

THE BELIEF IN THE DEVIL

BY MAXIMILIAN RUDWIN

THE belief in the Devil has now been abandoned by most "enlightened" men. Lucifer has been relegated by the "advanced" thinkers of today to the limbo of medieval legends. Satan nowadays gets only a sniff or a sneer. Beelzebub is used in our times as a butt at which men shoot their arrows of wit. The mention of the Devil in this period of progress, far from causing men to cross themselves, only brings a smile to their faces. At the very thought of Old Nick men burst into laughter. "I could not think of the Devil without laughing," the poet Southey confessed even a century ago.

These "enlightened" men consider themselves too far advanced with their scientific knowledge to retain even a modicum of faith in the "bogies," with which they were frightened in their childhood. They leave the belief in the Devil to what they call the backward, blind masses. They forget, however, that it is they who are blind. These scoffers at Satan should remember that not so long ago it was authoritatively declared in the ecclesiastical courts that "a denial of the Devil's personal existence constituted a man a notorious evil-liver and a depraver of the Book of Common Prayer."

The fact of the matter is that the denial of the Devil is the most successful snare Satan ever laid for our souls. Father Ravignan was indeed right when he declared that the modern disbelief in the Devil was one of the most cunning devices of the Enemy himself. "La plus grande force du diable," said this Jesuit priest, "c'est d'être parvenu à se faire nier." The Devil admitted to Charles Baudelaire that he had been very much afraid, with regard to his proper power, when he heard this prominent preacher cry from his pulpit in Paris: "My dear brethren, do not forget, when you hear the progress of lights praised that the loveliest trick of the Devil is

to persuade you that he does not exist" ("le Joueur généreux," 1864). Baudelaire's disciple, Joris-Karl Huysmans, in his novel *Là-Bas* (1891), similarly says that "the greatest power of Satan lies in the fact that he gets men to deny him." Satan expresses his satisfaction over his success in this regard in Frederick Beecher Perkins's story, *Devil-Puzzlers* (1871). In Pierre Veber's novel, *l'Homme qui vendit son âme au diable* (1918), on the other hand, the Devil mocks at this theological dictum.

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The belief in the Devil forms an integral part of every religion. "God and the Devil make up the whole of religion," said the German rationalist, Christoph Friedrich Nicolai. It will not do for a believer in the Deity to scoff at the idea of the Devil. Disbelief in the Devil cannot be reconciled with faith in God. A man cannot be a believer in the Almighty and a sceptic about the Adversary. "Dæmon est Deus inversus," says the Cabbala.¹ The Devil is nothing but the reverse of the coin called God. George Sand has said that "the Spirit of Evil and the Spirit of Good are but one single Spirit: God" (*Lélia*, iii). The German mystic, Jacob Böhme, in the sixteenth century, affirmed that God can be known only through Evil, which means, through the Devil. To deny the Devil is to discount the Deity. Lucifer is as necessary to the Lord, as the Lord is to Lucifer. "God without the Devil is dead, being alone," affirms Samuel Butler. Though they oppose each other, they also complete each other. They are a part and parcel of the great cosmic system. John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, well realized the need of the belief in the Devil and issued to his followers the famous cry: "No Devil, no God!"

This position in regard to the belief in the Devil cannot be assailed. The assertion that the Devil is as essential to religion as the Deity cannot be gainsaid. The Catholic never has discarded the belief in the Devil. For the Roman religionist, the belief in the Devil, as any other belief, has been fixed *ne varietur* by the Church. It follows, therefore, that faith in the Fiend must form a part of the religion of every good Catholic. But it is difficult to understand

¹ Walt Whitman, in his poem "Chanting the Square Deific," represents the Devil as a part of a quadruple divinity.

how any Protestant can discard the Devil from his dogma. The belief in Beelzebub forms an essential part of the Christian religion. Indeed, it is the pivotal point of the body of Christian dogmatics. Voltaire proved himself as good a theologian as a philosopher when he said that the Fiend was the fount and foundation of the Christian faith. "Cette doctrine [du diable]." the old man of Ferney said, "devient depuis le fondement de la religion chrétienne" (*Essai sur les mœurs et l'esprit des nations*, iii). In fact, from the old orthodox point of view, Christianity cannot be conceived without Satan. To employ a hackneyed simile, Christianity without Satan would be to the old orthodox believer very much like the play of *Hamlet* with Hamlet left out. The fact is that the whole Christian scheme of salvation is based on the belief in the Devil. What need, pray, would there be for salvation through Christ if there were no Satan constantly plotting against man?

