Dealing With the Devil

Michael Sean Winters | OCTOBER 3, 2011
Political Evil
What It Is and How to Combat It
By Alan Wolfe
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Alan Wolfe has written yet another book that should be required reading for anyone concerned with politics and religion and, most importantly, the estuary where politics and religion mix. In this book, Wolfe examines political evil and, echoing Hannah Arendt, argues that what political evil is, and how to combat it, are among the most urgent issues of our time.

Wolfe is one of the few writers who is as comfortable with Augustine as he is with Kissinger. He belongs to that rare breed of analyst who can combine historical analysis and philosophic insight and apply both to a survey of contemporary politics. He is unimpressed by the intellectual heights he has decided to scale in this book and suspicious of particular partisan or ideological blinders. Whether one agrees or disagrees with his arguments, this book should become the starting point for discussions of U.S. foreign policy.

The central argument of Wolfe’s book is that when focusing on political evil, Americans tend to focus on the evil and not the politics, and this tendency must be resisted. Denouncing terrorists and ethnic cleansers as evil may be true, Wolfe argues, but it is not necessarily helpful. Too much focus on the evil in the world seems to demand absolute, Manichean views of how we should respond. This has the unfortunate consequence of depriving our foreign policy makers of a range of diplomatic tools that might more effectively bring political evil to an end.

The U.S. response to the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, illustrates the problem. “The last thing the citizens of democratic societies should do in the face of terror is to allow themselves to be terrorized,” Wolfe writes. “Unfortunately, this is exactly what they do when they give their support to those leaders who claim that terrorism is a form of unreconstructed evil that must be eradicated from the face of the earth through the mobilization of military might.” The complicity of politicians is evident. For them the political value of serving as a focus of national unity in time of crisis is obvious and, in Wolfe’s analysis, led to the U.S. embarking upon two unwinnable wars.

Ever since Neville Chamberlain capitulated to Hitler’s territorial demands regarding Czechoslovakia, Munich has been a dirty word in foreign policy. Chamberlain’s appeasement in the face of radical evil contrasted thoroughly with Winston Churchill’s intransigence, and Churchill was vindicated by history. But Wolfe argues that Nazi Germany embodied radical evil, as did Stalinist Russia, and that while it was a mistake to negotiate with radical evil, negotiating with political evil is sometimes necessary even if it is distasteful. Not all evil
contains the threat that totalitarianism contained, but politicians continue to invoke the specter of Munich to
define contemporary foreign policy battles in ways that only tie their hands from finding real solutions to the
political evil they face today.

Wolfe is a master at delivering a phrase that captures the essence of a debate without reducing the issues, or the
actors, to caricature. “Those who plan and carry out political evil no doubt have malevolence in their hearts or
malfunctions in their brains. But it is not their insides that ought to concern us; it is their acts.” “When
confronted with political evil, we are better off responding to the ‘political’ rather than the ‘evil’.... Fighting
evil with evil contaminates, but fighting politics with politics does not.

“The best way to help political evil’s victims is to grasp why they are being victimized. We should not lose
our heads just because people lose their lives.” Wolfe has a fine turn of phrase. One wishes he had been in a
position to advise our political leaders these past 10 years since 9/11.

Nonetheless, I have two difficulties with Wolfe’s book. First, in his analysis of Augustine’s treatment of evil,
Wolfe rightly states that Augustine wrestled with the problem of theodicy by concluding that evil lacked
substance. But the more important point of Augustine’s teaching on evil is that evil is an absence of the good.
When William Wordsworth celebrated the French Revolution (“Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive”), he
dismissed “the meagre, stale, forbidding ways/ Of custom, law, and statute.” He was wrong. Custom, law and
statute are marks of a civilized and humane culture. The fabric of rules that can sometimes seem like so much
of an encumbrance are precisely the kind of civic good that makes political evil less possible. Chaos is evil,
and it is an evil that calls forth other evils. The accoutrements of civilization—the “meagre, stale, forbidding
ways/ of custom, law and statute” are positive goods essential to human flourishing.

Second, Wolfe has kind words to say about what he terms “secular Calvinism.” He writes that “secular
Calvinism’s great advantage is its ability to remind us to keep a watchful eye upon any political leader whose
pretensions toward grandeur may lead him or her down the path to political evil.” Maybe I am too much of a
stiff-necked Roman Catholic to give any credit to John Calvin. But I also suspect the Christian humanism of
St. Thomas More contained similar but non-Calvinistic impulses that would provide a check on political
hubris. Indeed, More’s life and writings stand as a huge rebuttal against those who contend the Reformation
was a necessary precursor to the advantages gained by the subsequent Enlightenment. I would have preferred
an Enlightenment rooted in More’s humanism over the one we ended up with.

Still, Wolfe’s book is easy to commend. It is thoughtful, its range is extraordinary, its insights acute and its
prose commanding. This is a difficult topic, and difficult topics require clear-headed thinking. Few people
writing about politics and morality today are more clear-headed than Alan Wolfe.

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of Jerry Falwell will be published in January 2012.