GOOD AND EVIL SPIRITS

By BRIAN O'LEARY

THE TEMPTATONS of Jesus in the desert present us with the *dramatis personae* of spiritual combat as seen by christian tradition. In the terse account left us by St Mark, we read:

> The Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. And he was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels ministered to him.[1]

This surprising sequel to the baptism of Jesus and its accompanying theophany[2] is no mere interlude before the beginning of the public ministry. It is the direct result of the coming of the Spirit upon Jesus, and gives in capsule form a theological explanation of the ministry of preaching and healing in which he is about to engage. Mark in particular interprets the mission and activity of Jesus as a battle waged against Satan, a battle of cosmic proportions, even though individual skirmishes may take place on a smaller and less dramatic scale. As David Stanley has pointed out:

> Mark has analysed the activities which engaged Jesus during his public life, and has placed them in four main categories, each representing a facet of this eschatological struggle with Satan. There are, in the first place, the exorcisms; secondly, there are Jesus's miracles of healing; thirdly, there are the debates or controversies with his adversaries; and fourthly, there is Jesus's continual fight against ignorance, tepidity, and obtuseness in his own disciples. These constitute for Mark four areas of combat, so to say, in which the battle against man's adversary, Satan, is waged by Jesus.[3]

The scene in the wilderness, therefore, gives us in pictorial and dramatic form a key to the interpretation of all the following episodes in Mark's gospel. The choice of the wilderness as the scene for the combat was quite natural to the hebrew mind. Symbolically, the desert represented the natural habitat of demons,[4] but it was

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[1] Mk 1, 12–13; cf Mt 4, 1–11; Lk 4, 1–13.

[2] Cf Mk 1, 9–11; Mt 3, 13–17; Lk 3, 21–22.

[3] Stanley, David M.: *A Modern Scriptural Approach to the Spiritual Exercises* (Chicago, 1967), p 135.

[4] Cf Lev 16, 8ff; Tob 8, 3; Mt 12, 43; Lk 11, 24.

also the place where man met God, especially in a crisis. The desert experience of the Israelites during the Exodus was a time when the people found favour with Yahweh;[5] and for St Paul it became a type of the christian experience.[6] Hosea too had depicted the restoration of Israel as a new wandering in the desert, when Yahweh would lure his unfaithful wife back into the wilderness to recapture the days of her youth and make love to her there once more.[7] Against the background of this double tradition, it is easy to understand the presence of both the Spirit and Satan in the temptation story.

When, towards the end of the third century, anchorites appeared in the egyptian and syrian deserts, their purpose in fleeing the world was not to escape its dangers, nor was it *Lebensuntüchtigkeit* (an inability to cope with life); rather they wanted to recreate, to relive the combat which Jesus himself fought and won against Satan after he had received the Spirit.[8] They took quite literally the words of Paul: 'For we are not contending against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers, against the world rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places'.[9] The Desert Fathers had no need of a systematic theology of spiritual combat, although such had been worked out by the great Origen.[10] They were engaging in it themselves, deliberately carrying the war into the demons' own territory, for it was this element of the biblical desert-symbolism which dominated their thought.

The most well-known of these ascetics was St Antony, whose life was written by St Athanasius in 357, about a year after the hermit's death. But the *Vita Antonii* was not just a biography of a great man; it conveyed in an arresting and colourful way a whole spirituality, that which made the desert flower. Antony became known throughout christendom, and fascinated people from many different walks of life. He was brought to the notice of Augustine, still struggling towards his own conversion, by a certain Pontitianus:

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[5] Cf Acts 7, 36; 13, 18. [6] Cf 1 Cor 10, 11. [7] Cf Hos 2, 14–23.

[8] Cf Switek, Gunter; '*Discretio Spirituum*', in *Theologie und Philosophie*, 47 Jahrgang, Heft 1 (1972), pp 44–48. [9] Eph 6, 12.

[10] Cf Switek, *op. cit.*, pp 41–44. Origen uses Eph 6, 12 in *Peri Archon* III, 2, where he distinguishes two phases in the spiritual combat: beginners only struggle against flesh and blood, the more advanced have to do so against principalities, etc. Origen's systematic working out of the spiritual life was brought into the desert by Evagrius Ponticus in the last decades of the fourth century. There is no certain evidence of any serious influence before then.

