

What Is Evil?

Theological & Philosophical Investigations

Thursdays, 2:00 - 3:30pm (- Oct 12)

frederickuu.org/fcc

Covenant

- Use **“I” statements**: *Speak from your own experience.*
- **Ask permission before sharing** other participants’ stories outside the group.
- **Lean-in/back**: be conscious of the level of participation that you bring to the conversation. Allow everyone a chance to speak before you speak again.
- You always have **permission to “pass.”**



Check-in

- Attendance
- “Evil” show & tell



Outline

1. *Why Study Evil?*
2. *Postmodernism & Evil*
- 3. September 21: Evil & Theodicy/Freedom**
Evil & Conscience/Intention
4. September 28: Evil as Sickness;
Evil as Distance: Us & Them
5. October 5: Evil & Authority
6. October 12: Personal Definitions of Evil, Takeaways,
Insights, Commitments (~500 words?)

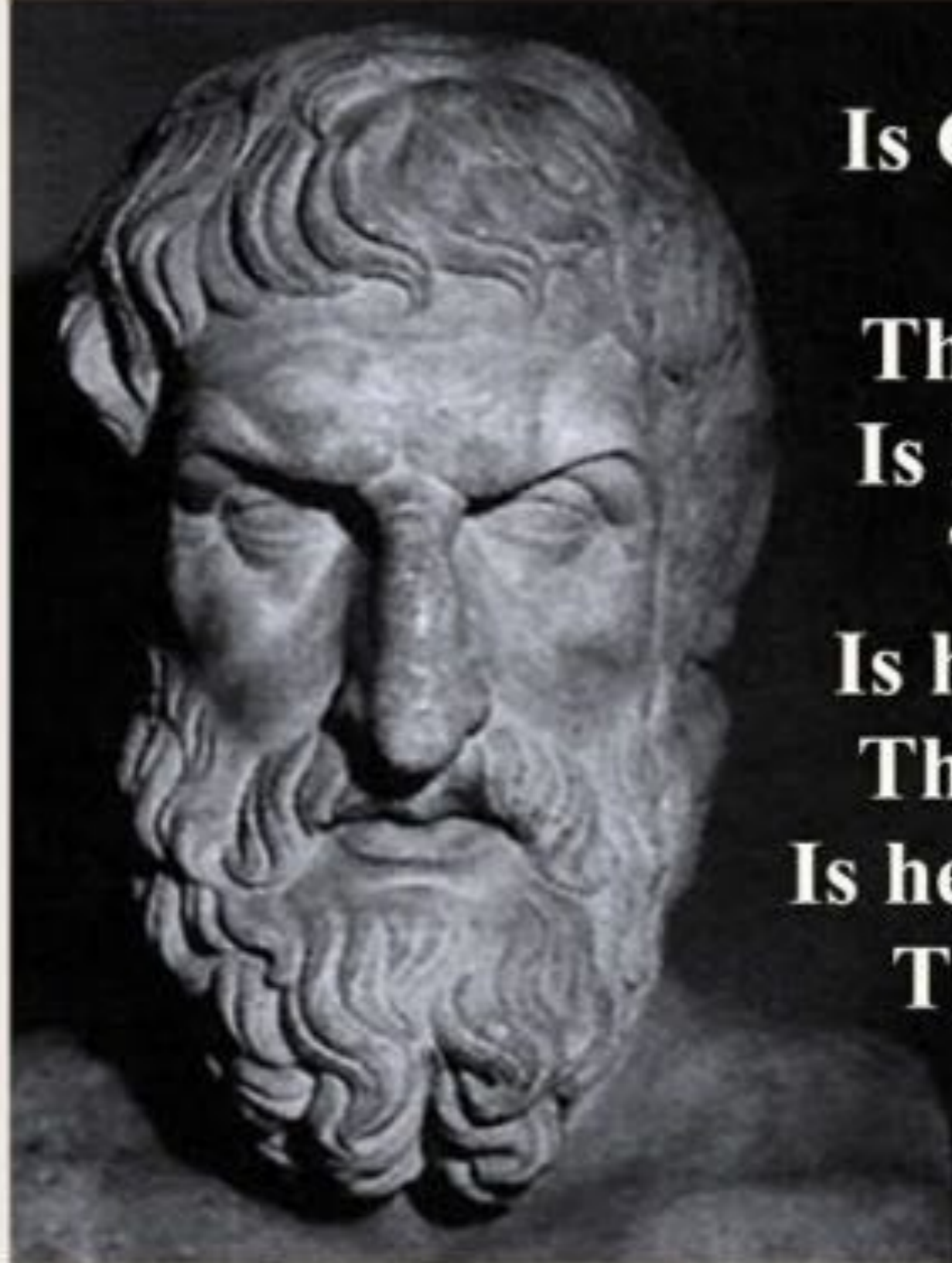
“Science of Evil” (National Geographic)

[youtube.com/watch?v=w_3RllxpAJo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w_3RllxpAJo) (2 min)

Theodicy

(Greek: theos 'god' + dikē 'justice')

- ✦ "Trilemma"
- ✦ Is it possible to reconcile the concept of an omnipotent, omniscient, and omni-benevolent deity with the existence of evil?
- ✦ (Or: Why would an all-powerful, good God allow evil?)
- ✦ [Bonhoeffer]



**Is God willing to prevent evil,
but not able?**

Then he is not omnipotent

Is he able, but not willing?

Then he is malevolent

Is he both able and willing?

Then whence cometh evil?

