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# Unde Malum: Deciphering the Roles Of Radical Evil within the Pentecostal Theo-Social Imaginary

Ryan Kelly

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Addressing the nature of radical evil is important to a theological approach to understanding culture. This study uses theological and philosophical studies of radical evil to highlight important areas of discourse within Pentecostalism. A case study of the faith community of Philadelphia Holy Pentecostal Church (a pseudonym) provides the means of doing an in-depth analysis of the roles of radical evil in Pentecostal worship and theo-social imaginary. Further, this study suggests that the Pentecostal service constitutes a kind of liturgy, and concludes that the expressive nature of worship in Pentecostalism is part of the reason for its inter-ethnic, cross-class, and international success.

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This study is an attempt to a) decipher and analyze the role of radical evil within Pentecostal theology and b) interpret the implications of these imaginaries on the social mechanizations of the Pentecostal faith community. Using the Philadelphia Holy Pentecostal Church as a case study, this ethnography's aim is to develop a theo-social matrix based on communal perceptions of radical evil. Data gathering methodologies included observation of worship services and other community activities, as well as oral and written interviews eliciting the perceptions of radical evil and the Devil within the individual informant's and community's spiritual foundations. A key goal in this project was to treat this faith community and their beliefs and practices with the most respect. Doing so is a conscious effort to reject the philosophy, present in much of current secular anthropology, that beliefs and cultural actions cannot truly be understood in the community's own terms, but must be uncovered to find an ulterior motive, one recognized by the anthropological community as legitimate (Fischer et al. 1986). A world of discursive scholarship has previously been committed to the study of the Devil and radical evil (Kearny 2003), yet little is known of the intricacies of the role of the Devil in contemporary American Pentecostalism. This project is an opportunity to take a closer look at this phenomenon through the lens of ethnography.

## The Relationship of Radical Evil to Pentecostalism: A History

The figure of the Devil has existed within the Judeo-Christian consciousness far longer than the philosophical discourse of radical evil, coined first in *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone* (Kant 1939). Kant's notion of radical evil, as a counter to the latitudinarianism of Rousseau, posited man's propensity to err towards evil action alone and absolutely. Jeffrey Burton Russell, whose academic career was largely devoted to a study of the perceptions of the Devil throughout the history of western culture, noted that radical evil in the twenty-first century is typically identified in three forms: moral evil, natural evil, and metaphysical evil. A person commits moral evil when s/he causes another to suffer. Natural evil occurs when suffering is caused by natural, arbitrary phenomena. The third evil, metaphysical evil, is the suffering that occurs as a result of imperfection (Russell 1988). But Burton Russell was skeptical of how seriously notions of diabolical evil were considered in the modern academe (Russell 1979; 1988).

The French scholar Robert Muchembled continued the discussion of the role of radical evil, bringing the discourse into the twenty-first century. The role of the Devil in western society, in direct agreement with Kant, was entirely intrapersonal according to Muchembled (2003). However, Muchembled's analysis of the psychology of radical evil was incomplete. It discussed the internal locus of the Devil in human personalities as if humans existed in vacuums rather than in culture groups and communities. The

study of the inter-personality of radical evil is an historical study as much as it is sociological. Returning to Burton Russell's analysis of suffering as the heart of radical evil, we must turn our attentions to the social forces driving the construction of institutions of mass suffering. Evident in Burton Russell's work is the recognition that the persecution of the Other is the most consistent manifestation of radical evil in both contemporary and past times (Russell 1988; Moore 1987).

