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“The Devil and all His Works”

BY J. STAFFORD WRIGHT

THE solemn renunciation of the devil and all his works has been omitted from the proposed new Catechism. The omission has been taken to indicate a disbelief in the existence of the devil, and presumably of evil spirits also; and indeed no other explanation is possible. It makes one a little frightened about future revisions of other parts of the Prayer Book and Articles. On the one hand there is the tendency to reinstate beliefs that were rejected at the Reformation as unscriptural, and on the other hand the tendency to repudiate scriptural teachings that have always formed an essential part of reformed and unreformed Church teaching, as in the case before us. Even if some theologians are agnostic about the devil, or actually “adiabolistic”, it is a serious breach of trust to impose their private judgment, even negatively, upon an official statement of Church teaching such as the Catechism. Private judgments tend to be ephemeral.

One generally assumes that disbelief in a personal devil is a modern phenomenon. Certainly Rudolf Bultmann treats it as this, when he uses his delightful *non sequitur* argument in his essay in *Kerugma and Myth* (p. 5): “It is impossible to use electric light and the wireless and to avail ourselves of modern medical and surgical discoveries, and at the same time to believe in the New Testament world of daemons and spirits”. Since Bultmann wrote this, we have met a similar type of argument, that sputniks and artificial satellites have made it impossible for us to believe in God. It is true that modern thinking has been the compelling factor in the minds of the revisers of the Catechism, but the issue was there at the Reformation, since Calvin writes: “Having above refuted that nugatory philosophy concerning the holy angels, which teaches that they are nothing but good notions or inspirations which God excites in the minds of men, we must here likewise refute those who foolishly allege that devils are nothing but bad affections or perturbations suggested by our carnal nature” (*Institutes*. I. xiv. 19. Beveridge’s translation).

Emanuel Swedenborg, who claimed to have visions of the worlds of heaven and hell, maintained that angels and evil spirits are not any separate creation, but are men and women who have lived on this earth. The Devil is then a name given to a certain sphere of existence, and is not a personal spirit. “Hell taken as a whole is what is called the Devil and Satan. The hell which is behind, where dwell those called evil genii, is called the Devil; and the hell which is in front, where dwell those called evil spirits, is called Satan.” (*Heaven and Hell*, published 1758; Everyman Edn., Section 311.) It is interesting to note Swedenborg’s explanation, in the same passage, that “the Christian world has formed an erroneous belief respecting the inhabitants of heaven and hell from certain passages of the Word, understood according to the sense of the letter only, and not illustrated and explained by genuine doctrine from the Word; for the literal sense of

the Word, unless illumined by genuine doctrine, bewilders the mind and begets ignorance, heresies, and errors."

Another who abandoned the literal sense of Scripture was Mrs. Mary Baker Eddy. Unlike Swedenborg, who based his teachings on his visions, she had to abandon the literal sense to square Scripture with her philosophy. "There are evil beliefs, often called evil spirits; but these evils are not Spirit, for there is no evil in Spirit." (*Science and Health*, pp. 206, 207.) Similarly on p. 584 she gives her definition of Devil as, "Evil; a lie; error; neither corporeality nor mind; the opposite of Truth; a belief in sin, sickness, and death; animal magnetism or hypnotism; the lust of the flesh, which saith: 'I am life and intelligence in matter. There is more than one mind, for I am mind . . .'"

For some strange reason the Christadelphians, who began in the middle of the last century, also deny the existence of a personal devil, and go to considerable trouble to reinterpret all the biblical references. Their standard work by Robert Roberts, *Christendom Astray from the Bible*, defines Satan as "sin in the flesh", while a recent booklet by S. F. Jeacock, *The Way of Life*, says: "We are all 'devils' or 'satans', in that we are in the flesh—in human nature. To assert that Satan is a 'fallen angel' is completely unscriptural" (p. 43).

* * * *

These quotations show two things. First, that the denial of Satan's personal existence has hitherto been outside the stream of Church teaching, and that now our Church of England is suggesting coming into line with the cults. This does not mean necessarily that it is wrong, since, when the Church as a whole neglects some truth, a sect usually arises to emphasize it. In this case, however, we are not concerned with a neglected truth, but rather with an interpretation that reverses the plain sense of Scripture. This raises the second point; if we leave the plain sense of Scripture, what shall we substitute as the proper interpretation? Swedenborg, Christian Science, and Christadelphianism have given three different interpretations; there may well be others.

