

# Why We Love



## In war, there are no unwounded soldiers.

— JOSÉ NAROSKY

... The official excuse for every war is always the same: self-defense. It's okay to kill other people and destroy their society because that's what they want to do to us. As Hermann Goering said, "The people can always be brought to the bidding of the leaders ... Just tell them they are being attacked, and denounce the peacemakers for lack of patriotism and exposing the country to danger." They haven't attacked us yet? Then we need a "preventive war." That suggests the problem with all "just war" theories. Once there's such a thing as a just war, every war becomes marketed as a just war.

But that's not why we like war. That's just how the propaganda works, how leaders get us to line up behind them. What makes us so gullible? Why are we so willing to sacrifice ourselves, even our children? Why doesn't exposing the lies of the last war inoculate us against the deceptions that will be used to promote the next one?

From a Buddhist perspective, the various conflicts in the Middle East look like a family quarrel. That's because the three Abrahamic faiths — Judaism, Christianity, and Islam — share much the same understanding of the world. It's a feud among brothers who have fallen out, which is, of course, sometimes the most vicious sort. Having been raised by the same father, they have a similar worldview: this world is a battleground where the good must fight against those who are evil. The most important issue is where each of us stands in this cosmic struggle. Our salvation depends upon it. It's necessary to choose sides.

*By David R. Loy*

It is not surprising, then, that the al-Qaeda understanding of good and evil — the need for a holy war against evil — is also shared by the administration of George W. Bush. Bin Laden would no doubt agree with what Bush has emphasized: "If you're not with us, you're against us." Since there is no room in this grand cosmic struggle for neutrality, neither of them is much concerned about the fate of innocent bystanders. Bystanders are not innocent. Once something has been labeled as evil, the focus must be on fighting it. The most important thing is to do whatever is necessary to destroy it. This implies a preoccupation with power and victory at any cost. Whether one supports small-group terrorism or state terrorism, the issue is the same. Which will be more powerful, the forces of good or the forces of evil?

Buddhism offers a different perspective. In place of this battleground of wills where good contends against evil, the most important struggle is a spiritual one between ignorance and delusion, on the one side, and liberating wisdom on the other. And seeing the world primarily as a war between good and evil is one of our more dangerous delusions.

Looking back over history, we can see that when leaders have tried to destroy evil, they have usually ended up creating more evil. An obvious example is the heresy inquisitions and witch-trials of medieval Europe, but for sheer violence and *dukkha* nothing can match the persecutions of the twentieth century. What was Adolf Hitler trying to do with his "final solution" to the "Jewish problem"? The earth could be made pure for the Aryan race only by exterminating the Jews, along with all the other vermin (gypsies, homosexuals, the mentally defective, etc.) who contaminate it. Stalin killed well-to-do Russian peasants because he was trying to create his ideal society of collective farmers. Mao Zedong eliminated Chinese landlords for the same reason. Like Bush and

bin Laden, they were trying to perfect the world by eliminating its evil people....

[In] Buddhism... what we call evil is, like everything else, an effect of causes and conditions, and it's important to realize what those causes are. Buddhism emphasizes evil itself less than the three *roots* of evil (also known as the three unwholesome roots, or the three poisons): greed, ill will, and delusion. The Buddhist solution to suffering does not involve answering violence with violence, any more than it involves responding to greed with greed, or responding to delusion with more delusion. As the most famous verse in the Dhammapada says, hatred (*vera*) is never appeased by hatred; it is appeased by nonhatred (*avera*). We must look for ways to break that cycle by transmuting those poisons into their positive counterparts: greed into generosity, ill will into loving-kindness, and delusion into wisdom.

The Buddhist path involves understanding how our minds work, and Buddhist teachers warn us about how our

Harry Potter book and movie, and so forth – you can add your own favorites to this list. The bad guys are stereotypes because they play a pre-determined role in our collective fantasy. Being ruthless, without remorse, they must be stopped by any means necessary. We are meant to feel that it is okay (and, to tell the truth, it's quite enjoyable) to see them get beaten up. Because the villains like to hurt people, it's all right to hurt them. Because they like to kill people, it's okay to kill them.

While such stories entertain us, they reinforce this worldview. What do they teach us? That if you want to hurt someone, it's important to demonize them first, to fit them into a good-versus-evil story by labeling *them* as evil. Even school bullies usually begin by looking for some petty offense that they can use to justify their own penchant for violence. That is also why the first casualty of war is truth. The media must sell some such story to the people: "In order to defend ourselves, we must..."

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minds get stuck in dualistic ways of thinking: not only good and evil, but success and failure, rich and poor, and so forth. We often distinguish between such terms because we want one side rather than the other, yet we cannot have one without the other, because the meaning of each depends upon (negating) the other. They are two sides of the same coin. If, for example, it is important for me to live a pure life (whatever that may mean to me), that doesn't mean I escape impurity. On the contrary, I have to think about impurity all the time: I will be preoccupied with (avoiding) impurity. We cannot have one side without the other, and together they distort the world for us. We do not experience the world as it is, but as filtered through such ways of thinking. As Chan master Huihai put it, true purity is a state beyond purity and impurity. By getting caught up in such dualisms, we "bind ourselves without a rope."

