Does Evil Really Exist?

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DURHAM, N.H. -- No, not in the sense of being satanic or demonic atrocities, according to David Frankfurter, professor of religious studies and history at the University of New Hampshire. True evil is a social construction that inspires people to brutal acts in the name of moral order.

In his new book, *Evil Incarnate: Rumors of Demonic Conspiracy and Satanic Abuse in History*, Frankfurter investigates the social and psychological patterns that have given rise to myths of witches, demons, satanic cults, and cannibalism throughout history. According to Frankfurter, evil does not exist as an entity beyond the realm of human understanding, but instead manifests as an unsettling public discourse created by folklore, cultural ideas, literature, and oral traditions.

The first work to provide an in-depth analysis of the topic, the book draws upon the history of religion, anthropology, sociology and psychoanalytic theory to probe the myriad ways people imagine evil, how they treat those who are deemed evil and the factors that give rise to panic about witches or evil cults.

"People have been obsessed by evil for centuries—obsessed with what evil is, who is evil, and how to avoid evil—and the 21st century is no exception. President Bush famously dubbed Iran, North Korea, and Iraq the Axis of Evil in his 2002 State of the Union address. In casual conversation and media stories alike, terrorists, politicians and criminals are labeled evil. With all these accepted references to evil, it is time that its true nature is exposed and thoroughly examined," Frankfurter says.

According to Frankfurter, linking terrorism and evil shifts the view of the terrorist "from a concrete mass-killer with a biography, distinct motivations, and specific goals, to a shadowy opponent of family and society in heartland America. And terrorism, of course, is the evil force that will stay outside as long as we conduct large-scale military exploits off in the distant lands we associate with it."

In many ways, the term terrorism and its close association with the concept of evil conjures meanings and responses similar to the terms witchcraft, devil-worshipper, and commie. And that, Frankfurter says, should be of concern to many.

"We become lost in these large-scale terms for evil, invoking them for every anxiety, every criminal suspect, every political maneuver," he says. "Those who have become wed to large-scale schemes of danger and conspiracy have sought to root it out by any means necessary."

People imagine evil in many ways. In its most basic form, evil for many takes on the likeness

of demonic spirits: half-animal, monstrous, overly sexual or cannibal. However, often people have imagined evil as actual people: foreigners, especially those nearby, or members of strange religions that we imagine ritually abusing or eating children and women.

"Imagining evil people and demons and witches is also exciting: we think about all the outrageous things they do with a kind of prurience," Frankfurter says.

So how do certain people or groups become labeled as evil? According to Frankfurter, the major factor is the arrival of "experts in the discernment of evil" -- witch-finders or experts in satanic ritual abuse or cults who bring a broad and intensified concept of evil to a community already anxious about misfortune, subversion, enemies, foreigners, cults and demons.

"But more broadly, we find these panics especially in cultures that are experiencing a kind of tension between their familiar worlds of neighbors, spirits, demons, evil eye, and bad luck, and a larger world of institutions (churches, child protective services, presidents and law enforcement). What happens is that the small community begins to feel that its familiar problems must now be understood in terms of the large-scale evil," Frankfurter says.

For those deemed evil, often the public response is to take drastic measures to cleanse them from the landscape. "One imagines the view of Tutsis in 1994 Rwanda, the view of Jews in 1939 Germany (and often in European history), and the view of Christians in second-century Rome. They represent predators, obstacles to safety and success," Frankfurter says.

When society labels people as evil, it places them outside humanity where others don't have to think about motivations or context in any critical way. "Use of this label amounts to intellectual laziness and has led, consistently, to the worst atrocities we know about. Speaking of 'evil' leads people to evil," Frankfurter says.

And according to the professor, people are thinking more about evil today. "We see and hear about so many horrible atrocities and crimes, yet are constantly presented with contexts and backgrounds and ways of understanding how they could happen. For many people, especially people of evangelical Christian bent, to label something or somebody evil has a refreshing clarity to it," he says.

This clarity provides an easier concept for understanding evil than thinking about the complex motivations of a person or a group. Thinking about evil is also exciting, Frankfurter says, offering a kind of license to think about sexual perversions and brutality we couldn't otherwise let ourselves imagine.

Frankfurter, a specialist in ancient Mediterranean religions, is a professor of religious studies and history at the University of New Hampshire. He is also the author of *Religion in Roman Egypt* (Princeton), which won the 1999 award for excellence in the historical study of religion from the American Academy of Religion.

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