Indeed, it is unlikely that the revisers of the Catechism have much acquaintance with these three viewpoints. At the moment the proposed Catechism does not contain any positive interpretation of "the devil and all his works", so we do not know what is in the minds of the revisers, nor what suggestions will be raised when the subject comes before the Convocations. Would it perhaps be fair to quote Paul Tillich as representing an average point of view? "The truth of the doctrine of angelic and demonic powers is that there are supra-individual structures of goodness and supra-individual structures of evil. Angels and demons are mythological names for constructive and destructive powers of being, which are ambiguously interwoven and which fight with each other in the same person, in the same soul group, and in the same historical situation. They are not beings but powers of being dependent on the whole structure of existence and involved in the ambiguous life" (*Systematic Theology*, Vol. II, p. 45).

Here Tillich groups together angels and demons, and it is probable

that, if we find grounds for rejecting the one, similar grounds will lead us to reject the other. Emil Brunner is a curious exception. In *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, Chapter 5, he argues strongly for the Christian belief in Satan as an essential part of the Gospel of salvation; but he is sceptical about the existence of angels, as being “theological hypotheses and nothing more”. Here however he is apparently in the opposite camp to Karl Barth. One must use the term “apparently”, since it is not at all clear what Karl Barth does actually hold about the existence of angels and demons, although he discusses the subject fully in his *Church Dogmatics* in Vol. III. Part 3. (pp. 477ff.). He accepts the ministry of angels as non-autonomous creatures, but refuses to regard the devil and his angels as being in the same category: “We cannot believe in the devil and demons as we may believe in angels when we believe in God” (p. 521). If one asks what they are, one is led back to Barth’s view of nothingness, “the being which exists only as it denies all true being, and is denied by it. Everything which had to be said about this element is also to be said of demons as the opponents of God’s heavenly ambassadors. . . . They are, but only in their own way; they are, but improperly. Their being is neither that of God nor that of the creature, neither that of heavenly creatures nor that of earthly, for they are neither the one nor the other. They are not divine but non-divine and anti-divine. On the other hand, God has not created them, and therefore they are not creaturely. They are only as God affirms Himself and the creature, and thus pronounces a necessary No” (p. 523).

What emerges from this is that we may not attempt to formulate any angelology or demonology. Yet why should we not do so? If we may study fallen and regenerated man, both in himself and in relation to Christ, and if we may study the world that God has put under man, why should we not also try to understand the nature of those beings who are said to come one degree higher in the scale than man, man being made “a little lower than the angels” and engaged in conflict with “principalities and powers in the heavenly places”? At the moment we are not concerned with good angels, but with the Evil One, whom the Bible reveals as the devil and Satan.

Satan is a subject of biblical revelation, as also is the nature of the Holy Trinity and the significance of the death of Jesus Christ on the Cross. Only too often people affirm and deny things about Satan which do not come from the biblical revelation at all. The essential picture of Satan in the Bible is so extraordinary that it is hard to conceive of its invention by anyone; yet the picture is absolutely consistent in both Testaments, though it is inconsistent with Jewish ideas of the intertestamental period and with non-Jewish ideas of a god of evil.

The astonishing thing about Satan is that he has access to the presence of God, thus disproving the popular evangelical slogan that evil cannot live in the presence of God. In the first two chapters of Job, Satan comes before God with the sons of God, and accuses Job, not of sin, but of serving God simply for the sake of the good things that come to him thereby. He obtains permission from God to damage

Job up to a fixed degree. His aim is to make Job renounce God, and in this he fails. We may compare this with Christ's words to Peter in Luke xxii. 31, 32. The Greek word may fairly be translated, as the R.V. margin suggests, "obtained you by asking", and this thought is present in the New English Bible: "Satan has been given leave to sift all of you like wheat; but for you I have prayed that your faith may not fail". Jesus Christ thus authenticates the background of the scene in Job. Satan has to come to God for permission to sift the disciples, and God gives this permission; there is the suggestion that He sets a limit to the extent of the temptation. Finally, in Revelation xii. 10, when Satan is cast down to the earth, it is said of him that he accuses God's people before God day and night. To return to the Old Testament, an example of his accusation is given in Zechariah iii, when Satan accuses the high priest before the court of heaven.

