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President Barack Obama does not speak for God

A Lesson on Good and Evil for Western Civil-Military Leaders

By John Stanton

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Who in the world is Barack Obama to claim that "No God" would allow the Islamic State to exist and slaughter what it considers to be non-believers? His statement follows the same line of transgression committed by Bill Clinton and George W. Bush in their baleful appeals to God and Christ, even as they approved and presided over operations leading to torture, rape, murder and the wounding of large swaths of humanity. And this sinful vanity-- the claim to know God's Will, is precisely the sin that the Islamic State's Caliph, the House of Saud, the Vatican, the Church of England and all stripes of religious sects worshipping Prophets/Gods from Yahweh to Zoroaster make each and every day in the name of "good."

Let us turn to the Russian author of Life and Fate, [Vasily Grossman](#), for a lesson on good and evil as the civil-military leaders of the 21st Century Western world appeal to their Gods to sanction suffering, censure, torture, murder and the creation of gulags large and small.

"Few people ever attempt to define 'good'. What is 'good'? 'Good' for whom? Is there a common good - the same for all people, all tribes, all conditions of life? Or is my good your evil? Is what is good for my people evil for your people? Is good eternal and constant? Or is yesterday's good today's vice, yesterday's evil today's good? When the Last Judgment approaches, not only philosophers and preachers, but everyone on earth - literate and illiterate - will ponder the nature of good and evil. Have people advanced over the millennia in their concept of good? Is this

concept something that is common to all people - both Greeks and Jews - as the Apostle supposed? To all classes, nations and States? Even to all animals, trees and mosses - as Buddha and his disciples claimed? The same Buddha who had to deny life in order to clothe it in goodness and love.

The Christian view, five centuries after Buddhism, restricted the living world to which the concept of good is applicable. Not every living thing - only human beings. The good of the first Christians, which had embraced all mankind, in turn gave way to a purely Christian good; the good of the Muslims was now distinct. Centuries passed and the good of Christianity split up into the distinct goods of Catholicism, Protestantism and Orthodoxy. And the good of Orthodoxy gave birth to the distinct goods of the old and new beliefs. At the same time there was the good of the poor and the good of the rich. And the goods of the whites, the blacks and the yellow races... More and more goods came into being, corresponding to each sect, race and class. Everyone outside a particular magic circle was excluded.

People began to realize how much blood had been spilt in the name of a petty, doubtful good, in the name of the struggle of this petty good against what it believed to be evil. Sometimes the very concept of good became a scourge, a greater evil than evil itself. Good of this kind is a mere husk from which the sacred kernel has been lost. Who can reclaim the lost kernel?

But what is good? It used to be said that it is a thought and a related action which lead to the greater strength or triumph of humanity - or of a family, nation, State, class, or faith. People struggling for their particular good always attempt to dress it up as a universal good. They say: my good coincides with the universal good; my good is essential not only to me but to everyone; in achieving my good, I serve the universal good. And so the good of a sect, class, nation or State assumes a specious universality in order to justify its struggle against an apparent evil.

Even Herod did not shed blood in the name of evil; he shed blood in the name of his particular good. A new force had come into the world, a force that threatened to destroy him and his family, to destroy his friends and his favourites, his kingdom and his armies. But it was not evil that had been born; it was Christianity. Humanity had never before heard such words: 'Judge not, that ye be not judged. For with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged: and with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again... But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you... Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them: for this is the law and the prophets.'

And what did this doctrine of peace and love bring to humanity? Byzantine iconoclasm; the tortures of the Inquisition; the struggles against heresy in France, Italy, Flanders and Germany; the conflict between Protestantism and Catholicism; the intrigues of the monastic orders; the conflict between Nikon and Avvakum; the crushing yoke that lay for centuries over science and freedom; the Christians who wiped out the heathen population of Tasmania; the scoundrels who burnt whole Negro villages in Africa. This doctrine caused more suffering than all the crimes of the people who did evil for its own sake...

