**Santeria and the Church of Satan**

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**Introduction**

New religious movements have been a major addition to many social changes. In “Comprehending Cults” by Dawson, we are introduced to many aspects of New Religious Movements, and the impact they have on today’s society (Dawson 2006: 28-29). Santeria and the Church of Satan are two religions that are without a doubt questioned by society. Many of us hold standards to what religion is and how it should be expressed. These two religions aren’t typically defined by society as a traditional religion but as we later see they both hold strong meanings to individuals, and are by definition a New Religious Movement. A New Religious Movement by definition is a religious group that is led by a charismatic leader or there is representation of “considerable authority” (Dawson 2006: 28). There is a claim to esoteric knowledge and a direct experience of divine. The organization is loose and fluid, and there is one distinctive way to salvation (Dawson 2006: 29).

**The Start of Santeria**

Santeria is a religion, based on West African and Caribbean origin, with strong Roman Catholic influences (Murphy 1993: 126). Many slaves used this religion to interact with ancestor’s deities. Some of these interactions involved animal sacrifice and music (La Torre 2004: 117). Like many religions, Santeria uses “Orisha” as their manifestations of god. This is a spiritual being and presence that is used within this faith (Murphy 1993: 125). Orisha’s are used as more of a category for different “saints”, each is used for different reasons and a ceremony would be used in order to distinguish which should be used (Murphy 1993: 125). Spells and ceremonies are used to either solve problems or help individuals. A lot of the times an Orisha needs to be provoked in order to cast a spell successfully (Gonzalez-Wippler 1975: 17).

To understand the true essence of Santeria, one must understand the significance it had to the people at the beginning of it’s decent into today’s world. The “Yoruban”, which is the name one uses in defining the West African community, were taken from their homes and forced into slave labor in Caribbean Islands (Murphy 1993: 126). They believed that even though everything was being taken away from them, they still had their faith in for a free life to keep them alive. After being taken to one of the Islands by Europeans, they were forced into the Roman Catholic religion. In order to maintain their original religion, and stay within the means of their new one, created the Santeria religion (Gonzalez-Wippler 1975: 34).

**The Beliefs and Ritual of Santeria**

The basis for Santeria is ceremonies and rituals. These are taken place in what’s called a “house of saints.” There are shrines that are built in people’s homes that are representations of an Orisha (Murphy 1993: 126). To become a loyal to the Santeria religion, one must go through an initiation process. Before one can be taught the beliefs and rituals, they must be cleansed (Gonzalez-Wippler 1975: 35). A blend of herbs and water are poured onto the individuals head, this process represents a rebirth for the initiator. After being cleansed there is a four-step process that is performed in order to reach complete devotion to Santeria (Brandon 1991: 56).

The first process is called Elekes, which is based on a beaded necklace. The necklace is first bathed in a scared mixture of herbs, sacrificial blood, and other potent substances (La Torre 2005: 117). The individual receives it from the most powerful and popular Orisha (Mason 2002: 30). An elderly member washes the individuals hair during this process, then the necklace is worn as a sign of protection. It is known that a woman must not wear hers during menstruation time. Men only do the second ritual, and it is called “medio asiento”. The main goal for this ritual is for the Orisha to take some of the “manly” spirit away from the individual. The individual must go into a meeting with an already initiated member, and their personal history must be reviewed. Depending on the findings of their conversations, an image will be made to construct a sculpture that will be put into the individuals home (Mason 2002: 33). This sculpture is used for protection, and will keep evil sprits away. In the third ritual, individuals receive objects that represent warriors. This ritual and these objects represent the life long commitment they have to their Orisha’s, as the the Orishas themselves have committed to guiding and protecting them forever. The last ritual is the most sacred, and most secretive of all the rituals of Santeria. This ritual is where the individual gets born into faith. It represents the impurity that one has before they are brought into this religion, and the purity that they have after (Gonzalez-Wippler 1975: 33-34). This sense of impurity is what makes Santeria a New Religious Movement. There is a sense that there is a clear way to salvation (Dawson 2006: 28).

We can see the intensity of purification continue, the newly initiated individual must spend a year away from non-initiated people, wear white and must not perform any cleansing on others. The basis of Santeria is ceremonies and prayers, most these are done with drums ( La Torre 2005: 116). The drum is a symbolic of the Orishas, and are only played by men. The drums are seen as being sacred and must be treated with respect. An example of this respect is that a dancer never turns their backs to the drums it is seen as a sign of disrespect (Gonzalez-Wippler 1975: 36-37).

