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Evil in World Religions at the University of Manitoba (2002-2008): An Introduction and Provocation

Abstract: This essay is a memoir of the course RLGN 1440 Evil in World Religions that I teach in the Department of Religion, University of Manitoba. The essay chronicles the development and evolution of the course from 2002 – 2008 and documents my efforts to do justice to the topic of "evil in world religions" without assuming immediate cross-cultural applicability or relevance. The basic question is this: What does the study of religion have to offer the study of evil? The essay is programmatic and aims to solicit feedback and productive criticism for the development of a third-person approach to the study of practices and attitudes pertaining to good and evil within a variety of religious traditions in a way that is consistent with contemporary developments in both moral philosophy and the study of religion.

[1] Evil is taught in a veritable dungeon of an amphitheatre. The gradated cave-like structure that is my classroom has a low ceiling and stone grey walls. The front is cloaked in darkness and when you're running PowerPoint on the central screen my lecture precedes as if from the shadows. The overhead lights in the room shine on the faces of the one-hundred and ninety students that regularly take the course and I stand behind a lectern in the front corner, a computer screen dimly illuminating my features. I have been teaching this course on an annual basis since 2002, always in the autumn months and always in the same time slot: 11:30am – 12:45pm. 2008 marks the seventh time I've taught this class. This essay is a memoir of sorts, my attempt to chart a path and solicit comments and feedback on a course for which I have found no serious precedent. My aims are programmatic: to develop a course of study that introduces students to the topic of evil without strong assumptions about what evil is. To put it simply, I'm asking what the study of religion has to offer the study of evil. This has been a challenge, a surprising challenge given the overwhelming number of books currently published on the topic of evil. Most of these titles are in philosophy or political studies and I am struck by how presumptuous they are about the nature of evil. It is as if everyone already knows what to study, how to study it, and what to conclude. These books generally read the same: after a quick survey of our errant assumptions about evil as a supernatural phenomenon followed by an excursus on earthquakes, evil is recast as a moral and political

problem. Along with these reflections there is usually a lament about our ignorance and helplessness and a careful list of all the great evils of the modern era: genocide, terrorism, psychopaths, and the destruction of the environment. The redress is usually an uplifting account of how to make the world a better place. Despite the detailed coverage of Augustine, Voltaire, Kant, and Darth Vader it more than often turns out that everything we ever wanted to know about evil we learned in Kindergarten. We can do better.

[2] As this course has developed over the past few years I have tried to avoid falling into unreflective moralism. I have also sought to avoid focusing on the "dark night of the soul" or the history and mythology of "evil" beings. To do this I have kept three related concepts close in mind: the ambiguity of the concept evil and its potentially limited cross-cultural applicability; the complex history of the study of religion and the extrication of the study of religion from theology; and, the vicissitudes of contemporary ethical and moral philosophy. It is this triangle of tensions that prevents me from moving too far in one direction, causing either a loss of focus or the haphazard narrowing of the topic. At least I hope this to be the case.

[3] Prior to my arrival at the University of Manitoba the course was entitled "God and Evil" and was no doubt designed with theodicy or theodicies in mind (the Department of Religion was established in the early 1970s under the auspices of comparative theology and comparative religion). When I accepted an Instructor position in the Department of Religion I had already taken three classes in theodicy: two undergraduate courses at the University of Windsor and a graduate class at the University of Toronto. I was familiar with the classical philosophical and theological arguments and quite a few of the modern solutions including mysticism, process theology, eco-feminist spirituality, and so on. As a graduate student working on the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School I found most of these arguments to be hypostatized and wrong-headed, although I was fairly good at grasping and writing about the arguments on their own terms. The thing is, if you don't accept the premise of some sort of supernatural realm it seems to me the entire field falls to pieces in an irritating rain of logical fallacies and obfuscations. Time and time again theodicy has proven to be extraordinarily successful in deflecting a pragmatic concern with how people come to identify this or that as evil in their lives. My encounter with theodicy turned out to be a good illustration of reification, a concept I learned about in Marsha Hewitt's graduate courses on the Frankfurt School and religious thought (especially, Adorno 1983).

[4] One way to approach "Evil in World Religions" would be to skip the more classical theological positions and go straight to the origins of contemporary moral philosophy. This was my original impulse in 2002. I would start with Immanuel Kant, work my way through the Marquis de Sade and Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, then on to Slavoj Žižek, Joan Copjec, Jürgen Habermas, Agnes Heller, and Seyla Benhabib. No doubt this would have been a demanding course for a first year student not well versed in German Idealism, Western Marxism, the New Lacanians, and Critical Theory. However, having a near complete doctoral thesis dealing with the early Critical Theory of Jürgen Habermas in hand I was feeling comfortable with my selections and with the ability of incoming university students to grasp even the most elusive details of the Kantian edifice (something which I still hold to be true).

[5] I pitched something like this to the Departmental Chair, Dawne McCance. Her reply was brief and discouraging. She suggested that because this is a Department of Religion I might want to think about covering the "World Religions" part of the course title. She was correct of course, but this wasn't particularly helpful for me at the time. In retrospect it was her response that instigated my rethinking of the field in a more comprehensive way. Regardless of my dismay, and because I

had accepted the position on short notice, I was left with only a few weeks to figure out what the phrase "evil in world religions" meant, or could mean. I did a quick search of library catalogues and came up with a few titles that could serve as course texts. I selected three, two of them having to do with religions of the world. In 2002 I used John Bowker, *Problems of Suffering in Religions of the World* (1975), William Cenkner, ed. *Evil and the Response of World Religions* (1997), and Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (1994).

