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Review of "The Devil: A New Bibliography"

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Abstract
The Devil has been many things in his long life: a servant in the celestial court (Book of Job), a prideful monarch preferring to reign in Hell (John Milton), or even God's ape (Martin Luther). Philip Almond introduces him first as the tormentor of young Regan MacNeil in the film version of The Exorcist. That movie, he argues "was the beginning of a re-engagement with the demonic in film, television, literature and music that has lasted into the twenty-first century" (xiii). It sparked an increase in actual exorcisms practiced by both Protestant and Catholic churches, as well as influencing fears of Satanic abuse of children and suspicion of demonic activity associated with neo-pagan groups. Our modern fascination with the Devil, however, is not actually Almond's focus. He uses the presentday only as a framing device for this accessible and engaging history of the Devil in Western culture from antiquity to the Enlightenment.

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The Devil has been many things in his long life: a servant in the celestial court (Book of Job), a prideful monarch preferring to reign in Hell (John Milton), or even God's ape (Martin Luther). Philip Almond introduces him first as the tormentor of young Regan MacNeil in the film version of The Exorcist. That movie, he argues "was the beginning of a re-engagement with the demonic in film, television, literature and music that has lasted into the twenty-first century" (xiii). It sparked an increase in actual exorcisms practiced by both Protestant and Catholic churches, as well as influencing fears of Satanic abuse of children and suspicion of demonic activity associated with neo-pagan groups. Our modern fascination with the Devil, however, is not actually Almond's focus. He uses the present-day only as a framing device for this accessible and engaging history of the Devil in Western culture from antiquity to the Enlightenment.

Almond aims to tell two different histories and present two different lives in this biography. The first encompasses the course of the Devil's eternal existence as established in Christian doctrine; that is, how a prideful angel fell from heaven at the dawn of time, achieved power over humankind, was in some way defeated by Christ's death on the cross, and will finally be vanquished at the end of days. These doctrines emerged over time, so this first life history inevitably "intersects and overlaps" with the other history presented here: the development of the "idea" of the Devil and the roles he has played at various times in Western societies (xvi). This second story is not an exclusively Christian one, as it begins with Jewish demonology and ideas of "the adversary," Satan. It follows the figure of the Devil through medieval apocalyptic traditions and early
modern witch-hunts, and it concludes with the radical disempowerment of the ancient enemy by seventeenth- and eighteenth-century philosophers, scientists, and jurists.

Almond's approach is as strictly chronological as his subject's convoluted life will allow. He begins with the reference in the Book of Genesis to the "Sons of God" who took human women to wife, fathering on them a race of giants, the Nephilim. Jehovah was not pleased, and from this kernel sprouted the idea of fallen angels and demonic spirits (although initially the demons were not the angels themselves but rather the souls of the Nephilim after they had been killed). Hebrew scripture also presents the figure of "the adversary," and Almond recounts how this job description turned into a proper name, Satan, whereas the Greek rendering, diabolos, retained the sense of being a title, the Devil. Situating the origins of the Christian Devil in Hebrew thought is obviously essential, but it's a shame that Almond didn't include at least a few references to ideas of evil spirits in other ancient Near Eastern traditions as well. While he stresses the complex development of Jewish thought, by omission he makes it seem as if this thought developed in a vacuum.

In his second and third chapters, Almond describes how the Christian Devil emerged from his Jewish roots, and in particular how he came to fall along with his demonic brethren. The story of the "Sons of God" had not originally included a chief evil spirit who precipitated their fall, which in any event was thought to have occurred around the time of the biblical flood. There is no scriptural basis for linking the tempting serpent in the Garden of Eden with the Devil, but early Christian writers began to do so, making Satan a mighty archangel who fell through rebellious pride, first at the creation of man and then at the very beginning of time, taking a host of angels with him. A great paradox of Christian thought is how the Devil and his minions can be both bound to their own torment in hell and still active agents tempting humanity into sin in the world. Part of the solution was that humans had become subject to the Devil through our own fall from grace in the Garden of Eden. Christ's death on the cross was conceived as a "ransom" to release humanity from this bondage but which then, logically, should have left the Devil rather powerless in hell. In the central middle ages, however, theologians largely supplanted the "ransom theory" of Christ's sacrifice with the "debt theory," in which Christ gave himself to pay humanity's debt of sin to God. The Devil was cut out of the transaction, so there was no longer reason to think that the crucifixion was any kind of turning point in diabolical history. That the Devil could now be "just as active in history after the passion of Christ as before it" (67), Almond suggests, was a main reason for the dramatic upsurge in concern over demonic activity that developed toward the end of the medieval period.

