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# Living With the Devil: A Meditation on Good and Evil

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# Dancing With the Devil: Stephen Batchelor's Ecumenical Uncertainties

Michael Keating\*

*Living With the Devil: A Meditation on Good and Evil.* By Stephen Batchelor. New York: Riverhead Books (Penguin Imprint). Pp. 224. ISBN 1573222763.

Stephen Batchelor's new work, *Living with the Devil: A Meditation on Good and Evil*, takes as its starting point the rather medieval notion that human life is a constant struggle with the Devil, which he refers to by its Buddhist name, *Mara*. With references to Buddhist and Christian theology, Milton, Baudelaire, Pascal and others, Batchelor draws a picture of the Devil as that negative force in the cosmos that causes everything from genocide to life's more banal compulsions. "It makes no difference what you grasp," said Buddha, "when someone grasps, Mara stands beside him." (21)

Other descriptors of Mara have this devilish force symbolizing "the precariousness of existence, its unreliability, its arbitrariness." (24) It

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is that “which limits us, confines us within boundaries,” it is sexual lust, it is what makes us “crave the blissful forgetfulness of being cuddled and nourished.” (25) Batchelor also references Baudelaire’s notion that the Devil is ‘boredom’, “the modern variant of what Buddha called *dukkha*: the fearful anguish knit into our mortal condition.” (40) But in the end, “Mara’s most effective weapon is sustaining a climate of fear.” (45)

If we step back and consider the most egregious barbarisms of the last century (e.g., the Holocaust, the Rwandan genocide, Stalin’s purges), it is not difficult to see that ‘fear’ was both the whip that the despots used to drive the people into a frenzy and also to keep everything under control. How could so many people simply march passively off to their deaths? Hitler was surely the demonic headlights shining into the eyes of Europe’s Jews. In our age—the so-called ‘Age of Terrorism’—fear has once again emerged as a potent political weapon. In its name civil liberties are being curtailed, protests are suppressed and a new generation of young people are sent to their deaths in the name of imperial sounding rhetoric. In a state of what Batchelor refers to as “compulsive reactivity,” (57) our leaders have cast themselves as heroes setting out to conquer Evil itself, whether the Axis of *Evil* or the *Evil* Empire. Such purposely allusive rhetoric attempts to justify everything from military interventions to raising taxes. The sad fact is that it appears to be a strategy that works. Just as ‘sex sells’ in advertising, so does fear sell in politics.

Batchelor paints a justifiably gloomy picture of the corrosive effects that a climate of fear can have on mankind. Like President Franklin Roosevelt before him, he points out that fear *of fear* is perhaps an even a greater impediment to liberation than simply looking at the challenge that lies in front of us. Fear is that swamp that threatens to overwhelm our security, our attachments and in the end, our very selves. Fear of losing, of

ageing, of dying, of being shamed: how much evil is perpetrated to accomplish nothing more than coming to terms with our essential weakness?

There is an old Chinese adage which states that 'in times of trouble the Superior man cannot be found.' For Batchelor this is not what the fight against the Devil requires. "Nirvana is found not by forsaking the world, but by probing its dark and fleshy depths." (104) For Batchelor, as for two of his philosophical interlocutors, Pascal and Montaigne, "Mara cannot be overcome simply by removing oneself from situations one finds disturbing." (106)

So what is one to do? At this point Batchelor leaves the world of Western Enlightenment discourse to remind us that Buddha came up with the idea of seated meditation and concentration on breathing as the way to remain centered in the midst of turbulence. The Buddha also extolled the virtues of being in nature and studying the natural, selfless order of things in order to derive wisdom and inspiration. In terms of personal action however, Batchelor writes: "No matter how carefully we attend to the call of the other, it is incapable of telling us how to respond." (140) This is a curious statement indeed. Can we not rightly assume that if someone is calling out to us it is generally 'purposeful', if only a simple cry for "help!" or "stop!"? No matter, says Batchelor, as "no system of rules and prohibitions, however elaborate, can provide exact instructions on how to deal with an unprecedented moral dilemma." (140) At best, he writes "ethical precepts provide a coherent framework for guiding one's actions; at worst, they encourage a self-righteous legalism that pays no heed to the call of the other." (141) To illustrate this latter point he notes the ethical dilemmas surrounding abortions. Do we kill the baby to save the mother? A difficult question, but Batchelor simply leaves it at that. In terms of life's truly difficult questions, it seems the Superior Man has not much to say.

Unfortunately, in the realm of political action Batchelor seems equally reluctant to address the question of 'right action'. In several instances he points out that Buddha had to accommodate himself to some pretty awful political regimes. The history of Buddhism from the time of Gotama up to World War II Japan has shown that Buddhism can often sit comfortably in the lap of despotism. For Batchelor, it is only in the post-Enlightenment liberal democracies that Buddhism finally has a social and political landscape that reflects its essential values. He leaves for our imagination the question of why Buddhism had so little impact on liberating the despotic cultures in which it was born. "To tackle Mara in the political realm is a hazardous exercise that calls for utmost vigilance and care." (168) It is an answer, but not a very encouraging one. It also reflects the fundamental weakness and despondency of Batchelor's prescriptions.

The final conclusion of Batchelor's analysis is that " 'Buddha' stands for a capacity for awareness, openness, and freedom, [and] 'Mara' represents a capacity for confusion, closure and restriction." (180) It is all good versus evil, God versus the Devil, but where has it really taken us? This is simply classic dualistic thinking that divides the world up into two sectors in constant war with one another. What he neglects is the more subtle understanding of reality that intuits that far from being opposed to one another 'good' and 'evil' are at the core of each other's being.

One has to assume at this point that after thirty years of Buddhist practice Batchelor is seeking to return to his Western roots. His interesting excursions into Enlightenment philosophy and symbolist poetry suggest a yearning to either fill a hole that is missing in his Buddhist practice or else to forge some kind of global synthesis. By his own admission he prefers now to dwell in the 'gaps' between all traditions. "By dwelling in their emptiness [the gaps], we are able to return to those questions for which each tradition claims to have the answer." (184) In his conclusion he sug-

gests that adherence to *any* ideology or religion is delusional and only in the “anarchy of the gaps” can one wander along and “ask anew the question posed by being born and having to die.” (184) This is all very poetic, but Batchelor appears to be contradicting his earlier statements regarding the need to avoid disengaging oneself from the unpleasant realities of life. A ‘gap’ is only defined by what surrounds it—gaps can only refer to the presence that defines them. After all, is it not within life’s “dark and fleshy depths” that the challenges lay?

Reading *Living With the Devil* is like listening to a jazz musician who starts a piece with a familiar refrain then quickly veers into idiosyncratic improvisation. In the hands of a competent musician or writer, as Batchelor surely is, the result is interesting, but like all improvisations there is something ‘off-hand’ about it. It is hard to tell whether Batchelor is seeking a new audience among disaffected Christians or simply expanding the vocabulary of his own inner quest. In either case this is a book that will appeal more to lovers of improvisations on old standards than to seekers of new and challenging insights.