Introduction

Satanism. The mere word conjures up all sorts of strange images: human sacrifice, sexual orgies and shadowy conspiracies. Unsurprisingly, as any scholar working on the topic will tell you, the reality of this phenomenon is more prosaic than what is commonly imagined. Certain aspects of it, which we will consider at the end of the chapter, are however almost as bizarre and startling as anything that can be imagined by paranoid Pentecostals or authors of lurid pulp horror. Between here and that point of extreme expressions, however, we first need to visit raucous English rakes, Romantic poets, anarchists, Decadents, a Danish dairy salesman, a supposed lion tamer and lover to Marilyn Monroe, a PSYOPS officer, and other colorful characters.

Defining Satanism

Before we begin our journey through the history of Satanism it is best to specify what the term will be taken to mean in the present context. Satanism is used here as a label in two ways: sensu stricto and sensu lato. The former variety refers to a system of thought in which Satan is celebrated in a prominent position. Of course, the term Satan is here interchangeable with the Devil, Lucifer and other names that have been commonly used to designate the principle of evil in a Christian context (a figure which most Satanists, however, perceive quite differently, as more or less benevolent or helpful). A “prominent position” signifies that Satan is the only or the foremost among the gods, entities or symbols revered. If this is not the case, the group or individual in question may still hold certain views that constitute a form of Satanism, but their ideology as a whole cannot be defined thus. The term “system” may designate anything from very simple constructs to highly sophisticated doctrines. This might seem a somewhat arbitrary dimension of the definition, but it is necessary in order to be able to exclude, for example, a person who lauds Lucifer in a single poem. Such an act does not make anyone a Satanist in the strict sense, any more than composing a single piece in praise of Christ would make a person a Christian.¹ Satanism sensu lato, on the other hand, entails celebrations of the Devil used as a discursive strategy in a fairly demarcated and restricted manner. Examples include socialists employing Lucifer as a symbol of revolution, feminists eulogizing him as an anti-patriarchal...
figure, and different varieties of purely literary veneration of Satan. These individuals and groups did not construct entire worldviews centered on Satan as the single most prominent symbol, even if they may have made quite prominent use of him. Hence, they are classified as representing Satanism sensu lato.

The polyvocality of the devil, and the “Satanists” who were not Satanists

On a popular level, Satan’s identity has always been fragmented into local variations. At times, the Satan of European folklore was a beast quite different from the Satan of the Church. Naturally, there were no watertight compartments between the two, and they existed in the same cultural context – partly overlapping, partly in contradiction to one another. Thus, the figure could be simultaneously comical and frightening, for example, and function as a tool for upholding order as well as subverting it. In folklore, most entities are of a more ambivalent nature than the clear-cut good-or-evil division in official Christianity. Hence, Satan could at times be seen as a helpful spirit, whom it was possible for the peasant population to turn to for assistance. A typical situation in which lowborn women asked the Devil for help was when they sought to avoid labor pains. God was presumably disinclined to help them with that particular problem since, according to Genesis 3:16, this suffering was meted out by him as a punishment for Eve’s transgression in the Garden of Eden.

The official theological stance on Satan remained constant throughout Europe even long after Luther had nailed his 95 theses on the church door in Wittenberg in 1517. The sharpest break in the traditional teachings about Satan came about with the Enlightenment, rather than the Reformation. Even though the reformers removed much in Christianity that they felt did not have a biblical foundation, most of the medieval diabology was, somewhat surprisingly, retained. The writings of Luther and other central figures clearly show how strong the time-honored teachings about the Devil remained. In the generations following Luther’s, an influence from the Protestant claims to a direct relationship with God made people gradually (even in Catholicism) start to see Satan increasingly as an inner voice tempting the individual. Ultimately, of course, the voice still issued forth from a malevolent external spiritual entity. Nevertheless, the theological psychologization of the Devil influenced portrayals of him in literature. Authors now bestowed an unprecedented psychological depth to the figure of Satan himself. This is reflected in the various versions of the Faust story from the late sixteenth century, where the Evil One often has a pensive, introspective and philosophical disposition. We can also think of Milton’s complex portrait of Lucifer in Paradise Lost (1667). Even so, Satan had certainly not been reduced to nothing but an inner voice or a character in cerebral fiction by this time. He was still very much viewed by most people as an active force in the world.

At an early stage in history, the Christian idea of the Devil gave rise to the notion of wicked people, Satanists, actively worshipping him. Conceptions about Satanists have been present in Western culture practically since the dawn of Christianity. Actual Satanists, in any reasonable sense of the word, have not been around for quite as long. Heretical Christian sects like the Cathars and Bogomils were unjustly persecuted in the Middle Ages as Satanists, and in the early modern era supposed witches were identified as adherents of Satan and punished accordingly. However,
the earliest evidence of anything that might even vaguely have resembled true Satanism concerns the disturbing circle of abortionists and poisoners that were involved with certain prominent members of Louis XIV’s court in the 1670s. Some of the criminal figures that the Sun King’s mistress Madame de Montespan (1640–1707) called upon to help her stay in her royal lover’s favor possibly invoked demons during rituals to achieve this goal. Supposedly, this entailed “black masses” (the term is of a later date, and was not used by either the alleged perpetrators, their accusers or the officials in charge of the case) being celebrated by an apostate priest on the naked bodies of women. Possibly, it also involved the sacrifice of new-born children (but no physical evidence of this was found, we should note). On the other hand, there also seems to be a good chance that the investigating police officer, Nicholas de la Reynie, in some way skewed the testimonies to make them fit with his own deeply Catholic mindset. He was maybe in fact dealing with suspects who considered themselves Christians, and commanded demons to do their bidding by binding them in the name of the Lord and His angels. Not even this much is certain. We can be fairly confident, at least, that these were not self-professed Satanists who thought of themselves in such terms.7

