

The Case for the Existence of Demons

Churchman 094/3 1980

Graham Dow

The assumption that demons do not exist has become sufficiently widespread for those of us who believe to the contrary to present the argument for their existence as a matter of urgency. This article seeks to present the case for the existence of the demonic realm in the traditional understanding of personal spirit-beings or demons, acting as agents of the supremely evil one, also known from biblical theology as the devil or Satan. The paper is not, specifically, an argument for the existence of the devil himself, although there are implications for that question in what follows.

The argument will be developed in two stages. Firstly, there is the positive argument for the existence of demons, which is assembled using the principle of *correspondence* with reality. Secondly, some of the arguments used by those who deny the existence of demons are considered as to their *coherence*. It will be argued that greater coherence is obtained if it is asserted that demons exist.¹ It is beyond the scope of this paper to consider in detail the evidence relevant to every point in the argument; some of that will be dealt with elsewhere in this issue. The intention in this article is to present the structure of an argument which will indicate that belief in the existence of demons can be supported by a rational approach to the relevant data.

I

The discussion must concern itself with the data from the New Testament which purport to describe this phenomenon and to un-cover its theological meaning.² It must also concern itself with the data of present experience, particularly that about which a serious claim is made for an explanation in terms of demonic realities. Then there is the relationship of such an explanation to what Berger calls the 'plausibility structures', the socially determined structures of verification and falsification which govern what is judged to be thinkable in society.³ It is then the principle of *correspondence* which provides grounds for an inductive argument that a demonic explanation is most consistent with certain data of present-day experience. The correspondence occurs at three levels.

1) There is correspondence between descriptions of present-day allegedly demonic phenomena, as encountered in the practice of exorcism, and the descriptions of exorcism in the New Testament. There is, therefore, a *prima facie* argument that we are dealing with the same kind of behavioural reality. Correspondence can be adduced at several points, of which the following are representative:

a) There is complete release of bondage by word of command to the demon, either by Jesus himself or, subsequently, by believers acting in the name of Jesus Christ.⁴ The stark simplicity of this 'treatment' by Jesus, as recorded in the synoptic Gospels, provides a striking contrast with the magic formulas and charms used at that time by pagan and Jewish exorcists. In the present day, in *particular* cases (and this is in no way a generalization), it provides a striking contrast with modest improvements gained by medical and psychiatric treatment.

b) Superhuman abilities are observed in some people before they are released by exorcism: abilities which afterwards have completely disappeared. The New Testament examples are inordinate strength (Mark 5:3-4; Acts 19:13-20) and divination (Acts 16:16-19). Comparable examples are not unknown in present-day exorcism experience, although they are not well researched. The former witch, Doreen Irvine, describes an occasion on Dartmoor when she first made herself invisible and later walked through fire.⁵ In the case of a witch known to me there was, before exorcism, the ability to do very rapid knitting, although she had never learnt to knit. Cases of superhuman strength are recorded.⁶ Those who have not seen such phenomena in person do less than justice to the testimony of others by simply assuming that all such 'observation' must be mistaken, to be treated just as miracle stories generated by primitive belief-systems.⁷

c) A person for whom exorcism is appropriate may manifest a violent and hostile reaction to Jesus, or to those who came in his name.⁸ The departure of the demon may also be associated with violence.⁹

d) Occasionally, a person speaks with a voice different from usual, and this voice, when addressed, identifies itself as the voice of the demon or demons present.¹⁰

2) The correspondence between the New Testament and the present day goes beyond the facts as described, to the categories in which such phenomena are perceived. Contrary to what has been argued, for example, by John Hull¹¹ and Michael Wilson,¹² the writers of the New Testament did not interpret disorder in demonic terms simply because of the prevailing contemporary framework of perception. The New Testament writers show the ability to ascribe similar disorders on some occasions to demonic reality and on other occasions not. For example, a dumb and blind person is cured by exorcism (Matt. 12:22-3, exorcism is implied) and also a dumb person (Matt. 9:32), whereas laying-on of hands with no hint of exorcism is used for a dumb man (Mark 7:32-7) and a blind man (Matt. 8:22-5). It is arguable that such a distinction represents considerable discernment on the part of the early Christian community; it was in fact quite well known in the ancient world that mental disorder could arise from organic or psychological causes.¹³ Furthermore, there is every reason to suppose that the categories of perception used by the Gospel writers were substantially consistent with those of Jesus himself, for they are found in what are considered to be the most authentic sources making up the tradition of Jesus' teaching.