Here is the basic fact about Satan. He is not a god of evil standing over against the God of supreme good. In this way he differs from the supreme evil spirit of Zoroastrianism. He is not indeed, responsible for all the sin in the world, as though he were the source of evil in the same way as God is the source of good. Thus the biblical belief in Satan is not dualistic. Our present Catechism is truly biblical when it speaks of the world, the flesh, and the devil, as each needing to be renounced. These three are linked, but they are not the same. If the devil were destroyed tomorrow, the world and the flesh would still be sources of temptation and sin. James i. 14 and Romans vii. 14f. are only two passages which speak of the evil that dwells within, without any reference to Satan. Again, the world is continually drawing us into conformity with itself, for example, Romans xii. 2 (Greek, *aion*), James iv. 4 (Greek, *kosmos*), without Satan's aid. Yet Satan is spoken of as "the god of this world" (*aion*) in II Corinthians iv. 4, and as "the prince of this world" (*kosmos*) in John xii. 31, and I John v. 19 says that "the whole world lieth in the evil one".

The picture that this gives is of Satan as a rebel against God, just as we are. He is the chief organizer of all rebellion against God in the universe, but this does not make him the ultimate source of all evil. Like the Communists he is anti-God, and is prepared to use anything and everything to further the rebellion. In so far as actual sins swing us away from God, Satan approves of them. When he obtains permission to test us, it is to shatter our confidence in God. But there is no reason to think that Satan wants the whole world to be involved in gross sin. It was the punctilious Pharisees to whom Jesus Christ said, "Ye are of your father the devil" (Jn. viii. 44).

The essential character of Satan is to be anti-God and anti-Christ. In so far as this is the sin of sins, Satan is the supreme sinner. Our misunderstanding of him is largely due to the fact that we do not see this as the essence of sin. If we can see it, we can also see that Satan is by no means concerned to bring about a world that is full of sins. He desires a world that is self-sufficient and hence independent of God. This is what he induced man to accept at the Fall, and this is what he tried to induce Christ to accept in the wilderness temptations. Only if we see this can we accept the biblical view of the world. There are degrees of goodness and badness in the world, if we judge actions as

things in themselves. Thus “ the powers that be are ordained of God ” (Rom. xiii. 1), and on the whole maintain righteousness ; yet they are part of the sphere that is governed by the god of this world. At their worst they may become persecutors of the people of God ; at their best they still need that regeneration that will bring them out of Satan’s kingdom into the kingdom of God. The world is bad because it aims at self-sufficiency instead of God-sufficiency, but it is potentially recoverable.

We ought to follow this up further in the light of the proper Christian attitude to such things as the United Nations Organization. Some evangelicals hold that all such groupings are of the devil, since they have no Christian foundation, and that consequently the Christian Church must have no part in them. Some even feel called upon to denounce them. The New Testament, however, calls on us to pray for kings and leaders, that their leadership may bring about peace, tranquillity, and godliness (I Tim. ii. 1, 2). Yet this is but a preliminary to Gospel salvation and the knowledge of the truth (3, 4). In other words, mankind as a whole knows from experience, which has partly been developed under the influence of the teachings of Christ, that peace and the suppression of some evils are essential for the well-being of communities and individuals, and Satan has to accept this. He is dealing with men and women who still retain something of the image of God (1 Cor. xi. 7, Jas. iii. 9), even though that image has been marred in all its parts. Thus a Christian will often be one with the world and with Satan in trying to bring about desirable actions, while at the same time renouncing the inadequate motives that underlie the actions. Thus paradoxically a Welfare State can be Christian in the ends that it promotes, yet Satanic in the comfortable self-sufficiency that lulls it into spiritual sleep. The Christian is to use the world without abusing it (I Cor. vii. 31).

