Sympathy for The Devil: the use and abuse of supernatural evil

An address to the Melbourne Unitarian Church, May 17, 2009

Please allow me to introduce myself
I'm a man of wealth and taste
I've been around for a long, long year
Stole many a man's soul and faith
And I was 'round when Jesus Christ
Had his moment of doubt and pain
Made damn sure that Pilate
Washed his hands and sealed his fate
Pleased to meet you
Hope you guess my name
But what's puzzling you
Is the nature of my game

"Sympathy for the Devil" is a song by The Rolling Stones which first appeared as the opening track on the band's 1968 album Beggars Banquet. Rolling Stone Magazine placed it at #32 in their list of the 500 Greatest Songs of All Time.

This presentation is in three parts. The first gives a historical overview of the various forms of "The Devil", especially in Abrahmic monotheisms, the second is the use and misuse of supernatural moral justifications, and the third is an expression of 'sympathy for the Devil', specifically the Hellenic demons, the Islamic Satan, and the Judeo-Christian Lucifer.

The Devil

A demon is commonly perceived a supernatural malevolent spirit. In Christian terms demons are generally understood as fallen angels, which that may be conjured and insecurely controlled; there are numerous books of demonology published in the early days of modernity - the fifteenth century onwards - that dealt with them in this way - such as the Ars Geotia, a section of The Lesser Key of Solomon. These were presented in a corporeal manner for example, the Demonic spirit Dantalion appeared with variable visage which he or she likes to keep constantly changing but can force it in a single form as required. An avid reader, he is rarely seen without a book. He has great knowledges of arts and sciences, and has both the ability to read and control the thoughts of others. Due to this ability, he is often summoned to cause love, and he controls 36 legions of spirits.

This is part used in the contemporary fundamentalist Christian view. Although they are not provided the corpoereal forms, they are still considered free willed spirits. When the pastor of the 'Catch the Fire' ministry claimed that the recent bushfires were caused by God lifting his protective veil from Victoria because the state government decriminalised abortion, what he is claiming is that demons either took over the minds of others, or infected usually inanimate objects in causing the fires. Likewise the Westboro Baptist Church would probably feel the same about the supposed prevalence of homosexuality in this state.

The non-corporeal component of the notion of daemons in contemporary fundamentalist Christianity seems to be
derived from the approach of the ancient Hellenes; although they differ significantly in attitude. In the trial of Socrates, the famous philosopher in his "apology", or defense, argues that he is guided by an demon who argues with him, who admonishes him to tell the truth, not to harm others and so forth. His demon is nothing less than the inner conversation he has with a generalised other; it is his conscience.

Traditionally, the leader of the demons in Abrahamic religions is "the devil". But who is this devil? There is evidently some confusion between the two names and different roles given to Satan and Lucifer. Satan ("the accuser") is an angel in Judeo-Christian belief, and to a jinni in Islamic belief. Originally, this figure was the one who challenged the religious faith of humans. Afterwards, the various Abrahamic faiths have regarded Satan as one that tempts humans to sin or commit evil deeds.

In most of Judiasm, Satan has no power of independent action, but requires the permission of God, which he may not transgress. He cannot be regarded, therefore, as an opponent of the Deity, whereas in Islam, Shay??n is an entity, who rebelled against Allah. In Islamic theology, the Shaytan and his minions are "whisperers", who whisper into the hearts of men and women, urging them to commit sin. This is where the desire to sin comes from, according to Islam. In this context we can understand how the notion of 'Satanic Verses' supposedly delivered by Muhammad as part of the Qur'an and later retracted as being sourced from the Devil are challenging.

Satan is also a name for the main deity of the Yazidi. The Yazidi is a syncretic Kurdish religion, who follow the Islamic story of Satan, except they revere Satan for refusing to submit to Adam. Instead they hold that the source of evil is in the heart and spirit of humans. Yazidis believe that good and evil both exist in the mind and spirit of human beings. And yet... in 2007, a group of around 200 Yazidis beat and stoned a 17 year old Yazidi girl named for falling in love with a Muslim boy.

Whilst Lucifer, from Latin "light bringer", or also "morning star" is a name frequently given to Satan in Christian belief, there are numerous indications that he is a separate being. In Isaiah, a passage refers to Lucifer as a king of Babylon, a person who seemed powerful but would fall. In Peter It was among the early Christian writers that the identification of "Lucifer" with Satan was established, through the works of writers like Origen who claimed that Lucifer was the name of Satan when the demon was cast down from heaven for rebelling against God.

A further, and most interesting confusion arises in the penultimate statement of Jesus in Revelations when he is quoted as saying "Know that I am the root and offspring of David and the Bright and Morning Star". Jesus is Lucifer who rebelled against God and was cast from heaven to live as a man? Now there's an interesting theological narrative for the Christians!

The Use and Misuse of Supernatural Evil

Returning to more earthly concerns, before the 1960s Satanic groups were largely illegal even in advanced liberal democracies with anti-witchcraft laws such as the British Witchcraft Act 1735, which was not repealed until 1951, were used to prohibit such groups the former Victorian member of parliament, Jean McLean, conducting some spell-casting promote the repeal of anti-witchcraft and sorcery laws in 2003. In the 1960s, as suited the liberal temperament of the time, modern Satanism came into broad public awareness particularly with events such as the founding of the Church of Satan in 1966. This distinction between modern and traditional Satanism is important; it correlated with the two orientations among the the many cults; theistic Satanism and atheistic Satanism.