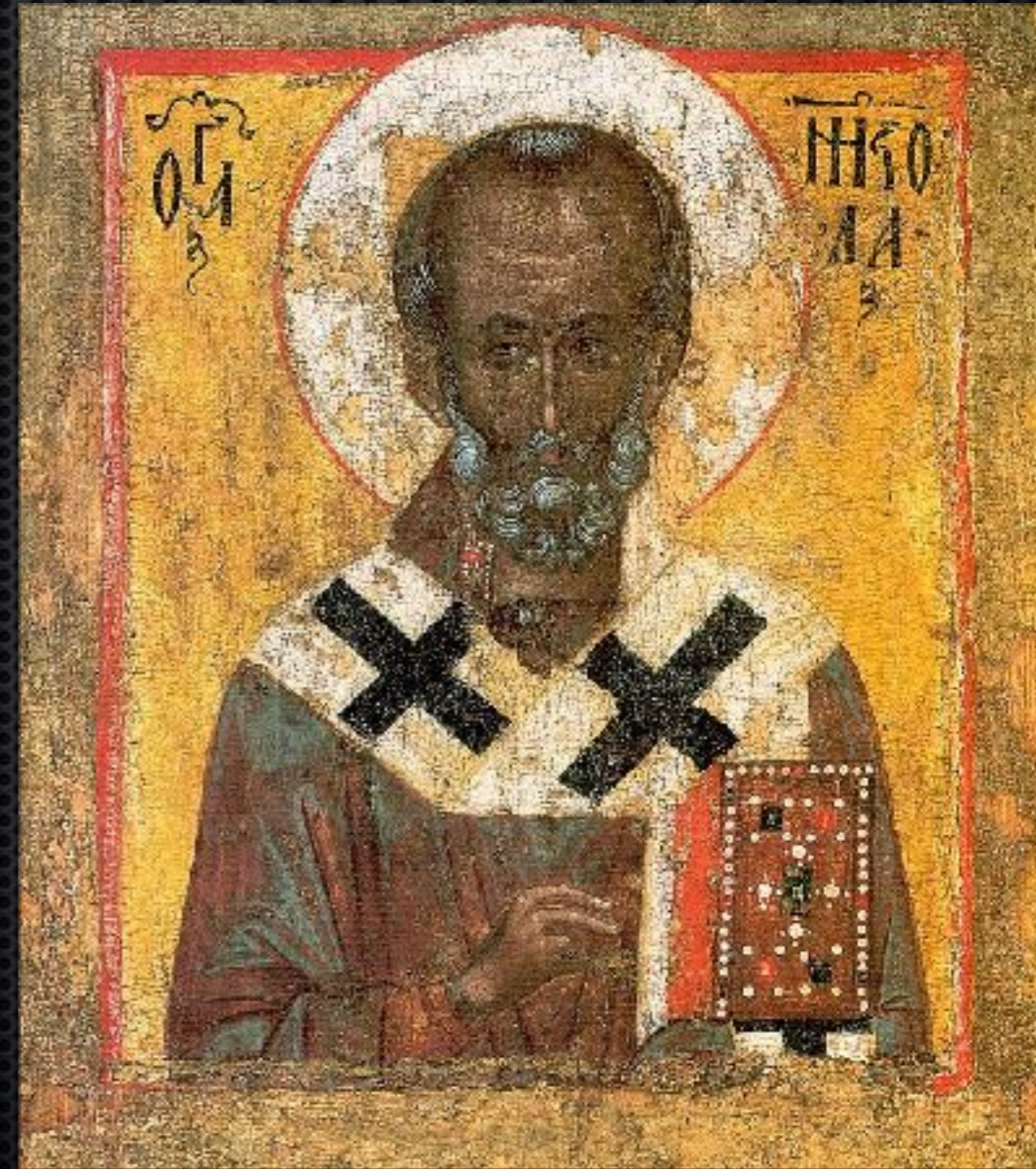
Is he neither able nor willing?

Then why call him God?

Epicurus

Augustine of Hippo (354-430)

- ✦ If not for free will, we humans would be robots and incapable of choosing to live as God wishes us to live.
- ✦ Evil: unfortunate, but unavoidable.
- ✦ God is neither responsible for evil nor guilty of neglect.



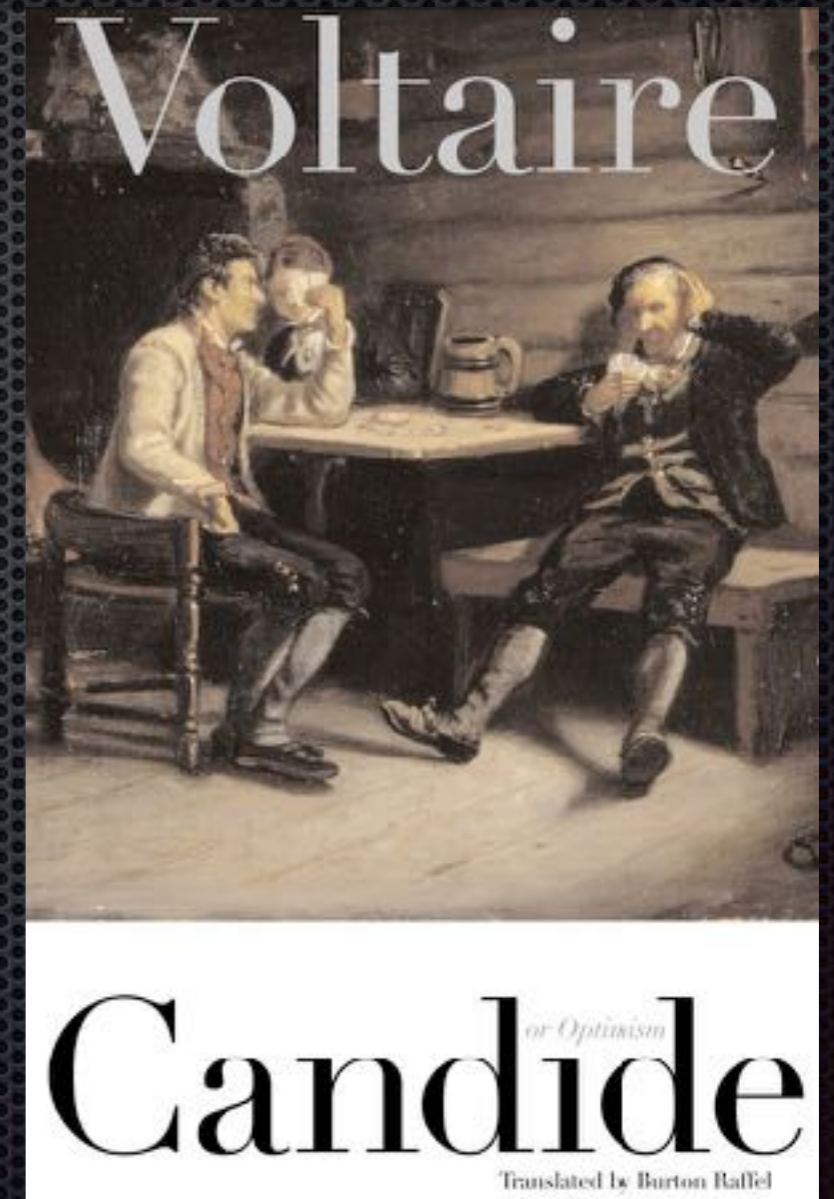
Gottfried Leibniz's *Theodicee* (1710)

- ✦ “best of all possible worlds” with its suffering and joy)
- ✦ Gift of a somewhat pre-determined, but benevolent deity.
- ✦ Evil as inextricable part of the most optimum world.