Moving from France to England, we find the so-called Hell-Fire Club. It was established in the 1750s, and it should immediately be underscored that the melodramatic name of the club was not its self-designation. Rather, it was invented by political enemies of Sir Francis Dashwood (1708–1781), its founder. Ominous tales of demon worship in this group have circulated for centuries, but in reality it was little more than a frivolous drinking club for the upper class. At most, the occasional toast to the Devil – in utter jest – may have been said. The sporadic participation by prominent visitors like Benjamin Franklin in the drinking bouts has even so kept interest in the old rumors alive, since they are convenient additions to various conspiracy theories.8

Apostles of darkness: how the romantics sowed the seeds of Satanism

On closer inspection, then, none of the people mentioned earlier seem actually to have been Satanists. While accusations of Satanism have been rife throughout much of the Christian era, an enduring and public tradition of veritable practiced Satanism was in fact not instated until 1966, with the founding of the Church of Satan in San Francisco. Yet, there were people who nourished an intense sympathy for the Devil long before. Let us consider some of the earliest examples, which date from the late eighteenth century.

In spite of the enlightenment critique of religion, a majority of people still believed in God – and the Devil – at this time. Certain progressive poets in England therefore took it upon themselves to fight what they perceived to be naïve superstition that stood in the way of social reform. This description best suits Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792–1822), but to an extent also William Blake (1757–1827) and Lord Byron (1788–1824). What all three have in common is that they used a positive portrayal of Satan as a tool of cultural critique, and a means to break the hegemony of orthodox varieties of Christianity.9 The starting point was the poets’ admiration of the heroic individualist Satan they discerned in John Milton’s portrayal of the figure in *Paradise Lost* (1667). Milton himself almost certainly had not at all intended his Lucifer to be interpreted in such a fashion, but this was no obstacle for the Romantics.10
Their sympathy for the Devil led to Robert Southey (1774–1843) famously describing Byron and Shelley as representatives of a "Satanic school" in poetry. In spite of the heated debate inspired by the Romantic celebration of Satan, the Luciferian leanings of the radical authors in question seldom extended beyond occasional outbursts in a text or two, even if the pro-Satanic ideas they propagated hereby came to be established as a specific language of cultural protest that would be enduring.

Blake was a mystic and visionary, who (probably) based several of his startling works of visual art and cryptic prose and poetry on actual visionary experiences. In some of his creations Satan is a sort of energizing cosmic rebel, who represents an expansive force just as necessary as the limiting and conserving God. There is also a political dimension to the works, which reflects the revolutionary circles their creator moved in. Often, Blake seems inimical towards God, the great forbidder and provider of moral codes. Ultimately, however, his utopian vision centered on a union of the cosmic opposites, as alluded to in the title of his perhaps most well-known text: The Marriage of Heaven and Hell (1790–1793).

Byron, on the other hand, was no mystic, but an ironic provocateur. This also shows clearly in his portrayals of Satan. The perhaps most subversive of them are the long philosophical dialogues between Lucifer and Cain (in the play Cain, 1821). The Devil here appears as a champion of free will and independent thinking. Still, the portrait is hardly completely flattering, and many of the Dark Lord’s negative traits are also retained. In certain other texts by Byron, God is held up as a sadistic tyrant. The tale of his decision to call down the great Flood upon mankind (Genesis 6–9) is retold from this angle in Byron’s Heaven and Earth (1821). Hereby, God’s opponents – Satan and fallen angels – appear as a more appealing, if not unproblematic, alternative.

Shelley was far more politically radical than Byron. He propagated vegetarianism, feminism, free love and non-violence as a method of protest. Furthermore, he was less ambiguous in his Satanism than his friend Byron. He would at times wrap it in several layers of allegory, but these allegories tended to be so translucent that it would have been obvious to most members of the public that they were reading a paean to Satan. A case in point is The Revolt of Islam (1817, also known as Laon and Cythna). Shelley here explains that the serpent (Satan) has been wrongly identified as the principle of evil. God, the supposedly good entity, is by contrast in fact a villain and the source of human suffering. The serpent/Satan is moreover connected in this text with human rebels against earthly oppression. In the central narrative of the long poem, a woman called Cythna is the leader of a rebellion against tyranny and patriarchal religion – the latter here symbolized by Islam. Cythna defies conventional gender roles when she rides out to battle wielding a sword, and stresses that in a true revolution woman’s liberation must be a key feature. Otherwise, mankind only achieves a partial freedom.

