

## Contemporary Religious Satanism: A Critical Anthology

Jesper Aagaard Petersen, ed

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An authoritative volume on contemporary religious Satanism has been overdue for some time and Jesper Aagaard Petersen's new anthology presents itself as the first serious book-length study of the subject. The range of material is certainly far-reaching, encompassing studies of influential groups, historical developments, and the strategies employed by Satanic practitioners to gain legitimacy. There are chapters on Satanic organisations in the Baltic region and Scandinavia, as well as coverage of Satanic crimes in Italy and the rise of cyber-Satanism on the Internet. British scholar Dr Dave Evans also provides some helpful statistical data on Satanism in the UK – it turns out that there are roughly the same number of Satanists and Druids in Britain (around 1500 of each in the 2001 national census).

However, the 14 academic chapters that represent the non-practitioner component of this anthology vary considerably in length and quality: some sections impress with their depth of analysis while others are disappointingly brief and paddle around the edges of the material they address. Perhaps most significantly the volume falls down in its relatively scant coverage of the American Temple of Set, arguably the most significant recent development in contemporary religious Satanism. On the positive side, though, the book does include a selection of primary source-documents by practising Satanists – and that is certainly a welcome inclusion. So what are the comparative strengths and weaknesses of this new anthology?

As Jean La Fontaine has observed (1999), there are only two well-established contemporary Satanic organizations of any stature – the Church of Satan (founded in 1966) and the Temple of Set (founded in 1975). Both organizations have maintained an international membership although it is not clear whether all the groups outside the USA are affiliated to the original organizations, have been founded with their agreement as independent off-shoots, or are simply imitations (La Fontaine 1999:94).

The Church of Satan was founded in San Francisco in 1966 by Anton LaVey (1930-1997), who remains a controversial figure more than a decade after his death not only because of his role in the rise of contemporary Satanism but also because of the exotic and substantially fictitious persona he developed to promote his cause.<sup>1</sup> LaVey's Church of Satan celebrated sensual indulgence and personal empowerment and its ceremonies were conceived as a means for channelling magical power into an expression of intense carnal desire. LaVey believed in parading Christian 'sins' as virtues and presented a number of key Satanic statements in his best known and most influential work, *The Satanic Bible* (1969). LaVey portrayed Satanism as a passionate and "vital" approach to life in the human jungle, celebrating any "sin" that could lead to physical, mental or emotional gratification. He also declared categorically that "Satan represents man as just another animal...who, because of his

divine, spiritual and intellectual development has become the most vicious animal of all.”

Paradoxically LaVey believed that the Church of Satan presented a clear and uncompromising challenge to the conventional Christian mores of Middle America but he did not regard his Church as specifically anti-Christian, arguing instead that Christianity was irrelevant. According to LaVey, Christianity failed to address humanity’s basic emotional needs, denied man’s carnal nature, and placed its devotees in a position of dependence on “an unmerciful God who cares not whether we live or die.” LaVey similarly had no illusions about vows of poverty as a means of gaining spiritual redemption, maintaining instead that magic was essentially about power, and that wealth was a type of power. More controversially LaVey reserved the right to divert funds otherwise intended for the Church of Satan across for his own personal use, and it was this particular issue that would result in a split in the Church of Satan leadership in 1975. At this point, contemporary American Satanism would divide into two opposing camps: those remaining loyal to LaVey and those who would depart, establishing the Temple of Set – the other key Satanic organisation referred to by Jean La Fontaine.

The act of desertion took place in June 1975. Key members of the priesthood resigned from the Church of Satan, at the same time making it clear that they were not leaving the priesthood itself. “In fact,” key defector Michael Aquino has stated, “we had a sacred responsibility to take it with us.” A doctoral graduate from the University of California at Santa Barbara, with a strong interest in comparative religion and philosophy, Aquino had joined the Church of Satan in 1969. At the time of the split within the Church of Satan he was a Priest of the fourth degree and the senior member of the splinter group. Nevertheless, in a manner somewhat comparable to Aleister Crowley’s famous revelatory communication from Aiwass in 1904 – which led to the establishment of the esoteric doctrine of Thelema – Aquino summoned the Prince of Darkness on 21 June 1975 “to tell us what we may do to continue our Quest.”

