

ONE SATANISM OR MORE SATANISMS

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1. Introduction

Satanists with vague or even lacking definitions of their philosophy are not far between. These individuals are often quite willing to accept several definitions of “true Satanism” as equally valid, usually arguing that Satanism is about choosing one’s own philosophy and one’s own norms.

But then why call one’s philosophy Satanism? If all the word implies is an individual approach, then why not just refer to oneself as an independent individualist? It would, after all, remove the confinement of being linked with a concept that most other people scorn. It is tempting to suggest that perhaps their openness to a liberal definition is a sign of apathy, or a sign that their own definition is unclear. If either of these possibilities is the reason for accepting multiple definitions, is it then meaningful to declare oneself a Satanist? This article attempts to answer this question.

2. Isms, Words, and Concepts

The word “Satanism” can be divided into the prefix “Satan” and the suffix “ism.” The suffix indicates ways acting or thinking, or a spiritual or ideological movement originating in a concept of “Satan.” This fact alone does not lead to an interpretation of “Satan,” nor does it indicate which phenomenon “Satanism” covers, however.

A closer look at the word is needed to properly decode its meaning. To begin with, it is of paramount importance to distinguish between two coexisting interpretations that should never be mixed or confused with each other.

1. The word Satanism refers to an imagined subversive, anti-Christian conspiracy that is controlled by, or in league with, the Devil. This definition can easily be dismissed as mere imagination, however, for two evident reasons. Firstly, the definition requires the phenomenon to exist (which it does not), and secondly, the phenomenon is presented in vague and contradictory terms. This definition is thus pure imagination, and does not describe an existing phenomenon.

2. The word refers to a philosophy, ideology or religion that is shared by groups of self-declared Satanists. Various such groups provide different definitions that, to a varying degree, oppose each other. We are thus dealing with several definitions of which some may be classified as philosophies or religions.

With these two commonly confused interpretations properly separated, the definition of the term “Satanism” can be narrowed by examining the integrity of some of the most common statements.

“Anything Is Satanic”

The statement is found among both self-declared Satanists claiming that whatever they happen to be doing is Satanic by definition, and non-Satanists asserting that, e.g., black clothes or role playing games are Satanic.

If Satanism is defined such that anything is Satanic, the term loses defining power. It is meaningless to use a definition if it does not establish a dichotomy, that is, if it does not determine when certain attributes are present or not. For example, it makes no sense to speak about birds unless one is able to explain whether an object is a bird or something else. Hence, the statement “I am a Satanist” becomes meaningless if Satanism means anything. The statement expresses nothing.

“Anything Called Satanism Is Satanism”

This statement is redundant, because its predicate is contained by the subject. The statement may be compared to the statement: “all felines are members of the cat family.” While the statement may help explain the word “feline” to a child, the statement does not clarify what precisely a feline is, because knowing that the word “feline” implies “member of the cat family,” the statement provides no new information. In the former statement, “anything called Satanism is Satanic,” term and description are identical, and neither are defined.

The statement dilutes the definition to such a degree that it loses all descriptive power. In addition, the statement focuses entirely on the expressions and ignores—or forgets—its existence. If one were to claim that “anything called birds are birds,” the statement would be evidently wrong (an elephant does not turn into a bird just because someone calls it a bird), and this is obviously also true for the statement “anything called Satanism is Satanism.” If one was to use the word “bird” about anything other than birds, the person doing so would be accused of either not knowing what the word meant or of using it improperly. A term cannot be used in practice unless proper rules exist for valid and invalid uses of the word, because the otherwise the term would be meaningless.

Incidentally, in practice the statement “anything called Satanism is Satanism” and the statement “anything is Satanic” are identical, because virtually everything has been deemed Satanic at some point.

“Anyone Who Calls Himself a Satanist Is a Satanist”

This expression, too, is redundant. No new information is offered with the proclamation that someone that calls himself a Satanist is a Satanist, except perhaps that the person considers himself or herself one.

The statement only explains what the person calls himself or herself, but it does not explain how the person acts or what the person thinks, and can therefore hardly be descriptive as an -ism.

For a definition that is based only on description and not on content, it is just the use of the particular word “Satanist” that makes the difference. This implies that if a parrot was taught to say “I’m a Satanist,” this skill would make the parrot qualify as one. (If one became a physician by just calling oneself a physician, people might think twice before visiting their physician.)

