

## Introduction

# DESPERATELY SEEKING SATAN

**O**n the west coast of Florida sits a small fishing village called Inglis. Originally called Crackertown (from a term used for white Southerners that can be taken as either derogatory or complimentary, depending on context), Inglis is but a few minutes north of the Crystal River, nestled among densely populated forests, waterways, and wildlife. With a population of only approximately 1,500 and located about an hour north of Tampa, Inglis achieved national attention in 2001 when it became the spiritual epicenter of a conflict between the forces of Satan and the servants of God. Inglis's Mayor, Carolyn Risher, made international news when she signed a city proclamation banishing Satan from her community. Specifically, the proclamation issued by the town of Inglis, carrying the town's seal and logo, states:

Be it known from this day forward that Satan, ruler of darkness, giver of evil, destroyer of what is good and just, is not now, nor ever again will be, a part of this town of Inglis. Satan is hereby declared powerless, no longer ruling over, nor influencing, our citizens.

In the past, Satan has caused division, animosity, hate, confusion, ungodly acts on our youths, and discord among our friends and loved ones. **NO LONGER!**

The body of Jesus Christ, those citizens cleansed by the Blood of the Lamb, hereby join together to bind the forces of evil in the Holy Name of Jesus. We have taken our town back for the Kingdom of God.

We are taking everything back that the devil ever stole from us. We will never again be deceived by satanic and demonic forces.

As blood-bought children of God, we exercise our authority over the devil in Jesus' name. By the authority, and through His Blessed Name, we command all satanic and demonic forces to cease their activities and depart the town of Inglis.

As the Mayor of Inglis, duly elected by the citizens of this town, and appointed by God to this position of leadership, I proclaim victory over Satan, freedom for our citizens, and liberty to worship our Creator and Heavenly Father, the God of Israel. I take this action in accordance with the words of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, as recorded in Matthew 28:18-20 and Mark 16:15-18.

Signed and sealed this 5th Day of November, 2001

Carolyn Risher, Mayor

Sally McCranie, Town Clerk. (Leary 2001)

Mayor Risher and her pastor placed copies of the proclamation in hollowed-out four-foot fence posts situated at the four entrances to the village. Each post was inscribed with the words "Repent, Request, and Resist." Subsequent to the posts being stolen a few months after installation, the Mayor's pastor replaced each with an eight-foot fence post—buried four feet into the ground and anchored with concrete.

Mayor Risher, a devout fundamentalist Christian, refused to rescind the proclamation against Satan, even when nationally ridiculed. When sued by the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) on behalf of Inglis resident Polly Browser, who claimed her U.S. Constitutional Rights to the separation of church and state were violated, the Mayor and the City Council stood steadfast. Neither remorseful nor repentant, Risher justified her position by declaring that "You're either with God or you're against Him" (*St. Petersburg Times* 2002). For the Mayor, there exists no middle ground, no subtle differences, and no nuances. You're either with God or with Satan—and few are those who take the narrow path, but many are those who traverse on the wide road to perdition. It would appear that unless individuals share the same form of faith as the Mayor, they are against God. The danger of such thinking is that it all too easily defines everything that is suspect, unfamiliar, or ambiguous—such as the stranger, the alien, the racial or ethnic other, or dissenters from the norm—as belonging to Satan's domain. One is left

wondering if indeed the enormity, intricacy, and complexity of evil are simplistically reduced to the image of Satan.

For many living in the twenty-first century, news of city officials partnering with the church to cast out demons from their town appears somewhat out-of-place, a practice long exorcised from public and religious consciousness since the end of the Middle Ages. Yet the actions of Mayor Risher and her fellow citizens may appear more at home in our alleged modern times than most Americans care to admit. According to a nationwide *Newsweek* poll conducted by Princeton Survey Research Associates<sup>1</sup> on April 13–14, 2000, 75 percent of those surveyed declared their belief in the reality of Satan, while 19 percent denied Satan’s existence, and 6 percent were unsure. An opinion poll conducted by Fox News<sup>2</sup> on September 23–24, 2003, discovered that 71 percent of Americans believed in the Devil, while 24 percent denied the existence of Satan, and 5 percent were not sure. A Baylor Religion survey conducted in 2007 showed that 73 percent were either absolutely sure (53.6 percent) or probably sure (19.4 percent) that Satan was real, while 27 percent doubted Satan’s existence.

