The Christian CENTURY

The Selling of Satan in Popular Literature

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SATAN SELLS. Or, at least, Satan is being sold at the local bookstore. Books, audiotapes and videotapes (no flannel graphs yet) shock and frighten us into believing that our society is under siege. We are at war. Evangelical Christians regard the enemy as an actual being, Satan himself. More secular books identify satanic groups, neo-Nazi organizations, child abusers, heavy-metal rock music and "value relativism" as the enemy while avoiding the question of the actual existence of Satan. Both approaches give rise to abhorrence, anxiety and fear.

A number of newly published books reflect the complex web of contemporary Satanism. Although many of these are both informative and discriminating, as a whole the current literature provides little theological guidance for understanding the relationship between radical evil in our society and the dynamics of sin in our own souls and psyches. For example, several books denounce the debauched use of children in pornography, but fail to ask why pornography is a lucrative business in our society. Such questions would drive us to ask about the nature of sin within us and our relationship with our divine creator. Instead of encouraging such probings, the books provide only shocking exposés of social phenomena.

What is the tie between Satan and sin? Satan and Satanism, I believe, are subcategories within the doctrine of sin. Sin starts with anxiety. To be anxious is not in itself sinful; yet, as Reinhold Niebuhr reminds us, anxiety is the breeding ground for sin. Ernest Becker, a social psychologist who sought a "science of evil," argued that human violence is the result of our denial of death—we erect an illusion to conceal the anxiety created by the awareness that we must die. To sustain the illusion that we are immortal, we steal life from other living things. We kill. We kill others emotionally or even literally, hoping to suck their lifeblood for our own vitality. In order to nip the process in the bud, Jesus bluntly tells us to trust God and not be anxious (Matt. 6:25). Trusting God prevents anxiety from turning into sin. Lack of trust in God releases uncontrollable forces that cannot but wreak havoc.

The illusion is propped up by self-justification. This is the religious component of sin. We draw a line between good and evil and then put ourselves on the good side of the line. We declare ourselves righteous. Though we may rise up in anger; though we may declare all our enemies to be evil; though we may march off to war and shed blood by the gallon; though we may belittle, shame and persecute otherwise innocent people, we identify ourselves with the cause of justice. Why? Because our religious consciousness identifies eternal verities such as righteousness or justice with the divine, with that which endures beyond death. Whether we engage in seemingly trivial gossip or actually launch a war against another nation, we do so in good conscience because we have found a way to justify ourselves.

Jesus dubbed this aspect of sin "hypocrisy." Similarly, St. Paul warned against the tendency to justify ourselves when we deliver the gospel; it is God who justifies us, he teaches, not we ourselves. If our justification comes as a gift from God, then we do not need a wall of illusion. If our resurrection comes as a gift from God, then we do not need to steal life from others. Grace undercuts sin by relieving anxiety, and this gives us a profound ability to love.

Now comes the subtle part. Self-justification is a lie. Satan is the "father of lies" (John 8:44). We lie when we wreak destruction on weaker nations while wrapping our-

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selves in the American flag. We lie when we sip our coffee while allowing the impoverished peasants who pick the coffee beans to suffer under oppressive feudal lords, justifying ourselves by the law of supply and demand. We lie when we denounce and belittle our theological opponents as if we alone stand on the side of justice and the liberation of the oppressed. Our sin hides beneath an overlay of symbols that represent what is just and good. Satan is at work, though hidden.

Nonsubtle evil, in contrast to subtle self-justification, comes in the form of Satanism as a religious practice, wherein people engage in deliberate evil while employing the symbols of evil. Sin is pursued in the name of sin. I call this "radical evil." Stealing someone else's lifeblood is here a literal act, and the serving of Satan is considered a source of empowerment that emboldens one to face down the threat of mortality. Satanists are still driven by an unrelieved anxiety, but rather than hide their cruelty they openly pursue their attempts to steal the power of life.

The question as to whether or not the devil exists as a personal being I take to be diversionary. What is theologically decisive is that sin and its fruits of cruelty grow out of our own souls when we are ravaged by anxiety rather than nourished by faith in God. In this sense, Satan stands on each of our doorsteps. We cannot rid ourselves of Satan by simply describing Satanism as a strange phenomenon to be objectively analyzed and combated by law enforcement agencies.

