

Satanism: Theological Exchanges, Current Issues

Kennet Granholm

Most of the perceived historical contacts between Christianity and Satanism are actually conflicts between Christianity and competing religions such as Judaism, Islam or European pre-Christian religious traditions, or between orthodox dogmatic Christian institutions, predominately Catholic ones, and heterodox Christian sects, deemed to be heretic. In the dominant Christian discourse these latter groups were often described as engaging in perverted sexual practices and having close affinities with the Devil. One of the earliest groups accused in this manner were the Gnostics, who in the second century CE interpreted the tenets of Christianity through Neoplatonic philosophy and regarded the world as created by an evil Demiurge. The path to the true hidden God lay in achieving spiritual insight, Gnosis, and thus escaping the material confinements that the evil Demiurge, identified as the Biblical JHVH, had imprisoned. In the following centuries, as the Church gained a dominant position in European culture, accusations of Heresy and more explicit accounts of dealings with the Devil increased. One of these groups, the Cathars, founded in Italy in the 1140s, was deemed a big enough threat to warrant the institution of the first inquisition in 1230.

Probably the most famous of the medieval groups accused of devil worship was the Knights Templar. The order was organized in 1118 to protect pilgrims in the holy land, conquered from the Muslims during the first Crusade in 1099, and soon gained considerable wealth and power in Europe. The situation caused much envy, and in 1307 King Philip IV of France arrested the members of the order and put them on trial for Devil worship. The last Grand Master of the Knights Templar, Jacques de Molay, was burnt at the stake in 1314.

Even though the above examples deal with internal Christian conflicts and entirely fictive accounts of devil worship, they have influenced the later Satanic

milieu. In some instances twentieth century Satanists have used some of the accounts, particularly those concerning the Knights Templar, as legitimating proof of the deep historical roots of Satanism. For example, the Baphomet entity (the name is probably a bastardization of the name of the Muslim prophet Mohammed), mentioned by some of the Templar in confessions made under torture, has become important for modern Satanists.

The French criminal trials of Gilles de Rais (1404-1440) and Catherine Montvoisin (de Voisin, 1637-1680) are of note when it comes to Satanism. Having squandered most of his fortune, De Rais sought the services of various magicians and alchemists and was rumored to have engaged in child sacrifice in order to gain wealth. He was convicted of heresy, sodomy, sacrilege, and murder, and he was hanged and his body burnt at the stake in 1440. De Voisin made her living by selling potions and poisons, and performing abortions. She was rumored to have organized Satanic Black Masses in her home and was burnt at the stake in 1680. In both cases the accounts of Satanic practices are incoherent and obscure, and at least de Rais seemed to have regarded himself not a Satanist but a devout Christian. In both trials, but more so in the case of de Voisin, the purported criminal acts weighed more heavily than the allegations of devil worship.

The so called Satanic Panic of the 1980s and early 1990s is another example of the contacts between a secularized Christian culture and imagined Satanism. The phenomena can be termed a moral panic, where fears that established

societal values and norms were being eroded were expressed through ideas of a Satanic underground being the reason. The panic was primarily instigated by an unfortunate union of psychotherapy and mass media, but to a large part the discourses on the subject were Christian-themed and both the self-proclaimed and publically identified experts were often conservative Christians. The accounts of Satanism in the Satanic Panic are very different from anything organized Satanic groups believe and practice.

As detailed in the entry on the history, beliefs and practices of Satanism, religious Satanism is a modern construct, having come into existence in the latter part of the twentieth century. The contacts and conflicts between this modern religious Satanism and Christianity have been surprisingly few. During the Satanic Panic, discussed above, some individuals in the Satanic milieu were accused of classic Satanic crimes, such as child abuse and child sacrifice. However, most often the Satanism of the Satanic Panic was unseen and nonexistent other than in the imaginations of the accusers.

The Satanism expounded in the form of music and subculture termed Black Metal is more for the sake of rebellion than any kind of reflected religious ideology, but examples of hostilities towards the Christian religion and its sacred symbols do exist. In Norway, where this musical subculture first came into existence in the late 1980s and early 1990s, a small group of individuals were responsible for a number of church burnings in the early 1990s. The instances were isolated, and whether this can be seen as any form of religious sentiment or simply a more extreme version of the rebelliousness of Black Metal is unsure. The church burnings largely stopped after the mid 1990s.

Theological Exchanges

That sustained theological exchanges are difficult to uphold between Satanism and Christianity should come as no surprise. Satanism is, simply by the name of the religious atmosphere it represents, in diametrical opposition to Christianity.