Voltaire's *Candide* (1759)

- ✦ Satirized Leibniz as a vapid apologist for a world defined far more by the presence of *suffering*, than the possibility for salvation.
- ✦ Evil: error that is born of humanity's insurmountable yearning for power and privilege.



- ✦ “75 years ago a homicide shocked the nation: Nathan Leopold (age 20) and Richard Loeb (age 19), two precocious college graduates in Chicago, each from a wealthy family, kidnapped and murdered a fourteen-year-old boy from their neighborhood.
- ✦ Tried to extort a ransom from the boy’s family. ...The two youths were neither deprived nor mistreated. They could look forward to a brilliant future. Why this seemingly senseless crime?

evil

After Postmodernism

HISTORIES • NARRATIVES • ETHICS

histories narratives ethics

Edited by Jennifer L. Geddes

- ✦ They sought the thrill, the kind of elation Baudelaire imagined in a momentary experience.
- ✦ But they planned this empty crime over a long period of time. They hoped it would demonstrate that they could conceive and carry out a perfect crime. they sought a physical and sexual bond by sharing the responsibility for such an inhuman action. ...
- ✦ And such a crime would demonstrate their superiority to and exemption from the ordinary laws of humankind.

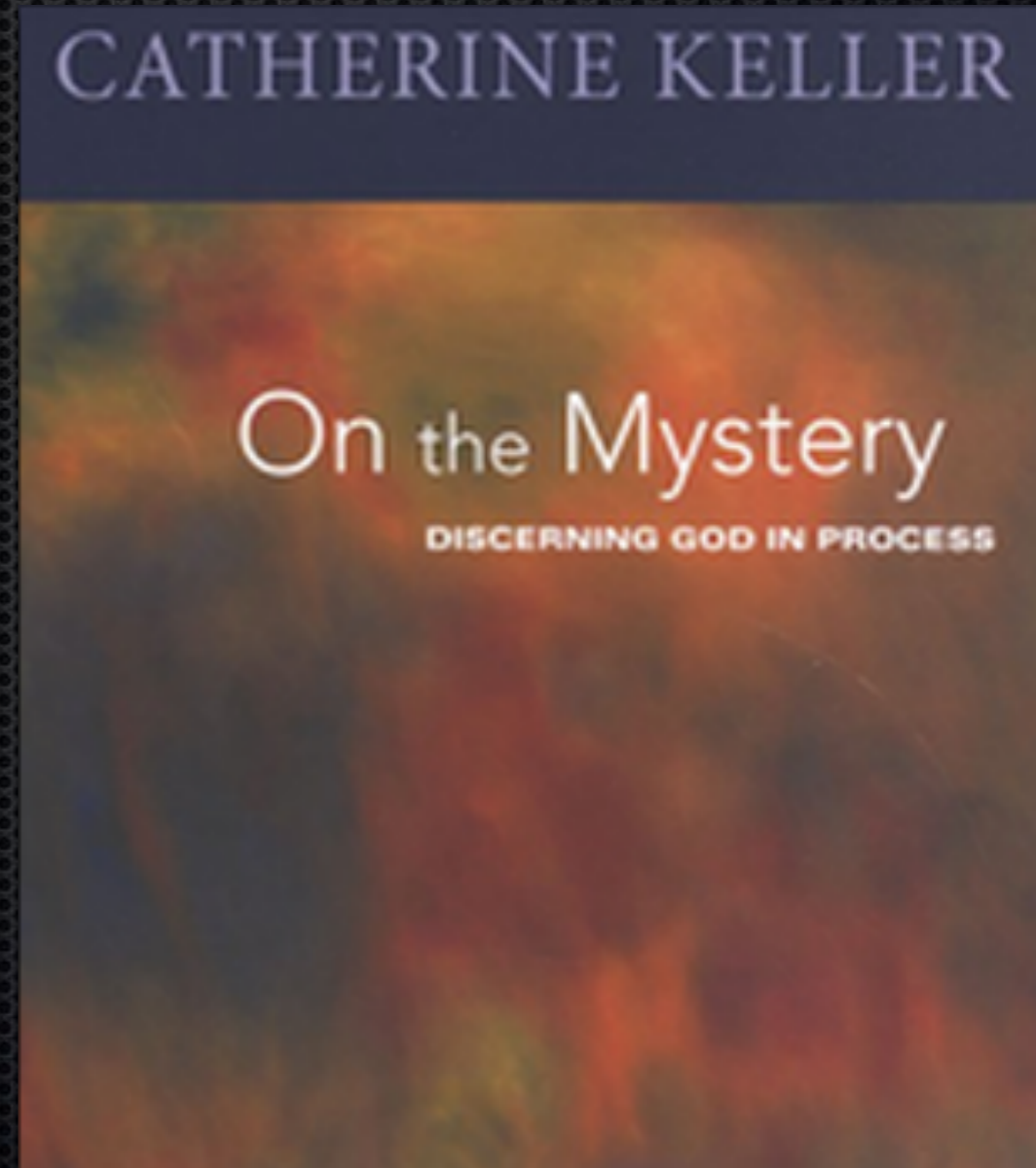


- ✦ The young men's defense was conducted by Clarence Darrow. ...In his summation, Darrow cited the Nietzsche influence ...and turned it into a mitigating influence.
- ✦ Of Loeb, the more intellectual of the two: "Your honor, it is hardly fair to hang a nineteen-year-old boy for the philosophy that was taught him at the university.
- ✦ Of Leopold: the fact that he lived and practiced the superman myth was evidence of a "diseased mind."
- ✦ The judge sentenced Leopold and Loeb to life plus ninety-nine years.



Process-Relational Theodicy

- ✦ Process: experience is messy, complex, ever-evolving, emerging, organic
- ✦ Relational: always-already interdependent
- ✦ *Intra-related becomings*
- ✦ The divine lures/prompts us toward justice, beauty, and creativity. Persuasion, *not* coercion.



Process-Relational Theology

- ✦ Some say God makes a hurricane to punish people.
- ✦ Others say this proves that the notion of “God” is absurd.
- ✦ Both refer to a “God” who's all-knowing, all-loving, and all-powerful, planning out and controlling each event.



The Rev. Jake Morrill

Process-Relational Theology

- ✦ Augustinian theodicy: blames suffering on human free will.
- ✦ Irenaean theodicy: bad stuff is to ultimately strengthen us humans.
- ✦ Some: stop the exercise of trying to square evil with reason--that we should focus on the tragedy of it, and tend to those who suffer, or bring the fight to evil in working for justice.

