HISTORICAL-THEOLOGICAL STUDY

Evolution of Demonology in the Undivided Church

From the Formation of the Canon of Sacred Scripture to the Second Council of Nicaea (787)

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1.1 Abstract

This study demonstrates how the Church of late antiquity and the early Middle Ages subordinated the inherited language concerning evil spirits to the theology of creation, christology, and the practice of spiritual discernment. The analysis encompasses Greek, Latin, and Eastern sources, monasticism, baptismal liturgy, canon law, Origenist controversies, and iconoclasm. The main thesis states that the maturity of patristic demonology is expressed not in the expansion of demon catalogs, but in the limitation of their ontological and practical rank through the teaching on the goodness of creation, freedom, Providence, and the definitive victory of Christ.

Keywords: patristic demonology, Church Fathers, monasticism, exorcism, logismoi, magic, freedom, christology, iconoclasm, Second Council of Nicaea.

1.2 Introduction: Scope, Method, and Meaning of the Term

“evolution”

Speaking of the evolution of demonology in the undivided Church requires double caution. First, the term “demonology” is a later systematizing category. The Church Fathers did not usually create separate treatises on demons along the lines of modern manuals. They spoke of evil spirits in scriptural exegesis, baptismal catechesis, polemics against pagan religions, reflection on freedom and the origin of evil, in ascetical teaching, hagiography, liturgy, and canon law. Second, “evolution” does not mean here a simple transition from a supposedly primitive myth to mature reason. Rather, it concerns a process of selection, reinterpretation, and ordering of many inherited concepts in the light of monotheism, creation, the Incarnation, and the Paschal mystery of Christ.

The chronological framework is opened by the late fourth century, when the core corpus of New Testament books became widely established in the Church. Of particular importance is Athanasius’s Thirty-Ninth Festal Letter of 367, containing the first preserved list of exactly twenty-seven New Testament books, followed by the African synods in Hippo and Carthage. This was not a single act of closing the canon across all of Christianity; the boundaries of some books still varied locally. However, it was a moment when a stable body of apostolic texts became the rule of interpretation. The endpoint is the Second Council of Nicaea in 787, customarily recognized by Catholicism and Orthodoxy as the seventh and final common ecumenical council. Its subject was images, not demons, but the iconoclastic controversy touched upon the very understanding of matter, idolatry, the presence of the holy, and demonic delusion.

Retrospections into the second and third centuries will be necessary. Late antique demonology did not begin with the establishment of the canon: it inherited the language of the New Testament and the solutions of Justin, Athenagoras, Irenaeus, Tertullian, and Origen. However, the analysis will focus on how this heritage was worked through from the era of Athanasius, the Cappadocian Fathers, and the birth of classical monasticism up to John of Damascus and Nicaea II. It is also necessary to maintain a distinction between the dogmatic core of the teaching and the changing forms of imagination. The claim that demons are creatures, that their evil stems from the abuse of freedom, that they remain under God’s power, and

that they have been fundamentally defeated by Christ has a different rank than descriptions of their animal forms, localization in the desert, or the manner of making noises in monks' cells.

1.3 Canonical Heritage and Earlier Synthesis

Patristic

The consolidating canon transmitted to the Church several layers of language concerning personal evil. The Synoptic Gospels presented the exorcistic activity of Jesus as a sign of the coming of the kingdom of God: if Jesus casts out demons by the power of the Spirit of God, the kingdom has already come, and the "strong man" has been bound. Paul spoke of "Principalities and Powers," but presented them primarily as powers disarmed on the cross and subjected to the risen Lord. The Johannine tradition linked the devil with the lie, murder, and the structure of the world that rejects the light, while proclaiming that the Son of God was manifested to destroy the works of the devil. The Apocalypse united in a single drama the dragon, the beasts, the idolatry of the empire, false prophecy, and the persecution of the saints. Consequently, canonical demonology was not a uniform catalog of entities, but a polyphonic testimony concerning personal, moral, political, and cultic evil.

Earlier Christian apologists gave this testimony a form capable of confrontation with the religious environment of the empire. The Greek word daimōn did not have an exclusively negative meaning in classical philosophy and religion; it could mean an intermediary being between gods and humans. Christians made a radical semantic shift: they rejected the possibility of a religiously legitimate mediation of demons, because the sole mediator of salvation is Christ. The gods of the nations were interpreted in apologetics as demons or as fictions sustained by demonic deception. Such an approach was not merely a polemical change of names. It shattered the entire system of sacrifice, divination, astrology, and state cult, presenting it as a competing economy of slavery.

