

Constructing a charismatic ontology of evil: a critical examination of Nigel Wright Graham Smith (University of Birmingham) grakiew@blueyonder.co.uk

Introduction

Charismatics have been accused of a dualistic approach to spiritual warfare, giving too high a status to Satan and developing a ‘demon-consciousness’. In the 1970s and 80s, a number of books and ministries developed demonologies that gave a detailed hierarchical description of the demonic world, and suggested that such demonic infestations were behind a range of sicknesses and sinful habits.¹ In reaction to this, even some commentators sympathetic to charismatics have written critiques of such approaches to evil and spiritual warfare; for example Andrew Walker, concerned as to the fear that such approaches can engender, coined the term ‘paranoid universe’ for this worldview. Frank Peretti’s works of popular Christian fiction were said to have reinforced the distortions of such a paranoid worldview.²

Nigel Wright has sought to counter charismatic ‘remythologising’ through an ontological account of evil that highlights its deceptive and shadowy nature. His ‘non-ontological realist’ analysis of the devil and demons seeks to deny them ontological substance without reducing their reality. He challenges traditional views of the devil as personal, and of the fall of angels as the origin of demonic forces. Through dialogue with Karl Barth, Jürgen Moltmann, Walter Wink and others, he defines evil as a godless emptiness that nonetheless has complex ways of taking form in the experience of societies and individuals.³

I have in my own research firstly sought to discover the views of a number of pioneers involved in the Anglican charismatic renewal in the 60s, 70s, and 80s in relation to spiritual warfare,⁴ and secondly conducted a case study in 2007/8 in a charismatic Anglican church (pseudonymously called St George’s) where there was well developed theology and praxis of spiritual warfare. In this paper I shall use some of these results to examine and critique Wright’s proposed ontology, and begin to construct a charismatic ontology of evil that seeks to remain faithful both to their experience and to the biblical data.

Evil as nothingness

Nigel Wright relies heavily on the theological analysis of Karl Barth, particularly his concept of ‘Nothingness’ (*das Nichtige*) as a power in opposition to God - which in Barth’s words ‘is not nothing’ but exists in negativity, without any right to exist or any value or positive strength.⁵ It is revealed primarily in its contradistinction to Christ, as the adversary whose hostility takes form as real death, real devil and real sin of human beings; yet it is an alien factor, not planned or willed, but only exists in negativity.⁶ He thus sees no equality between angels and demons; for him angels are glorious beings

¹ For example, Frank & Ida Mae Hammond, *Pigs in the Parlour* (Missouri: Impact Books, 1973), Bill Subritzky, *Demons Defeated* (Chichester: Sovereign World International, 1986).

² See for example Robert A Guelich, “Spiritual Warfare: Jesus, Paul and Peretti,” *The Journal of the Society for Pentecostal Studies* 2, no. 1 (1991), Andrew Walker, “The Devil You Think You Know: Demonology and the Charismatic Movement,” in *Charismatic Renewal: The Search for a Theology*, ed. T Smail, A Walker, and N Wright (London: SPCK, 1995), 88.

³ Nigel G Wright, “Charismatic Interpretations of the Demonic,” in *The Unseen World*, ed. Anthony N S Lane (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1996), Nigel G Wright, *A Theology of the Dark Side: Putting the Power of Evil in Its Place* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2003).

⁴ For example Michael Harper, David Watson, David MacInnes, Michael Green, and others.

⁵ Barth’s own exposition is mainly in Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics: Authorised English Translation*, trans. G W Bromiley and T F Torrance (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1960) III/3, 289-368, 519-31. There is also a helpful discussion in John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love* (Basingstoke: MacMillan Press, 1966) 132-204.