SATANISM AS a social phenomenon is protean, having frequently changed its visage in recent history. One of the various faces of radical evil is classic Satan worship, which probably began in 18th-century France. Satan worship mimics and repudiates everything Christian. These Satanists replace Jesus Christ with the devil as Lord, and the Eucharist with the black mass. This form of Satan worship appears to continue in small, highly secretive groups that have committed torture and ritual murder. Most of them use illegal drugs, as in the 1989 Matamoros murder—the kidnaping and ritual murder of Mark Kilroy and dozens of others by the cult of Adolfo de Jesús Constanzo in Mexico. The purpose of ritual murder and the subsequent eating of human flesh is twofold: to gain power from the victim and to desensitize cult members, readying them for criminal assignments. Though some say classic Satanism has died out, there is evidence that such groups do exist, though I doubt they are organized in any comprehensive way.

Another type is public Satanism. The current tradition started with the teachings of Aleister Crowley (1875-1947), a hedonist who declared himself the beast with the number 666 mentioned in the Book of Revelation and said that Satan's second coming was imminent. The Crowley tradition lives on through the Church of Satan and its founder, Anton Szandor LaVey, who declared in 1966 that the Satanic Age had begun. LaVey served as consultant to the 1968 hit movie *Rosemary's Baby*, about the birth of a Satanic messiah which parodies the birth of Christ. One of LaVey's early disciples, Michael Aquino, broke away to form the Temple of Set, hoping to capitalize on the name of the Egyptian god Set. Contemporary Crowleyism teaches that Christian morality is oppressive because it blocks expression of our more genuinely human propensities for unbridled pleasure through sex and power. These public organizations demand protection from prosecution, claim their First Amendment rights and argue that, regardless of what they teach, they themselves do not engage in criminal activity.

Active in San Francisco in the late 1960s were some people associated with both the Church of Satan and the Church of the Process of the Final Judgment, a group that broke away from Scientology in 1964. Process Church theology tied together Jehovah, Lucifer and Satan. It also reversed the fifth commandment to read, "Thou shalt kill." Although who influenced whom is not yet clear, one notable person on the scene and possibly influenced by the Process Church was Charles Manson, who in 1969 asked his "family" to murder ritually Sharon Tate, the wife of Roman Polanski, director of *Rosemary's Baby*. A decade later the Process Church was implicated in the David Berkowitz "Son of Sam" murders in New York.

Another version of Satanism is practiced by certain lone teenage dabblers. They tend to engage in fantasy games and are preoccupied with heavy-metal rock music, sometimes indulging in drugs and sexual orgies, though not necessarily. Mental-health workers tell me that such teens have a distinct profile: they are loners who begin to explore esoterica by themselves. This may lead to the mail-order purchase of satanic paraphernalia and the reading of LaVey's *Satanic Bible*, which they take with much more seriousness than its author did. Such teens are very susceptible to suicide. They may also team up with friends to experiment with the occult and to engage in such activities as church desecration. In rare cases, dabblers may become serial killers, as did Richard Ramírez, the Night Stalker.

The existence and activity of satanic cults also seems to have surfaced in cases of multiple personality disorder (MPD). Books about MPD and cults have become part of the phenomenon itself. The 1985 paperback republication of *Michelle Remembers*, by Michelle Smith and her psychiatrist, Lawrence Pazder (Pocket Books, 1980), inaugurated a new chapter in the history of Satanism. The book reports what Michelle told Pazder regarding her own experience growing up in a satanic cult during the 1950s on Vancouver Island. She did not consciously remember the horrors she had undergone, but they emerged in psychotherapy.

I recommend a more recent book of the same genre, Judith Spencer's *Suffer the Child* (Pocket Books, 1989). It chronicles the case of Jenny (a pseudonym), a child with MPD who was victimized by a classic satanic cult. Initiated into the cult as a preschooler by her mother, Jenny heard pseudo-scriptures read that blasphemed God and praised Satan. She was taught that the ritual dagger symbolized manhood and the chalice womanhood, and

that she should despise the Christian church. She watched sexual intercourse take place on the devil's altar and witnessed the torture and sacrifice of animals. Occasionally, she and other children would be placed on the altar beneath a priest with a dagger in hand. Scrapings of her skin and blood drawn from her vagina would be eaten and drunk by those participating in the drug-frenzied ritual. On one occasion Jenny apparently participated in the ritual murder of a woman. The book's title comes from the priest's corruption of Jesus' words when inviting Jenny into marriage with the devil—"Suffer the little children to come unto me, for of such is the kingdom of hell."

