
RELIGION & PHILOSOPHY

The Devil You Know

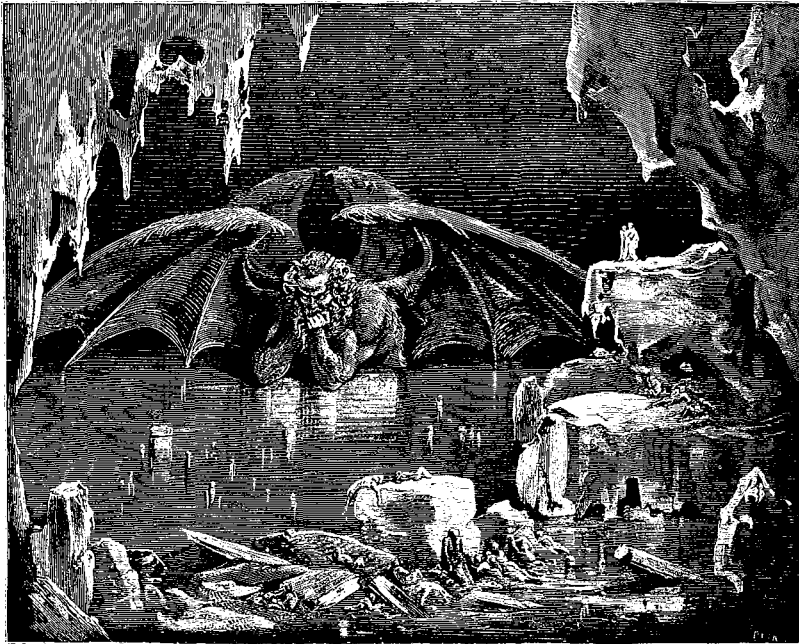
"Speak of the Devil" by Jaroslav Pelikan, in *Commentary* (Apr. 1987), 165 East 56th St., New York, N.Y. 10022.

"Better the devil you know than the devil you don't," the old adage goes. But what can we truly know about the Devil?

Pelikan, a Yale professor of history, argues that "diabology," the study of the Devil, is a useful way to examine an age-old question: How can evil persist if men can freely choose God?

In the Old Testament, the Devil "functioned as one deity among many others." But by the third century A.D., the Devil had become, to theologians, the chief agent of evil in the world. Manichean heretics of the time believed the world divided into two equal realms—the Kingdom of Light, ruled by God, and the Kingdom of Darkness, ruled by Satan. While Manicheanism vanished by the seventh century, its views were a major influence on Saint Augustine, who helped ensure the Devil's importance for the next thousand years.

In the 18th century, philosophers began to question the need for the Devil. Rationalists such as Immanuel Kant and Jean Jacques Rousseau explained the persistence of evil without assuming such "superstitious nonsense" as the Devil. Christians, unable to counter rationalist arguments,



Satan, as portrayed by French artist Gustave Doré in an 1861 edition of Dante's Inferno.

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began to abandon their belief in Satan.

Yet Satan has his place in the 20th century. Pelikan sees Satan as "a personification of evil," a way to explain such acts as the mass slaughter of Ukrainians under Stalin or Jews at Auschwitz. It was not the bureaucratic "banality of evil" that butchers such as Adolf Eichmann practised. These men were simply satanic, evil men whose crimes transcend their time.

We should not, however, follow the Manicheans and assume that Satan is as powerful as God. Human beings, Pelikan teaches, have free will and can freely choose either good or evil paths in the course of their lives. But beyond this world, "beyond the antitheses of light and darkness, good and evil, heaven and hell," lies the One Who Is, the Creator, who, for believers, will ultimately triumph.

Satan can thrive—and win converts—in a world where many doubt his existence. "Satan is quite happy to be what we still call a gray eminence," Pelikan concludes, "who can rule even if he does not reign."

Explaining Stonehenge

"Stonehenge: A New Theory" by Benjamin C. Ray, in *History of Religions* (Feb. 1987), Univ. of Chicago Press, P.O. Box 37005, Chicago, Ill. 60637.

Why was Stonehenge built? Historians through the centuries have suggested that Stonehenge was everything from a Druidic shrine to a temple to the Sun God. The most popular contemporary theory is that of Gerald Hawkins, who proposed in *Stonehenge Decoded* (1965) that Stonehenge was a gigantic calculator built to perform astronomical observations.

Ray, a professor of religious studies at the University of Virginia, argues that Hawkins failed to take into account the religious motivations of Stonehenge's builders. While Stonehenge was used for some astronomical purposes (such as determining the dates of solstices), "Hawkins was clearly wrong about Stonehenge's possible use as a calculating machine."

Hawkins believed that the "trilithons"—the pairings of two upright "sarsen" stones supporting a third "lintel" stone that form the central ring of Stonehenge—were positioned so that priests could see when the Sun and Moon were aligned in the sky. Because the Sun and Moon were aligned in 32 out of 240 possible positions, Hawkins concluded that Stonehenge was a finely tuned observatory.

Yet Stonehenge is less precise than Hawkins made it out to be. Astronomer Richard Atkinson found that even a random placing of trilithons in a circle would result in 48 alignments out of 240 positions. Moreover, the wide space between stones resulted in errors so large that Stonehenge can "hardly be said to indicate solar or lunar positions at all."

Stonehenge, Ray suggests, was built as a temple to communicate with the dead. Alignments were not "astronomically specific," but were perhaps placed so that rituals could be conducted when the Sun and Moon were "at their strongest moments." The trilithons were placed in a circle so as to "imitate in imperishable stone a great timber house," with "the vault of the sky" acting as a symbolic roof.