Process-Relational Theology

- ✦ After the Holocaust (“anti-theodicy”): beyond our human capacity to fathom or describe the relationship between God and evil (Book of Job).
- ✦ Still Others: God and humans are free, and in relationship, so nobody's going to be yanking anybody around here: it's all *co-creation* in this unfolding story.

Process-Relational Theology

- ✦ Maybe divine power isn't really ever about finally determining the precise grip of control.
- ✦ Maybe the relationship it moves toward isn't intimidation but *intimacy*.
- ✦ Maybe its signature trait isn't domination, but *creation*.
- ✦ Maybe shame and fear are hints we've been barking up the wrong tree.

Process-Relational Theology

Maybe the [Sacred] moves like the Dao,

- ✦ whispers like the still, small voice within,
- ✦ looks in a body like a man on a cross,
- ✦ child in the streets,
- ✦ woman giving birth,
- ✦ pot of soup for the neighbors.

Process-Relational Theology

- ✦ In the wake of earthquakes, hurricanes, and other natural disasters, there have always been many more options for how to understand God other than
 1. Cruel puppet-master
 2. Nothing at all.
- ✦ Suffering is far from all that there is.
- ✦ Even in the storm, there is healing and grace.



The Rev. Jake Morrill

DAVID RAY GRIFFIN

A PROCESS THEODICY

**GOD,
POWER,
& EVIL**

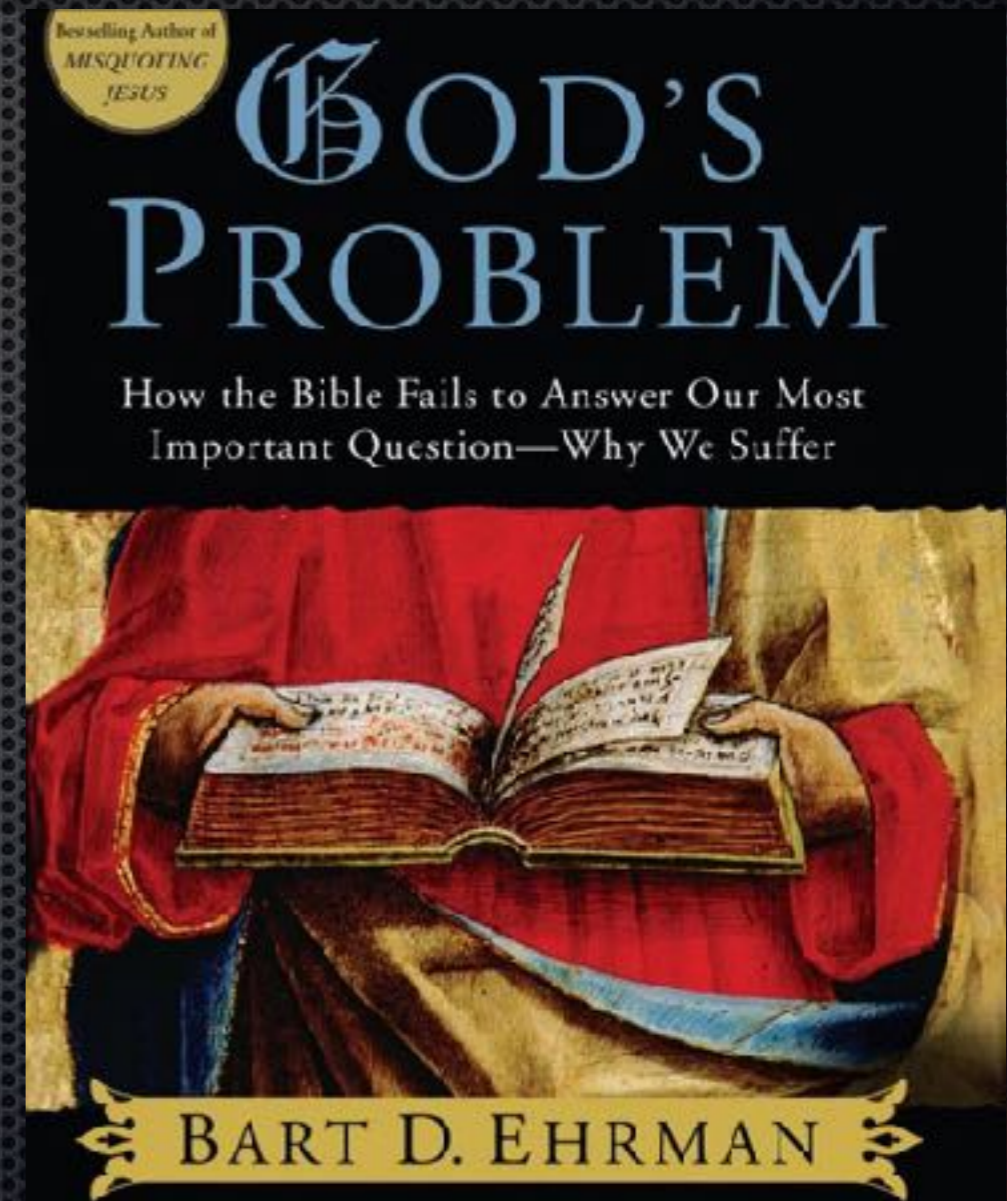
David
Ray
Griffin

EVIL
REVISITED

responses and
reconsiderations

Theodicy

- ✦ Exploring the contradictory biblical explanations for why an all-powerful God allows us to suffer.



Does the Universe Have a Purpose?

- Neil deGrasse Tyson

[youtube.com/watch?v=7pL5vzIMAhs](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7pL5vzIMAhs) (2 min)

How do you reconcile?

- ✦ good god
- ✦ existence of evil

Leonard Cohen, “Anthem”

[youtube.com/watch?v=6wRYjtvIYK0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6wRYjtvIYK0)

(6 min)

Leonard Cohen, “Anthem”

- ✦ **“Ring the bells that still can ring”**: “It’s no excuse—the dismal situation, the future is no excuse for an abdication of your own personal responsibilities towards yourself and your job and your love. They’re few and far between but you can find them.
- ✦ **“Forget your perfect offering”**: that is the hang-up, that you’re gonna work this thing out. Because we confuse this idea and we’ve forgotten the central myth of our culture which is the expulsion from the garden of Eden. This situation does not admit of solution or perfection. This is not the place where you make things perfect, neither in your marriage, nor in your work, nor anything, nor your love of God, nor your love of family or country. The thing is imperfect.