If one chooses this definition of Satanism, one must accept the fact that no individual can make particular claim to the title as a Satanist. One may acknowledge the fact that some have better knowledge of various groups and their interpretations of Satanism, but it will not make sense to state that Anton LaVey is better suited for the title than a confused teen-age boy.

The definition also implies that *The Satanic Bible* has no more importance than graffiti with anti-Christian slogans, and that it is not possible to determine whether homicide, suicide, human sacrifice, theft, rape, and other crime can be linked with Satanism. The only criterion is that just one individual declares that such acts are Satanic. It is also impossible to answer questions about the Satanic philosophy.

3. Criteria for an Objective Definition

Satanism can only be defined meaningfully if the term describes a concept that can be distinguished from other concepts. It means that the definition must be narrow enough to become distinctive. In short, the definition must provide a means of determining when something is Satanism and when it is not.

Objective research imposes a limit on the phenomena that are included within one’s scope. Furthermore, a subdivision into various categories of Satanism may be necessary, unless the initial definition is very exclusive, because it may not always be possible to meaningfully group all the phenomena included in the research together.

Here, too, it is of utmost importance to properly explain the subdivisions and not to mix two

subcategories. It is possible to have multiple meanings of a word, but in that case their meanings must be defined independently. A “bat” is both an winged mammal and a wooden club, for example, but a baseball player striking the ball with the animal would probably not bat a home run, and animals are not made of wood. Both uses of the word “bat” are correct, but the uses only make sense when the two meanings are kept separate and the specific meaning is revealed by the context. In most cases it would lead to meaningless and contradictory statements if such different meanings of a word were mixed, as if used to describe the same phenomenon. In the case of Satanism, it is typically Christian myths that must be kept away from existing philosophies and ideologies.

If nonetheless some general statements about Satanism are desired, one should weigh observations according to the sizes of the Satanic groups and which sources are taken seriously by most Satanists. General statements must necessarily be deduced from general tendencies, not sensational anecdotes. Descriptions of Satanism as an existing phenomenon must be derived from those thoughts and actions that can be found among existing Satanists. Accepting Christian myths about Satanism as a self-contained “type of Satanism” is tantamount to considering anti-Semitic statements constituent of a “type of Judaism.”

4. Criteria for a Subjective Definition

If Satanists are to define their own philosophy, the Satanists must determine which key elements distinguish Satanism from other philosophies or religions. In addition, the Satanists must determine which areas of their lives Satanism applies to. Does Satanism include philosophy, religion and politics, or does it apply only to life style or dress code? Do the Satanists choose Satanism as a philosophy or just a cool label? The Satanists must decide whether the term “Satanist” is a word that is used without meaning, or whether it adequately sets the stage for their philosophy. This demand also applies when others call themselves Satanists. If the term does not describe anything tangible, it doesn’t describe anything at all.

Groups that define their own form of Satanism do not necessarily consider everything else un-Satanic. Few concepts are black and white, and the groups could easily find “degrees of Satanism” in other philosophies. Certain elements may be considered irrelevant; for example, one may find atheism much more relevant for one’s definition than a particular dress code.

In spite of these open borders towards other definitions of Satanism, each Satanist must eventually recognize that he or she is being subjective and considers some definitions better than others. If nothing else, the Satanist has pieced together his or her personal philosophy in a way that is most meaningful to the Satanist. Other definitions will vary from that definition, and compared to those definitions, one’s own definition will (at least subjectively) be considered superior.

5. Which Definition Is Best?

To answer the question of which definition of Satanism is the best one, it is necessary to evaluate its degree of selfcontradiction and its clarity of concepts. If a definition cannot provide a concept that can be distinguished from other concepts, as happens if the definition is too broad, the definition is useless or deficient at best. If the definition involves mutually exclusive constructs, then the concept does not provide any clarification.

Furthermore, if Satanism is to be accepted as a philosophy, it must be defined according to the usual requirements of a philosophy. Among other requirements, Satanism must consider the fundamental philosophical questions, and a philosophical method must be applied in arguments. If these requirements are not met, either the definition does not define a philosophy, or the philosophy is primitive and lacks substance.

Defining Satanism as inverse Christianity or as anything called Satanism does not meet any of the above requirements.

A poor definition does not prevent a group from using the definition, but the group will soon find itself responding to criticism by stating that the critics lack proper understanding or that inconsistencies are part of a larger whole, or by modifying the definition ad hoc to meet the criticism, then claiming that the definition always did.