These poll numbers might help explain the success and popularity of such supernatural thrillers as Frank E. Peretti’s novels—specifically, *This Present Darkness* (1986) and its sequel, *Piercing the Darkness* (1989), the latter being the winner of the Evangelical Christian Publisher Association (ECPA) Gold Medallion Book Award in 1990 for best fiction. Both books together have sold over 3.5 million copies worldwide. Written by an Assembly of God minister, Peretti’s novels tell the tales of spiritual battles conducted between the angelic warriors of Heaven and demonic spirits from Hell for control of the citizens of the small fictitious towns of Ashton and Bacon’s Corner. The novels create a dualist cosmology where the characters are either fundamentalist Christians called by God to provide “prayer-cover” for the angels to win the spiritual struggle manifested in the physical world, or else non-Christians who are demon-influenced, if not possessed. These demons seem to flourish in multicultural settings (1989, 140), public schools (1986, 197; 1989, 31), school boards (1989, 216), colleges and universities (1986, 48; 1989, 248), the government (1986, 190; 1989, 22), multinational corporations (1986, 205), non-Christian religions such as Taoism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Native American spirituality (1986, 315; 1989, 366); liberal Christian ministers (1986, 238); and finally, organizations such as the United Nations (1986, 165), the World Bank (1986, 205), and the ACFA (the American Citizens’

Freedom Association, which seems eerily similar to the ACLU (1989, 71).<sup>3</sup> The true Christians are the real persecuted minority (1989, 82) who face the full power of secular society and the government, both of which are influenced by the forces of Satan.

Peretti paints for us a picture of absolute Evil engaged in a cosmic death-struggle against the forces of absolute Good, concepts rooted in how many Americans define Satan and God. Mayor Risher's proclamation to the residents of Inglis compares well with the novel's prayer warrior who also geared her proclamation to Satan, exclaiming "whatever your plans for this town, I rebuke you in Jesus' name, and I bind you, and I cast you out!" (1986, 113). What Inglis's Mayor does through decree, the fictionalized character in the novel does through prayer. Both of them rebuke, bind, and cast out Satan, in Jesus' name, from their towns.

The quest for the historical Satan is an endeavor not only to deal with the problem of evil but also to understand evil and shed new light on Christianity's age-old emphasis on absolute Good versus absolute Evil. The idea of a *quest* comes to us from the Medieval Latin term *quaestio*, meaning "to question." To begin a quest is to set off on a spiritual journey or a philosophical search for answers to questions dealing with ultimate meaning in human life. As the embodiment of light, goodness, and truth, Jesus Christ has been juxtaposed for centuries against the figure of the Anti-Christ as a representative of Satan, signifying the opposite qualities of darkness, evil, and falsehood. This cosmic and earthly dichotomy of Christ versus Anti-Christ has been central to the Christian imagination since the early Middle Ages whenever it confronted anxiety and fear about the approaching "not-yet" of the future and dealt with looming social changes that were forcing the church to alter its exclusivist doctrines or reform its hierarchical organizational structures.

In our quest for this historical and moral understanding, we must avoid the pitfall of limiting how many perceive Satan's role in the world today to small out-of-the-way towns, whether they be the fictional towns of Ashton and Bacon's Corner or the real town of Inglis, Florida. Satanic and demonic powers have been blamed for many of the atrocities of the past century, such as the two World Wars, the horror of Nazi concentration camps, numerous acts of genocide, detonation of atomic bombs, and the spread of terrorist attacks around the world. Indeed, whether we search the archives for modern examples or gaze back into the past for further evidence of our predisposition

for evil, acts of violence in the name of religious ideals aimed at defeating cosmic or absolute Evil are more numerous than most readers imagine.

Our quest for the historical Satan cannot rest content with an overview of the satanic origins of Judeo-Christian demonology, or by merely compiling another summary of how Satan has been presented in the Hebrew and New Testament scriptures, or with another academic analysis of the medieval witch-craze and the injustices of the Spanish Inquisition. If we are to be honest, then our search for the origins of Satan must also take on the larger and perhaps more ancient question about the origins of evil and the degree to which many of our images of evil were derived from popular culture and Christianity's struggle against rival religious beliefs and philosophical ideals. Just as important is the unsettling historical reality that greater atrocities have been committed in defense against various conceptions of the forces of evil personified in Satan and his demonic servants. Declaring the "Other" as Satanic or demonic has been effective for both religious and political leaders. Identifying the Other as a tool of Satan differentiates them from their political adversaries (those representing the evil in the world).