⁶ Barth, *C D* 111/3, 305,12,49.

who cannot 'fall' or deviate from God's will, but demons exist in a 'dreadful fifth or sixth dimension of existence' as an army never at rest, with falsehood as the manner of their being.⁷ The apparent similarity of demons with angels is a manifestation of a mimicking of the good; thus, though he defends angels against demythologising, the demons are 'the myth of all mythologies.'⁸

Barth's approach has much to commend it, notably his desire to protect the goodness of God. However, the idea of '*das Nichtige*' as that to which God says 'No' is not only paradoxical but problematic. How can he say 'No' to it and yet at the same time choose to permit it to come into being? Wright agrees that this is theologically inadequate, implying God was powerless to prevent it happening. And how could such virulent evil powers arise from a state of non-being without being created? Wright considers Barth's own solution (arising from the chaos of Genesis 1:2) is *eisegesis* and speculative here. However, Wright still sees the concept of Nothingness as well suited to a description of the essence of evil, particularly the emphasis on falsehood, and agrees that demons should only be given 'a quick, sharp glance.'⁹ The charismatics I studied at St George's had a healthy perspective on the power of Satan and his demons, considering that in comparison with God it was 'nothing'; but this was primarily because they were enamoured with the greatness of God and 'his incomparably great power towards us who believe' which can overcome sin and the devil - but still needs to be applied regularly. And while they would agree that Satan's nature is falsehood and lies, the subtle pervasiveness of those lies in a sinful world, as well as the strength of his rebellious opposition to God and his saints, is seen as something that requires persistent application of the truth in prayer to overcome, not just a 'quick, sharp glance.'

Evil as 'God-forsaken space'

Wright also draws on Moltmann's account of creation. God first created an empty space or *nihil* outside of himself within which to create the world, by withdrawing his presence and restricting his power (Isaac Luria's concept of *zimzum*); this literally 'God-forsaken space' calls forth a Nothingness identified with hell and absolute death, the negation of God, which is demonic and remains a constant threat of non-being to the creation that is let-be within the space. It is only finally overcome when in Christ God enters the space and defeats the demonic onslaught of the *nihil* on the cross.¹⁰

Wright concedes that this is more a speculative 'playing with ideas' than biblical exegesis; but again sees its value in suggesting that God's creative work *of necessity* gives rise to a threat to that creation that we associate with the demonic, and does not directly implicate God in its origin. It also sets the scene for a comparison Wright makes between evil and 'death', which can be personified in Scripture, is also a negative power that is not to be underestimated, but being the absence of life is not something in itself, lacking any ontological substance. However, as with Barth's ideas this would seem to give an inadequate assessment of the malevolence of evil. Moltmann himself hints at this, though without applying it to demonic beings: 'Admittedly the *nihil* only acquires this menacing character through the self-isolation of created beings to which we give the name of sin and godlessness.'¹¹ If Wright is to assert that the demonic powers are 'very real', then their menacing demonic character could not arise spontaneously from the *nihil*, but would need to originate in their own 'self-isolation as created beings', through the rebellion of spiritual beings such as angels.

⁷ Ibid. III/3, 525, 27-8.

⁸ Ibid. III/3, 521,25.

⁹ Ibid. 519.

¹⁰ Jurgen Moltmann, *God in Creation* (London: SCM Press, 1985) 86-8, 91.

¹¹ Ibid. 88. Moltmann continues: 'It is only in connection with [the non-being of the Creator] that we can talk about [annihilating] Nothingness.' The implication is that it is the sinful turning away of creatures in rebellion against God that opens up the prospect of Nothingness as the threat of eternal destruction.

The origin of evil: evil as arising from human sin

The nature of evil is closely tied in with its origin, and Cook helpfully describes four possible options.¹² Whilst Cook tends to favour forces of primeval chaos, Wright follows Noble in favouring human sin as the origin of evil, drawing on the analysis of Walter Wink.¹³ Wink's views are persuasively presented on a massive scale,¹⁴ and in taking evil and the spiritual battle seriously, have been welcomed by some charismatics.¹⁵ Wink is a perfect ally for Wright's non-ontological realist stance: on the one hand Wink denies being a simple reductionist, asserting again and again the spiritual reality of the powers; but on the other he denies them a separate, spiritual existence, seeing them as the innermost essence of material realities such as earthly institutions.¹⁶ Wink's ideas foster a strong sense of human responsibility, and recognise that evil is essentially parasitic, drawing its strength by preying on the energy of sin found in humankind and human society. Wright therefore considers that such 'purely spiritual' acts as binding and rebuking the devil 'will not avail if the supply lines of sin that enable the power of darkness to replenish itself.....are not also dealt with.'¹⁷

