

THE PROBLEM OF EVIL IN EARLY CHRISTIANITY¹

THE Problem of Evil, as we all understand it, is a Christian problem. It does not in fact arise till we accept a sovereign reality, at once absolutely good, or rather loving, and at the same time infinitely powerful, behind the diverse realities of the world. Now this supposition has never really taken root in men's minds outside Christianity. It is when this conception comes up against the unhappy facts of human experience that the problem of evil—at first a scandal—arises; 'If there is a God all-powerful and all-loving behind this world, how can he make his creatures suffer so?' But it is important to add that even inside Christianity the problem has taken two profoundly different forms. One was quietly ignored by the first Christian centuries, yet modern minds now seem to know no other and it is this that, we believe, is the problem of evil. That Christian theory of evil which seems to have finally prevailed since the XVIth century regards evil as an abstraction, as opposed to the Manichean doctrine which made of it a thing. But, in distinction to both, the older Christian idea rather denounced in it a person. I should suggest that the phrase 'problem of evil' does not in fact suit the older form of thought; it should be rather 'problem of the Evil One'; and it is quite significant to recall that the 'Libera nos a malo' of the *Our Father* which we translate now as 'deliver us from evil' used to be translated always as 'deliver us from the Evil One'. (In some European languages the struggle between the forms still continues.)²

However that may be, the original problem of the Evil One differs profoundly from the modern problem in that, so far from offering a solution in the speculative field, it demands an emergence from it. The 'Evil One' is not a thing evil in itself, but it is still less a negative concept; it is a freedom which has perverted itself, a perverted liberty. No amount of reasoning about essence can take hold of its contingent existence. But there are means to rid ourselves of it; that another existence should intervene in the field where the first is ensconced and should force it to retire. As the Gospel parable says: Let the stronger man fall upon the strong, seize his arms, reduce him to impotence and drive him out.

¹ Translated from the article in *Dieu Vivant* No. 6 by Rosalind Murray, and revised and abbreviated by the author.

² In Protestant Germany the liberal pastors will say: 'Erlöse uns von den Böse', while it is a test of orthodoxy to say: 'Erlöse uns von den Uebel'.

Let us begin with the epistles of St Paul. Two expressions conjointly express the state of the world possessed by sin; the world and men are plunged in bondage and in enmity. Already the epistles to the Romans and to the Galatians use the expressions *doulos* (Rom. 6. 16-20), *douleia* (8, 15 and 21), *douleuein* (6, 6; Gal. 4, 8 and 25) or *douloun* (Gal. 4. 3), which is the stronger. The same with *echthra* (Rom. 9, 7) and *echthre* (5, 10). We find *echthros* again in the first Epistle to the Corinthians (15, 20). To this 'enmity' we must relate the 'anger' which according to a whole succession of texts in Romans weighs upon man and on the world (Rom. 1, 18; 2, 5; 3, 5; etc.) The Epistles of the Captivity at the end of St Paul's life only accentuate this impression. The Epistle to the Philippians goes so far as to expound the incarnation of the Son of God by saying that 'He took on himself the condition of a slave' (2, 7.). Colossians and Ephesians lay more stress on the enmity (Col. 1, 21; Eph. 2, 14.) Not only do these last two Epistles speak of the anger about to fall upon the world (Col. 3, 6; Eph. 5, 6.), but Ephesians goes the length of saying that 'we were by nature children or anger' (2, 3.).

But what is this servitude that weighs upon the world and upon man? What is the enmity to which they are exposed, and of which they are, at the same time, accomplices, in such a way that the anger of God so hovers over them? St Paul does not seem anxious to tell us precisely who this Enemy is who has enslaved us. Or else he speaks of different enemies, different agents of oppression. But through his different formulae we can see that there is a unity in the malevolent system, that one unique power holds the threads of these multiple powers. In face of the royalty of the Son of God, Colossians (1, 13 and 14) sets up a mysterious *exousia tou scotous*, while Ephesians (6, 12), keeping the plural, speaks of *cosmocrates tou scotous toutou*. Let us look for a moment at the enemies who are enumerated. Those most frequently referred to seem to be mere abstractions; but the way that St Paul speaks of them as persons cannot be set aside as a mere literary form. If they are not actually themselves persons, one cannot avoid the impression that they are at any rate masks hiding a face that itself remains in darkness; a darkness from which there is no wish at all to see it emerge.

