

The secularization of the modern West has not eliminated this tendency. In some ways it has intensified it, because we can no longer rely on a supernatural resolution. We have to depend upon ourselves to bring about the final victory of good over evil, as Hitler, Stalin and Mao Zedong tried to do. It is unclear how much help bin Laden and Bush have expected from God.

Perhaps the basic problem with this simplistic good-vs.-evil way of understanding conflict is that, since it tends to preclude further thought, it keeps us from looking deeper, from trying to discover causes. Once something has been identified as evil, there is no more need to explain it; it is time to focus on fighting against it. Bin Laden and Bush seem to share this tendency. This is where we can benefit from the different perspective of a non-Abrahamic religious tradition.

For Buddhism, evil, like everything else, has no essence or substance of its own; it is a product of impermanent causes and conditions. Buddhism emphasizes the concept of evil less than what it calls the three roots of evil, or the three causes of evil, also known as the three poisons: greed, ill will and delusion. Let me offer what may be a controversial distinction: the Abrahamic religions emphasize the struggle between good and evil because the basic issue is usually understood to be our will: which side are we on? In contrast, Buddhism emphasizes
ignorance and enlightenment because the basic issue depends on our self-knowledge: do we really understand what motivates us?

One way to summarize the basic Buddhist teaching is that we suffer, and cause others to suffer, because of greed, ill will and delusion. Karma implies that when our actions are motivated by these roots of evil, their negative consequences tend to rebound upon us. That is true for everyone. However, the Buddhist solution to suffering does not involve requiring violence with violence, any more than it involves responding to greed with greed, or responding to delusion with delusion. From a Buddhist perspective, one cannot find justice for the deaths of some three thousand innocent people in New York and Washington with a bombing campaign that leads to the death of an even larger number of innocent Afghans. Rather, the Buddhist solution involves breaking that cycle by transforming greed into generosity, ill will into loving-kindness, and delusions into wisdom.

What do these teachings imply now, in the aftermath of the September attacks?

To begin with, we cannot focus only on the second root of evil, the hatred and violence that were directed against the United States. The three roots are intertwined. Ill will cannot be separated from greed and delusion; another's ill will toward us may be due to their greed, but it may also be a result of our greed. This points us toward the essential question that many of us have been wanting to ask, but that others prefer to brush away or evade: why do so many people in the Middle East, in particular, hate the United States so much? What have we done to encourage that hatred? This is a crucial question that all the simplenminded rhetoric about "evil" has tended to ignore or downplay.

Undoubtedly, some fundamentalist versions of Islam are also important factors; yet they are not the only ones. We Americans usually think of America as the most ardent defender of freedom and justice, but obviously that is not the way many Muslims in the Middle East perceive us. Are they misinformed? Are we? Or are both of us?

Does anybody think that we can send the USS New Jersey to lob Volkswagen-sized shells into Lebanese villages--Reagan, 1983--or loose 'smart bombs' on civilians seeking shelter in a Baghdad bunker--Bush, 1991--or fire cruise missiles on a Sudanese pharmaceutical factory--Clinton, 1999--and not receive, someday, our share in kind? [Micah Sifry]

More precisely, how much of U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East has been motivated by our love of freedom and democracy, and how much by our need--our greed--for its oil? (How did "our" oil get into "their" wells?) If the main priority has been securing oil supplies, and if we have sacrificed other, more democratic concerns for access to that resource, does it mean that our petroleum-based economy is one of the causes of the September attacks?

Buddhist teachings imply that we should focus especially on the role of delusion in creating this situation. Delusion has a special meaning in Buddhism. The fundamental delusion is our sense of separation from the world we are "in," including our separation from other people. Insofar as we feel separate from others, we are more inclined to manipulate them to get what we want. This naturally breeds resentment: both from others, who do not like to be used, and within ourselves, when we do not get what we want. . . . Isn't this also true collectively?

The delusion of separation becomes wisdom when we realize that "no one is an island." We are interdependent because we are all part of each other, different facets of the same jewel we call the earth. This world is a not a collection of objects but a community of subjects, a web of interacting processes. Our "interpermeation" means we cannot avoid responsibility for each other. This is true not only for the residents of lower Manhattan, many of whom worked together in response to the WTC catastrophe, but for all people in the world, how-ever hate-filled and deluded they may be . . . including even the terrorists who did these horrific acts, and all those who support them.