The strongly negative image of Muslim culture in The Revolt of Islam – complete with a lustful sultan who enslaves girls in his harem – ties in with a number of islamophobic stereotypes current at the time. Islam, however, is hardly Shelley’s true target. Rather, he uses it as a covert way of describing how hostile to women he felt that Christianity is. Satan’s role is similarly allegorical. The point, then, is not that Shelley wishes to celebrate Satan, even if this sublime figure appeals to him. His real goal is to undermine the power of Christianity in society. He seems to have believed this...
could be accomplished by deconstructing Christian myths and reversing the sympathies. Shelley’s heroine Cythna speaks of attempting a disenchantment, through which mankind would become free from the religious myths constructed to keep her in check and uphold the status quo. The same vision of disenchantment was held by the poet. Naturally, this meant that his glorification of Satan ought not be understood as an expression of real (inverted) religious sympathy. After all, Shelley had been expelled from Oxford University because of his pamphlet *The Necessity of Atheism* (1811). We find a similar Satanic atheist attitude a century later, in the work of the Italian Nobel Prize laureate (in 1906) Giosuè Carducci (1835–1907), who composed the poem “A Satana” (1865). In this provocative piece, the Devil symbolizes the Enlightenment, technology and human dignity – in short, all that Carducci opined that the Catholic Church stood in the way of in his country.

The first Satanist? Stanislaw Przybyszewski’s social darwinist diabolology

Poets like Charles Baudelaire (1821–1867) and visual artists like Félicien Rops (1833–1898) emphasized Satan’s connection to sensuality and carnal pleasures, making the figure an important image in some forms of resistance to Christian moralism and asceticism. Baudelaire’s blasphemous 1857 poem “Les Litanies de Satan” set the standard for such transgressive Decadent outbursts, even if the poet himself, ever the repentant Catholic, never made any real commitment to being of the Devil’s party. The foremost portrayer of Satanism in prose fiction in late nineteenth-century Europe was Joris-Karl Huysmans (1848–1907), who claimed to base his novel *Là-bas* (“Down There”, 1891) on his own experiences in Parisian circles of Devil-worshippers. This was almost certainly not true, but the claims helped make the book a bestseller. Huysmans, a troubled aesthete who longed to transcend the mercantilism and vulgarity of his era, eventually abandoned his fascination with the occult to return to the comforting arms of Mother Church.

None of the Romantics and hardly any of the Decadents, then, were very consistent (symbolic) Satanists, not even *sensu lato*. The first real example of such a figure is the Polish Decadent Stanislaw Przybyszewski (1868–1927). He made Lucifer the focus of a whole system of thought that he adhered to for a long time, and he openly called himself a Satanist. A central figure in the bohemian milieu of 1890s Berlin, Przybyszewski befriended greats like Edvard Munch, Richard Dehmel and August Strindberg. His own prose foreshadowed Expressionism in its focus on anguished inner states and subjective nightmarish visions of urban decay and religious doubt. Both the works of fiction and the essays that flowed from his pen expressed an explicitly Satanic worldview, where Satan became the paragon of liberty, strength and creativity. This also entailed contempt for the “herd”, the weaklings who blindly obeyed God and his ministers. God, we are told in texts like *Die Synagoge des Satan* (1897), is a friend to the unfit, the cripple and the castrated. This, the Pole assures us, is not commendable, but goes to show that God wants to hinder evolution and the natural order.

Evolution, to Przybyszewski’s mind, was the ultimate value in the cosmos. He fancied himself part of an aristocracy of intelligence and artistic talent, far above the baseness of common men. Unsurprisingly, Przybyszewski was one of Nietzsche’s first champions, even if the pessimism of Schopenhauer perhaps influenced him more.
His thinking is gloomy, and he revels in the pain of being that he deems necessary for artistic creativity. Suffering of the soul, in this sense, is good – but still a severe torment to endure. This is but one of numerous semantic inversions Przybyszewski indulges in: what others call decadence or degeneration represents a new stage in the development of the human race (i.e., decadence is evolution), the deeds of evil femmes fatales are a prerequisite for our continued evolution (i.e., wicked women are “good”), Satan is a savior for the elect (i.e., Satan is to be considered “god”), and so on. Even if Przybyszewski did not reject occult phenomena (preferring to describe them as fully “natural” wonders that science would be able to comprehend, but only in the future) his embrace of Satan was not really religious, but symbolic. It had no ritualistic dimension, and is best understood as an example of the Decadent philosophy of inversion at its most extreme. Many others were deeply marked by Przybyszewski’s Satanic social Darwinist ideas, and for a period he was a key player in early Modernist circles. His legacy is today remembered in his native Poland, and to an extent in Germany. It has also begun to attract attention from Satanists who seek the historical roots of their beliefs.

Red devils: socialist satanism in the nineteenth century

Przybyszewski’s Satanism, as we have seen, diverged from the egalitarian ideals the figure was employed to embody in the writings of Romantics like Shelley. The Pole’s interpretation was more or less an anomaly at the time, however. Most people who used Satan as a positive symbol primarily made him a freer of the oppressed, and an enemy of the hegemonic power structures. This is most clear in the case of socialist Satanism. Quite a few important socialists were inspired by the Romantic embrace of Lucifer. One of the most influential anarchists, Mikhail Bakunin (1814–1876), held up Satan as the archetypical rebel, and hence a role model for man, in his book Dieu et l’état (“God and the State”, posthumously published in 1882). As in the case of Shelley and others, this should not be understood as a literal veneration of the Devil as an actually existing entity or spirit. In the same book, the staunch atheist Bakunin warns of the constant danger of slipping back into the abyss of religious superstition. Even so, his ardor is great when he enthusiastically hymns Satan as the helper of mankind. “Satan, the eternal rebel, the first freethinker and the liberator of worlds”, Bakunin calls him.

