

The Devil's Imagine in Giovanni Papini's Works **

Abstract: Giovanni Papini's works have always been remarkable and surprising. Controversy could easily be found in his texts. His focus did not dwell on just one theme for too long; he had the ability to write about philosophy and religion or about good and evil at the same time. Papini's personal struggle was related to his faith. First an atheist, focused especially on philosophical themes; then a converted to Catholicism, combining philosophy and religion in his writings: this is Giovanni Papini's personality.

This article will focus on one of the main figures that come from religion: the Devil. The Italian philosopher has the courage to approach from different and surprising angles the story of Evil. He has tried to find new ways in shaping the image of the Devil in both the Catholic religion, as well as in Islamism.

Keywords: Devil, Giovanni Papini, Iblis, Religion, Image

Giovanni Papini's works have always been remarkable and surprising. Controversy could easily be found in his texts, regarding the period they were written. His focus did not dwell on just one theme for too long; he had the ability to write about philosophy and religion or about good and evil at the same time. Papini's personal struggle was related to his faith. First an atheist, focused especially on philosophical themes; then a converted to Catholicism, combining philosophy and religion in his writings: this is Giovanni Papini's personality.

This article will focus on one of the main and dominant figures that come from the field of religion: the Devil. The Italian philosopher has the courage to approach from different and surprising angles the story of Evil. He has tried to find new ways in shaping the image of the Devil in both the Catholic religion, as well as in Islamism. Even the way of describing the Devil is not so tough, the author rather using the terminology *Fallen Angel* for the force of evil, instead of the common Devil or Satan.

Papini's turning point in life is represented by the event that took place in year 1921, when he decided to return to Catholicism. Although he has

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** **Acknowledgement:** This work was cofinanced from the European Social Fund through Sectoral Operational Programme Human Resources Development 2007-2013, project number POSDRU/159/1.5/S/140863, *Competitive Researchers in Europe in the Field of Humanities and Socio-Economic Sciences. A Multi-regional Research Network.*

been baptized in the Catholic religion as an infant, due to different factors, he became an atheist. The family, especially his father, played an important part in this aspect; as a child, G. Papini did not have the permission to attend the classes of religion at school, therefore, the lack of information had its influence.

However, the Italian's interest in religion in general was very much present; that is why he was opened to all the situations he was exposed regarding religion. His attention, throughout the years, did not turn only towards the Catholic Bible, but also towards other religions. We can discover, by means of his works, his interest in closely studying the Koran, as well as several mythologies that included deities (from Egypt or Greece).

His first attempt to present Evil goes back in 1912, when he published an article entitled *Il demonio musulmano*. Even from here we can start seeing his interest in religion, an interest that was reflected a lot in his writings.

The *Fallen Angel* appears for the first time, both in the Bible, as well as in the Koran, in the episode that narrates the creation of the world. Giovanni Papini considers that both the angels, as well as their Creator, prove to be selfish when man was created: "On this point, the angels have been wiser than their Master. But God was stubborn, as all conceited persons are: in order to prove His power in general and especially His superiority in front of the angels" (Papini 2009, 65). The author of the article does support his opinion and explains to the readers the fact that the real reason behind Satan's rebellion is his refuse to worship the new creation, i.e. man.

Giovanni Papini tries, in an eccentric and surprising manner, to create a new image for the Devil; a new image that would help him be less blamed and more understood by humans.

Therefore, in the year of 1953 he comes back to this subject, having Iblis – the Devil from Islamism – present in his study entitled *The Devil: Notes for a Future Diabology*. As he approached this issue of the demon from Islamism, the Italian stated: "the Muslim demon Iblis has been convicted – according to the theologians of Islamism – because of his exclusive love for the pure idea of Divinity" (Papini 2013, 125).

Again in this volume, he brings up the idea of Iblis' rebellion and he tries to focus on the reasons that determined Allah's favorite angel to become the excluded one: "therefore, according to Mohamed, the banishing of the angel Iblis would be due to insubordination, jealousy and self-pride. Iblis does not rebel against Allah because he wants to be his rival, but only because he does not want to kneel down in front of the first man, which he considers an inferior being [...]. However, Allah, although furious because of Iblis' insubordination, He does not despise him: *he was not among those that threw with their face to earth*, says the Koran, and these words can be

understood in two ways: he was too proud to prostrate himself or the conscience of his superior dignity made him incapable of such a humiliating homage” (Papini 2013, 163-164). The Muslim Devil is here seen as making a simple mistake, a mistake that was not caused by hate towards the Divinity, but by his refuse to share Allah’s love with another being – although one created by the same Force that created him.