Correspondence arises because the same distinction of perception is also the experience of exorcists today. What may, generally speaking, be viewed as an organic and psychological disorder may in certain cases need to be seen and dealt with as demonic. This has been documented by the psychiatrist K. McAll for ten case-histories commonly described as schizophrenia or epilepsy.¹⁴ Richards presents a similar approach in discussion of diagnosis by contemporary exorcists.¹⁵ If, then, we are dealing with the same phenomena of pathology and cure as the New Testament describes, and if perception of these phenomena in demonic terms is similarly judged as appropriate on some occasions by a substantial number of Christian practitioners of healing today, then there is ground for serious consideration of the perception of the New Testament writers as a true perception.

3) It is, however, the third level of correspondence which is essential for the conclusion that demons exist. This is not the correspondence between the phenomena of New Testament times, or their perception, with the present day: it is that between the phenomena and the explanation offered in demonic terms, for cases where exorcism has been effective. In many

of such cases, a demonic interpretation is the most satisfactory model for understanding the reality present. For example, the violent reaction in the presence of Jesus, or to those who may exorcise in his name, or to the sign of the cross, corresponds to the existence of frightened evil spirit-beings whose ruler, Satan, has been defeated by Jesus on the cross and faces eschatological destruction. The effectiveness of the word of command corresponds to the personal nature of such realities and their departure. The success of exorcism where other treatments have failed would, in any comparable science, be good ground for the provisional validity of the interpretative model upon which it is based. Such an interpretation should not immediately be dismissed and alternatives sought.

The correspondence between phenomenon and explanation is borne out also by the testimony of certain Christians who, prior to their conversion, were steeped in occult practices. Thus Doreen Irvine,¹⁶ and also Raphael Gasson,¹⁷ the former medium, have no doubt that the achievement of such practices as levitation, or becoming invisible, could be attributed solely to the evil spirits upon whom they called. That such persons were not scholars, and presented their testimony at the popular level of writing, is insufficient ground for a thoroughly sceptical view of their self-understanding.

To argue that, for a similar disorder, a demonic explanation is correct in certain cases but not in others, is not inconsistent. The Devil is to be seen as the father of all disorder: commonly active through human temptation but able, when he chooses, to produce any disorder through his subordinate spirits. Psychiatric treatment effects helpful change in human attitudes, thereby rectifying some disorder; but in a case where spirits are present, exorcism will also be necessary. There is a parallel here with our understanding of health. We are accustomed to attributing all healthy life to God, and where appropriate, to medical achievement also. When, in answer to prayer, God gives health, we do not always consider it necessary to find a medical or psychological explanation also, although there may be one. Just as the same quality of health may on some occasions be appropriately viewed particularly as God-given, and on other occasions as given through medical or psychiatric care, so, in principle, comparable disorder may be viewed variously as specifically demonic or essentially a psychological matter, but within the totality of Satanic disorder in the world.

II

It now remains to examine the coherence of arguments presented by those who deny the existence of demons while retaining belief in the existence of God. Five such arguments will be considered.

Argument 1 *'I am twentieth-century western-cultured man and I do not perceive people as if they were possessed. This is not the frame of reference in which I think. I do not explain disturbed behaviour in this way; I do not see it like this.'*¹⁸

Michael Wilson, whose argument this is, then proceeds to imply that if a demonic perception of reality is inconsistent with the ways we perceive things today, then it must be discarded. But only if it can be assumed that the present-day ways of perception are the *true* perception of reality, is such an argument relevant to the question of whether or not demons exist. Yet the history of knowledge indicates that, in the course of time, ways of perceiving reality may change greatly as new observations are made. There is, therefore, no reason for assuming that present-day perceptions of reality decide the question of the existence or otherwise of demons.