There is first of all the sinister pair in the Epistle to the Ephesians, sin and death (*hamartia* and *thanatos*). The first man let sin into the world, and sin brought death with it as an acolyte (Rom. 5, 12). Then sin reigns and death reigns also (5. 14 and 21; 6. 12). According to another image, death passes from one man to another while sin dwells in us (Rom. 5, 12; 7, 17); more exactly, men become slaves

of sin for the benefit of death (Rom. 5, 21; 6, 16). Or else, reversing the order, St Paul can say that the wages paid by sin to its slaves is death (Rom. 6, 23), just as we have ourselves been 'sold to sin' (Rom. 7, 14). Sin moreover, like death, has a whole 'service' (*diakonia*) in this world (Gal. 2, 17 and II Cor. 3, 7). Finally, to deliver us, sin itself must be condemned (Rom. 8, 2 and 3), and death, which is the last enemy, must be slain (I Cor. 15, 26).

Behind this pair of enemies rises another. Its features are less distinct, but it also is directed from above. This new pair is composed of the 'flesh' and the 'world'. The first, at any rate in the earlier Epistles, seems to preoccupy St Paul the most; the opposite will be true as we shall see for a rather later Christian writer. It is very difficult to interpret exactly the sense in which these two words, 'flesh' and 'world' are used by the first Christian writers. We are apt to see as substances what are really rather tendencies; here we are at the insertion-point of that later metaphysical dualism which, pretending to interpret St Paul, has merely travestied him. One thing proves it; it is that his condemnation of the flesh and the world is accompanied by an extraordinarily optimistic appreciation of the body (*soma*), and of the creation (*ktisis*), both of which are destined to glory (I Cor. 16, 43; Rom. 8, 21). Both are victims of a state of things against which they protest and agonise without ceasing (Rom. 8, 22). Even if they can only utter ineffable groanings these are in harmony with those of the Holy Spirit (8, 23-26). How then are we to define the 'flesh' (*sarx*)? Let us say that it is an obscure but invincible complicity that the Power of Darkness finds in us, inherited in fact with our earthly nature and bound up with its present state. The material, instrumental elements in our complex being, instead of being at the service of our mind (*nous*)—itself in complete accord with the inspirations of the Spirit of God—is dominated by an outside power. And this power, thanks to its intermediary, acts not only on us but in us, introducing its enmity towards God into the very sources of our action. It is thus that St Paul can say that the 'mentality' of the flesh or its purpose and the dispositions for realising it (*to phronema tes sarko*) is death. This *phronema* is then the enemy of God in such a way that those who live 'according to the flesh' cannot please God (Rom. 8, 6-8). There is in fact a positive design or purpose which the flesh seems to bear inscribed within it (Rom. 13, 14), there is a desire of the flesh (5, 16), it has its wishes, and finally, its works are accomplished by men. In one passage St Paul even uses the paradoxical expression *nous tes sarkos* (Col. 2, 18). Elsewhere, he speaks of the 'children of the flesh' (Rom. 9, 8). These are the expressions which carry the idea

of personification furthest (especially the last, as opposed to the 'children of promise'), but they should not be over-pressed.

The *cosmos*, when it is taken in the same unfavourable sense as is usual in regard to the flesh, designates merely the actual situation in which created reality now is, rather than that reality in itself. As 'flesh', it was considered as in ourselves, so in 'world' it is envisaged as round about us. It is specially in 1 Corinthians that this sense is most frequent. There emerges from it the impression of a general organisation of the forces of evil, superimposed on, and more or less identified with, the organisation of the universe—which is what the word '*cosmos*' properly means. It is in this sense that he speaks of 'the wisdom of this world', folly in God's eyes (1 Cor. 3, 19), of the judgment which 'the world' must undergo (6, 2), and in which we are to avoid being involved.