The result, according to Aquino, was an act of automatic writing: “a communication from a god to a human being.” In a document titled “The Book of Coming Forth by Night”, Satan revealed himself as the ancient Egyptian god Set, and named Michael Aquino as LaVey’s replacement (Aquino ed 1983). Aquino claims that the revelation from Set led the priesthood of the former Church of Satan into new areas of enquiry: “In our research we discovered that this was in fact a much later corruption, and that the initial identity of Set had been that of the god of night, of the darkness, as opposed to the god of the day, the sun. Set symbolised the isolated psyche, the spark of life within the self, a creative force in the universe rather than an enemy figure, an inspiration for the individual consciousness.”<sup>2</sup>

The magical word *xeper* also became central to the philosophy of the Temple of Set. Pronounced “khefer” and translated as “I have come into being,” its associated symbols were the scarab beetle and the dawning sun. In a recent statement exploring

the significance of *xeper*, senior Temple of Set member Don Webb has written that this word generates the Aeon of Set, and is the current form of the Eternal Word of the Prince of Darkness. To know this word is to know that the ultimate responsibility for the evolution of your psyche is in your hands. It is the Word of freedom, ecstasy, fearful responsibility, and the root of all magic (Webb 1999).

Webb describes *xeper* as “the experience of an individual psyche becoming aware of its own existence and deciding to expand and evolve that existence through its own actions” (ibid). Because the Temple of Set emphasises the magical potential of the individual, the focus of the entire organisation reflects this orientation. All Setians are on an individual, self-determined magical journey and this defines the nature of their esoteric quest.

Jesper Petersen’s introduction to *Contemporary Religious Satanism* acknowledges the relevance of Paul Heelas’s well known concept of “self-religion” in understanding the dynamics of contemporary Satanism but greater emphasis is placed in this anthology on the LaVey/Church of Satan version of the phenomenon than on what seems to me to be the more interesting developments that emerged in the Temple of Set. If we are considering basic aspects of Left-Hand Path magical spirituality – which is essentially what this volume purports to be about, surely more attention should have been paid to Michael Aquino’s important essay “The Black Magical Theory of the Universe” which is included in a collection of writings assembled in *The Crystal Tablet of Set* (1983, revised 1986).

Petersen’s anthology does include a section containing primary documents relating to contemporary Satanism but its quality is variable and it does not include anything from Dr Aquino – one of the most authoritative writers on contemporary Satanic magic. The anthology includes an extract from Stephen E Flowers’ *Lords of the Left-Hand Path* (1997) and this is an important source – Flowers is one of the most influential writers to have emerged from the Temple of Set. There is also a piece titled “Reflections on Satanism” by European Satanist Vexen Crabtree, one of the most visible spokespersons advocating on behalf of the Left-Hand Path. However, Crabtree has published several detailed essays on the Internet and the specific selection chosen by Petersen for this collection is not among his best. If we consider that Petersen’s anthology claims to be definitive, Crabtree’s important essay “Left Hand Path Practices in the West” (2002)<sup>3</sup> might have been a better choice, since it defines key aspects of contemporary Satanic philosophy.

So far I must admit that my remarks about this new volume have been somewhat negative. However, while *Contemporary Religious Satanism* seems to me to have serious flaws, there are nevertheless undoubted strengths as well. James R Lewis’s “Infernal Legitimacy”, Asbjorn Dyrendal’s “Darkness Within: Satanism as a Self-Religion” and Kennet Granholm’s “Embracing Others than Satan” are arguably the strongest chapters in the overview section, while Gry Mork’s essay on Old-School Black Metal is the most fascinating and substantial chapter among the regional studies. Considered collectively these are the chapters in the anthology that give the

collection real bite and help the reader grasp the essential thrust of contemporary religious Satanism as a deviant spiritual phenomenon – which is basically what it is.

James R Lewis focuses on Satanic legitimacy and notes that LaVey's Satanic Bible functions like a sacred text within contemporary Satanic communities, reinforcing LaVey's perspectives and also, at the same time, serving to de-legitimize competing Satanic groups. Lewis draws on Weberian notions of charisma to explain LaVey's ongoing appeal and he explains that while the Church of Satan's founder claimed to support modern science he went well beyond contemporary secularism by proposing that the occult forces invoked in magical reality were not "supernatural" but were natural potencies that would one day be understood by mainstream science. Lewis argues that LaVey's primary legitimation strategy was to appeal to the authority of science while at the same time promoting an "animalistic" image of humanity derived from the Darwinian theory of evolution. Lewis also provides a concise overview of the unmasking of the artificial LaVey persona, a task initiated by *Rolling Stone* journalist Lawrence Wright (1991) and extended by LaVey's estranged daughter Zeena LaVey Schreck, who effectively denounced her father as a trickster.<sup>4</sup>

