

THE DEVIL WEARS A PARKA



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INTRODUCTION

Over the forty days of Lent 2019 I wrote a series of emails to subscribers of my ‘daily meditations’ reflecting upon the idea of ‘Sympathy for the Devil’. The Devil is a key part of the Christian Lent story, appearing as the key interlocutor in the story of Christ’s temptations in the wilderness. For some people, this story represents a literal series of temptations that Jesus suffered at the hands of a demonic persecutor, while this interpretation is problematic, it has the advantage of being mainstream in Christian terms. For others, though, this story represents the internal struggle that took place within Jesus as he set out to begin his ministry – a set of very human temptations to which he could have succumbed. The story is talismanic of the difference in perspective on the character of Satan that exists within the church. Much has been made, over the centuries, of the idea of the Devil, and in my series of reflections, I had hoped to poke a little at the wasp’s nest of ideas that have coalesced around the theme of ‘Satan’. My general approach is not to tell people what to think, but rather to give them something to think about: On this occasion I was perhaps too vague, too elliptical at times, and afterwards a number of people admitted that they had found the series a little confusing. On the one hand – good. This is a complex set of ideas, and it shouldn’t be too straightforward after all. But on the other hand – bad. I had added to the confusion, rather than helped to navigate through it. So now that the dust of Easter has settled, and the last chocolate eggs have been devoured, I have chosen to revisit the theme, and perhaps to throw a little more light than shade on to the subject.

THE MARCH OF THE MODS

The late 1950s through to the 1960s was a time of profound social change, certainly in the UK where the post war ‘baby boomers’ were in the process of coming of age. Many of them did so complete with disposable income of the sort that their parents, who had known the deprivation of pre-war decades could never have imagined. One of the interesting developments of this era was the proliferation of youth subcultures. They weren’t the first, but they were to become particularly vibrant and exotic, as they began to mix and match ideas and cultural icons of times past with attitudes that were very much of their time. Just as Kerouac had been a chronicler of the Beat generation, so there came new writers for a new set of young people – one of those was Colin MacInnes, who wrote ‘Absolute Beginners’ which was set in 1958 and saw its leading characters riding scooters, wearing Italian suits and

being altogether ‘Modern’. By the early 1960s, “the Mods” had in fact become a significant consumer group, a lower middle class subculture which prided itself on its differentiation from previous youth movements such as the Teddy Boys (Polhemus, 1994). At the same time another group of young people were also coalescing around a love of music, style, and a two-wheeled vehicle. Café racers, Coffee-bar cowboys, Greasers – these young people wore leather jackets and jeans rather than mohair, and listened to old school rock and roll rather than modern jazz and pop music. It may have been the Mods themselves who described these motorcycle enthusiasts as ‘Rockers’ – but in any case the name stuck and the group grew in numbers and strength, in direct counterpoint to their Mod opposites.

The development of these two groups, so similar and yet so different came to something of an apotheosis in the spring and summer of 1964 when media reports of violent clashes between warring groups of Mods and Rockers in seaside towns such as Clacton and Brighton hit the headlines. Reading front pages from the time it is clear that the scale and violence of these clashes were extraordinary, with mobs running riot, determined to kill or inflict serious damage on one another. The Daily Mirror on August 3rd 1964 declared ‘Riot Police Fly To Seaside’, while an iconic picture of two rockers jumping from a promenade as Mods hurl deck chairs at them was featured on the front of the Daily Sketch in May 1964 under the headline ‘Wildest Ones Yet’. The front page of the Mirror from March 30th 1964 told the story of how “the wild ones invaded a seaside town yesterday – 1,000 fighting, drinking, roaring, rampaging teenagers on scooter and motorcycles.” It was clear that these two groups were engaged in nothing short of all-out war. They were a real threat to society.

Or were they?