Other pivotal anarchist thinkers, like William Godwin (1756–1836) and Pierre-Joseph Proudhon (1809–1865), wrote in similarly glowing terms of Satan. This symbolism spread quickly among European reds, not only anarchists but also socialists of other types. For example, the turn-of-the-century Swedish social democrats were enough fond of it to start a magazine with the name Lucifer, where a number of inflammatory pieces of explicit socialist Satanism were published. The Church was a major enemy of socialism in Sweden (and elsewhere), and it is against this background we should understand such aggressive allegorical attacks on Christianity.

It was for partly similar reasons that several feminists around this time used a pro-Satanic symbolism. In their opinion, Christianity played a pivotal role in keeping women down. Some feminists therefore chose to portray a feminized Satan as an entity on the side of women in the struggle against the patriarchal God and his male priests. Like Shelley’s Cythna, they hereby hoped to destabilize the truth claims of
the old myths – including their traditional implications for gender hierarchies. In particular, feminists attacked the tale of Eve’s Satanically assisted transgression in Genesis 3. In their retellings of the narrative, they made a heroine of the first woman by lauding her curiosity, free thinking and courage to go against God. 29

Mephistopheles and the magicians: the rise of esoteric Satanism

Thus far, the only Satanist we have encountered that had any ideas even approaching positive magico-religious conceptions of Satan is Przybyszewski. In the context of Western esotericism, one of the first to unequivocally praise Satan was Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831–1891), chief ideologist of the Theosophical Society. Founded in 1875, this organization was the most important in the realm of alternative spirituality in its time. At its height of success, it had over 200 local sections worldwide, and many of the period’s central intellectuals and artists were deeply influenced by its teachings. Especially avant-garde painters like Mondrian, Kandinsky and Klee drew on Theosophy for creative inspiration and spiritual guidance. A basic notion in its cosmology is that all religions stem from the same esoteric source, but have been mis-interpreted by exoteric priesthoods. The universe and man are constantly evolving, moving towards spiritual perfection. In her huge two-volume work *The Secret Doctrine* (1888), Blavatsky explains that the instigator of mankind’s evolution is Lucifer. He made sure that we ate the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden. This made us free beings, and we escaped from God’s totalitarian rule. Satan does not, however, occupy a central enough position in Blavatsky’s system for it to be labeled a form of Satanism as a whole. 30

Even more subdued were the Satanic tendencies in the writings of one of her sources of inspiration, the French occultist Éliphas Lévi (1810–1875). He had once started to study to become a priest, and retained a strong sense of loyalty to the Catholic Church in spite of all his idiosyncratic ideas and conflicts with the ecclesiastical authorities. In some of his works, Lucifer is held up as a neutral force permeating the cosmos, which can be employed for benevolent ends. Yet, he was adamant that God was ultimately the only entity one should venerate, and that Satan did not possess a true, conscious existence. 31 Neither Blavatsky nor Lévi, then, were Satanists *sensu stricto*, especially not the French magus. Notorious British magician, mountain climber and poet (and many other things) Aleister Crowley (1875–1947) is occasionally advanced as an early example of a Satanist. He courted controversy, and did admittedly enjoy designating himself the Beast 666. Satan, however, is not a conspicuous presence in his esoteric writings, which center much more on Egyptian mythology. 32

The first person to actually build an entire esoteric system, albeit a rather miniscule one, around Satan was the obscure Danish occultist Ben Kadosh (Carl William Hansen, 1872–1936). In 1906, he published a Luciferian pamphlet presenting a bizarre mixture of Masonic mythology, odds and ends from conspiracy theories, and various other strands of high and low esoterica. Claiming to be in direct contact with the Powers of Darkness, Kadosh urged those with similar leanings to get in touch with him at his home address. His Satanic circle, if it was ever realized in the manner he intended, was as tiny as the volume of his writings. We know that he attracted at least a handful of acolytes, but exactly what they were up to is less well-documented.
Kadosh himself, who made his living as a dairy salesman, was mostly occupied with obtaining a staggering amount of Masonic degrees and patents, and his (for the period) uniquely Satano-centric system did not spread in the grand fashion he had envisioned. He remained a somewhat tragic local oddball, who became famous only indirectly through portraits of him in several well-regarded novels by different Danish authors.33

The German 1920s’ esoteric order Fraternitas Saturni was considerably more popular than Kadosh’s circle. It viewed Satan as an initiator and conducted Luciferian masses, but whether these features were sufficiently pronounced to merit a designation of the entire group as Satanic is not self-evident.34 The “Satanic” temple (this was a term she herself used) briefly operated by Maria de Naglowska in 1930s Paris presents similar problems. Its aim was an integration of Satan and God, and ultimately God seems to have been more important to Naglowska.35 Naglowska’s importance lies in her being the first to hold rituals open to the public, which were called Satanic by the congregation itself.