Asbjorn Dyrendal's chapter, "Darkness Within," analyses contemporary Satanism as a "self-religion", drawing on Paul Heelas' well-known application of this term to contemporary New Age spirituality. As Dyrendal points out, the New Age movement and Satanism both concentrate ideologically on the individual. However, there are also key points of divergence. Satanic notions of transformation involve concepts of self-deification that extend well beyond what Shirley MacLaine had in mind, and the Church of Satan's concept of an "alien elite" differs markedly from post-hippie notions of white light collectivism. Many New Agers yearn for transcendence while typically Satanists promote extreme individuality and ultimately a sense of alienation from the manifest universe that includes alienation from God, Brahma, the Great Goddess and all the rest. As Dyrendal notes in his concluding remarks, LaVey's legitimacy of violence and retribution also collide with New Age ideas about tranquillity, harmony and peace.

Kennet Granholm seeks to uncover key aspects of the contemporary Satanic milieu, extending his coverage beyond the Church of Satan to include references to the Temple of Set, the Rune Gild and the Scandinavian Dragon Rouge. In his chapter "Embracing Others than Satan", Granholm summarises key aspects of the Left-Hand Path – the branch of magic widely held to be 'demonic' – and highlights important characteristics of contemporary Satanism. These include the ideology of individualism, the view of man as a psycho-physical totality, the concept of self-deification, and the antinomian (or 'contrary') nature of modern Satanism. These, of course, are also key points that Temple of Set member Stephen Flowers made in 1997, so Granholm's analysis is largely emic in nature because it is based substantially on practitioner-concepts (an approach I personally support). Granholm points out, however, that the Rune Gild draws on Old Norse and Germanic deities that extend well beyond the 'Prince of Darkness', and the Dragon Rouge also embraces the Divine Feminine (including goddesses like Kali, Hecate and Sekhmet),

so a degree of eclecticism has been embraced by these contemporary practitioners of dark magic. Maybe, Granholm suggests, we should even begin to consider notions of “post-Satanism”...?

As mentioned earlier, one of the most interesting features of this book is the ‘regional studies’ section which includes Lithuanian, Italian and Scandinavian data. Here independent scholar Gry Mork’s chapter is the highlight, providing a fascinating insight into Black Metal music, a form specifically associated with contemporary Satanic culture in Scandinavia.

Mork refers to several Black Metal rock groups, including Darkthrone and Burzum, noting the emphasis on violence and anti-Christian symbols in their lyrics. Such music informs an aggressive sub-culture associated with arson attacks and the desecration of Christian churchyards so there is considerable potency in analysing contemporary Satanism as a vehicle of rebellion against establishment religion. In Black Metal music the figure of Jesus is portrayed as dark, cold and life-extinguishing – the very opposite of life in the Satanic fast lane. Black Metal supporters use their music to support notions of authenticity and vitality and invoke ‘primitivistic musical expression’ and the powers of darkness to challenge what is seen as a hollow, suffocating, life-denying, mainstream culture. As Mork points out, the Black Metal worship of darkness is a way of taking a clear stand against the metaphysics of light in modern, Western civilization.

These chapters, for me, are the outstanding elements in this anthology but I have to say that my response to this new publication remains mixed. Although these highlight chapters peel back the surface of the material with clarity and insight one still comes away with the sense that the challenge of this difficult and complex subject hasn’t been fully addressed by the book as a totality. As I have noted, the book has several worthwhile elements – but with some relatively obvious additional components it could have been a whole lot better.

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## **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> Wolfe (1974) and Barton (1990) helped create this fictitious persona. See also Wright (1991) and Zeena & Nikolas Schreck, "Anton LaVey: legend and reality" published on-line at [www.churchofsatan.org/aslv.html](http://www.churchofsatan.org/aslv.html).

<sup>2</sup> Interview between the author and Dr Michael Aquino for the 1998 television documentary, *The Occult Experience*, Sydney & New York: Sony Home Video / Cinetel Productions.

<sup>3</sup> Published at [www.dpjs.co.uk/lefthandpath.html](http://www.dpjs.co.uk/lefthandpath.html).

<sup>4</sup> See footnote 1 above.