

*Massimo Introvigne***Satanism: A Social History.***Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2016. 655 + x pages. ISBN: 978-90-04-28828-7. € 197.00 (hardback).***REVIEWED BY Eileen Barker, London School of Economics/INFORM.**

Massimo Introvigne, an Italian copyright lawyer turned sociologist of minority religions, is a veritable polymath. He claims to have collected most of the material that it is possible to obtain on Satanism, and I believe him. Much of this material – along with tens (possibly hundreds) of thousands of books, articles, brochures and pamphlets – is housed in the Turin library of CESNUR (the Centre for Studies on New Religions), an organisation that Introvigne himself founded in 1988.

By Satanism, which he distinguishes from ‘possession’, Introvigne means the worship of a character identified with the Biblical Satan or Lucifer by organised groups through ritual or liturgical practices. He draws further distinctions between this understanding of Satanism and cultural or ‘Romantic Satanism’, which employs images of Satan or Lucifer for political, artistic or literary purposes, but does not, on the whole, involve their worship. This, in turn, is distinguished from ‘Folk Satanism’, which can include adolescent Satanism and some criminal groups that appropriate simplified rituals from Satanism. Introvigne’s main distinction is, however, between rationalist and occult Satanism. Both have organised groups that perform ritual worship. Yet, whereas the former tends towards atheism and regards Satan as a metaphor or symbol of the human ego unencumbered by traditional morals and religion, the latter – although not necessarily accepting the Biblical narrative of Satan – does nonetheless believe in a real, living and sentient Being (Satan or Lucifer). Occult Satanists believe that, by invoking this Being, one can come into contact not only with It/Him but also with one’s uninhibited inner self.

But Introvigne is also, perhaps equally, preoccupied with anti-Satanism, and the book’s structure reflects what he calls his three-stage pendulum model. This involves, first, a stage in which Satanist movements emerge from an occult subculture and then extend beyond it. This gives rise to an over-reaction from the dominant culture, which, in turn, is followed by a loss of credibility of the anti-Satanists’ exaggerated stories. It is these three stages that serve to organise the volume into three parts, exemplified by three historical eras. First is the ‘Proto-Satanism’ era of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in France, Sweden, Italy, England and Russia. Next comes ‘Classical Satanism’, from 1821 to 1952. Thirdly, we have the ‘Contemporary Satanism’ era, taking us up to the present day. The three parts are divided into a number of chapters (13 in all), each of which is further subdivided into a collection of themes, issues and/or narratives.

As we might expect, considerable space is devoted to relatively well-known practitioners and innovators, such as Aleister Crowley and Anton LaVey. Yet there is much, much more besides. Readers of RASCEE may be interested to learn how, in Russian folkloric tradition, the Devil was a somewhat clumsy and even comic figure until the spread of prophetic numerological literature in the seventeenth century. This focussed in particular on the year 1666, as it contained 666, the Number of the Beast in the Book of Revelation. Unfortunately, that was when the Russian Orthodox Patriarch Nikon (1605-1681) was introducing liturgical reform. This resulted in a schism with those opposed to the reform, who came to be known as the Old Believers and who accused Nikon of being a Satanist “having made a pact with the Devil and of having regular exchanges with the Evil One” (p. 62). So terrible were the

beliefs the Old Believers held about Nikon (and others, such as the Tsar Alexis I and Peter the Great) whom they deemed the Antichrist, that they were driven to commit suicide by various unpleasant means. Some died of self-starvation, others by drowning, stabbing or burying themselves alive. Between 1675 and 1691, we are told, “around twenty-thousand Old Believers immolated themselves” (p. 63).

But it was not only the fearful Old Believers who were consumed with an interest in Satan. French translations of John Milton’s *Paradise Lost* were to inspire members of the eighteenth century Russian literati. Milton’s Satan was, however, a decidedly preferable Satan to that of the Old Believers. His was a Satan who came to be seen as a noble rebel, hailed by Russian free-thinkers inspired by the French Revolution. By the nineteenth century, the Russian Satan had morphed into a figure both heroic and tragic, or – at other times – an atheistic freethinker. The connection with radical politics continued to find resonance with Russians during the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 and throughout the Soviet period, but how far this involved the actual practice of Satan worship is a moot point.