> When, therefore, I had declared to him that I bestowed myself much in the reading of those scriptures, he took occasion, in the course of his speech, to discourse unto us of Antony, the egyptian monk, whose name was excellently famous amongst thy servants; but as for us, we had never heard of him until that hour. But he, so soon as he perceived this, insisted the longer in speaking of him, insinuating the knowledge of so great a man to us who were wholly ignorant, and wondering withal at that same ignorance of ours. We on the other hand were amazed to hear that so lately, and almost in our own days, such wonderful things had been wrought by thee in the true faith and the catholic Church. . . . From this he went on to speak of the teeming monasteries and of them who are a sweet savour unto thee, and of the fruitful bosom of the barren desert, whereof also we had heard nothing.[11]

It is easy to get lost in the vivid and sometimes lurid details of Antony's battles with the demons, and to miss the theological overview which Augustine had of God working in Antony 'in the true faith and the Catholic Church'. The *Vita*, however, keeps reminding us of the source of Antony's strength and achievements. Having described some early hostile encounters, it says: 'Such was Antony's first victory over the devil, or rather the Saviour's achievement in him'.[12] There is a repeated emphasis on the impotence of the forces of evil: 'They are weak and can do nought but threaten'.[13] The victory has already been won by Christ, and one has only to rely on him; then one can afford even to mock and scorn the demons. Dealing with one particularly harsh experience, the *Vita* reports:

> Antony, though scourged and pierced, felt indeed his bodily pain, but rather kept vigil in his soul. So as he lay groaning in body, yet a watcher in his mind, he spoke in taunt, 'Had ye any power, one of you would be enough to assail me; you try if possible to frighten me with your number, because the Lord has spoiled you of your strength. Those pretended forms are the proof of your impotence. . . . Our seal and wall of defence is faith in our Lord'. After many attempts then, they gnashed their teeth at him, because they were rather making themselves a sport than him.[14]

Then, as the demons disengaged in defeat and Antony's pain disappeared, he turned in complaint to Christ and asked:

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[11] Augustine, *Confessions*, VIII, 6. (London 1859).
[12] *Vita Antonii*, 7. [13] *Ibid.*, 27; cf 28 & 51. [14] *Ibid.*, 9.

> 'Where art thou? Why didst thou not appear at the first to ease my pain?' A voice answered, 'Antony, I was here but waited to see thy bearing in the contest'.[15]

Christ is always the main protagonist, and a *felt* absence is not the same as a *real* absence. He promises to be with Antony as 'an aid for ever'; and this guarantee, shared by all christians, is the basis for Paul's comforting words: 'God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your strength, but with the temptation will also provide the way of escape that you may be able to endure it'.[16]

What one faces in the spiritual combat, however, is not just brute force but the subtlety of the demons:

> There is need of much prayer and self-discipline to gain, through the holy Spirit, the gift of discerning of spirits, to detect their nature, namely, which of them are the less abandoned, which the more, what is the aim of each, what each affects, and how each is overthrown and ejected.[17]

Here is no simple-minded and naïve acceptance of the data of experience at their face value, but a willingness to work towards a condition of inner freedom (by prayer and self-discipline) in which the holy Spirit can operate, instruct and illumine. Antony is far from the wild and masochistic fanatic painted by his critics; and Newman, a sober and incisive judge, could write of him as follows:

> His doctrine surely was pure and unimpeachable; and his temper is high and heavenly – without cowardice, without gloom, without formality, and without self-complacency. Superstition is abject and crouching, it is full of thoughts of guilt; it distrusts God, and dreads the powers of evil. Antony at least has nothing of this, being full of holy confidence, divine peace, cheerfulness and valorousness, be he (as some men may judge) ever so much an enthusiast.[18]

The *Vita Antonii* represents in a popular and descriptive form the beliefs of the patristic age about good and evil spirits. The former are taken for granted as existing and active, but they play a less direct part in the spiritual combat itself. They are more in the nature of auxiliaries, guarding and protecting and encouraging the soul, while the main combatants are Christ, present through his Spirit in the christian, and Satan or his minions. The traditional doctrine of

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[15] *Ibid.*, 10. [16] 1 Cor 10, 13. [17] *Vita Antonii*, 22.
[18] Newman, John Henry: 'Antony in Conflict', in ch 5 of *Historical Sketches*, Vol II, (London, 1906), part III.

angels held that they form the court of God, that they are his ambassadors, and that they are collaborators with divine providence. It is in this last role that they become involved in the spiritual combat. But one might note how very subordinate is their activity in Mark's and Matthew's account of the temptations of Jesus, and their presence is not mentioned by Luke. This is possibly significant, given the importance of the temptation episode in the development of later tradition.

The christian understanding of and attitude to spirits remained more or less constant up to modern times. The middle ages, however, saw a great increase in devotion to the angels, for which St Bernard was largely responsible.[19] This phenomenon formed part of that spiritual-cultural complex by which medieval man gave expression to his new consciousness of reality, and his ways of relating both to this world and the other. But it represented no radical break with the past, and was in its turn strong enough to last into the sixteenth century, the age of St Ignatius and the *Spiritual Exercises*.