With the word *cosmos* we must put the word *aion*, especially the expression *aion houtos* as opposed to *aion mellon* (cf. Gal. 14). This term is always used by St Paul in the sense of the order of the present world, and always in an unfavourable sense. We are not to conform to it (Rom. 12, 2); its wisdom is vain (1 Cor. 2, 6-8; 3, 18). Christ has been given in order to snatch us from it (Gal. 1, 4), whereas, up till now we have walked, says St Paul, uniting the two terms in an untranslatable formula: *Kata ton aiona tou cosmou toutou* (Eph. 2, 2). One might put it that the 'world' and the 'flesh' are instruments used by the power (or powers) of darkness revealed to us in sin and death. In this respect, the second pair seem, as we have noted, less personal than the first. Let go by the invisible hands that govern them, 'world' and 'flesh' would become neutral again.

But who are, ultimately, these enigmatic, unknown beings who govern the *aion houtos*, who inhabit the 'flesh' and the 'world'? The Epistles of the Captivity seem to offer a clearer picture. The Epistle to the Ephesians (6, 12) speaks of *cosmocrates tou scotous toutou* (we have already quoted this strange expression). The same Epistle declares that: 'Our conflict is not with flesh and blood (the Biblical expression for humanity) but with the Principalities and Powers', the cosmic rulers of the present darkness, the evil spiritual existences, who are in the higher heavens (*ibid.*)³ While Colossians presents the victory of Christ as a formal triumph over these Principalities and Powers, a triumph which has despoiled them (Col. 2, 4-5). On the other hand, this later Epistle seems to identify them with those altogether mysterious beings which it calls *ta stoikeia tou cosmou* (8-20), in regard to which we are dead with Christ. Galatians had

³ *Translator's note.*—The quotations are translated from Père Bouyer's French version from the Greek, which differs in some cases from the Westminster text.

already referred to them; it was to these 'elements' that we were subjected when we were 'under the law', and it is to these 'weak and poor elements' that we return by taking up again the yoke of the law from which Christ has freed us. (Gal. 4, 3-9). Here we seem to take hold of solid structure. For the legal observances dealt with in this passage are those of the days and months, seasons and years, while the servitude in question a few lines earlier concerns beings who are not gods by nature and yet are treated as such (8-10). Either all this means nothing, or it refers to a cult of the Astral Powers (the Powers who rule the course of the seasons). That these should be put in conjunction with the law may seem at first surprising, but it is explained by two comparisons. We must first consider that Jewish belief, accepted by the authors of the Acts (7; 38, 53) and Epistle to the Hebrews (2, 2), according to which the Angels acted as intermediaries in giving the law to Moses on Sinai; St Paul explicitly assumes it in Galatians when he says that the law has been established by Angels. We must also consider the elusive reflection, again in the Epistle to the Hebrews (2, 5) that 'It is not to the Angels that he has entrusted the order to come', which implies that the present order has been entrusted to them.

We are now in possession of the whole sequence. St Paul envisages the actual world as mysteriously dependent upon the Angels from the beginning and to such an extent that even in the revelation of the law they have mediated between God and man. Now it seems that some at least of these Angels must have separated themselves from God. In any case they are now openly in opposition, forming a screen between him and us, fostering in us the illusion that they are themselves the ultimate reality (and therefore divine) on which the world depends, these rulers of the elements and the stars keep us in servitude. By their trickery, by the false wisdom which they exercise on their sensible appetites, they have succeeded (to our great misfortune) in drawing us with them in their enmity. And so the Pauline circle seems completed.

Now certain strange expressions in the earlier Epistles become clear. The Princes of the *aion houtos*, of whom it is said in 1 Corinthians (2, 6-8) that they would not have crucified the Lord of Glory if they had realised the folly, for them catastrophic, of their act. The 'spirit of this world' which is put in opposition to the 'spirit of God', and cannot be less personal (id. 12); finally and above all this quite extraordinary formula of 2nd Corinthians (4, 4): 'The God of this world has blinded the thoughts of the heathen'. In the context supplied by Galatians, Colossians and Ephesians the curious expression 'God of this world' takes on a sense of terrifying realism. At the

same time there can be no doubt that this 'god' is one with the 'devil' of Ephesians 4, 27, and the envious temptor Satan of 1 Thessalonians 2, 18. (Cf. 2 Thess. 2, 9; Rom. 16, 20; 1 Cor. 5, 5; 8, 5; 2 Cor. 2, 2; 11, 24; 12, 7). Although St Paul, as we have already remarked, lays more stress on the multiple evil powers that surround us, it is indisputable that for him they are but parts in a co-ordinated system and that this unity leads us back in the end to the dark central point of a malevolent personality. The Devil appears in a disturbing parallel with God. In opposition to the luminous centre round which the creation of the 'children of light' is gravitating, we have a shadowy counter-orbit around which an obscure creation of darkness is oriented—as it were super-imposed upon the other.