However, it remains true that to make inroads into accepted ‘plausibility structures’ for interpreting reality is a difficult task, just as it was when Copernicus asserted that the earth revolved around the sun, and as it was and still is for the assertion that the Jesus of history is the Son of God. Professor Ninian Smart is honest to admit:

I have argued that the phenomenologist of religion, and more widely the Religionist, is unlikely to accept the ‘theory’ of demons evident in the New Testament. But why? The reasons in one way are not to do with the facts. We can easily accept that men and children froth at the mouth and that women go into cataleptic states. We can accept also that blind men can come to see, for there is hysterical blindness. But what we may accept as facts has to be fitted to a theory, or more broadly to a view of the universe. Thus the relation between reported facts and explanations is a subtle and difficult one. By consequence, the diagnosis of the ‘true’ state of affairs depends on many criteria. This being so, it is absurd to suppose that there is a single ‘metaphysics’ of the study of religion. What the Religionist accepts as plausible is bound to differ somewhat from generation to generation.¹⁹

In the light of this difficulty, the question of the truth of an implausible metaphysical assertion has to be looked at in as unprejudiced a way as possible in the light of the facts. ‘Deviant’ knowledge must be given a chance to establish itself as truth.

Michael Wilson’s article also contains the seeds of its own criticism, for he begins by depicting a line-drawing which can be perceived as either a chalice or two faces. Thus he aims to show how the same reality can have very different perceptions. But what he fails to observe is that in an appropriate context each of the perceptions can be true, and in the context of his own article both are true for the same reality. In a similar way, there is no reason in principle why a phenomenon such as epileptic disorder may not rightly be perceived on one occasion in terms of psychological disorder and on another occasion as a demonic disorder; on further occasions still, both perceptions may be correct. Only if the supposed present-day perception positively rules out a demonic perception is the possibility that both may be true ruled out.

Unless we say that only what is verifiable empirically through the five senses can be held to exist (in which case God does not exist), there is no way of definitely disproving the existence of demons. The assertion, then, that the present-day perception of how things are, positively rules out a demonic perception, can only be made by the reductionism in which all exorcism phenomena are explained in categories such as of psychological science or of religious experience. But, in a different context, Smart warns against the foolishness of reductionism.²⁰ We never have before us all the possible data about any one area of knowledge, and hence to assume that all possible data can be handled in terms of another science and its categories is quite unwarrantable. Smart uses this to argue that religious experience has a certain autonomy, and that for it to develop its own models, causes, explanations and categories is perfectly appropriate. The same argument can be applied to the phenomena encountered in exorcism, which should not simply be reduced to other kinds of religious or psychological experience. In seeking the most illuminating categories for understanding such phenomena, it is striking to note that many of those with the greatest observational experience of this area of knowledge cannot but persist with explanations in terms of demonic realities.

Argument 2 *‘I personally feel under no pressure to believe in “possession” or “evil spirits” because Jesus believed in them. I feel under no obligation to exorcise anyone simply because Jesus and his contemporaries did so. The reason I feel free in this regard is because I believe*

*in the Incarnation . . . A great deal of disturbed human behaviour was then perceived as if caused by “possession”. It was the usual way to perceive it in those days, in that culture . . . This is what, for me, it means that Jesus was true man, God accepting the limitations of first-century Jewish flesh and knowledge.*²¹

This incarnation-based argument is again presented by Wilson. But it completely undermines any understanding of Jesus’ teaching as authoritative, unless it is supported by criteria for distinguishing at what points that teaching ceases to be purely culture-relative and becomes authoritative for all Christian ages. No such criteria, however, are offered by Wilson, and until they are the argument defaults.

