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CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY AND THE BELIEF IN EVIL SPIRITS: AN AFRICAN PERSPECTIVE*

ANDREW OLU IGENOZA
UNIVERSITY OF IFE, ILE-IFE, NIGERIA

Introduction

Theologia as a term which means 'reasoned discourse about God'¹ or 'the doctrine of God'² was probably invented by Plato³ and has been adopted into Christianity for the systematic study and presentation of topics relating to God. But in its wider connotations 'theology' is the systematic and scientific study of religion generally.⁴

In this paper attention is focussed on Christian theology in its relation to the belief in evil spirits, particularly from an African perspective. It has been fashionable of late for influential theologians like R. Bultmann and R. H. Fuller to disavow the existence and influence of the evil spirits spoken of in the New Testament. This is supposedly because of their modern 'scientific' or positivistic outlook, which asserts that only that which is scientifically verifiable by any of the five senses may be said to exist. Evil spirits do not belong to this category, therefore they do not exist.

We shall employ the inductive method of investigation in exploring the New Testament evidence which sustains belief in the existence of preter-natural forces known as evil spirits. We shall then parallel this with African religious beliefs and experiences, in support of the New Testament evidence. The main thesis of this paper is that if the Christian faith is to remain dynamic and relevant to 'modern man' anywhere, but particularly to the African, the belief in the existence of evil spirits against which Jesus Christ has (as Christians believe) won a decisive victory cannot easily be thrown overboard.

What then is Christian theology? As Brandon points out, the subject is so vast and many-sided, embracing such branches as dogmatic, biblical, moral, ascetical, mystical, symbolic, sacramental, apologetical, liturgical

* A version of this paper was read at the Edinburgh Conference in Christian Dogmatics, 1985.

1. See Maurice Wiles, *What is Theology?*, London: Oxford: New York, OUP, 1976, p 1.
2. M. G. Cambron, *Bible Doctrines*, Grand Rapids, Zondervan Publishing House, 1954; cf. 1974 reprint, p 13.
3. Plato, *Republic*, ii, 379a.
4. D. H. Smith in S.G.F. Brandon, ed., *A Dictionary of Comparative Religion*, London, Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1970, p 610.

and natural theology.⁵ Our main concern however will be with the source or sources of Christian theology, and to state that a study of evil spirits is a legitimate theme of Christian theology. When M. Wiles set out to write *What is Theology?* he was actually attempting to throw light on the sources, the nature and the methods for the study of Christian theology.⁶ Such a study would include a critical and detailed study of the Bible in its cultural, historical and literary milieu. It would pay due attention to Church history, the philosophy, the sociology and the phenomenology of religion — and much more besides. The picture is complex, but Christian theology cannot side-track or under-estimate what the Bible teaches on any subject. Though Wiles believes that biblical studies certainly have a vitally important place in Christian theology, he feels however that there are two fundamental reasons why the Bible alone cannot provide a definition of the subject-matter of theology. First of all, according to him, there is no such a thing as a 'coherent account of the teaching of the Bible' which does not draw its criterion of coherence from outside the Bible itself. He writes, 'not only are there obvious differences of belief between the Old and New Testaments, but also within the New Testament itself'.⁷ Secondly, in his view, even insofar as there is a coherent unit of biblical teaching, that teaching cannot simply be taken over as it stands and treated as an end-product of theology. He notes that the biblical writers share various cultural assumptions characteristic of the ancient world which are foreign to almost any modern *Weltanschauung*. To clinch his point, he gives two examples, the first of which we may refer to because of its relevance: 'The theologian cannot simply be committed in advance to belief in demonic possession. . . . Some form of interpretation is called for, and once again the criteria for that interpretative task are not provided by the Bible itself.'⁸

Wiles' position appears to be full of distortion and prejudice. Though it is true that the biblical writers had various cultural assumptions which were characteristic of the ancient world, it is unfair to conclude hastily that their views were erroneous in everything, especially as it concerns belief in the existence of evil spirits or demonic possession. Such an *a priori* position results from the reductionist stance of theological liberalism and scepticism which totally undermines spiritual realities. Secondly, Wiles is unnecessarily capitalising on the so-called 'obvious differences of belief' on the Bible. The impression he gives is that these 'differences' are absolutely contradictory and totally irreconcilable. This is not true. As pointed out by R. Martin, the principle of the harmony of the Scriptures 'goes right to the heart of the Christian concern with the

5. S. G. F. Brandon, *ibid.*

6. M. Wiles, *op. cit.*

7. *Ibid.*, pp 5-6.

