

# *Is a Belief in Satan Harmless?*

By Norm R. Allen Jr.

Many people accept the idea that, though sacred texts might be wrong on many accounts, they are relatively harmless and not worth taking the time to critique. Furthermore, they believe that a belief in Satan, like a belief in God, is a relatively harmless belief.

This latter belief is what concerns me for purposes of this writing. It is amazing that people can believe this given what we know about history. To begin with, all we have to do is consider how many groups have been demonized, harmed, and viciously attacked by religious fanatics.

Perhaps the best place to start would be during the aptly named Dark Ages. Good scientists were demonized for having the audacity to promote the heliocentric theory. Bruno was burned at the stake. Galileo was persecuted, and Copernicus was afraid to publish his findings while he was alive. Scientific progress had been retarded for centuries.

During medieval times, women were routinely accused of being literally in bed with demons. They were legally harassed, shamed, ostracized, and like some good scientists of the time, many of them were burned to death.

As many historians have made clear, anti-Black racism is not rooted in a natural antipathy that Whites have for Black skin. Rather, it is rooted in the idea that because most Black Africans were not Christians, they were sinners in league with Satan. They were in need of Christian salvation; and what better way to “save” them than by enslaving them and controlling their natural resources?

Many Bible believers have long believed that Jews belong to the “Synagogue of Satan,” and that they are evil Christ killers (which should actually make them heroes, because the crucifixion of Christ supposedly made human salvation possible.)

The now-obviously anti-Semitic Mel Gibson demonized Jews in his film *The Passion of the Christ*. Long before that, Martin Luther, drawing upon the Bible, demonized Jews in his tract *On the Jews and Their Lies*. He wrote that their holy books should be seized, that their synagogues should be burned, and that they should be run out of Europe.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, Hitler assumed Luther’s mantle of bigotry and intolerance and put the theory into practice. Hitler routinely referred to the importance of God and Christianity in his program, as even a cursory reading of *Mein Kampf* makes abundantly clear.

Today apostates, infidels and atheists are still routinely demonized. Indeed, when I was involved in organized humanism, I often had media appearances. After I appeared on the now-defunct *Rolonda* nationally syndicated television program, one audience member called me a devil. During a radio interview, another caller claimed that I was a representative of Satan.

However, aside from these anecdotal stories, there is strong evidence of genuine persecution of non-theists throughout the world. Indeed, several countries have laws against blasphemy on the books. In Indonesia, Alexander Aan was thrown in jail for 2 ½ years for expressing his atheistic

views on Facebook. The International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU) has been keeping track of many cases such as this for the past few years. (Their report *Freedom of Thought 2012* can be downloaded at <http://goo.gl/LuzzS>.)

The persecution of alleged witches is not a phenomenon relegated to the dustbin of history. On the contrary, in many nations, alleged witches and warlocks are still being demonized, harassed, persecuted and killed. In nations such as Nigeria, Malawi, Kenya and others, the most vulnerable members of society are being demonized and exploited. This raises the question: How could people be demonized if people do not first believe in demons?

In the U.S., Africa, the UK and other parts of the world, people still try to carry out exorcisms. In some cases, in attempts to drive out the alleged demons, those allegedly possessed, including children, are killed.

Those most likely to be demonized nowadays are LGBTQI people. Indeed, 77 countries have laws on the books criminalizing homosexuality. Many people believe it is possible to “pray the gay away.” Uganda and Nigeria have recently passed stronger laws against same-sex relations. Uganda wants to go further by making it illegal for NGOs to fight for the rights of LGBTQI people.

This anti-gay madness has been mostly whipped up by U.S. evangelicals, and it appears that the problem is about to get much worse. Rick Warren has revealed plans for an “All-African Purpose Driven Church Leadership Training Conference” in Rwanda. Warren has developed a special relationship with Rwandan President Paul Kagame, who many believe has been guilty of several human rights abuses. (For more information, see <http://www.religiondispatches.org/dispatches/petermontgomery/7910/>.)

An idea related to the idea of demonization is the idea of a Chosen People – another idea that many assume to be relatively harmless. However, this is one of the most dangerous ideas in the history of human civilization. In the Bible, it drove the Hebrews to commit genocide against their neighbors (e.g., Numbers 31:17-18.) It drove people of European descent, following their biblical role models, to oppress and enslave Africans and Native Americans. It drove Hitler to kill those people he demonized. How could this be otherwise? If there is a Chosen People, there must be other peoples that are *not* chosen and therefore deserving of death.

Ideas have consequences. They do not exist in a harmless vacuum. The idea that Satan exists it is no different. It is an idea that good, rational people should always be willing to denounce by any means necessary.