A further section of the book tells us about the Polish author Stanisław Przybyszewski (1868-1927), who was credited by some as being ‘the first Satanist’. Although it is doubtful how far he himself indulged in organised satanic ritual, there can be little doubt that he influenced a wider satanic scene, including Czech artists interested in esotericism. One of these was Josef Váchel (1884-1969), whose notoriety was due at least in part to his authorship of *The Black Mass*. This interest in Satan led to the rise of a Polish anti-Satanism, which was focussed largely on Czesław Czyński (1858-1932), who, having been expelled from the Martinist Order (into which he had initiated Bolesław Wójcicki) founded the *Ordo Albi Orientis*. Czesław and Wójcicki were reputed to have taken part in all manner of sexual rituals and orgies, and a number of suicides were reported to have taken place, though not to anything like the extent they had occurred among the Old Believers. An anti-Satanist reaction, bearing a close resemblance to the Great Satanist Scare that was to hit the West in the 1980s and early ’90s, resulted in police raids and volumes of press coverage. Numerous *soi-disant* former members of Satanist cults provided stories of the rituals in which they claimed to have taken part. One anonymous eyewitness reported that he was shown into a secret apartment where he met four men in robes and masks:

Inverted triangles hung on the walls, and on one of the walls was an image of Baphomet, i.e. a he-goat sitting on the globe... Three women, ... completely naked except for the faces covered with masks ... lay down ... forming a triangle ... Wójcicki stepped inside it, ignited the incense, and started to tell blasphemous prayers, desecrating the Catholic religion ... he walked to each person present, giving narcotic pills ... [and] recited a hymn to the glory of Satan, asking him to appear among his devotees (pp. 235-6).

Sometime later, Poland was to host a number of Black Metal groups that were associated with Satanism (some of them inspired by Nazism). One of these was The Temple of Infernal Fire; another, Graveland, eventually abandoned Satanism in favour of a vitalistic pagan ideology whilst maintaining a strong anti-Christian stance. Among the most extreme of the Polish Metal groups was Behemoth, whose award-winning album *The Satanist* included titles like *Ora pro nobis Lucifer* and *Messe noire*, and whose frontman, ‘Nergal’, made a habit of destroying Bibles on stage, which did not exactly endear him to Polish anti-Satanists or to the Catholic Church – or, indeed, to activists of the Orthodox Church who were responsible for disrupting concerts and eventually deporting the Behemoth musicians from Russia because, the complaint went, “at concerts they often perform kabbalistic and demonic rituals” (p. 497).

Introvigne's final section poses the question: Will there still be Satanists in 2030 or 2050? His tentative response is that it "will not become a major religious movement, and will remain small in numbers, but will not disappear" (p. 557). It may appear in different forms, such as online Satanism, and it has the advantage over other alternative movements in that Satan's image is immediately understandable, needing no introduction. But, Introvigne argues, returning to the hypotheses underlining his pendulum model:

Satanism is fuelled, if not created, by anti-Satanism, much more than Satanism is generated by a real prominence of Satanism. Anti-Satanism is a manifestation of both Christian and secular fears of modernity and post-modernity. As these fears are not likely to disappear, both anti-Satanism and Satanism will likely remain a small but significant feature of 21st-century religion and esotericism (p. 558).

The volume concludes with 61 pages of 'selected bibliography'; and two indices, 26 pages being devoted to names, and seven to groups and organisations. Given Introvigne's renowned expertise in esoteric art, I was disappointed that there were no pictures (although the cover has a nice Baphomet woodcut). However, given that the book's list price is already €197 / \$255, this is, perhaps, understandable. (Access to the e-book is the same price, possibly with an additional charge for tax). One certainly would not want to encourage libraries to refuse to purchase the book due to its expense. This is a work with a truly fascinating collection of absorbing stories, but it is not just that. Introvigne combines his impressive knowledge of facts, allegations, and pure fabrications with a skilful, and oft-times playful, blending of theoretical analysis and understanding of both the foibles and the extraordinary reaches of the human imagination.

I end with the observation that, if we count the blank sheet at the end, the book covers 666 pages. Is this, I wonder, entirely coincidental?

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