The Sociologist Stanley Cohen, a South African who had arrived in the UK in the early 60s had spotted some anthropological study material in these two emerging people groups, and so spent considerable time speaking to Mods and Rockers, interviewing them and learning about what interested and motivated them. He later explained in an interview: “I was working on my PHD in 64-65, when the original mods and rockers confrontations were happening at the seaside. I used to go down to Margate and places like that over bank holiday weekends, conduct interviews and fieldwork.” While Cohen certainly recognised that some violent clashes took place – he went on to point out that the scale of the scuffles was nothing like what media reports made it seem. What was being created, Cohen went on to argue, was a ‘folk devil’ and a ‘moral panic’ (Cohen, 2002). The irony

being that this media creation actually served the purpose of further developing the problem, as bored young people heard of the excitement happening elsewhere and looked to align themselves with one side or the other, and to get involved.

These teenage folk devils ripping up the very stretches of sand which Winston Churchill had declared that Britains would stand firm upon (“We will fight them on the beaches...”) became the visualised epitome of everything that was wrong with society, they were defined in opposition to that which the culture held sacred after years of war – the peace and tranquillity of the seaside promenade where the family can enjoy picturesque views of the sea which so carefully sets us apart from our continental neighbours. The ice cream man and the Punch and Judy stall, the deck chair and the umbrella. Although the battles between the Mods and Rockers soon fizzled out, they still loom large in the imagination of British people, and the template on to which their stories were written has been reused over and again, as new folk devils are created and new moral panics spawned. Hippies, punks, goths, ravers, all kinds of youth movements and other outsider groups have taken on the mantle at times, some for longer than others. Politicians too, have sometimes filled this role, as have social workers. Travellers of one sort or another have an enduring folk devil status – indeed Gypsy people are one of the few ethnic groups about whom it seems to remain socially acceptable to express racist views. Again they are defined in opposition to what the British person ‘holds dear’ – their travelling lifestyle an affront to the tax paying Englishman’s-home-as-castle.

OPPOSING THE SACRED

Just as folk devils are created in opposition to what society holds sacred, so too we could argue, are spiritual devils created in opposition to those things which are held sacred in a religious context. The collection of writings known as The Bible holds no cohesive narrative concerning ‘The Devil’ – rather that figure which is sometimes referred to as Satan is a kind of bricolage, made up of a variety of conflicting ideas. The Hebrew scriptures known to many Christians as ‘The Old Testament’ contain a number of references to Satan, some of which have him as an agent of God – carrying out a particular role in the heavens and on the earth. And there are a number of different ‘Satans’ too, all of whom perform the role of some kind of ‘adversary’ – like good old King Hadad the Edomite who was ‘stirred up by the Lord’ as an adversary (*śā·tān*) to Solomon (1 Kings 11:14). In other instances God

sends an adversary of one sort or another to do his bidding – such as in the story of Balaam and his Ass, and in the book of Job.

The idea of Satan in the centuries preceding the common era was not static, and people became increasingly influenced by a non-canonical book, little read by contemporary Christians but very popular in its time, and with an enduring influence. The Book of Enoch is a deeply dualistic text which has within it an epic story of heavenly warfare. Out of Enoch and another non-canonical text: Jubilees, come some key ideas which continue to influence the development of ideas about the Devil today – the Satan character (called Mastema in Jubilees) is the leader of a band of fallen angels, there is warfare between heaven and hell, there is a holy struggle against the evil empire.

Throughout contemporary history, depictions of the Devil have taken on key abnormal characteristics which are at odds with a hyper-normalised version of society. The characteristics of a countryside deity in the face of civilised urbanisation for instance; or characteristics of racial otherness in a society of dominant whiteness; sexual lasciviousness in the face of moral restrictions; and so on. Contemporary ideas of Satan as relating to the other who attacks a shared sense of the sacred include the former Republican candidate, Ben Carson's elliptical reference to Hillary Clinton as being in league with 'Lucifer'. Clinton had become totemic for sections of the American right wing as a representative of what Carson described as "The secular progressive agenda [which] is antithetical to the principles of the founding of this nation." Not much of a stretch then to align Clinton with the Devil for the man who would ultimately go on to become Secretary of State for Housing and Development in the Trump administration.