The Church of Satan (founded 1966) does engage in a critique of Christianity in general in much of its ideology. An example of this is, for example, the ninth Satanic Statement as presented in the Satanic Bible (1969): "Satan has been the best friend the Church has ever had, as it has kept it in business for all these years!". The rest of the statements are modeled to function as quasi-opposites to the biblical Ten Commandments, although they in essence expound ethics that are not in contradiction with Christianity. The Temple of Set, not a Satanist organization per se but a Left-Hand Path movement which has thematic similarities with Satanism, is less vocal in its critique of Christianity. Based on the organizations view that a magus is a magician who has successfully changed the world due to his/her influence, Jesus Christ is described as a magus by some writers in the Temple. This does, however, not mean that Christian theology or the figure of Jesus would be in any way central to the Temple's teachings. Quite the

opposite, on the quite rare occasions when Christianity is discussed the tone is usually critical. Dragon Rouge, another Left-Hand Path organization, is also predominantly critical of Christianity, although this critique is peripheral in the organization's teachings. In early 2009, however, Dragon Rouge founder Thomas Karlsson engaged in online debate in which he put forward the suggestion that the Left-Hand Path magician's methods and goals could, from a certain perspective, be regarded as being in line with Christianity. The magician's goal of self-deification could be seen as an attempt to achieve "existential adulthood", which, again from unorthodox perspectives, could be interpreted as the ultimate aim of God; a situation where his "children" grow up by seeking and achieving separation from him. This, however, was an isolated instance and more an example of the rhetorical eclecticism possible in Dragon Rouge than a form of discourse common to Dragon Rouge.

The challenge and critique Satanist and Left-Hand Path organizations direct at Christianity could possibly, when scaling of the worst excesses, function as an impetus to self reflection and theological development. To a large part Satanist philosophies have developed in response to experienced deficiencies and contradictions in Christian philosophy, practice and culture. In fact, many North American Satanists have a prior background in some Christian denomination. It is unlikely that forms of Christianity could be developed that could accommodate individuals drawn to Satanist philosophy, but the opportunity for open theological debate and growth nonetheless exists.

Current Issues

Transgressive Symbols, Symbolic Language, and Rhetoric

A major part of the Christian and secular opposition towards Satanism derives from the transgressive symbols and rhetoric used by Satanist and Left-Hand Path organizations. These include the figure of Satan, talk about the Prince of Darkness, and symbols such as the inverted pentagram. These symbols and rhetoric markers are used in the antinomian goal of separation from unreflected norms and values, with the aim of personal liberation and freedom and the construction of more conscious values. In themselves, the symbols and rhetoric are not "anti-Christian".

Imagined Moral Differences

The common view that Satanism expounds a system of morals that is in polar opposition to Christian morality is generally speaking not true. While small radical groups such as the Order of Nine Angles expound criminal behavior and violence, more “mainstream” organizations such as the Church of Satan, the Temple of Set and Dragon Rouge entertain moral values that are largely compatible with Christian ones. This includes obedience to law, responsible behavior and strong opposition to the restricting the freedom of others by violent means (e.g. by rape or murder – the practice of animal and human sacrifice is strongly condemned in most of the “mainstream” Satanic groups). The Nine Satanic Statements included in Anton LaVey’s Satanic Bible appear to be in opposition to the Christian Ten Commandments. On a closer inspection, however, and if framed in different words, one sees that they in fact do in many ways echo contemporary Christian views.

Hostilities and Fears

Even in a secularized society the idea of Satanism carries with it much fear. The Satanic Panic of the 1980s and the early 1990s was a clear example of this. At times the fears associated to Satanism have resulted in hostility towards self-professed Satanists and black magicians, often taking the expression of accusations of child abuse in ritual contexts. While it is unlikely that Satanism and Christianity and secularized Christian culture will ever find a common ground, it would be beneficial for all if a situation where Satanism could be assessed more objectively arose.

Further Reading

Gavin Baddeley. *Lucifer Rising. Sin, Devil Worship and Rock 'n' Roll*. Plexus Publishing, 1999

Joel Best, David Bromley & James Richardson. *The Satanism Scare*. Aldine de Gruyter, 1991

Per Faxneld. *Mörkrets apostlar: Satanism i äldre tid*. Ouroboros produktion, 2006

Malcolm Lambert. *The Cathars*. Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 1998

Jean la Fontaine. “Satanism and Satanic Mythology” in Bengt Ankarloo & Stuart Clark (eds.) *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe: The Twentieth Century*: 81-109. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002

Jeffrey Burton Russell. *Satan: The Early Christian Tradition*. Cornell University Press, 1981

Jeffrey Burton Russell. *Lucifer: The Devil in the Middle Ages*. Cornell University Press, 1984