

Asbjørn Dyrendal, James R. Lewis, and Jesper Aa. Petersen. *The Invention of Satanism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2016. 254 pp. ISBN: 978-0-19-518110-4

Dyrendal, Lewis, and Petersen's book, *The Invention of Satanism*, focuses on modern religious Satanism by asking how Satanism was "invented as a declared or philosophical position, and how it serves as a personal and collective identity." (2) In order to answer this central query, the book approaches its topic as a *bricolage* (3)—presenting seemingly fragmented discourses on the satanic, showing how they inform the emergence of modern Satanism, which, in turn, reinterprets and reframes these discourses. The goal of the book is to present foundational historical knowledge that culminates with and expands on our understanding of modern religious Satanism. Each of the authors have published on this topic separately, and this present collaboration is an accessible and solid introductory text to the ever-growing scholarly discourse on religious Satanism.¹

The book begins by offering a brief survey of anthropological studies on lateral topics: witches, demons, and magic. The chapter correctly claims that ideas surrounding misfortune and malevolence reflect the personal and social concerns of any particular group. The authors track the concept of cosmic evil from ancient Zoroastrianism and its opposing dual forces, to Judaism's notions of an obstructor or accuser of Yahweh (in Job, this accuser is called a generic title: (Heb.) "*ha-satan*"), to a fully developed personification of evil within Christian theological discourse (where evil gets a proper name: Satan). This anthropomorphized framing of evil is discussed in terms of its socio-political development, as satanic rhetoric mirrors Christian tensions with external secular powers and internal heretical exegeses.

Tracing satanic rhetoric into the Enlightenment, the book discusses fictional portrayals of the devil in Romantic literature, where he came to represent ideals of liberty and intellectual pursuits. This depiction of Satan as a symbol of

¹ For other recent academic books on Satanism, see: Reuben van Luijk, *Children of Lucifer: the Origins of Modern Religious Satanism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016); Massimo Introvigne, *Satanism: A Social History* (Leiden: Brill, 2016); Per Faxneld, *Satanic Feminism: Lucifer as the Liberator of Women in Nineteenth-Century Culture* (Stockholm: Molin & Sorgenfrei, 2014); Per Faxneld and Jesper Aa. Petersen, eds. *The Devil's Party: Satanism in Modernity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

freedom, antinomianism, and individualism is then a springboard for various authors described in the chapter on “Satanic Precursors.” People such as Ben Kadosh, Stanislaw Przybyssewski, Maria de Nagłowska, and Aleister Crowley use the image of Lucifer or Satan for “vitality, elitism, carnality, artistic and scientific creativity.” (36) The “European esoteric scene” and its confluence of occultism, theosophy, magic, and science produced the foundational ideas of modern Satanism (46).

The following chapters—four through nine—are the true meat of the book. Having outlined narratives that inform modern Satanism, the end chapters discuss how these narratives congeal in various religious and popular interpretations. These chapters outline Anton Szandor LaVey and his founding of the Church of Satan, its major schism, the Temple of Set founded by ex-Church of Satan Magister, Michael Aquino, and other persons and groups that identify as religiously satanic, such as the group garnering recent media attention with sensationalized promotional events, the Satanic Temple. Of note is the discussion on *The Satanic Bible* (arguably the primary text influencing Satanism today, published by LaVey in 1969) and LaVey’s strongly contested biographical details. The creation of the *The Satanic Bible* and its ostensible plagiarism, LaVey’s claims about magic as science, his lure and disdain for the occult milieu, his tension with detractors, friends, journalists and scholars alike, all frame LaVey as a provocative figure deliberately engaging with a “demonographical” charismatic authority (100). The line between fantasy and reality, within *The Satanic Bible* as well as in LaVey’s life story, are presented as a dual “mixture of the reactive, the esoteric, and the rationalist” (ibid). As the authors explain:

The carnivalesque attitude sometimes displayed in ritual and social settings probably did no harm in the countercultural environment. Add in inspiration from contemporary sociology and psychology in the use of popular occultism and the human potential movement, and LaVey had mixed his own cocktail of the ideas floating around in the occulture of his time. (65)

As Satanism expands beyond its controversial founder, it is enmeshed with notions of legitimacy and authority, and presents challenges to definitions of religion and magic. As other groups and individuals engage with LaVey and *The Satanic Bible*, continually modifying and reinterpreting Satanism, the “satanic milieu” (71) becomes constant in its consistent draw and fascination, but also transitory in terms of the high turnover of self-identifying Satanists, apart from select stable satanic organizations.

Also of note is the chapter on the Satanic Ritual Abuse scare of the late 1980s and early 1990s, a moral panic resulting in a modern-day witch-hunt, based on flimsy evidence, coaxed confessions, and the now debunked “repressed memory syndrome.” (125–29) This chapter, while not directly about active religious Satanists, is perhaps one of the strongest, as it demonstrates that Satanism, filtered through theological discourse and popular fears, allowed large segments of the population to project “folklore about Satan unto Satanism” and be convinced of a bizarre conspiracy theory about “a vast, underground network of evil satanic cults sacrificing and abusing children.” (103) If, in the Middle Ages, accusations of heretical “Satanism” reflected religio-political conflicts of the medieval church, so too did the modern-day so-called “Satanic Panic.” Despite having little to do with real religious Satanism, the popular obsession with all things “satanic” allowed people to imagine heinous fantasies, and inject their anxieties into the social problem *du jour*. Another distinctive aspect of this particular contribution to the field of Satanism studies are the chapters dealing with online surveys conducted by James R. Lewis. Though these sections are reworked material from previous article publications (not uncommon as an academic practice), they provide demographical statistics from a sociological perspective. Perhaps these chapters may read as somewhat dense to the novice reader unfamiliar with unpacking the charts, percentages, and survey questions that are integral to statistical analysis, but scholars will find use in the hard data, as such surveys are rare given the reclusive and secretive nature of most Satanists. These chapters provide a welcome glimpse into the satanic world, outside of canonical literature and official sources.

The Invention of Satanism provides a solid overview of the history of satanic discourse, theological framings, literary portrayals, conspiracy theories, as well as the continued obsession with Satanism in the popular mind, and the manner in which all these currents inform modern practicing religious Satanism as it continues to grow and shift. It contributes to the field as a respectable introductory academic text on religious Satanism, perhaps best suited for undergraduates or those unfamiliar with Satanism and scholarly approaches to it.

Cimminnee Holt
cim.holt@gmail.com