Leonard Cohen, “Anthem”

- ✦ **“There is a crack in everything”** that you can put together, physical objects, mental objects, constructions of any kind.
- ✦ **“That’s where the light gets in”** and that’s where the resurrection is and that’s where the return, that’s where the repentance is. It is with the confrontation, with the brokenness of things.

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Jim Carroll

punk, poet, author

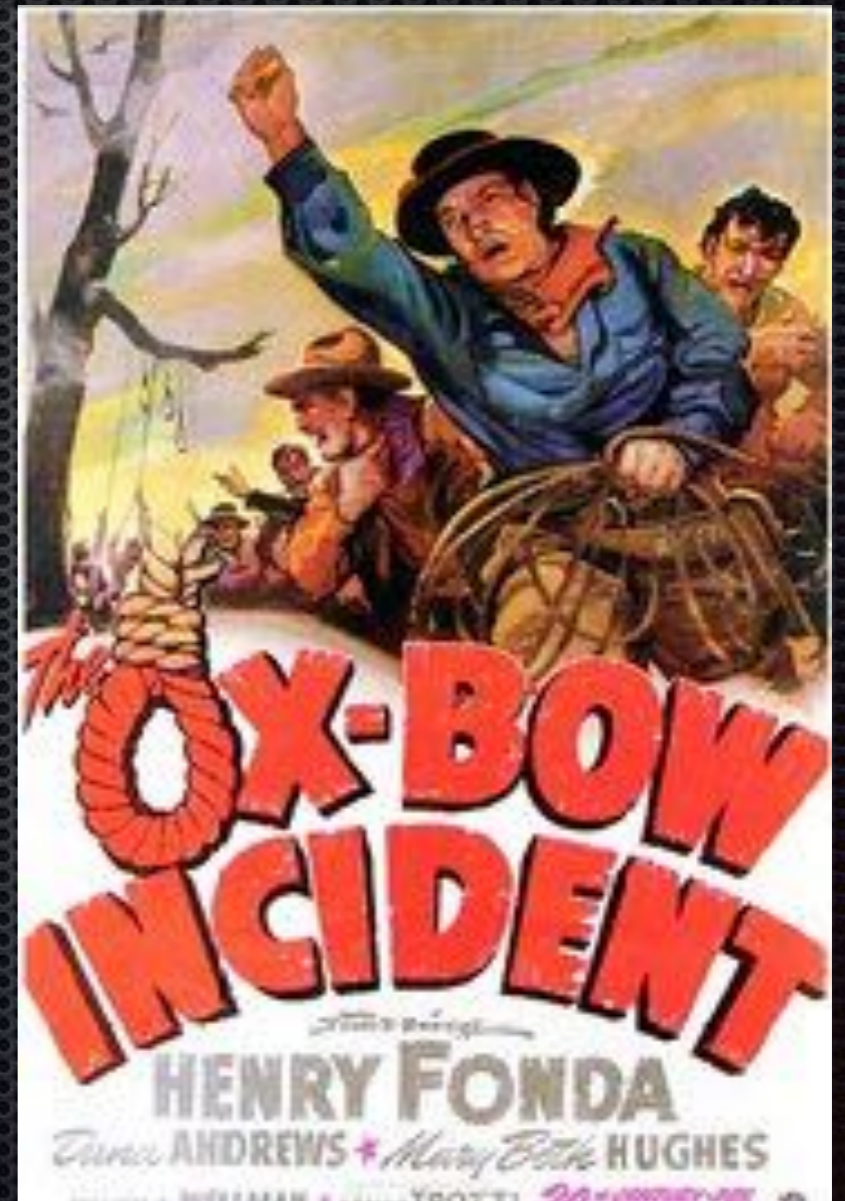
- ✦ Conscience is not more than the dead speaking to us



(1949-2009)

Ox Bow Incident

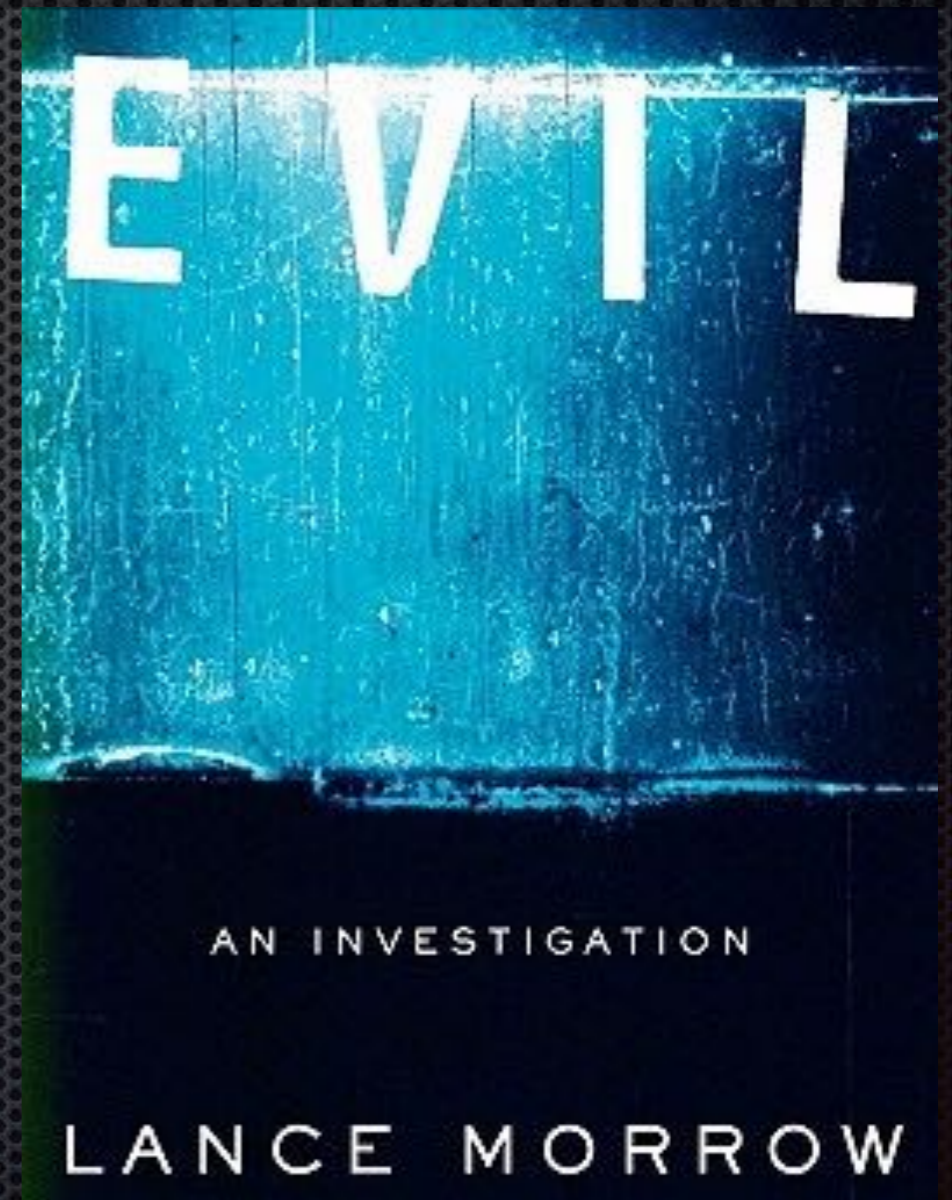
- ✦ Dead man speaks directly to the men who just hung him for a crime he did not commit.
- ✦ Listen to the dead man's words and see how conscience plays on the living: "They're the ones I feel sorry for, because it'll be over for me in a little while, but they'll have to go on remembering"
- ✦ [youtube.com/watch?v=lljlrAfBzYs](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lljlrAfBzYs) (3 min)