Christians are urged to distinguish the sinner from the sin. This attitude is also quite Buddhist. I do not know how greedy bin Laden and the other al-Qaeda leaders are, but they certainly seem to be extreme examples of how ill will and delusion can overwhelm the mind. Nevertheless, from a Buddhist perspective they still have Buddha-nature, which means that they still have the capacity to under-stand how evil their actions have been, and to try to atone for them. We know that such an awakening is unlikely to occur, and in fact bin Laden and most of the other al-Qaeda leaders may well be dead by the time you read these words. That fate, however, is not something for Buddhists to celebrate, but will be yet another occasion to mourn, in that case for the karmic consequences for them-selves, too, of their ignorance and deadly hatred.

Do not misunderstand me here. Of course those responsible for the attacks must be caught and brought to justice. That is part of our responsibility to those who have suffered. We also have a duty to stop all other deluded and hate-filled terrorists. If, however, we want to stop this cycle of hatred and violence, we must realize that our responsibility is much broader than that.

Realizing our interdependence and mutual responsibility for each other implies something more than just an insight or intellectual awareness. When we try to live the way this interdependence implies, it is called love. Such love is much more than a feeling; perhaps it is best understood as a mode of being in the world. Buddhist texts emphasize compassion, generosity, and loving-kindness, and they all reflect this mode, being different aspects of love. Such love is sometimes mocked as weak and ineffectual, yet it can be very powerful, as Gandhi showed. It embodies a deep wisdom about how the cycle of hatred and violence works, and about how that cycle can be ended.

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"He abused me, he beat me, he defeated me, he robbed me"--for those who harbour such thoughts ill-will will never cease.

"He abused me, he beat me, he defeated me, he robbed me"--for those who do not harbour such thoughts ill-will will cease.

In this world hatred is never appeased by ill-will; ill-will is always appeased by love. This is an ancient law. [Dhammapada, vv. 3-5, trans. altered]

The present Dalai Lama emphasizes the necessity for 'internal disarmament' (in Chappell, 190). For genuine peace--which is much more than
the absence of overt violence—such internal disarmament is as important as external disarmament, and this involves taming the greed, ill will and delusion in the minds of all those involved, starting with ourselves. It is not possible to work toward peace in a confrontational, antagonistic way.

Certainly, this insight is not unique to Buddhism. It was not the Buddha who gave us the powerful image of turning the other cheek when we have been struck. In all the Abrahamic religions the tradition of a holy war between good and evil co-exists with this "ancient law" about the power of love. That does not mean all the world's religions have emphasized this law to the same extent. Maybe this is one way to measure the maturity of a religion, or at least its continuing relevance for us now by how much the truth of this transformative law about love is acknowledged and encouraged. Given our much greater technological powers today, our much greater ability to destroy each other, we need this truth more than ever.

What does all this imply about the new situation created by the terrorist attacks? We are at an historic turning point. A desire for vengeance and violent retaliation has arisen, fanned by a leader caught up in his own rhetoric of a holy war to purify the world of evil... Now, please consider: does the previous sentence describe bin Laden, or President Bush? The al-Qaeda network, or the response of the U.S. government?

Many people wanted retaliation and vengeance --well, that seems to be what the terrorists also wanted. If we continue along the path of large-scale violence, bin Laden's war and Bush's war will become two sides of the same escalating holy war.

No one can foresee all the consequences of such a war. They are likely to spin out of control and take on a life of their own. However, one sobering effect is clearly implied by the Buddha's "ancient law": it is already apparent that massive retaliation by the United States is spawning a new generation of suicidal terrorists, who will be eager to do their part in this holy war.

Yet widespread violence is not the only possibility. If this time of crisis encourages us to see through the rhetoric of a war to exterminate evil, and if we seek to understand the intertwined roots of this evil, including our own responsibilities, then perhaps something good may yet come out of this horrible tragedy.

Good vs. Evil

More or less everything above is from a "Buddhist response" emailed to many people a week after the September 11th attacks. Afterwards I found myself reflecting more generally on the problematic duality between good and evil: first considering how that way of thinking deludes us, and then asking what alternative perspective might give us better insight into the cycle of suffering, ill will and ignorance.