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The Devil appears in the sacred books under his various aliases in his various forms and with his various functions. He is found at the very beginning of the Holy Writ. If he plays a minor part in the Old Testament, the New Testament is full of his devices and doings. The gospels and epistles speak of his powers of opposing truth and assisting error, of accomplishing signs and wonders, of plotting and scheming, of influencing and controlling thought, of rearing children and having a residence, a royal throne and a church of his own. They portray Satan as a roaring lion, prowling about and seeking whom he may devour (1 Pet. v. 8). The Saviour himself was not safe from Satan's snares, although he escaped them.

The Devil is encountered at the very dawn of human history, appearing to our first ancestors in the Garden of Eden; and from that day on, he has been inextricably wound up with the affairs of men. Although he played a rather minor part in the days of the patriarchs and prophets, he gradually developed in power with the march of the centuries so that in the Middle Ages he was the Prince of this world. The medieval period may well be considered the heyday of the Devil's reign over the minds and wills of men. There certainly was tremendous diabolical activity in those Catholic times. The Devil was the object of the greatest concern among our medi-

eval ancestors, who feared him so mortally and who fought him so courageously. Our forefathers were encircled by the fiends of hell, from whom they could not flee. Any uncanny or untoward experience was ascribed to the Devil. If a person disappeared, it was supposed that the Devil had carried him off.² The Reformation perhaps increased the Devil's power in this world still more by withdrawing from the Church the power of beating Beelzebub with book and bell. In the eighteenth century, in this *sæculum rationalisticum*, the belief in evil as well as in good disappeared, and in the following century Diabolus was relegated to the domain of old traditions and ancient superstitions.

But just when we thought that we had discarded the Devil and lulled ourselves in the fond conviction that all was for the best in this best of all possible worlds, we awakened at the beginning of this century to a new and sudden realization of a power of evil which is still at work in the midst of men. The world-war brought us a new and appalling conviction that all the attributes which used to form the personality of the Prince of Darkness were more rampant in the world than we in our former blindness ever dreamed. It was the lesson that the French Revolution and its attendant Reign of Terror taught many of the sceptics of the eighteenth century, and it was again the lesson that the devil-doubters of our day learned from the recent war and its tragic aftermath.

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The existence of Evil necessarily and inevitably points to the existence of the Devil. Victor Hugo, like so many other Romantics,³ deduced from the existence of evil, "that terrible sphinx propounding a terrible riddle," the existence of an Evil Being. "It is this perfection of Evil," says the author of the novel, *les Travailleurs de la mer* (1866), "which has sometimes sufficed to incline

² Thomas Carlyle's graphic picture of Monk Sampson's vision of the Devil, in his *Past and Present* (1843), will perhaps do more to explain how the belief in the devil grew and flourished in the Middle Ages than pages of explanatory statements.

³ Balzac, however, could not understand how there could be two synchronously omnipotent powers, as the Lord and the Devil. He had too much faith in the wisdom of God to believe in Beelzebub. "God would be very stupid," he assures us, "to leave in this world, which he has so curiously constructed, an abominable devil whose special business it is to spoil everything for him (*l'Héritier du diable*, 1832). Alfred de Vigny similarly said that he had too much respect for God to fear the Devil.

powerful intellects to a belief in the duality of the Deity, toward that terrible *bifrons* of the Manichæans. . . . It is certain that Evil at one end proves the Evil One at the other. . . . If there is an Up," he continues, "there must be a Down; if there is Light, there must also be Darkness" (*ibid.*, II. iv. 2). Victor Hugo found an echo in Huysmans, who, in his novel, *Là-Bas*, previously mentioned, makes the following interesting statement through the mouth of Des Hermies: "Manichæism is one of the most ancient, the simplest of religions, at all events, the religion which explains best the abominable mess of the present time." This dualism is deep-rooted in the thought of man. It is suggested by our bisymmetrical bodies of right and left, and by the duality of the moral world of right and wrong and of the physical world of heat and cold, day and night, light and darkness, in which we live.⁴

