

Doing Good, Doing Bad, Doing Nothing

with Karl E. Peters and Barbara Whittaker-Johns, "Scientific and Religious Perspectives on Human Behavior: An Introduction"; William J. Shoemaker, "The Social Brain Network and Human Moral Behavior"; Ervin Staub, "The Roots and Prevention of Genocide and Related Mass Violence"; and Karl E. Peters, "Human Salvation in an Evolutionary World: An Exploration in Christian Naturalism"

SCIENTIFIC AND RELIGIOUS PERSPECTIVES ON HUMAN BEHAVIOR: AN INTRODUCTION

by Karl E. Peters and Barbara Whittaker-Johns

Abstract. In June 2011, the Institute on Religion in an Age of Science (IRAS) considered the topic "Doing Good, Doing Bad, Doing Nothing: Scientific and Religious Perspectives on Human Behavior." Plenary speakers discussed evolutionary, biological, and neurological roots of bad and good behavior (Melvin Konner); unconscious prejudice (Mahzarin Banaji); cultural production of evil and how hope arises in suffering (Cheryl Kirk-Duggan); causes and consequences—neurological and social—of developmental trauma (Laurie Pearlman); social conditions for genocide and mass violence and responses that enable healing and prevent further violence (Ervin Staub); practices for conflict transformation, reconciliation, and peace building (Robert and Alice Evans); and from Eastern religions diagnoses of and prescriptions for overcoming central obstacles to fullness of life (Barbara Jamestone). The papers published here by William Shoemaker, Ervin Staub, and Karl Peters carry forward these evolutionary, neurological, social, and religious analyses and offer ways to become more active in diminishing harmful and nonresponsive behaviors and in enhancing human good.

Keywords: bystander; conflict transformation; developmental trauma; domination systems; evolution; hope; posttraumatic stress syndrome; project implicit; violence

The papers in this section of *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* represent some of the thought and discussion that occurred at the 2011 Summer

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Conference of the Institute on Religion in an Age of Science, which we organized and cochaired. At the Chautauqua Institution in western New York State, conferees attempted to gain greater understanding of the reasons human beings exhibit both good and bad behavior, and often do nothing when they know that harm is being done.

Respecting the integrity of the sciences, Institute on Religion in an Age of Science (IRAS) conferences are designed to present some of the latest research and thinking from the scientific community on particular topics relevant to religion, with the goal of enhancing human welfare and the welfare of all life and of Earth itself. Out of 57 conferences since 1954, 15 have dealt with the evolutionary and biological bases of morality and with human good and evil. Some have been published as theme or partial theme issues of *Zygon*: “Aggression: Its Biological, Psychological, & Social Roots, & the Place of Religion in Its Control”—1969 (*Zygon* 4/3 1969); “Conflicts of Values and Sources of Power”—1971 (*Zygon* 6/4 1971); “The Humanizing and Dehumanizing of Man”—1973 (*Zygon* 9/2 1974); “Genetics, Evolution and Ethics”—1975 (*Zygon* 11/2 1976); “New Evolutionary Bridges Between Science & Values”—1979 (*Zygon* 15/3–4 1980); “Can a Scientific Understanding of Religion Aid the Process of World Peace?”—1986 (*Zygon* 21/4 1986); “Gender Bias: Its Reality and Effects in Religion & Science”—1987 (*Zygon* 25/2 1990); and “The Evolution of Morality”—1997 (*Zygon* 34/3 1999).

Examples of papers from these issues are Hudson Hoagland, “Biological Aspects of Aggression and Violence” (1969); Lawrence Kohlberg, “Indoctrination Versus Relativity in Value Education” (1971); Solomon H. Katz, “The Dehumanization and Rehumanization of Science and Society” (1974); Bernard D. Davis, “Evolution, Diversity, and Society” (1976); J. W. Bowker, “The Aeolian Harp: Sociobiology and Human Judgement” (1980); Jerre Levy, “Varieties of Human Brain Organization and the Human Social System” (1980); Edward O. Wilson, “The Relation of Science to Theology” (1980); Ralph Wendell Burhoe, “War, Peace, and Religion’s Biocultural Evolution” (1986); Elise Boulding, “Two Cultures of Religion as Obstacles to Peace” (1986); Sarah Blaffer Hrdy, “Raising Darwin’s Consciousness: Females and Evolutionary Theory” (1990); and Michael Ruse, “Evolutionary Ethics: What Can We Learn from the Past?” (1999).

