

THE REALITY AND ORIGIN OF EVIL

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CHRISTIANS ARE CLEAR ENOUGH THAT EVIL IS REAL. BUT WHAT MIGHT THE WORD 'REAL' SIGNIFY IN THIS REGARD? In this article I intend to put forward two versions of the reality of evil. It will become clear that I favour the second version. Both accept that the encounter with evil is a fact of life. The central evidence for this is not first of all human history or personal experience, although these are compelling enough. Rather, it is the testimony of the New Testament to Jesus. Jesus was tempted by the devil in the wilderness (Lk 4.1–13). He exercised a ministry as a highly effective exorcist (Mk 1.21–28; 5.1–20). He understood his own death as an overcoming of 'the prince of this world' (Jn 12.31). And his mission is summed up as being 'to destroy the works of the devil' (1 Jn 3.8). The redeeming work of Christ is understood against the backdrop of the reality of evil, and the negative presupposition of the positive work of redemption cannot be omitted without changing radically the nature of Christian faith. But in what does this reality consist?

A TRADITIONAL PERSPECTIVE

The first version of its reality, which has a good claim to be the traditional and majority view, locates evil supremely in supra-human realities of a 'spiritual' kind, specifically in a being identified as 'satan' or 'the devil'. As all things ultimately derive from a good God who is the Father of lights, it is deduced that satan must have been created as a good angel, named Lucifer, who by an act of rebellion fell away from his vocation, persuaded other angels also to rebel, and so became the fountainhead of evil in all its forms. It is satan who is in view in the Garden of Eden, taking form as a serpent in order to tempt Adam and Eve away from their primeval devotion to God (Gen 3; cf. Rev 20.2). It is the devil who acts in concert with 'principalities and powers', 'cosmic powers of this present darkness' and 'the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places' to make 'war against the saints' (Rev 13.7).

Evil, then, following this version, is the ontological reality of an intensely evil being, surrounded by cohorts of lesser beings, that operate in a spiritual dimension to distort, negate and oppose the purposes of God. As God's creation is good these beings were not created in their present state but assumed their condition by the misuse of free will. This posits a fall or catastrophe in the created sphere at some point prior to the creation of human beings. Humans have fallen prey to evil by yielding to temptation and have become implicated in the rebellion and responsible for their part within it.

Human life is thereafter defined by the struggle between good and evil, God and the devil. Indeed, for many Christians belief in a personal devil amounts to an article of faith, despite the absence of any such statement in the Church's historic creeds. Yet, to balance this, it is firmly believed that in Jesus Christ God has decisively reclaimed the creation and overcome evil through his death and resurrection. The fruits of that victory are currently only partly felt and their full effect awaits the consummation when God will be 'all in all' (1 Cor 15.28). The coming of this glad day is assured, even if it is delayed.

This account of evil will be familiar to anyone who is acquainted with Christian history or those cultures that have been influenced by Christian faith. It is to be found in classics such as Milton's *Paradise Lost* or the works of Dante and has multiple references in works of sacred art. In theological writings it first appeared in Tertullian (160/170–c. 215/220)¹ and Origen (c. 185–c. 254)² and was given normative expression by Augustine (354–430).³ It is often supported by reference to Ezekiel 28.1–17 and Isaiah 14.12–21, and it is from the latter that the name 'Lucifer' ('Day Star, Son of Dawn') is derived. However, both these passages refer to identifiable historical persons (the king of Tyre and the king of Babylon) and the interpretative process that refers them on to a supra-historical spiritual power is by no means clear. For most of those who use these passages as proof-texts the association is simply assumed, with no attempt to justify how. Furthermore, where satan is identified in the Old Testament it is not with the same nature and role as he was later to assume. In Job, satan is God's servant, God's 'holy sifter', agent provocateur or 'enforcer'.⁴ Only later does his career take a turn towards the irreducibly sinister. Even the New Testament texts concerning satan's, the devil's or the fallen angels' origins are less than clear. Jude 6 and 2 Peter 2.4 are more likely to relate to the enigmatic passage in Genesis 6.1–5, which refers to the 'sons of God' taking wives, than to a pre-mundane fall. Jesus' reference to satan falling from heaven 'like a flash of lightning' (Lk 10.18) and the 'war in heaven' of Revelation 12.7 clearly apply to the mission of Jesus and of his followers rather than to the pre-historical origins of evil. So although securely ensconced within the history of Christian imagery and thought, it is by no means clear that there is a solid biblical basis for this first version of the reality of evil.⁵ There remain, of course, good theological reasons for finding the origin of evil in some kind of creaturely aberration through the