The existence of an invisible world, inhabited by spirits both good and evil, was taken for granted by the men and women of sixteenth century Europe. It was a belief, a conviction, a part of their cultural imagination which they had inherited from the Middle Ages, and which neither the Renaissance nor the Reformation had done anything to undermine. If anything it had become exaggerated to an unhealthy degree. One might speculatively try to explain this development in terms of the divorce of theology from spirituality, or an emotional credulity leading to a longing for the extraordinary, or the spontaneous reaction of a people who were fundamentally pessimistic and insecure in the face of overwhelming human and natural catastrophes. At least the central fact is evident: people held it as obvious that spirits entered not only into their lives but into their very beings.[20] Man would do well, therefore, to take the existence of these spirits into account in the regulation of his life and affairs. As a result, the borderline between orthodox christian devotion to the angels, coupled with vigilance in face of the devils, on the one hand, and a wide variety of superstitious attitudes and practices on the other, was vague and ill-defined. Magic, sorcery, pacts with the devil and other such deviant activities were exciting

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[19] Cf Duhr, J.: 'Anges', in *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, I, cols 601–603.

[20] Cf de Certeau, Michel: *Mémorial du Bhx Pierre Favre* (Paris, 1960), p 50.

interest among the educated as well as the illiterate.[21]

Ignatius was not prone to excess in this or in any other area. But he was a man of his time, and so by and large he accepted its world-view. He was also true to the more ancient and orthodox christian tradition on the existence and activities of spirits, and indeed to the biblical doctrine of the cosmic conflict between Christ and Satan. It is therefore not surprising that he should have presented such a key meditation as that on Two Standards in the way he did.[22] Nor is it surprising that when introducing the General Examination of Conscience he should write:

> I presuppose that there are three kinds of thoughts in the mind, namely: one which is strictly my own, and arises wholly from my own free will; two others which come from without, the one from the good spirit and the other from the evil one.[23]

This same distinction is made when Ignatius is offering advice to the director:

> While the one who is giving the Exercises should not seek to investigate and know the private thoughts and sins of the exercitant, nevertheless, it will be very helpful if he is kept faithfully informed about the various disturbances and thoughts caused by the action of different spirits.[24]

Contemporary studies point out how Ignatius considered that non-free thoughts and feelings, those which *se causan*[25] within the exercitant, rather than those he deliberately and freely chooses to initiate, are the proper matter for spiritual direction. 'The passive, received character of these motions – whether from the side of good or evil – is supposed or implied throughout the Rules (for the discernment of spirits)'.[26] Clear examples are in the comparisons which Ignatius makes between the conduct of 'our enemy' and that of an angry woman, a false lover, and a military leader intent on seizing and plundering a position he desires.[27] The exercitant is being acted on. Ignatius puts the matter in so many words when he says:

> It is characteristic of God and his angels, when *they act upon the soul*, to give true happiness and spiritual joy, and to banish all the sadness and

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[21] Cf Brouette, E.: 'La civilisation chrétienne du XVIe siècle devant le problème satanique', in *Etudes Carmélitaines* (1948), pp 352–385.

[22] Louis J. Puhl, s.j., (Maryland, 1959), cf Exx 136–147.

[23] Exx 32. [24] Exx 17. [25] Cf Exx 313.

[26] Bernardicou, Paul J., 'The Retreat Director in the Spiritual Exercises', in *Review for Religious* (July 1967), p 676. Cf Exx 313–336. [27] Cf Exx 325, 326, 327.

> disturbances which *are caused by the enemy*. It is characteristic of the evil one to fight against such happiness and consolation by proposing fallacious reasonings, subtleties, and continual deceptions.[28]

For Ignatius, discernment is essentially the discovery of the origin of non-free movements in a prayer situation. In this he was more in line with patristic than with later tradition which, from the time of Cassian, had gradually moved from investigating the charism of discernment of spirits to teaching the virtue of discretion or prudence.[29] Ignatius was in fact close to Antony, experiential in his approach, subtle in his investigations, calm in his reliance on God our Lord, conscious both of the cosmic dimension and the inner nature of life's spiritual combat. It is no accident that the temptations of Jesus in the desert can so well provide a scriptural presentation of the meditation on Two Standards.