The presence of this dualism underlying all St Paul's thought cannot be seriously questioned; it is really surprising that so many modern studies have managed to pass it by without, apparently, having noticed it. Yet it is the pattern of his whole conception of Redemption; for him it comes precisely as the solution, not conceptual but real, of the problem of the Evil One. But before going further, we must understand the true nature of this dualism; and this will oblige us, not indeed to correct a single feature in the picture we have sketched, but rather to add some others, in depth, which will strangely reinforce its complexity.

One point we must make first: In these texts from the Epistles of the Captivity, on the 'Powers', there is an undeniable wavering. It is not exactly that we cannot tell how far St Paul himself accepts the categories and hierarchies in which the Judaizing Gnostics he is opposing delighted, but rather that he uses their different nomenclatures pell-mell, without apparently troubling much about them. This has enabled exegetes to dispose of those embarrassing texts by saying that he accepted nothing at all from the elaborations of his opponents. The truth is that he recklessly upsets the outlines of that mysterious universe the map of which is tirelessly re-drawn by every Gnostic sect. But that these Powers, whatever they are, exist for him, and possess real power, of that there can be no doubt at all, since the whole reality of the work of Christ has been to dispossess them.

To say, as has been said, that there is nothing there but an imaginary picture of what takes place within the spirit of man, delivered from superstition by Christian doctrine, is not exegesis but mere dilution. With such methods, the 'rationalism' of certain moderns more than rivals in its absurdities the most fantastic 'spiritual exegesis'. But once more the real difficulty does not lie there; it is rather that St Paul in describing the victory of Christ overcoming

the Powers seems to speak of what we call 'good angels' at the same time as the 'bad angels', without our being able to distinguish clearly what applies to one from what applies to both.

There have been attempts to explain this by the theory that all the Powers are at bottom a-moral, neither good nor bad, like many of the 'daimons' of Hellenistic religion. This is an arbitrary simplification; it attributes to St Paul a conception which is not found anywhere else in Christian thought and it is, to say the least, very difficult to suppose that if such a conception had been adopted by the Apostle it should immediately afterwards disappear, leaving no trace! But this is not the most serious objection. There are texts in which St Paul envisages undeniably evil powers (for example those in which he speaks of the Devil, or Satan), and others in which he is considering thoroughly good powers, as when he is speaking to the Thessalonians of the angels who will accompany the Lord Jesus in his final revelation, or to the Corinthians of an 'angel of light', specifically to oppose it with Satan. (2 Thess. 1, 7; 2 Cor. 9, 14). If we were to admit the hypothesis under discussion we should have to suppose that these last texts refer to yet a third category. This cannot be maintained; they obviously embrace the entire system of higher, but infra-divine powers. To this apparent indecision in which St Paul seems to confuse the fate and the activity of the good and bad angels, we must add another, and a still more extraordinary incoherence. It is that in other places he seems to give to the bad angels access to God! We may remember the curious imagery of the Prologue and Epilogue of the Book of Job, in which Satan is presented as an angel who has still a right of entry to the divine Court, where the Lord Elohim deigns to dispute with him. Something of this conception remains for St Paul.

In the intimate confession of 2 Corinthians (12, 7) it would seem that to him too God has sent, if not Satan, at least an 'angel of Satan' to buffet him. And in 1 Corinthians the same Satan figures as a kind of executor of the 'high works' to which people are handed over, not only when they are damned, but what is more curious, in order to give them salutary punishment; 'for the destruction of the flesh, so that the *pneuma* may be saved in the day of the Lord' (1 Cor. 5, 2). The strangeness goes yet a stage further; which brings it to the verge of paradox. But it is perhaps here that the solution will be disclosed in a new lengthening of perspective which will give a new depth to all our vision. We tried just now to enumerate the enemies who were holding us in militant bondage, even in spite of ourselves, against God, but we did not name them all. There is still one that we barely touched on: it is anger. 1 Thessalonians (1, 10)

says that 'Jesus has delivered us from the anger to come' (Romans (5, 9) that 'We shall be saved by him from the anger'. Ephesians (5, 6; 2, 3), also speaking of the 'anger to come', says that 'we were by nature children of anger'. And this anger the same Epistle calls explicitly 'the anger of God'. And Romans (1, 18) says that 'the anger of God is revealed against all impiety and injustice'. It seems then that God himself has taken his place among the enemies of man!'

