

## SATANISM, CINEMA, AND MARTIAL ARTS

### An Interview with Dr Per Faxneld



**WRSP:** Your academic research has predominantly dealt with esotericism and new and culturally alternative religions, with a particular focus on Satanism. Were these subjects that interested you prior to entering academia, or rather something that you developed an interest in while in the university system?

**Dr. Faxneld:** The initial plan for my BA thesis in History of Religions back in 1999 was actually to write about Shintō. I took Japanese—but gave up after half a term as I didn't have the tenacity needed to tackle the kanji. At a loss for ideas, I then reverted to the topic I had written an earlier undergraduate thesis about, namely esotericism. However, at this time, in the late 1990s, I was not yet aware of “esotericism studies” as a field in its own right and figured what I was doing belonged to new religious movement (NRM) studies. When NRM studies later on sort of fizzled out and esotericism became the next big thing as I began my MA, my topic proved quite timely (I still think NRMs is a fascinating and important field, though). Esotericism is something I have always been captivated by. As a kid growing up in the 1980s and early 1990s, esotericism was present in all the things I liked best: metal, goth, and industrial music, Warhammer, role-playing games like Call of Cthulhu, comic books by Alan Moore, horror films. I also happened to have a paternal grandmother who was a co-mason and Rosicrucian (AMORC), and for my tenth birthday she gave me a tarot deck. That certainly also helped steer me in this direction.

**WRSP:** The work for which you are best known is *Satanic Feminism: Lucifer as the Liberator of Woman in Nineteenth-Century Culture*, a monograph first published in Sweden in 2014 as your doctoral thesis. In 2017 it was republished by Oxford University Press as part of their Oxford Studies in Western Esotericism series. Could you tell us more about what this “Satanic feminism” is and what led you to undertake this significant project?

**Dr. Faxneld:** It was quite simple, really: reading up on the prehistory of modern Satanism, as well as contemporary manifestations of it, I caught sight of a prominent feminist strand in both—that had not really been discussed by scholars before. I took the idea to the head of the History of Religions department at Stockholm University, the Buddhologist Per-Arne Berglie, and he said, “Sure, go ahead, write a doctoral thesis about it” (an easy thing for him to say, as the department did not have to offer salaried PhD positions back in those days!). And the rest is history. Well, actually it was not intended to be primarily about *history*: as originally proposed, the monograph would be one-third historical background and two-thirds ethnography on contemporary Satanic groups. I did two rounds of fieldwork among Satanists on the U.S. East Coast, but after a while it became clear to me that the historical material was so rich, and so huge, that it demanded being the sole focus of the study. Indeed, the first published version of the thesis ran to 724 pages, and then I had cut out 300 pages of discussion of additional source texts. I dare not think what a monster of a book it would have become if the contemporary stuff had also been included. Some of the fieldwork and analysis of present-day texts made it into my 2013 *International Journal for the Study of New Religions* article “Intuitive, Receptive, Dark: Negotiations of Femininity in the Contemporary Satanic and Left-hand Path milieu.”

Satanic feminism arose as a response to bigoted, male chauvinist use of Christian myth. According to the Bible, Eve was the first to heed Satan’s advice to eat the forbidden fruit and thus responsible for all of humanity’s subsequent miseries. The notion of woman as the Devil’s accomplice is prominent throughout Christian history and has been used to legitimize the subordination of wives and daughters. In the nineteenth century, rebellious females therefore performed counter-readings of this misogynist tradition. Lucifer was reconceptualized as a feminist liberator of womankind, and Eve became a heroine. In these reimaginings, Satan is an ally in the struggle against a tyrannical patriarchy supported by God the Father and his male priests. Such “Satanic feminism” was expressed in a wide variety of nineteenth-century literary texts, autobiographies, pamphlets, newspaper articles, paintings, sculptures, and even artifacts of consumer culture like jewellery. I investigated how colorful figures like the suffragette Elizabeth Cady Stanton, gender-bending Theosophist H. P. Blavatsky, author Aino Kallas, actress Sarah Bernhardt, anti-clerical witch enthusiast Matilda Joslyn Gage, decadent marchioness Luisa Casati, and the Luciferian lesbian poetess Renée Vivien all embraced Satan as an empowering symbol, and had the most wonderful time immersing myself in turn-of-the-century culture (an era I have been obsessed with since I read Sherlock Holmes and Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* at age eight).