Justin Martyr associated the activity of demons with the falsification of revelation, lust, and the imitation of prophecies. Athenagoras traced their fall to the misuse of freedom. Irenaeus placed them within the history of creation and salvation, defending the goodness of God against Gnostic visions of an evil demiurge. Tertullian used the practice of exorcism apologetically: according to him, spirits worshipped by pagans as gods reveal their own inferiority under the compulsion of the name of Christ. Origen, in turn, linked the reality of evil powers with a subtle analysis of temptation, the interpretation of Scripture, and the pedagogy of freedom. At the same time, his speculations on the pre-existence of spirits and the possibility of universal restoration became one of the points of later disputes. The common achievement of this epoch was the demythologization of evil without its depersonalization: the demon is not a second god nor a necessary pole of the cosmos, but a creature that became evil through a free turning away from the good. This principle was of fundamental importance. Christian monotheism does not allow metaphysical dualism. Satan is not the eternal adversary of God, and the struggle between good and evil is not a clash of equivalent principles. Everything that exists exists thanks to the Creator; evil has no substance of its own, but is a lack, a deformation, and a parasitic use of the good. The demon retains the nature of a created spirit, but his will is turned away from the goal. Such a resolution would allow later Fathers to speak seriously of a personal tempter without ascribing to him sovereignty over the world.

1.4 The Great Turn of the Fourth Century: From the Persecuted

Church to Christian Society

After Constantine, the environment in which demonological language functioned changed. Previously, the believer perceived the imperial cult and urban rituals as an area of conflict with the "ruler of this world." In the fourth century, temples began to be closed, elites received baptism, and the Church attained a public position. Evil, however, did not disappear with the political victory of Christianity. On the contrary, it moved to the center of the question regarding the authenticity of faith. The desert became the symbolic place of a new struggle, and monasticism a laboratory of discernment. What was previously a clash between the martyr and the violence of the pagan state became, in the monk's life, a struggle with lust, anger, vanity, despair, and false visions.

Athanasius in the *Life of Antony* created one of the most influential representations of this shift. His demons take animal forms, make noise, threaten, beat, suggest sexual images, and attempt to arouse fear. Read superficially, the work may look like a catalogue of wonders. In its theological structure, however, it is a story about the loss of power by the devil. Antony does not defeat him with magic technique, a secret name, or the strength of his own personality. He triumphs through faith in Christ, the sign of the cross, prayer, fasting, and sober discernment. Athanasius repeatedly emphasizes that demons are weak, mendacious, and dependent on human consent to fear. Their spectacle is a mask of powerlessness before the Crucified One.

In this view, the *Life of Antony* is a development of Nicene theology. The same Son whose full divinity Athanasius defended against the Arians destroyed death and the tyranny of the devil in his humanity. If Christ were merely a supreme creature, he could not grant creaturely incorruptibility or achieve cosmic victory. Demonology is thus subordinated to soteriology: the significance of demons lies primarily in the fact that their defeat reveals the power of the incarnate Word. The desert ascetic participates in Christ's victory; he does not independently reenact a duel of two powers.

With the Cappadocian Fathers, a further purification of language takes place. Basil the Great and Gregory of Nyssa develop the doctrine of creation, freedom, and the non-substantiality of evil. Gregory of Nazianzus, describing Christ's baptism and temptation, emphasizes that the adversary is vanquished by the obedience of the new Adam. Particularly important is the principle that evil does not constitute a nature. If the devil were evil by nature, moral responsibility would be illusory, and God would appear as the author of evil. The fall is an event of the will, not a product of creation. The Fathers did not always agree on the precise moment of the angels' fall or the exact meaning of the biblical texts concerning the "sons of God," but the consensus regarding the ontological dependence of demons on God was profound and enduring.

1.5 Baptism, Exorcism, and the Liturgical Experience

of Liberation

Fourth-century demonology was not merely an intellectual view. Its most common setting remained Christian initiation. The catechumenate included exorcisms, the renunciation of Satan, and a turn toward Christ. Cyril of Jerusalem speaks of exorcisms as purifying fire, deriving their formulas from Scripture. The candidate for baptism was not merely to assimilate a doctrine; he passed from a former dominion to a new belonging. The gesture of turning toward the west during the renunciation and toward the east during the profession of faith gave this change a cosmic, bodily, and communal dimension.

