

## Is The Devil For Real?

If you get a group of people together who are really interested in basic religious questions there is a high probability that before long one of them will say to another, “Do you believe there is a literal devil, an actual personality who does battle with God for the possession of our souls?” In other words, *Is the Devil for real?*” Christianity is split: one believer says, “Absolutely” — another says, “You can’t be serious!” And that division runs through Christian history for hundreds of years, so you can be sure that no matter on which side you find yourself, you’ll have plenty of company.

When I promised to talk about this topic I knew that our starting point would have to be the problem of evil, perhaps the most difficult question theologians have ever had to face. Here is the classic dilemma — please hear it carefully: If God is totally good, God must hate evil. If God is also omnipotent, God has the power to prevent evil. So why does evil exist? Evil on a grand scale, as in the holocaust, in the Oklahoma City bombing, in the atrocities of war in Serbia and Bosnia; and evil on a smaller but no less poignant scale when a father of murdered children wonders, in the anguished words of Shakespeare’s Macduff: “Did heaven look on and would not take their part?” Sometimes the evil is beyond comprehension, as in this report I kept in my files from a UPI story of November 14, 1984: “*Cynthia Palmer, 29, and her live-in-boyfriend, John Lane, 36, pleaded innocent to burning to death Mrs. Palmer’s 4-year-old daughter in an oven. The two, who told neighbors shortly before their arrest that they were ‘cooking Lucifer,’ were arraigned Tuesday in [Maine’s]*

*Androscoggin County Superior court. They were arrested Oct. 27 at their Auburn tenement apartment. Angela Palmer was found stuffed into the electric oven. The door was jammed shut with a chair.*” Do you need a moment to hear the screams of a little four-year-old girl as the heat begins to build and she kicks wildly to get out? We don’t have to debate the reality of evil. On the streets, in homes, on daily television we hear about it every single day.

Once more, the theological problem, simply put, is this: if God is all-powerful, then God is ultimately responsible for everything that happens in the world. Forgive me for making sure you understand what I am saying. If I have the power to keep you from starving, and I let you starve when you beg for food, I am responsible for your death. The logic is irrefutable, but it is an intolerable idea for believers when it is applied to God, so it occurred at a certain moment in the history of religion that if God is good, another source would have to be found for everything profoundly evil in human life. It’s possible, I think to pin down that moment in history, but I would like to wait to do it until next Sunday when we will trace the evolution of the devil concept through Jewish and Christian literature. Today’s remarks are a kind of anecdotal introduction to the subject, more general and a great deal more personal than we will be next week.

As I thought about belief in a literal devil, I recalled some moments in my own intellectual and emotional life. The night, for example, when I visited three women in the same hospital. One of them, well past 80, was recovering from a heart attack and eager to get back home to her husband and her hobbies.

Another was a courageous woman of about 50 who was fighting a losing battle with cancer, and knew it, but said quietly that she could handle what was coming.....and then dismissed herself as a topic of conversation and went on to be concerned about other people she and I knew. The third person was a younger woman whose words that night still haunt my memory.

When I walked into her room she had the blankets pulled right up under her chin, although it seemed quite warm to me. I managed a wonderfully creative way of opening our conversation: “Are you cold?” She said yes, that she was cold because she was afraid. *What was she afraid of?* Well, she said, she was afraid of the devil, because he was after her. *How did she know this?* I tried to ask gently, and she said, “I’ve seen him.” I asked if she meant lately, and she said at various times in her life, but yes, a couple of times just recently she had seen his shadow, she had seen his cloak, she had felt him pass near her. “Sometimes,” she said with a shudder, and with absolute sincerity, “I’m just sure he is inside me.”

I talked to her for an hour because I thought her situation was so desperate, but I’m afraid I didn’t accomplish very much. She wanted to know if I believed that there were demons, and I had to say that I did not. “What about the devil?” she asked, and I said I didn’t believe in a literal devil, either. I tried to explain why, but a hospital room is not the best place for dealing with complex theology so I suggested it might be more useful if we talked about it when she was feeling better. I did try to probe her past to find out where her fears came from, and I explained that I, too, had once been sure I had seen the devil. Several times, when I was a little boy, I was

absolutely positive that he was crouching down in a dark corner just to the left of the foot of my bed. I was terrified, and like her I pulled the covers over my head.

I don't remember how long that lasted, but I think I know how it got started. I know how much this will surprise some of you, but I was not always an easy child for my mother to handle, so sometimes — in desperation, she would say offhandedly that the devil was going to get me if I didn't behave. Now my mother, if you asked her if she believed in the devil, would say Yes, because things are written in the New Testament about the devil, and she would not know why the New Testament would say such things unless they were quite literally true. But her conviction was actually rather shallow, something she had bought into from sermons rather than something she felt deeply. She did not blame the devil when we had bad luck or sickness. She did not even blame the devil for horrendous evil in the world. She simply paid lipservice to what she had heard all her life from the pulpit.

