

Satanism: History, Beliefs, Practices

Kennet Granholm

Defining Satanism is harder than it might seem at a first glance. A good definition provided by the Swedish scholar Fredrik Gregorius is: *a collective term for movements and ideologies in which Satan plays an important and, for the adherent, positive role, either as a symbol or a spiritual force*. In this article, however, I will also deal with a number of groups and philosophies – collectively termed “The Left-Hand Path” – which bear a resemblance to Satanism, but do not attribute particular importance to Satan. The term Satanism will be reserved for philosophies, groups, and individuals who self-identify as Satanic.

History

Satanism as a religious/philosophical movement is a thoroughly modern phenomenon, having its roots in the late nineteenth century occult revival and emerging as a distinct movement in the latter part of the twentieth century. The numerous unorthodox Christian groups accused of heresy, such as the Gnostics in the second century AD, the Bogomils and the Cathars in the twelfth century, and the Knights Templar in the fourteenth century, did not expound Satanic philosophies. The same goes for the French cases of Gilles de Rais (1404-1440) and la Voisin (Catherine Montvoisin, 1637-1680), as well as Brit Sir Francis Dashwood’s (1708-1781) so called Hell-Fire Club, which was nothing more than a social club for noblemen who regarded Catholicism with ridicule.

In the popular imagination works of fiction, such as Léo Taxil’s (Marie Joseph Gabriel Antoine Jogand-Pagès, 1854-1907) accounts of the links

between devil worship and Freemasonry in the 1880s and 1890s, J.-K. Huysman's (1848-1907) novel, *La Bas* (1891), the occult fiction of Dennis Wheatley (1897-1977), and Hollywood movies such as *Rosemary's Baby* (1968), have largely formed perceptions of Satanism. While portrayals of this sort have not influenced actual Satanism to any larger degree, they can be regarded as important sources for the Satanism in the Norwegian Black Metal scene of the late 1980s and early 1990s.

The true origins of religious Satanism lie in the occultism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In the 1860s French occultist Eliphas Lévi (Alphonse Louis Constant, 1810-1875) discussed the Baphomet entity mentioned in the Knights Templar trials as a devil figure, and described the inverted pentagram, particularly with a goat's head inserted, as the most important Satanic symbol. The account was self-prophetic, as the symbol has later become, due largely to Lévi's treatment, the most important symbol for contemporary Satanists. Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831-1891), co-founder of the Theosophical Society in 1875, viewed Lucifer as a positive Promethean figure, and published a magazine bearing his name. In Denmark Ben Kadosh (Carl William Hansen, 1872-1936) was involved in fringe masonry, published the pamphlet *Lucifer-Hiram* in 1906, and described himself as a "Luciferian" in the population census of 1921. While the infamous magician Aleister Crowley (1875-1947) is often described as the fore-father of modern Satanism, he did not consider himself anything of the sort, and Satan held no exalted position in his teachings. Crowley is, however, a huge influence on most later magical philosophies, and this includes modern Satanism. The German magic order *Fraternitas Saturni*, founded in 1926, was perhaps the first occult group that actually appropriated the figure of Satan to any significant degree. In 1926 the order's founder Gregor A. Gregorius (Eugen Grosche, 1888-1964), also published the book *Satanistische Magie*.

The era of modern Satanism began in San Francisco, USA, in 1966 when Anton Szandor LaVey (Howard Stanton Levey, 1930-1991) founded the Church of Satan. LaVey's *The Satanic Bible*, published in 1969, is the most influential document

for the practices and beliefs of modern Satanists. In 1975 restructuring in the Church led a number of members, chief among whom was Michael A. Aquino (b. 1946), to leave the Church and found the Temple of Set. As the Temple is focused on the Egyptian deity Set instead of Satan it cannot be regarded as Satanism per se. Dragon Rouge, a magic order employing antinomian symbolism and vocabulary in ways similar to Satanist discourse, was founded in Stockholm, Sweden, in 1990. Both the Temple of Set and Dragon Rouge are more correctly labeled Left-Hand Path organizations.

While the abovementioned groups abide strictly to secular law and stress the importance of moral conduct, more radical Satanist groups such as the Order of Nine Angles and the Misanthropic Lucifer Order exist. Satanist groups are generally small, with the biggest ones having less than 500 members. Radical Satanist groups such as the ONA and the MLO have never had more than a handful of members.