In St George's, there was agreement that Satan largely gets his power from human sin; and, alongside 'resisting the devil', they also emphasized the need to 'cut the supply lines' - through repentance and then 'replacing' the sinful belief, attitude or behaviour with biblically-based opposing ideas and actions, once an area of evil influence had been identified. However, the idea that evil *only* arises in response to human sin and has no independent existence was not acceptable to them or any of my interviewees, and would be considered reductionist; for their experience would seem to reinforce what they saw in Scripture, that there are independent forces of evil which are 'prowling around like a roaring lion' (1 Pet 5:8) seeking to tempt and gain influence and a foothold (Eph 4:27) in their lives, with intentionality and scheming (eg Eph 6:11) that points to an adversary or adversaries possessing a degree of independent action and will. Thus, Wink may assert that 'a mob spirit does not hover in the sky waiting to leap down on an unruly crowd at a football match' but instead *comes into existence* (my emphasis) in a moment when the crowd reaches a certain critical flashpoint of excitement and frustration; but this could be countered by clear indications from Jesus's words and actions that evil spirits have an independent existence.¹⁸ So it is not enough for Wright and Noble, in explaining this view, to emphasize that Satan must be more than merely a mythical projection or personification, instead being 'a real and objective supreme power of evil which draws its reality and strength from the perverted corporate unconscious of humanity'.¹⁹ To this we might answer 'strength', yes, but 'reality', no. The reality of which Wright speaks is compared to that of a vacuum, intensely powerful yet consisting of sheer emptiness; or a 'black hole', unobservable apart from its impact upon other stars and its capacity to suck matter into itself.²⁰

¹² The traditional view of a fall of the angels, and three other possible explanations for the origin of what he calls 'black noise' - it being the shadow side of God, who 'created both good and evil' (Isa 45:7); as forces of primeval chaos arising in the created universe; or arising at the level of humankind in its collective sinful displacement from God. Robert Cook, "Devils and Manticores: Plundering Jung for a Plausible Demonology," in *The Unseen World*, ed. Anthony N S Lane (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1996), 180-2.

¹³ Thomas A Noble, "The Spirit World: A Theological Approach," in *The Unseen World*, ed. Anthony N S Lane (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1996), 214-20.

¹⁴ Three large volumes - Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), Walter Wink, *Naming the Powers: The Language of Power in the New Testament* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1984), Walter Wink, *Unmasking the Powers* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1986).

¹⁵ In my interviews, for example, David MacInnes was particularly appreciative of Walter Wink's insights.

¹⁶ Noble, "The Spirit World: A Theological Approach," 211-2, Wink, *Naming the Powers* 5, 103-05, 35, 40.

¹⁷ Wright, *Theology of the Dark Side* 46-7.

¹⁸ The apparently factual description of evil spirits roaming around in arid places seeking rest (Luke 11:24-6), and the curious case of the legion of spirits cast out of a man into a herd of pigs (Mark 5:6-13).

¹⁹ Noble, "The Spirit World: A Theological Approach," 215.

²⁰ Wright, *Theology of the Dark Side* 70.

Such empty ‘nothingness’ might indeed be the final end of evil;²¹ but it is hard to imagine how ‘nothingness’ could project intelligent, malevolent scheming into the world of substance, or exert wilful choice and rebellious opposition to all that comes from God, if it is in essence merely ‘godless emptiness’. If evil powers were indeed ‘nothingness’ in essence, they could be in Barth’s terms easily dismissed with ‘a quick sharp glance’ – not only as ‘all that is necessary but all that is legitimate in their case.’²² However, the experience of charismatics seems to mirror that of Jesus – when the Holy Spirit fills a person, he or she will often find that evil forces manifest with a forcefulness of opposition that at least requires an authoritative command of resistance to counter their stubborn rebellion and dismiss them from the scene;²³ but also at times for believers humbly to ‘purify their hearts’ in repentance for any inner duplicity that might give the devil a foothold.²⁴ Praxis would seem to confirm that the ‘reality’ of evil is more likely to be autonomous spirit beings which have wilfully rebelled, and tempt human beings to join them in their rebellion, rather than in Wink’s terms being the innermost essence of a material or earthly reality ‘lacking a separate spiritual existence’.²⁵