This does not mean that every catechumen was considered possessed in the later, strict sense. The baptismal exorcism expressed the broad bondage of sin, death, error, and idolatry, from which man is led

out. It is precisely here that the difference is seen between the demonology of the ancient Church and the later tendency to isolate "cases of possession." The renunciation of Satan concerned everyone, because everyone entered the world order marked by sin; special ministries toward tormented persons constituted only part of a broader practice of liberation.

Exorcism was at the same time distinguished from magic. Its effectiveness was not supposed to stem from the automatic power of syllables, knowledge of the spirit's name, or the manipulation of invisible energies. It operated as a prayer of the Church rooted in the name of Jesus, paschal faith, and authority received rather than possessed. Historical sources show, of course, that the boundary at the level of popular practices was sometimes violated. Christians wore amulets, consulted astrologers, and mixed biblical verses with protective formulas. That is why the synod of Laodicea forbade the clergy magic, incantations, astrology, and the making of amulets. The prohibition reveals not only the official stance, but also the persistence of behaviors that this stance attempted to eradicate.

Liturgical theology thus established a clear criterion: sacramental action is a movement from man to God and from God to man in the freedom of grace; magic attempts to subordinate invisible reality to human control. In practice, the boundary could be obscured by the similarity of gestures, the use of oil, water, the sign of the cross, or sacred words. However, the difference was decided not by the matter of the gesture, but by the relationship: the humble request of the Church instead of the technique of coercion, belief in Providence instead of determinism, and the subordination of charism to the community instead of the private power of the specialist.

1.6 Evagrius and the Internalization of Spiritual Warfare

The most significant achievement of the Eastern ascetic tradition was the synthesis of demonic language with precise observation of the psyche. Evagrius of Pontus did not deny the personal existence of demons. However, he described their manner of operation through *logismoi*, that is, thoughts, representations, and sequences of internal reasoning. The eight foundational thoughts — gluttony, impurity, avarice, sadness, anger, acedia, vainglory, and pride — did not constitute a simple list of offenses. They were a map of the dynamics of temptation: a stimulus arouses a mental image, the image demands dialogue, dialogue can lead to consent, passion, and action.

The demonological and psychological descriptions are not competitive in Evagrius. The demon employs the natural faculties of memory, imagination, and desire; it neither creates a separate soul nor abolishes freedom. It alters the arrangement of mental representations, stimulates memories, and suggests seemingly rational justifications. A monk should not ask merely: "what spirit is attacking me?", but also: "what is the condition of my concupiscible, irascible, and rational part; which memory has been stirred; towards what passion is this thought heading?". Demonology becomes a tool of self-knowledge rather than a pretext for shifting blame.

It is also important to distinguish between the appearance of a thought and consent to it. Evagrius is able to speak of blasphemous representations forcing themselves upon the mind and clearly reassures that their mere presence does not make a person guilty. This resolution is of great anthropological significance: it protects the conscience from identifying an involuntary experience with sin. The struggle consists in vigilance, short prayer, the appropriate use of Scripture, labor, moderation, and opening one's thoughts to an experienced father. Evagrius's *Antirrhetikos*, which juxtaposes temptations with biblical responses, alludes to the manner in which Christ answered the tempter in the wilderness.

Evagrius's system was at the same time burdened with elements of his broad cosmology, dependent on Origen. Later Origenist controversies caused part of his heritage to be transmitted anonymously or under other names. However, the method of diagnosing thoughts did not disappear. Through John Cassian it penetrated to the West, and through the Sinaitic and Philokalic tradition it remained alive in the East. It is precisely in this reception that the maturity of the undivided Church is revealed: it was able to separate the practical wisdom of discernment from controversial cosmological speculation.

1.7 John Cassian and the Western Reception of the Desert

John Cassian translated the experience of the Egyptian monks into the language of the Latin communities of Gaul. In his *Conferences* and *Institutes*, he adopted the eight principal vices, but embedded them in the pedagogy of community, obedience, and *discretio*. Discernment is for him the capacity to examine the origin, direction, and effects of thoughts. Not every zeal comes from God; a demon may suggest excessive fasting, isolation, or a seemingly heroic practice if they lead to pride, destruction of the body, or the severing of ties with brothers. Evil thus operates not only through overt passions, but also through the imitation of good.

Cassian balances demonic realism with a strong emphasis on the limits of demonic power. Evil spirits differ in their mode of operation and encounter the resistance of the human will; they cannot freely penetrate the deepest sanctuary of the human person nor compel them to sin. Their attack is permitted within the framework of Providence and can become an occasion for the exercise of virtue. This pedagogical interpretation of trial, derived inter alia from the Book of Job and the temptation of Christ, protects against the conviction that suffering proves abandonment by God.