1943

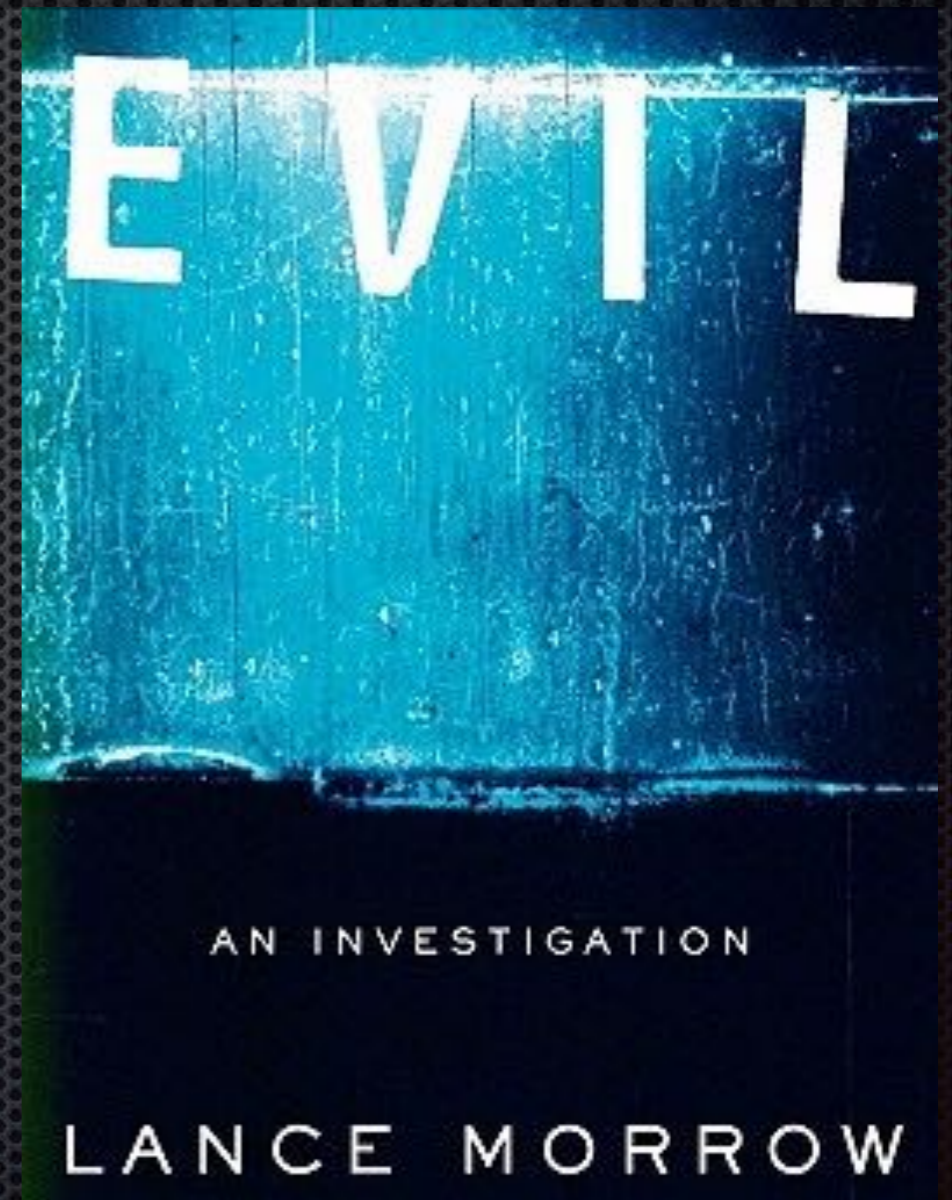
Conscience

- ✦ Aptitude or judgement that assists in distinguishing right from wrong.
- ✦ Psychological terms: feelings of
 - ✦ *remorse* when a human commits actions that go against the human's moral values
 - ✦ *rectitude* or *integrity* when a human commits actions that conform with the human's moral values.



Conscience

- ✦ To detect evil one uses instinct connected to moral sense.
- ✦ “Certain aborigines of Australia, thought it entirely permissible to kill a man if you encountered him while wandering in the Outback and he was not personally known to you; the jurisdiction of moral judgement stopped at the boundary of the known.”



“Ox Bow” (Lake) Incident

- ✦ River: carved over time by the force of flowing water.
- ✦ Curves of a river: most prominent in the middle section, where the river meanders along a shallower slope.
- ✦ Oxbow lake: formed when a wide meander from the main stem of a river is cut, via a process of erosion, to create a lake.
- ✦ Lake is then, suspended in place, no longer connected to the current, to the ever changing flow, to, you might say metaphorically, history and future, or eternity.



Evil & the “Ox Bow” Effect

- ✦ People (family, group, nation) becomes insulated by ideas, laws, prejudices, hatreds, etc. and thus cut off (physically, emotionally, intellectually) from those that once shared their banks, their flow—cut off from the unity of life.
- ✦ Child soldiers, terrorism, “rules” of war, Heaven’s Gate, (Amish?)
- ✦ Necessity and permissibility launder evil. Ox bows launder evil.



