Redeeming Evil, Part 1: The Problem **[1]**

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Social media is awash with videos “revealing the truth” about the origins of Easter, Halloween, and Christmas. “The truth”, these videos claim, is the “shocking” revelation that Christianity appropriated the celebrations from pagan cultures. This is usually accompanied by a click-baity expression of surprise, or a sagely, knowing look into the camera.

None of this is true (not for Easter [2], Halloween [3], nor Christmas [4]). But, if there were a kernel of truth to the accusations, then so what?

Tainted Things

Growing up, I remember that there was a small book on satanism and the occult in our house. The purpose of the book was to warn people about encountering satanism in everyday life. It was a product of the Satanic Panic [5] of the 1980s and 1990s. I have no idea where my parents got that book, as they were not gripped by the Satanic Panic. One thing that I remember from that book from when I was a teenager, was a list of satanic symbols that the reader should be aware of. These included obvious examples, such as the pentagram, and the upside down cross1. Even the stylised double s of the Schutzstaffel (Nazi SS) featured. But one seemed odd to me: a lightning bolt (⚡). It’s a universal symbol used to indicate high voltage, battery charging, and other electrical related information.

Even as a child, I thought that stigmatising such a ubiquitous symbol was going overboard. Does the presence of this symbol mean that electrical transformers in neighbourhoods and household electrical chargers are all somehow satanic? That these devices are demon possessed? Are they now cursed or hexed? Has the use of this symbol, even unintentionally, “claimed”, “given permission”, or “invited” (to use the language I have heard some people use around Halloween celebrations) Satan and his demons to inhabit the energy drink which sports the lightning bolt as an emblem? Surely context matters?2 Or, if intention does matter, how can we possibly know the intention of someone who spray painted the symbol on a wall or doodled it on a piece of paper?

Isolation and Fortification

Such warnings against “satanic symbols” have, I believe, something in common with contemporary cancel culture. It is that once something—or someone—has been tainted with the association of something evil, unrighteous, or undesirable, then there is no redeeming it. The comedian who made a racist remark a decade ago can never again be granted an audience. The pentagram will always be a channel for summoning dark spirits. In both cases, there is the claim of a moral authority (and superiority). It creates an “us versus them” mentality, and an urgency to isolate from, and protect

against, the “them”. Crossing the boundary from “us” to “them” is easy; often we are all too eager to toss someone over that line. Crossing from “them” to “us” on the other hand, is extremely difficult, if possible at all.

Yet redemption lies at the heart of the Christian message.

Imagine putting (if it were possible) all the words that you know in a box. Now take out anything which has an undesirable connotation: all the swear words, anything sexually suggestive, all the double entendres, anything racist or mocking and demeaning. This also applies to archaic and historic uses. You might have many left over when you are done. But every time a word left in the box acquires a bad connotation, you have to take that out as well. And once you have taken it out, it can no longer be put back in. Yes, you can make up new words, but imagine one day running out of words; or only having so few left that you can only form limited sentences and ideas with them. It might seem absurd, but if we are not able to ever put anything back in the box (what I am going to call “redemption”), then that is the direction in which we are heading; even if it takes many generations. Now imagine the same for businesses, books, songs, movies; anything.

If redemption is not possible, all that will one day remain is a fearful and joyless isolation.

Consider the dilemma that many Christians, who believe that positive affirmation of homosexual expressions is sinful, have when it comes to the rainbow. The rainbow has been appropriated by the LGBTQ+ community as the “pride flag”, But Christians believe that the original meaning of the rainbow was as God’s promise to Noah to never again destroy all life on earth. The ubiquity of gay pride means that if one sees rainbow colours somewhere, one’s first association with it may very well be gay pride, even if that wasn’t the intention. But do Christians declare the rainbow (or the discrete rainbow colours) as anathema? Has LGBTQ+ activism won out against God’s covenantal promise? Is the symbol of God’s covenantal promise to humanity now forever tainted, and if so, can it never be redeemed for its original purpose? I think not. But one would need to proceed in wisdom and maturity.

Fighting Monsters in Our Imagination

Coming back to people objecting to so-called Christian appropriation of pagan practices: what is the heart of these objections?

