Book Review | Une Histoire Du Diable

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The book of M. Muchembled entitled The History of Devil substantively introduces readers to the history of devil in the Medieval Europe of XIIth-XVIth centuries up to today. Ranging from a set of folklore regarding the role played by Lucifer in the profane world, medieval literature before than XIIth century lacked a coherent sense of what the devil meant. Basically, even though the European cultures had a complete idea about Lucifer, these beliefs did not trigger sufficient fear as in the forthcoming centuries. Most interested in figuring out the devil as a product of the convergence between Christianity and other folkloric mythologies stemming from Mediterranean, Celtic and Norse realm, theologians certainly focused on the salvation of spirit instead the fear of evil.

However, the influence of Lucifer gradually strengthened in the Middle Ages as a result of the radical political shifts that characterized the XIIth century and after. At the time the Catholic Church centralized its hegemony over countries and disputes the devil became a self-oriented mechanism used to dissuade potential dissidents by means of a combination of terror and attraction. An eternity of suffering, as the Church postulated, was indeed too much for a farmer to bear in life. For that reason, hell was elaborated as a site of despair for all sinners. However, the devil offered to overcome the daily frustrations and despair lay-people experienced for that which the Church only suggested prayer. This type of discourse immediately seems to be disseminated to all strata of medieval society from Kings and riches to poorer farmers. The point of entry here was associated with the convergence of politics with religion. For the Catholic Church, Muchembled avows, Lucifer emulated not only the totalitarianism of Kings, hedonism, and power, but also paved the long-simmering moral of a continent that was consolidating a much broader sentiment of superiority over other folks (ethnocentrism) aimed at legitimating its territorial and political expansion (Muchembled, 2003).

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Second, other relevant aspects of devil have been the intellectualization of the body in Christianity and derived tension between humanity and animals. The development of a new culture of body elaborated a depiction of evil that combines sexual banalities of women with the devil and a prohibited carnal contact between animals and humans enrooted in the moral convictions of this epoch. Throughout his work, one thing lingers in the thought of Muchembled: the devil is a social construction rooted in the politic structure of a society that recur to it in order to avoid a broader social fragmentation. The evil and, of course, the devil are often re-symbolized as a mechanism of control and self indoctrination; this is the case for example of Basilea’s Coincile held from 1431 to 1445 wherein the legitimacy of current Pope Martin V had been overtly defied (Muchembled, 2003). To some extent Lucifer was functional to the interests of Catholic Church and Christianity. Under such a context, the present review is two-fold; on the one hand it focuses on the emergence of devil as a politic mechanism of indoctrination between XIIth-XXth centuries, and on the other hand, it critically debates the main contributions and limitations of Muchembled in the interpretation of what the riot of Lucifer in heaven really means.

Undoubtedly, scholars multiplied their treatises along with the witchcraft from 1435 to 1490. The image of Satan, the witch and evil were visually promulgated throughout Europe by means of the painting and other arts. The terror and fascination for the devil culturally has been a phenomenon seen for almost more than 2000 years, however, his shape has been varied by country and over time. As the previous argument noted, one of the aspects that surely characterize the symbolization of Satan in our times is the cathartic effects of terror films. This industry of spectacle combines the much deeper terror as imagined in Middle Ages with the comfort of home. Basically, Muchembled accepts that the beliefs in God and Devil have been transformed in a way of entertainment.

Following this, it is important not to lose sight of the fact that Sigmund Freud was the first who saw in fear the convergence between ambivalence among different feelings. The subject often experiences fear in order to prevent the fragmentation of personality whenever it is circumscribed to contrasting emotions such as love and hate. The function of a scapegoat (as an object of aversion) seems to be related to keep the control and order of psychological structure. Of course, similar remarks can be portrayed under a sociological perspective. To wit, societies elaborate their own notion of evil in order for them to prevent a much broader fragmentation (Freud, 1998: 11). For that reason, whatever generates pleasure sometimes scares.

Underpinned in the Freudian proposition that there was a social tension between the secular authority of King and Church that finally had been rechanneled under the image of devil, Muchembled argues that Europe witnessed from 1480 to 1490 a considerable rise of trials against witchcraft based on the main three relevant aspects of a covenant with Lucifer. A classical ritual of Satanism was certainly characterized by the
assassination of children, the copulation with animals, and harm against the property or health of a neighbor. In perspective, the popular wisdom suspected that a disproportionate wealth or the success in business might be a result of a pact with Satan. While the devil provided the involved person with a set of material properties, that person needed to give his soul in exchange. This ceremony encompassed three important points: a) the devil offered as possible all things that day-to-day were circumstantially banned, b) women became a threat for a society based on the patriarchal order, sometimes copulating with devil and c) the death of younger generation. In other terms, sex, death and wealth were inextricably interwoven. This argument coincides with the work of C. Karlsen in New England who stresses the connection between witches and devil as staunch foes of God’s Kingdom. Evil in the Middle Ages symbolized a practical correction of the glitches emerged in the process of economy and reciprocity whenever a women inherited households and properties from their father or husband without off-spring. This meant that witchcraft worked as a mechanism of security enrooted in the logic of economy or wealth distribution (Karlsen, 1987).

