

Adam Kotsko. *The Prince of this World.* Stanford University Press 2016. 240 pp. \$75.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780804799683); \$22.95 USD (Paperback ISBN 9781503600201).

This is quite an intriguing and provocative book that Adam Kotsko has written. Its main thesis (with which I disagree for religious and technical reasons—but this disagreement does not interfere with my all-over judgement of Kotsko’s volume) can be summarized as a prequel to Anatole France’s *The Revolt of the Angels*. France’s novel departs from a more traditional storyline of fallen angels who desire to dethrone God. It, however, ends with the shocking and bewildering refusal of Satan himself to participate in the final battle because a dream had shown him that God will become Satan, and Satan God, and that this would be repeated over and over again. God was Satan and Satan was God, and this overturning of roles would continue were it not for Satan refraining from participating. He has grown fond of his own little place (in, or called) Hell. Kotsko’s book offers us the genealogical account of exactly this satanical prediction: God becoming the devil, just once more. (In opposition to the title, Kotsko’s book is mainly not about the devil, but rather all about God). Before I discuss some of the more interesting claims made by Kotsko, let me quickly give a short resume of *The Prince of this World*.

The book is almost perfectly divided into two parts equally subdivided into 3 chapters. The first part proposes a genealogical reading of the Devil. This genealogical reading of the Devil traverses three ‘periods,’ respectively the Hebrew Biblical tradition, the period of early Christianity (which includes the formative period of the New Testament writings and the Patristic period), and the very large ‘period’ that starts with early monasticism and ends with high medieval Scholasticism. Within these ‘periods’ Kotsko individuates a series of what he calls ‘paradigms’ and, following Carl Schmitt’s ‘general state of consciousness’ or Michel Foucault’s ‘historical a-priori,’ proposes a rather well delineable ‘attempt to grapple with the specific articulation of the problem of evil’ (13)—which, according to Kotsko, stands at the root of the question of the Devil. The paradigms Kotsko individuates are the Deuteronomic, the Prophetic, the Apocalyptic, the Patristic, and the Monastic paradigm. A final ‘paradigm’ can be individuated as the Medieval Scholastic paradigm that will be under investigation in the second part.

The second part thus dwells on three thematic aspects of the Devil as he ended up becoming, through the various ‘periods’ and ‘paradigms’ explored in the first part, in the high medieval (scholastic) period. The three aspects that are being put into focus regard his fall, his importance and relation to the earthly city, and, finally, his life in hell. However, as much as medieval demonology is at the center of Kotsko’s discourse, it is not solely what is at stake (and neither was it exclusively so in the first part). Kotsko intends to demonstrate that the medieval theorization on the Devil is not a dead theological tradition but a living one, albeit alive under a different guise: namely modern secularism (said differently, modern secular politics).

The conclusions drawn from these two main parts can be summarized accordingly: 1. The genealogical reading applied to the (history/biography of) the Devil consists in a demonstration that the ‘biblical God went from being the vindicator and liberator of the oppressed to being a cruel ruler who delights in inflicting suffering on his friends and enemies alike. In other words, it is the story of how God became the devil’ (4); 2. The implications of this God/devil couple—‘the peculiar conceptual knot that ties together free will, [which implies the need and acceptance of] blame-worthiness, and [which also implies simultaneously the] legitimacy [of God]’ is ‘one of the most powerful – and deeply questionable – legacies that Christianity leaves to secular modernity’ (5).

Kotsko’s volume ends with a short conclusion which, besides offering a summary of the proposed argumentation, holds in spell the proposition of a new paradigm. For as much as one could

have expected a more radical conclusion (especially considering the argumentation brought forth), this is not the case (luckily). And whilst the medieval Christian legacy is (correctly) considered to be still present in our modern world, something the Enlightened world was unable to do away with, a utopic clean slate is not the envisioned outcome. What is instead offered is the welcome and much more humble realization that historically broken off attempts (in a variety of fields) might point in the direction of what could be done. The genealogical reading of the Devil's history has shown the options blocked and the actual road taken. Considering what has come about, one might want to consider more carefully what was left behind.

As I mentioned at the beginning of this review, I do not agree with the thesis of Kotsko's volume because of religious and technical (philosophically technical) reasons. However, before I venture into commenting on these issues, first some much more positive comments.

First, the most important point Kotsko makes is that the afterlife is unconditionally related and connected with this earthly life. Even if this has been denied by theologians of all kinds, there are no thoughts about the hereafter that are not also, and simultaneously, thoughts about changes in earthly situations. True, at times Kotsko slightly exaggerates. It is, for example, not true that the afterlife becomes a site of reflection 'only when this world seems unredeemable' (169 – emphasis added); it suffices to think about the 'birth' of Purgatory, which is thoroughly related to the birth of the medieval city, and which had very little to do with earth's [un-]redeemability. But his insistence that all reflections on the thereafter are also reflections on this life can only be stressed and applauded.

Second, what a pleasure it is to read a well-researched and nicely written book. The volumes that are discussed in this book are accurately chosen and are fully relevant to the discussion. Reading this volume is like being immersed in a cozy library of befriended books.

Now the technical philosophical dissensus—besides the fact that as a person who considers himself a member of the Catholic Church, I can obviously not accept Kotsko's main thesis; it is a thesis that is theologically flawed, but that does not mean that it can't be philosophically extremely interesting (which it turns out to be). This is a story of 'becoming,' about 'evolution' and 'progress'—at least this is how the book is written. (The present perfect simple tense is over-present in Kotsko's discourse, and as we all know, this tense is used to indicate the importance of the past—past actions—in the present.) However, it seems that, like others before him, Kotsko has forgotten that when offering a Foucaultian genealogical reading one has to take into account that one is still within a greater archaeological framework. And the profoundly evolutionary (diachronic) historical tale, that Kotsko offers (his discourse of becoming) is, I believe, rather problematic. Is this detrimental to Kotsko's whole project? Obviously not. It can also remain a genealogy, but it will not be a Foucaultian one. (It will be a Nietzschean one, or a Kotskoian one). I presume Kotsko went for Foucaultian genealogy for a very good reason, but the lack of synchrony is then to be understood as a true shortcoming of this otherwise very impressive book.

One final, but mere physiological, remark. Unfortunately, when not treated with utter caution, this book literally falls apart. When I had reached page 40, page 15 had already come loose – and by the end more than 10 pages had come loose. As books should be read and re-read (used and abused), they should not implode upon touch.

To conclude let me reassume. Adam Kotsko's *The Prince of this World*, is a provocative, well researched and well written volume. Anybody interested in themes ranging from (historically interpreted) religious philosophy to political theology should give this book the time and attention it merits. Notwithstanding these aspects, it needs to be stressed that the main thesis of this book does raise some questions. First of all, God being somewhat equated with the devil is not a thesis sustainable theologically, let alone will it be so for anybody who considers himself Christian or Catholic. Second, and much more importantly, the Foucaultian genealogy proposed seems to ignore

one of the fundamental traits of Foucaultian genealogy itself. The diachronic reading, as proposed by Kotsko, is not defensible within a Foucaultian horizon. This is obviously not an unsurmountable critique. Just like any genealogy leaves the possibility open of other (genealogical) readings, refusing the 'Foucaultness' of Kotsko's genealogy leaves open the option of other genealogies.

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