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NOTES

1. *Apology* 22
2. *De Principiis* 1.6
3. *City of God* 11.11
4. W Wink, *Unmasking the Powers: The Invisible Forces that Determine Human Existence* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), p. 15.
5. SHT Page examines the biblical texts in *Powers of Evil: A Biblical Study of Satan and Demons* (Leicester: Apollos, 1995) and is similarly cautious.
6. For a fuller exposition of non-ontological realism see my book, *A Theology of the Dark Side: Putting the Power of Darkness in its Place* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2003).
7. T Noble, 'The Spirit World: A Theological Approach', in ANS Lane (ed.), *The Unseen World: Christian Reflections on Angels, Demons and the Heavenly Realm* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1996), p. 219.
8. Wink, *Unmasking the Powers*, pp. 24–5.
9. Barth's discussion of this theme can be found in *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of Creation* Volume III/3 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1961), pp. 289–368, 519–31.
10. PS Fiddes, *Participating in God: A Pastoral Doctrine of the Trinity* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2000), p. 166.

► misuse of freedom within a good world. But the doubts about its biblical anchor may also mean that the second version of the reality of evil can provide an illuminating alternative.

NON-ONTOLOGICAL REALISM

This second version may be described as 'non-ontological realism' in that it fully accepts the reality of evil as a force within human social and spiritual existence whilst denying that there is an ontology of evil underlying it.⁶ In other words, evil in itself does not consist of structured form or being. This amounts to a claim that the language used in the Scriptures and in the traditions of Christian thought and practice to describe evil is narrative and mythic in nature even though the reality to which it refers is far from being mythical.⁷ Otherwise put, the devil is a product of sinful human society rather than the other way round, a construct of godless corporate human existence. In the language of Walter Wink, 'Satan thus becomes the symbol of the spirit of an entire society alienated from God, the great system of mutual support in evil, the spirit of persistent self-deification blown large, the image of unredeemed humanity's collective life'.⁸ Evil is literally godlessness, the destructive spirituality that is created when God, the beneficent source and sustainer of life, is excluded from human communal existence by multiple human choices to be godless. It is ultimate emptiness.

Although a minority voice within the long history of Christian thought, this position is not one that has been unrepresented. Drawing from Plato, Augustine advanced the idea of evil as *privatio boni*, the absence of the good. Traces of it can also be found in Athanasius. It experienced a distinctive and creative revival in Karl Barth's concept of *das Nichtige* (Nothingness) to describe the essence of evil and his accompanying assertion that nonetheless 'Nothingness is not nothing'.⁹ As Paul Fiddes expresses it, 'Like the darkness which comes when the light is turned out, it is what happens when God's creation slips away from the divine aims. To call evil "non-being" or "the nothingness" (*nihil*) does not therefore deny that it is powerful, or pretend that it is some kind of illusion. It simply has no power of its own: it is a parasite, drawing its vitality from the life-giving trunk of a tree. Evil always perverts what is good, and twists what is full of life into what is destructive.'¹⁰ A significant parallel can be drawn here with death, an association that is often made in the Bible itself. To turn to evil is to die (Ezek 18.4,20; Rom 6.23). Death is a

powerful reality that casts its shadow over all of life. We feel its encroachment and fear its power to turn all things to bitterness. Death is real, but death is not something in itself; rather, it is the absence of life. It can be personified and reified as though it were itself something, the 'last enemy' (1 Cor 15.26,55) but actually it has no ontology, no being-in-itself.