Historically speaking, the Devil has been paramount in the persecutory relationship between societies and their respective Others. The legend of the satanic pact and other diabolic rites led to the persecution of vulnerable populations throughout Europe from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance (Moore 1987). This phenomenon reached its apex in the centuries of the Witch Hunts, a craze that famously migrated across the Atlantic, and perished in the trials at Salem (Russell 1986). Devil worship and societal obsessions over secret evil societies waned in the modern era, only to reemerge popularly in the late 1980s and 1990s in circumstances that caused panic and outcry across thousands of American families. It was during this time that much of the American population began to suspect that heavy metal rock music was influencing teenagers and adolescents to worship the Devil and act out violently. The most infamous of cases was that of the West Memphis Three, who were ostracized from their community because of their grunge aesthetic, and convicted of a murder under highly questionable circumstances (Leveritt 2002). More recently, however, perceptions of the threat of secret, diabolist societies have once again vanished from the public imaginary.

Popular perceptions of the Devil have also begun to diminish in American Christian communities, across denominations. The Devil, rather than a Mephistophelian tempter constantly at work in our world, has come to be merely a symbol for evil. Though the Catholic Church still holds to the belief that the Devil can physically possess a human being, the Catholic catechism no longer suggests that, in sin, a believer is in unity with the Devil. The same can be said for most of the popular Protestant denominations across the country (Russell 1988). The exception is in Pentecostalism, a movement that has grown rapidly in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, and that commands nearly a fourth of all Christians globally. Pentecostalism differentiates itself from the remaining Corpus Christianorum in its embrace of an element of raw spirituality not witnessed in other Christian denominations, along with an embrace of the struggle between good and evil (Cox 1994). This study focuses on the notion of the Devil as an actor in the spiritual and physical lives of Pentecostal believers (cf. Land

2010). Its purpose is to analyze the nuances of Pentecostal perceptions of the Devil and to understand these in social context.

## **The Devil as a Lens: The Utility of the Optics of Radical Evil**

Pentecostalism is an American movement, originating in a revival that occurred on Azusa Street in Los Angeles in the early twentieth century, but having roots in nineteenth century holiness churches as well. From the beginning, it was characterized by a breaking down of divisions between races and classes, as worshippers united under the powerful influence of the Holy Spirit and engaged in battle with the Devil for both their bodies and their souls.

To this day, among most Pentecostal congregations, and indeed the congregation upon which this case study is built, there is an implicit understanding that the Devil and God both have power over the health and morality of our physical bodies. This dualistic theology of the Pentecostal movement is singular among modern Christian denominations and most probably finds historical precedent in the Albigensian movement of thirteenth century southern France (Pegg 2008). The Pentecostal theological tradition differs from Catholicism, for instance, in their disparate presentations of relative powers of God (via the Holy Spirit) and the Devil. Though followers of Pentecostalism will be quick to assert the superiority of God's power to that of the Devil's, the abilities associated with the power of the Devil are not afforded to it in any other Christian theological tradition. The disparity is evident in the Pentecostal liturgy but is probably best understood through conversation with the parishioners themselves, as will be seen below.

In sum, within the Pentecostal imaginary, the role of the Devil is a total social fact—to borrow a phrase from Durkheim (1995). Theological discussions and conversations of personal spirituality begin and end with the Devil. It is the mirror, the inverse, of the Holy Spirit. It is the Holy Spirit's opposite and opposition. Because of this, the idea of the Devil as a nearly omnipotent spiritual figure serves as a useful optical device for understanding the theology of the faith community as a whole as well as the individual members' beliefs. The Devil is both the object of the discussion and the discussion's major diviner.

## **A Holy (and Metaphysical) War: The Holy Spirit and the Devil in the Pentecostal Liturgy**

From the vantage point of an outsider—that is, someone unacquainted with the mores of Pentecostal worship—the first thing that is immediately noticeable is

the atmosphere that surrounds the congregation like an invisible electrical current. It is similar to the collective anticipation felt in a crowd of thousands before a long-awaited event. In the case of Pentecostal worship, however, that same atmosphere is created by groups as small as thirty people. This atmosphere of worship is made possible by the Holy Spirit, who acts as a form of energy and gifts his presence to the believers. This is only the first of the gifts that the Holy Spirit grants to believers in worship. Indeed, if the Devil can pull the believer into sin and inspire evil, then the Holy Spirit can combat that influence by further gifts of his own. These gifts include speaking in tongues, the hearing of words, and healing by faith (Land 2010: 45-50). The Holy Spirit's gifts are miracles, and their frequency in Pentecostalism is unrivalled throughout all of the denominations of Christendom.