Because enlightenment or "awakening" requires mindfulness of our ways of thinking, Buddhism encourages us to be wary of antithetical concepts: not only good and evil, but success and failure, rich and poor, and even the Buddhist duality between enlightenment and delusion. We distinguish between such opposing terms because we want one rather than the other, yet psychologically as well as logically we cannot have one without the other since the meaning of each depends upon the other. That sounds abstract, but such dualities are actually quite troublesome for us. For example, if it is important for me to live a pure life (however purity is understood), then my life will be preoccupied with (avoiding) impurity. If becoming wealthy is the most important thing for me, then I am equally worried by the prospect of poverty. We cannot take one lens without the other, and such pairs of spectacles filter and distort our experience of the world: because we focus too much on some aspects we are unable to perceive and appreciate others. If "wealth/poverty" becomes the most important category I use to understand and react to the world, I tend to see all situations in those terms.

What does this mean for the duality of good versus evil? Perhaps the most important way the interdependence of good and evil shows itself is that we don't know what is good until we know what is evil, and we don't feel we are good unless we are fighting against that evil. We can feel comfortable and secure in our own goodness only by attacking and destroying the evil outside us. St. George needed that dragon in order to be St. George. His heroic identity required it. And, sad to say but true, this is why so many of us like wars: they cut through the petty problems of daily life, and unite us good guys here against the bad guys over there. There is fear in that, of course, but it is also exhilarating. The meaning of life becomes clearer. The problems with my life, and yours, are now over there.

That is one of the main reasons why the end of the Cold War created a big problem in the United States, and not only in the military: once Reagan's "evil empire" was history, people whose "goodness" depended on its "badness" felt adrift. A new enemy was needed, but Grenada, Panama and the war on drugs didn't really fill the shoes. This new holy war on worldwide terrorism is much more promising, especially since it seems that we won't ever be able to tell when or if we've won.

In mid-October 2001 the U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld said that the fight against terror will undoubtedly prove to be a lot more like a cold war than a hot war. If you think about it, the Cold War it took 50 years, plus or minus. It did not involve major battles. It involved continuous pressure. It involved cooperation by a host of nations. It involved the willingness of populations in many countries to invest in it and sustain it. It took leadership at the top from a number of countries that were willing to be principled and to be courageous and to put things at risk; and when it ended, it ended not with a bang, but through internal collapse [Time, October 15, 2001, p.17].

Am I the only one who detects some nostalgia in this comparison? Despite all the problems involved, it is reassuring to return to the good old days. Now we know what needs to be done: to be courageous and aggressive attacking the evil that is outside threatening us.

Everyone loves this struggle between good (us) and evil (them), because it is, in its own fashion, quite satisfying. It makes sense of the world. Think of the plot of every James Bond film, every Star Wars film, every Indiana Jones film, etc. The bad guys are caricatures: they're ruthless, maniacal, without remorse, so they must be stopped by any means necessary. We are meant to feel that it is okay--to tell the truth, it's pleasurable--to see violence inflicted upon them. Because the villains like to hurt people, it's okay to hurt them. Because they like to kill
people, it is okay to kill them. After all, they are evil and evil must be destroyed.

What is this kind of story really teaching us? That if you want to hurt someone, it is important to demonize them first: in other words, to fit them into your good-vs.-evil script. Even school bullies usually begin by looking for some petty offense (often a perceived insult) that they can use to justify their own violence. That is why the first casualty of all wars is truth: the media must "sell" this script to the people.

As this suggests, such stories are much more than entertainment. In order to live, we need air, water, food, clothes, shelter, friends--and we need these stories, because they teach us what is important in life. They are our myths. They give us models of how to live in a complicated and confusing world. Until the last hundred years or so, the most important stories for most people have been religious: the life of Jesus or Mohammed or the Buddha, and the lives of their followers, etc. Theologians and philosophers may like arguing over concepts and dogmas, but for most people it is the stories that are important: the Easter passion, the Prophet in exile, the future Buddha deciding to leave home...

Today, however, the issue is not usually whether a story is an ennobling one, a good myth to live by, but the bottom line: will it sell? You don't need to be religious to wonder how much of an improvement that is.

Disney's very successful--that is, very profitable--Lion King film contrasts the noble ruler of the animals, his loving wife and their innocent cub Simba, all on the good side, with Simba's evil uncle. The uncle hatches a plot to kill the king and eliminate Simba, who escapes but eventually returns to fight the uncle, etc. All very predictable and boring, although often beautiful visually.

In Japan Lion King was featured in cinemas at the same time as Princess Mononoke, an animated film by Hayao Miyazaki, Princess Mononoke, turned out to be more popular, breaking all attendance records. One of the striking things about this film--in fact about many of Miyazaki's wonderful films--is the way it avoids any simple duality between good and evil. In Princess Mononoke, for example, people do bad things, not because their nature is evil, but because they are complicated: sometimes selfish and greedy, and sometimes just so narrowly focused on what they are doing that they do not see the wider implications of their actions.

