

Lucifer

Both Christ and Satan are called Lucifer – the Morning Star. Don Cupitt looks at the contrasts and curious parallels between them.



Lucifer is, in Latin, ‘the light-bringer’. In Greek the equivalent word is Phosphoros, the name of an element so unstable that it glows in the dark and ignites spontaneously. Being so unstable, and therefore a ‘base’ element, makes Phosphoros a good name for Satan.

Behind the name Lucifer is a long and curious story. The planet Venus, being so much closer to the Sun than Earth is, often rises in the East just before dawn and appears in the West just as the Sun is setting. In pre-scientific times the morning appearance of Venus was named Lucifer, the Morning Star, and its evening appearance was called Hesperus, the Evening Star. In the Bible, not only the Morning Star, but a number of other stars too, might appear just before sun-up. Collectively, they may be thought of as ‘the morning stars’, or even as the ‘sons of God’, for example in Job 38:7 God asks:

Where were you on the first morning of creation
When the morning stars sang together,
And all the sons of God shouted for joy?

Thus the rising Sun and its attendant stars were a natural symbol of God, surrounded by his heavenly court of ‘ministers’ or ‘angels’. Around these phenomena grew up a very potent myth referred to by the prophet Isaiah (14:12–15):

How are you fallen from heaven
O Day Star, son of Dawn! ...
You said in your heart,
‘I will ascend to heaven;
Above the stars of God
I will set my throne on high; ...
But you are brought down to Sheol
To the depths of the Pit.

Here is the origin of at least the first episodes in the fully developed Myth of Satan. He had begun life as the first and greatest of God’s creatures. But the best and brightest of the Sons of the Morning had rebelled against the divine order. In his vanity he had tried to usurp the place of God, and a number of other angels had joined him. But when God arose in his full strength Lucifer and his allies were quickly eclipsed and cast down from Heaven. By this stupendous fall a new world came into being, namely Hell, the permanent domain of Satan and the rest of his band of rebel angels. They were fixed at the opposite pole of the Universe from God, but had some power to visit Earth in order to test and to tempt humans. They entered us via the imagination, the faculty in us that can be troubled by sinful thoughts.

Lucifer began as a very beautiful, golden-haired, heavenly being who looked like a Greek god; but the fallen Lucifer, Satan, was usually portrayed as a hideous monster until the late Middle Ages when, in the *Très Riches Heures* of the Duc de Berry, he is first portrayed as a beautiful man, crowned and robed, in his glorious aspect. This seems to be the beginning of a long process of rehabilitation, especially when the gradual rise of modern democratic politics begins to make Satan a more sympathetic figure.

In all the seven or so primary civilisations, it seems that power and authority came down from the gods through those who ruled on their behalf. Some form of monarchy was the norm. Even as late as Victorian times, children learnt that there were animal, vegetable and mineral ‘kingdoms’. There were – I think, still *are* – ‘noble’ and ‘base’ metals and gases. The lion was the king of beasts,

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the eagle of birds and the oak of trees. The entire universe in every part of it exhibited a divine order, and you were instructed to know and to keep to your 'place' or 'station' within it. To rebel against it was the greatest sin of all. There were, of course, some popular uprisings in the later Middle Ages, but they did not have a complete alternative world-view to offer. All they could do was to appeal from the bad king to the good king, and they failed. Even Luther was still so embedded in the old hierarchical world-view that he did not for a moment endorse the politics of the more radical reformers. On the contrary, he supported their savage repression.

John Milton was in a more personally embarrassing position. By his time the Reformation had gone somewhat further. Milton had supported the Parliamentarians: he had been an apologist for regicide. Wasn't he *himself* a rebel against the divine order of things? And yet, in the 1660s, he is dictating the greatest Christian epic poem since Dante, *Paradise Lost*, and he is going to tell the story of the Fall of the Rebel Angels, of the Creation of Man and of the Fall of Man, all in such a way as to *confirm* the divine order and justify the ways of God with Man. To do this he must write epic lines in which he must make Lucifer's revolt against God intelligible, without appearing to be *himself* in the least sympathetic to Lucifer's cause.

