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Modern Satanism: Anatomy of a Radical Subculture. Chris Mathews. Praeger Publishers. 2009. 246 pages. Hardback \$49.95 USD; £34.95 GBP. ISBN: 0-313-36639-X. ISBN-13: 978-0-313-36639-0.

An introduction typically provides a reader with a more or less adequate sense of an book's topic and general orientation. Sometimes, however, a book's conclusion provides a better key for understanding an author's perspective. Chris Mathews' *Modern Satanism: Anatomy of a Radical Subculture* is a case in point. Though his introduction gives one the impression that the author is taking a balanced approach to his subject, Mathews structures his argument like an approaching storm, gradually building his rhetorical assault on contemporary Satanism until he concludes with a harsh attack:

Its key doctrines are not just odious and repugnant, they are demonstrably false. It is an immature, intolerant, and hateful ideology.... [We must] affirm the right of critics to subject Anton Szandor LaVey's crypto-fascist ideology and its various permutations to a rigorous critique and ultimately declare it intellectually, scientifically, and morally bankrupt. (pp. 204-205)

A second reason I would recommend beginning with this book's conclusion is because the reader will quickly discover that the author is equally dismissive of Christianity, though Mathews saves his rhetorical flourishes for LaVey and LaVey's spiritual heirs. While earlier chapters of *Modern Satanism* present some relevant phases of Christian history in a less-than-complimentary light, it is not until several pages before the end that the author accuses Christianity of "promoting base assumptions about the world that do not accurately reflect reality" (p. 203) (a nicer way of saying "demonstrably false"). He also links Christianity with Satanism by asserting that "Many Satanic beliefs are identical to those of other conservative religious figures," specifically conservative Christian figures (p. 204).

I have to confess that when I received a copy of *Modern Satanism*, one of the first things I did was to locate my name in the index and read Mathews' critique of my work on contemporary Satanism. I immediately felt compelled to respond by giving *Modern Satanism* a positive or, at the very least, a neutral review to avoid the impression that I was 'getting back at' Mathews. I should also note that, as a general principle, I think

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book reviews should, in most cases, focus on providing overviews rather than critiques of new publications. However, the more I read, the more I was forced to conclude that *Modern Satanism* was in many ways a deeply flawed volume. Before proceeding to a critique, I will first provide a brief overview of the book's contents.

After a promising introduction focusing on LaVey, Mathews spends the next two chapters, "The Morning Star" and "Baleful Eyes," providing several different historical backdrops for modern Satanism. For readers with an interest in LaVeyan Satanism, Chapters Three and Five, "The Black Pope" and "Satanic Legions" constitute the meat of the book. Chapter Four, "Man, the Animal," presents an analysis and critique of social Darwinism. Chapter Six, "The Left Hand Path," is partly an examination of the LHP tradition in relation to LaVeyan Satanism, and partly the first stage of a heavy-handed critique of modern Satanism's connection with Nazi fascism and racist neo-Paganism. Chapter Seven, "In the Company of Killers," begins with a summary of the Satanic Ritual Abuse (SRA) scare. Though the author does not directly link LaVeyan Satanism to SRA hysteria, he criticizes Satanic ethics as failing to appropriately distance modern Satanism from Satanic crime. Chapter Eight, "The Plague of Nazism," expands on the theme of the links between Satanism and Nazism, while Chapter Nine, "Natural Born Satanists," explores the defective psychology Mathews sees as characterizing Satanists (e.g., "a high incidence of narcissistic personality disorders," p. 91). Chapter Ten, "Apocalypse Cheerleaders," examines Satanism's impact on popular culture, particularly heavy metal music. Finally, the book's conclusion, "Worst Case Scenario: Satanism, Egalitarianism, Darwinism, Atheism, and Nihilism," restates some of the author's criticisms of Satanism and adds a few more, such as imputing the aforementioned link between Satanists and Christians.

The first couple of chapters are generally acceptable. The two chapters that actually focus on modern Satanism would have been more acceptable if written by a journalist, and if the book itself had been presented as a work of journalism rather than as a scholarly work. Also, the fourth chapter might be useful for readers who have ever wondered why social Darwinism was relegated to the dustbin of history. Finally, the balance of the volume would be quite helpful for readers interested in acquiring information for the purpose of reinforcing negative stereotypes about modern Satanists. The author's critique of Satanism almost completely overwhelms all other information contained in second half of the book.

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I have already quoted one example of Mathews' overheated rhetoric. In other places in *Modern Satanism*, he dismisses *The Satanic Bible* as "jejune" (p. 77) and characterizes many Satanists as suffering from "narcissistic personality disorders and a tenuous attachment to reality" (p. 91). In yet other colorful passages, he describes Satanic ideology as "stupefyingly superficial" (p. 174) and "fundamentally parasitic and hypocritical" (p. 199), and Satanic ethics as "jingoistic nihilism" (p. 198) or, alternately, as "sophomoric moral nihilism" (p. 202).