None of these groups and individuals founded lasting Satanic traditions. Fraternitas Saturni still exists, but seems to have toned down the Satanic content almost entirely. This applies even more to the Theosophical Society. A small Luciferian organization in Scandinavia today draws on Kadosh’s ideas, but this is a revival rather than a direct continuation.36 To summarize the history of Satanism thus far, it probably did not exist as a religious practice or coherent philosophical system any earlier than around the year 1900, when figures like Przybyszewski and Kadosh pioneered such ideas. But as a more or less fixed and distinct strategy for cultural critique – a colorful form of drastic counter-discourse organized around Satan as the root metaphor, and utilized by socialists, radical individualists, feminists and others – it has been around for at least twice as long.

The dark side of the age of aquarius: counter-culture and the Church of Satan

After World War II, there was a brief hiatus in Satanist activity. The motif was no longer fashionable in literature, and many of the old esoteric orders had disbanded. The occult was not, to use the lingo of the time, “hip” any more. But this would soon change. In 1968, the Rolling Stones sang of “Sympathy for the Devil”, and one of the biggest hits in cinemas was Roman Polanski’s adaptation of Ira Levin’s 1967 novel Rosemary’s Baby. This tale ends with a gathering of Satanists proclaiming it is “the year one”, the dawn of a new Satanic era. It must certainly have seemed that way to many people. 1969 saw the release of the ominous (but hardly pro-Satanic) eponymous debut album by Black Sabbath. More obscure bands like Black Widow and Coven also unleashed albums (in 1970 and 1969, respectively) with lyrics about diabolical rites and glamorous witches. All this was part of a shadowy underbelly of the hippie movement and the nascent new age milieu.37

The allure such themes apparently held for many was what made an editor at Avon Books (a division of the Hearst Corporation) suggest to a locally semi-famous eccentric in San Francisco, one Anton Szandor LaVey (1937–1997, born Howard Stanton Levy), that he write a Satanic Bible. The editor felt sure such a book would earn a significant sum of money. LaVey certainly had some sort of qualifications for
this. He was well-read in esoteric matters. And more importantly: since the 1960s, he had regularly held lectures on the occult to a select group of (paying) participants, including anthropologist (and later neo-shaman) Michael Harner and several established horror writers. From the lectures and discussions in this informal group grew something vaguely resembling a philosophical system, which used Satan as a metaphor of certain desirable characteristics. Literal belief in Satan as a spirit did not feature. LaVey himself later described his ideology as “secular Satanism”. In 1966, LaVey shaved his head and grew a beard and moustache in the style of Ming the Merciless (of Flash Gordon fame). Together with his partner Diane Hegarty he produced a series of small mimeographed sheets presenting his Satanic philosophy, as he had settled on designating it. 38 1967 was an eventful year for the would-be Satanic leader, as he conducted a Satanic wedding ceremony, a baptism (of his daughter Zeena) and a funeral (a member of the group who had died). Even if these spectacular attention-seeking rituals (to which the press was invited) bestowed a limited but global fame to LaVey, the Church of Satan (CoS), as it was now called, remained a local phenomenon at this point. 39

When approached by the editor at Avon, LaVey – again with some help from Diane – cobbled together a provocative and entertaining delineation of his atheist Satanic philosophy. Doing this, they borrowed quite freely (some would say plagiarized) from nineteenth-century social Darwinist Ragnar Redbeard, and also drew on the fiercely pro-capitalist philosophy of Ayn Rand. As can be discerned from this, LaVey’s Satanism propagated social stratification, elitism and individualism. In a way, this was not very far removed from generally held American values – a fact the Satanic high priest was keen to emphasize. His teaching, however, also had a strongly epicurean orientation, with LaVey underscoring that we should take what pleasure we can here and now, since no Heaven (or Hell) awaits us in an afterlife. This aspect was certainly less in synch with mainstream Americanism, at least the forms of it that were socially acceptable to profess. In reality, the pleasure-oriented mindset was hardly that much of an aberration. 40 Combining it with the allure of the occult certainly struck a chord with quite a few people, and the Church of Satan started growing rapidly. It is open to speculation how many of the members were truly dedicated to LaVey’s tenets. Some probably merely felt it would be a chic thing to be able to brandish the fiery-red membership card at cocktail parties, as a sign of transgressive coolness. A number of local so-called “grottos” were now set up, and the Church soon had members all over the world. Eventually, this form of organization proved difficult to administrate, and it was abandoned in favor of a more loose structure. 41

Part of LaVey’s genius was his skill when it came to generating publicity and reinventing himself. According to the official biography, LaVey grew up with a gypsy grandmother telling him tales of vampires and demons. As an adolescent, he travelled with an uncle to allies-occupied Europe, and attended a private screening of footage documenting secret occult rituals of the Nazi elite. He later worked at carnivals and strip joints as an organist, and travelled with a circus as lion tamer. During this period, he had a relationship with then-unknown Marilyn Monroe. Working the carnival circuit, LaVey provided the background music for both striptease shows on Saturdays and Evangelical services on Sundays. He would then see the same men that had lusted after the naked women the night before sit in the pews the day after asking forgiveness for their sins. This made him draw the conclusion that Christianity
functioned as a hypocritical suppression of our true desires. Other jobs included police photographer and oboist with the Ballet Orchestra of San Francisco. He also studied criminology at college, and later acted as occult advisor to Polanski during the filming of *Rosemary’s Baby*. In the scene where Rosemary is raped by Satan, LaVey played the fiend, wearing a rubber suit. Perhaps unsurprisingly, critical examinations of these stories have fairly conclusively proved them all to be inventions. This is somewhat beside the point, though, as “fake it till you make it” and a carny hustler mentality is very much part of the CoS ethos. LaVey was spectacular in a sense, because he could make people believe he was. He evidently had enough charisma to attract celebrities like Jayne Mansfield and Sammy Davies Jr. to his church.42

