

PREFACE

This book is the product of a conversation that took place over several years between a historian, Albert Hernández, and an ethicist, Miguel A. De La Torre, concerning the ethereal, specifically the spiritual force of evil. The historian was interested in how evil has been manifested throughout the centuries; the ethicist was interested in how moral agency is constructed in response to how evil is defined and which people-group signifies said definition. We entered the conversation with different backgrounds and different goals, sharing with each other—and now with you—our own testimonies concerning our encounter with the Evil One, or better yet, the evil ones.

Albert Hernandez

I am a deeply religious man who grew up Roman Catholic in the Cuban exile community of Miami, Florida. My love for historical studies began early; the memories of so many relatives who passed away longing to return to a vanished world and time haunted my ethical sensibilities, making me highly suspicious of romanticizing the past. I learned the contested story of ideological division between Cubans who supported their former capitalist dictator, President Fulgencio Batista, with deep loyalty and Cubans who sided with the alleged Communist liberator, Fidel Castro, with a sincere hope for a better future. Each was certain that absolute good was on their side and that absolute evil resided in the twisted hearts and minds of their opponents. These tendencies came to a head in Miami during the late 1980s and early 1990s as Soviet Communism collapsed and scores of disillusioned former revolutionaries “tired of Communism” and, believing it to be “a lie,” began arriving in Miami after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Such are the outcomes of

ideological obsessions for many men and women; whether one is possessed by the ideas of the “left” or by the ideas of the “right,” sooner or later one’s excessive passion for the noble cause simply runs out of fuel and one enters a state of disillusionment. The twentieth century witnessed an enormous level and intensity of such ideological struggles, and I recall how my maternal grandmother, a Cuban peasant with a fourth-grade education, compared this type of excess, whether from the “left” or the “right,” to demonic possession.

A small but significant aspect of the early Cuban exile experience was the generous support and empathy received from the Jewish community and its leaders in the 1960s. Some of my parents’ Jewish friends and neighbors were Holocaust survivors. In my early thirties, I attended a public presentation that affected me deeply. During the presentation, a conversation focusing on the problem of evil drifted to the question of madness as a means of explaining the violence and evil of the Nazi concentration camps. Some in the audience were convinced that such atrocities could be explained by reference to psychoanalytic theory or mental illness. Others believed that the key to understanding such inhuman cruelty lay in the role of demons and Satan corrupting the human soul and turning it against all that God represents. Finally, an elderly Jewish man from Nuremberg, Germany, told his story. According to him, if we had seen with our own eyes how some of the camp guards could play with little children in the morning, bounce them on their laps and give them candy at noon, and then stand coldly at the selection line to decide who lived for another day and who went to the gas chambers for an alleged shower, the answer was easy. “Then, my dear friends,” he said, “you would never doubt that *the demonic is real* and what an extremely dangerous force it is when unleashed upon the world!” The man’s words have stuck with me through the years, moving me to explore the question for myself. How could an all-loving and all-powerful deity allow evil things to happen to otherwise innocent men, women, and children? Does postulating absolute, sentient Evil—as represented traditionally in the form of Satan and his demons—offer a partial answer?

Miguel A. De La Torre

I went to Blessed Sacrament Catholic School in Jackson Heights, New York, and I attended Mass every Sunday. I was baptized and confirmed in the church, but at night I would offer sacrifices to Obatalá (my mother’s *santo*), Changó (my father’s), and of course Elegguá (my *santo*). I was a child of Elleguá, best known within the Santería faith tradition as the trickster. I wore his

elekes—beaded necklaces—kept his image in a dish behind my front door, and was in line to become a *santero*—a priest of the faith.

Like many Hispanics, I grew up in a hybrid spirituality where I could be a good Catholic boy who prayed the rosary by day and a faithful Santería devotee by night. Although theologians will be quick to point out the contradictions of my religious practices, those of us who participate in the faith of the people recognize and hold a more fluid understanding of spirituality. In my early twenties, motivated by a youthful desire to assimilate to the dominant culture, I walked down a Baptist church aisle and gave my heart to Jesus. Eventually, I would go to seminary and pastor a rural church in Kentucky.

During my spiritual journey as a Southern Baptist, I did more than simply put aside my previous religiosity. I learned from spiritual mentors that Catholicism, due to all the statues of saints in churches, was idol worship and that the Pope was akin to the Anti-Christ. As to my Santería, this was clearly of the Devil. All of the *santos* venerated were in fact demons, with Ellegguá as the head demon, Satan. I accepted these interpretations without question, and turned my back on my spiritual roots with the zeal of a new convert. I was now walking with God, no longer a servant of the Devil.

Yet as I read scripture, I was struck by how little mention Satan receives in the Hebrew Bible and how sparse were the New Testament bases for the fuller understanding of Satan that would later develop in Christian faith. Also, as I saw the evil that good Christian folk were committing in the world, or with which they were complicit through their silence, I began to wonder about the role Satan might be playing in their lives. Added to this was the witness of non-Christian faith traditions that seemed in their praxis to be more faithful to the ideals of Christianity than some of those within my own faith tradition.

I began to question Satan, wondering how he developed and how he is used to define those who did not believe as I did. I began to wonder if it was a good idea to have such a strict dichotomy between absolute Good and absolute Evil, a concept that did not seem to be the norm in the Hebrew Bible. Furthermore, reaching back to my Elegguá, I began to wonder how an ethics based on the concept of trickster—a concept that appears all too often in the biblical text—would differ from an ethics in which we are with God and those who disagree with us are with the Devil.

As I reclaimed the hybrid spirituality of my people, seeing and defining myself as a “Baptecotal Catholic Santero,” I moved away from a rigid understanding of faith and instead boldly began to wrestle with faith concepts that

bring oppression to the most vulnerable. One such concept, which was the primary motivation for me to engage a historian in the present project, is how the demonization of others facilitates and justifies their disenfranchisement and dispossession. As a liberative ethicist, I am compelled to seek out the face of evil if I truly want to work toward the dismantling of oppressive social structures.

From these social and intellectual contexts began the conversations that led to the beginnings of our quest for the historical Satan. As the years went by we discussed the manifestation of evil across the pages of history and in the works of different philosophers and ethicists. What exactly is evil? Is it the byproduct of demonic beings? An antithesis to the goodness of God? A consequence of a cosmic battle between the forces of Christ and those of Satan? Or is it part of human nature? Is it an innate predisposition or the result of learned immoral behaviors? Why is the history of Christianity punctuated with so many episodes of unnecessary violence and intolerance of other traditions in the name of goodness and light? We each wrote on the topic and shared our work with each other, allowing our coauthor to add, delete, or challenge our work. Pages went back and forth between us as together we shaped the conversation into the book you are presently holding.

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