8. *Ibid.*

Scripture, particularly the New Testament.⁹ This principle emphasises the unity of the Bible as the word of God, rather than seeing the Bible as a symposium of discordant contributors. If God cannot contradict himself, then a diligent study and interpretation of Scripture with Scripture will eliminate apparent contradictions. Contrary to Wiles' view, the basic principles of interpreting the Scripture ought to be derived primarily from the Scriptures themselves, and not *a priori*, or philosophically superimposed from outside. Though the Bible is not the only source of Christian theology, it is primary.

Any subject-matter which is appreciably mentioned in Scripture qualifies for diligent investigation in its known historico-cultural and grammatical context, and evaluation in the light of experience. It is in this light that the belief in the existence and influence of evil spirits ought to claim adequate and unprejudiced attention in Christian theology.

Arguing about Spirits

The existence of Satan and evil spirits was generally accepted until the *Aufklärung* (c. 1650-1780). From then on positivistic intellectualism and general scepticism have made the Bible appear strange, incomprehensible and unfamiliar. The existence of spiritual entities like angels, demons, heaven, hell, and so on, are held to be unscientific and misleading. Bultmann categorically stated, '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 demons and spirits.'¹⁰ Bultmann's position has support in many other writers. Michael Wilson, for example, writes, 'I personally feel under no pressure to believe in . . . evil spirits because Jesus believed in them. . .'¹¹ And Brian Hebblethwaite finds 'grave incoherence in the idea that God might be thought to be sustaining a created universe containing fallen irredeemable non-human spirits and allowing them to interfere in the human world.'¹² R. H. Fuller had no hesitation in coming to the conclusion, 'we no more believe in demons.'¹³

The belief in Satan and other evil spirits is thus consigned to the realm of myth and superstition. Such wholesale denials of the existence of the demonic realm ignore the overall biblical evidence and contemporary pointers in that direction, and rob the Christian faith of its continuing relevance and dynamism. The very fact that Satan, demons — and even God — are beyond the awareness of the five senses is not enough reason

9. R. P. Martin, *Approaches to New Testament Interpretation*, Exeter, Paternoster Press, 1977, p 225.
10. R. Bultmann, 'New Testament and Mythology', in H. W. Bartsch, ed., *Kerygma and Myth*, ET, London, SPCK, 1953, p 5.
11. Michael Wilson, 'Exorcism', *Expository Times*, LXXXVI, July 1975, p 293.
12. Brian Hebblethwaite in his letter to the *Church Times*, 6th June 1975, p 12.
13. R. H. Fuller, *Interpreting the Miracles*, London, SCM Press, 1963, p 120.

to reject their existence *a priori*. So Roy Lawrence writes:

the fact that the devil and demons are normally beyond the awareness of our senses is not a conclusive reason for rejecting them. Science has shown that there are colours we cannot see with our human eye, sounds we cannot hear, concepts we cannot encompass with the human mind. It is a mysterious universe in which we live. We know only a small fraction of it. Furthermore there is an increasing amount of attested evidence which strongly suggests the existence of the demonic. Some of it comes from psychological studies or psychical research, and some from the more baffling areas of ordinary pastoral experience.¹⁴

Analogies seldom work perfectly. It is doubtful if demonic forces could be placed on the same level as the colours and sounds which are beyond ordinary human perception. However, the Bible talks of the invisible God having created all things, both visible and invisible (Col. 1:15,16).