In the West, the scheme of the eight vices was subsequently transformed, particularly by Gregory the Great, into the well-known system of capital sins. This change is something more than a correction of numbers. The language of "demons" increasingly becomes the language of ordered moral theology. This does not imply the secularization of temptation; it indicates that the spiritual combat takes place within permanent human dispositions, social relations, and habits. The Western tradition did not abandon stories about exorcisms, but increasingly linked them with the examination of conscience, the practice of penance, and the formation of virtues.

1.8 Augustine: Critique of Pagan Mediation and the Primacy of Grace

The most systematic Western account of late antiquity originated with Augustine. In books VIII–X of *The City of God*, he engages in a dialogue with Platonism, especially with the conception of demons as intermediaries between gods and humans. He accepts that they are rational and spiritual beings, but rejects the category of "good demons" as religious mediators. If they are subject to passions and moral disorder, they cannot lead to happiness; if they are holy, they should be called angels and understood as servants of God, not objects of cult. The only Mediator who purifies and unites with God is the incarnate Christ.

Augustine's critique of demons is part of his critique of the entire Roman political religion. Demons exploit the desire for spectacle, power, and secret knowledge in order to bind humans to cults. Their primary tool is not spectacular violence, but *superbia*—pride, which compels the creature to seek divinity outside of obedience to the Creator. In this sense, an empire founded on *libido dominandi* can acquire demonic traits,

although Augustine does not simply identify any state with the kingdom of the devil. Two cities arise from two loves; demonology is inscribed into the moral history of desire.

At the same time, Augustine remains an opponent of astrology, divination, and theurgy. In *On Christian Doctrine*, he interprets superstitious practices as a kind of consent or pact with demons. The word *pactum* does not have to mean a formally concluded agreement in the late medieval sense; rather, it expresses an objective relation of participation in a system of signs through which man expects knowledge or power outside the order of Providence. This is an important stage of development: the criterion of the demonic character of a practice becomes not only the object of cult, but the very project of gaining control and knowledge in a manner contrary to the love of God.

Augustine also limits the tendency to burden the devil with total responsibility for human evil. The tempter acts, but sin becomes sin through human will. Without grace, the will is wounded and entangled, but it does not cease to be a will. Demonic temptation and internal *concupiscentia* can mutually reinforce each other, yet they are not identical. This distinction remains essential for the doctrine of responsibility, penance, and healing. The devil is not a convenient explanation for everything that man refuses to acknowledge as his own.

Regarding the impact of demons on matter, Augustine accepts the possibility of extraordinary phenomena, but considers that created spirits do not perform creation *ex nihilo* and do not alter the laws of nature by sovereign power. They can manipulate the hidden properties of things, imagination, and the senses, utilizing knowledge greater than human knowledge. Even then, they remain within the bounds of divine permission. This is an attempt to simultaneously acknowledge the testimonies of the epoch and protect the exclusive omnipotence of God.

1.9 Conciliar Christology as the Hidden Axis of Demonology

The councils from Nicaea I to Constantinople III did not formulate a separate treatise on demons. Their Christological definitions, however, established the boundaries of correct demonology. The Nicene *homoousios* safeguarded the conviction that the One who conquers death and evil powers is true God. Constantinople I confirmed the full divinity of the Holy Spirit, whose activity was attributed to exorcism, sanctification, and the restoration of the image of God in humanity. Ephesus, defending the unity of the person of Christ, did not permit the human acts of Jesus to be separated from the divine subject of the Word. Chalcedon affirmed the fullness of both natures without confusion or division, ensuring that the salvific struggle was neither a theatrical pretense of divinity nor the solitary effort of an ordinary human being.

In the disputes concerning the will of Christ, demonology reveals its anthropological depth. Constantinople III taught the existence of two natural wills and operations in the one person of Christ, with the human will not opposing the divine will but freely cooperating with it. The obedience of Christ heals the disobedience of Adam. Victory over the tempter therefore does not consist in the annihilation of human freedom by omnipotence, but in its perfect realization in communion with God. For ascetics this means that grace does not replace human action, and human discipline is not an autonomous technique of self-liberation.

