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Philip C. Almond. *The Devil: A New Biography.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014. Illustrations. 296 pp. $29.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8014-5337-3.

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Even today, popular culture revels in the supernatural, especially its dark sides. While supernatural beings, such as angels and demons, are now excluded in scientific discourse, they are explicit in Christian scriptures and dominated European debates over the nature of the cosmos well into the Enlightenment.[1] It was, as Philip C. Almond notes in this new biography of the devil, impossible for Christians to imagine a cosmos without the devil until the late seventeenth century, or even later. Belief in, and fear of, these usually invisible, spiritual creatures motivated some of the most heinous crimes against other humans, especially Jews, heretics, and alleged witches. Of course the ostensible death of the devil did not end human atrocities in the West, but in explaining these we need to consider the lingering effects of the centuries-long demonizing of particular outsider groups, such as the Jews. It is therefore critical that we give the devil his historical due.

Almond's biography carves out of the mass of works related to the diabolical a carefully delineated history that is both scholarly and accessible and that contributes to the intertwined fields of Christian theology, magic, witchcraft, and demonology. Almond, a prolific scholar who has published books on English witch trials and demonic possession cases, on the witch skeptic Reginald Scot, and on the histories of Adam and Eve and of heaven and hell, among other subjects, describes his new volume as a "secular history" of the idea of the devil.[2] It is deeply immersed in the Christian tradition yet treats the subject with scholarly detachment and objectivity. Almond details the birth (chapter 1), fall from heaven (chapter 2), role in Christian theology (chapter 3), long and varied life (chapters 4 through 7), and "death" (chapters 8 and 9) of this mythical creature. That the devil died in the Enlightenment may be moot, but certainly his role in Western civilization has diminished greatly.

Almond reveals just how diverse ancient Hebrew and Christian stories were about the devil's origins. Particularly influential was ***The First Book of Enoch*** (ca. 300-100 BCE), a noncanonical Jewish work that established a belief in a fall of

angelic beings who interacted with humans. Also important was the Genesis 6 story of the "sons of God" who married the "daughters of men" to produce giants, or Nephilim. By the century before Christ, various Hebrew versions of a tempter (Satan) or agent of punishment to keep Yahweh at arm's length from doing the necessary dirty work had come together in a vague notion of a devil. In the church's first centuries, there was a vigorous debate over whether Lucifer fell before or after the creation of Adam and Eve, whether or not the serpent was the devil in disguise, or if the Nephilim were in fact demons.

Almond necessarily deals with the essential contradiction in Hebrew and Christian thought with respect to God: If he is perfect, why is there evil? If he is sovereign, how can an agent of evil exert so much power against the children of God? In the church's first millennium, most theologians held to the ransom theory of atonement, that Christ's sacrifice was made to pay off the devil as a "ransom" for humanity's sin. Tricked into thinking that he would have the son of God and humankind in his clutches, the devil discovered instead that he was utterly defeated with Jesus's resurrection. Yet, if defeated and chained in hell, how could Satan still rule the earth? These and many other questions continued to vex Christian writers, and the variety of responses through the medieval period proves a fascinating read.

The High and Late Middle Ages saw a rise in the fear of demonic activity, coalescing mostly around new heretical groups and the growing interest in ritual magic among the clergy (chapters 4 and 5). Almond focuses on four factors in the growing interest in the devil: the rise of the Cathars; the development of "academic angelology" and demonology; the arrival of the Arabic occult sciences; and a new emphasis on apocalyptic thought, especially through the works of Joachim of Fiore (p. 70). These were indeed factors in the elaboration of the demonic witch conspiracy theory by ca. 1400. Almond emphasizes the Cathars because their theology of two gods, one good who ruled the spiritual realm and the other evil who dominated the material, raised the debate over the devil to new heights. He however pays little attention to the church's efforts to suppress another heretical group, the Waldensians, whom scholars have also identified as critical in this development, especially since the witch sect was initially called the *Vauderie*, or Waldensians.[3]