The same criticism can be made of the statements in the Open Letter on Exorcism issued on 15 May 1975:

On the evidence of the synoptic Gospels, Jesus performed exorcisms. It seems that he shared the beliefs of his own time. But, whatever view must be taken of this, the church has never expected that her members must necessarily share all Jesus’ beliefs—in the field of eschatology, for example. The fact of cultural change is recognized in Scripture, which itself shows how a universal faith takes different forms in different cultural settings.²²

In his commentary on the statement, Don Cupitt admits that it begs many questions about the relation of religious truth to cultural change, and for that reason does not say in so many words that demons do not exist.²³

Let us suppose that criteria could be established which allowed certain perceptions of reality in Jesus’ teaching to be designated as culturally conditioned rather than true, on the grounds that such perceptions were not of primary importance to Jesus’ self-understanding of his divine mission. It would be very difficult to place Jesus’ references to Satan or demons in that category. Very clearly Jesus is recorded as viewing his mission in terms of a struggle with Satan,²⁴ and it is difficult to treat this as culture-relative while continuing to recognize as true his claim to the divine authority of his mission. Alternatively, to retain belief in Satan while discarding that in demons, would be a solution which sits too lightly upon the association of the two in the data about Jesus’ understanding of his work.

Another possibility for the required criteria is that perceptions of reality which are not substantially those of the Old Testament should be discarded, as drawn conveniently from contemporary Jewish and Hellenistic culture. Certainly, the doctrine of Satan and demons is not well developed in the Old Testament. However, on such a count, Jesus’ teaching about the after-life has also to be discarded; and here, it seems, Christians prefer to follow him with confidence.

It is more satisfactory to argue that Jesus exercised careful choice as to which perceptions of his own day he espoused. He showed himself well able to reject the popular view of his time that all sickness was due to sin.²⁵ In his understanding of sickness-disorder, then, closely related in the Gospels to demonization,²⁶ he was plainly not a man of his time.

Argument 3 *That to believe in the existence of demons is to hold an incoherent theodicy.* Brian Hebblethwaite, for example, states the case as follows:

I find grave incoherence in the idea that God might be thought to be sustaining a created universe containing fallen irredeemable, non-human spirits and allowing them to interfere with the human world.²⁷

Hebblethwaite finds the roots of the incoherence which he attacks, in belief in the devil himself. But it is doubtful whether admission of the devil unduly increases the insolubility of the theodicy problem, which remains a formidable one for Christian theology even if God is the only being in the supernatural realm. Indeed it is Mascall's argument that the opposite is true: the existence of the demonic realm, he says, eases the theodicy problem.²⁸ For without the existence of this realm, responsibility for evil must be laid more directly upon God the Creator, who then appears incompetent, laying us wide open to the Marcionite heresy.

Of course, there is general agreement that ultimate responsibility for the existence of evil must be God's; otherwise we have an ultimate dualism, which Mascall firmly repudiates.²⁹ But the directness or indirectness of this responsibility is important. If man, as created by God, carries responsibility for evil, then it can be said that God created responsible men who might do evil, but must not necessarily do evil. God's responsibility is thus indirect, and the existence of evil is connected with the autonomy with which God created man. If, however, only God and man have responsibility for evil in the world, then the existence of that horrific evil for which demonic language is used (at least symbolically), must be laid solely at the feet either of God or man. With neither option does there lie much basis for hope. But if there exists a demonic realm over which Satan rules, yet under God's sovereignty, there is scope for a more positive affirmation both of the goodness of the Creator God and of the continuing dignity of man.

This is not in any way to seek to evade human responsibility for evil, but simply to recognize that the possibility of a demonic realm introduces a further agent of responsibility for evil, thus making possible a firmer affirmation of the dignity of man. It is true that the demonic solution simply removes the mystery of God creating human beings who create chaos, to that of God creating spirit-beings who create chaos. But if this is not gain, neither is it loss.

