

Review: JAE123

A SUMMARY CRITIQUE
A TALE OF TWO EXORCISMS

a book review of
Glimpses of the Devil:
A Psychiatrist's Personal Accounts of Possession, Exorcism, and Redemption
by M. Scott Peck
(Free Press, 2005)

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Is the Devil real? According to Christian pollster George Barna, 60 percent of American adults “contend that Satan does not exist but is merely a ‘symbol of evil.’”¹ In 2005 Barna also reported that “46% of born again Christians deny Satan’s existence.”² What is particularly disconcerting about the “born again” statistic is that the Bible clearly teaches that the Devil exists: Satan is a real, personal being capable of manifesting paranormal power, tempting believers, blinding the minds of unbelievers, and more (e.g., Job 1:6–12; 2:1–7; Zech. 3:1–2; Matt. 4:10; Luke 10:18; John 8:44; 2 Cor. 4:4; 11:14; 2 Thess. 2:9; 1 Tim. 5:15; 1 Pet. 5:8; Rev. 12:9). The Bible also clearly affirms the reality of demon possession (e.g., Matt. 4:24; 8:16, 28; 9:32; 12:22; 17:18; Mark 1:32; 5:16, 18; 7:29; Luke 4:33–35; 8:27; 11:14; Acts 19:13).

In *Glimpses of the Devil*, psychiatrist M. Scott Peck, who passed away in September 2005, turns his attention to the dark side of the spiritual realm. Peck’s main purpose is to offer scientific evidence for the existence of the Devil based on his involvement in two exorcisms more than 20 years ago. Another goal is to encourage the establishment of demonology as “a proper field of scientific inquiry” (p. 239). Does the controversial author succeed? It will be helpful to review some of Peck’s history briefly before assessing his latest work.

The Road Less Traveled. Peck is well known for his best-selling book *The Road Less Traveled* (1978). Published prior to his self-professed conversion to Christianity, Peck’s book rightly concerned discerning Christians. In one passage Peck wrote, “God wants us to become Himself (or Herself or Itself). We are growing toward godhood. God is the goal of evolution.”³

A few years later Peck claimed to have converted to Christianity. *The People of the Lie: The Hope for Healing Human Evil* (1983) represented his first postconversion work. Many Christians were encouraged by this book and its support for the reality of evil (*Glimpses of the Devil* is inspired by a chapter in *The People of the Lie*).

Despite Peck’s profession of Christianity, over the years his theology has hardly been orthodox. Some critics have accused Peck of promoting a form of monistic pantheism (i.e., all is one, all is god), minimizing the significance of sin in relation to God’s judgment, holding to a weak view of the authority of the Bible, accepting religious pluralism, rejecting the reality of hell, and other serious errors.⁴ It is with caution, then, that one should approach Peck’s works, including *Glimpses of the Devil*.

What Peck Gets Right. Peck acknowledges the reality of truth. In a largely postmodern world of moral relativism, it is encouraging to read comments such as “all truth” is “rooted in reality” (55). Peck also

labels various New Age occult practices “egregiously false” (27) and acknowledges the reality of heresy, describing it as “something that bedeviled almost all of humanity in our postmodern world” (41). When speaking to one demon possessing a woman whom he calls Jersey, Peck labels its lies as “false preaching” (49). Peck tells Jersey following her exorcism, “You chose the truth over lies” (71). Later he tells her, “God is truth, and truth is what is real” (83).

Peck also believes in the reality of evil. This is made evident throughout the book. In one passage he writes, “The demonic is evil, and if we know nothing else about Satan, demons, or evil people, it is that they lie” (100).

In addition, Peck is cautious in his diagnosis of demonic possession, indicating “genuine possession is a very rare phenomenon,” and adding, “The diagnosis...is not one to be bandied about” (xiv). This is a refreshing contrast to some Christian views that are quick to see demon possession as common and prevalent, sometimes at the expense of human culpability for evil acts.

In describing the exorcisms, Peck repeatedly references times of prayer (25, 26, 44, 45, 63, 79, etc.). He rightly communicates the importance of prayer in relation to exorcism (see Mark 9:29), although he does not specify the kinds of prayers offered.

What Peck Gets Wrong. Despite several positive aspects, the book also contains numerous areas of concern. First, Peck’s entire endeavor—attempting to prove or disprove the reality of the Devil—is based on his assumption that subjective experience trumps biblical revelation. The Bible is clear that the supernatural world exists and that it includes fallen angels. If Peck believed in the reliability and authority of Scripture, he would not need to rely on his own experience to prove the reality of the demonic. His approach is neither scientific, because it relies too heavily on subjective experience, nor biblical, because it views biblical evidence as insufficient.

