

SECRET SOCIETIES



Their Mysteries Revealed

JOHN LAWRENCE REYNOLDS

SECRET SOCIETIES

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For Anna P., of course.

Cruelty has a human heart,
And jealousy a human face;
Terror the human form divine
And secrecy the human dress.

William Blake

The more things you know, or pretend to know,
the more powerful you are.
It doesn't matter if the things are true.
What counts, remember, is to possess a secret.

Umberto Eco

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INTRODUCTION



Fools, Fears and Fanatics

They were among the most frightening of early secret societies, a furtive group both feared and hated by citizens of the Roman Empire. Many suggested killing every man, woman and child who were members. Others proposed caution, having heard tales of bloody vengeance taken against enemies of the group. Some grew worried that their own neighbors might be society members, infecting their children with dangerous ideas and engaging them in revolting practices. A few were fascinated by the outrageous antics attributed to this secret organization; their curiosity piqued, their imaginations running rampant, they asked themselves: could these people really be so depraved?

Tales exchanged among the Romans were almost beyond belief. The members of this secret group, it was said, were cannibalistic, eating human flesh and drinking human blood during secret rituals, and their gory feasts often included newborn babies. They promoted sexual orgies among brothers and sisters, and engaged in bizarre ceremonies, met in clandestine locations, avoided contact with respectable society, and identified themselves by flashing the image of an instrument of torture when they met.

“An infant covered with their meal that it may deceive the unwary,” one Roman wrote, “is placed before him who is to be stained with their rites. This infant is slain by the young pupil, who has been urged on as if to harmless blows on the surface of the

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meal, with dark and secret wounds. Thirstily—O horror!—they lick up its blood; eagerly they divide its limbs. By this victim they are pledged together; with this consciousness they are covenanted to mutual silence. Such sacred rites as these are more foul than any sacrileges . . .”

Throughout the Mediterranean region during the first century of the first millennium, especially among Romans, who valued nobility above all qualities, these stories were equally repulsive and fascinating. Roman politicians began demanding elimination of the sect, without question or exception. Most citizens agreed, and crowds began to gather in the marketplace where they exchanged tales, confirmed evidence, and embellished the more unpleasant aspects of the secret society’s behavior. Over time, a consensus was reached: something must be done to break the cult’s bonds and rein in these scoundrels, these perverts, these insurgents, these . . . Christians.

From our perspective two thousand years later, the tales of disgusting Christian practices sound like propaganda created by members of the Roman senate as a strategy to eliminate the sect. Perhaps by spreading vile stories among the populace, we assume, citizens would be dissuaded from joining the ranks of Christians, and Rome’s harsh treatment of the new religion’s followers would be supported.

In reality, the Roman senate had little to do with the outrageous tales. While the general populace may have been scandalized by reports of cannibalism and incest, public opinion mattered little to politicians, who were concerned with more practical matters, including the refusal of Christians to worship the emperor. Tolerant of religious disparity generally, Rome’s major objection addressed this single unacceptable behavior, considered an act of disloyalty to the Empire. When Christians began converting others to their point of view, their actions represented an insurgency that could not be ignored. At that point, Roman leaders encouraged stories of their scandalous activities, employing them as a weapon to suppress the movement.

But Rome’s senate and other leaders did not originate the stories of bizarre behavior by Christians. These yarns, spun in the imaginations of ordinary citizens, were based on information provided by Christians themselves—information subject to

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exaggeration and malignment that grew directly out of the twin mills of ignorance and suspicion. Consider the clues that inspired the tales:

Secrecy

Christians kept to themselves, did not admit strangers to their ceremonies without the approval of a known member, and demanded that new members undergo a test of faith before being admitted. But there were valid reasons for all these actions. Following Christ's crucifixion, declaring that you were a Christian was akin to signing your death warrant. When Christians began concealing their activities in response, paranoia over their goals and practices grew deeper and more widespread, stimulating a more desperate need for members to mask their identity. And so spun the cycle of oppression, leading to deeper secrecy and generating greater paranoia, inviting new oppression.

Cannibalism

Didn't Christians conduct ceremonies in which they consumed the flesh of a man, and drank his blood? Of course they did. To Christians, the Communion sacrament represented an allegory of oneness with the spirit. To unbelievers, it sounded suspiciously like repulsive reality.

Eating babies

Lacking effective methods of contraception and abortion, poor Roman citizens set unwanted infants outside to die of starvation and exposure. As abhorrent as this may be to modern sensibilities, it was acceptable practice in a culture where unwanted mouths to feed presented a major burden on the family. When Christians began rescuing these infants from certain death, baptizing them into their faith, Romans grew confused. Why would someone choose to raise another's child? The idea defied logic. Or perhaps they were not being raised at all. Perhaps, given their practice of consuming flesh and blood, Christians gathered abandoned babies as a source of

raw material for their disgusting ceremonies. The fact that these children were being cared for and raised as Christians was not considered plausible. Nor, of course, was it nearly as intriguing.