Conciliar Christology also guarded against demonological excess in the interpretation of heresy. The Fathers frequently described erroneous teachings as “demonic,” with reference to 1 Tim 4:1. This rhetoric could serve as a warning that religious falsehood is not neutral. It carried, however, the risk of demonizing the opponent and of replacing argument with anathema. The finest conciliar tradition did not reach its

decisions by describing the alleged spirits standing behind one's opponents, but through the examination of Scripture, the liturgical rule of faith, the testimony of the Fathers, and the consequences for salvation. Demonology remained a moral framework for dispute, but it could not substitute for theology.

1.10 The Problem of Origen and the Limits of Speculation

The Origenist controversies of the sixth century demonstrate how the Church established the boundaries of speculation regarding the spiritual world. Origen desired to think of creation as entirely dependent on the goodness of God and of punishment as pedagogical. Certain ideas attributed to him or to later Origenists included the pre-existence of rational spirits, cosmic cycles, and the ultimate apokatastasis including the devil. The history of the condemnation is complex: the fifteen anathematisms against the Origenists are sometimes linked to the Second Council of Constantinople in 553, yet their formal status in the acts of the council remains a subject of discussion. Therefore, this issue should not be presented with false simplicity.

Regardless of the documentary problem, the mainstream of both Eastern and Western tradition rejected the image of the demonic fall as a transitional stage of a cosmic cycle. There was a strengthening conviction regarding the fixation of the choice of spirits and the eschatological finality of judgment. From a theological perspective, the aim was to protect the seriousness of freedom and the history of salvation. If all choices were automatically reversed, the drama of the cross, conversion, and judgment could be reduced to a mere appearance. At the same time, the Church did not accept speculative curiosity regarding the number of demons, their names, or their exact order as content of the faith.

The reception of Evagrius proves that the condemnation of speculation did not annihilate the entire spiritual tradition associated with Origen. The analysis of thought, the practice of prayer, discernment, and the idea of spiritual therapy were preserved. On the other hand, those elements of cosmology that seemed to blur the uniqueness of creation, the incarnation, and judgment were rejected. The evolution of demonology thus takes the form of critical memory: the Church preserves experience, but changes its metaphysical framework.

1.11 Pseudo-Dionysius, Hierarchy and the Ontological

Diminution of Demons

Corpus Dionysiacum, written likely around the turn of the 5th and 6th centuries, exerted an enormous influence on the Christian vision of the spiritual world. Pseudo-Dionysius ordered the nine biblical names of celestial beings into three triads and linked the angelic hierarchy with the ecclesiastical movement of purification, illumination, and union. From the perspective of the history of demonology, more important than the catalog of choirs itself is his understanding of evil. Evil is not a being or a positive nature; it has no independent principle of existence. Even a demon exists only insofar as it remains God's creation; it is evil through the lack of proper good and the perversion of its activity.

Such an approach leads to the ontological diminution of the demon. In hagiographic imagination, it may occupy a large space, yet in metaphysics it is radically dependent. It does not create, possesses no light of its own, and does not establish an alternative hierarchy equal to the angelic one. Its action is a deformation of relations. Pseudo-Dionysius enabled later theology to speak of spiritual worlds without cosmic dualism. At the same time, the elaborate hierarchization of angels favored symmetrical speculations about the orders of demons, although this symmetry never acquired the same dogmatic foundation.

In *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, a place also appears for persons tormented by evil spirits within the pastoral order. They are not excluded from the Church's concern, but are surrounded by ritual, teaching, and gradual incorporation. This demonstrates the ecclesial dimension of healing. Discernment is not a private duel of a charismatic with a spirit, but part of the community's action that leads from disorder toward communion.

1.12 Syriac East, Hagiography, and the Plurality

of Local Languages

The picture of development would be distorted if it were restricted to Greek and Latin authors. Syriac, Coptic, Armenian, and Georgian traditions assimilated the common core of faith in distinct cultural environments. Syriac literature readily employed imagery of combat, fire, light, and darkness, and linked ascetic experience with the watchfulness of the heart. Aphrahat and Ephrem, preceding the adopted framework, established a language that endured later: Satan operates through division, imitation, and the distortion of desire, yet is vanquished by humility, fasting, prayer, and the sacramental life of the community.

Hagiography from Egypt to Gaul fulfilled a theological and social function. Stories of saints casting out demons attested to the continuity of apostolic power, Christianized space, and reinforced the authority of bishops, monks, and shrines. In the *Dialogues* of Gregory the Great or in the books of miracles of Gregory of Tours, demonic episodes are part of a world in which relics, the sign of the cross, the Eucharist, and the prayer of the saints reveal the closeness of the invisible. However, these texts must not be read as clinical protocols. Their literary genre selects events, typifies characters, and interprets local memory according to biblical patterns.