The roots of this particular conference stem from the suggestion by IRAS member Ruth Bercau that we should address the issue “War, Why?” This concept began to coalesce around the broader question, “Why do good people do bad things?” As ideas for the conference developed, some participants wanted to explore why people also do good. Some wanted to consider why many are passive “bystanders,” while others intervene even at great risk to themselves. The conference title accordingly evolved to “Doing Good, Doing Bad, Doing Nothing: Scientific and Religious Perspectives on Human Behavior.” A part of the official conference

statement was “What do we mean by ‘harm,’ ‘benefit,’ and related terms? What roles do our evolutionary roots, genetic factors, brain development, early childhood environment, life events, and social and religious systems play in shaping human behavior—good, bad, and indifferent? What can be done to decrease bad behavior and promote more beneficial behavior among individuals, in families, between peoples?” These questions were addressed in plenary lectures, workshops, chapel services, and informal discussions among the participants.

Human beings have always had to wrestle with evil. It so often tears asunder our hearts and minds as we struggle to comprehend how and why one human being can destroy another. Evil rips apart our hope of finding, or making, meaning in life. Nevertheless, we must try to understand this dimension of human existence. To do so, we need as many complementary perspectives as possible to wrestle with how to do good, to avoid doing bad, and to be active, not passive, bystanders in the face of evil. Even in the time of one week, with two plenary lectures from each speaker and several workshops, we found that we made only a small advance in understanding a topic of such amazing scope and depth. Yet, we believe that each of us is called to choose an emphasis for how we are to be of use in the world to further the power of good. As we respond, we can be strengthened by acquiring some insight about why we are drawn to use some tools and their applications more than others.

We began the conference on a Saturday evening with a panel in which each of the speakers shared what drew them to their work as it related to the theme of the conference. In their responses we heard the rich and complementary ways that good people might use a particular perspective and its application to work for transforming evil into good. These responses provided the framework for what each speaker developed in two major presentations. In what follows here we will sketch some of work done at the conference, citing selected examples from the plenary presenters. Then, we will briefly introduce the three papers in this issue of *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science*.

Our keynote speaker was Melvin Konner, a professor in the department of anthropology and the program in neuroscience and behavioral biology at Emory University. Konner said that he became a lapsed Orthodox Jew in the course of his own “American Jewish journey. I began as an Orthodox boy, became a skeptical, uninvolved young man, and grew back into Jewishness as children entered my life. . . . Certainly I have not had my faith reawakened. But I have had my love for the tradition and my allegiance to the people who practice it reconfirmed beyond all measure” (Konner 2003, xxii–xiii).

Konner works and writes on the evolutionary and anthropological aspects of human evil, as well as on what nurtures our evolutionary capacity for cooperation and altruism. His book *The Tangled Wing*:

Biological Constraints on the Human Spirit (2002) examines the multiple evolutionary, genetic, neurological, child developmental, social, and immediate situational causes for rage, fear, joy, lust, love, grief, and gluttony. At the conference, he used this multicausal approach to explain how “human nature has a dark side but also a spirit that can mount to the sublime. It embraces a broad but definable range of people, and there will always be a struggle not just among, but within each of us, as our idea of the good contends with the selfish need to survive” (Konner 2010). In his second plenary presentation Konner explained how altruism, cooperation, human love, and morality have evolved, so that we can counter our “dark side.” With his thorough analysis, Konner helped us understand the occurrence of events such as that in Le Chambon in France, where non-Jews risked their lives to save 5,000 Jews during the Nazi invasion. These people, along with others who struggled to save Jews from the Nazis in other places, are recognized in Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Museum in Jerusalem, which has honored 22,000 individuals from all over the world with the title of “Righteous Among the Nations” for risking their lives to save Jews during the Holocaust.

Mahazrin Banaji is a professor of psychology and researcher at Harvard. In her work she uses cognitive/affective behavioral measures and neuroimaging to explore the hidden, unconscious social biases in adults and children and then to raise questions about the social consequences of these biases.

She helped develop the “implicit association test” (IAT), which she demonstrated at the conference with hands-on exercises that showed us how we all are socially conditioned subconsciously to stereotype and show prejudice to those who are different from us (www.projectimplicit.org, Banaji and Greenwald 2013). The test is based on our ordinary and unconscious ability to make associations—for example, thunder and rain, gray hair and old age. It measures the attitudes of test takers by asking them to do the following:

Pair two concepts (e.g., young and good, or elderly and good). The more closely associated the two concepts are, the easier it is to respond to them as a single unit. So, if young and good are strongly associated, it should be easier to respond faster when you are asked to give the same response (i.e., the “E” or “I” key [on the computer keyboard]) to these two. If elderly and good are not so strongly associated, it should be harder to respond fast when they are paired. This [timing] gives a measure of how strongly associated the two types of concepts are. The more associated, the more rapidly you should be able to respond. (Question 2, FAQ’s Project Implicit 2012)

Banaji was led to this work by growing up in India in the Zoroastrian religion, where she was taught that the world is, simply, a struggle between evil and good. As she left this tradition and India, and came to the United States, she became intensely interested in the many, and often hidden,

inclinations in human behavior—not just the simple battle between good and evil—and especially in the question of why we may have good intentions, but not act on them.