6. Other “Satan” Groups

It is remarkable that some Satanists that usually imagine themselves as authorities on questions of values and moral are very hesitant to entering a debate when another Satanist considers something “Satanic.” Satanists, in particular, would be thought to question everything, so could it really be that the Devil’s advocates are fooled when the defendant pretends to be like-minded?

There is no reason to trust other groups, just because they refer to themselves as Satanists. Many such groups are so different that they can be either atheistic or theistic, and their paradigms can be quite incompatible.

In practice, Satanism represents a plurality of definitions where “Satanism” is the only common denominator, and where often a Satanic group has more similarities with other religions and philosophies than with other groups claiming to be Satanic.

Comparisons between Satanic groups can be made from symbols and mythology, and from philosophical content. Different Satanic groups sport Christian, Norse, Buddhist, or Egyptian mythology and symbolism, and there are groups that use either Western paradigms or Eastern teachings. Some groups are best classified as religious groups, whereas other groups are better categorized as philosophies or maybe just youth subcultures.

Plurality of definitions under one umbrella religion is a common phenomenon; for example, Christianity alone counts more than 25,000 different interpretations. Yet all of these groups base their ideology on the same one book, the same one mythology, and to a certain extent the same fundamental statements. Satanism does not have such fundamental constraints, however, allowing a much wider plurality. In fact, the odds of agreeing with any arbitrarily selected Satanic group are probably about the same as those of agreeing with any other random religion or philosophic grouping.

Hence, if one adopts a reasonably unambiguous definition of the essentials of Satanism, one is forced to reject certain groups as Satanic, or at least consider them other kinds of Satanists that use the term differently. They must be considered wholly separate phenomena that have no relevance for one’s own definition of Satanism.

7. Corollaries of Definition

When Christians describe Satanism, usually they base the definition of their own religious world-view, which often prompts them to consider other religions, popular culture (such as rock n’ roll music), other Christian groups, political systems, atheists, feminists, vegetarians, homosexuals, etc. to be Satanists. The definitions fit their own world-view, but do not meet the demands of science. Hence, their definitions should be regarded as religious statements that demonize phenomena that are incompatible with their world-views.

A sociological view starts with groups that use the term about themselves and those phenomena that the groups consider covered by the term. The next step is to separate myth from existing groups, and variance from norm. First then is it possible to say anything meaningful. The sociological description of Satanism will influence public opinion, and may be used in a legal context where Satanic connections are postulated, or where fundamental rights of Satanists are violated.

When Satanists describe Satanism, they define their philosophy. It means that they adopt issues that they consider positive or at least rational. Their definitions influence their own understanding of Satanism, but also influence society around them if they propagate information through interviews or homepages. If one considers the way clearly boundable concepts such as “jews” or

“blacks” have been viewed throughout History, it is evident that public opinion has immense importance. Negative prejudice has caused persecution, genocide and slavery.

From the perspective of self-preservation, it is absolutely stupid when some Satanists publicly connect their own philosophy with groups that are criminals or advocate crime, especially if the particular group of Satanists does not itself support such initiatives. It may be fun as a “chick effect” if one is a confused teen, but as an adult with a professional career it is highly disadvantageous. If Satanism were as groups such as “Order of Nine Angels” claim, Satanism would be outlawed, children of Satanists would be forcefully removed, and the Satanists themselves would be given mental treatment. Fortunately, Satanism is not like that, and groups such as “Order of Nine Angels” are a parody at best, and never acted as they claimed. Supporting positions that counteract one’s own position or undermine one’s ability to lead a proper life is self-destructive. If a Satanist supports such groups as “a part of Satanism” in spite of disagreeing with the philosophies of such groups, the Satanist has a confused definition of Satanism and maybe harbors a secret wish for self-destruction. Such Satanists damage not only themselves, but also other Satanists.

8. Conclusion

If a term includes everything, it covers nothing. To use a particular term, the term must be defined in such a way that correct and incorrect use can be determined. This means that the term must be reasonably clearly defined, and if the term has multiple meanings, each meaning must be defined independently of the other meanings. Using definitions such as “anyone that calls himself a Satanist is a Satanist” or “anything called Satanism is Satanism” are not valid definitions, because they are both unclear, self-contradictory and without content.

If an individual wants to meaningfully declare himself or herself a Satanist, the person must decide on a specific meaning of the term. It is possible for the Satanist to respect other uses, but he or she can hardly consider other definitions to be equals or included in his or her own definition, even if they use the same denomination.