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What the Devil?

A selection of classic teachings about the Lord of Darkness and forces of evil in world religions.

Buddhism

The Buddhist concept of the devil is called Mara, the head of the heavenly demons and the Sense Desire realm. Buddhists believe that Siddhartha was tempted by Mara before enlightenment, but he could not be swayed from his path. Mara symbolizes desire and everything that hinders humans from proceeding along the right path.

I believe the devil:

- Is real and can possess people
- Is real and can directly influence human action, but can't possess people
- Is just a metaphor for the evil humans are capable of
- Is a dangerous idea that leads us to demonize other people


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Christianity: General

Christianity teaches that the devil (or Lucifer/Satan) is a fallen angel, after Isaiah 14:12: "How you are fallen from heaven, O Day Star, son of Dawn!" Lucifer was a good angel who rebelled against God and was kicked out of heaven.

Christianity: Catholicism

Catholics believe that the devil and other demons were angels created by God who became demonic, or adversaries of God, after their fall. Satan, lord of demons, exists and can cause humans harm, but he is still a creature and not equal to God.

Hinduism

Though Hindus believe there is evil in the world, there is no single devil-like entity in Hinduism. However, there is a concept of *asura*, or evil spirit. Evil spirits do not remain evil forever—they are beings of *Naraka*, the lower plane, and can evolve to goodness. The Bhagavad Gita, one of Hinduism's most important texts, tells the story of Arjuna's fight against evil and lower desires, embodied by the army of Kauravas.

Islam

Iblis, the devil in Islam, is described in the Qur'an as "the adversary." Originally, he refused to obey God's commandment to prostrate himself before Adam. The devil in Islam tempts humans and tries to mislead them. Before beginning to read the Qur'an, Muslims recite the *Ta'awud*, in which they say, "I take refuge in God from Satan the stoned one"—praying that they may take refuge in Allah from the devil.

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Judaism

Judaism teaches that humans were created with two inclinations, the *yetzer tov*, or good inclination, and the *yetzer ra*, the bad inclination. The inclination to do bad or be selfish is within a person, it is not the result of an outside force. The Jewish concept of Satan, the "hinderer," is that he is an angel who leads humans to evil, and people must struggle to overcome their evil inclinations.

Wicca

Wiccans do not have a concept of the devil in their beliefs or practices. Wiccans do not believe that good and evil come from a divine source, but instead individual humans are responsible for their actions.

Zoroastrianism

One of the earliest concepts of the devil comes from Zoroastrianism. Zoroaster, founder of Zoroastrianism, taught belief in two distinct entities: Angra Mainyu and Ahura Mazda. Mainyu was an evil spirit who tempted Zoroaster, but Zoroaster overcame evil in favor of Ahura

Mazda, the supreme Zoroastrian god and "Wise Lord."

The Devil: Underemployed . . .



CHRISTIAN CENTURY June 19-26, 2002

PLURALISM WATCH: Last summer Dennis R. Janz taught a comparative religion course in Kosovo. Janz, a professor of religious studies at Loyola University in New Orleans, had hoped that class discussion might inspire some respect and understanding of different faiths—and a capacity for self-criticism. He was not encouraged by the response he got from his Muslim students at the University of Pristina. At one point he held up the example of Pope John Paul II apologizing for the sins of the Catholic Church. “The looks of satisfaction on the students’ faces spoke volumes. They did not say it, but they might as well have: ‘It’s about time.’ With great delicacy, then, and without even mentioning Islam, I raised the tough question: Could it be, I wondered, that leaders of other religions might also have something to apologize for? Blank looks. The seed I was trying to plant was falling on stony ground” (*Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, June).