Massimo Introvigne

Satanism: A Social History. Brill: Leiden, 2016. Pp. x + 655. Hb, \$255.

Introvigne's social history of Satanism is a strange book. It is part an encyclopedic tome on satanic cults and beliefs in the European Christian past, and part socio-historical description of recent waves of satanic manifestations, among them the creation of the Church of Satan and performances by Black Metal bands that invoke Satan. I, for one, have not figured out in what sense the book is a social history. Assuming that social history is the research into social change, the social composition of societies, social causes of historical events, or social movements, there is nothing socio-historical about *Satanism*. What the book does, and does well, is to offer readers a survey of past and present beliefs in Satan and cults of Satan. A survey, though, rather than an analysis.

Satanism, as Introvigne argues, is a cultic reality, a social category (be it affirmative or paranoid), and a metaphor. It is neither clear whether people who are accused of Satanism are or are not worshippers of Satan; nor is it obvious when such accusations should be taken literally and when metaphorically. Introvigne raises many intriguing and important questions in the introduction to his book, among them what is the role of the devil in satanic cults? Can satanic cults exist without this figure? What are the historical and social *imaginaires* that give rise to satanic cults? Where should the line be drawn between occultism and Satanism? What are the relations between Satanism and conspiracy theories, past and present? And what are the epistemological and exegetical concerns that should shape our reading of "satanic" sources? It is therefore disappointing that practically none of these topics are being answered.

Introvigne, a practicing Catholic, is well aware of the crucial role of Satan in the long history of Christianity prior to the eighteenth century. In fact, we cannot imagine the Christian Middle Ages without the constant battle against Satan's temptations, and the Great Deceiver, using his male and female minions (the witches), terrorized early modern Christianity to such a degree that more than thirty thousand innocent people were executed for witchcraft. Satan was also a metaphor for things gone bad, and accusations of Satanism were used as a means to get rid of political and economic enemies. Alas, the book skims over the first 1,800 years of European combat against Satan. For Introvigne, Satanism is modern Satanism, and was born with the claim that the French Revolution was the work of Satan. This is an interesting claim to make, but one still ought to articulate the relations between this claim for rebirth and its history. What exactly are the continuities and breaks between modern Satanism and its precedents? By the early nineteenth century, theologians, scholars, philosophers, cranks, radical sectarians, psychopaths, lunatics, magicians, charlatans, and Jesuits had already discussed Satan *ad nauseam*. A thorough discussion of

the way they shaped the modernity of Satanism could have contributed immensely to clearing out some of the confusions Introvigne himself presents, among them, as listed above, the questions of the sincerity of the belief in Satan and the sincerity of the accusations against satanic worshippers.

When it comes to the nineteenth century, the book takes a new life and offers a systematic and detailed description of the different cults, theologies, and the merely weird beliefs that characterized many of the new configurations of satanic groups and churches. Occultism became popular in major European cities, and with it, often, adoption and adaptation of previous anti-Satanic hysterical fantasies, now actually being practiced by Spiritualist acolytes of Satan and by pseudo-scientists interested in hidden powers. At times, anti-Catholics cultivated satanic beliefs and cults; at other times Catholics imagined and even invented cults they could then accuse for all forms of evil. As Introvigne demonstrates, it was not always easy in the nineteenth century to draw the line between followers of Satan, anti-satanic fanatics whose obsession bordered on admiration, and artistic imagination. Nor was it easy to tell whether different spiritualist trends, such as magnetism and Freemasonry, actually promoted occult powers that were presumed to be satanic (especially due to the fact that rival occult sects and trends competed among themselves). And it was also during the nineteenth century that both Satanism and Catholic anti-Satanism became boring. The same stories—be they celebratory or accusatory—reporting bizarre sexual encounters were reported time and again.

For readers of this journal, the Jesuit obsession with Lucifer and the struggle of the Society of Jesus against Freemasonry would, of course, be of interest. Some Jesuits also took part in the cultivation of Catholic esotericism in the nineteenth century, and Introvigne documents their fascination with Satanism. The most engaged involvement of the Society with Satanism was its support of the Freemason-turned-Catholic convert Léo Taxil. Taxil was an anti-clerical author of pornographic novels who became a Freemason before converting to Catholicism and becoming a prolific author of anti-Masonry literature. Patronized by Italian Jesuits, he helped them prove what they had already known about Freemasonry and their sexual perversities. But then, alas, Taxil surprised all by announcing that his conversion was nothing but a hoax, thus exposing his supporters to ridicule. This story, one of numerous anecdotes Introvigne supplies, is entertaining. But does it really tell us something new and important about Satanism? Or on Catholicism? Or anti-Satanism? I doubt it.

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