Evil and the concept of ‘personhood’

Another plank in Wright’s construction is that the devil is less than fully personal: ‘The devil possesses a much reduced and essentially malevolent way of being which to dignify as personhood would be to vastly overrate.’²⁶ He again follows Noble, in granting the devil an atomic individualistic personhood according to the minimalist definition of Boethius as ‘an individual substance of rational nature’, which the devil might be able to fulfil in so far as he is ‘an agent able to think, to know, to will and to act’; but lacking true personhood as theologians are coming to understand it, as ‘persons-in-relation’.²⁷

Thus far, however, this is not really an issue of contention, more one of the use of language. Whilst Ferdinando and others may use the term ‘personal’, it is in the context of arguing that in the language of the New Testament the writers in their references to Satan, demons and powers clearly had in mind personal *spirit beings* (my emphasis), with intelligence, will and self-consciousness;²⁸ Green asserts that ‘what most people mean [by a personal devil] is to claim that Satan is an organising intellect, a single focus and fount of evil inspiration.... Scripture depicts him as a spirit....but not “personal” in any meaningful sense....the great “It” is in every way the pale imitation of the ultimate “He”’.²⁹

What is in dispute however is the jump Wright makes from this to asserting that the devil is not an individual but a power, a dynamic which takes on the character of agency and intelligence and chaotically wars against God – for him evil is not ordered rationality but chaos, which masquerades as personhood. For him, just as in a sense ‘all human personhood is *constructed*... via the relationships that

²¹ Thus, Walker, “The Devil You Think You Know,” 102.

²² Barth, *CD* 519, Stephen F Noll, “Thinking About Angels,” in *The Unseen World* (Anthony N S Lane: Paternoster, 1996), 23. Barth considered that looking too closely at demons or the devil (as Luther did) may cause us to become ‘just a little or more than a little demonic.’

²³ ‘He even gives orders to evil spirits and they obey him’ Mark 1:27; cf. interviews with Michael Harper, Michael Green, John Collins and Tom Walker.

²⁴ Cf James 4:6-10; Ephesians 4:27.

²⁵ Wink, *Naming the Powers* 105.

²⁶ Wright, *Theology of the Dark Side* 73.

²⁷ Noble, “The Spirit World: A Theological Approach,” 217, Wright, *Theology of the Dark Side* 73. This Trinitarian understanding of personhood has been seen as a model for all concepts of self, as having more to do with relationality than with substantiality – see Stanley J Grenz, *The Social God and the Relational Self* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001) 4.

²⁸ Keith Ferdinando, “Screwtape Revisited: Demonology Western, African and Biblical,” in *The Unseen World*, ed. N S Lane (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1996), 108,20.

²⁹ Michael Green, *I Believe in Satan's Downfall* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1980) 30.

surround us...is there a way in which out of the unconscious, fallen human collective psyche the devil and even the demons might be constructed as hypostases?’ He also uses the analogy of ‘machine intelligence’ as potentially connected with demonology. This is clearly a reductionist argument and highly speculative. Even Noble recognises that personality is something we are born with, ‘but we will be damaged persons unless we develop into loving persons in a matrix of stable, loving relationships.’ In this way, ‘Satan and his demons may possibly be conceived of as damaged persons, or perhaps better as ‘anti-persons’, parasitic on human wickedness.’³⁰ Charismatics have little problem in conceiving of them as ‘anti-persons’, as long as, unlike Wright, they are also seen as ‘damaged persons’ – for just as human personality, however marred, is created and fallen, so it is difficult to imagine the devil and demons constructing themselves from the fallen human collective psyche, rather than being fallen created beings;³¹ and ‘machine intelligence’, even if it could become an independent centre of ‘will’ (which is doubtful), is purposefully created by human beings.