In many respects, LaVey stands in the tradition of Decadent dandies like Baudelaire and Rops, who were also masters of self-mythologization. His celebration of the eccentric, the unique and the darkly erotic fits quite well with such predecessors. A major difference, however, is that LaVey is, as he was once described “a junkyard philosopher”.43 That is, his aesthetic is partly far removed from the high art avant-garde snobbism of the European Decadents, as it valorizes elements of American pop culture, especially “forgotten” and “camp” artifacts.44 His writing style reflects this double nature, mixing bombastic condemnations of God, worthy of a Parisian absinthe-sipping Decadent, with slang-filled street-smart paeans to dirty knickers and carny showmanship. Unlike many earlier Satanists, LaVey has a sense of humor and often uses jokes to make his point.

While LaVey was more or less an atheist, he still believed in the efficacy of magic.45 This can be understood in terms of psychological self-help, or in accordance with more classical conceptions of sorcery.46 Perhaps half-jokingly, LaVey enjoyed telling the story of how his acolyte Jayne Mansfield was decapitated in a car crash after he had accidentally clipped off her head in a photo while cutting articles from a newspaper.47

Where does Satan come into all this, then? To LaVey, Satan is a symbol of the natural urges in man that have been suppressed by the collectivist “slave morality” of Christianity (to speak with Nietzsche). Satan also represents the individual him- or herself, and symbolically worshipping Satan thus equals self-adoration.48 There are additional ambiguous phrasings in *The Satanic Bible* about the Devil as a dark force in nature, but as a whole LaVey’s Satanism is quite firmly atheist.49 In a sense, the Church of Satan can be considered fellow travelers with the international humanist movement. So, the question remains. *Why Satan?* An important reason why the Devil is chosen as the symbol of LaVey’s church is, as he explains, that this is the central figure of opposition to Christian morality. Besides, being shocking and scary are obviously useful for promotional purposes. Moreover, we need “ceremony and ritual, fantasy and enchantment”.50 Hence, Satanism.

In the desert of Set: Satanism in the shadow of the pyramids, and diabolical pluralism

Not all members of the Church of Satan were fully content with this worldly form of Satanism. Some longed for a more “spiritual”, theistic alternative. Perhaps because of this, and perhaps due to LaVey’s decision to start selling initiatory degrees in the Church, a group of members, led by the top official Michael Aquino (1946–),
broke off in 1975 and started an organization of their own: the Temple of Set (ToS). Aquino, unlike LaVey, has a colorful background that is actually true. He is a former green beret, served as a PSYOPS officer in Vietnam, and later alternated between a successful academic career in political science and working for the military in various capacities. After his break with LaVey, Aquino purportedly channeled *The Book of Coming Forth by Night*, straight from Satan himself. Here, the Prince of Darkness declares that he no longer wishes to be called Satan, but prefers the name of his earliest manifestation among humans, the Egyptian god Set.51

From this text grew the Egypto-centric theistic system of the Temple of Set. The ultimate goal in this order is self-deification in a literal sense, where one can live on after the death of the physical body and attain miraculous powers. Set is seen as a benevolent “older brother” who can aid in this process, and whom the Setian sorcerer (or sorceress) can communicate with directly. The Temple of Set as such has seldom had more than a few hundred members at a given time, but this new form of Satanism became influential in a much wider esoteric milieu.52 It is sometimes claimed that the Temple of Set should no longer be defined as Satanists, due to their strong Egyptian focus and distancing from the term Satanism.53 Yet, they still employ the inverted pentagram as their main symbol, and Set remains firmly identified with the Devil. It therefore seems fairly reasonable to count them as Satanists, albeit with certain caveats.

Anton LaVey left school in his teens. Michael Aquino and several of his cohorts hold Ph.D.’s.54 This is naturally reflected in their respective teachings. The CoS constructs itself as a sort of “Devil’s carnival”, while the ToS prefers to think of itself as a continuation of Plato’s academy. This can be seen very clearly when one compares their respective websites. The CoS site displays cartoonish devils in garish colors, alongside buxom demon women. The ToS site features images of Greek temples, and voluminous texts filled with footnotes and scholarly references.55

In the wake of the Temple of Set there followed other theistic Satanists. Today, there exists a quite dynamic set of such groups, especially in the United States. Among the more prominent figures we find for example Venus Satanitas, well-known for her YouTube broadcasts, and Diane Vera. The latter emphasizes Satan as an egalitarian freedom fighter, much like Romantics and socialists did in the nineteenth century.56 Venus Satanitas and Diane Vera share a pluralistic vision of the Satanic milieu, where atheist and theistic Satanists should respectfully acknowledge one another as branches of the same tree (this also fits well with the pluralism of accepting multiple princes of darkness, as the ToS does). The CoS, on the other hand, is severe in its condemnations of anything existing outside their own fold as “heretical” pseudo-Satanism.57