We see these persistent tendencies at play nationally in the way President Obama has come to be demonized—horns and all (see Figure 1)—as well as globally in the rhetoric of security and containment that led up to Operation Desert Storm in 1991 when Saddam Hussein's capacity for evil was compared with that of Adolf Hitler's Nazi regime as the embodiment of absolute Evil in modern times. We see the pattern repeated when Iran's President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad states that former U.S. President George W. Bush is inspired by Satan (Harrison 2003), or when Venezuela's President Hugo Chavez, speaking from the same lectern as President Bush during a United Nation's address, said: "The devil came here yesterday, right here. . . . It smells of sulfur still today." And what was the reaction of the United Nations? First gasps, then horrified giggles, then finally loud applause that lasted so long that U.N. officials had to instruct the cheering group of delegates to stop (Cooper 2006).

Simple name-calling, while providing provocative sound-bites for the evening news, still misses the persistent role some perceive Satan plays in horrific world events. Take for example the tragedies that occurred on 9/11, when four planes were hijacked—two flown into the World Trade Center in New York City, one into the Pentagon outside of Washington D.C., and the last crashing in a field in rural Pennsylvania, falling short of its intended

target. The nineteen al-Qaida hijackers who commandeered the jets, armed only with boxcutters, saw themselves as holy warriors combating what they perceived to be the “Great Satan”—a term first applied to the United States in the late 1970s by the Ayatollah Khomeini of Iran during that nation’s Islamic Revolution.

The poverty and misery experienced by many within the Muslim world is understood as a consequence of Zionism and its major sponsors, the United States and Great Britain. When we consider how the United States benefits from economic globalization at the expense of the majority of the world’s population, it is not surprising that many Muslims in our world, among others, view the U.S. as the major exporter of evil. It matters little if Americans fail to see themselves as global aggressors—many throughout the world do. By dismissing the Muslim world as the real evil, the Christian West can ignore the causes of their resentment and any validity their grievances may have.

But can such dismissals work both ways? Not surprising, the hijackers of 9/11 saw themselves mainly as fervent believers choosing to enter martyrdom. As demonstrated by Palestinian suicide bombers, the extreme act of self-sacrifice is conducted as a religious and patriotic expression against the forces of evil. By dying for God and country, they achieve redemption while defying unjust powers. Fueled by the consequences of the U.S. position in the world, these young men—and many other young men and women throughout the world—understand salvation from the forces of Satan as linked to attacking what they perceive to be the root cause of evil in the world: America, “the Great Satan.”

The 9/11 hijackers were not the only ones who saw the U.S. as an evil nation deserving judgment from the Almighty. On Friday, September 14, 2001, the imam of the Red Mosque in Islamabad, Pakistan, delivered his weekly message, focused on the 9/11 attacks that occurred three days earlier. “This is the wrath of Allah,” said the imam, his voice ringing over a loudspeaker. “You Americans commit oppression everywhere, in Kashmir, in Palestine, and you do not see the blood spilled.” No Arab country had the means to launch such attacks, the imam declared, “But when Allah catches hold of you, there is no escape” (Constable 2001).

But just as some within Islam perceive the United States as the “Great Satan,” so too does the United States perceive some Muslim factions and nations and their people as evil and satanic. Since the collapse of the Berlin Wall and the start of “the War on Terror,” George W. Bush provided us,

during his 2002 State of the Union speech, with a new term: the “Axis of Evil” (Iraq, Iran, and North Korea). A similar scenario played out when President Ronald Reagan’s eagerness to revitalize the U.S. defense industry and halt the spread of communism around the world compelled him to describe the Soviet Union as “the evil empire” while denying the validity of international research suggesting this alleged empire was already on the verge of bankruptcy, internal collapse, and open revolt among its Islamic eastern provinces by the time of his election in 1980 (d’Encausse 1979). Euro-American fears of Soviet aggression, which Moscow’s expansionist and reactionary behaviors often encouraged, drove American public opinion about the future safety of the free world to agree with President Reagan’s characterization of the U.S.S.R. as an “evil empire.” Reagan’s use of this phrase, and its echo across the world of newspaper and television media, as well as in living rooms and dinner tables across America, made it one of the most successful rhetorical ploys ever used in focusing U.S. foreign policy on a global enemy.

Labeling opponents of the United States as evil is not limited to those who participate or advocate acts of violence. All who reject the U.S. position in the world, specifically Muslims or Arabs, are seen as demonically led. Franklin Graham, son and successor of evangelist Billy Graham, created a furor by describing Islam as a “very evil and wicked religion” (Kristof 2002). Meanwhile, Jerry Vines, former head of the Southern Baptist Convention, declared the Prophet Muhammad to be a demon-obsessed pedophile, which echoed earlier medieval projections of Islamic evil and serious disrespect about the religious message and ministry of Islam’s merciful and revered founder. The true followers of Satan are thus identified and stereotyped as those who practice “Radical Islam” (Kristof 2002).