[6] With little time to prepare, as I was trying to finish my dissertation before the end of summer, I flipped through the chapters quickly, ordered the books, packed my bags and moved from Toronto to Winnipeg. It wasn't until the third or fourth week into the term, about half way through Bowker's *Problems of Suffering in Religions of the World*, that I permitted myself to realize that the text I was using was not only unpalatable, it was also unconscionable. As a teacher one hopes that through the learning process students will become more knowledgeable. My experience suggested to me that I was heading in the exact opposite direction. It could have been the move, the culture shock, the new job, the workload, or even the weather. Whatever it was, I came to feel that the material I was lecturing on was like learning in reverse, a catastrophic hemorrhaging of intelligence. My impulse was to blame myself and I almost left the profession altogether. I didn't, but it took one of those elusive "ah-ha" moments to turn things around.

[7] I vividly recall being in the middle of a very long and very dry monologue about the perceived theological merits of suffering in Christianity (I had written a single spaced twenty-four page lecture) when I abruptly stopped and put down my notes. My exact words have long since faded from memory but I expressed an honest sentiment: "I hate what I'm teaching you. I will not be continuing the class like this. There is a serious problem here. I'm very much opposed to the kind of analysis that is found in Bowker's text." That straightened a few spines and caught a few wayward glances, at least for those who hadn't managed to shuffle off their conscious selves in the wake of a very boring lecture. I turned the rest of the course around and upside down. Instead of lecturing on Bowker and illuminating the complexities of the text by providing additional background, I engaged in a detailed and zealous critique of each chapter. I drew out the limitations of his approach to the study of religion and the inaccurate simplicity of his conclusions; for example, I situated the chapter identifying Marxism in the context of the Cold War. The anthology edited by William Cenkner was better, but I took an equally critical position on it. What does it mean when non-Christian religious traditions began to adopt Christian terminology to address the "problem of evil?" Does it make sense for Buddhists to talk about sin? Certainly I am in no position to agree or disagree about the nature of religious thought as it is presented, but I couldn't help but suspect that something was wrong here. Why is it that when we talk about evil and world religions, all the world religions end up sounding Christian?

[8] I was once told that there are things that are good to think and there are things that are bad to think. Theodicy is bad to think. When theologians seek to engage in inter-religious dialogue about theodicy we end up with a bizarre phenomenon: non-Christian religious adherents begin to talk like Christians. In other words, theodicy seems to be a conceptual bundle that resists being addressed from outside the terminology that surrounds it. Not always, but often enough. I arrived at a hypothesis: *theodicy is a colonizing philosophical and theological problem*. It is as if the problem of theodicy works to prevent lexical and conceptual dexterity, shutting down and closing debate rather than opening it up, looping inwardly in spirals of unassailable and incoherent assumptions. Worth noting, this phenomenon makes sense if we understand the link between religious language and cultic praxis: religious thought is ground in its own ritual performance and at times resists

translation into propositionally differentiated speech (Habermas 2002; 2008). Any form of analysis that is ground in the particularities of ritual experience cannot avoid the quagmire of a solipsistic view and a certain degree of ineluctability. I don't think this has to do with any kind of ineffability; rather, religious "belief" is primarily performative. This notion is brilliantly captured in Johannes Wolfart's "If I were a Lutheran, what would I do?" (2003) and Malcolm Ruel's "Christians as Believers" (1997). In other words, when others try to engage the issue, understanding in a communicative sense can not but fail – there can only be an attempt to mirror the ritual display of the theologian performing theodicy. Theodicy as ritual, yes. When seen in this way, theodicy, contrary to what many philosophers of religion might say about it, is a philosophical problem that discourages innovative and active research. Its narcissistic qualities baffle rather than enlighten. I would even suggest that the scholarly emphasis on theodicy could be better understood through the lens of Elisabeth Young-Bruehl's theorization of the ideologies of desire (1996).

[9] As a side note: at this point I had not yet realized that "world religions" could also be construed as a colonial project, this insight would come with my reading of Hans Kippenberg (2002), Russell McCutcheon (2003), and Tomoko Masuzawa (2005). Although this complexity perhaps implies that this kind of course should not be offered at all, I still have high hopes that the study of evil and the study of world religions can be formulated and reformulated in productive and legitimate ways.

[10] In 2003 I had been hired as an Instructor again. I accepted the offer to repeat the course and set out to avoid the colonization of "evil in world religions" by the *fabula* of theodicy. The problem was simple: I had no idea how to avoid the problem. Almost all of the writings on evil and religion are related in one way or another to the problem of theodicy. Even those who try to shift the burden from the concept of evil to the issue of suffering do not really displace the theological emphasis. If anything they only intensify it (none of the writings on suffering that I surveyed delved into the realm of the sociology of pain). Despite this, the second time around I was wiser and more cautious. I prepared well in advance to find material that would be suitable. I selected three texts: Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger* (2002), Bram Stoker, *Dracula* (2003), and again, Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1994). Although Arendt's book does not deal with religion, its emphasis on the demands of justice in the face of the new criminality of genocide fit my interests well. In addition to these three texts I used a reading package with supplemental essays. The reading package included nine essays on sati from a variety of disciplines and three essays on religious ethics in Japan. I considered using David Parkin's *Anthropology of Evil* (1991) but found that too many of the contributions seemed improvised, as if the contributors found themselves obligated to talk about something they didn't have much to say about. It is a valuable contribution to the field and admittedly it resonates with my aims here and the ambiguity that adheres to the idea of evil in relation to the study of religion.

[11] Not having an extensive background in anthropology put me at a bit of a disadvantage when using Mary Douglas's text. Playing catch up with her analysis was a challenge but I found the notion of pollution and taboo to work wonderfully well when seeking to establish some sort of cross-cultural conception of "evil" that did not simply reflect Christian theological interests. I turned to the novel *Dracula* because it seemed to me that a lot of what Douglas was talking about resonated deeply with the text and, at the very least, it would provide a fictional test case for assignments. The idea for using *Dracula* came from Darlene Juschka, who had used it as a required text at the University of Toronto for an introductory course on the Phenomenon of Religion. *Dracula*, it turns out, is very good to think. After all, we often identify both Dracula and Adolph

Eichmann as evil, yet there is a dramatic difference in our explanation for why they are considered evil differs.