If raised by a sceptic, I believe the purpose is an attempt to discredit Christianity. If Christianity appropriated ideas from other religions, the unstated reasoning goes, it somehow proves that nothing about it is real. None of its historical claims can then be taken seriously. I might be wrong that this is the intention of all sceptics, but if this is correct, it is very much a *non sequitur*. If Christianity did appropriate something, it’s not because it was trying to patch together a religion without any real substance behind it, but because it wanted to fix what it viewed as broken, but repairable (redeemable).

If raised by a believer, it comes from a place of fear or hostility. There is the “us”, who are good and holy, and the “them”, who are evil and defiled, and never the two should meet. By participating in what is evil (whether knowingly or unknowingly), Christians are committing a grave sin, which can endanger them and invite the wrath of God.

While Christians fear sinning by participating in practices corrupted by evil associations, thereby somehow inviting demons into their lives, Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 8:4–6 that this is not the case:

> Therefore concerning the eating of things sacrificed to idols, we know that no idol is anything in the world, and that there is no other God but one. For though there are things that are called “gods”, whether in the heavens or on earth—as there are many “gods” and many “lords”—yet to us there is one God, the Father, of whom are all things, and we for him; and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things, and we live through him.

> 1 Corinthians 8:4–6

The pagans' superstitions (which, I believe, could involve real demons) are not anything (literally nothing; not a thing) compared to the real and living God. Paul goes on to speak about people whose consciences bother them shouldn't be enticed to participate—and that is fine, but we should not be held back by *fear of the power of evil*.

Conclusion

On 30 July 2003, the last "Type 1" (original design) Volkswagen Beetle was produced in Mexico. With a run of 65 years, the Beetle had been iconic and impactful for generations of people over much of the world. However, seeing how many people were nostalgically fawning over the news of the end of the production run of the Beetle, some people couldn't help themselves from remarking that the vehicle had a dark origin: it was Adolf Hitler himself who wanted a "people's car" (the literal meaning of the name "Volkswagen") for the mass of German people to be able to afford and use. The design was so successful, that it allowed many people across the world to own a car they otherwise may not have.

Would the world have been better off if the Beetle had been a victim of denazification? Setting aside questions of environmental impact, it allowed for the upward social and economic mobility (pardon the pun) of generations of people—most of whom, arguably, never knew what its ideological origin was. BMW, IBM, Kodak, Hugo Boss, and others, are all companies that collaborated with the Nazis. In today's culture, they would likely have been summarily "cancelled". They might not be able to fully redress past wrongs, but they can work towards the betterment and the common good in the future. The alternative is to whittle away, slowly, until only a tiny island of like-minded and flawless people remains, isolated from the rest of the real and messy world. As each word becomes a profanity, as every symbol acquires a chequered association, those who are "holy" will have to shun all of the rest of the world.

Compared to a perfect God—who truly is holy—all of humanity falls short of its purpose and intent for which we were created. That is the literal definition of the word "sin". Before we've left the starting gate, we ought to have been "cancelled" (or, to put it more traditionally, "deserved death"). But God's plan was always one of redemption: offering forgiveness for past (and present and future) wrongs, working out a transformation of outlook and purpose, so that people can build towards the Kingdom of God, which is the setting right of the wrongs of the world, and aligning the world with God's creative purposes.

> For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.
>
> Romans 6:23

And while a Tweet can travel across the world in a matter of minutes or hours, bringing an end to someone's career and reputation, God has a different way of doing things:

> The Lord is not slow concerning his promise, as some count slowness; but he is patient with us, not wishing that anyone should perish, but that all should come to repentance.
>
> 2 Peter 3:9

In the next article in this series, we'll consider some examples of redemption which have occurred. Then, we'll consider how we can go about to redeem (not excuse or condone, but shift perspective).

- 1. Even though it is today often branded as a satanic symbol, tradition tells us that the apostle Peter requested to be crucified upside down, not to mock the cross on which Jesus died, but as a sign of reverence, saying that he was not worthy to die in exactly the same way as his Lord and Saviour.
- 2. The spectre of “satanic symbols” continued to haunt me for years. At university I really enjoyed graph theory. But in graph theory, a K_5 graph is a pentagram. I needed to convince myself that it is a mathematical entity, not some form of satanic worship in and of itself, and that drawing one or working with one wasn’t participation in satanism. It sounds silly, but such are the scars left on us who grew up with the Satanic Panic [6].

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