I do not know if Miyazaki considers himself a Buddhist, but his films seem to be so. Compare the following passage from the Sutta Nipata, an early Buddhist sutra, where Ajita asks of the Buddha, "What is it that smothers the world? What makes the world so hard to see? What would you say pollutes the world and threatens it most?" Notice that his response makes no reference to evil:

"It is ignorance which smothers," the Buddha replies, "and it is heedlessness and greed which make the world invisible. The hunger of desire pollutes the world, and the great source of fear is the pain of suffering.

"In every direction," said Ajita, "the rivers of desire are running. How can we dam them, and what will hold them back? What can we use to close the flood-gates?"

"Any such river can be halted with the dam of mindful awareness," said the Buddha. "I call it the flood-stopper. And with wisdom you can close the flood-gates." [Sutta Nipata, vv. 1032-1036]

A Better Duality?

What alternative is there, if we try to avoid the simplistic duality between good and evil as our way of understanding and evaluating the world? Is it enough to talk about the three roots of evil, or can we say something more about their origins? If greed, ill-will and delusion can be transformed into generosity, loving kindness and wisdom, it seems to suggest that these two ways of living are different angles on the same thing, divergent responses to the same situation. What is that situation?

I think we do better to distinguish between two basic modes of being in the world, two different ways of responding to the uncertainty--the death-haunted insecurity--of our life in the world. This insecurity involves not only the impermanence of our circumstances (the fact that everything is changing all the time) but the fragility of our own constructed identities (that "everything changing all the time" includes our sense-of-self).

One mode of being in the world involves trying to stabilize ourselves by controlling and fixing the world we are in, so that it becomes less threatening and more amenable to our will. The other mode involves a very different strategy, giving priority to opening ourselves up to the world and a greater acceptance of the open-ended impermanence of our existence. That means not allowing our concern for controlling the world to dominate the way we respond to the world.

Both of these involve a quest for security, but they seek that security in very different ways, because they understand the nature and source of security differently. Security is from the combination of the Latin words se and cura, literally "without care"--that is, the condition where I can live without care, where my life is not preoccupied with worrying about my life. We can try to achieve such a condition by completely controlling our world, yet there are other ways to be "without care," which involve a greater trust or faith in the world itself. The first way is more dualistic: I try to manipulate the world in order to fixate my situation, including my own sense of who I am. The second way is more nondual: greater openness to the world is possible because that world is perceived as less threatening and more welcoming, so my own boundaries can be more permeable.

The best terms that I can think of for these two modes of being are fear and love. Notice that, despite the tension between them in our lives, they are not antitheses in the way that good/evil, rich/poor, high/low, etc., are; the meaning of each is not the opposite of the other. Fear and love are not a pair of spectacles to be put on or taken off. If I am right that these are the two most basic modes of being in the world, the choice between them, or proportion between them, is the basic challenge that confronts each of us as we mature. This choice is nothing new to
psychologists, of course, and a contemporary psychotherapist, Mel Schwartz, has expressed it better than I can:

Contrary to what we may believe there are only two authentic core emotions; they are love and fear. Other emotions are secondary and are typically masks for fear. Of these, anger is very common. Although we may have come to regard anger as a source emotion, it is really a smokescreen for fear. When we look at our anger, we can always find fear buried beneath it. In our culture we are trained to believe that it's unwise to show fear. We erroneously believe that expressing such vulnerability will permit others to take advantage of us. Yet the fear is there nonetheless.

In the film Princess Mononoke the main protagonists display plenty of greed, ill-will and delusion, but it is not difficult to detect the fear that underlies them. The major conflict is between two powerful women, both attractively presented, who want to kill each other. Lady Eboshi, the benevolent ruler of Iron-town, is destroying the forest to mine the iron ore she needs for making muskets and bullets; these weapons are both Iron-town's source of income and its means of defense against predatory warlords. Young Mononoke, raised by an enormous white wolf god, wants to kill Eboshi to defend against the rape of the forest. Each side fears what the other side is trying to do to them. Like Bush and bin Laden, the hatred and aggression of each is a mirror-image of the other. During the climax, an extraordinarily violent battle between them, another warlord also attacks Iron-town, encouraged by the Emperor, who craves the head of the Great Forest Spirit, because a legend says that head can confer immortality on whoever gets it. This last motivation is not much developed in the film, but it reminds us of perhaps our greatest fear, and perhaps the one that interferes most with our ability to be open to the world.