It is precisely here that tension arises between the orthodox principle and everyday religiosity. Official theology rejected magic, but the faithful sought tangible protection. Relics, oil from sanctuary lamps, cross inscriptions, and prayer formulas could be used in a spirit of faith or treated instrumentally. The Church did not respond with a simple prohibition of all materiality. It developed sacramentals, the cult of the saints, and the theology of the sign, striving to shift the desire for protection from the logic of manipulation to the logic of communion. The process was never fully completed, and therefore normative sources must be read alongside archaeology, magical papyri, and testimonies of popular practices.

1.13 Gregory the Great and the Pastoral Synthesis of the West

In Gregory the Great, three lines converge: the Augustinian metaphysics of evil, the Cassian psychology of vices, and the hagiographic culture of the sign. His *Moralia in Iob* present the Christian life as a struggle in which external trials reveal internal dispositions. Job is a figure of the tempted Church, and Leviathan is a figure of the ancient enemy. Moral exegesis asks not only what happened in the past, but how the text reveals the present movements of the soul and the strategies of pride.

In the *Dialogues*, on the other hand, holiness manifests power over demons, but miracles are not an independent measure of perfection. Gregory warns that signs can be deceptive, and the fundamental criterion is humility and love. This is particularly important because early medieval society easily linked extraordinariness with authority. True charism does not create a spectacle around the exorcist; it points to Christ and leads to the amendment of life.

The transformation of the eight thoughts into the system of capital vices gave demonology a pastoral structure. Pride as the root, followed by vainglory, envy, anger, sadness or acedia, avarice, gluttony, and lust become the object of ordered therapy. The West does not deny the personal tempter, but shifts the emphasis from identifying spirits to recognizing vices and their corresponding virtues. In this way, demonology serves the sacrament of penance, preaching, and spiritual direction.

1.14 Canon Law: From the Prohibition of Magic to the Regulation

of Religiosity

Church canons present demonology from a practical perspective. The Synod of Laodicea condemned magic, spells, astrology, and amulets among the clergy. Canon 61 of the Council in Trullo of 691/692 provided for penance for those who consulted diviners and persons promising knowledge of the future. Other norms condemned practices associated with pagan festivals, masquerading, dancing, and divination. The legislator did not create a detailed theory of demons; he protected the exclusivity of Christian trust in God and cut off the paths leading to religious syncretism.

The severity of the sanctions must be understood in a pastoral context. Penance was not merely intended to punish the transgression of an institutional boundary. It was meant to heal the habit of seeking certainty outside of Providence. Divination promises knowledge, astrology transforms creation into a system determining freedom, and an amulet can reduce a sacred sign to an automaton. In each case, the problem is a competing way of inhabiting the world: fear is to be mastered through control rather than transformed by faith.

Not all survivals of ancient culture were automatically demonized. The Church adapted the calendar, buildings, art forms, philosophical language, and local customs, carrying out a selection among them. The criterion was not origin in itself, but the current cultic and anthropological meaning. This ability to discern would prove decisive in the dispute over icons: matter can serve idolatry, but it is not by nature demonic.

1.15 John Climacus, Maximus the Confessor, and the Maturity

of Ascetic Synthesis

The *Ladder of Paradise* of seventh-century John Climacus presents the spiritual life as a gradual purification of desires and the maturation of love. Demons appear frequently in it, but victory consists above all in humility, sorrow, remembrance of death, prayer, and obedience. Especially dangerous are passions that disguise themselves as virtue: anger called zeal, vanity drawing nourishment from asceticism, and pride born after victory over other vices. The more subtle observation becomes, the less useful is the simple division between an external attack and an innocent victim.

Maximus the Confessor integrated asceticism into a grand vision of cosmic reconciliation in Christ. Passions are the misuse of natural faculties. Evil spirits suggest false ways of relating to things, but they are not the creators of human nature or the material world. The Logos, through His logoi, gives meaning to creation, and man recovers freedom when he loves things in accordance with their reference to God. The struggle against demons thus becomes a struggle for a true relationship: not an escape from matter, the body, or history, but their liberation from passionate appropriation.

The christology of Maximus, based on the teaching of the two wills of Christ, has direct consequences. Temptation is not proof that nature is evil; it reveals the possibility of using natural energy against its purpose. Asceticism does not destroy the will, but frees its movement toward the good. This is a mature

response to dualistic temptations that repeatedly returned in the Christian environment: the demonization of the body can itself become a distortion, because the body was created, assumed by the Word, and destined for resurrection.