The Biblical Viewpoint

The Old Testament appears none too fertile a ground of information for belief in evil spirits. Yahweh was the acknowledged source of all things, so much so that even the lying spirit that spoke through the prophet Zedekiah was among 'all the host of heaven' that stood before Yahweh in the celestial court (1 Kg. 22:19-23). The only reference to a tormenting evil spirit in the Old Testament is in connection with King Saul. This evil spirit (*rûach rā'âh*) was from Yahweh (1 Sam. 16:14). Even the popular names for the acknowledged head of the world of evil spirits, *viz* 'Satan' or 'the devil', are sparingly used in the Old Testament. Two words are translated into 'devil' in the Old Testament, *Sā'ir* (Lev. 17:7; 2 Chr. 11:15; Isa. 13:21, 34:14) and *sêd* (spoiler, destroyer, cf. Dt. 32:17; Psa. 106:37). The word 'Satan' (hater, accuser, adversary, opposing spirit) is found some sixteen times in the Old Testament, in 1 Chr. 21:18; Psa. 109:6; Zech. 3:1-2, and in Job chapters 1-2 which account for twelve of those times. It is clear from the preceding that the doctrine of Satan and of evil spirits is not well developed in the Old Testament. It was in post-exilic Judaism that the belief in evil spirits became prominent, as a result of the greater interaction of the Jews with the outside world. The angel Raphael reportedly instructed Tobit to ban evil spirits from a bridal chamber by burning the heart and liver of fish in fire (Tobit 6:7, 16:17, 8:3). Neither the Jewish writer and historian Josephus,¹⁵ nor the scribe Johanan ben Zakkai,¹⁶ nor the secluded Essenes¹⁷ were insulated from the popular belief in evil spirits.

14. Roy Lawrence, *Invitation to Healing*, Eastbourne, Kingsway Publications, p 63.

15. Josephus, *Antiquities*, 8:11:5; 8:47; etc. For greater details cf. James Dunn and Graham Twelftree, 'Demon Possession and Exorcism in the New Testament', *Churchman*, Vol 94, No 3, 1980, pp 210ff.

16. Cf. *Interpreters Dictionary of the Bible*, Vol 2, p 199, citing Pesik dRK 406.

17. *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, Vol 15, pp 118-119.

From the available evidence, belief in evil spirits in later Judaism, important thought it was, was peripheral as far as official religion was concerned.¹⁸ But this can hardly be said of primitive Christianity. Not only was the belief in evil spirits, with the corresponding practice of exorcism, important in the early Church, it was very much central; and this centrality probably goes back to Jesus himself. It is perhaps significant that the very first miracle Jesus performed (as recorded by Mark, widely believed to be the oldest Gospel in our possession) was the exorcism of an unclean spirit (*pneuma akatharton*)¹⁹. 'Of the thirteen healing stories in Mark's Gospel, the largest single category is that of exorcisms. . . .'²⁰ Mark uses *pneuma* with or without qualification no less than fourteen times to refer to foul spirits. Matthew has four such usages, while Luke has twelve. In the Acts there are nine instances while the Apocalypse has three.²¹ An evil spirit could be known by the affliction or condition it causes, or the extraordinary power it conferred on a person, hence there are deaf and dumb spirits, or spirits of divination.²² These spirits are portrayed as wicked, with some more wicked than others.²³ Their sole aim is to ensnare man and thereby thwart God's purpose of salvation.

Another conspicuous word-group used for, or in connection with, evil spirits is made up of *daimonion*, *daimōn* and the verb *daimonizomai*. The noun *daimonion* (a demon or evil spirit in the New Testament) appears ten times in Matthew, twelve times in Mark (if we include the textually doubtful ending of Mk 16:17), and twenty-one times in Luke. The word appears six times in John's Gospel and not at all in Acts. Paul uses it four times in 1 Cor. 10:20-22 (cf. e.g., 'what pagans sacrifice they offer to demons (*daimoniois*) and not to God'). *Daimonion* is used three times elsewhere in the New Testament.²⁴ The equivalent *daimōn* is very rare in the New Testament, appearing once each in Matthew, Mark and Luke.²⁵ The other occurrences are at Rev. 16:14 and 18:2. The verb *daimonizomai* (to be possessed or oppressed by a demon) is used seven times in the New Testament, but exclusively in the Gospels.²⁶

In addition to ordinary demons that afflict people here on earth, Paul apparently recognised another category or hierarchy of spirit-beings which he called *archai* (singular *archē*, i.e. principalities or princes of

18. See *The Encyclopaedia of Jewish Religion*, London, Phoenix House, 1965, p 112.

19. See Mark 1:21-29.

20. Cf. Dunn and Twelftree, *op. cit.*, p 211.

21. Those calculations have been done from Robert Young's *Analytical Concordance to the Bible*, Iowa Falls, Riverside Book and Bible House, n.d.

