



# Mephistopheles: The Devil in the Modern World

*Jeffrey Burton Russell*

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## **Mephistopheles: The Devil in the Modern World** Jeffrey Burton Russell

*Mephistopheles* is the fourth and final volume of a critically acclaimed history of the concept of the Devil. The series constitutes the most complete historical study ever made of the figure that has been called the second most famous personage in Christianity.

In his first three volumes Jeffrey Burton Russell brought the history of Christian diabolology to the end of the Middle Ages, showing the development of a degree of consensus, even in detail, on the concept of the Devil. *Mephistopheles* continues the story from the Reformation to the present, tracing the fragmentation of the tradition. Using examples from theology, philosophy, art, literature, and popular culture, he describes the great changes effected in our idea of the Devil by the intellectual and cultural developments of modern times.

Emphasizing key figures and movements, Russell covers the apogee of the witch craze in the Renaissance and Reformation, the effects of the Enlightenment's rationalist philosophy, the Romantic image of Satan, and the cynical or satirical literary treatments of the Devil in the late nineteenth century. He concludes that although today the Devil may seem an outworn metaphor, the very real horrors of the twentieth century suggest the continuing need for some vital symbol of radical evil.

A work of great insight and learning, *Mephistopheles* deepens our understanding of the ways in which people in Western societies have dealt with the problem of evil.

## **Mephistopheles: The Devil in the Modern World Details**

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## From Reader Review Mephistopheles: The Devil in the Modern World for online ebook

### Steve Wiggins says

I have to admit being in awe over Jeffrey Burton Russell's accomplishments. *Mephistopheles* is his fourth book about the characterization of evil throughout history. In the first of these books, *The Devil*, he describes himself as an historian of ideas. That description takes him through some fascinating places. Russell also admits that he believes in some kind of personified evil, and with his extremely lucid thinking he backs the idea up over these four volumes. (The second and third, *Satan* and *Lucifer*, respectively deal with time frames up to the Middle Ages; all four are discussed on my blog, the most recent here: *Sects and Violence in the Ancient World*.) *Mephistopheles* deals with the Devil from the Reformation until the late 20th century.

*Burton understands and describes theology well. Theology isn't everyone's cup of tea, of course. This particular volume has plenty that's not theology since the character of evil was also addressed in literature and film in the modern period. Russell gives not only a history of the character of Mephistopheles, but also strong justification for keeping materialism in its place. A logical and well-informed thinker, he draws the reader into areas they might not want to go with extended discussions of the main works—including those of some unexpected writers—of authors who deal with the question of good and evil. Throughout it all, he keeps open the possibility that evil is real.*

*Written during the 1980s, this book contains the palpable terror of nuclear war. Over the decades we've perhaps become too comfortable with the idea of mutually assured destruction. Nevertheless, Russell's final chapter is chilling. Given how things have progressed since the 1980s—I remember well the terror of the Reagan years when war with Russia seemed inevitable—I can't help but wonder if Russell is correct. When unstable, hate-driven men are given access to nuclear codes we have to wonder if there will be anyone left to write a post-script to this book. Many would benefit from reading this book, even if they have no interest in who the Devil might be. It is a powerful statement that includes genuine insights, whether the reader agrees or not.*

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### Roderick Brunt says

A fast read!

Though embellished with some really fine old engravings, I'm unable to commend the author on a serious effort in regard to its primary subject.

*Mephistopheles: The Devil in the Modern World*; the title does suggest the contents to be fiction oriented and alas, to this end it fulfills its goal. The book is well written, the research conducted was comprehensive and thorough – a bit too abstract in places; and yet with all due respect, how could it not be?

In the end and my opinion – this not a historical reference volume, though a fascinating ramble nonetheless. By the way, if you're uncertain on this one, study the exhaustive bibliography, which is a fine indication as to the basic ideology of the work.

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### Joseph F. says

The fourth and final book on the conceptual history of the Devil by Russell. Here we start with the

reformation, and move through enlightenment philosophy. This is the only volume that deals with a psychological analysis of the Devil. Not a big surprise since there really was little science of the mind in the middle ages. He mainly covers Freud and Jung. It is then that the book really takes off into the realms of literature. There is so much fiction in this volume that it reads a bit like a Who's Who of European and American modern literature. Let's face it, so much ink had been spilled concerning Satan in the eyes of theologians and philosophers that they start sounding a bit redundant. It took Milton, the romantics, the Shelleys, the decadents, and others to begin seeing Satan in an original light. The Devil became less plainly evil, but now had some interesting features.