What biblical support is there for the devil and demons as lacking ontological substance? Paul identifies false gods with demons (1 Cor 10:20), and he also affirmed that, whilst there was some kind of real existence for these ‘many gods’, nevertheless ‘an idol is nothing at all’ (8:4-5).³² However, whilst this may indeed suggest that demons exercise their power insofar as people believe in them,³³ we can hardly conclude that Paul would see all demons’ very existence as arising from ‘nothingness’. In Ephesians, he more than once refers to the ‘powers’ in language that implies supernatural cosmic forces in a hierarchy of spiritual beings, which exist ‘en tois epouraniois’ (‘in the heavenly realms’), a phrase considered highly significant in the teaching at St George’s.³⁴

Conclusion: towards a charismatic ontology of evil

Wright warns charismatics of the dangers of conceiving of the dominion of darkness as the counterpart to the divine kingdom and so assuming ‘a kind of legitimacy within the created sphere.’ Because the essence of evil is deception (Jn 8:44), the demonic realm may only be *masquerading* as ontological and structured. He adds a favourite quotation: ‘the power against which faith is faith has its own reality, just as certainly as it does not have its own validity.’³⁵ However, whilst Wright accuses charismatics such as Green and Arnold as remythologizing in applying the Biblical imagery concerning evil too literally,³⁶ he has done his own remythologizing by ascribing reality to the forms of evil, including perhaps a limited form of personhood, yet retaining a modernist denial of ontological substance - because following Noble and Wink, he sees their origin as a projection of the corporate spirit of fallen humanity.³⁷

³⁰ He goes on: ‘perhaps the concerns of those who fear reductionism here will be satisfied if we conceive of him as a malevolent intelligence, willing, acting and knowing, but totally lacking in personal feeling or sympathy, and obsessed with self-aggrandisement.’ He acknowledges here that this accords with Green’s position - Ibid. 30, 126, Noble, “The Spirit World: A Theological Approach,” 217.

³¹ Not all charismatics consider demons to be fallen angels – Derek Prince for example has proposed that they are the offspring of fallen angels and men in Genesis 6 – but still, therefore, fallen spiritual beings.

³² Noble, “The Spirit World: A Theological Approach,” 215-6, Wright, *Theology of the Dark Side* 71.

³³ Clinton Arnold, *Powers of Darkness: A Thoughtful, Biblical Look at an Urgent Challenge Facing the Church* (Leicester: IVP, 1992) 94-5, Noble, “The Spirit World: A Theological Approach,” 216.

³⁴ See also Ferdinando, “Screwtape Revisited: Demonology Western, African and Biblical,” 108, P T O’Brien, “Principalities and Powers: Opponents of the Church,” in *Biblical Interpretation and the Church: The Problem of Contextualisation*, ed. D A Carson (Nashville: Nelson, 1985), 49.

³⁵ Wright, “Charismatic Interpretations of the Demonic,” 163. His quotation is from Otto Weber, *Foundations of Dogmatics* Volume 1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982) 489.

³⁶ Arnold, *Powers of Darkness: A Thoughtful, Biblical Look at an Urgent Challenge Facing the Church*, Green, *I Believe in Satan’s Downfall*, Wright, “Charismatic Interpretations of the Demonic,” 158.

³⁷ Here he draws on the ‘meontic’ theological tradition of not only Barth but Augustine - see Cook, “Devils and Manticores,” 182, Noble, “The Spirit World: A Theological Approach,” 214, 17-8, Wink, *Unmasking the Powers* 24-5.

