

PERSONAL, the hierarchy of the

In our Theotabletalk group a few days ago, somebody raised the question whether Jesus' tempting interlocutor (Mt.4.1-11 & parallels) was "personal." Was our Lord talking with somebody (once, "the tempter"; 2x, "Satan"; 7x, "Satan") or only to himself? Most broadly, is there conversation between the natural & the supernatural--& if so, is it both down from heaven (i.e., prayer) & up from hell (as in the Synoptic Jesus' three temptations), or only the former, or (as atheists claim) neither? This Thinksheet is about the ontology (actuality, reality) of the personal.

Biologism says there's no range to the personal, it's only a bio-emergent: consciousness, which is fundamental to the personal, is nothing more than a characteristic of mind, which is nothing but the (material, physical) brain in action. A further dimension of this **minimalist** claim is that while some other complex species share with us some aspects of the personal, only human beings inhabit the category of personality, are persons. Until the Enlightenment, the West was **maximalist**, believing in the whole hierarchy of the personal:

	<u>residence</u>
1 GOD	heaven
2 ANGELS	"
3 PEOPLE	earth
4 DEMONS	hell
5 SATAN, THE DEVIL	"

1 The Enlightenment (roughly, "modernism") first dropped hell with its residents, then the angels, & finally deity--a reductionist project whose success we call radical secularism. Before it came to a full stop, some over-enthusiastic theologians celebrated it--e.g., Harvey Cox's THE SECULAR CITY (1966--two years after which Gabriel Fackre's more sober evaluation [SECULAR IMPACT] was published: "Secularity yes, but not a secular orthodoxy. A secular orthodoxy is no better than the ecclesiastical orthodoxy which it seeks to destroy" [p28])).

2 "Personification" is the dramatic elevation of the impersonal to the personal level--e.g., the Christ-figure lion Aslan in the THE LION, THE WITCH, AND THE WARDROBE (a just-released movie), the first of C.S.Lewis' Narnia Tales. In Mel Gibson's spectacularly successful "The Passion of the Christ," Jesus converses both with God (his invisible supernatural Father) & Satan (a visible personal presence in Gethsemane as the film opens, later a dark-dressed person moving behind the crowd with the movement of Jesus' cross)--indeed, Satan in the film seems not only real, but more real than God. How much less punch the film would have had if both God & Satan were invisible! And, after the Enlightenment dropping of evil as personal (i.e., as Satan & demons), how much less real evil has seemed!

3 The meganarrative (overarching story) of the Bible is told on a five-level stage with ladders joining the whole. Because earthlings can't imagine the supernatural (either good or evil), the ladders are invisible to them. The biblical world-story can be told by the ladders. God made them & can use all of them. Angels can't use the ladder up to God, though one of them (Lucifer) tried & was thrown down all the stairs. People can ascend to heaven or descend to hell. Demons can infest earth, including people: that's up one ladder. As the "prince of the power of the air," Satan can ascend three ladders--& indeed is over "all the kingdoms of the world" (Mt.10.8; L.4.5-6 ["I will give all this authority"])--but he knows there's no point to his trying the top ladder again: he can't unseat God (the Story is monotheistic), & on the top floor there's only one throne (so he can't be co-regent [as in Zoroastrianism & Manicheism])).

4 Notice that of Jesus' Three Temptations, only the third (1) is political (Kingship, power over) & (2) within Satan's power to effect (being a conditional promise of what Satan can do for Jesus). In his KING, PRIEST, AND PROPHET (T&T Clark International/04), Robert Sherman does well to correlate this temptation with what

is usually the last listed of the "munus triplex" (Jesus' "triple office"---Prophet, Priest, King). We cannot doubt that Jesus believed (1) that personal evil is not limited to humanity & (2) that all personal evils (floors 3-5 of our 5-story residential building) use all powers available to them to fight against all the forces of personal good & (3) that Satan's freedom & authority are limited & temporary. "The LORD is King," & Jesus saw his sub-regency as having powers he used (to heal, exorcise demons, organize & train his troops for non-violent missions) & self-defense ("legions of angels" he could call upon) he did not use. On my architectural analogy, Jesus in his mission & ministry had access to all five floors.

In the other two temptations, Satan promises not what he can do but what God can do. They are acceptably but tenuously expressive of Jesus roles of Prophet (Deut.34.10-12 exalts, as the supreme prophet, Moses, whom Jesus as prophet quotes [8.3] to fend off the temptation to use his power over nature to meet his bread-need) & of Priest (the connection being the mere symbolic fact that, for this temptation, he's on a temple "pinnacle" above the other priests).

5 The personal precedes the material: our five-story structure is built for persons ready to live in it. The Creator-Person was there, really-real there, before creation (i.e., the universe-named-with-its-Source). Limiting the personal to the Creator & human beings weakens the sense of the supernatural personal, as does dropping the Bible's personal pronouns for God. 5.14.45 (as WW2 was ending), a German theologian wrote me "Don't you dare fling away the DEVIL. For everything that is not God and that is not of God is DEVIL and of the DEVIL." In prison camp 5.6.43 he'd written me "Evil must be thought of as personal, or its implications for religious living will suffer. Our nearest apprehension of God is as of personal Being; the same holds for evil." Amid the deprivations & other miseries as a POW, he became more aware of the invisible cosmic good-&-evil powers which he experienced as more personal than when his life was comfortable. How unconsciously, when we are free, do we "come short of our spiritual potentialities" & responsibilities! "God showed me these beasts [in & beyond the Book of Revelation], in his mercy, and I am able now to measure a little more accurately the love with which God loved the world....What remains is the revelation of God in Christ; the religion of faith, hope, and love, and reconciliation through the death of the Son of God." (After prison camp, these were the courses he taught*in seminary [in German, of course]: Greek, Latin, English, French, Music, Hebrew History. And he was full of JOY!) *All during the first term!

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