[12] Sati became a case study concerning issues of sacrifice, the feminine, fundamentalism, and secular politics. The chasm between how sati is introduced in many world religions texts and its complicated political and religious entwinement with colonial attitudes and practices proved to be instructive in many ways, especially in illustrating how the bodies of women are often identified as obstructions to masculine enlightenment and thus denigrated or destroyed (see also Beers 1992; Eilberg-Schwartz and Doniger 1995). For a time I considered focusing the entire course on misogyny and representations of the feminine. I also used the film *Seven Samurai* to emphasize the difference between rituals of purification and principled ethical systems, noting that in the modern world widespread legitimacy is only granted to ethical or moral systems. This notion was supported by Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. All of this material worked fairly well. I felt as though things were going better, although I was not entirely sure why this constellation was working.

[13] In 2004 I used the following course description:

The course introduces students to perspectives on evil in selected world religions. Readings have been divided by topic rather than tradition, suggesting that cross-cultural themes emerge in light of the subject matter of this course. Themes to be examined include: purity and pollution, the monstrous, sex and gender, social trauma, and genocide. The first section begins with the anthropological work of Mary Douglas. Douglas's comparative approach introduces the notion of "danger" which is (possibly) at the heart of many ancient and modern notions of "evil." Additional illustrations of the significance and relevance of notions of purity and impurity will be discussed in relation to Zoroastrianism, Maori cannibalism, and Bram Stoker's novel Dracula. The second section will delve into western conceptions of the monstrous. In this section readings will suggest a similarity between the horrific and the holy, and between the unknown and the familiar. The discussion will largely focus on monsters (e.g. Leviathan, Dracula) in western religious traditions. The third section examines notions of the horrific and gender. In particular, the ancient and modern cross-cultural association of sexuality and the feminine with corruption and death. Writings concerning motherhood and sati in India will be discussed along with Buddhist notions of celibacy and the feminine. The fourth section focuses on contemporary Japanese popular / historical culture, Akira Kurosawa's film Seven Samurai in particular. Medieval Shinto concepts of purity and impurity will be discussed and the way in which Japanese history has been cinematically re-written to fit within a more Confucian ethical system. This will be situated alongside a study of the military defeat of the American South. The last section deals with genocide in the 20th century. The class will be reading parts of Hannah Arendt's book Eichmann in Jerusalem. The roots of European anti-Semitism will be examined as well as her famous phrase "the banality of evil" in the context of the modern practice of genocide. Modern concepts regarding justice and moral philosophy will also be discussed.

[14] The third time around I used *Dracula* and *Eichmann in Jerusalem* again but dropped Douglas's book. I found that the first few chapters alone served as an excellent introduction to the course – the analogy between ritual purity and impurity and secular clean and dirty has proven to be one of the best hooks for the class, it engages students immediately and successfully when it comes to thinking about this thing we call evil. Using only the first three chapters of *Purity and Danger* also allowed me to introduce new material. The new addition was a very interesting volume by Timothy Beal, *Religion and Its Monsters* (2001). And, of course, I continued to create and utilize an ever burgeoning reading package. In 2004 the reading package included essays on purity and pollution in Zoroastrianism and in Maori traditions alongside the first three chapters of Douglas's *Purity and Danger*. I also supplemented Beal's book on religion and monsters with essays by H.P. Lovecraft and

Rudolph Otto. The third section on gender again dealt with sati and conceptions of the feminine with an added essay on conceptions of the feminine within domestic realm in Buddhist hagiography. The fourth section examined the relation between cultural trauma (military defeat) and changes within religious identity, again focusing on Japan. And, as before, I used Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. When I first started using this text I was lecturing on it for about eight or nine classes. However, because of my tendency to include rather than exclude this section had shrunk to about four or five classes.

[15] As can be seen, each year I have attempted to be a bit more expansive, increasing the range what we might call "evil" beyond purity and pollution but also progressively drawing on a more varied range of religious traditions. Whenever I taught *Dracula* it renewed my suspicion that monsters are really good to think when it comes to trying to figure out what the phrase "evil in world religions" means. Thus, Timothy Beal's book was a revelation in many ways. He was approaching something I wanted to talk about but doing so in an untraditional and exploratory way. A more traditional text would have dealt with myth and world religions, telling the reader about glorious heroes and malevolent monsters and how everything is a representation of some primal force of nature. Beal didn't do this. He focuses in on monsters; and, using the Freudian notion of the uncanny and Douglas's notion of chaos and disorder, illuminates how religious communities come to identify themselves in contrast to others through their monsters. Drawing attention to notions of purity and impurity and the uncanny nature of monsters goes a long way in showing how complex our relation to "evil" is. Beal's work also suggested that "evil" can be studied in a provocative and progressive way without reference to theodicy at all. Not all monsters can be considered evil, nor can impurity be associated with evil in most instances. For example, sometimes a holy figure may deliberately move into contact with a ritually impure object as a means of deflating the sacred. These complexities and others began to open a new world of study that had only been hinted at previously. If we begin with things that are generally undesirable or are viewed as dangerous, we enter into an extraordinary array of human behaviors that are all but invisible within the constricting confines of the theological problem of evil. Thinking about monsters and impurity started me on a long process of rethinking the nature of religion but also rethinking the nature of moral philosophy and how to study evil from a third person perspective.

[16] Evil in World Religions: 2005. The course was divided into four sections.