22. Cf. Mark 9:17,25; Acts 16:16.

23. Acts 19:12-16; Luke 11:26 and Matthew 12:45.

24. That is, at 1 Tim. 4:1; Jas 2:19; and Rev. 9:20.

25. Mt 8:31; Mk 5:21 and Lk. 8:29.

26. That is, three times each in Matthew and Mark and once in John's Gospel, in debunking those who accused Jesus of being demon-possessed.

spiritual existence), *exousiai* (authorities), *kosmokratores* (world-sovereigns) and *ta pneumatika tēs ponērias* (spiritual hosts of wickedness) whose abode is in 'the heavenly places'.²⁷ R. P. Martin writes,

The enemies Paul has in mind are however not simply the human agents which oppress the churches; behind them he sees malign forces of evil. . . the spiritual hierarchy of evil are thought of here as having detached themselves in rebellion against the cosmic Lord and so as being in active opposition to Him and His people.²⁸

The African Perspective

When the Evangelist wrote that Jesus and the apostles cast out evil spirits, or when Paul talked of spiritual forces in the heavenly places, they may have been the victims of their cultural background. But such an explanation is becoming less satisfactory. Not without justification, many people who cannot be said to be ignorant accept the belief in the existence of 'personal spirit-beings or demons acting as agents of the supremely evil one'.²⁹ In his informative submission on the subject, Dow advances a number of reasons in defence of this position. First of all, he points to what he calls the correspondence between descriptions of alleged demonic phenomena as encountered in contemporary exorcisms, and the descriptions of exorcisms in the New Testament.³⁰ This suggests *prima facie* that we are dealing with the same behavioural reality. Observation and investigation show that those believed to be victims of spiritual bondage experience complete and immediate release after a commanding prayer of exorcism where other methods appear to have failed. This not only applies to pathological, psychosomatic or psychiatric conditions, but also to certain moral aberrations.³¹

Another corroborative correspondence lies in unusual and super-human manifestations like inordinate strength (as in Mk 5:3-4; Acts 19:13-20), the power to divine or predict the future (as in Acts 16:16-19), the power to become invisible, levitate, metamorphose into an animal or some other object, immunity to hurt from fire, machet cuts, piercing with sharp instruments and even bullets. But, surprisingly, these abilities are said to disappear completely after conversion. A former witch called Doreen Irvine, for example, has described an occasion on which she

27. Cf. *The Analytical Greek Lexicon*, London, Samuel Bagster & Sons Ltd, 1967 reprint, p 53, etc.

28. R. P. Martin, 'Ephesians', in D. Guthrie, *et al*, eds., *New Bible Commentary*, IVP, 1970, p 1122.

29. See Graham Dow, 'The Case for the Existence of Demons', in *Churchman*, Vol 94, No. 3, 1980, pp 199-208.

30. *Ibid.*

31. See Don Basham, *Deliver us from Evil*, London, Hodder & Stoughton, 1972, pp 63,119; Francis MacNutt, *Healing*, Notre Dame, Indiana: Ave Maria, 1974, 1979, p 195.

made herself invisible and walked through fire.³² In the course of research in August 1980, I met a preacher who was visiting Jattu in Bendel State, Nigeria, who claimed that he had the power to become invisible, or to be immune to machet cuts or bullets while he was still a magician and political thug before his conversion. Stories abound in Africa of how the ancient fathers who were steeped in traditional magic and sorcery became invisible, disappeared or changed into non-human objects during wars. This is not to say that those powers always worked for them; they failed at times, especially when confronted with a higher power. Hence such people had to observe taboos, keep strictly to prescribed formulae, and continue searching for higher sources of power. Demonic existence is often the best explanation for the manifestation of such extraordinary abilities. Thus Doreen Irvine and Raphael Gasson, a former medium, had no doubts that their abilities to levitate or become invisible were solely attributable to the evil spirits whom they invoked.³³