And that's why, at the end of her patience, she could so casually enlist the devil's help in managing her son. She was not serious. The idea of a devil struck no real terror deep into her emotional life, so she did not realize what it might do to mine. But at age ten it was not just a theory to me. I had an extremely vivid imagination, which suggested to me that if there is a devil, he has a shape — or maybe a dark shapelessness, which is even worse — so that I created a devil in my child's mind scary enough to frighten me almost out of my wits a few times. Hearing me say this, the young woman in the hospital admitted she had been involved in

some churches where the devil was much talked about, and where his reality— his honest-to-goodness literal reality — was taken for granted. I got the impression she had built up a strong guilt complex about certain thoughts that had entered her mind, and that it helped diminish her sense of guilt to blame the devil.

Blaming the devil has a long history. When we are faced with a man capable of bombing the federal building in Oklahoma City, with terrorists killing innocent Greek tourists in Egypt, with Serbian soldiers using rape as a military strategy, and with the mother of the little girl in the oven, we seem to need a metaphysical explanation. Such things, we comfort ourselves, are too horrible to for human origin — therefore, some alien force has to be responsible. There was a moment in human history when somebody, for the first time ever, took that force out of the realm of the abstract — where we are never comfortable for very long — and gave it a name and a face. Tracing the evolution of the devil is next week's work, but if you can't wait I'll mention some of the best books. The literature is vaster than you would believe until you start to research it, but a University of California professor named Jeffrey Burton Russell has pulled it together like no one else and made himself the preeminent historian of the concept of evil in modern times. In three books of splendid scholarship he writes about Satan in early Christian tradition; about Lucifer, the devil in the Middle Ages; and about Mephistopheles, the devil in the modern world. Here is another, called *The Prince of Darkness*, and still another called simply, *The Devil*. (The cover design, by the way, is related to the traditional view that Satan is

either black or red). The books I've mentioned are all aimed at professional students but parts of this one are especially useful for pulpit summary and I will share those with you next week.

But I'd like to go back now to some of the popular concepts of the devil as I have met them in personal experience. Those of you who grew up in more sophisticated circles than I did may find yourselves in a strange thought world, but I knew that world well in my childhood and it still has a powerful influence over millions of people you may not have occasion to meet in your social and business lives. For example, when I was a boy in Oklahoma I watched incredulously from my front porch one Sunday night as a group of excited — one might say “hysterical” — people ran out of their small Pentecostal church in pursuit of the devil. They chased him down the street past my house, shouting his name. I couldn't see him, but it was obvious they thought he was there and that they were about to catch him. When they became convinced he had escaped them by scrambling into a storm sewer, they knelt down at the entrance to it and threw sticks and rocks at him. These were not people under a doctor's care for mental illness; these were people who would get up the next morning to pump gas, teach school, sell groceries, build houses. I have wondered if the first tiny seed of scepticism about a personal devil was planted in my young head that night?

Many years later, walking across campus at Wichita State one day with a man enrolled in my *Bible As Literature* class, I listened as he told me how he and a childhood friend had peeked through the window of a fundamentalist church one night at people shouting “Amen” and “Hallelujahs” to their preacher's emotional

description of the devil and his works. They were watching particularly one large boy they knew who was kneeling at the altar, waving his hands in the air and shouting at the devil to get out of his life. To their amazement, he suddenly jumped up, ran toward the window where they had stood a second before, and plunged through it headfirst. He landed at their feet without seeming to notice or recognize them, and crawled frantically under a nearby truck. When they kicked a fender and asked, “What are you doing under there, George?” he yelled back that he was hiding from the devil.” I have no idea how much psychological harm may have been done to George, but by the time I had children I was determined to keep them from a faith based on that kind of hysteria. I did not minimize to them the capacity for evil of the human mind. It is, after all, from the dark pools in us that the figure of Satan has risen up in the human imagination. We are apathetic about injustice and suffering, we limit our love to those who love us back, we refuse to forgive, we poison relationships and murder reputations by wicked gossip, but instead of blaming ourselves we find it much more comfortable to blame a source of evil outside ourselves. Or, as the Jewish scholar and teacher Ben Sira put it so well in a book written 180 years before Christ: “When an ungodly man curses Satan, what he is really cursing is his own self.”

I can't imagine a better springboard than those words for what we will consider next week, so please think about them once or twice over the next few days, and come back on Sunday to hear about the curious evolution of Satan in both Jewish and Christian thought.

Our hope each time we come here, gracious God, is that in equal

measure our

hearts will be touched and our minds challenged, so

that with tenderness and wisdom we may help to create the

kingdom of heaven, in the name of Christ our Lord. Amen.