In great hearts the cruelty of life gives birth to good; they then seek to carry this good back into life, hoping to make life itself accord with their inner image of good. But life never changes to accord with an image of good; instead it is the image of good that sinks into the mire of life - to lose its universality, to split into fragments and be exploited by the needs of the day. People are wrong to see life as a struggle between good and evil. Those who most wish for the good of humanity are unable to diminish evil by one jot. Great ideas are necessary in order to dig new channels, to remove stones, to bring down cliffs and fell forests; dreams of universal good are necessary in order that great waters should flow in harmony... Yes, if the sea was able to think, then every storm would make its waters dream of happiness. Each wave breaking against the cliff would believe it was dying for the good of the sea; it would never occur to it that, like thousands of waves before and after, it had only been brought into being by the wind.

Many books have been written about the nature of good and evil and the struggle between them... There is a deep and undeniable sadness in all this: whenever we see the dawn of an eternal good that will never be overcome by evil - an evil that is itself eternal but will never succeed in overcoming good - whenever we see this dawn, the blood of old people and children is always shed. Not only men, but even God himself is powerless to lessen this evil. 'In Rama was there a voice heard, lamentation, and weeping, and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children, and would not be comforted, because they are not.' What does a woman who has lost her children care about a philosopher's definitions of good and evil? But what if life itself is evil?

I have seen the unshakeable strength of the idea of social good that was born in my own country. I saw this struggle during the period of general collectivization and again in 1937. I saw people being annihilated in the name of an idea of good as fine and humane as the ideal of Christianity. I saw whole villages dying of hunger; I saw peasant children dying in the snows of Siberia; I saw trains bound for Siberia with hundreds and thousands of men and women from Moscow, Leningrad and every city in Russia - men and women who had been declared enemies of a great and bright idea of social good. This idea was something fine and noble - yet it killed some without mercy, crippled the lives of others, and separated wives from husbands and children from fathers.

Now the horror of German Fascism has arisen. The air is full of the groans and cries of the condemned. The sky has turned black; the sun has been extinguished by the smoke of the gas ovens. And even these crimes, crimes never before seen in the Universe - even by Man on Earth - have been committed in the name of good. Once, when I lived in the Northern forests, I thought that good was to be found neither in man, nor in the predatory world of animals and insects, but in the silent kingdom of the trees. Far from it! I saw the forest's slow movement, the treacherous way it battled against grass and bushes for each inch of soil... First, billions of seeds fly through the air and begin to sprout, destroying the grass and bushes. Then millions of victorious shoots wage war against one another. And it is only the survivors who enter into an alliance of equals to form the seamless canopy of the young deciduous forest. Beneath this canopy the spruces and beeches freeze to death in the twilight of penal servitude.

In time the deciduous trees become decrepit; then the heavyweight spruces burst through to the light beneath their canopy, executing the alders and the beeches. This is the life of the forest - a constant struggle of everything against everything. Only the blind conceive of the kingdom of

trees and grass as the world of good... Is it that life itself is evil? Good is to be found neither in the sermons of religious teachers and prophets, nor in the teachings of sociologists and popular leaders, nor in the ethical systems of philosophers... And yet ordinary people bear love in their hearts, are naturally full of love and pity for any living thing. At the end of the day's work they prefer the warmth of the hearth to a bonfire in the public square.

Yes, as well as this terrible Good with a capital 'G', there is every day human kindness. The kindness of an old woman carrying a piece of bread to a prisoner, the kindness of a soldier allowing a wounded enemy to drink from his water-flask, the kindness of youth towards age, the kindness of a peasant hiding an old Jew in his loft. The kindness of a prison guard who risks his own liberty to pass on letters written by a prisoner not to his ideological comrades, but to his wife and mother.

The private kindness of one individual towards another; a petty, thoughtless kindness; an unwitnessed kindness. Something we could call senseless kindness. A kindness outside any system of social or religious good.

But if we think about it, we realize that this private, senseless, incidental kindness is in fact eternal. It is extended to everything living, even to a mouse, even to a bent branch that a man straightens as he walks by.

Even at the most terrible times, through all the mad acts carried out in the name of Universal Good and the glory of States, times when people were tossed about like branches in the wind, filling ditches and gullies like stones in an avalanche - even then this senseless, pathetic kindness remained scattered throughout life like atoms of radium.