> Contemporary literature provides almost no healthy theological guidance for understanding radical evil.

This story was discovered through an interrogation of the 400 personalities that speak with Jenny's voice. The current theory is that the physical and psychic pain must have been so overwhelming that, to protect itself, the psyche fractured, isolating pieces of the self from the suffering. MPD therapy seeks either to integrate the various personalities or, as in the case of *The Three Faces of Eve*, to isolate one as the sole personality.

The only evidence we have for satanic activity in *Michelle Remembers*, *Suffer the Child* and a few hundred similar publicized cases is from testimony given in psychotherapy. No independent witnesses or law enforcement investigators provide corroboration. The next step in research should be to investigate—with the skills of a discipline other than psychotherapy—the role that therapy itself plays in the MPD phenomenon.

These stories have influenced popular conceptions of Satanism. Sandi Gallant of the San Francisco Police Department heard the authors of *Michelle Remembers* at one of their West Coast speaking tour stops in 1985. She applied their observations to her own investigation of missing-children cases and concluded, with no empirical evidence, that satanic cults had kidnapped many of the disappeared children for ritual purposes. After doing some research, Gallant typed up a brief police manual on satanic crime, including a half dozen pages cataloging satanic symbols. She told investigators that if they found some of these symbols associated with a crime they should suspect satanic involvement. Her photocopied and stapled manual was sent first to the Los Angeles Police Department, which applied it to graffiti of a local gang, the Stoners. The Baldwin Park Police reproduced the manual and then it passed from one police department to another until it was eventually distributed around the nation.

Gallant's report failed to discriminate outright devil worship from neopaganism, which is a more generic nature religion. Representatives of Wicca—neopagan goddess worshipers and witchcraft practitioners—told Gallant that they do not advocate criminal activity. Gallant learned from the conversation and began to draw the distinction. In the half decade since, she has matured in many of her assessments. But it is too late to retrieve the near-ubiquitous police manual. So with minimal information police everywhere believe they are pursuing an epidemic of cult crime. The mixture of media attention plus the vituperations of outraged preachers has wrought widespread confusion and misunderstanding.

Desperately needed are investigators who will take the best of existing information and try to find out just how widespread satanic activity is, whether the accounts given by MPD victims can be corroborated, to what extent drug traffickers and pornographers rely on satanic ritual, and similar matters. Without further knowledge we will be carried away by hype and emotion.

TWO RECENT books help fill the information gap. Jeffrey Burton Russell's *Prince of Darkness: Radical Evil and the Power of Good in History* (Cornell University Press, 1988) remains the best historical treatment of belief in Satan from biblical to modern times. Russell, a professor at the University of California at Santa Barbara, gives us a scholarly yet readable account of the idea of the devil in Scripture, the patristics and medieval literature, the Reformation, and in modern times beginning with the French Revolution. Carl A. Raschke's *Painted Black* (Harper San Francisco, 1990) complements Russell's work by adding a forceful yet factual survey of contemporary Satanism in North America. Raschke, a University of Denver professor of religion, was one of the first scholars to make clear the connection between New Age spirituality and ancient gnosticism in *The Interruption of Eternity* (Nelson-Hall, 1980). In *Painted Black* Raschke details the ritual murders at Matamoros and elsewhere, and points out important connections between Satanism and drug traffic. These two valuable books are strong on information but disappointingly weak in their philosophical or theological explanation of Satanism.

A less valuable book in this same category is Arthur Lyons's *Satan Wants You* (Warner, 1988), an updated version of his 1970 paperback *The Second Coming: Satanism in America*. Lyons chronicles the history of the devil and discusses contemporary Satanism, but his historical treatment is so biased against the Christian church that the reader finds it easy to sympathize with the devil and his followers' righteous rebellion. Whenever evil is made to look good, I get nervous. Also, Lyons virtually dismisses the criminal acts of contemporary satanic individuals and organizations as "urban legends," as media hype. There is no reconciling Raschke's data with Lyons's interpretation.