1.16 John of Damascus: Classical Codification

John of Damascus, active in the 8th century within the environment of the Caliphate, gathered the earlier tradition in *An Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*. His chapter on the devil and demons is short, which in itself remains significant. Demonology has a definite place in the system, but does not dominate the teaching on God, creation, incarnation, sacraments, and resurrection. The devil belongs to the angelic powers, was created good, and of his own choice turned away from good. Demons do not know the future by nature; they can predict it on the basis of observation, speed, and experience, and then exploit human gullibility.

The Damascene emphasizes that evil spirits can attack, but have no power to coerce man. It is up to man to accept or reject the suggestion. Evil and impure passions are the work of their perverted mind, but human responsibility remains intact. In this statement many centuries of development converge: the anti-dualism of Irenaeus and the Cappadocians, the ascetic analysis of Evagrius, the principle of Providence present in Chrysostom and Cassian, and the Augustinian distinction between temptation and consent.

John of Damascus also consolidates the eschatological finality of the fall of the demons. Their punishment does not mean the triumph of an equivalent evil, but the revelation of God's justice toward created freedom. At the same time, he does not develop sensational descriptions of infernal administration. Classical Eastern dogmatics achieves maturity precisely through restraint: it speaks as much as is necessary to protect the belief in the goodness of creation, the reality of freedom, the action of Providence, and the victory of Christ.

1.17 Iconoclasm and the Second Council of Nicaea: Matter, Image, and the Demonic Accusation

The iconoclastic controversy was indirectly a great demonological dispute. Iconoclasts accused the cult of images of a return to idolatry, and thus to the sphere traditionally associated with demons. Defenders of icons responded that such an identification ignores the Incarnation. If the Word truly became flesh and was visible, matter can be incorporated into the witness of salvation. An icon is neither a god nor the seat of autonomous power. The veneration rendered to the image passes to the prototype; adoration in the strict sense belongs exclusively to God.

The Second Council of Nicaea in 787 distinguished *latreia* due to God from the veneration shown to icons, the cross, the Gospels, and relics. This decision established the boundary between an icon and an idol. An idol locks the gaze within a created thing and attributes divinity to it; an icon opens a relationship toward the represented person within the faith of the Church. The demonological significance of this distinction is profound. Evil spirits do not possess matter as their own domain. Body, color, wood, gesture, and space can serve holiness because creation is good and has been embraced by the Incarnation.

This did not mean the sacralization of every image nor the acceptance of the magical use of icons. The Council assumed an ecclesiastical order of veneration, the orthodoxy of the depiction, and the relationship to the prototype. Just as exorcism had previously been distinguished from incantation, so now the icon was distinguished from the fetish. In both cases, the external similarity of a gesture does not determine its nature; the content of faith, intention, and relation to communal worship are decisive.

Nicaea II closes the adopted chronological framework, yet at the same time reveals the fruit of the entire prior journey. The undivided Church passed from the apologetic unmasking of pagan gods, through monastic thought analysis, the metaphysics of the privation of good, the Christological doctrine of the redeemed will, and the canonical struggle against divination, to the affirmation of matter capable of serving the memory of the Incarnation. Demonology was incorporated into the theology of creation and could no longer justify a simple fear of the material world.

1.18 Continuity of East and West and Real Differences of Accent

Until 787, one can speak of a common foundation of East-West demonology. Both traditions professed the created nature of angels and demons, the libertarian origin of their evil, the reality of temptation, the limitation of Satan's power by Providence, Christ's victory, and the eschatological judgment. Both practiced baptismal exorcism, condemned magic and astrology, developed the cult of martyrs and saints, and interpreted the moral life as spiritual warfare. This communion is more important than subsequent terminological differences.

However, the dominants differed. The Greek East particularly developed the analysis of logismoi, the therapy of passions, apatheia understood not as indifference, but as freedom enabling love, and the cosmic vision of deification. The Latin West more strongly elaborated the categories of guilt, grace, capital vices, penance, and the social theology of the two cities. These are accents, not two contradictory systems. Cassian transmits the East to the West, Augustine is read in the Greek world indirectly, and Gregory's Dialogues are translated into Greek. Cultural boundaries are permeable.

Equally important is the distinction between elite and popular tradition. Theologians consistently limited the power of demons, yet preaching and hagiography could employ images of ubiquitous threat. The law condemned amulets, and Christians continued to wear them. The Fathers taught the responsibility of the will, and people attributed diseases, failures, and conflicts to evil spirits. The history of demonology is therefore not exclusively a history of doctrine. It is a history of negotiating the boundary between orthodoxy, pastoral practice, literary imagination, and the need for security.