In the 1980s, musicians from the noise and industrial scenes were attracted to the CoS. Figures like Boyd Rice and Nikolas Schreck goaded the establishment by combining Nazi symbols with Satanism in their avant-garde projects. In this context, it was not always clear where to draw the line between irony, iconoclasm taken to its extreme and actual fascist sympathies of some bizarre variety.58 The High Priest himself kept a fairly low profile, but emerged to mass media prominence again in the 1990s. Due partly to the rise of the black metal scene (see the next section), Satanism was experiencing a new peak at this time. After LaVey’s death in 1997, his partner (and mother of his only son) Blanche Barton took over the role as leader. In 2001, she
handed this responsibility over to Peter H. Gilmore, whose period in office has seen a particular emphasis on LaVey’s atheist ideas. This may have something to do with a wish to more clearly demarcate the boundaries towards the theistic Satanists that are – as mentioned – becoming a more vocal group with the help of the internet.

The ToS has had a succession of leaders through the years, with Aquino returning as high priest a couple of times but mostly leaving this responsibility to others. This has led to the ToS being far less intimately bound up with a personality cult than what is the case in the CoS, where there is a strong tendency among members to mimic LaVey’s personal aesthetics and appearance. This might seem paradoxical given the CoS focus on individualism, but on the other hand the group could also be seen as simply a club for individualists that share certain quite specific tastes and preferences.

**Violent worship: Satanic crime, terrorism and rock concerts as rituals**

The major Satanic organizations have a zero-tolerance attitude towards criminality, and the Church of Satan has even made a point of regularly cooperating with police and authorities. Most organized Satanists are accordingly law-abiding individuals, who may have an idiosyncratic aesthetic taste and a penchant for provocation but can hardly be deemed dangerous. Yet there are also exceptions to this rule, on the extreme outer fringes of the milieu. In the UK, the media have reported quite extensively on one David Myatt, who has held prominent positions in Satanic, neo-Nazi and Muslim jihadist circles. Ever since the 1960s he has been one of the leading intellectuals among British national socialists. He was allegedly the mentor of notorious Combat 18 nail bomber David Copeland, whose 1999 bombing campaign resulted in three deaths and numerous serious injuries. Myatt himself had by now converted to Islam, and became somewhat influential among radical Muslims. For example, he spoke in extremist mosques and wrote an essay defending suicide bombings, which was displayed on Hamas’ website for several years. It has been suggested that his Nazism and militant Islamism are both only tools in a (literally) Satanic scheme, which aims to bring down the current order. Danish scholar Jacob Senholt has convincingly demonstrated that Myatt – though he himself denies it – is the man behind the Order of the Nine Angles (ONA), a sinister theistic Satanist group with roots that may stretch as far back as the 1960s. Hiding behind a plethora of different identities, Myatt has been the chief ideologue of this secretive order all along. Using extreme political groups to further the apocalyptic goals of the order is fully congruent with tactics suggested in various ONA documents. There have probably never been more than a handful of members in the ONA, but, as Senholt points out, this is no reason not to be wary of extremists of this type, since they may have an unexpectedly great and dangerous indirect impact.

An enthusiasm for all types of extremism links the ONA with the subculture and musical genre known as black metal. In its initial stages, the genre was all about spectacle and image. However, as the 1990s began, a small clique of musicians in Scandinavia decided they wanted to practice what their predecessors had only sung about. Black metal, they laid down, should be about actually worshipping death, darkness and the Devil, not just play-acting. Borrowing a line from Milton’s Satan, we can say that these individuals cried out “Evil, be thou my good”. What the psychological
The mechanisms behind such a decision were, we can only speculate about. The radicalization of this subculture soon had tangible tragic consequences. A great number of churches were burned down by Satanists and affiliated figures in Norway, Sweden, and Finland. Even worse, at least three murders were committed by young men belonging to this milieu. One could question whether these deeds were direct results of the ideologies propounded in the black metal scene. The perpetrators may have been antisocial or pathological individuals who were drawn to black metal because it reflected their own already twisted mental state, rather than well-adjusted persons being warped by the influence of an extreme music subculture. Similar questions can be asked about Jihadist terrorists or racist terrorists like Anders Behring Breivik as well. Yet, it would seem quite probable that even if some of the Satanic church burners and murderers were dysfunctional to begin with, the influence of black metal's celebration of misanthropy, violence, and extremism would have made things worse and may have pushed some of them over the edge. To a degree, there are here parallels to the processes of radicalization that have been delineated by scholars of violent Islamist extremism.

It would furthermore be fair to describe church burnings as acts of terrorism, as they were ideologically motivated acts of destruction aimed at symbolic targets representing an opposing creed. The rationale may not always have been carefully thought-through, but that surely equally applies to many other acts that are commonly labeled terrorism.