Evil & the “Ox Bow” Effect

- ✦ Do you trust your conscience to detect evil? (*Why or why not?*)
- ✦ If someone contributes to an evil act or result without intending to contribute (without awareness of the evil they are committing or allowing) have they done evil? [*Intent does not always equal impact.*]

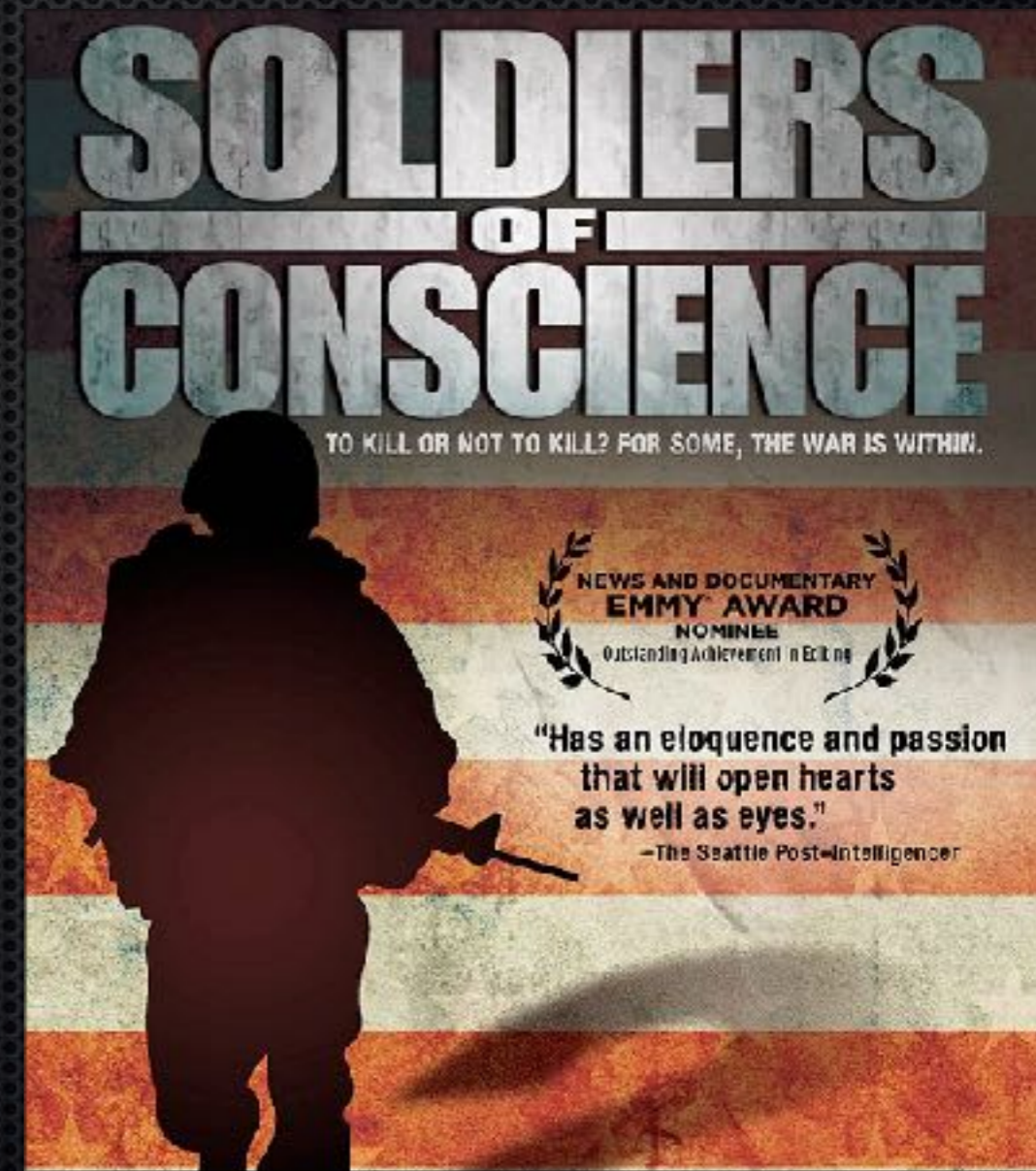




***“A
conscience
is that still
small
voice that
people
won't
listen to.”
(J. Cricket)***

“Crystallization” of Conscience

- ✦ Military term for the process by which active duty soldiers become *Conscientious Objectors*
- ✦ (What does it mean to have un-crystallized, malleable conscience?)
- ✦ “reflexive fire”: bypass the conscience—or conscious thought. (Conscience literally means “*with knowledge or awareness.*”)
- ✦ [youtube.com/watch?v=0-sKvPb5qG4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0-sKvPb5qG4) (3 min)