1.19 Theological Evaluation: Achievements, Tensions, and

Criteria of Interpretation

The greatest achievement of the undivided Church was the subordination of demonology to christology. The center of faith is not knowledge about the adversary, but communion with God through Christ in the Holy Spirit. Evil powers appear on the periphery of the confession of faith as creatures fallen and defeated, not as an object of fascination. Proper demonology has a doxological structure: it ends with the glorification of God, rather than admiration for the power of evil.

The second achievement is the preservation of the unity of the personal and moral-psychological dimension. The Fathers do not reduce the devil to a metaphor, nor do they reduce temptation to an external invasion. Evagrius, Cassian, Augustine, Maximus, and John Climacus show that spiritual influence takes place through human faculties, the history of one's desires, and habits. Thanks to this, discernment is possible which recognizes the reality of personal evil, while at the same time not releasing man from responsibility.

The third achievement is the anti-magical nature of Christian practice. Exorcism, the sign of the cross, relics, and icons make sense within the faith of the Church; they are not a technology of dominating

the invisible. When they are detached from conversion, prayer, and sacramental communion, they can be reduced to an amulet. Ancient canons prove that the Fathers were aware of this danger, even if their communities did not always manage to overcome it.

However, it is also necessary to name the limitations of the sources. Authors of late antiquity use pre-modern knowledge about illness and psyche. Certain neurological, psychotic, dissociative, or traumatic states could have been interpreted demonologically. It would be unjustified both to recognize all ancient descriptions as clinically accurate testimonies of possession, and to state a priori that none concerned a religious experience irreducible to available diagnoses. Reliable hermeneutics respects the genre of the text, the level of knowledge of the epoch, and the theological goal of the author.

Another limitation is the rhetorical demonization of outsiders: pagans, heretics, Jews, or political opponents. The language of spiritual warfare could strengthen the identity of the community, but also strip opponents of subjectivity and justify violence. Contemporary reception must separate the theological truth about the deceptive power of evil from historical abuses in which people were identified with demons. The New Testament commands fighting not against "flesh and blood," but against powers; this principle should block the transformation of demonology into a tool of hatred.

From the tradition of the undivided Church, five criteria of correctness can be extracted, without creating a new catalog from them. First, every statement must preserve the absolute sovereignty of God and the goodness of creation. Second, it must remain consistent with the incarnation and the paschal victory of Christ. Third, it cannot abolish human freedom and responsibility. Fourth, the practice of discernment must be ecclesial, humble, and free from the magical lust for control. Fifth, the fruit should be peace, truth, conversion, and love, rather than obsessive fear, curiosity, or the building of the exorcist's authority.

1.20 Conclusion

From the formation of the canon to the Second Council of Nicaea, Christian demonology progressed from a scattered biblical language and apologetic confrontation with pagan cults toward an integrated part of the theology of creation, redemption, and spiritual life. Athanasius showed the desert as the place where the weakness of demons is revealed before the cross. Evagrius and Cassian described the mechanism of temptation in thoughts and passions. Augustine undermined pagan mediation by demons and linked their activity to pride and false worship. Pseudo-Dionysius deprived evil of ontological independence. Maximus demonstrated the healing of the will in Christ, Gregory the Great united ascetics with pastoral care, and John of Damascus codified the common teaching in the form of a restrained synthesis.

The ecumenical councils, although they rarely spoke of demons directly, established the conditions without which Christian demonology loses its balance. The full divinity and humanity of Christ, the unity of His person, the reality of two natures and two wills, and the possibility of the sanctification of matter mean that salvation encompasses the whole person and all creation. The Second Council of Nicaea brought this logic to its consequence: the image can serve the truth of the Incarnation, and matter is not the property of the evil one. In this way, the last common council of East and West closed an epoch in which the anti-dualism of the Fathers received a mature liturgical expression.

Ultimately, the maturity of the demonology of the undivided Church is measured not by the number of names of evil spirits or the elaboration of descriptions of their activity, but by the ability to limit their place. The devil is a real adversary, but not the center of theology; temptation is serious, but does not invalidate freedom; matter can be abused, but remains good; history is a field of battle, but its end belongs to God. The

demonology most faithful to tradition is therefore both sober and paschal: it acknowledges evil without fascination for it, discerns it without dualism, and opposes to it not a technique, but life in Christ.

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