

# The devil's in the details: Do we still need Satan?



## Highland Views

Chris Highland  
Guest columnist

During summer hot spells, my mother used to say it's "hotter than the hubs of Hades." Heat can be hellish. So can our beliefs.

When you imagine "the Face of Evil" I would guess it has a human face. Does a world leader appear? Does your mind conjure up a picture of something in a film or book, or a frightening creature described in a sermon or a painting on a Sunday School wall?

"Evil" is (lazy) shorthand for the worst actions of people. When I was a chaplain, entering seven separate units

of a county jail every week for 10 years, I met with men and women who were called "evil" or "monsters" out in the public or in newspapers. I saw them as deeply flawed human beings, not evil or monstrous.

As for the monstrosity some traditions call "Satan," I think we're merely putting a face and a name on something or someone we fear or fail to understand. A natural phobia of the unknown morphs into a belief in something beyond the human, something super-natural. People think they know what the Bible teaches about this character, but I wonder. "In Hebrew, the term Satan is usually translated as 'opponent' or 'adversary,' often understood to represent the sinful impulse or, more generally, the forces that prevent human beings from submitting to divine will" ([www.myjewishlearning.com](http://www.myjewishlearning.com)). This

personification (anthropomorphic evil) is opposed to God's way, yet needs divine permission to do anything to anyone. Strange as that is, religions often provide a tempting alternative to faithfulness, otherwise there would be nothing to compare to – or challenge – the good and righteous path.

Christian tradition has run wild with the concept, creating a kind of sinister anti-superhero called the devil (diabolos in Greek). The legendary tale of "Lucifer" who "fell from heaven" is one odd story squeezed from an ancient text (Isaiah) that has nothing to do with our modern superstitions of Satan. For those of us raised in Sunday School we remember the terrible tale of Job (not the best bedtime story). God allows a shadowy fellow named "the satan" to do all kinds of awful things to test the faith of an innocent man – really quite cruel

and unfair. But who was this persecutor sent by God? A meanspirited prosecutor who accused Job and then was given permission from the Judge to do anything but kill him. This raises a whole courtroom full of ethical and theological questions. What kind of judge – or god – would allow such a tortuous test?

"The Jewish mystical tradition has much to say about Satan ... and the demonic realm [but] on the whole, Satan occupies a far more prominent place in Christian theology than in traditional rabbinic sources" ([www.myjewishlearning.com](http://www.myjewishlearning.com)). Satan tempting Jesus in the desert, falling out of heaven in defeat (Luke 10; John 12) and prowling around like a roaring lion (First Peter 5) – these are images burned into the minds of orthodox and folk traditions

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that felt the need to have a mythological nemesis. “Some of these Christian ideas are echoed in Jewish tradition, but some also point to fundamental differences – most notably perhaps the idea that, in the Hebrew Bible at least, Satan is ultimately subordinate to God, carrying out his purpose on earth. Or that he isn’t real at all, but is merely a metaphor for sinful impulses” ([www.myjewishlearning.com](http://www.myjewishlearning.com)).

The plea in the Lord’s Prayer, “Lead us not into temptation,” relates to this ancient idea that the gods need an opponent, so a satan figure is created to tempt and test humans so they will cling to a God who will “deliver us from evil.” Early Christians believed they were in the center of a cosmic war, persecuted by malevolent forces.

Most of our scary images and feelings about Satan and the Devil come not from the Bible but from our most fantastical imaginations. As children we learn to fear the “Dark Lord” Vader

in Star Wars, Lord Voldemort in Harry Potter, Sauron in Lord of the Rings – all sorts of nasty evildoers and shadowy creatures. The forces of Good always win the day and we’re relieved – at least until the next fantasy film.

A contemporary example of the creative use of the adversarial nature of the Satan image is the work of The Satanic Temple, whose seven “Fundamental Tenets” emphasize compassion, justice, respect for personal freedoms, science and wisdom, because they believe “Satan is a symbol of the Eternal Rebel in opposition to arbitrary authority.”

We may claim “the devil made me do it” or enjoy “playing devil’s advocate” with a “devil-may-care” attitude, but opposing views can keep us honest. And even roaring lions are not evil.

*Chris Highland served as a minister and chaplain for many years. He is a teacher, writer and humanist celebrant. Chris and his wife, the Rev. Carol Hovis, live in Asheville. His latest books are “Friendly Freethinker,” “Broken Bridges” and “A Freethinker’s Gospel.” Learn more at [chighland.com](http://chighland.com).*