2007

“Crystallization” of Conscience

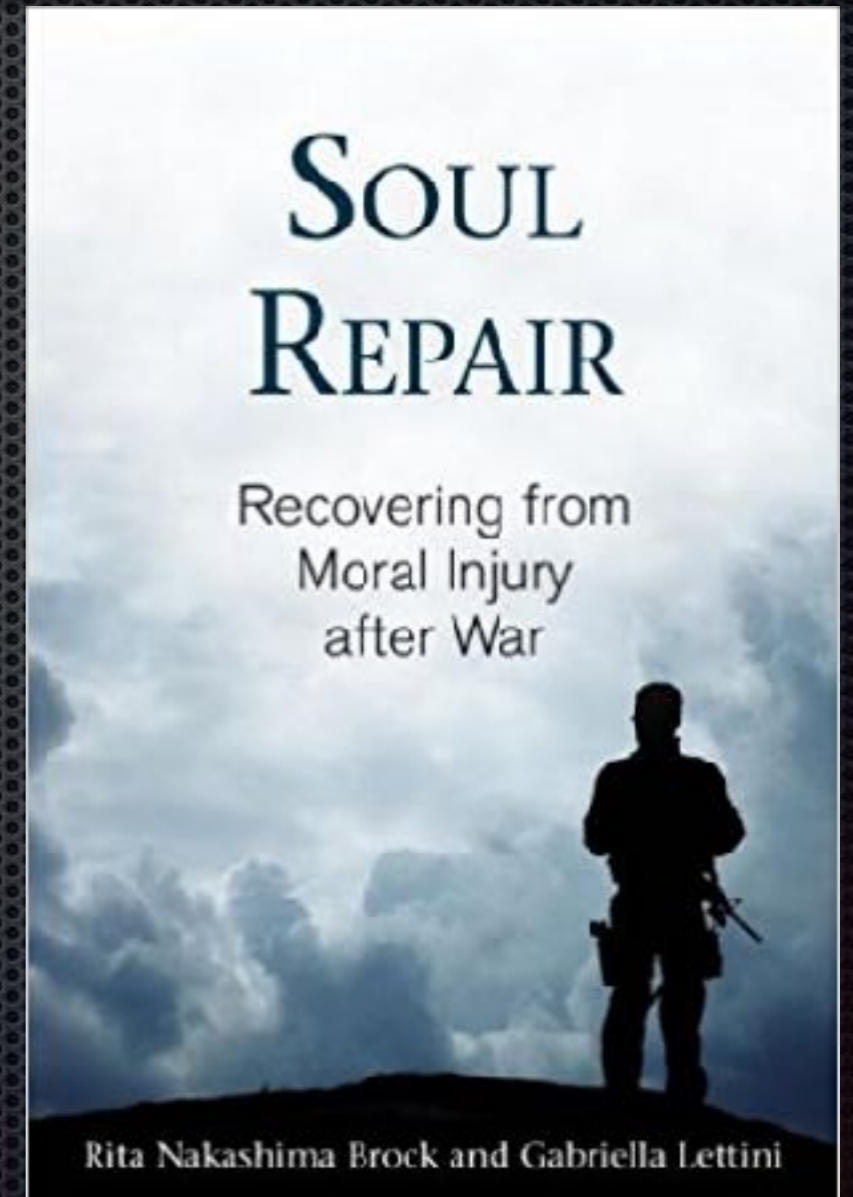
- ✦ What would happen if we...developed a new nonviolent peacekeeping force of 100,000 persons ready to move into violent conflicts and stand peacefully between warring parties in Central America, Northern Ireland, Poland, Southern Africa, the Middle East, and Afghanistan?
- ✦ Frequently we would get killed by the thousands. But everyone assumes that for the sake of peace it is moral and just for soldiers to get killed by the hundreds of thousands, even millions. Do we not have as much courage and faith as soldiers?



cpt.org//resources/writings/sider

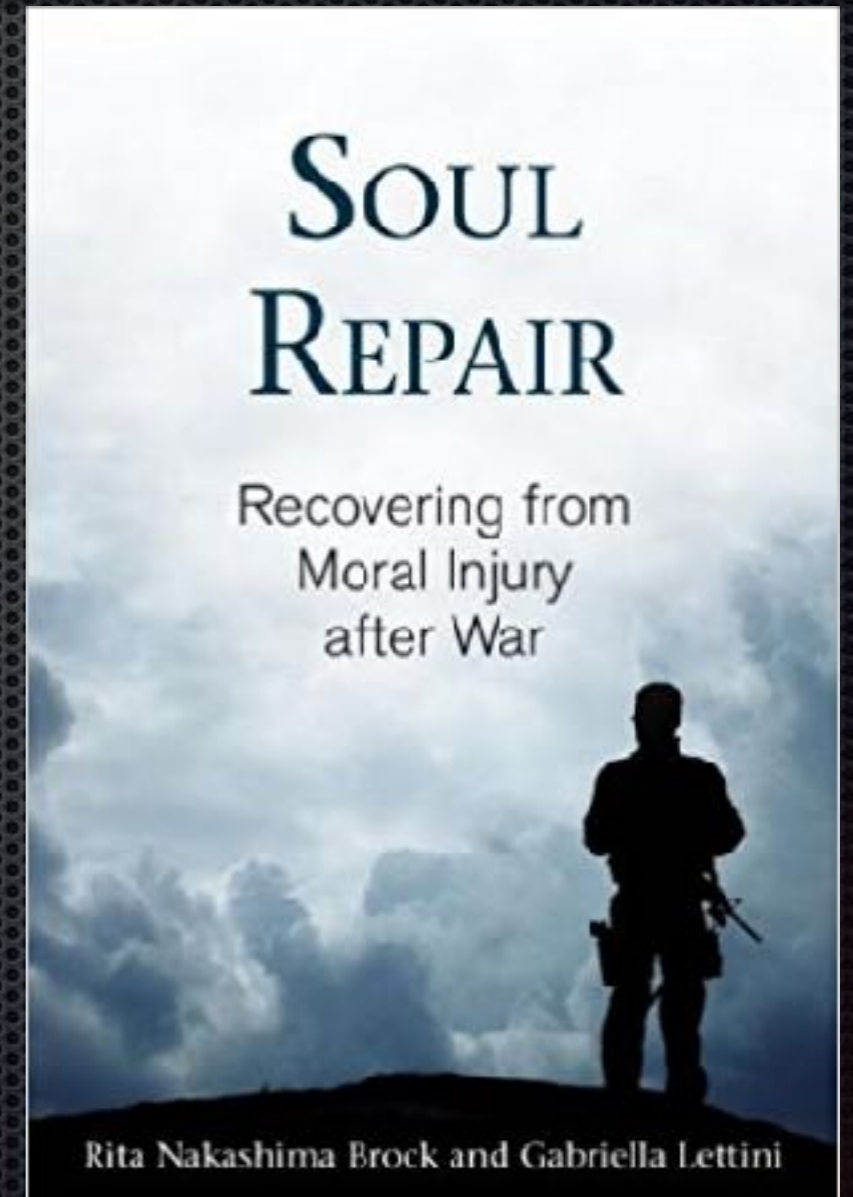
“Crystallization” of Conscience

- ✦ **PTSD** (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder): typically caused by exposure to trauma in the outside world.
- ✦ **Moral Injury**: *internal* struggle resulting from the violation of one’s conscience.



“Crystallization” of Conscience

- ✦ “Feeling terrible about killing someone is a sign that I’m a *moral* person, and I don’t want to feel better about it because that would be a sign that I’m *not* a good person anymore.”
- ✦ “There’s a boot camp to prepare for war, but no boot camp to reintegrate veterans to civilian life. They were taught reflexive fire shooting, but not how to recover a shredded moral identity”



21st-century, postmodern perspective

- ✦ What is evil?
- ✦ What is/are the *source(s)* of evil? (Why does evil exist in history? Why does evil exist in the human heart?)
- ✦ What is/are the *nature(s)* of evil? (How is evil at work?)
- ✦ How we might best respond individually & collectively?

Discussion Questions

- ✦ Do you use the word evil?
 - ✦ Are you *comfortable* using the word “evil?” Why or why not?)
 - ✦ Should I/you/we/they be using the word evil more or less in such a time as this?
- ✦ Do you have a felt sense of what you mean when you regard something as “evil?”
 - ✦ Can you describe what it is that makes something “evil?”

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