1) Purity and Pollution, Clean and Unclean. Readings included essays by Mary Douglas as well as essays on purity and impurity within the Christian scriptures, the debate within Christianity about grape juice and wine, notions of purity within Zoroastrianism, in relation to Maori cannibalism, as well as Cantonese funeral rituals. I also used Beal's essay on the novel *Dracula*.

2) The Monstrous, The Demonic, and Scapegoats. Readings included essays by H. P. Lovecraft and Rudolph Otto. I also used essays on scapegoating and Jonestown as well as on monsters and national boundaries in sixteen century Europe.

3) Ideals and Ideologies of the Feminine. Readings included an essay on femininity within Buddhism, sati, and motherhood in American fundamentalism.

4) Modern Evil: Genocide. In addition to Arendt's book I used two essays by Zygmunt Bauman from *Modernity and the Holocaust*.

[17] I was addressing four conceptions of "evil." First, I discussed and illustrated the idea of ritual impurity, which is not exactly evil, but is usually, though not always, to be avoided. I was insistent that we use the term *ritual* impurity or *ritual* pollution to discuss this, especially in contrast to our secular notions of clean and dirty. Second, I cut back on the emphasis on monsters to include the demonic and a section on scapegoats. I was very pleased with this section in theory but not in practice. I had not yet located the kind of resources that I was hoping for. The third section dealt with the feminine which, although rarely considered evil in an overt way, is usually considered dangerous. The last section examined "modern evil" and the issue of hatred and genocide. In 2005 I used two books, Arendt and Stoker. Everything else had been converted and placed in the reading package. While I was satisfied with many of the readings I thought there was a structural problem that I couldn't put my finger on. I had articulated four kinds of evil: pollution, monsters, the feminine, and genocide. But, the first three of these things are not considered evil in a moral sense. They are "evil" only by way of being considered things that are often considered good to avoid. Despite my efforts to think clearly on this issue, I still felt that something wasn't right.

[18] In 2006 the course took a conceptual leap forward. By now I had been hired in a tenure-track position and was beginning to see this course as a permanent part of my teaching responsibilities. At the end of the term in 2005 I realized that at the root of my reading selections was a basic distinction that had not yet been made explicit: *there is a fundamental distinction between a religious notion of evil and a moral notion of evil.* In retrospect this strikes me as rather obvious but at the time it came as a revelation. What religious traditions avoid, see as dangerous, demonize, sacrifice, or scapegoat has very little to do with what a modern thinker might associate with morality or with notions of human rights, generalizable interests, or democratic rights and freedoms. Making this distinction clear allowed for a highly progressive restructuring of the course.

[19] At this point it is worth mentioning: I draw my conception of moral consciousness from the discourse ethics of Jürgen Habermas, who makes a razor sharp distinction between ethical life ("the good") and morality ("justice"). While the priority of this distinction in terms of human obligations to one another has been shown to be problematic by several moral philosophers, including Seyla Benhabib, Agnes Heller and Albrecht Wellmer, a thematic distinction remains both plausible and desirable (for some of these debates, see Benhabib and Dallmayr 1990). Furthermore, it isn't that I want to equate "ethical life" with "religious life," rather, to notice that religious life expresses a vision of the good life and in doing so identifies what is undesirable, what is to be avoided and, sometimes, what is evil. Following definitions of religion provided by anthropologist Melford Spiro (1987) and sociologist Steve Bruce (1996), I distinguish religious life from ethical life by seeing religious notions of evil as linked up with the supernatural realm or some sort of transcendence. This is not always the case with ethical life which is a far more inclusive field (see Benhabib 2002; Taylor 2007). Aware of the complexity of this debate and conscious that this isn't a course on moral philosophy, I make a generic distinction that is both plausible and has a certain degree of philosophical legitimacy: there are two kinds of evil, religious notions of evil, having to do with aversions, dangers, and harms associated with the supernatural realm and moral notions of evil, having to do with considerations of agency, motivation, impartiality, and justice. To render this as polemic as possible I contend that these two perspectives are mutually exclusive.

[20] **2006 Undergraduate Calendar Description**: *The course introduces students to perspectives on evil in selected world religions. Prologue: This course is not so much about evil in world religions, as if it can be assumed that we know what evil is in advance, but how the scholar of religion might go about thinking about evil in the world and in world religions. Starting with the premise that evil is in some way related to traumatic*

human experience, the assigned readings retroactively construct the social dynamics of such experiences as a means of introducing what constitutes what we today call "moral consciousness." Thus, instead of talking about what religious adherents consider good or evil this course examines the experiences and concepts that must be in place prior to any possible discernment or judgement about good or evil. The thesis of this course therefore argues that the concept "evil" is a derivative of traumatic root experiences. In other words, the readings present a case for the position that the source of our concept of evil can be traced to our experiences of order and disorder, anxiety, disgust, dread, the monstrous, self and other, friend and stranger, and pain and suffering. The readings show that it is through these social experiences, which are first and foremost exemplified within the history of religions, that the concept of evil eventually emerges and comes to be cemented into a framework of law and order (a declaration of human rights, parliamentary democracy).