However, the most problematic aspect of the book's argument is the author's portrayal of modern Satanism as a "dangerous" ideology that "legitimizes and glorifies violence" (p. 79). The many pages devoted to linking Satanism with racism and fascism help to fill out and concretize this portrayal. Paradoxically, however, in his chapter on the SRA scare, Mathews quotes from Kenneth Lanning's important 1989 FBI report where Lanning bluntly concludes that, "far more crime and child abuse has been committed by zealots in the name of God, Jesus, and Mohammed than has ever been committed in the name of Satan" (cited in Mathews, p. 126). With the exception of violence associated with Scandinavian Black Metal Satanists (a category of Satanists emphatic about *distancing* themselves from LaVey¹), Mathews is unable to refer to concrete incidents of Satanic violence – though he does try to assign LaVey a share of the blame for validating murderers like Richard Ramirez (pp. 130-131).

As for connecting Satanism with Nazism and neo-fascist political views, Mathews refers to my research on contemporary Satanists – which found that 22% of respondents identified as Democrats or Greens² – and then proceeds to dismiss my findings because they undermine his portrayal of most Satanists as potentially violent right-wingers (pp. 171-172). However, by happy coincidence, I am currently in the middle of conducting a new survey that, among other things, extends my prior observations on the political preferences of Satanists. As of today (9 August 2009), I have received 169 responses to a new online questionnaire. Out of the 166 people who answered the 'political orientation' item, 49 self-identified as non-political (many of these were teenagers, not yet old enough to vote), 24 as libertarian, 18 as socialist, 14 as left-liberal, 19 as independent, 11 as right-conservative, 7 as far right, and 24 as 'other.' In another part of the new questionnaire, I explicitly asked respondents about their attitudes to a variety of different phenomena, including Nazism and neo-Nazis. Out of 163 Satanists who responded to this item, 76 were extremely negative, 35 negative, 32 neutral, 12 positive, and 8 extremely

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positive. In other words, two-thirds of my current sample expressed either a negative or an extremely negative evaluation of Nazism. These statistics speak for themselves.

At this point one might legitimately ask, Where did the author of *Modern Satanism* go wrong? Beyond the problems created by framing this phenomenon in moralistic terms, a major issue is that he apparently never communicated, even by email, with a single Satanist – and as anyone with fieldwork experience could have told him, it is always more difficult to stereotype a group after one has met living, breathing participants. An aspect of this problem is that Mathews' graduate training was in philosophy (he holds an MA in philosophy from the University of Auckland), and philosophy is not a fieldwork-oriented discipline.

A more serious problem than not communicating with Satanists, however, is that Mathews seems never to have contacted any of the scholars who actually study modern Satanism. Had he done so, even briefly, Mathews could have avoided the many glaring omissions that informed readers will immediately notice in *Modern Satanism*. I was particularly surprised to find no mention of either Graham Harvey's 1995 essay, "Satanism in Britain Today," or Bill Ellis' important books. Also, his critique of LaVey would have benefited greatly had Mathews consulted John Smulo's work, such as Smulo's "Christ's Advocate: An Incarnational Apologetic to Satanism," which has been available online for the past five years. Additionally, he seems to be completely unaware of my other writings on Satanism beyond the three papers he was able to find online. Because my email is prominently displayed at the beginning of my online *Marburg Journal of Religion* articles on Satanism, Mathews could easily have contacted me about his project.

Finally, had Mathews not been afraid of being contaminated by communicating with serious scholars of Satanism, he would have been informed about forthcoming publications, such as my and Jesper Aagaard Petersen's *Encyclopedic Handbook of Satanism* (2008) – which probably appeared while *Modern Satanism* was already in production – Petersen's *Contemporary Religious Satanism* (2009), and Petersen's insightful contribution to *Sacred Schisms* (2009). New religions scholars are generally not a stingy bunch, so Mathews would likely have been able to have obtained draft copies of forthcoming chapters – which would have considerably enhanced the authority of his book.

I could call Mathews to task on innumerable other issues, such as his failure to mention Paul Heelas' notion of 'self-spirituality' – a key concept in many analyses of

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contemporary Satanism – but at this point I would be beating the proverbial dead horse. A final problem I will mention is that in a number of places Mathews commits the same logical errors he criticizes in others. Thus, for example, in *Modern Satanism*'s next-to-last endnote, he criticizes Christian apologists for committing the fallacy of *argumentum ad consequentiam*, meaning such apologists argue that a premise is true or false – in this case, the truth or falsity of the “revelation of Christ” (p. 234) – based on whether or not the premise has desirable consequences. However, in numerous places throughout *Modern Satanism*, Mathews rejects Satanism's principles as false, partly because “none provide any basis for maintaining a stable, civilized society” (p. 136). In other words, he deploys exactly the same kind of flawed logic against Satanists that he criticizes when utilized by Christian apologists. On this point and others, Mathews wades into self-contradictions that result in his own arguments eating themselves.

Except for scholars who have research interests that focus specifically on contemporary Satanism, I cannot recommend *Modern Satanism: Anatomy of a Radical Subculture*. Readers should instead save their money for Petersen's *Contemporary Religious Satanism: A Critical Anthology*, reviewed elsewhere in the current issue of this journal.

References

1. In this regard, refer to Didrick Söderlind and Asbjørn Dyrendal, “Social Democratic Satanism? Some Examples of Satanism in Scandinavia,” in Jesper Aagaard Petersen, ed. *Contemporary Religious Satanism: A Critical Anthology* (Ashgate 2009), p. 157.
2. James R. Lewis, “Who Serves Satan? A Demographic and Ideological Profile.” *Marburg Journal of Religious Studies* 6:2. (2001).

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