Alongside these dark deeds, black metal was, and remains, an artistically interesting and often quite innovative genre. Today, there are many thousands (sic!) of artists producing such music across the world. Some bands have won prestigious music awards, and the more commercially oriented artists sell huge amounts of records. At present, black metal straddles the fence between mainstream semi-acceptance (at least in Scandinavia, the major newspapers regularly feature appreciative reviews of such records and concerts) and antismith Satanic activism. This is often an uneasy balancing act, as the musicians struggle to maintain underground credibility by appearing truly dangerous and simultaneously want to avoid being marginalized from various lucrative contexts. Some, of course, care little for making money (believe it or not) and retain a hardline theistic Satanist worldview. Classic 1990s black metal Satanism views the Devil as an evil entity existing outside of man, who the Satanist bows down to. Spreading misery, and inflicting pain, ends up pleasing Satan, and black metal is a tool in this endeavor. Rock concerts, according to this view, are close to the satanic fantasies of Evangelicals concerning the dangers of rock music. Indeed, Christian conspiracy theories, alongside horror fiction, may have been a source of inspiration in the granting-wielding worshippers of dark arts.

Much, if not most, black metal Satanism is quite primitive (often intentionally so) and is hardly built on serious theological (diabological) reflection. During the 2000s, this has partly changed, and a more intellectual strain of black metal has emerged. In the mid-1990s, on the other hand, this was not the case, and some figures in Sweden's scene were frustrated by this. They were not the party to the formation of an extreme order which combined black metal's unflinching devotion to the sinister with more classic esoteric practices. The name of this group was the Misanthropic Lucifer Order, later the Temple of the Black Light (TotBL). It would be incorrect to
reduce the TotBL to a by-product of the black metal scene, but many of its members at first came from this background. In terms of cosmology, the TotBL are a neo-Gnostic group, and they perceive themselves as struggling against an oppressive demiurge that has imprisoned them (the “fireborn” divine spirits) in flesh and an illusory physical world. The leading members of the order committed a murder in 1997, for which they were subsequently jailed. One of them was a successful musician, who resumed his artistic career after being released from prison in 2004. In 2006, he committed ritual suicide. The TotBL remains active and publishes texts that have had a considerable impact in the international theistic Satanic milieu. Their radical brand of Satanism is something of an anomaly and should – along with the teachings of the ONA – be understood as the furthermost extreme in an already controversial and antinomian religious current.

Notes

3 On this, see Per Faxneld, Satanic Feminism: Lucifer as the Liberator of Woman (Stockholm: Molin & Sorgenfrei, 2014), 100–101. For some intriguing early-modern Swedish examples of folk magic that appears to almost have crossed the border into Satanism sensu stricto, see Häll, “It is Better to Believe in the Devil,” 29–39.


17 The Middle-Eastern setting is also used to conceal the parallels to the French revolution (much-admired by Shelley) that would otherwise have been too provocative for English readers.


24 Ibid., 57, 60.


26 Ibid., 61–63.


28 Ibid., 530–531, 535–537, 539–551.

29 For a comprehensive treatment of this, see Faxneld, *Satanic Feminism*.


33 The only scholarly studies of Kadosh so far are Per Faxneld, “The Strange Case of Ben Kadosh: A Luciferian Pamphlet From 1906, and Its Current Renaissance,” *Aries: Journal for the Study of Western Esotericism* 11 (2011); Per Faxneld, “In Communication With the Powers of Darkness: Satanism in Turn-of-the-Century Denmark, and Its Use as a Legitimating

34 Faxneld, *Mörkrets apostlar*, 177–188. In this book I argue that the early Fraternitas Saturni should be labelled Satanists, but having read more of their material from the 1920s and 1930s I am no longer quite so sure about this. A fine recent discussion of their teachings can be found in Hans Thomas Hakl, “The Magical Order of the Fraternitas Saturni,” in *Occultism in a Global Perspective*, ed. Henrik Bogdan and Gordan Djurdjevic (Durham: Acumen, 2013).


45 LaVey was an atheist at least in the sense that he did not believe in a personal God, who cares about humanity. If there is such a thing as God, LaVey explains, it is better to conceive of this power as a balancing factor in nature, an impersonal force permeating the cosmos. Anton LaVey, *The Satanic Bible* (New York: Avon Books, 1969), 40.

46 Ibid., 110; Barton, *The Secret Life of A Satanist*, 95–96, 98.


48 LaVey, *The Satanic Bible*, 96.

49 Ibid., 62.

50 Ibid., 53.


53 Ibid., 223–225.


55 www.churchofsatan.com; www.xeper.org


www.churchofsatan.com/cos-ever-forward.php


Milton. For full accounts of the genesis of the black metal scene, see Michael Moynihan and Didrik Søderlind, Lords of Chaos: The Bloody Rise of the Satanic Metal Underground (Venice, CA: Feral House, 1998); Ika Johannesson and Jon Jefferson Klingberg, Blod, eld, död: En svensk metalhistoria (Stockholm: Alfabeta, 2011). Both are journalistic books, but are nonetheless the best sources for descriptive background information. The many interviews with key players make these works quite invaluable to scholars.

On radicalization, see e.g., Donatella della Porta and Heinz-Gerhard Haupt, “Patterns of Radicalization in Political Activism,” Social Science History 36 (2012).

To grasp the vast scope of the genre, consult www.metal-archives.org.

This has been an issue that musicians have had to negotiate from the start of the scene in the early 1990s. On this, see Keith Kahn-Harris, Extreme Metal: Music and Culture on the Edge (Oxford: Berg, 2007).


### Bibliography (selection)