[21] It was at this time that I began to see the course itself as a provocation, an argument. The "course thesis" challenges and encourages students to think about the topic in a more comprehensive way. The argument aims to show and provide evidence for an analytic distinction between religious and moral notions of evil. In an important way, "evil" here is a second order category created by the scholar that can be used to illuminate and understand human behaviour in a cross-cultural way (McCutcheon 2003). It may not be the best term but it is one that generates a great deal of interest and enthusiasm. Quite easily this course could be called "Dangers in World Religions" or "The Bad in World Religions" or even "Harm in World Religions." None of these titles, however, captures the range I seek to address, from relatively trivial ritual impurities to profound moral grievances. And, as previously noted, whenever possible I have sought to resist the tendency toward cultural hegemony by starting with a concept of evil that is cautious and tempered with a degree of vagueness. At the same time I find no reason to adopt a relativistic attitude. I remain convinced that impartial cross-cultural analysis is possible even when there is theoretical awareness that conceptual imperialism or ethnocentric interpretations are unavoidable: we view things from where we stand in history. Self-reflection, revision, and openness to correction constitute the fundamentals of scholarship and studying evil is no different. Seeing means seeing something with a bias, but bias is what gives us perspective and, one might hope, perspectives gained through consensus building and careful argumentation can be impartial. Awareness of this matrix is what Hans-Georg Gadamer calls "historically effected consciousness" (Gadamer 1994). Certainly we must aim to be reflective enough to accommodate the perspectives of others and allow critique, critical reflection, and rejoinder.

[22] By approaching the topic of evil with a minimal definition, things human beings avoid, find dangerous or potentially harmful, it becomes illuminating to dwell on all of the intricacies of avoidance. Beginning with the emotional and cognitive basis of development seems to be a concrete and practical place to start since there is an incredible spectrum of attitudes and practices that are involved here. When one thinks about ritual impurity, monsters, strangers, suffering, and sacrifice the old problem of theodicy can't help but strike one as impoverished. The study of "evil" is so much more than an abstract logical problem to be worked out by adding and subtracting or substituting ontological assumptions. What we eat, how we eat, who we associate with and when, what we talk about, how we clean our environment, how we feel about ourselves and others – monsters under the bed, skeletons in the closet, demons in the shadows . . . there is an almost unlimited range of activities that could and should be associated with the study of evil in world religions. This is the stuff that constitutes our attractions and aversions, our elementary notions of good and evil. As far as I know, no one has done a sustained study of "evil" in this way, and yet there is so much more that could be said.

[23] In 2006 I am still using *Dracula* and Arendt but the course reading has ballooned into the backbone of the course. The most significant innovation this year was a distinction between the social and cognitive origins of "evil" (what I eventually call "basic concepts") and the illustration of "evil" within different religious traditions ("exemplars"). In 2006 the first section of the course dealt with ritual purity and impurity as an analogue to clean and dirty, supported by Douglas's understanding of order and disorder. Then I looked at disgust, fear, and dread. The articles used in this section do not relate to religion directly; rather, they focus on the experience of disgust or the experience of dread and pain. These are the basic elements of emotional life. This is followed by readings about monsters, sacrifice, and scapegoats, the basic elements of religious life.

[24] The second section of the course illustrates these concepts within religious traditions. Notions of impurity and disgust are illustrated in an essay by Daniel Sack concerning Protestant debates about using a single chalice for the celebration of the Eucharist or multiple cups. These concepts were also illustrated by James Watson's essay on funerals in Cantonese society. For example, as Watson observes, a general disgust is experienced around funerals, shame accompanies attending a funeral, and impurity occurs if one touches the corpse (and touching the corpse is a ritual obligation). The corpse handlers themselves are excluded from the community except during funerals, but they are shunned and eyes are averted when they are near. Certainly death is not viewed as evil, but it is viewed as a time of great danger. And in my view, focusing on perceived dangers – whether from others or inherent to the structure of the cosmos – is the best way to approach the topic of evil in world religions.

[25] Section three examined the roots of racism as another combination of these emotional dispositions and experiences. For example, once we understand how dread works, it is possible to approach racism through this experience. The targeted group is portrayed as monstrous and described in terms that are typically associated with impurity, thus creating a feeling of disgust. What I emphasize at the end of the class is the categorical distinction that must be made between religious notions of evil and moral notions of evil, especially when it comes to courts of law. I have been heard to say, "You don't get thrown in jail because you're ritually impure. You go to jail if you've wilfully and knowingly broken the law." At least we sometimes hope this is the case if the law is just. To be sure, many criminologists have noted instances where judges and juries have not been able to make this elementary distinction: e.g. if a woman guilty of petty theft is deemed to be a "bad mother" is more likely to receive a harsher sentence than a "good mother" (according to this malicious reasoning a "good mother" is married, has children and stays at home, a "bad mother" is single, has children, and works). No doubt legal systems are not perfect and, drawing on my familiarity with theorists including Benhabib and Habermas, I make a more than tacit distinction between a legal theory and moral philosophy. Yet, it seems to me that this distinction between religious evil and moral evil opens up an entirely new field for the study of evil, but also stands to provide a tremendous amount of empirical evidence and context for studies in moral or political philosophy.

[26] My course outlines in 2007 and 2008 are modifications of this schema and thesis. I retain the tripartite division from the previous year: 1) The Anatomy of Evil, basic concepts 2) Case Studies and Exemplars 3) Morality, Law, and Democracy. As indicated in the 2008 course outline below, each year the class is pitched as having a "course thesis." In 2007 the course thesis was that moral notions of evil are derivatives of religious notions of evil. In 2008 I reversed the thesis and suggested that religious notions of evil are derived from our moral intuitions. A good final exam question is: "Evaluate the course thesis in light of the required and recommended readings." The most recent required and recommended reading list is attached here as an Appendix I-II.

[27] In the first section, "Anatomy of evil, basic concepts," I look at two kinds of building blocks for an adequate notion of "evil" that are viable as a cross-cultural categories. On the one hand we look at emotional dispositions (dread, pain, secular defilement, shame). On the other hand, at attitudes and practices having religious and non-religious correlates: ritual, story-telling, sacrifice, monsters, and so on. In a straightforward sense these building blocks constitute not only the anatomy of evil but also the anatomy of a workable definition of religion. They are far from definitive. In 2009 I intend to add a section on vengeance with ancillary readings on anger and hatred. The section pertaining to the religious content of the anatomy of evil could also include ceremony, as distinct from ritual, a section on myth as well as a section on exchange, magic, sorcery, and alchemy. Additional complexity could be brought into the portrait by including notions of history, memory, and temporality.