It is true that in the case of anger, if there were nothing else, we could still escape from the dilemma by the usual subterfuge of 'imaginary expressions', 'oratorical phrases', etc., but there is a final enemy at whose appearance such camouflage crumbles; this is the Law of God. For it cannot be doubted that St Paul especially, though not only, in Romans presents the divine Law as the great enemy of man, as the enemy 'par excellence' which Christ has vanquished. He is well aware how this idea must shock the most firmly rooted conceptions of his hearers and he tries to forestall their objections. Of course, he says in the end, 'the Law is holy, the commandments are holy, just, and good' (Rom. 7, 12), but he does not retract anything of what he has already said. For instance: 'The Law accomplishes anger; whereas where there is no law, there is no transgression either'. (Rom. 4, 15). 'The Law intervened in such a way that abuse might abound' (5, 21), 'for without the Law, sin is dead; as for me, I lived for a time without the Law, but the commandment having come, sin took new life, came to life again, and I am dead'. (7, 8). 'You on the contrary', he says to the Christians, 'you are dead to the Law; the passions of sin exercised themselves by the Law, but now, so far as the Law is concerned, we do not exist any more'. (7, 4-6). The Epistle to the Galatians, for its part, having affirmed at length the impotence of the Law, that infirmity mentioned in Romans 7, 3 (cf. the beginning of Galatians 3), concludes: 'that Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the Law', and that 'if you are led by the Spirit, you are no longer under the Law'. (Gal. 5, 18). Ephesians (2, 15) adds the final word: 'In his own flesh he has reduced to nothing the Law made of regulations and decisions—*ton nomon ton entoton en dogmasin*. Let us go through these disconcerting assertions: It would seem that in the triumph of Christ the good angels are, in certain respects, confounded and dispossessed with the bad; inversely, in the decaying order which subsists until the *Parousia*, side by side with that instituted by Christ, the Devil sometimes figures as God's agent. Finally, behind his own enmity is ranged that of the divine anger, or rather that of the divine Law, and Christ seems to deliver us from these no less than from Satanic malice. How are we to resolve these anomalies?

Firstly, they substitute what I would call an *historical dualism* for the *metaphysical dualism* that one might be tempted to construct behind St Paul's system. There are two successive orders; the first was established on the subordination of the physical world to the spiritual Powers created by God as good, and more especially to their chief, 'the prince of this world'. This first order has come to grief through the treachery of its chief, drawing after him (in his fall) a considerable proportion of the hierarchy of which he was the head. Yet it subsists. This subsistence is provisional, but so long as it lasts, the 'elements of this world', the 'princes of this world' retain both their original function in it (however they may misuse it) and also their divinely appointed authority. It is true that, on the one hand, they abuse it, in so far as they deflect towards themselves the worship of the inferior creatures, a worship of which they ought to be merely ministers on God's behalf; but it is no less true, on the other hand, that they are themselves deceived, and that at the height of their malice, they do still, although unknowingly, serve the divine purpose. This paradoxical situation is revealed in the blindness of the 'princes of this world' who crucified the Lord of Glory, but would no doubt have taken great care not to, if they had realised what they were doing (1 Cor. 2, 8). In fact, by carrying to the highest pitch their perversion of the order entrusted to them, they broke the spring. Henceforward another order can take its place in which it is the new humanity, the humanity of Christ, God and man both together, which reigns in God's name.

In this perspective, everything is explained. The good angels suffer the consequences of the defection and eviction of Satan, not personally, but as members of a spiritual organism, fallen in its head and consequently in its whole structure. They will certainly take part in the new order, will even have a place of honour in it, but they will no longer be princes. They will enter in it as the auxiliaries of a new Prince, who is the last Adam, the divine Man. In this sense they will find themselves subordinated to the world which up till now they ruled, since the new humanity, made one with Christ its head, in a unity to which they cannot aspire, will participate in his sovereignty.