To counter such evil, the self-proclaimed believers in the “real” God enter into a crusade against God’s enemies, similar to the fictionist yarn spun by Peretti. The invisible spiritual battle taking place around us, which is won or lost by how many believers drop to their knees in prayer, directly impacts the physical battles between true Christians and the rest of the world. According to Mayor Risher, the evil committed on September 11 inspired her to pursue the proclamation against allowing Satan into her town: “It gave me the inspiration that [her constituency] needs to be ready if something like this was to happen to the town of Inglis. We need to be ready to meet our maker.” Even though a terrorist attack on a small Florida village is highly unlikely, manipulating fear allows the Mayor to call her fellow citizens to repentance.

She goes on to say that “if our churches band together and pray, our nation and our town can be a godly nation and a godly town” (Tuchman 2002).

For some religious leaders, whether dealing with Christianity or Islam (or any other faith tradition for that matter), the Other is either the personification of evil or demon possessed. It cannot be denied that evil was, and continues to be, committed throughout the world by men and women of all religious orientations. But to reduce the Other to an ultimate representative or personification of evil justifies cruelties and atrocities committed by those engaged in the battle to save humans from Satan’s corruption. No evil ever dreamed-up by Satan can outdo the atrocities committed by good, decent people attempting to purge such evil forces from this world. Any “crusade to rid the world of evil,” once and for all, is a misguided endeavor fraught with deep peril for both the self-appointed warriors of goodness, as well as for the alleged evildoers who will be on the receiving end of these projections. Some of the most diabolical actions, enough to make the very demons of Hell cringe in shame, are committed by those who consider themselves to be God’s righteous chosen ones in the spiritual battle against the forces of evil. David Frankfurter states it best, “historically verifiable atrocities take place not in the ceremonies of some evil realm or as expressions of some ontological evil force, but rather in the course of *purging* evil and its alleged devotees from the world” (2006, 224).

To paraphrase the immortal words of the cartoon character Pogo the Possum: “We have met Satan, and he is us!” Whether it be flying planes into skyscrapers or U.S.-based mercenary companies that kill unarmed Iraqi civilians, such acts are justified as a form of self-defense against an invincible satanic Other. Unfortunately, the spiritual battle against the alleged forces of darkness, which often becomes a physical battle in the political or military arena, masks any actual evidence of evil supposedly existing in the accused Other. Naming the Other as “satanic” or “demonic” effectively short-circuits moral arguments, political critiques, or social analysis. By definition, the individual, group, or nation accused of manifesting or personifying Satan’s vices and desires can never be in a dialogue of mutual edification or a meaningful compromise. Pure and virtuous warriors in a cosmic spiritual battle against the forces of Satan need not consider, understand, or explain the root causes of the opponent’s actions. To do so demonstrates a lack of resolve or an acute moral weakness. Even those who attempted to articulate a more nuanced elucidation as to the causes of the 9/11 events, an understanding

that considers the grievances of the hijackers, are dismissed as “coddling terrorists” or attempting to “psychoanalyze” evil. In either case, a critical exploration of the causes of evil fails to occur. Instead, in the name of God, or Allah, and in defense of the highest good (*Summum Bonum*), evil—with few or no constraints—is perpetrated in order to resist evil. Fire always seems to be fought with fire.

Still, even though many Christians may rail against Satan—casting him out from influencing their lives—they still need Satan. Inglis’s Mayor Risher may “bind the forces of evil in the Holy Name of Jesus” and cast Satan from her fair village, but nevertheless Risher, along with many Christians, desperately need Satan. For, you see, how else can she, or we for that matter, explain the presence of evil before a God whom we claim to be all-loving and all-powerful? Reading any major local or international newspaper section, on any given day, is to read about evil on a global scale (for example, Darfur, the most recent in a long line of genocidal hotspots) and on a local scale (for example, the abused body of an innocent child recently discarded in a garbage dumpster). In a world overflowing with injustices, one must ask: “Where is God?” Surely an all-loving, all-compassionate, and all-merciful “Father” would act protectively and proactively upon hearing the agonizing cries of a child. The existence of evil raises what theologians call “the theodicy question,” best articulated by the eighteenth-century philosopher David Hume, who asked concerning God: “Is he willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then he is impotent. Is he able, but not willing? Then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? Whence then is evil?” (1948, 196).