Our belief in the Devil may differ somewhat from that held by our ancestors. Diabolus now shows himself perhaps no longer as a blackman with horns, hoofs and tail. Nevertheless, he is just as vivid to us as he was to the hermits of the Thebaid or the monks of the Middle Ages. What Renan said with regard to the Deity may well be applied to the Devil. When this eminent historian of religion was asked if he believed in God, he replied: "I do not know if the Divinity exists, but the Divine always exists." Whether or not the Devil exists, the Diabolical undeniably exists. But the Devil is more than a mere abstraction, an idea or a principle of evil, as he is presented by our "advanced" thinkers. The unity of all the forms and elements of evil, which still is so unmistakably real in the world, seems rather to point to a personality if not to a person. "We may not believe in a personal Devil," says Mr. Stanton Coit, "but we must believe in a devil who acts very much like a person."⁵

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Indeed, how can any man doubt the existence of the Devil? Thousands upon thousands of persons, in the Middle Ages and even later, saw him with their own eyes; and if unanimous testimony may be counted as proving anything, we must admit that the Devil is the

⁴ H. Taine also deduced the existence of the Devil from the existence of evil. Cf. J. Bourdeau: *les Maîtres de la pensée contemporaine* (Paris, 1904).

⁵ Stanton Coit: *The Soul of America: a constructive essay in the sociology of religion* (New York, 1914).

one person whose existence has been demonstrated beyond the slightest shadow of a doubt. How real the Devil was to St. Anthony and to Martin Luther! The first of the anchorites, upon the authority of St. Athanasius, was so tempted and tormented for twenty years by the Devil that he well-nigh lost his religion. Luther devoutly believed not only in the Devil's individuality but in his frequent appearance in physical form among men. The German reformer lived in a constant consciousness of contact with and opposition to the Devil. The founder of Protestantism affirmed that he had seen Satan with his own eyes and that he had frequently carried on a conversation with him. When Luther was studying at night in the monastery at Wittenberg, he often heard the Devil making a racket in the empty chapel below and was forced to slam his book and go to bed. The Fiend often looked over Luther's shoulder when the latter translated the Bible in the Wartburg and disputed with Diabolus in regard to the correct meaning of the Hebrew text. "The Devil," Luther assures us, "knows Scripture well and he uses it in argument." The founder of Protestantism carried on a serious controversy with the Contradictor on the subject of transubstantiation, and, in the course of the heated argument, lost his temper and hurled the inkstand at his visitor. The Devil dodged, and the ink splashed on the wall behind him. As proof of this episode, the inkstains may be seen to this day in Luther's former cell in the Wartburg.⁶

Many modern writers, who will certainly never receive canonization, are staunch believers in the Devil. E. T. A. Hoffmann, the most famous of the fantastic fictionists of Germany, held a firm belief in Beelzebub. It was a settled conviction with this writer that, when anything good befalls a man, an evil power is always lurking in the background to thwart the beneficent action. "The Devil," Hoffmann used to say, "will put his hoofs into everything, however good it is at the outset."⁷ This writer lived in constant dread of the Devil. He believed that, by means of a bargain, the Evil One had obtained possession of his soul, which could no longer

⁶ Luther's dispute with the Devil is very cleverly described by Népomucène Lemerrier in his *Panhypocrisiade* (1819). Concerning Luther's belief in the Devil, read Wm. Edw. H. Lecky: *A History of the Rise and Influence of Rationalism in Europe* (2 vols., London, 1865).

⁷ That is why one of the prayers of Charles the Fifth was: "May God do and Satan not undo."

escape eternal damnation. The poor man was persuaded that the Enemy of Mankind stood behind him while he wrote and looked over his shoulder. He so feared the Fiend that he would often awaken his wife in the night and beg her to keep watch with him and protect him, as he was sitting over his work.

Heinrich Heine, in a famous quatrain, warns us against doubt in Diabolus:

"Mortal, mock not at the Devil,
Life is short and soon will fail,
And the 'fire everlasting'
Is no idle fairy-tale."