Wright is correct to point out that the texts concerning a fall of angels are problematic;³⁸ but there are more hints in Scripture of evil powers having arisen in this way than the even more speculative accounts of Cook, Wright and Wink. The gospel ascribes to Jesus words of judgement on ‘the devil and his angels’;³⁹ and, whilst the timing of the events they refer to is very difficult to interpret, both Jesus and Revelation record a ‘fall’ of the devil.⁴⁰ There is significant exegetical evidence here (Rev 12) that the ‘devil and his angels’ share a similar positive ontology as spirit beings to ‘Michael and his angels’, and that it was wilful rebellion that led to their loss of status.⁴¹ Borrowing Wright’s analogy, even a black hole was a star once, otherwise it would not exist at all. Walker may be correct that the devil is undergoing a depersonalising metamorphosis towards non-personhood;⁴² but both biblical data and pastoral experience suggest that this is not because the devil arose from ‘nothingness’, but in his fall lost the goodness of full ‘personhood’ possessed by the angels, and seeks to drag humans with him into his rebellion.

Wright has challenged charismatics for their ‘apparent reluctance to go beyond the mythological and narrative imagery of Scripture to ask more *theological* questions about the actual nature of evil.’⁴³ I would submit that in the ‘ordinary theology’ of some members of St George’s there is indeed a clear theological answer as to the nature of evil, in characterising its essence as ‘rebellion’, which would require a positive ontology.⁴⁴ Evil as ‘rebellion’ arises from choice to sever a relationship of willing submission to an all-loving God, and this fits naturally with an origin in the fall of angels that parallels, and then draws power and sustenance from, the fall of human beings; this also reveals that one of the most effective ways to overcome the influence of the demonic is through continuous repentance from our own rebellion against God, so that, forgiven and filled with the Spirit of Christ, Christians too can exercise the authority that Jesus delegated to them over all the power of the enemy, as they discover the vastly superior power and greatness of God, and of His love that sweeps Christians up in Christ into a position of spiritual authority.⁴⁵ Far from necessarily resulting in an increase in paranoia, my studies reveal that it is possible for a charismatic spiritual warfare praxis on such a basis to progressively release from fear – through the power of continuous repentance, faith in the atoning victory of the cross, and resisting the devil in his energising of sin patterns, leading to a growing appropriation of inner spiritual freedom and security in God.

³⁸ Wright, *Theology of the Dark Side* 63.

³⁹ Matthew 25:41. There is a similar phrase in Revelation 12:7 – ‘the dragon and his angels’, where the dragon is identified as ‘the devil, or Satan’.

⁴⁰ ‘I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven’ (Luke 10:18); ‘he was hurled to the earth, and his angels with him’ (Revelation 12:7-9). This would also seem to be an allusion to one of the two ‘problematic’ Old Testament texts, Isaiah 14:12. Green makes a case for a distinction in the other text (Ezekiel 28:1-19) between ‘the prince of Tyre’ and ‘the king of Tyre’ that is a spiritual power behind the earthly one, though it is not a strong case. He does also rightly point out though that Jude 6 and 1 Tim 3:6 do point in the same direction. Green, *I Believe in Satan's Downfall* 36-39.

⁴¹ Cf. also the fivefold emphatic rebellious ‘I will...’ of ‘Lucifer’ (the ‘morning star’) in Isaiah 14:12-14. Although the description of fallen rulers in Ezekiel and Isaiah may be more human than demonic, it could at least point to an interplay between the two – for surely the human rebellion and proud autonomy from God mirrors the rebellion of the evil spiritual powers that ally with, and draw power from, such human sin.

⁴² Walker, “The Devil You Think You Know,” 102. He draws particularly on C S Lewis to illustrate this idea.

⁴³ Wright, “Charismatic Interpretations of the Demonic,” 158.

⁴⁴ When presented with some of the alternatives given above as to the origin and nature of evil, one interviewee commented succinctly: ‘The fallen angels would be more my understanding, obviously because of the nature of rebellion in sin, and the whole nature of Satan is rebellion.’

⁴⁵ Luke 10:19; Ephesians 1:19-23, 2:6. The way in which the realm of demonic spirits interacts with humans is nevertheless not simple and obvious, involving much deception and interplay with psychological factors, just as indeed ‘the world, the flesh and the devil’ are intertwined in their negative influence.

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