Almond's focus is, however, on how the devil became so intimately involved in magic. Utilizing his expertise in English witchcraft cases, he neatly describes in chapters 6 and 7 the varying positions maintained by witchcraft writers and natural philosophers on the devil's responsibility in human affairs. Did he and his minions actually have sexual congress with humans, and if so, how? What did that say, then, about the respective natures of spirit and matter? Historian Stuart Clark has revealed that these queries were central to the Scientific Revolution as natural philosophers debated the devil's nature, form of corporeality, and place in the cosmos. Almond's close reading of the primary sources reinforces Clark's conclusions, highlighting the array of opinions among Catholics and Protestants, although the vast bulk of his sources are from the English scene. By the late seventeenth century, philosophers, such as Thomas Hobbes, Baruch Spinoza, and the Dutch Cartesian Balthasar Bekker, were disputing the reality of demons. Bekker's book ***The Bewitched World*** (1691) set off a storm of controversy in the 1690s with its declaration that demons did not exist except as the evil inclinations within humans. Almond traces that particular notion back to the English gentleman skeptic Reginald Scot and his ***The Discoverie of Witchcraft*** of 1584. Almond seems unaware of an even earlier tradition for this belief in the writings of the Dutch spiritualist David Joris (ca. 1501-56) whose posture that the devil existed only in an individual's mind was widely known and condemned, while Bekker's opponents included Joris's name alongside Hobbes and Spinoza as

sources for Bekker.[4]

Almond's overview of the various origin stories of the devil may seem arcane, but it is extremely valuable for early modern historians. In their quest for non-scholastic interpretations of scripture, Renaissance humanists and Protestant Reformers turned to the early church fathers, discovering some of the older demonological traditions. Almond, however, does not pursue this point, and neglects the more radical dissident streams, whose proponents especially latched onto some of these alternative notions, such as the aforementioned Joris who also taught that the devil was created only after the fall of Adam and Eve, a position that now, thanks to Almond, seems less puzzling, since Joris had humanist friends acquainted with ancient Christian sources.[5]

The Devil: A New Biography contains a number of black-and-white images that Almond uses well to illuminate his arguments. There is a good bibliography and an index, although I found the latter incomplete. There are also a number of important recent secondary works not cited. I also think that Almond does not adequately explore the propagandistic role of either demonizing rhetoric or exorcism, both of which played huge roles in the Reformation.[6] Some comparison with medieval Jewish and Islamic demonologies would have been helpful, too. That said, Almond's study offers a fascinating tour through the maze of thinking about the devil in the Latin Christian world. Since he focuses on learned traditions, Almond rightly affirms the devil's demise in scientific debate by the mid-eighteenth century, although his epilogue acknowledges the revival of interest in matters diabolical since then. Instead, Almond's careful overview of the Western perspective on the devil provides a valuable and highly readable explanation for one of the most bizarre and devastating ideas in Western history.

Notes

[1]. Stuart Clark, *Thinking with Demons: The Idea of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997).

[2]. His most recent books include *The Lancashire Witches: A Chronicle of Sorcery and Death on Pendle Hill* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2012); *England's First Demonologist: Reginald Scot & " the Discoverie of Witchcraft"* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2011); *The Witches of Warboys: An Extraordinary Story of Sorcery, Sadism and Satanic Possession* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2008); and *Demonic Possession & Exorcism in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

[3]. See especially Kathryn Utz Tremp, *Von der Häresie zur Hexerei: "Wirkliche" und imaginäre Sekten im Spätmittelalter* (Hanover: Hahnsche Buchhandlung, 2008); and Wolfgang Behringer, "Detecting the Ultimate Conspiracy, or How Waldensians Became Witches," in *Conspiracies and Conspiracy Theory in Early Modern Europe: From the Waldensians to the French Revolution*, ed. Barry Coward and Julian Swann (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), 13–34. See also Michael D. Bailey, *Battling Demons: Witchcraft, Heresy, and Reform in the Late Middle Ages* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003).

[4]. Almond has denied that Scot was associated with the group of spiritualists known as the Family of Love founded by the Dutchman Hendrik Niclaes; Almond, *England's First Demonologist.* For the alternate perspective, see David Wootton, "Reginald Scot / Abraham Fleming / The Family of Love," in *Languages of Witchcraft*, ed. Stuart Clark (London: St. Martin's Press, 2000), 119-139. See also Hans de Waardt, "Witchcraft, Spiritualism and Medicine: The Religious Convictions of Johan Wier," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 42 (2011): 369-391.

[5]. Gary K. Waite, "'Man Is a Devil to Himself': David Joris and the Rise of a Sceptical Tradition towards the Devil in the Early Modern Netherlands, 1540-1600," *Nederlands Archief voor*

Kerkgeschiedenis / Dutch Review of Church History 75, no. 1 (1995): 1-30.

[6]. See, for example, Gary K. Waite, *Eradicating the Devil's Minions: Anabaptists and Witches in Reformation Europe, 1535-1600* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007).

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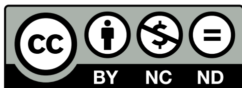
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