Second, Peck repeatedly acknowledges his own ignorance and status as a “baby Christian” (11, 38, 60) at the time of the first exorcism even though he was in charge of the procedure. He even grants his poor theological understanding at that time (38, 41), relying on another team member to quote the Bible, communicate theological truths, and correct Peck’s theology “several times” (49, 60). In many sections he describes himself with phrases such as “with the little I knew of demonology” (21), “I knew nothing about the matter [of deliverance]” (23), “I was just as bewildered” (26), “this is a whole new world for me” (27), “we didn’t have the foggiest idea of what we were doing” (45, 46), and “we were so ignorant” (106). A true case of demonic possession is no time for a novice believer suddenly to take on a role that requires spiritual maturity.

Third, although the subtitle of the book includes the term “redemption,” Peck fails to explain adequately the concept. How is one redeemed? Is repentance required? What must one do to be saved? These are important questions, yet Peck does not address them satisfactorily.

Fourth, Peck implicitly accepts the unbiblical notion that a Christian can be demon possessed. For instance, he expresses concern that a Christian who has undergone exorcism may be “repossessed” (79, 145, 224, 226, 228). Peck offers no scriptural reason for believing this to be possible, again apparently basing his belief on his experience rather than on Scripture.⁵

There are other concerns with the book as well. Peck reveals “names” of demons such as “a demon of confusion” (51) and “demons of lust and hate” (59). Such naming conventions may in effect shift the blame for acts of sin from human beings to demonic influence. One exorcism team member was an atheist (128), yet Peck seems to have no qualms with this incongruity. Peck voices concerns regarding Jersey’s interest in psychic power, but he never specifically cautions readers about the dangers of occult involvement.

Two Equal and Opposite Errors. Harold Netland rightly has observed, “Too often Western Christians have adopted a functional naturalism that, while theoretically acknowledging the supernatural dimension, in practice ignores it.”⁶ Barna’s statistic indicating that almost half of born-again Christians deny the existence of the Devil supports Netland’s disturbing insight. Peck is to be commended for

acknowledging the reality of truth, evil, the Devil, and demonic possession, but Christians who are seeking more reliable biblical information on demonology will be better served by resources such as Hank Hanegraaff's *The Covering* (W Publishing Group, 2002) by Robert Dean, Jr., and Thomas Ice, or by reputable systematic theology books including *Christian Theology* (Baker, 1998) by Millard Erickson.

Undue interest in the demonic is dangerous, particularly if involvement in such studies begins to overshadow our focus on God. C. S. Lewis put it best: "There are two equal and opposite errors into which our race can fall about devils. One is to disbelieve in their existence. The other is to believe, and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them."⁷ Sometimes our "glimpses of the Devil" are best kept as glimpses.

— reviewed by Robert Velarde

NOTES

1. The Barna Group, "Religious Beliefs Remain Constant but Subgroups Are Quite Different", March 19, 2004, "The Barna Update," Barna.org, <http://www.barna.org/FlexPage.aspx?Page=BarnaUpdate&BarnaUpdateID=160>.
2. The Barna Group, "Beliefs: Trinity, Satan," Barna.org, <http://www.barna.org/FlexPage.aspx?Page=Topic&TopicID=6>.
3. M. Scott Peck, *The Road Less Traveled* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1978), 269.
4. For evangelical critiques of Peck see H. Wayne House, "M. Scott Peck: Traveling Down the Wrong Road," *Christian Research Journal* 18, 4 (1996), available at <http://www.equip.org/free/DP102.htm>; Howard Pepper, "A Summary Critique: The Works of M. Scott Peck," *Christian Research Journal* 10, 3 (1988), available at <http://www.equip.org/free/DP100.htm>; and H. Wayne House and Richard Abanes, *The Less Traveled Road and the Bible* (Camp Hill, PA: Horizon Books, 1995).
5. See Brent Grimsely and Elliot Miller, "Can a Christian Be 'Demonized'?" *Christian Research Journal* 16, 1 (1993), available at <http://www.equip.org/free/DD075.htm>.
6. Harold Netland, *Encountering Religious Pluralism: The Challenge to Christian Faith and Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 337.
7. C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (New York: Collier Books, 1982), 3.