Although many people still hesitate to admit it, Ignatius taught a spirituality of consolation. This means that for him, true consolation, coming from the good spirit, is the ultimate criterion and the desirable confirmation in a decision-making situation; and in one's ordinary living it is the normal way of experiencing God's good pleasure. An illustration of this can be found in that part of the *Spiritual Exercises* devoted to 'Three times when a correct and good choice of a way of life may be made'.[30] An election made in the 'first time' involves a certainty so strong that there can be no possibility of doubt or hesitation:

> When God our Lord so moves and attracts the will that a devout soul without hesitation or the possibility of hesitation, follows what has been manifested to it.[31]

This experience of being acted on by God is certainly a high and intense form of consolation. More complex and difficult is an election made in the 'second time',

> ..... when much light and understanding are derived through experience of desolations and consolations and discernment of various spirits.[32]

But after being led through the educational experience of submitting to the movements of opposing spirits, it is finally into consolation that one must emerge, because that is the 'characteristic'

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[28] Exx 329 (italics mine).
[29] Cf Switek, *op. cit.*, pp 52ff.
[30] Cf Exx 175–188.
[31] Exx 175.
[32] Exx 176.

work of the good spirit by whom we wish to be guided: 'It is characteristic of the good spirit, however, to give courage and strength, consolations, tears, inspirations, and peace'.[33]

Finally, even when one makes an election in the 'third time', one of tranquillity, 'a time when the soul is not agitated by different spirits, and has free and peaceful use of its natural powers',[34] one ought still to seek confirmation through consolation when one is offering the election one has made to God.

> After such a choice of decision, the one who has made it must turn with great diligence to prayer in the presence of God our Lord, and offer him his choice that the divine Majesty may deign to accept and confirm it, if it is for his greater service and praise.[35]

That such confirmation must be in the form of consolation, is clear not only from the context, but also from the experiences of Ignatius's own life, on which the teaching of the *Spiritual Exercises* is based.[36]

One could multiply examples of the role of good and evil spirits according to the understanding of Ignatius. But it must suffice to draw attention to the implication of the sixth annotation, that one cannot make the Exercises without experiencing the movement of these spirits:

> When the one who is giving the Exercises perceives that the exercitant is not affected by any spiritual experiences, such as consolations or desolations, and that he is not troubled by different spirits, he ought to ply him with questions about the exercises.[37]

Ignatius presumes that the absence of non-free movements is an indication that the exercitant is not doing his part, is not serious and conscientious, and is in need of the director's firmness.[38] In such a case, the director may look on his task as that of stimulating inner conflict in the exercitant, so that real discernment may become possible. Prayer during the Exercises is not meant to be a continuous experience of placidity and calm. In 'exercising oneself' one is opening up to the influences of good and evil spirits, allowing oneself to become their battleground.

In the final analysis, we want to experience the working of the

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[33] Exx 315. [34] Exx 177. [35] Exx 183; cf 188.

[36] Cf Giuliani, Maurice: 'Les motions de l'esprit', in *Christus* 4 (1954), pp 62–76, esp. 71–75. [37] Exx 6.

[38] Bl Peter Favre has a more subtle reflection on this point in his *Memoriale*, nos 301302.

holy Spirit. 'The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control'.[39] But how are we to understand the reality of the 'other' spirits? As personal? As psychological? As symbolic? For Ignatius they were clearly personal; our contemporary problematic was not his. But it must be underlined that the experiential starting-point of Ignatius is the same as ours: that is, the effects of these 'spirits' in us. The way in which he expresses this experience, the categories which he uses, are of secondary importance.

> We must distinguish between the *intellectual category* on which Ignatius relied in using this term *(espíritu)*, a category which is dependent on the atmosphere (of his time): ideas which were then held about spirits, angels, etc., and *that which he personally wished to express* by that term. The authenticity of his thought is not subject to an eventual proving false of the realities implicit in that term, which were for Ignatius no more than a support for his thought.[40]

What is of perennial value in Ignatius is his accurate description of the effects of 'spirits' on man, and the way in which these are to be dealt within a faith perspective, not his presuppositions about the ontological status of these 'spirits' themselves.

> For Ignatius the essential thing is 1) that a spirit is something *distinct* from a man's will, but which is nevertheless experienced within; 2) that it moves and incites a man to some action – it is a movement, an impulse; 3) that it can move a man in different directions and with varying finalities.[41]

Such an experience can be recognized by anybody who is reflectively conscious of his inner life – whether he live in the sixteenth or the twentieth century, whether in the time of Antony the Hermit or Jesus of Nazareth. The 'spirits' are always present, and their activities form the basis for man's spiritual combat, for his exercise of discernment, and for the greater and lesser elections which he is called on to make during his life on this earth.[42]

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[39] Gal 5, 22.

[40] Iparraguirre, Ignacio: *Vocabulario de Ejercicios Espirituales* (Rome 1972), p 103.

[41] *Ibid.*

[42] For an attempt at translating Ignatian categories into those of modern psychology, cf Meissner, William: 'Psychological Notes on the Spiritual Exercises', in *Woodstock Letters* 92 (1963), pp 349–366; 93 (1964), pp 31–58, 165–199.