The word “theodicy” is derived from two Greek words: *theos*, which means God, and *dikē*, which symbolizes justice. The word argues that God is just despite the presence of evil. For evil to exist, and God to be acquitted of complicity and retain an all-loving and powerful nature, injustice must somehow be reconciled with God. For many, evil exists because (1) human depravity makes no one innocent (hence the concept of Original Sin rooted in Adam and Eve’s fall from grace); (2) it is as part of some master cosmic plan whose end purpose is to produce mature followers of Christ (as Paul would say: “all things work for good to them that love God”—Rom 8:28); and/or (3) because there is a devil, a father of misery and darkness who can be blamed for all the evil and injustices that exist in the world. Satan literally becomes a necessary evil—an evil that excuses God. Satan allows the Rishers of the world to hold on to a faith in an all-loving and all-powerful God while

evil runs rampant. Indeed, the history of several major religious traditions is punctuated with examples of acts of violence and policies of intolerance carried out in the name of the one, true God of power and might. Nevertheless, regardless of how we wish to imagine or construct Satan, regardless of what powers we may wish to bestow upon him, in the final analysis there must remain on God's office desk a sign that reads "the buck stops here."

As necessary as Satan may appear to be for Christians, attempting to understand Satan via the theodicy question may conclude with the justification of evil. Terrence Tilley would argue that to seek answers to the theodicy question is to attempt to make God's providence complicit with injustices. Evil becomes an abstract concept that ignores pain and suffering (1991, 210–14). The mother whose daughter was raped before her eyes by an invading army; the father who holds his son in his arms as he dies of hunger due to the poverty faced by a population located in the midst of rich, fertile land; or the child who loses his or her parents to a drunken driver going home from a Christmas party—all these find little solace in doctrinal positions on the theodicy question. For those who suffer unjust situations, explaining away evil so that God's limitless love and power can remain unquestioned falls short of any meaningful and honest discussion about Satan.

It matters little if Satan exists—evil definitely does. And maybe our response to Satan is a recognition that the evil he causes, or represents, is beyond human comprehension. No simple theological answer for the reason of Satan's existence will satisfy the one suffering unjustly. Our quest for the historical Satan is meaningless unless we also develop a response to the disturbing examples of evil committed in the name of goodness and justice—an ethics—that seeks to counteract the forces of Satan.

Our concern is not whether Satan is believed to be physically or symbolically present. The fact of the matter is that Satan, in the minds of many, is both physically real and symbolically at hand; and that presence has and continues to influence human moral agency. Any understanding of human nature, religious beliefs (specifically Christianity), or morality must touch upon Satan and the evil he represents. This is why this book was developed. It is not our goal to prove or disprove Satan's existence. Such exercises fall short of our real goal concerning Satan: understanding the reality that we have traditionally called Satan, its actual origins and influence on humanity, and our call to overcome the injustices caused in Satan's name. Our interest is to understand Satan as symbol and what this symbol signifies. Our hope is to

move beyond the numerous existing dichotomies that oppose those who seek to rid the world of Satan's presence to those who seek to define who/what is Satanic and who/what is not.

Redefining what Christianity, and Euro-American society, is trying to signify when claims about Satan's existence surface will help us to discuss and confront the concept of evil. The questions we pose at different historical stages of our investigation include: Who exactly is Satan? What are his origins? Does Satan have power over humans? How has he evolved throughout history? Is he the evil counterpart to God? Does Satan contain similar attributes as God—all-knowing, all-powerful, ever-present? These historical questions raise other theological and philosophical questions: If Satan is imagined as almost as powerful as God, can Christianity really claim to be monotheistic? Where does evil come from and what can be done about it? Are the origins of evil supernatural, or is evil the result of human free-will and desire? Or is evil simply a human projection? Is Satan more a figment of our imagination than an actual being—as the caricatures of Satan wearing red tights, with horns and a pitchfork, signify? Or was the nineteenth-century French poet and literary critic Charles Baudelaire correct when he stated: “the Devil's cleverest trick is to persuade [us] that he does not exist”? (1975, 135).

The purpose of this book is to explore the problem of evil as historically and morally constructed by Christianity through the changing image and symbols of Satan. The traditional dichotomy between an absolute Good (personified by God and Christ) and absolute Evil (personified by Satan and his demons) is a development within Christian thought and civilization that has negatively influenced how moral reasoning is normatively conducted. Yet a more biblically rooted understanding of the developing conception of Satan, what we might call his trajectory from the ancient Hebrew tradition to early Christian thought, and throughout the Medieval Era, is quite different than our prevailing contemporary understandings of Satan. Rediscovering how Satan was originally envisioned and developed can provide modern-day Christians with insights for comprehending the ambiguities of right and wrong and perhaps for living a more balanced moral life. \*