By exploring the connections between esotericism, literature, art, and the political realm, I attempted to shed new light on neglected aspects of the intellectual history of feminism, Satanism, and revisionary mythmaking. What I did not expect was the impact the book would have on contemporary Satanic groups (for example, it ended up on official Satanic Temple reading lists) and, even more surprising, how conservative Christians across the world (for example in Italy, Australia, and the U.S.) would employ it as “proof” that feminism is the Devil’s creation. In fact, the first to order the book from the Swedish publisher was the Vatican Library (they even wanted two copies!). The fact that Satanists, feminists, and conservatives have all found the book so useful quite neatly illustrates the theoretical points I make in it about the malleability of texts. Happily, academic colleagues have also appreciated it, and it received rave reviews in journals like *History of Religions*, *Nova Religio*, *Aries*, *Reading Religion*, *Comparative Literature Studies*, *Nineteenth-Century French Studies*, *Feministiskt perspektiv*, and *Tidsskrift för kvinnoforskning* (as well as being awarded The Donner Institute Research Prize).

**WRSP:** *Satanic Feminism* deals heavily in literature, looking at works like Sylvia Townsend Warner's *Lolly Willowes*. In the book you make an important point about how literature has value for those studying the history of religion. Could you tell us more about this argument? How does the approach to literature that you take differ from the perspective adopted by literature scholars?

**Dr. Faxneld:** The basic argument is that literature powerfully shapes life worlds, creates shifts in public discourse (or reproduces it), and that the representation (and, in this case, subversion) of religion in literature is therefore of key importance to the historical study of religions.

I'm not sure my approach is necessarily that different from what scholars of literature do—it's a vast academic field, with a multitude of methodological schools of thought. One thing, perhaps, is that I am quite interested in biographical details regarding authors, but not, I should emphasize, as some sort of corrective or sole determinant when it comes to interpreting texts. Rather, this dimension is interesting to help understand why certain themes and sources became popular to use (often linked to social class and gender) and as a para-textual determinant of the *reception* of texts—the public persona of the author often being of significance to how readers understood their works. This, I suppose, differs from the “death of the author” notion embraced by *some* literature scholars, where the text itself is the sole focus, but there are also many whose methods are much like mine.

**WRSP:** Your work in *Satanic Feminism* focuses on the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but I wondered if you had thoughts on these discourses of Satanic feminism as they have developed since that time? Do popular culture portrayals, such as the recent Netflix series *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* (with its clear feminist messaging in its portrayal of Satanic witches), indicate a growing mainstreaming of these discourses?

**Dr. Faxneld:** I have to admit I haven't watched *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* (the trailer did not appeal to me much), though I must do so sooner or later for professional reasons. Certainly, such pop culture portrayals indicate a growing mainstreaming of what we can call Satanic feminism. Robert Eggers' 2015 film *The VVitch* is another example. Well, at least many viewers have understood it as an empowering depiction of devil-worshipping witches, though it could arguably also be read as an example of demonized feminism or at least a very traditional riff on witchcraft tropes – which is fine, as it's meant to be entertainment or a work of art, not a political pamphlet that you need to agree with (many of the best horror films have horrible politics).

**WRSP:** You have also played an important role in raising academic awareness of some of the earliest self-described Satanists, namely Stanisław Przybyszewski and Ben Kadosh. How did you come across these figures and what do you see as their significance in the broader history of Satanism?