[28] As a bonus question for the 2008 final exam I asked the class which concepts they would most like to see added to the list of "basic concepts." The recommendations contained the following terms: compassion, hate, jealousy, social roles, identity, stress, judgement, grievance, deities, love, lust, money, fear, corporate evil, addiction, guilt, power, revolution, captivity, magic, anxiety, malice, curiosity, anger, violence, sin, gender, the unknown, discrimination, envy, birth, death, ethnocentrism, futurity, danger, and abjection.

[29] It is worth mentioning that while this distinction is relatively easy to grasp, it is not altogether clear for many students and scholars who assume that to be "truly" or "authentically" religious is to be moral. The course thesis challenges this idea. Along with Melford Spiro (1987) and Steve Bruce (2002), I define religion as a perceived relation to supernatural powers, *not* as ethical worldview. As Spiro puts it, religion is "an institution consisting of culturally patterned interaction with culturally postulated superhuman beings" (197). Bruce's definition is similar: religion is "beliefs, actions and institutions predicated on the existence of entities with powers of agency or impersonal powers or processes possessed of moral purpose, which can set the conditions of, or interview in human affairs" (2). Defining religion this way often conflicts with cherished ideas about the nature and role of religion in society. It is not rare to receive panicked and confused emails, usually in the first month of classes, expressing bewilderment and frustration: "I thought we were going to talk about the crusades and terrorism – I don't understand why we're talking about dirt and disgust!" Inevitably I suggest that there is no point in taking a course about evil in world religions if one has already decided what is and is not evil – this course addresses the *question*: what does the study of religion have to offer the study of evil? More than this, in the contemporary era we use the term evil in a very exclusive way, mainly in reference to the will. This is consistent with a moral conception of evil which, in my view, does not exhaust the potential of the term nor its varieties.

[30] On a related note, many students rush to the assumption that because I am presenting disgust as a basic concept in the anatomy of evil that I take the position that all things disgusting are evil. Things are far more complicated. Religious or moral notions of evil are advanced concepts, they only emerge as thinkable in certain situations. I might suggest as a response that Dracula is identified as evil not because he is a monster (the Cookie Monster isn't evil, is he?) but because he is described as unnatural, disgusting, horrific, demonic, impure, and monstrous. It is the constellation of several ideas that contributes to the designation that this or that is "evil."

[31] The overall aim of the course is to introduce students to a course of study. I aim to teach them how to study evil without strong cultural or religious assumptions about what evil is, starting with the premise that whatever evil is, we generally avoid it (qualifying this by saying the subject is also

fascinating, thus captures our interest). The course is framed by a thesis, and the readings are arranged to support the offered claim. The course thesis variably states that religious and moral notions of evil are distinct. I emphasize that this distinction is descriptive, not moralistic. There is a categorical difference between how evil is understood in religious traditions and how evil is understood from the viewpoint of the legislator in a multicultural and democratic context. I have yet to find exceptions to this – with the caveat being that a religious tradition that has "modernized' itself by casting off its supernaturalist tendencies will likely adopt a moral notion of evil. I can safely say that at this point I am persuaded by the division underlying the thesis, although it can be cast readily in more or less controversial terms (e.g. does moral consciousness come from our early childhood experiences; does morality derive from magical thinking or religious practices, etc.). Given my conviction that I'm pursing an innovative and progressive course of study for this topic, I felt it necessary to solicit feedback, criticism, and assistance for what could readily be identified as the science of evil.

[32] In conclusion, I have found it essential not to design this class with a moralistic agenda. The course of study aims to be descriptive and explanatory through and through. Even so, the intention to describe and explain human behaviour is itself the result of a normative judgement, to study evil rather than take to the streets to eliminate perceived injustices. However, there is much to be learned about how and why we identify this or that as evil. Are these judgements sensible? How did they arise? Why the persistence of the concept? The course of study proposed here offers modest clues as to how we might go about answering some of these questions.

[33] Addendum: Without the extraordinary interest of so many students in this topic, none of this would have come to light. Thanks must also be extended to all of my colleagues, past and present, in the Department of Religion who – undoubtedly – have probably heard more about this particular class and this particular topic than they would otherwise desire. Special thanks to Ian Brown, Andrew Coates, Buffy Cowtan, Ryan Harby, James Hartzell, and Matt Sheedy for reading and providing comments on this account.

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Kippenberg, Hans. 2002. *Discovering Religious History in the Modern Age*. Princeton: Princeton UP.

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Ruel, Malcolm. 1997. "Christians as Believers." *Belief, Ritual and the Securing of Life: Reflexive Essays on a Bantu Religion*, 36-59. New York: E. J. Brill.

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Stoker, Bram. 2003. *Dracula*. New York: Penguin Classics.

Taylor, Charles. *A Secular Age*. Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2007.

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Appendix I

University of Manitoba
Faculty of Arts
Department of Religion

RLGN 1440 Evil in World Religions

2008-2009 Undergraduate Calendar Description: The course introduces students to perspectives on evil in selected world religions.

Introduction: This course sets out a program of study introducing students to the idea of evil without assuming in advance what it is. By means of a series of key concepts and exemplars the course readings and lectures aim to illustrate how evil comes to appear as such. Students will encounter the complex ways in which the experience and idea of evil is derived from everyday psychological, religious, and social experiences.

