

## *My Name is Legion*

**The Devil: Perceptions of Evil from Antiquity to Primitive Christianity**, by Jeffrey Burton Russell, *Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1977. 276 pp. \$15.00.*

BASICALLY this book deals with the concept of evil as it came to be formulated first mythologically and then philosophically in the ancient world. Though mainly a detailed historical survey, the book includes valuable comments on psychological and theological issues. Strange things are happening today. I live on the hillside where Matthew Arnold walked and meditated upon religion and morality. Recently in a chance encounter on the lane a lady expressed to me her anxiety about reported happenings at the clump of trees on the hilltop. There, it was said, ceremonies of witchcraft and black magic had been enacted. And this was but one instance of the revival in many places, one gathers, of attempts to make contact with the forces of evil.

Equally there has been a renewed interest in exorcism, the practice of which has already led to tragic results in particular cases in Britain and Germany. Yet there has been very little scholarly investigation of the history of concepts of evil, at least in recent years. There have been treatises on the fall, on sin, on theodicy and on eschatological victory. But so far as I am aware little has been written on the question of the personification of evil and of the way in which a possible personal principle of evil is operative in the world today. Professor Russell does not claim to supply this deficiency in any comprehensive way. But he has certainly provided a most impressive historical account of the development of the concept of evil, and it is against this kind of background that the philosophers and the theologians can attempt to construct their interpretations of the great moral conflicts which beset us today.

In an interesting preface the author defines the nature of his enterprise. He does not presume to give an account of *what actually happened* in remote places and in ancient times.

His aim is to give an intelligible account of what people *believed* to have happened. We have the evidence of texts and other symbolic forms, and these enable us to gain a fair knowledge of the beliefs of people belonging to cultures other than our own. Even here there are obvious difficulties of interpretation, but at least the main structures of systems of belief can be deduced from the myths and legends and later the histories and cosmologies of ancient peoples. Professor Russell concentrates his enquiry upon the way in which the nature of evil is expressed and particularly upon the emergence of personified evil—the Devil or Satan.

The two extremes of thought—a complete monism or an uncompromising dualism—have appeared but rarely in the history of mankind. Man is too conscious of the ambiguities and tensions and contraries of life to embrace the first: he is too anxious to gain the assurance that these dualities can be overcome and that some form of reconciliation can be effected, either now or in the future, for him to be attracted by the second. So we find unlimited varieties of what may be called modified monisms on the one hand and qualified dualisms on the other. Wherever, as for example in India, life has continued in the same general pattern century after century, with a close affinity between humans and the whole natural order, there the creative and destructive elements in gods and men are held together within a single comprehensive natural theology. Wherever, on the other hand, as amongst nomadic peoples on the steppes or the fringes of the great deserts, life is a constantly repeated struggle with hostile forces, there every triumph of good over evil is celebrated and the hope entertained that in the far distant future evil will be finally overcome.

It is within this second outlook on life that the possible existence of a prince of evil has gained credit. Within the first system a place is found for all kinds of malevolent sprites and spirits and even the gods behave ambiguously in their relations with men. But there is no cause to concentrate the evils of human existence within the powerful malevolence of a single personal antagonist. On the other hand,

where there are constant conflicts, where the opposition is led by a ruthless and cunning monster, it becomes almost natural to regard him as the tool of a far more powerful personal Agent, the adversary of the good God and the implacable enemy of mankind.

Fundamental to Professor Russell's exploration is the claim that most human thought is analogical rather than logical, mythopoeic rather than philosophical. This means that the altogether significant symbolic forms relating to God or to the Devil are the great myths which attempt to provide a comprehensive picture of reality. Their makers do not attempt to avoid ambiguities or opposites. Light and dark, order and disorder, are somehow integrated into a composite whole. "Mythology," Russell affirms, "understands the principle of evil as the opposite side of the principle of good, as the shadow of the God." This affirmation he illustrates convincingly by reference to the ancient worlds of the Far East and of Hellenistic civilization. I would regard all this as corresponding to what I have described as the outlook of a modified monism.

The outstanding example of an uncompromising dualism is to be found in the teachings of Zarathustra and the ancient religion of Iran. To what degree this influenced Judaism and Christianity is uncertain, but it may, I think, be confidently affirmed that both Hebrew religion and early Christianity were more inclined towards dualism than towards monism in their outlooks. Only as Christian thinkers endeavored to relate their faith to Hellenistic philosophy did the inclusion of the Devil within some comprehensive theology become the goal of thought. At the earlier stage both Christians and Jews concentrated their attention upon the actions of God by means of which He had vanquished the powers of evil in certain specific instances and on the future climactic action by means of which He would defeat, even annihilate, the Satanic adversary and inaugurate a reign of universal peace. Professor Russell has a fine overall description of this outlook when he speaks of a tension "between explicit monotheism and implicit dualism" as being characteristic of Hebrew and of Christian religion. And he provides a striking summary

of the Hebrew position as standing "between the monism of the Hindus and the dualism of the Zoroastrians." This position, he believes, is to be preferred, for in facing the problem of evil a creative tension rather than an harmonious consistency is the only real possibility open to man: "Precisely in its willingness to confront the problem of evil without recourse to the simpler solutions of either dualism or monism, Christianity advanced the motion of the concept of the Devil creatively."

I have given little indication of the immense range of the author's explorations in the history of the religious beliefs and practices of mankind. On India, on Iran, and on the classical world he writes with an impressive mastery of detail and with valuable textual and pictorial illustrations. On Christianity he confines himself in the main to the New Testament in view of the fact that he plans to write another volume on developments of the concept in the mediaeval world.

The concluding chapter, entitled "The Face of the Devil," ends with a personal apologia which is frank and persuasive. The author has written in historical rather than in metaphysical terms. Yet he is aware of a responsibility to make some declaration about the personal convictions to which he has been led as a result of his historical studies. After setting out seven propositions which are clearly open to debate he finally writes: "Of course I am not certain that the Devil exists, much less what he is if he does exist. All reservations considered, however, I do believe in the existence of a personification and principle of evil call it what you will." The terms "personification" and "principle" are by no means easy to interpret and it is probable that myth and analogy and parable and metaphor are more useful for grappling with the problem than any reduction to single abstract words. Nevertheless the idea that somehow the vast forces of evil in the world today are being organized and engineered by a *personal* agent makes a strong appeal to anyone seeking meaning for life amongst the chaotic disturbances and the terrifying potentialities of our contemporary world.

Reviewed by F. W. DILLSTONE