The correspondence between the New Testament phenomena and their present-day counterparts extends to the categories in which such phenomena are perceived. It is doubtful whether the Evangelists were merely naive and superstitious, such that they always interpreted pathological disorder in demonic terms because of the prevailing cultural circumstances.³⁴ On the contrary, these writers often exhibited considerable discernment in describing similar disorders on certain occasions in demonic terms, and, on other occasions as normal illnesses. For example, a dumb and blind person was reportedly cured by exorcism (Mt. 12:22-23; 9:32), whereas the laying on of hands, with no hint of exorcism, is used for the cure of a dumb man (Mk 7:32-33) and a blind man (Mt. 8:22-25). It was recognised in the ancient world that mental disorders could arise from purely organic or pathological causes, or alternatively from demonic.³⁵ This is also applicable to the traditional African position. Professor T. Ranger has indicated that, in pre-colonial times, the African had a cosmology of health which put diseases into two categories, the 'Diseases of God' which were natural, avoidable and only treated with herbs; and the 'Diseases of Man' which were caused by wickedness. The latter category were afflictions produced by the malice of sorcerers or

32. Doreen Irvine, *From Witchcraft to Christ*, St Louis, Concordia, 1973, pp 95-98.

33. Irvine, *ibid.*, p 94; Raphael Gasson, *The Challenging Counterfeit*, Plainfield, New Jersey, Logos, 1966, p 132.

34. For example *vide* the claim of Michael Wilson, 'Exorcism', in the *Expository Times*, Vol LXXXVI, July 1975, p 293.

35. See G. Dow, *op. cit.*, citing Herodotus, *History*, 2:173; 6:84; and Hippocrates, *On the Sacred Disease*. Both K. McAll, 'The 'Ministry of Deliverance'', in the *Expository Times*, LXXXVI, July 1975, pp 296-298 and John Richards, *But Deliver us from Evil*, London, DLT, 1974, ch 6, make similar distinctions in modern times.

witches, or afflictions caused by offences against ancestral spirits.³⁶ The treatment of such diseases lay in the spiritual sphere since they were caused by the actions of spirits.

In a 1980 survey conducted in Nigeria, I observed that belief in the spiritual causation of illness is still very strong in post-colonial Africa, even among the highly educated. According to one of my respondents, demonic or witchcraft activities are beyond scientific investigation. Unexplainable situations, like not being able to diagnose the cause of, or medically treat, a certain ailment, even in the best-equipped hospitals, tend to convince many Africans that evil spiritual agencies exist. It is not true to say that such beliefs disappear with advancement in education, or that they mark primitiveness as against civilisation. According to E. L. Mascall, apart from Christian tradition, the invoking of evil spirits has existed in far too vast a variety of different cultures, classes and social conditions to be simply an example of childish credulity.³⁷ What education may do is to remove the grossly superstitious elements in tradition. The informed African need not believe, for example, that it is the spirit of his dead grandfather that has re-incarnated in his son just because there are physical or behavioural resemblances. Many African pastors with whom I have discussed these matters have no doubts about the existence of evil spirits. They often give examples to buttress their conviction.³⁸ Franklin Donaldson has reported that the Revd Simon Mundeta of Zimbabwe within his African cultural milieu believes that the spirits are there 'just as we read in the New Testament.'³⁹ But Mundeta departs from his traditional African culture by not worshipping the ancestral spirits. He is fully convinced that 'only God, revealed through Jesus deserves our worship, and the Holy Spirit alive and working in us is stronger than the evil spirits'.⁴⁰

The full import of discussion thus far is that the assertions of Bultmann, Fuller, and others that evil spirits do not exist are not to be taken seriously. Thomson Jay Hudson, a noted spiritualist, has been cited as