Cheryl Kirk-Duggin is professor of theology and women's studies at Shaw University Divinity School. Many of her experiences growing up as an African-American woman in the South gave her both insight and determined strength in healing the powers of domination in our society which promote oppression and violence. She imbues and strengthens all her teaching, writing, and activism with spiritual practices of gratitude and expressions of joy—including bursting into song to open her two presentations.

Her first presentation used the ideas of social Christian ethicist Emilie Townes (Townes 2006) along with biblical texts, hymns, R&B (rhythm and blues), hip-hop, and the movie *Sophie's Choice* to analyze the cultural production of evil. She examined how destructive levels of brokenness, oppression, violence, and aggression are impediments to humans embodying their God-given personal and communal goodness. In the same way, Kirk-Duggin examined the power and reality of hope. Based on being in a relationship with an immediately present God, hope is the foundation for having the audacity to survive, endure, and transform the “Holler,” the primal cry reflecting evil and violence in the space of life's inhumanities and injustices (Crawford 2002). Grounded in the stories of black women, such as Janie Crawford in the movie *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, the cry's forceful stance of passion evokes freedom and fuels action (see also Hurston [1937] 2006). Although there are impediments to hope, catalysts for hope can be found via our life stories, an embodied ethical life, and the move toward justice and healing (see Kirk-Duggan 2001, 2006).

In her career, Laurie Pearlman, a clinical psychologist, has focused on understanding traumatic stress. Her work has included research, psychotherapy, professional training, and community and crisis intervention work—both nationally and internationally. She has published widely, notably about vicarious traumatization and the related need to support those working with trauma survivors (see, e.g., www.tsicaap.com).

In her presentation she clarified that posttraumatic stress syndrome (PTSD) in adults who have experienced sudden trauma as adults (e.g., war, acts of violence, or natural disaster) manifests in particular ways. However, PTSD that arises from what recently has become known as “developmental trauma” has different consequences and requires its own specialized understanding and healing. Developmental trauma is the trauma experienced by a child while the brain is still developing, causing PTSD from such things as sexual, physical, or emotional abuse, neglect, and bullying.

She elaborated on what we have learned about the lasting changes in brain function and structure that are often the result of developmental trauma. There are frightening statistics about the prevalence of such trauma throughout our culture. In the end, it often leads to further violence against others, or against oneself in such forms as mental illness, addictions, an unfulfilled life, or an early death. However, in a second presentation, Pearlman spoke encouraging words about innovative methods of therapy that foster resilience in child and adult survivors of childhood trauma.

In recent years Pearlman has applied her understanding of traumatic stress in working with large groups of people, including work she shares with her spouse Ervin Staub. Both have a similar affirmation of hope in their work—whether with persons or whole groups who have endured bad things being done to them. They believe in the altruism that can be born out of suffering—especially if one is committed to finding and nurturing their inner capacity for empathy.

Ervin Staub, professor of psychology emeritus at University of Massachusetts, Amherst, founded the Ph.D. concentration on the psychology of peace and violence. The focus of his work and writing is on the social psychology of evil, including violence in small groups, mass violence, and genocide (Staub 2011). He is particularly concerned about the harm done when people are passive bystanders and is especially dedicated to encouraging the potential for good that comes from active bystanders. He has articulated ways that families and communities can teach children and youth to care about others beyond their immediate group. With his wife Laurie Pearlman and others, Staub has worked in Rwanda developing some creative and successful approaches to healing, reconciliation, and the prevention of further violence, including the popular, ongoing radio drama *Musekeweya* (“New Dawn”) about two villages in conflict. Embedded in the program are 35 “communication messages” about prevention and reconciliation.

Staub attributes an experience from his childhood as being part of the path that led him to his life’s work. He is a child survivor of the Holocaust. As he told us, and as he writes in his book *The Psychology of Good and Evil*, “I was a 6-year-old boy in Budapest in the summer of 1944 when about 450,000 out of 600,000 Hungarian Jews were transported to Auschwitz and killed. I and members of my nuclear family survived because of Raoul Wallenberg, a Swede who heroically saved many lives in Hungary, and Maria, a Hungarian woman who worked for my family and did all she could to help us.” We called Maria “my second mother, and I feel that her courageous actions and loving nature taught me . . . to have faith in human beings and in the possibility of our caring about each other, about the ‘other,’ about all ‘others’” (Staub 2003, xiii).

