

R C I A

Rite for the Christian Initiation of Adults

Evil

Goodness is a positive, uncreated, eternal value belonging to God.

Evil is **not** a positive value, but merely the absence of goodness in a particular situation.

*For this reason the Church has constantly condemned the heresy of **dualism**, which suggests that good and evil are equal but opposite realities struggling on equal terms for power in the universe. We have a heresy to avoid in this field.*

Signs of Evil

God, the Good, only creates good things, people, etc.

There is freedom in the universe for us to choose whether or not to receive our life and its pattern from God, or to live for ourselves, on our terms. God, of course, remains a good God.

We are like plants who can choose to grow in the sunlight or try to grow in darkness.

- Our choice of darkness as our environment is called sin.
- Our choice of light is a mark of the holiness God creates in us.

When I exclude the goodness of God from my life, I become a darkened space in the cosmos, and my own powers as a human being give a location and a sort of incarnation to sin. This is the way in which evil becomes “real”: but even here, it is really my good powers and my presence that supply the only reality properly so called.

“Evil” in itself has still no existence of its own.

There can be whole clusters of darkness, which may seem to take on an independent force that is somehow greater than its inhabitants. Nazism seemed to many people to incarnate a power for evil which was inexplicable in so civilised and cultured a country as Germany. This is a sign to us of the great darkness of which we are capable when all our human powers are subverted, deprived of the light of God.

It is very easy for **superstition** to take us over in this context. We can come to construct whole worlds of demonic organisation, which can stand in opposition to the Kingdom of Heaven, giving a kind of fake symmetry to our world-view. Dualists believe that there is a God who creates good and another who creates evil, that there are evil and good people, that in any situation these two “divine powers” will be found locked in conflict.

The serene sovereignty of the One God has no part in this version of reality, and its aficionados live in daily fear that evil may triumph and blot out the good forever.

This is a very stunted notion of what we believe, and there is no room in it for the redemption Christ brings by his resurrection. The Catholic version simply replaces the Evil God with the devil, who is given vast influence, supernatural powers, and many divine characteristics, allegedly sufficient to terrify us into good behaviour. This is a grotesque parody of the faith, and deserves to be repudiated.

- What part does the experience of evil play in our religious life?
- Do we have complete faith in the power of God over evil?
- Does the onset of evil rob us of faith, and make worldlings of us?
- Do we believe that what we call evil may sometimes, in the sense of the Cross, be necessary for our redemption, and good for us?

A Short History of Satan

In the area around Jerusalem in the eighth century, people felt rather close to God (whom they called Yahweh, *the Lord*, except that they didn't actually use the name, so we aren't quite sure what it was: *Yahweh* is a kind of conjecture.) Yahweh had given them the city, the Davidic Throne, the Ark of the Covenant, the Temple, and the Holy Land; they felt that God was near, and they told the stories of Adam and Eve walking in the Garden with God, etc.

In the Northern Kingdom (Samaria - the ten tribes who had broken away from Jerusalem after Solomon had taxed them almost into extinction) felt rather differently about God, whom they called Elohim, *God*. They had an imitation king unblessed by the promises to David - and most of the Northern Kings did not die in their beds. They had no Ark, their Temples were the old confederate sanctuaries on the High Places which Solomon had destroyed: they felt like a second-class Israel, with shonky institutions founded on human thinking. This feeling of unworthiness penetrated to their Scriptures, and they produced stories where, instead of meeting God or speaking with God, people dealt with God's messengers (Greek *angeloi*). It was only a form of words, which expressed the cultural need for defence which the people felt. But little by little the angels began to take on specific characteristics and even to have names. They are sometimes identified with the stars (under the title "sons of God").

At the beginning of the book of **Job** God is depicted having a matey discussion with some of the angels. Satan mooches past: he is the Accuser of Men, the angel charged with detecting human faults and delivering them in evidence to the heavenly court; a perfectly respectable heavenly courtier. As time goes on Satan gets a worse and worse reputation (nobody likes an Accuser of Men) until at length he appears as the well-known "fallen angel" or Lucifer, and the enemy of humanity. How this divine messenger fallen from grace becomes the Serpent out of the Garden of Eden is quite a puzzle; he was still discharging heavenly office at the time of Job, and can hardly also have been in the temptation business at the beginning of time. You can see how easily evil starts to morph into various stories! (That's what it's like when you have no independent existence.) All sorts of other foreign titles leak into the Bible: Asmodeus is one of seven evil spirits in Persian mythology, and he pops up in the story of Tobias. Beelzebul was the Philistine god of the city of Ekron, and his name means "Lord of the earth" though Jewish mockery translated it "Lord of the flies", which sounds very much the same in Hebrew. Many foreign idols are identified with named demons by the Jews, and Paul certainly believed that false gods existed - but that they were demons.

The mythology of the "rebel angels" arose to try to explain how a straight servant of the truth like Satan could turn into the Father of Lies. Fortunately these stories are at the outer limits of our faith, mostly depend on apocryphal stories not included in the Bible - and a bit on Milton - and we should look at them through the long lens of history.

Some Devil Questions

- Do you ever think evil has an independent existence - that there is a force for evil separate from those who make evil choices?
- Some people sense that evil in this shape can inhabit places or houses, lying in wait for those who enter. How do you feel?
- Do people externalise evil to lessen their own unease at the knowledge that they themselves are sinful? Can this idea make us feel less guilty?
- The idea of Hell as headquarters of evil has fascinated people from age to age. Does it help us to live in the world, and go to heaven?
- Jesus liberated people possessed by evil. How do we think of this mysterious happening today?