
The Dragon Rouge is an occultist organization created in Sweden in 1990 by Thomas Karlsson, then little more than a teen-ager who had been reading esoteric literature and had probably been in contact with groups of persons interested in the same subjects. The organization may have had the same sort that countless similar groups have had in Europe and the USA since the 1960s, and especially in the last twenty years. Mostly composed by young men and women attracted by the mysterious lure of the “occult,” who would spontaneously join together in order to give a communal dimension to their interests, it would have been confined to a local dimension and would have probably died out once most of the members had grown up to a more mature age. But things went differently with the Dragon Rouge. On the one hand Karlsson showed obvious abilities as a leader, organizer, and theoretician of the group; on the other there were some fortunate circumstances that helped the organization not only to establish itself steadily in Sweden, but even to extend its influence across the borders of its homeland. This materialised when, in the mid-1990s, a spell of satanic scare struck Sweden. Some Swedish media came across the name of the group and, linking it to Satanism, began to present hostile accounts of its doings. Predictably, the negative reports did nothing but enhance the curiosity for, and consequently the popularity of, the order. All of a sudden, the Dragon Rouge experienced a massive increase in its membership (500 at its peak), which at first even created some problems of management for the leadership. After the media tsunami subsided, the group reorganized itself over a new basis, began to produce a consistent corpus of rituals and teachings, and expanded abroad.

Granholm’s book is actually a Ph.D. dissertation. As is the custom in Finland and in other Scandinavian countries, the dissertation has been published by the local University Press on the occasion of its defence. In the book Granholm presents the first comprehensive account of the history, the structure, the teachings, and the ideology of the order. Moreover, Granholm has not only studied the group from the outside. As has become an accepted practice in the study of New Religious Movements, he has included participant observation among his methods of research. He has therefore joined the group, and the ceremony of his initiation is one of the rituals described in the book. Even if, judging from his own account, he has not advanced very far in the initiatic structure of the order, he has nevertheless spent a great amount of time, over
a period of more than two years, meeting other members and attending courses and ceremonies. This has given him the possibility to build up a unique insight into the workings of the group.

The book is divided into eight chapters. The first one contains a thematic and methodological introduction. Here Granholm discusses at length the research area, the “insider terminology” used throughout the book, and the sources he has gathered during his observation of the group (interviews of members, questionnaires, etc.). Of particular interest is the definition of Left Hand Path (LHP) as a specific way “of relating to and approaching the numinous” (27). Granholm makes it clear that this concept is important in order to understand the identity and the ideology of the group. According to the Dragon Rouge members, the LHP differs from a “Right Hand Path” (pursued by more “mainstream” organizations) because it focuses on “chaos, darkness and freedom,” instead of “order, light and restriction” (28). This explains why the Dragon Rouge prefers to define its ritual practices as “Dark Magic” (opposed to what is defined as a less interesting “Light Magic”: 26).

The same chapter also includes a final section where the author “positions himself.” Granholm honestly admits that, although he has never been attracted by the practical aspects of occultism, “the worldview and the people I have come across during my research represent something compelling to me” (59), and that his interest for the organization is also “personal” (ibid.).

With the following chapter Granholm begins the “descriptive” part of his work, by offering an overview of the historical background of the group, both with respect to the history of esotericism in general, and more particularly to those currents, such as occultism and neopaganism, that are essential for understanding the underlying ideology and the formal structure of the Dragon Rouge. Aleister Crowley, the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn and Kenneth Grant are, among others, opportunely referred to as models and direct sources for the Dragon Rouge. However, one would also expect to find here some references to organized Satanism, with which Dragon Rouge seems to share a certain “air de famille.” Surprisingly enough, Granholm refers to satanic groups only very briefly in discussing the “alternative spiritual milieu” in Sweden (110–111). We will get back to this point later on.

In the following three chapters Granholm offers a multi-layered description of the order focusing on three main aspects: its ideological and philosophical tenets as they are expressed in its official documents; the organizational and initiatic structure (which also includes a profile of the founder, Thomas Karlsson, and a summary of the main events in the history of the order); and, finally, its ritual practices. Granholm’s description of the rituals of the Dragon Rouge is mainly based on his own experiences as participant-observer. This is