The atmosphere of heightened jubilation in Pentecostal services is in part due to the occurrence of these miracles. In truth, parishioners attend services in full expectation that such miracles will take place. That is not to say, however, that miracles are taken for granted by worshippers. Rather, the worshippers routinely express their gratitude for being allowed to be in a place where such fluent grace can flow in and through them.

The miracles play a key role in the Pentecostal service. But because there is no quantifiable way to indicate when a miracle will occur, much of the service's structure must be improvised. Theologians have in the past shied away from referring to the Pentecostal service as a liturgy for this very reason. But, the regular occurrence of miracles in every service, set within a loose, informal structure, still implies a liturgy even if there are fewer time constraints, less specified roles, or an indistinct separation between sacred and profane spaces.

Some structure exists. There is obviously a beginning and an end to every service, marked by processions. But there is no set duration, with some services lasting for as few as forty-five minutes and others as long as three hours. Long services can feel like a marathon to an outsider, but are times of deep worship and un-coerced devotion for church members.

There is always an arc, or a zenith, in the service in which the worship is at its most intense. It is at this point in which the occurrence of miracles is most likely. The journey from the beginning of service to the zenith can be described as a dialogue between the faith leader and the worshippers. The charisma of the faith leader is his most useful tool. As if tending to a fire, the pastor stokes the worshippers with scripture quoted from memory verbatim, along with aphorisms of the power of the Holy Spirit intended to cure people's various ailments. The stoking continues until from the embers a miraculous flame bursts out.

At the height of worship the dialogue between the faith leader and the worshippers becomes skewed. Sounds and movements blend together into a spiritual cacophony, and suddenly a worshipper is *taken*. What at first glance appears to be a worshipper in the throws of a seizure is in reality a worshipper whose body has been appropriated by the Holy Spirit. The worshipper's body shakes and s/he begins to mutter indistinguishable sounds that are thought by the believers to be the word of God. This is the miracle of speaking in tongues. While this miracle usually occurs randomly, it can sometimes be solicited by the faith leader placing his hand on the forehead of the worshipper and quoting from the scripture. In doing so, the faith leader becomes a sort of diviner of miracles and occupies a spiritual plain somewhere between the worshipper and the Holy Spirit.

The miracle of speaking in tongues is believed to be a form of prophecy, as is the miracle of hearing words. In the speaking of tongues the worshipper is a conduit for the Holy Spirit to other worshippers, but in the hearing of words it is believed that the Holy Spirit is speaking directly to the worshipper. Also, they are hearing literal words, in their native language, rather than the sounds muttered in speaking in tongues. However, the underlying message of heard words can be as mystifying to the worshipper as in tongues. While the worshipper can understand the literal meaning of the words being spoken to them, the underlying meaning or significance of these words or phrases is not immediately apparent. Like many forms of prophecy, the meaning is not completely understood until after the prophecy has been realized.

Finally, there is the possibility of a miracle of healing by faith. This is the most rare of the miracles to take place during weekly services. In its purest form, the nature of faith healing is evident in its name. It involves a worshipper who is suffering being brought before the fellow worshippers. If the suffering worshipper can stand than s/he stands, but s/he can also be sitting or lying down. The fellow worshippers, led by the faith leader, then place hands upon or over the body of the worshipper and begin to pray to the Holy Spirit to heal the sufferer from the ailment. The purpose of this miracle is not to bypass or offer a superior alternative to Western medicine. Rather, it is meant as a possible remedy when no further medicinal options are available (for example, worshippers would not attempt to faith heal a broken leg when a plaster cast will heal it in weeks). Also, physical ailments are not the sole subject of faith healing. Worshippers who suffer from mental illnesses may also be brought to be healed. There is currently not enough information in this study to discuss the permanence of the miracle of faith healing; a faith healing can result in either a cure, or a temporary respite from the ailment.

