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A Worldview Clash at the United Nations

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"Those who incite murder and celebrate suicide reveal their contempt for life itself," the President declared. "They have no place in any religious faith, they have no claim on the world's sympathy and they should have no friend in this chamber." Is the United Nations up to this challenge? [See official text of President Bush's Speech]

The European press anticipated the President's U.N. address as an opportunity to put America and the Bush administration on trial. Some predicted that the President would bring a rather nonconfrontational address designed to secure U.N. support. They were wrong. Bush went to New York to put the U.N. on notice and call it to fulfill its responsibility.

The President's address revealed that his basic worldview remains unchanged. In the immediate aftermath of the September 11 attacks, President Bush shocked the cultural elites by his forceful and deliberate use of the categories of good and evil. These words have been debased by the postmodern worldview, and the academic and political elites assume that evil is an outdated and unusable word. But, though the word may have been erased from the postmodernists' dictionary–it is still essential to the President's vocabulary, and that of the American public.

Standing at the rostrum of the General Assembly, the President drew the critical distinction between good and evil: "Events during the past two years have set before us the clearest of divides: Between those who seek order and those who spread chaos; between those who work for peaceful change and those who adopt the methods of gangsters; between those who honor the rights of man and those who deliberately take the lives of men and women and children, without mercy or shame. Between these alternatives there is no neutral ground. All governments that support terror are complicit in a war against civilization. No government should ignore the threat of terror because to look the other way gives terrorists the chance to regroup and recruit and prepare. And all nations that fight terror, as if the lives of their own people depend on it, will earn the favorable judgment of history."

This view of the world is anathema to the international elites–especially in Europe and the United States. The worldview is force-fed to America's young people through the educational system, and college professors report that students are reluctant to call anyone evil, even Adolf Hitler. This moral disarmament is as dangerous as the threat of terrorism, but it is part and parcel of a worldview determined to draw no moral distinctions between the agents of terror and their victims.

In the arena of the United Nations, the primary divide on this question is between America and Europe. As Robert Kagan of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace explains, "It is time to stop pretending that Europeans and Americans share a common view of the world, or even that they occupy the same world. On the all-important question of power–the efficacy of power, the morality of power, the desirability of power–American and European perspectives are diverging."

Kagan believes he knows why the American and European worldviews are diverging. He explains that Europe has bought into Immanuel Kant's Enlightenment vision of "perpetual peace," while Americans reflect Thomas Hobbes' belief that violence can only be restrained by the use of force. Kagan traces the history of Europe and the United States in order to demonstrate the evolution of these worldviews, but he sees the divide in basically secular terms.

While Kagan offers a very insightful argument, I would offer an alternative explanation. Europe and the United States do represent very different worldviews, and these worldviews do determine how each culture views the world. But there is something beyond a secular reality here. The twentieth century witnessed the rapid secularization of European culture. Though the process began in the Enlightenment itself, the secular tide did not sweep over Western Europe until after the Second World War. The secular worldview cannot deal with the category of evil. Behavior may be socially unacceptable, or even pathological, but not evil. The very concept of evil requires a belief in moral absolutes, and moral absolutes depend on an objective morality. In the end, only a divine Creator can establish an objective morality. The formula is simple: No God, no moral absolutes, no evil.

Americans are not [yet] as secular as the Europeans. Most Americans claim to believe in God, and the residue of the Christian worldview still informs the American conscience. Americans–along with their president–believe in the reality of good and evil. They also believe that evil must be confronted and, where necessary, confronted with force.

The Christian worldview imposes the concept of original sin on our understanding of what it means to be human. Christians understand the reality of evil and believe that evil must be restrained. The use of force is always surrounded by a host of moral questions and qualifications, but, in the end, most Christians are convinced that force must often be exercised, lest human sinfulness be set loose.

Time will reveal the U.N.'s response to the President's speech and appeal. Recent history offers little reason for confidence that the United Nations will summon moral resolve and meet the President's challenge. Nevertheless, the speech itself offers an opportunity to consider the basic divide between the Christian and secular worldviews. There is little hope for those who refuse to acknowledge the difference between good and evil.