The next several chapters, chapters four to six, recount the development of late medieval demonology from the thirteenth-century scholastics onward, the growing fear of demonic magic among ecclesiastical authorities--initially focused on relatively elite and educated clerical necromancers but eventually encompassing
ordinary people from all walks of life—and finally the culmination of these trends in the major witch-hunts of the early modern period. Witchcraft, in particular, had been the focus of an enormous amount of scholarship, and Almond synthesizes it well, always keeping his focus on the demonic aspects of his story, which is not necessarily the totality of the story of witchcraft. One would, of course, expect this focus in a book on the Devil. But again, by omission, readers not familiar with the broader scholarship on witchcraft might be led to assume that witch trials were driven entirely by elite demonological theorizing, isolated and unaffected by far more common concerns about harmful magic, or judicial developments for that matter. Almond also presents some medieval demonological concerns as stemming from fear of heretical Cathar dualism, which church authorities interpreted as diabolism. But there is now a substantial body of scholarship warning that ordinary people accused of Catharism may not have held complex dualistic theories at all. Thus the interpretation should not be that "real" heretical beliefs fueled concerns about diabolism, but that existing clerical concerns about diabolism colored church authorities' depiction of perceived heretics.

In chapter seven, Almond turns to the topic of demonic possession, noting that the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were the great age of the demoniac in Europe, as well as being the age of the major witch trials. He articulates the connections between these phenomena well, and he also uses demonic possession to pivot to the history of growing skepticism about demonic powers. The behaviors that some authorities attributed to possession others ascribed to medical causes such as melancholia or hysteria. Chapter eight, "The Devil Defeated," does not continue this story, however, but returns to the more doctrinal course of the Devil's life, here his biblically prescribed defeat at the end of time. Chronologically, Almond's account here also backtracks to focus on biblical Revelation as well as medieval apocalyptic theories, especially those of Joachim of Fiore and his followers. This story culminates, however, in the readings given to Revelation and interpretations of the identity of Antichrist that flourished in the Reformation period, so the placement of this chapter is ultimately appropriate.

Almond closes his biography not with the doctrinal defeat of the Devil but rather with his cultural "death." Skepticism about demonic power began to emerge even in the demonological literature of the witch-hunt period. Developments in natural philosophy and prevailing interpretations of "wonders" in the natural world exacerbated his trend, and ultimately philosophers questioned the capacity of the Devil to interact with the physical world in any way. For religious thinkers in the Enlightenment, he became a purely spiritual foe, whereas for the more secular-minded he could cease to exist entirely.

Almond is quick to note that these developments applied only to certain strata of Europe's educated elites. For many at other levels of society the Devil remained a very real and embodied figure, as he remains for some in the Western world even into the twenty-first century. But these people and their perceptions of the demonic are
not part of Almond's story. His history of the idea of the Devil in Western culture is very much a high intellectual history: Satan as depicted in scripture, patristic writings, scholastic theology, and early modern philosophy. Even Almond’s discussion of the period of the witch trials centers on demonological treatises and not trial records or other accounts of what ordinary people may actually have believed about the Devil. The book also comes with a number of wonderful plates depicting the Devil in works of art, but there is almost no discussion of how Satan appears, or how his appearance fluctuates, in painting or literature.

To tackle the topic of popular perceptions of the Devil would be to expand the scope of this book considerably. It would also introduce a frustrating level of ambiguity, because through so much of Western history, authentic popular perceptions of the demonic are enormously hard to come by and terribly problematic when they appear. Nevertheless, there is certainly another history of the Devil, and an enormously important one, beyond the mainly theological and demonological account given here.

That observation does not detract from the great strengths of this book. Published in the US by Cornell University Press, it was first issued in the UK by I.B. Taurus, and those familiar with that press will recognize immediately the kind of high-quality and academically informed but nevertheless accessible treatment the Devil receives. For whatever criticisms one can raise here or there, Almond has accomplished an impressive feat in compressing the long and complicated life, or lives, of the Prince of Darkness into a clear, coherent, and engaging narrative. For students and general readers, this is an excellent introduction to the Devil’s story, and scholars will find it a valuable synthesis as well.

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