I also found this to be the most eerie and haunting volume of the four. Maybe because it most resonated with the modern world and the present evils we now face. However, I'm still not convinced of the existence of an actual Devil, nor God for that matter. The author hints that he does. He tentatively explains that radical evil, such as an Auschwitz, has a transcendent quality. (pgs. 298-299).

Huh?

We find new ways to kill many more people than before and somehow this means that the evil comes from without? I'm not convinced.

Although Russell is objective with all views presented I feel that he is not a big fan of scientism and materialism. And the only time I felt a real disdain is when he mentioned briefly the existence of modern Satanists such as LaVey's group, or the Church of Set. I guess he's not a fan.

The book ends with the author waxing a bit too poetic when he tries to be optimistic about the future as he gazes up at the stars and states that love is what makes the sun and stars move.

Sorry, but gravity does that. I know I'm being pedantic, but maybe I'm a bit like those bloodless, rational intellectuals that Flannery O'Connor criticizes in her books. (This is one of the authors Russell talks about, one I'm sure I will not be taking up!)

But apart from my own views, this is a fascinating book worthy of another 5 star rating; just like the previous 3. It is chock full of history, philosophy, theology, psychology and literature. And all four books gave me much to contemplate.

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## **Richard Anderson says**

End of a mighty tetralogy. Well worth it.

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## **John David says**

To be frank, I haven't read any of the previous three of Jeffery Burton Russell's books which together comprise a "history of the Devil" from antiquity through the twentieth century. I started at the end, because the only other volume I own, the third in the series, is packed away in a box somewhere and it didn't have the chance to catch my eye. The reason why series like these attract me so much is beyond me – maybe I'm just drawn to big, unwieldy reading projects. However, judging from the last volume alone, this seems to be at a superficial treatment, with little to offer someone already interested in the history of religious ideas.

This volume picks up with the beginning of the Reformation, whose emphasis on sola fide revitalized older medieval ideas of diabolology. Some interesting, and scary, fragments of Martin Luther's life are retold, including the tidbit that one of his most important biographers, Heiko Oberman, described Luther's whole existence as a "war with Satan." He also uses this section of the book to look at the diabolology of John Calvin and sixteenth-century mystic-contemplatives St. John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila.

With the appearance of the Enlightenment, increasing popularity of empiricism, rationalism, and use of the

scientific method, people started to take diabolology – or at least the possible existence of the Devil – much less seriously (which is hardly a surprise). In this section of the book, Chapter III, the reader gets a plodding, thirty page-long piece of exegesis on Milton’s “Paradise Lost,” which while it is a poem largely about the Devil, seems to consist of too much summary and too much ham-handed literary analysis. Its appearance is abrupt and completely out of place in an otherwise smooth (at least until that this point) history of ideas.

When Russell begins to talk about the Enlightenment and some of its most prominent thinkers, he weirdly and biliously starts tossing around pejoratives, like “propagandist.” He doesn’t seem to except the modern biological consensus position on evolution, stating “new reflections on randomness and time suggest that even in billions of years the information of intelligent life by random processes is virtually impossible,” though he intelligently stops short of trying to argue that a supernaturally intelligent being is responsible for the diversity of life on Earth (p. 151).

He has a particular dislike for Hume, especially his argument against miracles, which Russell again endlessly belabors, attempts to rebut, and fails. He hilariously claims that de Sade is the “logical conclusion of atheism” – an interesting admission concerning an author whose work perhaps more than any other in the eighteenth century confirms the existence of evil in the world. He reads de Sade as an inveterate misanthrope and sexual deviant (which is much too easy) instead of as an ironist who is actually trying to make cogent points about the very real existence of good and evil in society. None of this bodes well for his reading of Goethe’s “Faust” – which is much shorter than his reading of Milton, though just as uninteresting.

The overall tone of this book comes across as a later-day apology for religious ideas which don’t really jibe with modernity, which probably explains his hostility to several facets of it. Russell’s obvious trouble reconciling himself to commonly accepted scientific positions (like evolution), the long, meandering renditions of literary works (of which I only mentioned two, but there are several more of less important writers), and his obvious disdain for the Enlightenment make for a perfect storm which make this book both sad and funny to read. Russell’s specialization is the medieval time period, so maybe I just caught him trying to tie up loose ends in a historical period with which he has little familiarity. This can be forgiven. As soon as third volume finds its way out of a box and onto a bookshelf, I might pick it up.