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The devil, then, is seen to be bad by reason of his rebellion against God, and not because of any eternal or finite quantity of bad deeds that he has committed. He is in a sense like ourselves, in whom evil, which came into the world through saying No to God, has become something positive and damaging. The fall of one who was created perfect is hard to understand, but the fall of Satan and the fall of man are the same in essence. Admittedly the fall of Satan is a deduction from Scripture, but no other deduction is possible if we are to avoid dualism. It is no longer fashionable to apply the words of Isaiah xiv. 12f. and Ezekiel xxviii. 11f. to Satan, yet this interpretation should not be totally abandoned. Thus in Ezekiel xxviii. 2-10 the prophet addresses “ the *prince* of Tyre ” in terms that are solely applicable to a human ruler, but at verse 11 he turns to address “ the *king* of Tyre ” in terms that are solely applicable to a spiritual being who is standing behind the movements in Tyre. Some interpreters speak of the language of myth here, yet the myth of a presumptuous and fallen spirit may well be the tradition about Satan. At the very least we must say that the inspired prophets compare the rulers of Babylon and Tyre to some high spirit who rebelled against God in his pride, and they must have believed that there was some basis for their comparison.

It is important to note that Jesus Christ clearly believed in the personality of the devil. It would be a poor sort of criticism which ascribed all the Gospel references to the primitive Church. The temptation in the wilderness can only have been told by Jesus Christ Himself. Admittedly the reality of Christ's temptations is a problem, but there is even more of a problem if Christ's temptations came from His own nature. While some of the intertestamental writings spoke of many Satans (or Adversaries), Jesus Christ and the New Testament writers speak of one Satan, or Devil, with other personal spirits under him. These include the demons, which are mistranslated in the A.V. as " devils " ; there are two different words in the Greek for *devil* and for *demon*. There are others, who are spoken of as the devil's " angels " (Rev. xii. 9), and as " principalities and powers " (Eph. vi. 12). It is a reasonable assumption that Satan was not alone in his fall, and, since he is not ubiquitous, the acts of Satan include the acts of his agents.

It should now be clear that a belief in Satan does add something to a mere belief in evil. The warfare in which we are engaged is centred in the world where Jesus Christ died, but we are not the only combatants. Behind the scenes there is an unseen enemy of God, who is determined to manipulate the world against God so far as he is allowed to do so. He is particularly the adversary of those who break away from his hold. For them he uses especially the weapons of deceit and persecution. In the wilderness he did not attempt to lead Jesus Christ into gross sin, but to make a wrong choice of method. Similarly he attempts to lead Christians into wrong choices, often concerning Christ and the Gospel (for example, II Cor. xi. 13-15). At other times he is able to rouse persecution against them, like a roaring lion (for example, I Pet. v. 8). Both these aspects come out clearly in the two devil-inspired beasts in Revelation xiii.

So the devil is a master-strategist, enticing, deceiving, embittering, persecuting, but always God sets a limit to what he may do. To ask why God does not destroy him here and now is to ask why He does not destroy us at the same time. For purposes of His own God allows both the devil and ourselves to have freedom to continue in existence, even in sin.

How are we to think of the limits that God sets to Satan? We can hardly visualize Satan knocking at the door of heaven at any hour of the day or night, and asking " Please may I tempt so-and-so? ", while God debates, " Shall I let him, or not? " It may be truer to think of certain broad spiritual principles, just as there are natural principles in the world of time and sense. For example, self-confidence (Luke xxii. 31), profound spiritual experiences (II Cor. xii. 7-10), unnatural physical behaviour (I Cor. vii. 5), an unforgiving spirit (II Cor. ii. 10, 11), automatically, as we may say, open doors for Satan to damage the individual and the Church. He has God's permission to intervene. But there are other occasions, as with Job, when God allows Satan to stir up trouble for those who have done nothing to deserve it. Satan seeks thereby to break the hold that God's people have on God; God purposes to bind them more closely to Himself. Hence comes the force of the battle.

For us in this era there is a new factor. The power of Satan was crippled on Calvary. John xii. 31 speaks of his being cast out. Revelation xii. 7f. also assumes the victory of Calvary. It is for us to stand firm and to claim the victory through the triumphant death of Jesus Christ, to maintain the Gospel testimony, and to be prepared to fling ourselves to the death into the battle (Rev. xii. 11). The result must always be the defeat of Satan, even if the blood of the martyrs has to become the seed of the Church. Sometimes the victory is seen with the eye of sense ; always it is there for the eye of faith.