**Dr. Faxneld:** I found both of them when I wrote my BA thesis back in 2001–2002. The topic of the thesis was Satanism prior to the establishing of the Church of Satan in 1966, and I dug pretty deep and hard to find examples of actual, self-designated earlier Satanists. Przybyszewski, Kadosh, Herbert Sloane, Maria de Nagłowska, and Fraternitas Saturni (the latter two, however, with some caveats) were what I came up with, along with the pro-Satanic tendencies present in certain texts by Eliphas Lévi and H.P. Blavatsky. Plus, of course, numerous literary and socialist figures who were employing Satan as a positive symbol of rebellion. The BA thesis was then expanded into my first published monograph, *Mörkrets apostlar* (Apostles of

Darkness) in 2006, subsequently accepted as my MA thesis. Once I started my PhD in 2007, I looked further into these figures, and wrote academic articles and book chapters about some of them.

Their significance lies in that figures like Anton LaVey or Michael Aquino should be understood as part of a longer tradition of lauding Satan, that is not merely literary in nature. Pre-LaVeyan Satanism is interesting as a sort of dark, sinister underbelly of more mainstream forms of esoteric thought, and the fact that it had this subaltern position speaks volumes about the broader historical esoteric milieu. It is also thought-provoking with the complex and ambiguous pro-Satanic ideas nested in Blavatsky's *The Secret Doctrine* (1888). Though of marginal importance to Theosophy at large, they arguably laid the ground for much of the esoteric Satanism to follow.

**WRSP:** With Jesper Aa. Petersen, you are the co-editor of the 2013 edited volume, *The Devil's Party: Satanism in Modernity*. How did that project come to fruition? Did it emerge from an existing network of scholars engaged in researching Satanism?

**Dr. Faxneld:** That book resulted directly from the first SatCon, an academic conference on Satanism organized by me and Jesper and Asbjørn Dyrendal in Trondheim, Norway in 2010 (I think it was). One of the more memorable things about that conference, aside from the many interesting papers and discussions, was the soft ice machine the Norwegians had leased—meaning all these experts in diabolical matters stood slurping away on ice cream cones during the coffee breaks. Suitably gluttonous, I suppose. You could say an international network of scholars working on the topic was properly established at that very conference. We did a second SatCon a few years later in Stockholm, co-organized by me and Kennet Granholm (who has since sadly left academia), and there is occasional talk of a third one any year now.

**WRSP:** Has your work attracted much interest from contemporary Satanic groups, and/or practitioners of other esoteric currents? If so, what has that response been?

**Dr. Faxneld:** It has, and with very few exceptions the reactions have been positive. As mentioned, some groups have even added my work to their official reading lists. I think it is important for scholars of religion to have a cordial and respectful relationship with groups they study, though this should of course not keep us from deconstructing insider historiographies (Ronald Hutton's *The Triumph of the Moon* being a perfect example of how this should be done) or dissecting power dynamics within the religious field.

**WRSP:** You are also interested in the relationship between art and esotericism, having for instance published an article on that topic in *Nova Religio* 19, no. 4 (May 2016) titled, "Mona Lisa's Mysterious Smile: The Artist Initiate in Esoteric New Religions." This intersection is something that a growing number of scholars, such as Amy Hale, have delved into over the past decade or so. What do you see as the importance of this avenue of research?

**Dr. Faxneld:** In one way, art can function like literature, shaping life worlds and creating shifts in public discourse (or reproducing it) on religion and esotericism, and so on. Discussions about esoteric art, for example in the art criticism of a period, also often have much to tell us about contemporary society. So, there is that sociological dimension to why the topic is interesting. Careful analysis of the esoteric context for works of art will also facilitate a deeper understanding of art history, for example the by now well-known

role of Theosophy in the development of abstract art. Large chunks of modern art history are really impossible to comprehend correctly without a basic grasp of esotericism. It is furthermore a vital key to unlocking deeper layers of meaning and resonances in the work of individual artists. I have just finalized an article on the surrealist Leonora Carrington, who I think is a good example of how we can engage more fully with an artistic production via esotericism. She is also paradigmatic for how it is nonetheless seldom possible to lock down a *single* meaning using esotericism as some sort of matrix for interpretation.

