

THE REDISCOVERY OF EVIL SINCE 9-11

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Before the horror of September 11 a year ago, only those branded intolerant would dare use the word evil to describe evil. Now every airhead from the Hamptons to Hollywood uses it. What's going on?

Fear did it. It was fear that led the nonjudgmental types to rediscover the meaning of evil. Prior to 9-11, the last time the high priests of tolerance invoked this word was to describe pro-life activists. Now the word rolls off everyone's lips. This, of course, carries its own risks: the power of the word eviscerates when overused. That being said, it remains true that the bigger problem is the continuing triumph of moral relativism; this is especially the case on college campuses.

The National Association of Scholars (on whose board of directors I serve) recently released the results of a survey on the ethical lessons that colleges are teaching. The most salient finding was that three-fourths of college seniors report being taught that right and wrong depend "on differences in individual values and cultural diversity." Only a quarter of the students reported that their professors adhered to the more traditional understanding of morality, namely, that there are uniform standards of right and wrong.

This is hardly surprising. For the last four decades, our cultural elites have been teaching that to be educated is to be open-minded, and to be open-minded is to believe in the moral equality of all cultures and civilizations. According to this secular catechism, the only persons who deviate from this verity are bigots. Ergo, students think it's a badge of

enlightenment not to condemn cannibalism, slavery, torture and genocide. Who are we to judge other cultures by our yardstick?

In the 1980s, I gave a lecture at Carnegie-Mellon University in Pittsburgh to a class of Ph.D. students. After my talk I was approached by two male students, both of whom were Jewish. They berated me—in a manifestly self-righteous way—for having very strong convictions. I instantly plead guilty to their charge. I then asked them quite directly if they believed that all cultures and civilizations were of equal moral worth. They expressed surprise that anyone would disagree with this observation. But then I wiped the smirk off their faces.

To make sure I understood what they were saying, I offered an example of their position. In this country we put pizza into ovens, I remarked, and in Nazi Germany they put Jews into ovens. In other words, it's just a matter of different strokes for different folks.

I thought they were going to have a stroke. Stuttering and stammering, they hastened to say that no, that was not what they meant. But, of course, they were wrong. The example I gave followed logically from what they maintained: if there is no way to rank order cultures, it all comes down to different strokes for different folks. I advised them to consider what happens when first principles are abandoned altogether.

Moral relativism is not only an intellectually bankrupt idea, its real-life consequences can be deadly. Consider a more recent example.

On July 18, late at night, the Senate passed the Born-Alive Infants Protection Act (President Bush signed the bill on August 5). The Democrats insisted on a voice vote so there would be no record of their decision. The bill, considered highly controversial by some Democrats, allows doctors to treat children who survive an abortion. That's right. It has long been legal in this country to allow a baby that survives

an abortion to die on an operating table while doctors and nurses do nothing. Other forms of infanticide, such as partial-birth abortion, persist: it is still legal to stick a scissors into an infant's head when he's 80 percent born. This way there's little chance he won't be dead on arrival (puncturing the skull allows the baby's head to collapse so he can get through the birth canal more easily).

On August 2, the New York Times ran a front-page story titled "Eggs of Endangered Turtles Fall Prey to Florida Dealers." A new underground market has arisen in Florida: the sale of sea turtle eggs (some people like to eat them like oysters). These are federally protected turtles and it is a misdemeanor to sell their eggs. It so happens that when the turtles lay their eggs in the predawn hours, poachers move in to steal them. Those who sell the eggs can get one year in jail and a \$50,000 fine. Those who actually steal the eggs are guilty of a felony and can be sent up the river for years.

Now if only we treated unborn babies the way we treat unborn turtles. The fact that we tolerate this kind of evil shows that the tragic events of 9-11 have not awakened us from our moral slumber. Not until our society comes to accept what the Catholic Church teaches—that there are moral absolutes and that all life is sacred—will we turn the corner.