CONCLUSION

So where does all this leave us, vis-à-vis the Devil? For one thing, any serious scholarly examination of the Biblical texts has to concede that the idea of Satan in Christian scriptural terms is complex at the very least – there is no single 'Satan' emerging from the Bible in the way that some suggest. The textual justification for believing in a fallen angel who seeks to tempt humans to sin so that they can be consigned to Hell is thin – and to hold that opinion means that one relies heavily on oral and non-canonical traditions. We must also recognise that the Devil has taken on a number of characteristics which are notably socio-political, in other words Satan has come to characterise traits which are antithetical to certain

societal ‘sacreds’. Hence the adoption of Satan as something of an anti-establishment mascot: this is not simply because people actually want to worship an entity which has no interest in anything other than malignity, but because they want to express their distaste for social rules and restrictions. When we come to consider how those same rules and restrictions have been used to oppress all kinds of people and to exploit the world’s resources, this doesn’t seem entirely unreasonable.

Just as folk devils were created in a series of minor seaside fracas’ during the early 1960s, so a composite opposite to the sacred sense of a holy God has been developed over the centuries and claimed the identity of ‘Satan’. Of course, to say all this doesn’t necessarily deny the reality of a genuine sense of ‘evil’ such as seems evident in the world around us and in our own selfish motivations, nor does it deny the fact that such an idea can then create havoc of its own: just as the manufactured folk devils of Clacton and Margate spawned copycat violence in other seaside towns. It does call in to question though the sense in which responsibility for human actions can be shucked on to an outside actor – the responsibility for human evil is surely to be borne by humans themselves, not ascribed to a ‘demon’. It should leave us with a realisation that of all the devils with which we are familiar, many are representatives of that which ‘civilised’ society regards as sacred: The rule of law; the protection of the family; the ability to generate and collect wealth; and at times the preferential treatment of one group over and above another. The horn headed, goat legged, nature gods were an affront to the churches and organised religious structures of the city, just as the Trident wielding deities a threat to civilised Roman Christianity – elements of both were thus adopted into depictions of the Devil. The long association of women as Satan’s emissaries, slaves or servants (e.g. witches, or even Democrat politicians) speaks very clearly to society’s patriarchal nature, powerful women of any sort were/are a threat to the dominance of men.

Some people believe resolutely that the Devil is a ‘real’ individual entity, who exists in opposition to God in a state of open “heavenly” warfare. They expect this war to come to an end eventually, and with it the end of the world-as-we-know-it. In some cases they site evidence of an experiential nature, which is difficult, if not impossible, to dispute. Indeed, this has been – to some extent – a staple of ‘orthodox’ Christian belief for centuries. Whether it was part of the worldview of the very earliest Christians, is more difficult to establish. People at that time had a different way of understanding the world, and a different

route by which they navigated ideas of myth and history. Some people imagine that to say this implies that people then were less sophisticated than people today, and that we are by implication criticising them by offering a different perspective on their language. In fact the opposite, to my mind, is true: I think that the writers and editors of these early texts were incredibly sophisticated and wrote with extraordinary levels of subtlety. The problem is that we, in the 21st century lack the tools and skills to understand them, and to decode their literature. “It’s not you, it’s me...” As they say. For many other Christians and others who find themselves ‘outside looking in’ - Satan is entirely allegorical. They read or understand the Biblical texts which refer to the Devil as a way of explaining and understanding the world that is or was best developed through poetry and story, rather than what post enlightenment thinkers consider to be ‘facts’. This, they consider, is a better way to read these ancient texts, and it sits more comfortably with the various complexities of the depictions of Satan in the texts. Ultimately, though, with all things, such conclusions must eventually come down to personal convictions.

Works Cited

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