The French novelist, Prosper Mérimée, who openly professed his unbelief in supernatural powers, was convinced that the Devil had much to do with the affairs of men. Théophile Gautier, sceptic and scoffer though he was, believed in the Devil. Barbey d'Aurevilly and Charles Baudelaire held firmly to the Catholic doctrine of the existence and influence of the Devil. The poet of the *Fleurs du Mal* (1857) was a staunch believer in the constant presence of the Great Enemy in this world. He laughed at his "enlightened" friends who imagined that "the Devil would one day be gobbled up" by manufactories and machines. Baudelaire had a certain feeling that an evil power existed exterior to man, since he failed to conceive how, save by means of such intervention, various sudden acts and thoughts could be explained. In a letter addressed to Flaubert in 1860, Baudelaire expressed his belief in the Devil as the origin of moral evil as follows:

"From all time I have been obsessed by the impossibility of comprehending sudden acts or thoughts of man without the hypothesis of the intervention of an Evil Power not in man himself."

In his autobiographical *Mon Cœur mis à nu*, the same writer expresses his Manichæan belief in the duality of human nature with the following words:

"There are in every man, at every hour, two simultaneous urges—one toward the Deity (spirituality), and one toward the Devil (bestiality). The invocation of God, or spirituality, is a desire to rise; that of Satan, or bestiality, is a joy in descent."

Baudelaire also believed in hell, and laughed at the freethinkers and humanitarians of his day, who proposed to abolish hell out of

friendship for humanity. He particularly poked fun at George Sand and, apropos of her disbelief in hell, remarked that she "had good reason to wish to suppress hell."

Anatole France, profoundly pagan though he was, professed a strong belief in Beelzebub and the Black Bogey (*le Livre de mon ami*, 1885). This scoffer at all things sacred was scared by Satan. There is a lurking suspicion that the atheist Thibault could not divest himself of the belief in the Devil which he had imbibed with his mother's milk. This latter-day exponent of the spirit of doubt and denial also regretted his loss of faith in inferno and envied his ancestors, who never questioned the reality of the unquenching fires of hell. His poem, "la Danse des morts" (1887), ends with the following line:

"Blessed are they who believed in hell."

Ernest Renan, who carried the spirit of critical inquiry into the field of religion, likewise regretted his loss of belief in hell. "I would that I knew there was a hell," he wrote; "far better that hypothesis than that of nothingness." As he had a horror of paradise, which he considered a place of perpetual *ennui*, he diplomatically preferred purgatory. Voltaire, who is generally considered among the good Christians as the incarnation of unbelief, was not altogether certain in his mind that hell did not exist. When a light-hearted sceptic wrote him one fine morning, "I have succeeded in proving that there is no hell," the sage of Ferney replied, "You are very fortunate; I am far from that."

Rémy de Gourmont, thoroughly godless as this deep thinker was, manifested a passionate interest in Diabolus, and sang the praises of Satan much in the manner of Baudelaire and Carducci. Our own James Huneker believed in the Devil even if he denied the Deity. His pupil, Benjamin de Casseres, is more convinced of the reality of the Adversary than of the Almighty.⁸

This belief in the Devil on the part of freethinkers puts to shame the doubts with regard to Evil and the Devil which we find frequently expressed by good churchmen and churchwomen in both camps of Christianity. Happily enough, the majority of men in Christendom still hold firmly to the belief in a personal devil. Against

⁸ Casseres expressed his belief in the Devil in his review of the present writer's collection of *Devil Stories*, which appeared in the *New York Herald*, of May 8, 1921.

Diabolus the Catholics yet swing their incense and the Protestants still thunder from their pulpits. In one country of Europe, at least, the Devil has not lost his legal status. According to newspaper reports, a few years ago, a Protestant pastor was sentenced at Bromberg, Poland, to eighty days imprisonment and a considerable fine for denying the existence of the Devil. The clergyman made no comment on the case beyond saying that the Devil would be glad to know that he had such fervent defenders in Poland.⁹

⁹ The present writer was told a few years ago by the president of a Baptist college that he would advise any man who did not believe in a personal Devil not to join the faculty of that institution.

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