Robert and Alice Evans are founders and directors of the international peace-building organization called the “Plowshares Institute,” founded in 1981 (www.plowsharesinstitute.org). In the 1970s they were teaching in Uganda when Idi Amin, known as “the Butcher of Uganda” came to power. They saw their colleagues murdered, and they saw the courageous refusal of the leaders of the Christian church and the university to follow Idi Amin. When the Evanses were forced to flee Uganda for fear of their own lives and those of their children, Desmond Tutu invited them and their children to South Africa. It was there that they felt the call to become agents of conflict transformation in the world. Presently they work around the globe and in many cities in the United States.

The Evanses’ work is grounded in New Testament scholar Walter Wink’s concepts of proactive nonviolence, of dismantling domination powers by naming them, unmasking them, and engaging them, and especially the idea of learning to listen to the other, to stand in the other’s shoes (Wink 1998). To do this, they help local leaders write “case studies” from conflicts they have experienced, and Alice and Bob Evans publish many of these to be used by others in further work (Evans et al. 2001; Kraybill et al. 2001).

At the conference they engaged us in an exercise that showed us what it is like to work on a case, using the published, true, disguised case study “Beyond the Battle.” The problem posed by this case is that the first black woman chairperson of a polarized urban Board of Education wants to avoid a board vote that would lead to defeat and retaliation. She is struggling to find a “third way” to reach mutual understanding among the board members, parents, and the teachers’ union. Interactive engagement with cases such as this is one of the cornerstones of the Plowshares Institute’s intensive workshops that introduce specific concepts of conflict transformation and begin to equip participants with skills of constructive intervention and peace building.

The Chapel Speaker for the week, Unitarian Universalist minister Barbara Jean Jamestone shared her immersion in Eastern Religious traditions. She grew up as a Southern Baptist in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, where she witnessed the closing of five state mental hospitals and saw the former patients wandering the streets, lost and alone. She came to believe that we may not be able to defeat the domination systems in which we live, which leave so many lost and alone, but that we can understand any evil behavior as a tragic expression of unmet need. Her concept of wrestling with good and evil is to follow the Buddha’s Middle Way and to also engage in the bodily spiritual practices which allow us to live “full stretch.” In her morning chapel services, Jamestone suggested how Shinto, Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism each diagnose a central obstacle to human fullness of life and prescribe an antidote.

This issue of *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* includes three papers that emerged from the 2011 IRAS conference “Doing Good, Doing Bad,

Doing Nothing: Scientific and Religious Perspectives on Human Behavior.” Each paper is based on a lifetime of work. Since his Ph.D. from MIT, William Shoemaker has engaged in research and teaching about the human brain. Based on his two-session workshop at the conference, his essay develops an understanding of the social brain network (sometimes called the paralimbic system) and how various kinds of malfunctioning affect human behavior. As noted above, Ervin Staub has spent most of his professional life studying the roots of human violence and has developed practices of healing and prevention. His essay, originally published in an edited volume by Oxford University Press and reprinted with two small additions here, gives the substance of what he presented at the conference. For 45 years Karl Peters has done philosophical theology in the context of science, attempting to show how an evolutionary framework and specific scientific discoveries can help address religious concerns. His postconference essay draws on some of the work of others at the conference and develops a “naturalistic” Christian understanding of human evil and salvation.

These papers and the 2011 IRAS summer conference raise some important general questions about the relation between religion and science. First, how does the practical emphasis of addressing significant human problems fit with the more theoretical questions often discussed in *Zygon* papers? Second, how can the unique contributions of religious communities to justice and well-being complement responses to human evil that are called for from secular communities such as medical, social, legal, and political institutions? Third, how can religious thinkers and leaders, who often are not trained in the sciences, acquire enough scientific knowledge about such topics as human evolution, the brain, child development, and socialization so that they can combine this knowledge with the experience and wisdom of their own traditions in order to be able to exercise moral and spiritual leadership in inspiring the diminishing of human evil and enhancing of human good? Finally, practices of “doing good, doing bad, doing nothing” are found as both the strengths and weaknesses of all communities—religious, scientific, and secular—that seek solely to do good. How can members of IRAS and others who are grounded in both a religious and scientific understanding of empathy seek to understand, affirm, and further the diverse ways that human beings come together in community to do good—an affirmation that is larger than any passing differences among, or frailties within, those communities of hope?

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