**WRSP:** Many of your early writings, largely in Swedish, focus on cinema. Is the intersection between esotericism and cinema an ongoing interest of yours?

**Dr. Faxneld:** It is indeed. I took three terms of cinema studies, plus a summer course on Japanese cinema, and film remains one of my great passions—I spend a lot of time at the Cinematheque in Stockholm! My mother also had a background in cinema studies, so I had something of a cinephile upbringing. Even though I enjoy many different genres, horror is close to my heart and also the genre where my academic expertise in esotericism is most useful for doing analysis.

The early publications you refer to deal with topics like the cultural history of zombie films, mummy films and Egyptomania, Japanese horror films, and German silent horror films. I have recently written pieces on occult dimensions of *Nosferatu* (1922, my all-time favourite film and a work I constantly find myself returning to in my writing), the bizarre “documentary” *Häxan* (1922), and personifications of death in cinema. Coming up is also an overview chapter on esotericism and cinema that I’m co-writing with my good friend Francisco Santos Silva. This spring, a cinema in Stockholm invited me to select a series of classic early horror films and I then gave talks on their religious dimensions before the screenings—great fun, with very enthusiastic audiences.

**WRSP:** From 2015 to 2017 you also worked on a post-doctoral project focusing on the character of Lilith, and her transition from Jewish lore into Christian and post-Christian contexts. Could you tell us more about this particular project?

**Dr. Faxneld:** The Lilith monograph, a short one compared to for example *Satanic Feminism*, has been 60 percent finished since back in 2017. The reason I did not wrap it up at that time as planned was that in the middle of my post-doc my mother suddenly became ill and died. This hit me very hard, and I temporarily re-focused my publishing strategy on clearly delimited articles (so I still gave my post-doc financiers more than their money’s worth in terms of publications!). A sprawling monograph, focusing on the period from around 1800 until the present day, was simply a bit much to handle under the circumstances. Immediately when my post-doc ended, I was tenured at a different university. This meant I was thrown into a world of heavy teaching and administration duties, and Lilith ended up in the desk drawer. I still hope to return to this project at some point, as it’s a quite agreeable little book and I did an awful lot of fieldwork and digging for obscure primary sources that would be a shame to waste. However, there’s a very promising PhD thesis being written by Brennan Kettelle in Amsterdam right now on queer dimensions of Lilith, so I will at least wait until that is published so as not to unnecessarily duplicate anything, and to be able to enter into dialogue with the present cutting edge of Lilith studies.

**WRSP:** Your current focus is on martial arts and the sacralisation of physical exercise. Could you tell us more about this?

**Dr. Faxneld:** I have a three-year project funded by The Swedish Research Council where I'm looking at notions of spirituality in Japanese martial arts in Sweden. Primarily, I'm analysing how ideas about subtle energy (*ki*), martial practice as a form of meditation, the development of a "sixth sense," attaining unity with the cosmos, a sacralisation of the self, and so on, have been negotiated in relation to Swedish secularity over time, ever since the arrival of Japanese martial arts in the early twentieth century. There are also interesting tensions and polemics within the martial arts milieu itself over whether there is, or should be, a spiritual dimension at all to such activities.

A view among westerners of East Asian martial arts training as spiritual has been around for a long time and is found across Europe. For example, a 1983 survey among West German Kyūdō (Japanese archery) practitioners determined 84 percent claimed they were drawn to it as a spiritual training. The theme of martial arts spirituality has occasionally caused controversy, as evidenced by discussions in the International Olympic Committee. When Japan applied to have Judō included in the program for the 1964 Tokyo Olympics, concerned voices claimed Judō was insufficiently "secular." This rhetoric reared its head anew in 2008, when China (unsuccessfully) attempted to incorporate Wushu into the Beijing Olympics. In terms of a broader impact outside martial arts practice as such, this milieu has also functioned as a contact point with Buddhism for many. Moreover, it has, alongside yoga, arguably been pivotal in a broader sacralization of bodily exercises in the West. Such dimensions make martial arts relevant to all scholars working on the transnational circulation of East Asian religiosity and/or Western alternative spirituality.