Books with a distinctively Christian agenda require particular attention. Readers must be wary of books that lump together the New Age movement and Satanism, as if the former derives from the latter. I have studied the New Age for more than a decade and have found no

inherent connection. There are occasional overlaps, such as in the Temple of Set, but it is quite possible to engage in New Age practices and completely avoid the satanic. Though I do not plan to defend New Age spirituality here, I do oppose assessing guilt by association. The worst offender and perhaps the mother of the contemporary genre is Constance Cumbey's *Hidden Dangers of the Rainbow: The New Age Movement and Our Coming Age of Barbarism* (Huntington House, 1983), which describes the New Age as not only satanic but also Nazi-like and anti-Semitic. More recently, in *Dark Secrets of the New Age* (Crossway, 1987), Texe Marrs has written that "the leaders of the New Age World Religion are Satan's generals and admirals." Those who associate the New Age with Satanism have their facts wrong. I surmise these authors connect the two only in order to frighten their audience into rejecting everything they themselves reject.

I am also disturbed by those who associate everything unconventional with the devil's work. When people see through this sham, they may also dismiss the idea of radical evil itself. Radical evil does exist, and must be taken with utter seriousness. But if we so trivialize evil by identifying it with every point of view with which we disagree, we may not recognize Satan when he appears.

Characteristic of the tendency to overgeneralize is John Charles Cooper's *Black Mask: Satanism in America Today* (Revell, 1990). Cooper tries to mobilize Christians against diabolical forces that have infiltrated our nation. He describes Satanism with appropriate drama: it is "political rebellion, ethical inversion, religious heresy, and suicidal self-loathing, all mingled in one great taunting gesture of obscenity, thrown in the face of the universe." Everywhere today, he adds, such Satanism is seducing our youth into antisocial and criminal activity through books, movies, drugs and the "new morality."

The culprit, says Cooper, is hedonism. "The real influence of contemporary antisocial and criminal events is the spirit of the age in which we live." This "spirit of the age" he dubs "the contrapuntal tradition" and sees it represented by such phenomena as extremist feminism, gay liberation, the sanctioning of abortion, destruction of the family and the return of occultism in the New Age movement. "Popular culture, the way we see ourselves and the way we are with one another, is the source of satanic activity, not some organized conspiracy."

This book proceeds on an enigmatic train of doublethink—it affirms and denies the same things. For example, Cooper claims he wishes not to sensationalize Satanism. Yet the book is billed as an exposé and reports on case after case of lurid cruelty and sacrilege. Although denying that the occult or New Age and Satanism are connected, he sweeps them all up into broad denunciations of the silly hedonism that bankrupts the spiritual life of our country. He describes alleged ritual practices such as baby sacrifice in revolting detail, but then admits that there is insufficient evidence to prove that anyone has practiced such acts. He also describes the actions of serial killers such as Manson and Berkowitz, but admits that most serial killers are loners while most Satanists are groupies—indicating that there is only a loose tie between the two phenomena.

Cooper is a veteran writer and does include some accurate and pertinent information. His chapter on the history of Satanism, which includes data on its rise during Louis XIV's reign in France, is especially interesting. Unfortunately, the helpful information is so mixed with diatribes against the New Age, the occult and feminism that the reader might mistakenly conclude that all these deserve the same denunciation on the same grounds.

BOOKS TO AVOID, if one seeks accurate information and a discriminating perspective, include *Devil on the Run,* by Nicky Cruz (Dove, 1989). The author, famed for his dramatic conversion to Christ (narrated in *The Cross and the Switchblade),* blames his own temptations to commit murder on everything that the evangelical magisterium bans: magic, astrology, reincarnation, gurus, spiritualism, inner visions, mystic auras, astral travel, witchcraft or "anything of the kind. All of it is from below, not from above—from the devil, not from God." Cruz even indicts UFOs and Steven Spielberg's movie *E. T.* for being "manipulated by evil forces."

Bob Larson's *Satanism: The Seduction of America's Youth* (Thomas Nelson, 1989) is not much better. He warns teenagers of the dangers of drugs and heavy-metal music (as he should, because the dangers are there), but then goes on to condemn parapsychology and New Age practices as doors to Satanism. He offers no evidence beyond guilt by association. *Satanism*, by Ted Schwarz and Duane Empey (Zondervan, 1988), and *The Edge of Evil: The Rise of Satanism in North America*, by Jerry Johnston (Word, 1989), deserve good marks for their informative case-by-case descriptions of contemporary Satanism (the latter book is better organized than the former). Yet these two works lack a theory of evil that deals with the internal dimensions of sin. Thus they describe Satanism as a mere external social phenomenon that we should fear only if it drifts into our neighborhood.