Of the three principle miracles, speaking in tongues, hearing words from the Lord, and faith healing, it is faith healing that most functions to create a unity among worshippers. This is due to the fact that worshippers often feel a sense of accomplishment and fraternity through summoning the Holy Spirit to heal their fellow worshipper's suffering. Unlike in the cases of speaking in tongues and hearing words, the worshippers are primary actors along with the Holy Spirit in creating a miracle. In the other cases, the worshippers play only a secondary role.

Again, all of these miracles occur most frequently in the arc, or the zenith, of worship. This is the point in which the barrier between the worshipper and the Holy Spirit is at its most transparent. The Holy Spirit is thought to be moving around the room as the worship becomes increasingly frantic and intense. However, the Devil is not far away. The barrier between the worshipper and the Holy Spirit is equally thin between the worshipper and the Devil. This parity is best understood through the Pentecostal understanding of sin.

There is little difference between the Devil and sin in Pentecostalism. When a worshipper sins, it is not because they are morally obtuse or because they are inherently sinful creatures. Rather, the Devil as a conscious actor pulls the worshipper towards sin. When the worshipper is infested by sin they are believed to be literally infested by the Devil. The Devil is more than a symbol of evil, but rather the physical manifestation of sin itself. This relationship adds a metaphysical component to the confession and forgiveness of sins within Pentecostal theology.

Confession within the Pentecostal imaginary is a public act that occurs during weekly services. The worshipper confesses their sins aloud to a faith leader and the other worshippers. This alone does not make the Pentecostal confession different from the act of confession in other Christian denominations. What is unique, however, is the underlying narrative. The worshipper, in a state of sin, is also in a state of diabolical possession. The act of confessing the sin is also a proclamation of the fact that the worshipper is possessed by the Devil. In forgiving the worshipper of their sins, the faith leader must also alleviate them of the burden that the Devil poses by extracting the Devil from the body of the worshipper. Confession, to the Pentecostals, is a form of improvised exorcism.

The nature of confession within the Pentecostal imaginary lends itself best to helping us understand the combative nature of the relationship between the Holy Spirit, the worshipper and the Devil. The Holy Spirit and the Devil are locked in a battle that manifests itself physically, metaphysically, and symbolically throughout the Pentecostal liturgy. Physically, the Holy Spirit can speak through worshippers and directly to worshippers

and can potentially even heal their suffering. The worshippers also undergo a great deal of suffering as a result of their sinning, which is believed to be a direct result of the Devil's intervention in their lives. So metaphysically, the Devil and the Holy Spirit battle over the soul of the worshipper during the act of confession: the Holy Spirit, working through the faith leader, hopes to expel the Devil, and the Devil hopes to remain in control of the worshipper. This is the narrative of spiritual warfare that undergirds the Pentecostal liturgy.

## **Sisyphus and the Devil: A Critical Analysis**

With speaking in tongues, chanting, singing, flailing about, there is something that seems deeply manic to an outsider in the Pentecostal service. Yet Pentecostals seem to embrace the spiritual aspect of worship to the point of almost Sisyphian levels of absurdity (Camus 1955). The art of worship that is employed during these services does not lend itself easily to an objective analysis. Rather, the explosive "volume" of the worship can make it quite difficult for outsiders to understand. On the other hand, the growth of Pentecostalism in already-Christian nations may be a testament to the fact that many Christians feel constrained by a rigidly structured and emotionally reserved liturgy. These Christians are choosing to worship in an environment in which their faith can be expressed as flamboyantly as they desire.