I'm also looking at how masculinity is constructed in this milieu. Insider discourses often hold up Western masculinity as limiting for the individual, tied to unnecessary violence and to a (supposedly) destructive hard-line secularism. Eastern masculinity, by contrast, is constructed as spiritual, semi-pacifist, and encompassing a broader spectrum of situation-specific softness and hardness. Enlightened Zen samurai and (paradoxically pacifist) warrior monks are ideal figures, connecting spirituality and forms of "alternative," "non-Western" masculinity. There are always multiple constructions of masculinity in any given culture, which stand in a hierarchical relation to each other as well as to the varieties of femininity. Awareness of this provides a scaffolding for analysing the martial arts milieu and what hegemonic masculinities its counter-ideal of "spiritual, peaceful warriors" has historically been positioned in relation to. Conceivably, however, martial arts masculinities often need to be conceptualised as "hybrid masculinities," a recent term designating when men in a position of privilege nominally distance themselves from dominant ways of "doing gender," yet to some degree reproduce hegemonic masculinity.

**WRSP:** Are there any future research projects or publications of yours that we should be looking out for?

**Dr. Thomas:** Last month, *Satanism: A Reader*, co-edited Johan Nilsson and myself, came out from Oxford University Press. And just a couple of weeks ago, the huge volume *Det esoteriska Sverige* (Esoteric Sweden), to which I have contributed three lengthy chapters, was published. It will appear in English translation next year.

Together with the historian and folklorist Fredrik Skott, I'm applying for funding for a project on Swedish folk grimoires that I have high hopes for. I'm also looking for funding to write a monograph on the Spiritualist group The Edelweiss Society (that I contributed a chapter on in *Det esoteriska Sverige*).

On a completely different note, I have a new book coming out in the spring of 2024 called *Secret Stockholm*—a guidebook to peculiar places in my native city. Much of the content is, unsurprisingly, related to esotericism. The book is part of the brilliant series from French publisher Jonglez, that has already covered many other cities across the world.

Finally, my book of “folk gothic” short stories, *The Tree of Sacrifice* (2020), is being published in English next year. (Originally written in Swedish, it has since been translated into Finnish and Danish, with a Ukrainian edition also on its way). Moreover, I have a new fiction book in the works, with a similar setting (rural northern Sweden a hundred years ago or so).

**WRSP:** Are there topics to do with Satanism, or with esotericism and alternative religion more broadly, that you feel are really in need of further investigation?

**Dr Faxneld:** Numerous. “Folk magic” (and its intersections with so-called “learned magic,” in itself a problematic category in many ways) is a topic that needs to be more fully integrated into esotericism studies (something I hope to do with the folk grimoire project just mentioned), which as currently constructed has a very classist bias in many ways. In general, social class is a topic I plan to do more work on. Often mentioned in passing in discussions of, for example Theosophy, its full ramifications need to be explored in-depth.

Regarding Satanism, I think there has been an unfortunate emphasis on U.S., U.K. and Scandinavian Satanism. This field is in dire need of a more global approach. Right now, I’m a visiting scholar at Tōhoku University in Japan, and I’ve had the opportunity to talk to some local Satanists. It’s fascinating to see the differences between Anglo-European Satanism and the varieties present in a country where only around 1 percent identify as Christians. I would love to do a conference and collected volume on global Satanism!

**Dr. Faxneld, thank you for participating in the WRSP Forum!**

**This interview is also being made available at the personal blog of the interviewer,  
Dr. Ethan Doyle White (<http://ethandoylewhite.blogspot.com/>)**

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**WRSP Interviewer:  
Dr Ethan Doyle White**