How much better it would be, for example, if the Israel-Palestine conflict were understood in these terms! Not as a holy war between good and evil, but as a tragic cycle of reciprocal violence and hatred fuelled by a vicious cycle of escalating fear on both sides. Israelis fear that they will never be able to live at peace, believing that Palestinians are determined to destroy them. Palestinians, impoverished by Israeli control over their own communities and dominated by its U.S.-supplied military, strike back in the only way they can.

Needless to say, Schwartz's point about anger as a smokescreen for fear is also very pertinent for understanding the after-math of September 11th. The United States is not used to being attacked, and the disempowering fear that ensued was not something most people were prepared to cope with. In such a case, the collective conversion into national anger, and a reciprocal act of aggression against Afghanistan or some such country, was inevitable. We knew somebody was going to get bombed.

And what is al-Qaeda's anger a smokescreen for? What fear cowers behind their horrific desire for violence and mass destruction? It has been widely reported that bin Laden is offended by the U.S. military presence in Saudi Arabia, Islam's holy land, yet that is only the tip of a much more problematical iceberg. Al-Qaeda has widespread support among poor Muslims--now more than ever --because it is seen as defending Islam against the globalizing West.

Although the relationship between Islam and Western-led modernity is a complicated issue, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that Islam needs to reform in order to become more compatible with the modern world. That is not the only conclusion to be drawn, however. Of all the major religions, Islam is probably the most concerned with social justice, and therefore the most sensitive to the great social injustices of Western colonialism and domination. Allah is a merciful God but He is also a God of justice and will judge us harshly if we do not accept personal and collective responsibility for the less fortunate. Islam believes that everything really belongs to God, and material things should be used as God wishes them to be used. This means not hoarding but sharing with others who need them. That is why the capitalist idea of using capital to gain ever more capital--you can never have too much!--is foreign, even reprehensible, to many devout Muslims. For example, the often-quoted Surah 102:1 of the Qur'an declares that "The mutual rivalry for piling up (the good things of this world) diverts you (from the more serious things)" and Surah 92:18 praises "Those who spend their wealth for increase in self-purification."

By adapting so well to the modern world of secular nationalism, capitalism and consumerism, the West has learned to finesse such concerns. Islam is less willing to accept such equivocations, because it recognizes no God above Allah. And recent controversies over the World Trade Organization and other institutions of economic globalization remind us that the era of colonialism is far from over. Bin Laden's own Saudi Arabia is a good example: created by the British after the first world war, now in the U.S. "sphere of interest," it has one of the most oppressive, undemocratic and hypo-critical governments in the world--but we in the U.S. hear almost nothing about that reality, and we never will, until the day the U.S. government decides it is necessary to replace that government to keep the oil flowing.

So do poor Muslims around the world have reason to fear and hate the U.S.? Of course they do, and all the more after the aggression in Afghanistan. That military reaction to September 11th invites the same response as in the Middle East, where every Israeli assassination invites a Palestinian suicide attack, and vice-versa.

Needless to say, viewing the conflict in these terms--not good vs. evil but reciprocal cycles of escalating fear and aggression--does not offer us any simple solution. Mutual fear and hatred between Israelis and Palestinians has been brewing for generations and will not easily be defused. Yet this perspective offers us the hope for a solution, which present policies of mutual retaliation obviously do not. What has been created can be undone, if each side makes efforts for "internal disarmament" and also accepts responsibility for addressing the fear in the heart of the other side.

The same is true for the new holy war between aggrieved Muslims and the United States. In this case, I think it will become necessary to address the even larger issue of social justice around the world, and whether the United States is going to be part of the solution rather than part of the problem.

We may wonder if this is a realistic possibility in the foreseeable future, especially given the quality of leadership on most sides. From a Buddhist perspective, then, the first issue becomes whether the duality of good vs. evil can be more widely perceived as delusive, and whether the more insightful duality between fear and love can become more widely acknowledged.
The sangha community of monks and nuns founded by Shakyamuni Buddha eventually became settled and wealthy, but originally they were a motley crew of wandering mendicants, with almost no possessions except robes and begging bowl. The Buddha sent them out one by one in all directions to preach the Dharma, in a manner strikingly reminiscent of the way Jesus charged his apostles to go out and preach that "the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand": "Take nothing for your journey, no staff, nor bag, nor bread, nor money, and do not have two tunics" [Matthew 9:3]. What were both teachers saying? Don't worry about yourself, about how you will live, what you will eat; just do the best you can spreading the word and have faith that you will be taken care of. In other words, let go of your fears about yourself. Instead, open up to the world and live a life of love focused on giving to the world rather than taking from it, trusting in the world rather than always trying to protect yourself from it.