The expressive aspects of Pentecostal worship may also be the reason behind the rapid rate of conversion in the developing world. The overt spirituality and the active, miracle-laced services employed by Pentecostals may seem familiar to indigenous communities, who see aspects of their own native spirituality presented in a Christian ritual. The spirituality of Pentecostalism may provide a cultural bridge to many people who would have otherwise discounted the truth of the Christian message.

This same spirituality, however, is not an effective conversion tool for groups of the population who have already rejected their respective Christian faiths for a more agnostic set of ideals. To many in this subsection of the population, the spirituality of Pentecostal worship is perceived as a form of mindless, unreflective fanaticism. It is far more radical than the expressions of faith in which they were raised and which they have already rejected. Pentecostalism thus both struggles and succeeds due to the nature of its worship.

There is yet one disparity that has not been addressed, and it is located where radical evil and the Pentecostal theo-social imaginary finally meet. Though in the above sections the beliefs and actions of Pentecostal worshippers have been presented as uniform among believers, there is one aspect in which this is not the case. Pentecostalism, since its genesis in

the early twentieth century, has embraced a form of worship that is inclusive of all races and classes. In the faith community that this study is based on, such principles are rightly maintained. While the Pentecostals practice a form of worship in which all are equal before God, there exists an inverse correlation between the socio-economic status of the worshipper and their critical understanding of the theology in practice.

One might assume that because of lesser access to a good education poorer believers would not grasp the true message of the Pentecostal theology being considered here. But, the results of this study indicated that the opposite was true. Many of the church members with higher degrees of education were found to critically misunderstand key tenants of the faith while poorer, less educated members were found to have a keen grasp of them. The topic with the highest level of disparity was the role of the Devil. In discussions, the less-educated church members tended to describe a Devil figure in a manner that was more in line with the type of spiritual actor referred to by the faith leader and the majority of the worshippers. This is a type of Devil that is a tangible actor, one that pulls the faithful to sin and then infests their bodies. Conversely, many of the church members with higher levels of education exhibited the penchant to critically reason their way past a real Devil figure, and concluded that the Devil is more of a symbol of evil or merely the existence of evil in the world, but not an actual being. Interestingly enough, this same disparity was not evident in discussions of the power of the Holy Spirit. In these cases, there did seem to be a uniformity of belief between classes and between educated and uneducated church members.

The inverse correlation described above may be due in part to the overwhelming amount of culturally-based lore associated with the Devil among Pentecostals. Indeed, the “common knowledge” promulgated about the Devil is ubiquitous in the Pentecostal community (Russell 1988: 152-53). Nearly everyone seems able to recite their own personal maxim or aphorism on the subject. Yet this culturally-based knowledge is viewed as anti-intellectual by those with higher education, who seem to feel the need to critically reason a more abstract Devil figure and to view the popularly regarded Devil figure as hollow or somewhat cartoonish. The cause of this inversion, therefore, is not rooted in a discourse of faith, but rather in negotiating cultural influences with theological doctrine.

### **Such Fluent Grace: Conclusion**

A number of observations can be made at this point. First, that while growth in Christian denominations worldwide has been increasingly stymied,

Pentecostalism has grown rapidly both in America and abroad, in the developed and developing worlds. Second, that Pentecostalism possesses a unique spirituality in the community of Christian faith. Third, that since its inception on Azusa Street in Los Angeles, Pentecostalism has been committed to an equality of race and class through worship (Cox 1994: 3-7). This study has suggested that the second of these two observations, its unique spirituality, may be responsible for the others, that is, for the growth of the movement and for its ability to cross race and class boundaries. It has also suggested that a redefinition of the nature of liturgy is warranted. A combination of structure and openness to the unpredictable grace and miracles of the Holy Spirit creates a form of worship in Pentecostalism that is accessible to both educated and uneducated people, however differently they may interpret the nature of their enemy.

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**Ryan Kelly** is an author and commentator based in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. He frequently delivers talks on gender politics, radical evil and critical pedagogy.

*Author email:* tud28551@temple.edu.

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