It is on this ground that St Paul can say: 'Do you not know that we shall judge the Angels?' (1 Cor. 6, 3); and it is exactly the situation he describes in the Epistle to the Galatians (3, 23-4): 'We have been under the Law and therefore under the Angels, as an heir is under his tutor; so long as the heir is a minor, the tutor is his master, but when the former attains his majority, the latter becomes once more what he always was in reality, a simple servant—let us

utter the word—a slave, in the house of his master, where the heir is lord by hereditary right. On the other hand, so long as the final order of Christ has not wholly supplanted its predecessor, this will persist with its own network of relations. Satan remains Prince of this world and he is, in his very malice, the agent of the justiciary anger by which God reaches through him all the others who have joined with him in his revolt. It remains that this anger will accomplish the purpose of redemptive love. For the Devil, in trying to turn it against the divine champion, will exhaust the power that has been still left to him; proved by him on Christ, the divine anger reveals the infinite love concealed within it. Or should we say more simply that refracted into anger by sin, this love becomes itself again the moment that it touches the 'Holy and Just One' whom God has made sin for our sakes that we may become 'justice' in him? (2 Cor. 5, 21). Thus Satan consummates his own disaster, not only by damning with himself all those who side finally with him in his revolt, but that in crucifying Christ, the Head and Body, he has torn up the contract according to which the world belonged to him. (Col. 2, 14). This contract was nothing but the Law, good in so far as it expressed the divine will for justice which is, as it were, the framework of the world, yet enemy to man in so far as it involves him in the punishment of Satan's punishment, since he has consented to his rebellion. It is effaced by Christ on the Cross because on the Cross the absurdity into which the first order has fallen through its perversion is revealed. This perversion has in fact reached its climax by contact with the supreme initiative of divine love.

We see thus that the diabolic tendency is always inhibition. It holds on to a first stage in the divine action and refuses to follow its developments; it holds on to what it has; but it is overwhelmed and as it were drowned in the rising tide of love. The second chapter of Philippians suggests this contrast between the two successive princes of the world; the one who tried to snatch equality with God as his prey, and was overthrown; and the other who annihilated himself in the generosity of his love and who has been raised above all created power.

This kind of dualism, then, so far from diminishing God, so far from leaving him only one half of the universe, re-ascends up to God by its two branches. God is not divided, but he wishes for his creatures both freedom and that free response to the love that creates it which is faith in the Pauline sense. The first gift is the condition of the second, but if we stop short there, at freedom for its own sake, it becomes a screen against creative love, and there is conflict. But the possibility of this conflict now appears as a necessary condition for

that higher unity towards which the very love that creates freedom is ending.

But to say this is to touch on questions which are no longer St Paul's. It is time to pass on to the Synoptic Gospels.

(To be concluded)

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WIDOWS OF GOD

BY the 'Widows of God' I mean those people whose marriages have gone wrong and who cannot marry again because of the validity of their first marriage and the fact that the partner of it is still living. If Newman could call his celibacy widowhood the state of these people, at least of those in good will, doubly deserves the name. It suggests the desolation of their state, both men and women, and it is by an act of God, by the eternal law of one man one woman, that they are condemned, or called, to celibacy.

As Catholics marry non-Catholics who see no wrong in divorce, and as Catholics themselves adopt the standards around them, and as wars and migration increasingly interfere with marital fidelity, there is a growing percentage of Catholics in this position. It would be interesting to get the statistics of parish priests on it. But whether it is ten per cent or twenty it represents a very great pastoral problem in the Church. And one must not forget the growing number of those outside who might become Catholics were it not for this impediment, that they have a broken marriage somewhere in their history and know they could not become Catholics and remain with the partner they now have. Most priests have at one time or another come across such cases where they would be hesitant to encourage a potential convert and think 'non sunt inquietandi'.

A large number of people in this position were innocent of the family break-up that led to their present state, as far as human judgment can see. A large number are innocent at least by repentance, and now wish to redress any wrong they did and live a good Christian life. But it is very often impossible to restore the unity that has been broken. And at the same time a conspiracy of the prophets of modernism, doctors, psychologists, journalists and social scientists, assisted by most of our drama and fiction, is bent on proving the impossibility of continence, and the irresistibility of the ring of the bell known as falling in love. The latter process is shown as something independent of all ordinary human self-control, even portrayed in some 'christian' literature as if it were some