What does this mean for the duality of good versus evil? It's the same trap. We don't know what is good until we know what is evil, and we can't feel that we are good unless we are fighting against that evil. We can feel comfortable and secure in our own goodness *inside* only by attacking some evil *outside* us. There is something quite satisfying about this struggle between good (us) and evil (them), because it makes sense of the world. Think of the plot of every James Bond film, every Star Wars film, every Indiana Jones film, every

Such ways of thinking and feeling are dangerous. Nevertheless, understanding good-versus-evil as a dualism that deludes us is not by itself sufficient for understanding the enduring attraction of war. That dualism rationalizes a more basic reason why war is so addictive.... war gives meaning to our lives. This gives us insight into the psychology of terrorism. Why would someone want to crash hijacked airplanes into skyscrapers, killing thousands – including oneself – and terrorizing millions? Perhaps only religion can provide the motivation and collective support for such terrible deeds, because religion, ironically, is what usually teaches us the ultimate meaning of life.

... Spiritual struggles can provide a heroic identity that transcends even death, for death is not checkmate when you are an agent of God. What grander destiny is possible than to be part of the cosmic forces of Good fighting against Evil? A heady alternative to languishing in a refugee camp without much hope for the future – or, for that matter, to channel-surfing and shopping at the mall. One's own death as a martyr (literally, "witness") becomes a sacrifice (literally, "making holy") that ennobles one's victims as well as oneself. All is justified because the meaning of that spiritual struggle transcends this world and its inhabitants.

If the worldview, meaning, and power provided by warfare are addictive for many, what happens when military

struggles are elevated into a Cosmic War between Good and Evil? The attraction of warrior-identity becomes even greater.

In short, religious terrorism helps us understand that the problem with a good-versus-evil worldview is not merely that it is a simple and comfortable way to understand the world. ... Despite its horrors, war fills the void – the shallowness, loneliness, alienation, and malaise – of everyday existence. Is this because it conceals better something that is missing in our everyday identities? Is this lack of meaning a general description of all peacetime life, which suggests a grim prognosis indeed, or does it describe the sense of lack in modern society, which seems to doom our lives to triviality insofar as it provides us with no cosmic role greater than consumerism or (occasionally) patriotism? In other words, is there something unsatisfactory and ultimately frustrating about the secular alternative that makes religious wars so attractive?

... The distinction between sacred and secular was originally a religious distinction, meant to empower a new type of Protestant spirituality – that is, a more personal way to address our sense of *lack*. By privatizing an unmediated relationship between more individualized Christians and a more transcendent God, Martin Luther's emphasis on salvation-by-faith-alone worked to eliminate the spiritual aspects of *this* world. The medieval understanding of a continuity between the natural and the supernatural was broken by *internalizing* faith and *projecting* God's sacred realm far above this one. The newly liberated space between them created something new: the secular. As the modern world has evolved, the spiritual aspects of life have become less important while the secular has gradually become more dynamic. As the sacred pole has faded away, or become merely subjective and private, little remains visible except the secular by itself, without any spiritual perspective or moral authority.

What may be misleading about this explanation of a diminished spiritual dimension is that it still seems to suggest *superimposing* something (for example, some particular religious understanding of the meaning of our lives) onto the secular world (that is, the world "as it really is"). My point is just the opposite. Our usual understanding of the secular is a deficient *worldview* (in Buddhist terms, a delusion) distorted by the fact that one half of the original duality has gone missing, although now it has been absent so long that we have largely forgotten about it.

Why is that deficiency a problem? Because the secular world lacks something important: a valid way to understand and resolve our sense of lack, which is the basic spiritual problem. For Buddhism, this sense of lack – the feeling of

something missing, that something is wrong with my life – is the shadow side of one's delusive sense of self. My sense of self, being a psychological and social construct, is by definition ungrounded and therefore intrinsically insecure. Traditional religions acknowledge this problem by explaining what the problem is (sin, for example) and what to do about it (confession, penance, and so forth). Secular modernity can only explain any sense of lack we may feel as a result of social maladjustment or some form of oppression (class, race, gender, etc.). There are many unjust social arrangements that need to be addressed, to be sure, but resolving them will not fill up the bottomless hole at one's core.

... Samsara is the way this world is experienced due to our greed, ill will, and delusion, which makes it a realm of suffering. Technological development gives us opportunities to reduce many types of suffering, but for Buddhism our deepest and most problematic anxiety is due to the sense of *lack* that shadows a deluded sense-of-self. A secularized world can actually be more samsaric and addictive for us than a pre-modern one, because it is more haunted by the modern loss of traditional securities. The Buddhist solution is to undo the habitual thought-patterns and behavior-patterns that cause us to experience the world in such a diminished way, so we can realize the spiritual dimension of everyday life that has always been there – even when we have been unable to see it, due to our delusions and cravings...

If war is a collective response to our collective problem with lack, we cannot expect war to cease until we find better ways to address that basic spiritual problem. ☸

*This is an excerpt from Money Sex War Karma by David R. Loy, Best Professor of Ethics/Religion and Society at Xavier University, Cincinnati, and a Zen teacher. Published by Wisdom Publications [www.wisdompubs.org](http://www.wisdompubs.org) Paperback \$US15.95. Reprinted with permission.*