Non-ontological realism attempts to go behind the mythic language in which evil is described in order to ask more penetrating questions about its nature and form. Inevitably this takes us into areas of some complexity, but evil is complex, being made up of 'the world, the flesh and the devil'. One of the advantages of the first version of evil's reality is its apparent simplicity, although this could be characterised as naivety. Perhaps this is a distraction, however, looking for too easy an account of our predicament, drawing our thinking away from the seat of the problem which is to be located not in some heavenly realm beyond us but in the world of human actions. Counting in favour of a non-ontological view is the evident fact that in describing the world's condition the Bible does not offer a narrative about a fall of angels but of human persons. It is from this that sin and death are said to have come into the world (Rom 5.12). It is this that gives rise to depraved human societies and cultures which distil their own godless spiritualities, otherwise known as idols. More significantly, in the purposes of God to redeem the world it is not into the world of angelic spirits that the Son of God enters but into the world of flesh and blood. The Word of God is made flesh because it is here that the problem is primarily located and here that it must be addressed. It is as a human being that the Son of God works redemption and reconciles the world to God. This surely relativises and subordinates the power of darkness to being an outcome rather than a cause of human actions. In the work of redemption the incarnate Son repairs and restores a broken world because it is in the failure of humankind to respond to God's grace and fulfil its divinely given mandate that the heart of the world's problem is to be found.

ENGAGING EVIL

Non-ontological realism therefore seeks not to deny the reality of the power of evil but to reinterpret it. This is not simply because the mythic version of the majority Christian tradition does not resonate with much contemporary thought but because the different perspective it offers is more satisfying theologically. What is irreducible is the fact that there is a spiritual

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dimension to life. When it becomes alienated from its creative source this becomes a negative power and not just a neutral one. Growing out therefore of human decisions, corporate and individual, to turn away from God and resist the wooings of the Spirit this godlessness takes progressive form in human communities, institutions, societies and civilisations. It creates a dynamic away from the living God and towards death which rapidly overpowers and dominates the human beings with whom it originated. Humans are now imprisoned within a power of darkness of their own making but beyond their control. It takes actual form in a variety of unpredictable ways: in distortions of people's mental and spiritual health, in the fracturing of their inner selves, in their imprisonment within addictions and compulsions, in the breakdown of wholesome relations, in institutional systems of power and domination, in the inequities between nations, in dehumanising ideologies and false religion. The language of 'evil', 'the demonic' and even the 'satanic' can quite rightly be applied to the ways in which the power of darkness, of godless emptiness, manifests itself. From all of these things we need to be saved and preserved.

Within this perspective the devil is not an individual being but a power, a dynamic which takes on the appearance of agency and intelligence and chaotically wars against God. It issues out of collective human resistance to God and holds in thrall the very beings on which it parasitically draws. It is immensely powerful but is at the same time a power that is negated and overcome in Jesus Christ. This is where hope is to be found. For God's saving action has also taken form in a human being who has come to destroy the work of the devil. His first calling is to live faithfully for God, embodying fully what it means to love God and neighbour. He does not fall prey to temptation but resists it and in so doing lives the life that all other humans have failed to do. He lives by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God and chooses obedience to the Father so as to achieve what all others have failed to achieve, a life of supreme devotion to the Father. Having done this for us and in our place he also endures in our place the judgment of death and godforsakenness, bearing and absorbing in his own person the fate that we bring upon ourselves. He does this as the agent of God's forgiving and reconciling grace, God acting through him to reconcile us to the divine life. By enduring evil, hostility and hatred he negates it. By refusing to submit to evil even at the cost

of his own life he overcomes evil on the cross and this victory is revealed in the resurrection. He also establishes around himself a community that participates by faith and the Spirit in his own victory, establishing a free people who can work in his name to free the world from its bondage to false gods, ideologies and spiritualities.

The calling of the Church is to be a free community, liberated by Christ through his Spirit. We are not to be naïve about a world in which evil is an active power, nor surprised by its strange mutations, nor overcome by its assaults or its temptations, nor discouraged in our struggle. We are called in the strength of Christ to stand. ■

SIN IS MORE COMPLICATED THAN YOU THINK!

