

# BLACKFRIARS

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## THE DEVIL

SINCE Père Bouyer wrote his essay on the Problem of Evil which BLACKFRIARS is publishing in this and the previous issue, a considerable amount of energy has been given to the consideration of the Devil. Père Bouyer himself shows how concrete a reality the evil one was in the New Testament. Perhaps it was this 'pointer' of his which led to the compilation of the large volume of *Etudes Carmelitaines* entirely devoted to the subject of Satan. But before Père Bouyer there was already a considerable devil literature, particularly of course in the popular 'Screwtape Letters' and more seriously in Denis de Rougemont's *Talk of the Devil*.

Perhaps this reintroduction on to the stage of modern consciousness of an almost forgotten personality may seem to many rather reactionary and childish. The rationalist and modernist movements have until now been successful in repressing any personal spirit of evil, so that for many it seems to be merely a horrible medieval trick of frightening children off the forbidden path of sin. Of course we are well aware of the danger of handing over responsibility for all one's own personal sins and weaknesses to the devil in order to prove an alibi. We can easily make the devil take the major

share in any temptation in which our own evil inclinations are the prime movers. We can also regard our enemies—Hitler, Stalin, Communism—as the subjects of diabolical possessions. The devil provides an easy solution to tangled human problems; and human nature sails with a list towards manicheism, because evil personified means an apparent reduction of personal evil. These are clearly reasons for being on our guard against a quick facility in resurrecting the person of the evil one. But they are not the reasons for his suppression in modern consciousness.

As de Rougemont reminds us, it was Baudelaire who pointed out that 'The Devil's best ruse is to persuade us that he does not exist'. And in the present age of secularism we are in fact presented with a habit of mind which cannot accept any real spirit and which is for that very reason most easily subject to the power of the Evil Spirit. Mr Christopher Dawson's Gifford Lectures (reviewed in the present issue of BLACKFRIARS) make this abundantly clear; for he is concerned to show how secularism destroys both religion and culture, the denial of spiritual realities being the influence most destructive of human nature today. He concludes the chapter on Priesthood and Sacrifice:

The intellectuals who have succeeded the priests as guardians of the higher tradition of Western culture have been strong only in their negative works of criticism and disintegration. They have failed to provide an integrated system of principles and values which could unify modern society, and consequently they have proved unable to resist the non-moral, inhuman and irrational forces which are destroying the humanist no less than the Christian traditions of Western Culture. (p. 106.)

These forces are in fact given a full range of destructive activity precisely because they are not admitted as real by those who encourage them. And Christians may easily be struck by the same blindness, for they are living in the materialist atmosphere which produces the radical secularism of the day. For example, intelligent Catholics are often interested in St Thomas's treatise on the Angels, not because they have any real conviction about the existence of such a spiritual world, but simply because of the interesting epistemology and psychological topics which are discussed therein by the Angelic Doctor. Such people are not interested in whether such spirits exist but only in what they would be like if they did exist. They are interested in the 'Problem of Evil' as a problem but *not* as a person, as Père Bouyer shows. They read the *Screwtape Letters* with enjoyment, but only because C. S. Lewis tends to use the devil purely as a mirror of human problems. Many of the

more sophisticated Christians are very far from realising the importance of Guardian Angels even though our Lord himself speaks of these spirits as being before the face of God. Similarly they are reluctant to admit the reality of the Evil One, who is, as Père Bouyer reminds us, an essential part of the Gospel teaching. It is presumably the same influence of materialism which in many cases has led men to soft-pedal the doctrine of eternal punishment, the pains of hell. The more preoccupied we become with the material things around us the dimmer grows the world of spirits. We are like a man who does not know of his overdraft because he refuses to look at his bank book.

Of course we can fall into superstition in these deep matters, that is we remain on the surface, the outward showings of the spiritual world; but the Gospels themselves teach a vivid and realistic acceptance of the existence of good and evil spirits to neglect which for fear of superstition is to reduce the Christian religion to the humanitarian social science it has become for so many. And yet anyone with experience of the individual difficulties of men and women today, particularly those who are regarded as being fit subjects for mental hospitals or the psychologist's parlour, will realise that the Evil One plays a direct and personal part in the lives of a great number of individuals. Officially the Church will only recognise as diabolically possessed those who show evident signs of being out of themselves. 'Speaking in strange tongues, or understanding them, revealing hidden or distant things, showing powers which are beyond those natural to the age or condition (of the patient)'; these or things of a similar nature are the criteria the Church demands before granting permission for exorcism. Yet there are many less spectacular cases which suggest some diabolic power perverting the naturally good inclinations or intelligence of an individual. Again, in the misunderstandings which exist in families or among friends it would seem quite evident that an external influence in some sense 'possesses' the group since individually each is good-hearted and mild and yet within the context of the family quarrel each becomes quite 'beside' himself in malicious judgment and antagonism. Still more evident does this strange sort of group possession become in international affairs. The lying malice which organises a world-wide situation so that conflict and war become almost inevitable cannot be laid to the account of any individual man. Even the most war-mongering of national leaders can scarcely have the astuteness and agility with which war-schemes are prosecuted, while the enormous majority of men who seem prepared to fight if necessary, thus becoming caught up in the tangled mass of misunderstanding

and deceit, is in fact peace loving at heart and loathing the idea of further bloodshed.

A contributor in the present issue suggests a practice of parochial exorcism which is aimed at the group as well as the individual 'possession' of a specified territory. The evening prayer of the Church at Compline is in fact specifically directed against the demon of the dark, and such an exorcism might at least be regarded as an extension of the prayer of a parochial Compline. The invocation against the power of evil spirits contained in the rite of exorcism should be most efficacious for those who really believe in the world of spirits; and if there is any truth in the stories which are often repeated regarding the power of the exorcism prayers, then such a practice as that suggested would in fact provide a safeguard against evil.

But to avoid the easy descent into superstition in such matters it is necessary to return to the Gospels and recapture something of the atmosphere of the struggle which throughout our Lord's life was taking place between God made man and the 'Prince of this World'. That struggle continues with as much fury now as then, for the Gospel continues in us. Each member of the Mystical Body is of necessity committed to war against the Evil One, the Father of Lies, first of all in himself and then among those around him. It is only thus that the Kingdom of God can prevail against the reign of evil.

THE EDITOR

**IN THE MARCH ISSUE**

**Catholics & Modern Politics**

by

**AELRED GRAHAM**

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