

It is C. S. Lewis, perhaps the most prominent popular writer on Christianity in the second part of the twentieth century, who has provided one of the most interesting perspectives on this aspect of the Bible:

One of the things that surprised me when I first read the New Testament seriously was that it talked so much about a Dark Power in the universe – a mighty evil spirit who was held to be the Power behind death and disease, and sin. The difference is that Christianity thinks this Dark Power was created by God, and went wrong. Christianity agrees with Dualism that the universe is at war. But it does not think this is a war between independent powers. It thinks it is a civil war, a rebellion, and that we are living in a part of the universe occupied by the rebel. Enemy-occupied territory – that is what this world is. Christianity is the story of how the rightful king has landed, you might say landed in disguise, and is calling us all to take part in a great campaign of sabotage. When you go to church you are really listening in to the secret wireless from our friends: that is why the enemy is so anxious to prevent us from going. He does it by playing to our conceit and laziness and intellectual snobbery. I know someone will ask me, ‘do you really mean, at this time of day, to reintroduce our old friend the devil – hoofs and horns and all?’ Well, what the time of day has to do with it, I do not know. And I am not particular about the hoofs and horns. But in other respects my answer is ‘yes I do.’ I do not claim to know anything about his personal appearance. If anybody really wants to know him better, I would say to that person ‘don’t worry. If you really want to, you will. Whether you’ll like it when you do is another question.’ ... Christians, then, believe that an evil power has made himself for the present the Prince of this World.⁶⁰⁷

These remarkable words serve to remind us of the absolute centrality of demonology – of belief in the devil and his powers – to the historical Christian faith. In short, if we try to trace the genealogy of the deepest preoccupation of the modern child protection movement, we find it leads back to the very heart of our traditional religious orthodoxy.

A preoccupation with the works of the devil and the manner in which he has supposedly infiltrated the ordinary institutions of our world is not simply present in the New Testament. It remained a staple part of the orthodox Christian imagination for most of the last two thousand years. In all its most significant manifestations up to the time of the Reformation, the Christian church never ceased to imagine the culmination of history as an apocalyptic battle in which Satan and the powers of darkness were finally defeated and the pure reign of God was established for all eternity.

Such apocalyptic fantasies were once the very essence of religious orthodoxy, and it was in the white-hot religious zeal which was associated with them up to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that our modern 'rational' consciousness was originally forged. Yet, as C. S. Lewis implies, there came a point in the history of Christianity when the devil and all his works began to disappear. In Britain and much of Europe the decline of hell and the gradual disappearance of traditional Christian demonology began in the seventeenth century but was most marked during the nineteenth century.⁶⁰⁸ By the end of the 1960s it was almost complete. Indeed, by now, many practising Christians are almost completely unaware of the centrality which fantasies about dark powers and apocalyptic battles once enjoyed in the Christian church. As the religious scholar S. G. F. Brandon has written: 'The secularisation of Western society has coincided with a growing uncertainty among Christians, of most denominations, about their traditional eschatology. Although the ancient concepts of Judgment, Heaven and Hell are still current in hymns and prayers, and are enunciated in the reading of the Bible, the imagery in which they were originally presented is now found embarrassing.'⁶⁰⁹ In this respect our modern cultural predicament has been most succinctly and poignantly expressed by the novelist John Updike: 'Alas we have become, in our Protestantism, more virtuous than the myths which taught us virtue; we judge them barbaric.'⁶¹⁰

Today we tend to explain the 'disappearance' of the devil from our contemporary world-view by invoking the triumph of rationalism. Yet this represents a fundamental misunderstanding both of our cultural

history and of our cultural psychology. The principal objection to it is that it fails to take account of the fact that the Judaeo-Christian tradition is itself one of the principal sources of modern rationalism. The dream according to which human irrationality is finally defeated and replaced by the reign of reason has always been at the heart of Christian apocalyptic fantasies. It was Christianity which fostered the view that human irrationality and human viciousness, though part of our 'fallen' nature, were not part of our essential spiritual and rational identity. In the eternity of God's kingdom which was to be established at the end of history, they would be banished for ever. It is religion, in other words, which has encouraged us to believe in an unrealistic version of human nature according to which all human unreason (traditionally personified as 'the Beast', the 'Whore of Babylon', or 'Satan') can be bound for a thousand years (the 'millennium') or somehow permanently excised from human nature. 'Rationalism' is, in this sense, the greatest of all the irrational delusions which has been promoted by our religious tradition.

The alternative to the modern myth which explains the decline of demonology by reference to our increasingly rational outlook is to recognise that demonology has not in fact declined at all. It has simply been relocated in another part of our culture where it remains just as central to our modern consciousness as it ever was in the past.

This is what we might expect if we adopt the kind of perspective on our own history which might be taken by a cultural anthropologist. Any anthropologist who studied the extraordinary continuity of our culture's preoccupation with dark alien forces over the last two thousand years might very reasonably come to the conclusion that they were studying an aspect of human nature itself. This is not to say that such preoccupations are written into the DNA of the human species. But there is, at the very least, strong circumstantial evidence to suggest that a preoccupation with dark conspiracies is part of our cultural identity. If such a preoccupation is part of 'human nature', or of what might be termed, less traditionally, the 'cultural physiology' of the human brain, it would follow that we remain just as susceptible to demonological fantasies as our ancestors who lived in an age of faith.

It may well be that the Christian church has largely renounced its interest in doing battle with Satan, and in the traditional trappings of biblical demonology. But, in Britain at least, the organised Christian church now plays relatively little role in our national life. The modern child protection movement, by contrast, plays a significant role and, if



At the heart of all apocalyptic fantasies is the idea of a final and decisive battle between the forces of Christendom and the forces of evil – frequently symbolised by the many-headed ‘Beast of the Apocalypse’. In this sixteenth-century Lutheran woodcut Christ is shown trampling triumphantly on a three-headed version of the apocalyptic beast. One of the heads is that of the pope, who spews out monks and demonic spirits. The second is that of the devil disguised as an angel. The third is that of a Muslim, specifically of the Turk, who was seen at the time as a sign of the last days, and as identical with Gog and Magog, the hosts of Satan who figure in Revelation 20:7.



Apocalyptic fantasies played a crucial role both in the English Civil War and in the Newtonian movement and remain part of the hidden inheritance of modern rationalism. In the seventeenth-century engraving reproduced above, which projects a massive fantasy of male domination, the place of Christ has been taken by Oliver Cromwell, who is shown standing in triumph on the dead body of the Whore of Babylon and the defeated reptilian form of the seven-headed beast – the Roman Catholic Church. In some seventeenth-century versions of this image – which is already a clear example of the ‘pornography of righteousness’ – the woman’s breasts and nipples are exposed. As Dan Jacobson has written, in words which might well be applied to W. T. Stead and the modern child protection movement: ‘A conviction that one is writing or speaking on the side of virtue can license an indulgence in fantasies that virtue itself would ordinarily compel one to forswear.’