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THE QUEST FOR A SINLESS SOCIETY

Sin used to be easy. When I was a kid most agreed sin was about breaking God's law, especially the Ten Commandments, and that was about it. Somehow or another certain places were labelled sinful, especially the pub and the dance hall, and certain actions associated with them were considered sinful, especially smoking, drinking, dancing, playing cards, gambling and any sex outside of marriage. If I had asked the preachers I was hearing if that was their total understanding of sin they would have said it was more complicated than that. The idea of 'falling short of the glory of God' was mentioned but never really explained. Sin was said to be a three-letter word with 'T' in the middle. But essentially sin was a crime against God.

Then came the moral revolution of the sixties and sin became unpopular. In the anything goes society that was emerging, sin seemed to belong to the pre-war world which had been much more rigidly structured and had a heavy emphasis on institutionalised authorities and their associated rules. The old moral consensus was breaking down. Experimentation, diversity and tolerance became fashionable. Yet, there was no denying that there were people who did wrong, even if the categories of what was considered wrong was smaller than before. Wrongdoing wasn't just a relic of the past. It was the reality of the present. Post-war optimism and freedom had not created paradise. What was society to make of the continuing presence of wrongdoing, and, therefore, wrongdoers?

The first reaction was to judge them as sick rather than sinful.¹ Sin became an illness rather than a crime. The sinner was treated as a sick person who could be healed by medical treatment – surgery, drugs or therapy – or the imposition restorative justice. This relieved a person of the need to accept moral responsibility since they were no more culpable for their wrongdoing than they were of catching the flu. The extreme illustration of this came in Stanley Kubrick's film *A Clockwork Orange*² where a violent thug called Alex was thought to be cured of his aggression by treatment based on Skinner's behaviourist approach to psychology.

Like the mature adult who emerges from the gangling teenager, so more recently a refined view of sin as sickness has developed in which all wrongdoing is capable of rational explanation. Wrongdoers are viewed as sufferers. The cause of their suffering lies either with themselves, through, for example, a defective gene, or with society, through poverty or discrimination. The

problem may be one of heredity or environment but culpability still does not lie with the wrongdoers personally. Hence, villains have become victims. Offenders have become the offended. So the same trajectory of relieving individuals of moral responsibility is being followed.

At the same time, the category of wrongdoing continues both to shrink and be redefined. Behaviour thought to be unacceptable just 20 years ago is now frequently welcomed as a symptom of diversity and the freedom to choose one's lifestyle without restraint. Parliament has decriminalised and de-legislated much to do with private morals, believing it is not their business to tell people how to live. It has done so at some cost to the public purse. The freedom to choose how to live means, inevitably, than many make unwise choices and harm themselves or others. It is expected, of course, that the government, rather than the individual, should pay the costs involved to repair or minimize the damage done, through the health service, social services, or court system. So the price tag is met by society as a whole. To paraphrase Rabbi Jonathan Sacks who made the point succinctly: 'Our society believes in the privatisation of morality and the nationalisation of responsibility.'³ We have become, he says, a society of claimants, and that impoverishes all our lives.

Yet, while most morality has become a purely private affair, it has not disappeared altogether. Further redefinition has taken place and a new list of contemporary deadly sins is being drawn up, which emphasises the sins of discrimination, sins against children and financial malpractice. In the absence of any agreed moral consensus, a fragmented society in which the formation of individuals no longer happens in families or through voluntary associations, has difficulty in enforcing its disapproval at such practices. The absence of social capital,⁴ especially that element of it which relates to trust, means society can only enforce its will by resorting to detailed legislation in which grand moral principles are replaced by minute rules that anticipate every conceivable form of wrong-doing in the area concerned. These rules are then enforced by an army of inspectors (all of whom, of course, have to be inspected), of electronic surveillance and even of snoopers. A moral state has been replaced by a procedural state.⁵ Process rather than substance becomes all that matters. So we have been jettisoned into a new age of pharisaism.