The course readings are divided into three sections. The first section examines the anatomy of evil, beginning with notions of purity and impurity (clean and dirty). Other relevant emotional experiences, including disgust, dread, and shame are also studied. Myths and rituals, including narratives about monsters or sacrificial practices, follow. The second section of the course provides illustrations of these experiences and practices from several ancient and contemporary religious traditions. The final section examines the relation of religious notions of evil to modern notions of criminality and morality. In the last section it is argued that the legal system draws on a *moral* understanding of evil in contrast to non-moral or religious conceptions pervasive in myth and ritual.

The course itself is arranged in the form of an argument, a thesis. Viewed in this way, the readings present evidence for the thesis that moral intuitions precede religious notions of evil. Evidence will also be presented in support of the claim that religious and moral notions of evil are mutually exclusive.

Required Textbooks:

Bram Stoker, *Dracula*. New York: Penguin Classics, 2003.
RLGN 1440 Evil in World Religions: Reading Package, 2008 (includes *A Guide for the Erudite Student*).

Appendix II

RLGN 1440 Evil in World Religions, Reading Package 2008

MacKendrick, Kenneth G. *A Guide for the Erudite Student: Department of   Religion 2008-2009.*

Section One: The Anatomy of Evil, Basic Concepts

Lecture 1 Purity and Pollution
Douglas, Mary. "Introduction" and "Secular Defilement." In *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Pollution and Taboo*, 1-7, 36-50. New York: Routledge, 2002.

Recommended Reading
Ikenga-Metuh, Emefie. "Ritual Dirt and Purification Rites among the Igbo." *Journal of Religion in Africa* 15 (1985): 3-24.

Ortner, Sherry B. "Sherpa Purity." *American Anthropologist* 75, no. 1 (1973): 49-63.

Lecture 2 Purity and Morality
Douglas, Mary. "Internal Lines." In *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Pollution and Taboo*, 160-172. New York: Routledge, 2002.

Zhong, Chen-Bo and Katie Liljenquist. "Washing Away Your Sins: Threatened Morality and Physical Cleaning." *Science* 313 (2006): 1451-1452.

Recommended Reading
Berger, Maurits S. "Apostasy and Public Policy in Contemporary Egypt: An Evaluation of   Recent Cases from Egypt's Highest Courts." *Human Rights Quarterly* 25 (2003): 720- 740.

Lecture 3 Disgust
Miller, William Ian. "Disgust and Its Neighbors" and "Thick, Greasy Life." In *The Anatomy of Disgust*, 24-37, 38-57. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997.

Recommended Reading
Rozin, Paul and April E. Fallon. "A Perspective on Disgust." *Psychological Review* 94, no. 1   (1987): 23-41.

Lecture 4 Shame and Stigma
Nussbaum, Martha C. "Inscribing the Face: Shame and Stigma." In *Hiding from   Humanity: Disgust, Shame, and the Law*, 172-221. Princeton: Princeton   University Press, 2004.

Recommended Reading
Boonin, Leonard. "Guilt, Shame and Morality." *Journal of Value Inquiry* 17 (1983): 295- 304.

Heller, Agnes. "The Power of Shame." *Dialectical Anthropology* 6, no. 3 (1982): 215-228.

Lecture 5 Dread

Alford, C. Fred. "The Ground of Evil is Dread." In *What Evil Means to Us*, 35-59. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997.

Recommended Reading

Koch, Ehud. "Representations of Dread: The Dreaded Self and the Dreaded State of the Self." *Psychoanalytic Quarterly* 69 (2000): 289-316.

Lecture 6 Pain

Bendelow, Gillian A. and Simon J. Williams. "Transcending Dualisms: Towards a Sociology of Pain." *Sociology of Health and Illness* 17, no. 2 (1995): 139-165.

Recommended Reading

Scarry, Elaine. "The Structure of Torture." In *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*, 27-59. London: Oxford University Press, 1985.

Lecture 7 Monsters and the Uncanny

Beal, Timothy K. "Introduction" and "Chaos Gods." In *Religion and Its Monsters*, 1-10, 13-22. New York: Routledge, 2002.

Recommended Reading

Burke, Peter. "Frontiers of the Monstrous: Perceiving National Characters in Early Modern Europe." In *Monstrous Bodies / Political Monstrosities in Early Modern Europe*. Edited by Laura Lunger Knoppers and Joan B. Landes, 25-39. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004.

Schaefer, Nancy A. "The BBC and an American 'Faith Healer': The Making of a Folk Devil." *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 17, no. 1 (200): 39-59.

Lecture 8 Ritual

Kertzer, David I. "The Power of Rites." In *Ritual, Politics and Power*, 1-14. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988.

Recommended Reading

Douglas, Mary. "Away from Ritual" and "To Inner Experience." *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology*, 1-38. New York: Routledge, 1996.

Lecture 9 Sacrifice

Meyer, Melissa L. "Sacrifice." In *Thicker than Water: The Origins of Blood as Symbol and Ritual*, 163-203. New York: Routledge, 2005.

Recommended Reading

Chidester, David. "Salvation and Suicide." In *Salvation and Suicide: Jim Jones, The Peoples Temple, and Jonestown. Revised Edition*, 129-159. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003.

Kearney, Richard. "Strangers and Scapegoats." In *Strangers, Gods, and Monsters*, 26-46. New York: Routledge, 2003.

Strenski, Ivan. "Sacrifice, Gift, and the Social Logic of Muslim 'Human Bombers.'"
    Terrorism and Political Violence 15, no. 3 (2003): 1-34.

Lecture 10 Myth and Story-telling

Singleton, Andrew. "No Sympathy for the Devil: Narratives about Evil." *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 16, no. 2 (2001): 177-191.

Recommended Reading

Lovecraft, Howard Phillips. *Supernatural Horror in Literature*. New York: Dover Publications, 1973.

Wolfe, Tom. "New Journalism." In *The New Journalism*. Edited by Tom Wolfe and E. W. Johnson, 3-52. New York: Harper and Row, 1973.

