

Andrew Delbanco. *The Death of Satan: How Americans Have Lost the Sense of Evil.*
N.Y.: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1995. 274 pp. \$23.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-374-13566-9.



Reviewed by Raymond J. Haberski

Published on H-PCAACA (March, 1998)

The image of a demon on the cover of Andrew Delbanco's book, *The Death of Satan*, appears, appropriately, as an example of what he criticizes: depictions of Satan as a creature completely unfamiliar to us. Evil, Delbanco argues, looks like you and me—it exists within all of us—and our failure to understand this leads him to make disturbing pronouncements. He believes that if American society continues to define evil and sin as either a social disorder or "the fundamentalist demonizing of the other, we shall have no way of confronting the most challenging experiences of our private and public lives" (p. 234). To lose the sense of evil would serve Satan's ultimate design for humanity: the incapacity to confront him within ourselves.

Delbanco traverses the intellectual terrain of literary figures, theologians, and philosophers from the Puritans to postmodernists to get a sense of changing conceptions of evil over time. Through out this period, he believes, a dangerous intellectual and emotional gap has opened that separates the individual from his or her evil. At one end of this historical continuum are the Puri-

tans who found Satan dangerous not because he was a foe from without, but because he lurked within, this made him maddeningly elusive. "The rhetorical power of a Puritan preacher, Delbanco writes, lay in his ability to evoke sin as something both overwhelming and insidiously slight" (p. 45). But since those early days, Delbanco contends, evil has become an abstraction that contemporary America describes as the distant "other." Lost in our post-modern age is the language necessary to make Satan real to people.

Delbanco has quite clearly identified who he believes has grappled most effectively with the complexities of evil. Among his heroes are Jonathan Edwards, Abraham Lincoln, Herman Melville, Walter Lippmann, and, especially, Reinhold Niebuhr, individuals who have understood the ironies of what Delbanco terms the unregulated self: what happens when a person stops believing in original sin. These great minds engaged the evil of their times but were able to retain a sense of their own and America's capacity for sin. For example, when Niebuhr eviscerated communist ideology he was careful not to overlook American

faults, such as red-baiting and reliance on nuclear weapons.

Delbanco's use of representational figures reveals both the brilliance and ineffectiveness of his argument, though. It is a sobering thought that except for these few figures, Americans have largely misunderstood the meaning of evil. But to satisfy Delbanco's standards would, it seems, require feats of super human strength. Human nature, as Dostoevsky constantly reminded his readers, condemns people to undermine their morals even while they attempt to uphold them simply because they can. This paradox reveals a problem Delbanco cannot overcome: has it ever been or will it ever be possible to construct a community that can truly understand the irony of being human?

At times Delbanco's book sounds like a jeremiad. Considering his work in Puritan thought, this is not surprising nor necessarily inappropriate. Preachers resort to impassioned speeches to confront a crisis. He states in his conclusion: "My driving motive in writing this book has been the conviction that if evil, with all its insidious complexity, escapes the reach of our imagination, it will have established dominion over us all" (p. 234). Yet even though Delbanco can describe our predicament and a tradition within American thought that can help us understand it, his argument is caught, ultimately, in a conundrum that even the Puritans found impossible to solve. Although Delbanco has sounded an alarm that he believes we disregard at our own peril, we are, still, most likely to ignore his warnings simply because we are human.

This review is copyrighted (c) 1998 by H-Net and the Popular Culture and the American Culture Associations. It may be reproduced electronically for educational or scholarly use. The Associations reserve print rights and permissions. (Contact: P.C.Rollins at the following electronic address: Rollins@osuunx.ucc.okstate.edu)

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at
<https://networks.h-net.org/h-pcaaca>

Citation: Raymond J. Haberski. Review of Delbanco, Andrew. *The Death of Satan: How Americans Have Lost the Sense of Evil*. H-PCAACA, H-Net Reviews. March, 1998.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=1786>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.