The literature is not all bad, by any means. A Trojan horse for sane and discriminating insight in the citadel of

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Triumphs

These are the triumphs
Which bring us, half-smiling,
To the mirror each morning:

Beetles surviving a sidewalk,
Two lovers touching a wildflower
But not picking it.
Ink leaving a pen.

David Abrams

anti-Satan literature is a book by British writer Nigel Wright: *The Satan Syndrome* (Zondervan, 1990). This is solid theology in popular form, although unfortunately written in exclusive language. Wright has carefully thought out the dynamics of evil and a theology of the devil. He starts by stating the dilemma: post-Enlightenment people must not disregard the devil, as if he were solely part of an outdated myth-oriented epoch, but they must also avoid becoming overly fascinated with demonic forces and thereby grant them more power than they deserve. Should we believe in the devil? Yes and no; yes, we should believe that the devil exists as a supra-individual, even transcendent force that presses us toward evil. No, we should not believe in the devil in the sense of granting him the trust and affirmation that belong strictly to God. "The devil should be the object of disbelief," Wright declares. Is the devil personal? No, only God is personal. Satan is subpersonal because he thrives on destroying what has been created, personality included. Yet—and here is another dilemma—the language we use personifies this otherwise depersonalizing force. By referring to the devil as "he" or "him" we impute a dignity he does not deserve. Nevertheless, we may continue to speak this way if for no other reason than Jesus and the New Testament writers used such personal pronouns when speaking of the devil.

Wright distinguishes evil from the "shadow." Partly agreeing with Augustine's *privatio boni* and Karl Barth's notion of evil as nothingness, Wright emphasizes that evil stands in total opposition to the holy being of God. Nothing about evil can be transmuted into something good. The shadow, on the other hand, is different. Although rejecting Carl Jung's enthronement of the shadow in the being of God, Wright likes the concept. The shadow may be dark, but in itself it is not evil. It refers to the experiences and suffering we undergo that cause us difficulty, but from which we emerge as better people. Wright accepts such things as decay and death as part of God's good creation and not the product of the fall. Thus the shadow contributes to healthy soul-making. We can benefit from the shadow, but we can never benefit from outright evil. What, then, is the relationship? "Evil uses the shadow as an alibi." Evil hides behind the shadow, deceiving us into thinking the two are identical, thereby inducing toleration of evil. Wright, however, has no toleration for evil. "Evil is that power at work in the world about which nothing good should be said or thought. For this irrational, absurd and destructive power, human beings should entertain nothing but scorn."

"Guilty . . . until proven guilty."

The book also offers insights into military metaphors. We are at war with the forces of evil; we seek the devil's defeat—but these military metaphors harbor a danger. The language, mentality and posture of spiritual warfare may tempt us to confuse our true enemy with the people whom God enjoins us to love. We may identify evil structures as satanic and then feel justified in persecuting the people involved in those structures. Wright uses the witch hunts and homophobia as examples of cases where faithful Christians have behaved lovelessly by demonizing homosexuals and certain women and then seeking victory over them. Such moral triumphalism betrays the gospel. In using the language of war we risk losing our feeling for the finer qualities of justice, truth, mercy and gentleness and fail to see that spiritual warfare is waged precisely through these qualities. Spiritual warfare is somewhat analogous to battle, to be sure; but it is essentially different.

Wright pleads that we not fill our atmosphere with demons and devils that are not there. He calls for thoughtful discernment, for rational analysis in the pursuit of truth. If the devil be the "father of lies," then speaking the truth is necessary for unmasking the lies. "Enthusiasm and assertiveness are no substitute for clarity and persuasiveness of argument." This book helps us to think the right way.

Wright is right: we need to think. We also need moral resolve. In addition, we need theological leaders who will help us to assess the significance of our current situation. Evil is subtle. It involves lies, even lies to ourselves. We have not truly addressed the topic of the Prince of Darkness if we treat it merely as an objective phenomenon, as one crime among others that involves only those people we read about in the newspaper. We make matters worse when we dub it a massive social phenomenon that we, the presumably right-minded citizens, should try to wipe out with new legislation or better law enforcement or vigorous church activity. The subtlety slips away. When we speak of the devil, there is always a subjective dimension, a hook within each of our own souls. The bookstores have yet to put on the shelves a volume that provides an accurate description of the breadth and seriousness of Satan-related crime combined with an exposition of the inner workings of our own soul that will not easily let us off the hook. ■