On the other hand, Giovanni Papini concentrates a lot of his attention also on the Devil from the Catholic Bible; his intentions when shaping the image he has on evil are clear from the very beginning, since the language he uses in presenting the Devil is not as harsh as one would expect it to be. And this image – although a little difficult to accept at first – is motivated by the fact that any Christian should consider seeing something good even where one least expects to find. That is why, we will see G. Papini affirming: “this infamous and yet famous being, invisible and yet ubiquitous, either denied, either adored, either feared, either defamed, that had its own priests and poets, its courtiers and its martyrs, is still more popular than understood, more described than analyzed. We must see the Devil with new eyes and to approach him in a new spirit. Not with the servility of the wizard who wants to take advantage of him or with the fear of the believer who wants to protect himself from him, but with the eyes and the spirit of the Christian who wants to be a Christian until the last consequences – even the most daring ones – of Christianity” (Papini 2013, 15).

The author’s intentions are clear, and not too far away into the volume we will discover Papini’s version of the evil’s image. He also wanted to try something new, and one must admire in him the detailed documentation from different religions that he has made before creating the Devil’s new profile. Papini thus tried to understand the Devil in his profoundness and to explain all his actions, as well as their causes.

The main idea from the volume *The Devil: Notes for a Future Diabology* is focused on the fact that Hell will end at some point, since everything has a beginning and an ending, and the punishments for the condemned ones will no longer exist. Giovanni Papini “liked to emphasize on the infinite and forgiving love of God, which he could not form with the punishments of an eternal conviction” (Di Felice 1993, 136). Which is in fact the author’s main intention? Papini strongly believes that the great love God has for all the beings He created will determine Him to find, in one way or another, an answer for this problem. Satan will thus be forgiven for what Papini considers to be a mistake based on a great love for Divinity.

Most people, Christians or not, see Satan as a being with very scary features, very big and powerful, usually with physical characteristics that are meant to determine people to avoid even speaking his name out loud.

Giovanni Papini studied this aspect as well. His focus for this issue did not remain a limited one, as he approached several other researchers, from different periods of time.

Starting from the fundamental text of the Bible, the Italian philosopher discovers the fact that even Messiah is described to be, from a physical point of view, an ugly person: “this resemblance that one did not think of between Christ and Satan is, as all others, very mysterious and maybe inexplicable. But from the words of Isaiah, we are allowed to draw only one conclusion: the ugliness of a being is not always a sign and an argument in favor of his malice” (Papini 2013, 167). The author tries here, once again, to point out the fact that the *Fallen Angel's* physical description should not always reflect the behavior or his personal thinking. This image of the scary being seems to have been created by humans, thus reflecting their fear of eternal punishments in case of wrong behavior in life.

From a visual point of view, we all know that all drawings and paintings depicting the Devil – from any religion – have tried, throughout time, to present him in the most frightening possible way.

Giovanni Papini does not forget to mention one of Italy's favorite poets – Dante. In his works, Dante too shows interest in religion and also in the *Fallen Angel*. In his masterpiece *Divina Commedia*, the Devil is present in all three books. However, Papini notices the fact that Dante preferred depicting Satan as he has been at the beginning, in all his glory, and not necessarily his deformed physical appearance. And for this, Papini will state: “even from Dante's masterpiece, no matter how Christian and medieval he has been, it stands out that sympathy, because in his poem he tends to mention his first condition, his splendor and his nobility more than his dreadful aspect from nowadays” (Papini 2013, 167).

Giovanni Papini goes even further and does not forget to also remind us of one of his short-stories from 1904 – *Il demonio mi disse* – where his vision for the Devil goes beyond borders and evil takes here a human form. Not long before the Italian philosopher, the Russian writer Fyodor Dostoyevsky had the same point of view regarding the Devil being described as a human being. In 1953, Papini will come back to this idea, and in the study *The Devil: Notes for a Future Diabology* he thinks mostly at different persons throughout history that had a character and a behavior that could easily be considered evil beyond the normal level from a human being.

He thus tried to highlight the level of evil that can be found right here on earth, among human beings: “they were considered incarnations or sons of Satan those princes or state leaders that have committed bloody crimes against their subjects and who were adversaries and persecutors of the Church and of Christ. Anyone who orders, in a ruthless manner, massacres

is, in the eyes of the people, an incarnation of the Devil” (Papini 2013, 109-110).

In conclusion, Giovanni Papini's ideas regarding the presentation of Satan's image in his works are maybe, at a first glance, a little bit rebellious; however, at a closer look, all these ideas are not necessarily wrong, but only a little bit extravagant and different from some points of view.

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