36. Terence Ranger, 'Medical Science and Pentecost: The Dilemma of Anglicanism in Africa' — a paper at the Ecclesiastical History Society conference in Bangor, July 15-18 1981.
37. E. L. Mascall, *The Christian Universe*, London, Darton, Longman and Todd, 1966, cf. pp 118-119.
38. Such pastors include the Revd Joseph Kurewa, a Methodist minister from Zimbabwe, in a private interview at Château de Bossey in Switzerland, 17 June 1979; the Ven. Archdeacon G. K. Ajomo, a retired Nigerian Anglican clergyman, private interview at Okape in Akoko-Edo, Bendel State, Nigeria, 11 August 1980; the Revd J. B. S. Coker of the Church of God Mission, Benin City, Nigeria in response to a questionnaire item in August 1980.
39. Franklin Donaldson, *The Sister Buck Memorial Hospital: Project in Spiritual Hospital*, 1966-67, p 7. (I owe knowledge of this source to Dr J. Masamba whom I met at the World Council of Churches Headquarters in Geneva, 1979.)
40. *Ibid.*

saying, 'The man who denies the phenomena of spiritism is not entitled to be called a sceptic, he is simply ignorant.'⁴¹

Conclusion

The belief in the existence of rebellious evil spirits opposed to God's plan of salvation and hostile to the people of God (*ton laon tou Theou*) has positive implications for Christian theology. Christianity under such an assumption cannot afford to be complacent. It is neither contradictory nor dualistic to believe in a good God who is spirit; in his incarnate and risen Son; and in his Holy Spirit who indwells believers; and at the same time to believe in the existence of malevolent spirits as affirmed in the New Testament. In fact, contrary to Michael Wilson's assertion, such belief provides a satisfactory *raison d'être* for the incarnation.⁴² According to the Johannine school of thought, the reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil (1 John 3:8). As Dow rightly points out, Jesus is recorded as viewing his mission in terms of a struggle with Satan, and it is difficult to treat this as culturally relative while continuing to recognise as true his claim to the divine authority of his mission.⁴³ By the appearance of his Son, and through the Son's total mission on earth, God disarmed 'all principalities and powers and made a public example of them, triumphing over them. . . .' (Col. 2:15).

The New Testament conceives of Christians as involved in spiritual warfare. So Paul enjoins the believer to arm himself with the panoply of God (Eph. 6:10-18). In such spiritual and moral seriousness, in other words, Christianity in its full vitality, lie the success and the effectiveness of the indigenous *Aladura* churches in Africa whose members, following the Pauline exhortation to pray at all times in the Spirit, 'rise up daily, morning and night, and pray for hours.'⁴⁴ They also carry out the ministry of healing, exorcism and the discernment of spirits. To wish evil spirits out of existence because it is no longer 'scientific' to hold such a belief does a great disservice to Christian theology, which ought to seek to be faithful to the New Testament. The result of such an attitude is usually spiritual coldness, apathy and disillusionment. The better alternative is to create what Irving Hexham calls a 'dynamic theology' which proclaims the triumph of Christ over all powers of evil, and his ability to liberate the tormented soul.⁴⁵

41. Victor Ernest, *I Talked with Spirits*, Wheaton, Illinois: Tyndale House Publishers and London, Coverdale House Publishers, 1970, preface, citing T. J. Hudson, *The Law of Psychic Phenomena*.
42. Michael Wilson had said that the reason he felt free not to believe in evil spirits is 'because I believe in the Incarnation', *cf. op. cit.*, p 293.
43. G. Dow, *op. cit.*, p 204.
44. See N. I. Ndiokwere, *Prophecy and Revolution*, London, SPCK, 1981, p 279.
45. Irving Hexham, 'Theology, Exorcism and the Amplification of Deviancy', in *Evangelical Quarterly*, Vol XLIX, 1972, *cf. pp* 111-116.

The Jews believed that the sure protection against evil forces was obedience to the Torah and a life of prayer. From the Christian perspective, Victor Ernest writes,

There is only one way to cope with the spiritual realities surging beneath the visible surfaces of life: know the revelations in God's word and live by them. This requires primarily diligent Bible study and prayer.⁴⁶

46. Ernest, *op. cit.*, p 76.