Beliefs

As Satanism is in no regard a singular movement, there naturally exists no one set of beliefs that can be attributed to all those who would term themselves Satanists, and even less to those groups and individuals who have a family resemblance to Satanism. General tendencies are, however, radical individualism, the use of antinomian symbols, and goals of personal liberation.

The Church of Satan, and much of contemporary Satanism, expounds an essentially atheist and materialist philosophy. Satan is not worshipped as an objectively existing metaphysical being, but rather regarded as a symbol and immanent force of rebellion, freedom, and the animal nature of the human being. The Church's view of the human being is highly elitist and individualist. In the Satanic Bible nine satanic statements are listed, which engage in a critique of the ten commandments of Christianity and promote indulgence, an active and aware approach to life, self-interest, and the view that man is in essence an animal.

Left-Hand Path orders such as the Temple of Set and Dragon Rouge are generally less materialistically focused, and are more interested in the spiritual evolution of man. A common factor in order such as these is an extreme level of eclecticism, where elements are borrowed from most magical traditions, religions, and mythologies from around the world and history.

The Order of Nine Angles is markedly different from most Satanist groups in that they promote separation from societal norms and laws, and subsequently criminal conduct, as a necessity for Satanic initiation.

Most self-identified Satanists are not members of any group, but operate in isolation, perhaps having contacts with other solitary Satanists through various forums on the Internet. The true numbers of Satanists are therefore nigh impossible to determine. Anon LaVey's Satanic Bible is a common basis of most Satanic beliefs.

Practices

Satanic religious practices are equally diverse to Satanic beliefs. What can be said, however, is that the common practice of most contemporary Satanic groups, and the related Left-Hand Path groups, is based on Western ritual magic traditions, in particular those expounded by the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn and Aleister Crowley.

The Black Mass is probably the one ritual that is most closely linked to Satanism in peoples' imagination. The problem is that the Black Mass is essentially an imagined ritual act, thought up not by Satanists but by its detractors. The Black Mass is discussed in LaVey's *Satanic Bible*, but acknowledged as a literary invention which Satanist would only use as a psychodrama to facilitate their separation from vestiges of lingering Christian sentiments, sans the sacrifice of babies, naturally. The main ritual practices of the Church of Satan revolve around so called lesser black magic, manipulative practices where the Satanists attempts to influence events favorably to him-/herself, and greater black magic, which employs ceremony in order to effect change in the world and the practitioner. Greater black magic is described as an emotional rather than an intellectual act. The basic structure of a Satanic ritual elements, as described in *The Satanic Bible*, involves a nude woman acting as the altar and all other participants wearing black robes. The wall is adorned by the Baphomet-sigil (the picture of a goats head in an inverse pentagram, surrounded by the Hebrew letters for Leviathan) and the room lit by black candles along with a single white one (representing "the hypocrisy of Right-Hand Path religions"). At the start of the ritual a bell is rung nine times, an invocation of

Satan is performed, and a drink is taken from the ceremonial chalice. Then the four princes of Hell are called forth from the cardinal points, and the main ritual text – expressing the Satanist's desire for lust, destruction or compassion – is read and the parchment containing a representation of this desire is burnt. Group rituals may involve a wand representing the phallus, a sword, and a gong.

The Temple of Set rituals are very varied, but often borrow terminology and elements from Church of Satan rituals, such a division into lesser and greater black magic, the ringing of the bell nine times, and an invocation of Set. However, the Temple does not employ a nude altar.

While the practices of Dragon Rouge are highly eclectic, the core of the order's system is based on Kliphotic Kabbalah – exploration of the dark realms of the Jewish mystical tradition, Old Norse mythology – especially rune magic and mysticism centered on the god Odin, Vamacara Tantra – with a focus on Kundalini meditation and activation of bodily energy points called Chakras, and Typhonian Alchemy – in an initiatory path leading to self-deification.

The described, but most likely rarely or never practiced, rituals of groups such as the Order of Nine Angles are more radical, involving elements of criminality and human sacrifice.

Many Satanist and Left-Hand Path organizations have some form of initiatory structure, often modeled on the example set by the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. In the individualist ethos of Satanist and Left-Hand Path philosophies, and in opposition to most other esoteric initiatory systems, the idea that initiation is not conferred by the organization, but rather effected by the practitioner and then recognized by the organization, is common. Higher levels of initiation then signify increased self-awareness and development along the path of self-liberation.

Further Reading

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