

## **”God is caught in Hell, so it is better to believe in the Devil”: Conceptions of Satanists and sympathies for the Devil in Early Modern Sweden**

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The term ”Satanists” was occasionally used by early modern Swedish theologians to denote the proverbial servants of Satan. In certain contexts this usage seems to have been of a clearly derogatory character, but in others it was undoubtedly meant to imply individuals believed to be in actual league with the Devil or even to belong to a form of satanic religious cult. But were there really ”Satanists” in early modern Sweden in any meaningful sense of the word?

Through the process referred to as demonization, a strategy applied already by the medieval church, the often ambiguous supernatural entities of early modern popular culture were frequently identified with the Devil and his demons. This process did not work in only one direction, however. The Devil himself sometimes came to be endowed with traits akin to the more multifaceted nature spirits of the popular mind. Hence, one may speak of alternative traditions concerning the Devil, in which it was possible to conceive of him as a helper or a kind of familiar spirit, even though he simultaneously appears to have retained most of his adversarial role as the enemy of God. Under certain conditions people voiced quite blatant sympathies for the Devil, and even held that befriending Satan was better and wiser than praying to God. There are also several written pacts with the Devil preserved in early modern Swedish court records which – although presumably often made under quite desperate conditions – further corroborate this motif. In connection with popular magic and witchcraft, there are further hints of certain ritualistic methods for summoning the Devil. In these contexts are also expressed views and words which suggest that the Devil could be part of more or less coherent unofficial worldviews.

Such blasphemous speech and forbidden actions were, perhaps not surprisingly, often linked to individuals perceived as ”outsiders” in several respects. Not only alleged witches and sorcerers, but also people accused of thievery, robbery, whoredom, murder and other transgressions – if not apprehended frequently dwelling in the wilderness outside the local village communities – were particularly conceived of as being in league with Satan. Indeed, there is evidence to suggest that they themselves, having already been marked as deviants or sinners, sometimes turned to the Devil as a kind of patron or helper of the rebellious or perhaps of those feeling unjustly treated by the community and the authorities. Such individuals, when interrogated by the courts, occasionally reported communicating with Satan, and at times even sleeping with him or magical entities in some way connected to him.

Thus, while there is no evidence of any organized or even loosely knit ”Satanism” or ”satanic cult” in early modern Sweden, one may – in certain respects – speak of the existence of a form of ”individual Satanists” and possibly a ”satanic discourse” partially outside the boundaries of established religion and the framework of learned demonology.

The present study is a brief examination of the aforementioned motifs and conceptions, based primarily on a few particularly revealing court records and theological commentaries.