Biblical theology provides us with insights as to why God might allow the existence of this demonic realm, the view which Hebblethwaite finds so incoherent. Firstly, this realm is used to set up for man the arena of moral struggle within which he faces temptation and testing, and learns to choose the righteousness of God (e.g. Job). Secondly, its activity represents a divine judgement upon mankind for choosing evil ways. The clearest statement of this is in the Revelation of St John.³⁰ There is no inconsistency here with Mascall's argument: for it is to say that although God tests and judges man, he does so indirectly in a way that does not contradict his creative goodness, but rather allows man to choose God in the face of evil; a choice that cannot be if evil comes direct from the hand of God, and which breeds hopelessness if evil is solely in man.

The coherence of the existence of demons for theodicy takes its basis from that of the devil himself. If Satan is allowable, why should he not have minions? The idea that created spirit-beings rebelled and received irrevocable judgement is not, in itself, incoherent. Christian tradition speaks of irrevocable judgement for rebellious humans after death.

Hebblethwaite argues that it is only necessary to retain the demonic language of Christian tradition in a symbolic sense, without any actual existence of demons implied.³¹ But this is not an argument against their existence; it might, however, be a fair way of dealing with the

language if, on other grounds, demons have been shown not to exist. With or without this demonstration such a use of demonic language is misleading, for what is being described is simply the evil men create.

Argument 4 *Exorcism is a typically clinical approach to evil. I see the main task of the church in our generation...the task of promoting health, not by concentrating on getting rid of badness, but by withstanding evil as Jesus did on the cross, using it, as it were, for fuel for growth together towards wholeness.*³²

Far from seeing it as ground for hopelessness to locate evil in man, Michael Wilson, whose argument this is, regards it as essential to healthy human identity. If our attitude to evil is to get rid of badness, then this leads to a flight from suffering and a failure to grasp the possibilities for personal integration which are presented by threats to the existing order. Society on the 'sanitized' model seeks to get rid of its offenders, when what is required is reconciliation. In a similar way, Wilson argues, exorcism is inappropriate for growth to personal wholeness.

This argument again sidesteps the question 'Do demons exist?', substituting the question 'Is a demonic perception helpful to human growth?' Perhaps Wilson is assuming that if demonic perception were true, it would be helpful. The answer is that it is helpful in certain cases. Wilson's integrative approach, based upon rejection of the clinical model, is plainly one sided, for even he would not argue that surgeons have no place in medicine. Disorder appears in a variety of forms; in some cases expulsion is appropriate, in other cases integration. To argue that in certain cases of disorder a demonic perception is both correct and helpful for treatment, is in no way to discount the significance of integration between conflicting forces in many other situations.

Argument 5 *That the evil in supposedly demonic phenomena can be explained by the sheer physicalism of man.*

Hebblethwaite writes:

There are ways of seeing human evil as resulting not only from men's free will but also from their being rooted in a physical organic world—that rootedness itself being the necessary condition of their relatively independent personal being over against their Creator.³³

This argument falls into the foolishness of reductionism, previously discussed; demonic phenomena cannot adequately be reduced so as to belong with all manifestations of human rebellion. But there are other weaknesses. Firstly, it ignores the immanence of God in all material things, to which the Scriptures bear witness in terms of the Spirit's movement (Genesis 1) and renewal (Psalm 104:30), and Christ's presence in all things (Colossians 1:17; Ephesians 1:10; Hebrews 1:3). God is both distinct from his material creation and immanent in it. Secondly, it neglects the distinctiveness between man and the physical organic world: man has a distinctive capacity for transcendence. The rebellion of man occurs in resistance of this transcendence, and his obtuseness therefore belongs to his distinction from the material creation and not because of his roots in it. There is no sign of such rebellion in, say, the animal kingdom.

The conclusion of this paper, then, is that a coherent understanding of certain behavioural phenomena is given by the demonic model. It has been impossible to examine all the

arguments to the contrary, but those that have been considered fail in their coherence. There is, however, sufficient correspondence between the demonic model of perception and the data of human behaviour in certain cases associated with the practice of exorcism, for the model to be recognized as a valid perception of the truth in such cases.

