

John Milton's Lucifer: The Reason People Like Him

In an article for *The Atlantic* on March 16, Edward Simon [endeavors](#) to get to grips with the fascination that Americans feel for the character of Lucifer in John Milton's epic poem, *Paradise Lost*. In a well-written and well-reasoned article, Simon sees aspects of Milton's Satan in the characterization of thoroughly modern anti-heroes in contemporary TV dramas, especially *The Sopranos*, *Mad Men* and *Breaking Bad*, all of which are seen to reflect in some manner the American dream. This morbid fascination with Milton's archetypal anti-hero prompts Simon to ask a provocative question: What's so "American" about John Milton's Lucifer?

Since Simon does such a great job of answering this question himself, we'll leave his well-woven argument to speak for itself. There is, however, another provocative question that must be asked if we are to avoid misunderstanding and misconstruing Milton's Satan. Regardless of how "American" he is, we need to ask how Christian he is.

At the heart of such a question is a paradox. From an orthodox Christian perspective, the real Satan is, at one and the same time, a Christian and an anti-Christian. He is a Christian in the sense that he knows that Christ is the Incarnate Son of God; he is an anti-Christian because he hates the Son as he hates the Father. He knows the Trinitarian God and he hates him. He is not an unbeliever. He is a rebel who is at war with the reality in which he has no choice but to believe.

The demons in the Gospel do not deny the authority of Christ; they defy him, as far as they are able, and despise him, but they do not and cannot deny him. We see this Christian/anti-Christian paradox in the manner in which Dracula, in the old Hammer horror movies, recoils in horror from the sight of a

crucifix. He hates the symbol of the power of Christ but he cannot help but retreat from it because the power he despises is real.

The problem with Milton's Lucifer is that he is not synonymous with the Lucifer of the Bible or the Lucifer of Christian tradition. He is a figment of Milton's heterodox imagination. Milton's God is not the Trinitarian God of the Christians but a Unitarian God, who creates Lucifer and the other angelic beings before he creates his Son, the latter of whom enters the scene as a sort of afterthought. Lucifer is, therefore, rebelling against a new creature, the Son, seeing him as a usurper. Considering Milton's theological break with orthodoxy, his denial of the Trinity and, in consequence, his denial of the Incarnation also, it is grievously erroneous to see *Paradise Lost* as a Christian work. Except for its biblical trappings, it is no more Christian than the earlier epics of Homer and Virgil, and perhaps less so.

William Blake might have been right when he said of Milton that he was "of the devil's party without knowing it". Certainly Milton was doing the real devil a service in inventing a mythical devil who has proved so attractive. Milton's Lucifer has what he perceives to be a just grievance and rebels against the perceived injustice with great courage. On the other hand, it is hard to feel much sympathy with Milton's God who is not loved because he is not loveable. He is an omnipotent Puritan prig who is right because of his might. A Pharisee himself, he might well have been the sort of God whom the Pharisees worshipped but he has little in common with the God of the Christians. Meanwhile, Milton's Son is not worshipped because he is not God. Having nothing in common with Jesus, he is depicted by Milton as a warrior who boasts of his martial prowess. Perhaps nobody in history has done more to evoke sympathy for the devil than John Milton, even though he would no doubt have been appalled at this dark side of his legacy.

In answer to the original provocative question, Milton's Lucifer is not Christian. He is no more Christian than the poet who gave him life. In consequence, those who feel that they have sympathy for the Miltonian devil are not sympathizing with the real Satan, any more than they are rebelling against the real Christ.

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