Section Two: Case Studies and Exemplars

Lecture 11 Purity and Sacrifice

Spencer, Kathleen L. "Purity and Danger: Dracula, the Urban Gothic, and the Late Victorian Degeneracy Crisis." *English Literary History* 59, no. 1 (1992): 197-225.

Recommended Reading

Arata, Stephen D. "The Occidental Tourist: Dracula and the Anxiety of Reverse Colonization." *Victorian Studies* 33, no. 4 (1990): 621-645.

Keyworth, David. "The Socio-Religious Beliefs and nature of the Contemporary Vampire Subculture." *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 17, no. 3 (2002): 355-370.

Lecture 12 Purity and Monsters

Beal, Timothy K. "The Blood is the Life." In *Religion and Its Monsters*, 123-140. New York; Routledge, 2002.

Lecture 13 Pollution and Shame

Bowden, Ross. "Maori Cannibalism: An Interpretation." *Oceania* 55, no. 2 (1984): 81-99.

Recommended Reading

Cucchiari, Salvatore. "Between Shame and Sanctification: Patriarchy and Its Transformation in Sicilian Pentecostalism." *American Ethnologist* 17, no. 4 (1990): 687-707.

Lecture 14 Secular Defilement and Ritual Impurity

Sack, Daniel. "The Cup: Purity and Authority." In *Whitebread Protestants: Food and Religion in American Culture*, 31-59. New York: Palgrave, 2000.

Recommended Reading

Bynum, Caroline Walker. "Fast, Feast, and Flesh: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women." *Representations* 11 (1985): 1-25.

Fuller, Robert C. "Wine, Symbolic Boundary Setting, and American Religious Communities." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 63, no. 3 (1995): 497-517.

Khan, Aisha. "'Juthaa' in Trinidad: Food, Pollution, and Hierarchy in a Caribbean
Diaspora Community." *American Ethnologist* 21, no. 2 (1994): 245-269.

Lecture 15 Disgust, Pollution and Death

Watson, James L. "Funeral Specialists in Cantonese Society: Pollution, Performance, and Social
Hierarchy." In *Death Ritual in Late Imperial and Modern China.* Edited by James L. Watson
and Evelyn S. Rawski, 109-134. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990.

Recommended Reading
Ariès, Philippe. "Forbidden Death." In *Western Attitudes toward Death: From the Middle Ages to the
Present.* Translated by Patricia M. Ranum, 85-107. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University
Press, 1974.

Lecture 16 Purity and Disgust: The Slime of Domestic Life

Wilson, Liz. "Celibacy and the Social World." In *Charming Cadavers: Horrific Figurations of the
Feminine in Indian Buddhist Hagiographic Literature*, 15-39. Chicago: University of Chicago
Press, 1996.

Lecture 17 Feminine Sacrifice, Masculine Dread

Harlan, Lindsey. "Perfection and Devotion: Sati Tradition in Rajasthan." In *Sati, the Blessing and the
Curse: The Burning of Wives in India.* Edited by John Stratton Hawley, 79-91. New York:
Oxford University Press, 1994.

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Blessing and the Curse: The Burning of Wives in India.* Edited by John Stratton Hawley, 91-99.
New York: Oxford University Press, 1994.

Recommended Reading
Hardgrove, Anne. "Sati Worship and Marwari Public Identity in India." *The Journal of Asian
Studies* 58, no. 3 (1999): 723-752.

Hawley, John S. "Hinduism: Sati and Its Defenders." In *Fundamentalism and Gender*, 79-110.
Edited by John Stratton Hawley. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994.

Lecture 18 Feminine and Symbolic Purity

Balmer, Randall. "American Fundamentalism: The Ideal of Femininity." In *Fundamentalism and
Gender.* Edited by John Stratton Hawley, 47-62. New York: Oxford University Press, 1994.

Recommended Reading
Hunt, Alan. "The Purity Wars: Making Sense of Moral Militancy." *Theoretical Criminology* 3,
no. 4 (1999): 409-436.

Lecture 19 Suffering and Monstrous Revelation

Beal, Timothy K. "The Sleep of Wisdom." In *Religion and Its Monsters*, 35-45. New York:
Routledge, 2002.

Palahniuk, Chuck. "Chapter 6." In *Fight Club*, 47-55. Henry Holt and Company, 1996.

Lecture 20 Belief, Unbelief, and Ritual Efficacy

Henkel, Heiko. "'Between Belief and Unbelief Lies the Performance of Salāt': Meaning and
　　　Efficacy of a Muslim Ritual." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 11 (2005): 487-
　　　507.

Ruel, Malcolm. "Christians as Believers." In *Belief, Ritual and the Securing of Life: Reflexive Essays on a
　　　Bantu Religion*, 36-59. New York: E. J. Brill, 1997.

Lecture 21 Scapegoats, Sacrifice and Atonement

Smith, Jonathan Z. 'The Devil in Mr. Jones." In *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown*, 102-
　　　120. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982.

Section Three: Morality, Law, and Democracy

Lecture 22 Morality and the Law

Arendt, Hannah. "Judgment, Appeal, and Execution" and "Epilogue." In *Eichmann in
　　　Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil. Revised and Enlarged Edition*, 234- 279. New York:
　　　Penguin Books, 1994.

Lecture 23 Morality and Universalism

Benhabib, Seyla. "'Nous' et les 'Autres' (We and the Others). Is Universalism Ethnocentric?" In *The
　　　Claims of Culture: Equality and Diversity in the Global Era*, 24-48. Princeton: Princeton
　　　University Press, 2002.

Lecture 24 Deliberative Democracy

Habermas, Jürgen. "Popular Sovereignty as Procedure." In *Between Facts and Norms:
　　　Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*. Translated by William Rehg, 463-
　　　490. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1996.