There are many such passages in the gospels, especially in the Sermon on the Mount. "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth" [Matt. 6:19]; "Do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat or what you shall drink, nor about your body, what you shall put on. . . . Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns . . . . Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, and yet your heavenly Father takes care of them" [Matt. 6:25-29]. And what did Jesus tell the rich young man? "If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give it to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.' But the young man went away sorrowful, for he was very rich" [Matt. 19:16-22].

Perhaps the most remarkable Gospel passage of all, from a Buddhist perspective, elaborates upon this teaching of salvation through insecurity. Jesus declares that any disciple who loves his father or mother or son or daughter more than him is not worthy of him; even family attachments should not keep us from following the path. (Becoming a monk in Buddhism is also known as "leaving home.") This apparently cruel verse is immediately followed by one of the most wonderful verses of all: "He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for my sake will find it" (Matt. 10:37-39). This encourages us to follow the personal example of Jesus, who "emptied himself" (kenosis) [Phil.2:5-11].

There are different ways to understand that emptying, but as a Zen Buddhist I am reminded of the 13th century Japanese Zen master Dogen, who wrote something that resonates in much the same way: "To study Buddhism is to study yourself; to study yourself is to forget yourself; to forget yourself is to be awakened and realize your intimacy with all things." The fruit of the Buddhist path, the end of a life organized around fear, is to lose and empty yourself by forgetting yourself, which is also to find your true self: not an alienated self threatened by the world and trying to secure itself in defense against those anxieties, but a nondual self that knows itself to be an expression or a manifestation of the world.

Both religious traditions encourage us to live in this way, and not necessarily because of what will happen to us after we die. This encouragement is often understood in terms of some heavenly reward that we can get in an afterlife (better karma in a future rebirth, or an eternity with God in heaven), which caters to our fear of mortality. But there is another way to understand both nirvana and the kingdom of heaven if, as Augustine put it, God is closer to me than I am to myself. Then forgetting/ losing myself is a way to realize the Buddha-nature or divinity at the core of my being right now, so that "not I but Christ lives in me" (Gal. 2:20). From the usual perspective obsessed with securing ourselves, forgetting myself or losing myself seems the supreme foolishness; but from a more spiritual view-point it can lead to the greatest security, a life without care" because if we have truly emptied ourselves and died to ourselves then there is no longer anyone left to die, no longer any alienated self to worry about death.

Then we should live a life of love, not because of hope for some afterlife reward (though I do not mean to deny the possibility of survival in some form), but because (as Spinoza would put it) a way of life oriented on love is its own reward. Both modes of living--fear and love--involve reinforcing feedback systems that tend to incorporate other people. The more I manipulate the world to get what I want from it, the more separate and alienated I feel from it, and the more separate others feel from me, when they recognize that they have been manipulated. This mutual distrust encourages both sides to manipulate more. On the other hand, the more I can relax and open up to the world, trusting it and accepting the responsibility that involves responding to its needs--which is what loving it means--the more I feel a part of it, at one with other people; and consequently, others become more inclined to trust and open up to me.

The final word I have to offer on this choice is neither Christian nor Buddhist, reminding us that no religious traditions have a monopoly on this wisdom. It is an uncredited story (I could not trace its source) that was included in an email I received after September 11th.

A Native American grandfather was talking to his grandson about how he felt about the tragedy on September 11th.

He said, "I feel as if I have two wolves fighting in my heart. One wolf is vengeful, angry, violent. The other wolf is loving, forgiving, compassionate."

The grandson asked him, "Which wolf will win the fight in your heart?"

The grandfather answered, "The one I feed."

References


Gyatso, Tenzin, the 14th Dalai Lama, “Dialogue on Religion and Peace” in Chappell, pp. 189-197.
Schwartz has proposed that the mental health community reconsider the nature of DSM diagnosis. He maintains that we should not conflate a diagnosis as being a literal "real" thing but merely as a description of what we think we see. He notes that our tendency to think in this manner is akin to reification.[13] His article Diagnosis Disorder articulates this thesis.[14] Schwartz suggests that much of the epidemic rate of mental health diagnoses, particularly anxiety and depression, are suggestive of living from an incoherent worldview. [15].