From Seven Sins to Lutheran Devils: Sin and Social Order in an Age of Confessionalization

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1 Introduction

In 1568, the Lutheran pastor Jodocus Hocker published a work on the origins, nature and activities of the Devil and his minions titled *About the Devil Himself (Der Teufel selbs)*.¹ The book is distinguished not for its originality, but for its comprehensiveness. Hocker assembled a wide array of writings on the devil and the legions of hell from scriptural passages to the writings of theologians, predominantly but not exclusively his fellow Lutherans.² In *The Devil Himself*, Hocker declared that the world was full of devils. Indeed, there were so many devils that human beings could never hope to know or count them all.³ These creatures hated human beings, especially Christians, and they “directed all their industry, effort, thoughts, work and actions” to corrupting susceptible human beings and bringing about their damnation.⁴ Devils went about their work with great cunning and a high degree of skill and specialization. Different devils were responsible for different sins: there were “pride devils, envy devils, whoring devils, gambling devils, drinking devils, [and] greed and usury devils.”⁵ And devils, like humans, were part of a hierarchically organized society. According to Hocker, it was the lesser devils who had charge of sins like “whoring, greed and vainglory,” while the more important devils were

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¹ Jodocus Hocker, *Der Teufel selbs, Das ist Warhafftiger bestendiger und wolgegründter bericht von den Teufeln: Was sie sein, Woher sie gekomen, Und wie sie teglich wircken* (Ursel: Henricus, 1568). The book was not quite finished when Hocker died of the plague in 1566, and the task of completing it fell to his friend Hermann Hamelmann, who was also a Lutheran pastor. See Keith L. Roos, *The Devil in 16th Century German Literature: The Teufelsbücher* (Bern: Herbert Lang; Frankfurt/M: Peter Lang, 1972), p. 94. Hocker’s *Der Teufel selbs* was later incorporated into Sigmund Feyerabend’s *Theatrum Diabolorum* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Schmid, 1569). All quotes are from the Feyerabend edition.

² He also cited various Church Fathers, as well as John Calvin and Heinrich Bullinger.

³ Hocker, *Der Teufel selbs*, fol. xvi.

⁴ Hocker, *Der Teufel selbs*, fol. xxvii verso.

responsible for the very serious sins of leading people into “false belief, doubt and heresy.”

Hocker's vision of a world filled with devils struggling constantly to deceive and seduce human beings was one shared by many of his contemporaries. The Devil loomed much larger in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century culture than in medieval culture. Stuart Clark has amply demonstrated that early modern Europeans, both Catholic and Protestant, were both fascinated with and terrified by the diabolical. Historians of witchcraft have detailed the ways in which learned elites grafted demonological concepts onto popular beliefs about witches, but also about ghosts, fairies and folk healing practices. As Johannes Dillinger describes the process, "locally formulated witch ideas fused demonology and popular beliefs into genuinely new concepts." Activities that were once construed as magical were now labeled diabolical. The rising incidence of witchcraft accusations and trials furthered the sense that the devil was everywhere active and pursuing a malicious agenda to corrupt and destroy human beings. In this same period, reported cases of demon possession rose dramatically. These too provided further confirmation of the omnipresence of diabolical forces. Indeed, Hocker cited the fact that, “many people are completely taken over by [devils] and physically possessed” as clear evidence of the prevalence of devils in the world. The conviction that devils were everywhere and that they posed a terrible threat to humankind was closely linked to the widespread belief that the end of the world was near. The Devil, it was held, was

6 “Also sind ungleiche Empter under den Teuffeln / dise sind geringe Teuffel die mit Hurerey / Geitz / Eitel ehr und andern dergleichen Sünden anfechten. Das aber sind höhere Geister / die da anfechten mit ungläuben / mit verzweifelung / und mit ketzereyen....” Ibid., fol. LVI.
10 “daß viel Leute von inen gar eingenommen / und leiblich besessen werden...” Hocker, Der Teufel selbs, fol. 11.
11 Clark, Thinking With Demons, esp. chapter 23, “The Life and Times of the Antichrist.”