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## **Burcu says**

Kitabın degerlendirmesi icin, bkz.  
<https://wanderlustpress.net/2015/06/0...>

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## **Äsruþr Cyneapsson says**

Russell concludes his study into the conceptual history of the Devil in fine form. The exegesis of Milton's 'Paradise Lost' and Goethe's 'Faust' are invaluable. Russell has never concealed his bias throughout the series, yet it does here cause him to falter in his analysis of contemporary Satanism. His dismissal of the Temple of Set is ineffective due to Russell's bias leading him to rely upon subjective opinion, as opposed to the depth of research and analysis he devotes elsewhere. The initial 80% of this final entry in the series is thus excellent. The final chapters are less worthy of your time.

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## Eric\_W says

Jeffrey Burton Russell has, one might say, specialized in the devil. In a series of volumes he has traced the evolution of Satan and evil as perceived in religion, literature and philosophy since the beginning of recorded time. *Mephistopheles: The Devil in the Modern World* traces modern man's view of the devil beginning with the 16th century to the present.

We are surrounded by different "truth systems." What may be true for science may have different validity in another truth system, e.g. art or history. Science says little about beauty, for example. A tree is a plant, but it may also be a symbol in art, a totem in religion, or the tree on which John Smith was hanged. All are equally true. So it is with the devil and evil, explains Russell. Moral evil cannot be measured by science which can only investigate the physical world.

The devil as a concept was created to help explain evil. During the 16th century as Protestants and Catholics warred with one another, Satan grew in stature. The Pope symbolized the Antichrist for Protestants while Catholics exorcised demons from Protestants. The Devil became an important symbol for religion which philosophically requires evil in order to define good. The Faust legend metaphorically represented the changing attitudes toward evil that occurred during the 15th and 16th centuries. The struggle in medieval times had been homo centric: God vs. Satan, but God intervenes to save and protect man. In Shakespeare and Faust the struggle became more individualistic (society had become more bourgeois and competitive); the struggle a more protestant and personal one. The fight is now between man and the devil. The struggle has also become more pessimistic. In medieval times the devil was depicted as a clown, funny-looking and stupid. The sinner was invariably saved. Now, Faust turns away from God, hardens his heart and is invariably doomed. The increasing ambivalence toward knowledge is apparent. The Faustian sin is to seek ultimate knowledge and the power which comes from this knowledge. (I'm going to have to quit talking about knowledge being power). The tension between religion and scholarship still apparent today was unique to Protestantism according to Russell. The Devil has also become much more introspective and sympathetic toward his victim (*The Screwtape Letters* ?). The humanization and internalization of the devil became a major theme in 16th and 17th century literature.

Russell traces the changes in perception of evil from the clowning medieval simpleton to the Reformation's introspective and cunning, spiritual lunatic. The more plausible Satan reflected qualities admired by the romantics: individualism, rebellion, ambition and power; a liberator in rebellion against a society who blocks the way toward beauty and love. The Gothic novel portrayed good as a veneer covering up evil and danger. Ironically during the 17th century, belief in the devil declined as those in power became threatened by the witchcraft craze. It was one thing to let the commoners burn each other at the stake, but when the elite felt threatened suddenly it was discovered there was no scriptural basis for sorcery or witchcraft. Theologians also worried that evil had become so prominent as to make the devil virtually independent of God. Russell traces the rise of skepticism and by the late 1700s the much more common view was that God and Satan exist but rarely intervene in the world.

Russell's final chapter is devoted to a discussion of God and the Devil's role in a modern materialistic world. He points out that while science cannot confirm the existence of God neither can it find any evidence against it. He argues that the concept of evil and the devil may be useful because it allows us to conceptualize the reality of non-good (my term.) If it were better understood that a "perceived spiritual voice may come from a power of evil, dangerous cult figures who argue that they speak with the voice of God might win fewer followers." Russell is at his best when dealing with the historical evidence of belief in Satan. His literary illusions become tendentious. Still, a book worth reading. Rather than start at the end of the series you might wish to begin at the beginning with *The Devil: Perceptions of Evil from Antiquity to Primitive Christianity*, followed by *Satan: The Early Christian Tradition*, then *Lucifer: The Devil in the Middle Ages*.

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## **Jules says**

The devil is one of the most intriguing characters in literature. Even readers of Paradise Lost will attest to being pulled into the magnetism and charisma of this representation of radical evil. To the romantics, the devil was a rebellious hero. The devil in this is not so much just a part of Christian diabolology, Russell shows the reader that he is a subject of art, a poet and an inspiration to the gothic writers.

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## **Pete says**

not trying to flag myself for God's no-fly registry but have been curious about the great pretender recently for schoolwork and some creative writing and i did some comparison shopping. this dude's trilogy (of which this is the final third) on the cultural footprint of the Devil gets the job done

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