You don't need to be Derrida to be able to spot Milton's difficulties. They were obvious enough to William Empson and indeed to William Blake, who pronounced very sagely that Milton 'was of the Devil's party without knowing it'. But Blake is *himself* in the same position! His Lucifer is iconographically indistinguishable from the figure of the risen and ascended Christ, who in Revelation proclaims *himself* 'the bright morning star' (22:16). Odder, Jesus also promises to 'give the morning star' to the one who chooses and stays with the right side in the controversies at Thyatira (Rev 2:28). This suggests that the modern difficulties about the relations between God, Christ and Satan, although they have been exposed by political change, have an origin that goes back deep into the New Testament itself. We need first a brief summary of the strange pattern of resemblances, reversals and contrasts that links the two great and closely inter-twined figures of Christ and Satan:



Lucifer chained. By Guillaume Geefs in the cathedral of St Paul de Liège

1. Christ is the (only-begotten and eternal) Son of God, whereas Lucifer is the greatest of the (created) Sons of God.
2. Christ in his glorious aspect looks just like Lucifer in his glorious aspect.
3. Both Christ and Lucifer are the Morning Star.
4. Christ in his humiliated and lowly aspect is always fully human; whereas the humiliated Lucifer is for long a hideous monster and begins to look more human again only in early-modern times. Eventually, he is even a gentleman.
5. Both come down from the Heavens to Earth like a bolt of lightning. Jesus 'will baptise you with fire', and he came 'to cast fire upon the earth', lightning having long been seen as a major sign from heaven. Jesus himself declares that in a vision he saw 'Satan fall like lightning from Heaven' (Luke 10:18).
6. Jesus (in the developed theology) is always the seriously tempted but *obedient* Son of God; whereas Satan is always the *rebellious* Son of God. Satan cannot be thought of as changing sides until modern Universalism comes along.
7. Satan is the present ruler of this world, and Jesus the Messiah-designate is the future ruler of this world.
8. Both Satan and Jesus must bear a heavy punishment for the sin of rebellion against God. Indeed Calvin thought they bore the *same* dreadful

damnation; but Satan bore it on his own account, whereas Jesus bore it for us.

9. During his earthly ministry Jesus is regularly charged with blasphemy and with being able to cast out devils only because he is personally in league with the greatest of them all, Beelzebub.
10. Both Lucifer and Jesus have visited all three cosmic realms, Heaven, Earth and Hell, whether as living there by right, or as visiting for business purposes.

This whole story, in its developed Western form, is a great myth of the long war between good and evil. But from the first it has contrary undercurrents which suggest that it's a cover-up job. The original Jesus, an ethical teacher standing at the end of the world who pictured a new moral order based *not* on the Law of the Father, but on pure love, seemed to be announcing the end of the Divine Order in the cosmos and the end of the government of human life by divine Law. This was too much for his contemporaries to accept. The 'bad', rebellious and radical-humanist side of Jesus, whose enemies correctly described him as a blasphemer who had prophesied against the Temple and who would destroy the Law, was split off and ascribed to Lucifer. From what was left, a new obedient Jesus was constructed, an ecclesiastical Jesus who was a model of passive submission to the will of the Father. Thus God could remain undisturbed in heaven for many centuries.

Out of the very complex materials available, the Christian Fathers gradually assembled the Latin Grand Narrative which tells of a long cosmic battle between good and evil – a story that worked pretty well until early-modern times, when the rise of a new democratic sentiment and of a longing for human autonomy began to blow it apart. A partial humanisation and even rehabilitation of figures like Lucifer and Judas began, while at the same time there has also long been a desire for a less weak, passive and effeminate image of Jesus himself. I am not suggesting that the disobedient Son of God and the obedient should simply change places, but rather that the received ecclesiastical Jesus is far too weak a figure to have been the author of the best teaching accredited to him. Meanwhile we must await the theologian who can attempt a major deconstruction of the entire Latin Christian Grand Narrative.

This is an article from Don Cupitt's *Turns of Phrase. Radical Theology from A-Z*, SCM Press (London 2011). The book is reviewed on page 18.

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