Some Germans arrived in a village to exact vengeance for the murder of two soldiers. The women were ordered out of their huts in the evening and set to dig a pit on the edge of the forest. There was one middle-aged woman who had several soldiers quartered in her hut. Her husband had been taken to the police station together with twenty other peasants. She didn't get to sleep until morning: the Germans found a basket of onions and a jar of honey in the cellar; they lit the stove, made themselves omelettes and drank vodka. The eldest then played the harmonica while the rest of them sang and beat time with their feet. They didn't even look at their landlady - she might just as well have been a cat. When it grew light, they began checking their machine-guns; the eldest of them jerked the trigger by mistake and shot himself in the stomach. Everyone began shouting and running about. Somehow the Germans managed to bandage the wounded man and lay him down on a bed. Then they were called outside. They signed to the woman to look after the wounded man. The woman thought to herself how simple it would be to strangle him. There he was, muttering away, his eyes closed, weeping, sucking his lips... Suddenly he opened his eyes and said in very clear Russian: 'Water, Mother.' 'Damn you,' said the woman. 'What I should do is strangle you.' Instead she gave him some water. He grabbed her by the hand and signed to her to help him sit up: he couldn't breathe because of the bleeding. She pulled him up and he clasped his arms round her neck. Suddenly there was a volley of shots outside and the woman began to tremble.

Afterwards she told people what she had done. No one could understand; nor could she explain it herself. This senseless kindness is condemned in the fable about the pilgrim who warmed a snake in his bosom. It is the kindness that has mercy on a tarantula that has bitten a child. A mad, blind, kindness. People enjoy looking in stories and fables for examples of the danger of this senseless kindness. But one shouldn't be afraid of it. One might just as well be afraid of a freshwater fish carried out by chance into the salty ocean. The harm from time to time occasioned a society, class, race or State by this senseless kindness fades away in the light that emanates from those who are endowed with it.

This kindness, this stupid kindness, is what is most truly human in a human being. It is what sets man apart, the highest achievement of his soul. No, it says, life is not evil! This kindness is both senseless and wordless. It is instinctive, blind. When Christianity clothed it in the teachings of the Church Fathers, it began to fade; its kernel became a husk. It remains potent only while it is dumb and senseless, hidden in the living darkness of the human heart - before it becomes a tool or commodity in the hands of preachers, before its crude ore is forged into the gilt coins of holiness. It is as simple as life itself. Even the teachings of Jesus deprived it of its strength. But, as I lost faith in good, I began to lose faith even in kindness. It seemed as beautiful and powerless as dew. What use was it if it was not contagious?

How can one make a power of it without losing it, without turning it into a husk as the Church did? Kindness is powerful only while it is powerless. If Man tries to give it power, it dims, fades away, loses itself, vanishes. Today I can see the true power of evil. The heavens are empty. Man is alone on Earth. How can the flame of evil be put out? With small drops of living dew, with human kindness? No, not even the waters of all the clouds and seas can extinguish that flame - let alone a handful of dew gathered drop by drop from the time of the Gospels to the iron present... Yes, after despairing of finding good either in God or in Nature, I began to despair even of kindness. But the more I saw of the darkness of Fascism, the more clearly I realized that human qualities persist even on the edge of the grave, even at the door of the gas chamber.

My faith has been tempered in Hell. My faith has emerged from the flames of the crematoria, from the concrete of the gas chamber. I have seen that it is not man who is impotent in the struggle against evil, but the power of evil that is impotent in the struggle against man. The powerlessness of kindness, of senseless kindness, is the secret of its immortality. It can never be conquered. The more stupid, the more senseless, the more helpless it may seem, the vaster it is. Evil is impotent before it. The prophets, religious teachers, reformers, social and political leaders are impotent before it. This dumb, blind love is man's meaning. Human history is not the battle of good struggling to overcome evil. It is a battle fought by a great evil struggling to crush a small kernel of human kindness. But if what is human in human beings has not been destroyed even now, then evil will never conquer."