Over and over throughout the book, one can read the thesis that societies are prone to symbolize a tragic perspective of their own existence altering the common lore for producing social cohesion by means of an external foe. The point seems to be that in the U.S. there has been a resurgence of the Devil as something else than a form of entertainment. Thousand of exorcists, chronicles of possession and a terrible paranoia by the Evil has been one of the most observable pathologies Country-wide. In sharp contrast with this, in Europe and above all in France, the devil has been trivialized to a secondary position more secularized beyond the jurisdiction of super-natural. These cultural expressions are in part diverse elaborations aimed at offsetting the anguish for being in a type of intellectualization of death and suffering. To a greater or lesser degree, Muchembled is stubbornly convinced that in the U.S. the classical representation of Lucifer during XIth-XVth centuries is being replicated to the extent of reanimating a wider spirit of progress and civilization introduced by the founding parents.

This tension between what failure and success mean for people still persists, concentrated into the psychological subject with emphasis on the sublime and misery of each person. This tradition was coined by Puritanism and the first protestant Reformers. This of course triggered the most sublime discoveries of humanity but at the same time the conquests and territorial expropriation such as the conquest of America or the present military expansion and hegemony of the U.S. in the World. At the same time, in Europe the pessimism of a philosophy of a fearsome God and an omnipresent devil was changed once the Enlightenment set the pace to the rationality creating a perspective much more lax regarding human fate.
In addition, Muchembled in this point makes an all-encompassing development of the historical evolution of the Devil in the social imagination of Europe and the United States. This erudite work is valuable from all perspectives. However, in one point it lacks a coherent understanding of how the myths of Lucifer or Devil operate in Judaism and later in Christianity. In the following lines, we will shortly debate the existent interconnection between the current ways of production and the mythology of Lucifer’s revolution. Basically, Lucifer as a social construction embodies the frights and taboos of Western culture. As with other myths such as Prometheus, Lucifer symbolizes the tension between reason and love. First and foremost, one of the characteristics of sin seems to be the pride to be like God. This means that those creatures (that is, those who were created) feel that they are in a condition to be like the creator, and of course this happened when the first man, Adam, ate of the apple which from the tree of knowledge. One might speculate if Adam would have not chosen to eat the apple, he would not have been sent into exile. The decision-making opened an unknown door towards the uncertainty that finally ushered Adam into sin. Many scholars have devoted considerable efforts to understand why a powerful creator (God) gives inception to one of his most staunch enemies. Nonetheless, here we strongly believe the question is not properly focused. For some this seems to be a proof of the inexistence of God, while for others a testimony of His greatness and piety. Our thesis is that the myth of Lucifer in Judaism and Christianity emulates the attachment of parents and sons as an ever-persistent bondage.

Beyond the fear this personage arouses, one of the theological problems scholars have not resolved is linked to the fact Lucifer defied God’s will. As one of the first and loved sons, Lucifer is not destroyed by God but banished to an underground place wherein all human despair is condensed: hell. Anthropologically speaking, this is a main asset of Hebrew mythology wherein the liaison between Father and Son was almost sacred. Unlike other mythologies such as Greek or even Roman, characterized by the downright fighting between Parents and Sons because of power and glory, Judaism and Christianity expressly prohibited Fathers killing their sons (of course with the exception of Abraham).

A thought of this nature can be observed in other myths as Cain/Abel, The Prodigal Son, and others. Exile was transformed in Judaism as the necessary punishment for defying the authority of Father. This is exactly what the myth of Lucifer’s revolt means. After all, the latter accumulated for himself everything what was of value for the angels, such as light, wisdom, and power. As one of stronger angels of heaven, Lucifer (luzbel) was created to betray God’s trust. Ultimately, one might add that this was the reason why Western Culture does not have a term to designate the status of a person who had involved in the loss of a son. Basically, Lucifer and evil re-symbolize one of the most fearful aspects of the West and capitalism, the death of offspring on which the current logic of production (heritage) appears to be founded. Offspring played a pivotal
role in the confirmation of late-capitalism. This has been perhaps one of the points Muchembled does not focus in his insightful and interesting book.

References