**Controversy and Santeria**

Santeria is widely judged for its animal sacrifices and there are many stereotypes around the religion as well. Chickens are the sacrificial animal, and are usually eaten by the people after the ceremonies (Murphy 1993: 98). These sacrifices are done by the Orisha’s due to the implications and judgments that the Orisha’s have against animal cruelty. In 1993, there was a case against this sacrificing, and there haven’t been problems since then. These stereotypes as we can see are not supported by facts (Bascom 1950: 65).

**Church of Satan: The Beginning**

Another controversial religion that gains much negative attention is the Church of Satan. Anton LaVey founded the Church of Satan in the 1960’s (LaVey 1998: 168). The main point was to embrace the “carnal” self, and to worship the Satanic Bible, which was written by LaVey himself (Navone 1975: 542). LaVey made the Church of Satan much more exclusive in the late 1970’s then he did when he first started it (Richardson 1991: 8). He had a theory that people were using it to cover up their complete lack of achievements in the world, and therefore put an emphasis of accomplishments as criteria for acceptance (Wright 1991: 2).

**The Different Types of Members of the Church of Satan**

The Church of Satan has two different types of members. One is a registered member. This simply means they are members of the church, and have no interest in gaining a position. An active member has clear intentions in being involved with the church, and being more integrated into the local chapters (Randall 1976: 185). This fits the characteristics of a New Religious Movement by guiding individuals that might feel alienated from other religious cultural into this movement. These members must go through different degrees of membership before they reach the final degree, which would be referring to LaVey’s role (Richardson 1991: 9). All active members must be legally adults, if they are underage there participation is limited. There is a fee when registering as a new member. Two hundred dollars is paid before receiving a red card declaring you as a Church of Satan member (Wright 1991: 5).

**Beliefs and Rituals of the Church of Satan**

Contrary to popular beliefs the Church of Satan does not worship or believe in the devil himself. They have set guidelines to live by and most come from the belief that we need to live natural lives, opposed to following the words of God (Richardson 1991: 184). There are two main functions that the Church of Satan represents. The first is that there must be an integration of magic and logic. The second is that the religion must represent self-indulgence, carnality, and pleasure instead of self-denial (LaVey 1998: 163). The main point is to make a community of people to express themselves the way they want without being judged and without the strict guidelines that are set by many other religions (Christianity) (Randall 1976: 190).

**The Church of Satan and Santeria’s Use of the Media:**

Both of these religions use new digital media to spread their messages and organize their communities. Most of the information in this paper was off the internet, which within itself is using the media to exploit their beliefs. Since many people have a lot of mixed feelings and lingering stereotypes based on these religions, the media clearly states facts that debunk these stereotypes and could possibly draw more members to their groups.

**Similarities Between Santeria and the Church of Satan:**

Both Santeria and the Church of Satan hold a sense of community. Both religions emerged during times of social change, which led to individuals needing validation of experimentation, including the religious sphere. The social integrations and tradition social systems were broken down, and these religious groups provide reassurance. Since both groups need commitment from their members, they felt integrated with that group.

A key aspect of New Religious Movements is their straight forward characteristics. Both the Orisha’s and LaVey, were charismatic leaders and gained the respect as an authority figure. The Lofland/Stark model outlines the process of conversion. (Roberts and Yamane 2012: 203). In both Santeria and The Church of Satan, the individuals need to feel “social affiliation” (Roberts and Yamane 2012: 203-204). Since Santeria is an influential part of Caribbean culture there is cultural pressure to join the Santeria religion. If one doesn’t feel connected to traditional religious groups, one may join the Church of Satan to feel apart of a group. In both religions the next step would be recruitment. In the end would be a change in an individual’s belief system (Roberts and Yamane 2012: 204). According to Robert and Yamane, this outlines “seeking” (Roberts and Yamane 2012: 204). There is a clear emphasis on direct and clear way to salvation. The organizations are both fluid and loose, making it more appealing to public. There is a direct experience of the divine that individuals can see and sought after (Dawson 2006: 29).

**Differences Between the Church of Satan and Santeria**

The differences between these two religions are merely based on their beliefs. Santeria connects Roman Catholic beliefs, with Caribbean influence. The Church of Satan follows beliefs by Anton LaVey. Both are used to move away from traditional religions and move towards a new era. Both were started many years ago, but they have held on and are still actively gaining members (Nelson and Taub 1993: 533).

**Conclusion**

There is a definite stigma that is attached to Santeria and the Church of Satan. Santeria is known for animal sacrificing and unethical rituals. The Church of Satan is thought to be worshiping the devil, and being responsible for bad behavior and law encounters. After researching these two religions, both are not what the stereotypes say they are. They are different and are nothing like traditional religions but they are not as horrible as society makes them out to be. I think a lot of New Religious Movements would fall under this same stigma and would then be proved to be different but not harmful.

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