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Is Pope Francis Wrong in Trying to Change the Lord's Prayer?

by: Douglas Lockhart

Pope Francis seems to have a problem with the wording of the Lord's prayer; he would like to replace the words "Lead us not into temptation" with "Do not abandon us to temptation", an attempt to shift the emphasis from who or what is doing the tempting to that which is being tempted, namely, us.

But why seek to change what has been acceptable for so long?

Could it be that Francis is aware of something untoward in the present wording? Do the words "Lead us not into temptation" suggest what they seem to suggest, that it is "God" who does the tempting? That's how it sounds, and *that* is most probably its meaning given that Jesus was a Jew brought up with the Jewish scriptures. The Jewish scriptures are, well, Jewish; they are, like Jesus himself, not "Christian" in any shape or form.

Let's dig a little deeper.

Before time started and history began to role it is said that God created *everything*. Prior to this there was *only* God - there was

no *tempter*. Then came the creation of the angelic realm followed by human beings and the talking snake who tempted our first parents.

At the head of the angelic queue we find "Lucifer", *an angel of light* in God's employ not yet become "Satan" who, one has to presume, was the tempting snake's fallen ventriloquist in the Garden of Eden.

Quite a tale, and about to become complicated because something awful is said to have happened: Lucifer, for reasons unknown, turns into God's antagonist and gets kicked out of heaven. Next time we hear of him he is called "Satan" and, surprise, he is still in God's employ, but with a twist - he is now functioning as a "tempter" with God's blessing. Well, almost. We're told that he *forces* God's hand against an innocent individual called Job.

Job is subjected by Satan to a series of calamities *allowed* by God to test his faithfulness, tests that Job ascribes to God and not to some other source. And he is

correct in his assumption; it is God who has allowed this series of tests to take place.

Let's double back to the Garden of Eden. Question: Who is actually doing the tempting in that story? Our first parents are told by God not to eat of the fruit of a certain tree, for if they do they will be as gods knowing the difference between good and evil. They eat, they know, and are subsequently described as fallen in their natures. Question: Who is the snake's handler in that moment? Is it Lucifer-Satan behind the scenes, or is it God? And why is knowing the difference between good and evil such a big deal? Has this story perhaps something to do with becoming self-conscious?

There is a parallel story to Job's regarding King David in 2 Samuel 24 (probable early tenth century) with a repeat of the same story in 1 Chronicles 21 (probable fourth century) where, suddenly, responsibility is *switched* from God to Satan. This text alone suggests Satan to be a principle of evil in his own right, and it is the only time that the noun "Satan", meaning *adversary*, is used as a proper noun.¹

In *Europe's Inner Demons*, the Jewish scholar Norman Cohn suggests that "Satan ... developed out of Yahweh himself, in response

to changing ideas about the nature of God".²

In contrast to this, Christianity's theory of evil reduces human beings to playthings between gigantic opposing forces. Satan is no longer perceived as in God's employ; he has become a freelancing tempter. But why? Where had he got this idea from? From his old employer of course: he had previously tempted with God's permission and only later *sought* permission as in the case of Job. Which tells us that the tempting business was not his own invention, and that it had moved up a notch.

According to the Old Testament, a tenth of the hosts of heaven were said to have followed Satan down to our realm, an exodus followed by a further migration of angels to earth for purely carnal reasons. So what kind of place had heaven become? What is this myth's tangled web trying to tell us?

The angels of the Old Testament constituted a kind of divine postal service between heaven and earth. Prior to the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, angels of an anthropomorphic type had said to have appeared to Lot, and although human in appearance, had been immediately recognised

by Lot as angels - *destroying* angels, as it turned out.

Many centuries later St Augustine would maintain that the Devil and his angels were expelled from heaven and cast into darkness. Having once been angels, however, they could not be robbed of that status, merely demoted: they retained their angelic bodies, their ethereal natures and their extraordinary powers. Question: Why did God *allow* the whole business of temptation to continue? Was it all part of a grand cosmic plan linked to redemption?

Or is it perhaps that God, his angels, and the problem of good and evil have not been properly assessed by theologians? Could it be that good and evil and the complex relationship between them constitute not two separate things, but only one thing - the *completed* mind. Without the capacity to imagine "opposites" we would be mentally frail and incomplete. Which tells us that being *complete* is more important than being *perfect*, or *innocent*, and that "temptation" is a creative state leading to greater awareness.

Good and evil may actually constitute the *sum of possibilities*

each and every mental and physical event carries. It's either that or entertain the idea of God having *allowed* evil to come into existence for the express purpose of testing us to destruction. *That* is an untenable suggestion. Better that God be seen to *encompass* the possibility of evil, not *as* "evil" in itself, but as an unavoidable consequence of our being in a world governed by space and time. Any other explanation puts God's reputation in jeopardy.

Society eventually changed its mind about Satan, and much else. Milton and Goethe conveyed him as a tragic, yet heroic and even reasonable, man of the world; Christopher Marlow and J.B. Priestly followed suit. Satan turned into a horned being dressed in a one-piece garment of red complete with pitchfork and cloven hooves: he became a pantomime character.

But the problem of good and evil did not go away; it is still with us, and ever will be as we strain towards completeness. Not *perfection*: completeness in Robert Burns' sense of "[Seeing]ourselves as others see us." Or, as Isaiah so astutely wrote: "I sat where they sat, and I was astonished."

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