Theistic Satanists are said to venerate Satan as a supernatural deity, derives from the Black Mass ceremonies supposedly celebrated during the medieval Witches or Black Sabbath, which was a parody of the Catholic Christian Mass. Its main objective was the profanation of the Host, usually by sexual rituals. True hosts were given by Christian priests that had made a diabolical pact to the attendants to the Sabbath to be profaned by them. In the early 1990s, there was a number of church burnings and vandalisation of graves in Norway that were carried out by mostly teenaged theistic Satanists; at least one fireman died as a result of the burnings.
In comparison, modern, non-theistic Satanists argue that the Black Mass is only suitable for psychodrama and has no supernatural component. The most well known group of this sort is the Church of Satan established by Anton LaVey. Its teachings are based on individualism, self-indulgence, and "eye for an eye" morality, including kindness and support to one's friends, harshness to one's enemies. LaVeyan Satanists are usually atheists and agnostics who regard Satan as a symbolic of the inherent nature in humans.

Luciferianism, in contrast, is either considered as an identification of an aspect of Satanism, or as an independent expression. The latter group includes an approach from the gnostic tradition, especially in the past decade. Modern groups and individuals identifying themselves as "Gnostic Luciferian" emphasise the symbolic importance of enlightenment through knowledge, and draw correlations with the myth of Prometheus.

Evidently, except for a few isolated instances, most so-called "devil worship" is largely a symbolic expression. Actually carrying out acts of earthly evil is rather rare. The same cannot be necessarily said of those religions which try to make an appeal to a supernatural good. In 2003 the veteran German socialist Heinrich Fleischser said in an interview [1]: "Bush prays to his god very often. Those who attacked the Twin Towers prayed to their god. Israel's Sharon prays to his god. Which god is it?"

The problem is, to express succinctly, is that appeals to the supernatural versions of "the good" (as presented in eternal, unchanging and sacred texts) often result in an earthly implementation of evil. Whilst there are often additional reasons for religious wars, usually economic or racial for example, none should doubt the motivational power among those to whom the supernatural is a reality. The following quote from a presentation I gave at this church two years ago on Religious Freedom and National Self-Determination illustrates the problem:

Human history - and much of pre-history, if we accept the recordings of the great anthropologists - has been a constant struggle between those who seek to promote religious freedom and open inquiry, and those who have sought to impose on the lives of others one or another or even no religion and limit such inquiries through a variety of means of persecution; through censorship, desecration of holy sites, discrimination, forced conversion, pogroms, segregation, terrorism and war.

One need not delve into many examples of the more extreme attempts of war, torture and genocide to limit religious freedom; most are well known; the Diocletian persecution of Christians by Roman pagans, the Christian Crusades of the Levant, the Mohammedan conquest and rule of Hindu India, the conquest of Mesoamerica and the destruction of their religious life, the Christian versus Christian wars of the Inquisition, the reformation and counter-reformation and into the twentieth century with the public and private Christianity of Hitler against the Jews: "I believe that I am acting in accordance with the will of the Almighty Creator: by defending myself against the Jew, I am fighting for the work of the Lord."

In a more contemporary example [2], members of One Mind Ministries starved a 16 month old boy to death because he didn't say "Amen" after meals. "After he died, they prayed over his body for days, expecting a resurrection, then packed it into a suitcase with mothballs. They left it in a shed in Philadelphia, where it remained for a year before detectives found it last spring." Psychiatrists have decided that the perpetrators are not criminally insane. "She wasn't delusional, because she was following a religion".

Sympathy for the Devil

Recently, a Cardinal claimed in a BBC interview [3] that secularists, atheists are "not totally human" because they don't particularly care for the transcendent meaning called "God". This is not a fringe cult, nor a fringe spokesperson. The Cardinal is the Archbishop of Westminster and President of the Bishops Conference of England and Wales. He is one of 125 cardinals who elected Pope Benedict XVI. He is also the same Cardinal who transferred a priest who was engaging in sexual abuse of children rather than reporting him, and the Cardinal who has "misgivings" with the idea
that Turkey could become part of the European Union because of its large Muslim population.

Contrary to what the Cardinal suggests, atheists and secularists are totally human. Indeed it is a far greater danger, as history has shown us and continues to do so, to make appeals to supernatural versions of good an evil to trump their earthly implementation. In this regard, I will take the opportunity to express sympathy for that symbolic entity, the Devil. Satan is the tempter - he doesn't force anyone to engage in wrong acts he merely tests their moral resolve. He accuses people when they have done wrong - but it is their action and their responsibility. Likewise Lucifer is just the lightbringer - he doesn't force anyone to misuse (or fail to apply) knowledge, he simply is the provider of knowledge.

How people behave morally is the own responsibility; and there is a certain and justifiable anger at those who do not, and especially the hypocrisy among those who argue for a supernatural "good". We can consider, for example, the book on the science versus creationism debate "Telling Lies for God" by Ian Pilmer. The title illustrates the issue; that in an appeal to supernatural goodness, people will engage in real lies, deceit, and misrepresentations which is justified by a "greater", yet completely unreal, notion of "the good". This cannot continue and the logical conclusion is unavoidable; appeals to supernatural good and evil are untenable and must be abandoned. Instead, in all cases, we must instead always follow prosaic, material and earthly concepts of the good.

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