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There has been no attempt in this article to give an encyclopedic treatment of all the biblical references to Satan, but rather to highlight the essentials. There must be very few people outside the sects who will actually deny that the Bible presents Satan as a personal being, personal in the sense of having an active will against God. It remains in conclusion to see whether we are forced by modern knowledge to reject this position. Admittedly this is a negative position, but there are some Christian beliefs, such as heaven, or the judgment, or the personality of the Holy Spirit, that are accepted as facts of revelation even though they cannot be demonstrated as true or untrue. The fact that they were taught by Jesus Christ is for the Christian a sufficient attestation of their truth.

We grant that when Jesus Christ spoke of the sun rising, He used commonsense language, which, though not scientifically true, expresses what all can understand without being misled. Yet it is difficult to put His statements about Satan into this category, since the facts cannot be proved or disproved by scientific instruments. Here the evidence of One who claimed to be totally sensitive to the spiritual world must be paramount. The demythologizing argument that the Jews and Gnostics believed in spirits, and consequently Jesus and the New Testament expressed experience in terms of spirits, is no argument one way or the other.

The sole ground on which one might dispute the existence of Satan and other spirits would be the findings of modern psychology. We must go into this with our eyes open. Some modern psychologists—though, thank God, not all—think that by explaining religious experience along certain lines they have disproved the existence of God and evil spirits. It is thoroughly inconsistent for a Christian to reply : “ In explaining my experiences, you have shown that my belief in Satan is fallacious, but I refuse to accept your arguments about God ”. If we say, “ I know God for myself, but I do not know Satan,” the psychologist will reply that our knowledge of God, so-called, is purely our interpretation of certain feelings which have arisen in the course of our upbringing, as is other people’s interpretation of certain feelings in terms of Satan.

A possible come-back would be that the belief in Satan is pragmatically and psychologically bad, since it is an escape from accepting personal responsibility for sin, and the projection of our sins on to an external scapegoat. If this were the biblical view of our relationship with Satan, there might be something to be said for it, but we have already seen

that the Bible never leads us to put the responsibility for our personal sins on Satan. Moreover we must again note that this argument is double-edged, since God also may be the projection of our good self, and the belief that God puts into our minds good desires may be completely fallacious.

In the last resort it is probable that people have in mind the excesses to which belief in the devil has led. If people had known more about complexes and hysteria, there would never have been the terrible witch hunts that have marred the history of the Church. Equally, one might add, there might not have been the religious excesses that have arisen in the worship of God. Our mistake lies in our insistence on an *Either-Or*. Either this experience is supernatural, or it is natural; either it is from God, or from an infancy conflict with my parents; either it is the devil, or it is a complex. Both God and the devil use human personality. Out of an infancy situation God can fashion a personality that will be just right for a sphere in the Church; or the devil may fasten on a repressed conflict and use the unregenerate person, or immature Christian, as a centre of conflict for God's work. Those who wish to follow this up will find an excellent chapter, entitled "Devils and Complexes", in Victor White's *God and the Unconscious*, now reprinted in a paperback.

To discuss the nature of demon possession, in which I firmly believe, would be beyond the scope of this article. Similarly to introduce a detailed study of witchcraft and of Satanism (which modern witches say has nothing to do with witchcraft) would be to wander far beyond the Catechism, to which we must now return.

The omission of the devil in a Christian catechism is to shut the young Christian's eyes to a vital aspect of revelation and life. The Bible does not present evil as an impersonal force that only emerges personally in individuals and groups in this world. To resist sin and evil is vital; but we are only half alive to the situation if we do not see that there is a personal organizer of the world's revolt, who will try to exploit us if he can. Jesus Christ met him, and struck him a mortal blow on the Cross. We too will meet him, and the victory of the Cross is to be our weapon. To renounce "the devil and all his works" is to seek to become aware of his total strategy against the Church, and to oppose him (and not only sinful individuals) in the warfare of intelligent prayer and action.