THE REV. G. GRAHAM DOW is lecturer in Christian doctrine and pastoral studies at St John's College, Nottingham.

Endnotes:

- 1) I am grateful to my former colleague, Dr E. David Cook, for helpful criticism of this paper and for help in clarification of the philosophical categories used in the argument.
- 2) I am grateful to my colleague Dr Stephen Travis for permission to use material from an unpublished paper prepared in 1975 for a Methodist working party on exorcism.
- 3) Peter L. Berger, *A Rumour of Angels* (Alien Lane: Harmondsworth 1970) p 50.
- 4) New Testament examples: Matt. 8:16; Mark 1:25, 5:8, 9:25; Acts 16:18. For present day examples see John Richards, *But Deliver Us from Evil* (DLT: London 1974) chapter 6.
- 5) Doreen Irvine, *From Witchcraft to Christ* (Concordia: St Louis 1973) pp 95-8.
- 6) Richards, op. cit., pp 140, 149-50.
- 7) For example, Brian Hebblethwaite, Review of Richards, 'But Deliver Us from Evil', *Theology*, LXXVIII No. 662, August 1975, p 434.
- 8) New Testament example: Mark 1:23, 24.
For present-day examples see Richards, op. cit., pp 140, 145, 147.
- 9) New Testament examples: Mark 1:26, 9:26.
For present-day examples see Richards, op. cit., p 140.
- 10) For New Testament example: Matt. 8:28-32.
For present-day examples see Richards, op. cit., pp 140, 145, 150.
- 11) John Hull, *Hellenistic Magic and the Synoptic Tradition* (SCM: London 1974) for example the conclusion, pp 142-5. Hull is restrained in his conclusions but ventures to suggest that Jesus did not think of himself according to the magical traditions in which Mark and Luke present him.
- 12) Michael Wilson, 'Exorcism', *The Expository Times*, LXXXVI, July 1975 p 293.
- 13) e.g. Herodotus, *History* 2.173, 6.84; Hippocrates, *On the Sacred Disease*.
- 14) R. K. McAll, 'The Ministry of Deliverance', *The Expository Times*, pp 296-8.
- 15) Richards, op. cit., chapter 5, and chapter 6 pp 124-36.
- 16) Irvine, op. cit., p 94.
- 17) Raphael Gasson, *The Challenging Counterfeit* (Logos: Plainfield, New Jersey 1966) p 132.

- 18) Wilson, op. cit., p 292.
- 19) Ninian Smart, *The Phenomenon of Religion* (Macmillan: London 1973) p 147.
- 20) Smart, op. cit., p 142. The discussion of the reduction of religious experience to psychological categories, pp 138-47, is illuminating.
- 21) Wilson, op. cit., p 293.
- 22) The statement is cited by Don Cupitt, *Explorations in Theology 6* (SCM: London 1979) pp 50, 51.
- 23) Cupitt. op. cit., p 53.
- 24) Mark 3:22-7, 8:33; Luke 4:1-13, 22:31.
- 25) In the Lucan tradition, responsibility is accorded to Satan in Luke 13:16; and in the Johannine tradition, personal sin may or may not be the cause. John 5:14 and 9:1-3.
- 26) Mark 1:34, 3:10-11, 6:13; Luke 9:1.
- 27) Brian Hebblethwaite, letter to the *Church Times*, 6 June 1975, p 12.
- 28) E. L. Mascall, *The Christian Universe* (DLT: London 1966) p 118.
- 29) Mascall, op. cit., p 111.
- 30) For example, the references to the Satanic beast bringing about a destruction of mankind, which is consistent with God's judgement upon mankind for its rebellion against him. Rev. 17:13-18, 19:19-21, in the context of chapters 15-20.
- 31) Hebblethwaite, op. cit., p 12.
- 32) Wilson, op. cit., p 295.
- 33) Hebblethwaite, op. cit., p 12.