Satanism in Denmark

Jesper Aagaard Petersen

The phenomenon of Satanism in Denmark should be understood in relation to the basic dichotomy between a ubiquitous Christian mythology of subversive evil and spiritual warfare on one hand and the discourse and practices of self-designated Satanists on the other. For this reason, when discussing contemporary Satanism it should be made clear from the outset whether one is referring to Christian voices and their claims about others, voices within the “satanic milieu” talking about themselves, or reproductions and appropriations of these voices by the media and popular culture (Petersen 2009, 2012). All influence, relate to, and gradually shade into each other; nevertheless, they should be kept analytically separate. In addition, these types should be related to global trends in order to fully appreciate the impact on Danish cases.

Christian and Reactive Paradigmatically Conform Satanism

Up until the mid-1990s, Christian understandings of Satanism as inverted Christianity and immorality dominated the discourse on Satanism in the media and in popular culture (Dyrendal & Lap 2002). Although neither the Satanic Ritual Abuse scare of the United States and the United Kingdom nor the violent church burnings and murders in Norway had any equivalents in Denmark, they were nevertheless reported and reproduced as models of interpretation in small-scale scares over the “occult” and church desecrations in the 1980s and 1990s. It is important to stress, though, that the media generally exercised a critical stance towards religious interpretations; thus Christian counter-cult groups, such as Dialogcenteret (Dialogue Centre International), primarily influenced the media and public education by framing Satanism as a secular psychological and social problem of youth deviance (Dyrendal & Lap 2002: 209, 219, 222).

In this sense, Satanism is conflated with the “occult” and “crime” by coupling it to graveyard and church desecrations and constructing a slippery slope leading from adolescent interest in the occult over participation in “above-ground” groups to a full-time criminal career (e.g., Frederiksen 1999). This interpretation was not entirely hegemonic, as we shall see below, but it has continued
into the present as one available frame in which to conceptualise new and old events. School libraries are still full of Christian books on “the occult”, and the media are still quick to sensationalise even the most speculative link to Satanism.

Within the broader satanic milieu, Black Metal groups and adolescent seekers have appropriated this Christian model, but with a twist: They have allied themselves with the “Prince of Darkness” and his cohorts in the battle against Christianity. In most cases, though, this identification should be considered a rebellious identity-construction or an ironic play with society’s taboos through the model of transgression provided by Norwegian Black Metal’s worship of “Darkness”, rather than a coherent discourse of beliefs, practices, and organisation (Mørk 2009). Thus this first type of self-styled Satanism, which could be termed Reactive paradigmatically conform Satanism, or reactive Satanism for short, covers anti-Christian Devil-worshipers who react to Christianity by conforming to the model of evil provided there and reproduced in popular culture (Petersen 2009: 6–7; Schmidt 2003: 11).

A parallel could be drawn to the historical case of shoemaker Christen Pedersen (Holst 1990: 267–273), who sold his soul to the Devil in September 1634. He did this by signing a Faustian contract to the effect that he was secured economically for life, even quoting passages from the literary antecedent verbatim (the seminal Historia von D. Johann Fausten, published by Johann Spies in 1587, was translated into Danish in 1588). After a complex secular and clerical juridical process, in which he repented, he was finally sentenced to death in 1635, but was released before the verdict could be effectuated. When the self-designation is serious and meaningful, it is necessary to include individuals and informal groups that participate in ostensive performance of myth to get a full picture of the satanic milieu; nevertheless they belong on the periphery and should be considered in a wider cultural rather than a specific satanic context (in contrast to the “counter-theologies” proposed by Sørensen 2006).

Certain figures within the Black Metal scene straddle the fence between Christian myth, adolescent transgression, and the satanic milieu in a narrower sense; the Danish singer King Diamond can serve as one example. He is a long-time member of the American Church of Satan and has participated in media events to promote this understanding of Satanism. At the same time, his bloody and aggressively anti-Christian stage shows can be compared to similar acts within the Heavy Metal scene. Even though these shows contribute to and apparently substantiate the Christian understanding of Satanism, at least on a surface level, they are as ironic as, e.g., Alice Cooper’s (a born-again Christian), and should be understood as reflections on morality and the hypocrisy of Christianity and society, not as Satanism per se. We should not conflate artistic