Orgies and sexual incest

When reports of Christians engaging in Love Feasts began spreading among the Romans, it was an easy leap to assume that the “love” aspect was not entirely spiritual in nature. Certain Gnostics, another secretive society, participated in ritual sex and regarded semen as a sacred fluid, consecrating each member’s status with it. Christians and Gnostics varied widely in their beliefs and practices, but it’s easy to imagine an average citizen of Rome shrugging and commenting the Latin equivalent of, “Christians, Gnostics, what’s the difference? They’re all the same.”

The incest factor? It grew from the practice of Christians referring to each other as “Brother” and “Sister” in expressions of fondness and support. In other cultures, sisters and brothers were born of the same parents, an undisputed fact, and no allegorical reference applied.

An instrument of torture as symbol and identity

In Roman times, the cross was a widely employed instrument of torture and death. To Romans, there was nothing reassuring about displaying a cross or drawing its shape in the air with your hand, a gesture that could be interpreted as a threat. Visualize a modern-day clandestine group of people employing a hangman’s noose, a guillotine, or an electric chair as a symbol of unity and values, and imagine your reaction.

This view of Christians as a menacing secret society remains as fitting a lesson about collective fear and repulsion today as it was then. In spite of advances in technology and communication, our fascination with secret societies remains powerful and abiding. When prodded and inspired by popular culture’s twisted depiction of esoteric organizations in films and novels, our belief in their existence and dangers may match or exceed the flawed visions Romans harbored about Christianity.

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As the Christian example proved, the most common responses to secret societies by outsiders are suspicion and fear, born in the belief that *anything that is good should not be kept secret, and anything kept secret cannot be good.*

We crave secrets, along with societies to maintain and perpetuate them, as much as we desire honesty in our dealings with others. We expect important business and military decisions to be made in secrecy. We accept back-room politicians arriving at decisions about candidates and policy while striving to remain anonymous. And we harbor secrets from our friends, our children and our lovers. Yet we also strive to fathom all the mysteries affecting our lives, demanding access to information that has been denied us, whatever the motive. If secrets are being kept from us, we insist, they must be shared. And if they are being shared by a definable group exclusively, the group's motives must be suspect.

Secret societies have changed, gradually but significantly, over time. In the ancient world they were primarily philosophic and religious in nature. By the medieval period, politics began to replace the philosophical quotient, although religion remained the dominant element. By the mid-eighteenth century, the societies had evolved in one of two directions: either towards *political and fraternal associations*, retaining remnants of philosophical and religious trappings from the ancient world; or in the direction of *outright criminality*, using secrecy to achieve clandestine ends and acquire enormous wealth.

The differing objectives influenced the manner in which the societies were constructed and operated, because their secrecy became necessary either as a means of creating exclusivity for members or as a defense against discovery and harassment. Among members of fraternal organizations, exclusivity added distinction; for organizations subject to harassment by law enforcement or society as a whole, secrecy became a tool for self-preservation. Either way, the effect was to generate mistrust among nonmembers. Mistrust led to assumptions, the assumptions were invariably negative, the negative perceptions aroused hostility, hostility strengthened the organization's secrecy, and the circle revolved ad infinitum. Little has changed.

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This circle of suspicion and response launches a fever of assumptions that resists any attempt to insert a dose of reality, a process as powerful and predictable today as it was when Nero took music lessons. Secret societies, you will be lectured by adherents of conspiracy theories, control the world's destiny. The declaration of wars, the onslaught of global epidemics, the election of national leaders, and the presence of alien life on earth are controlled by societies whose power and purpose are as rampant and evil as any James Bond villain concocted by Hollywood. Fanatics trot out and display proof with all the authority of a prosecuting attorney making a case to a credible jury, while serious objections are twisted into evidence that the Devil's power is so all-embracing he can convince you that he does not exist.

It's fine entertainment for those who suspect that their lives are manipulated by unseen powers. They seek evidence like seedlings craving light, even when the source of light is somewhat less illuminating than the sun. According to conspiracy buffs, every decision regarding your economic well-being, your position in society, the condition of your health, and the institution that governs your life rests in the hands of enigmatic men—they are almost always men—whose identity is either concealed from view or hidden behind a mask of benign public service. Nothing you think or do is yours alone to decide, you will be lectured. The world's destiny is determined by Freemasons or Gnostics, Wicca or Druids, the Bilderberg Group or the Illuminati, the Mafia or members of Skull & Bones. Economic disasters? Vanishing resources? Wars and famine? Only fools believe these occur naturally. To conspiracy theorists, they are the result of conscious actions taken by robed grandmasters, Sicilian warlords, plotting Rosicrucians, followers of Kabbalah, or other menacing factions.

The most rabid believers assume that all groups are equally involved, exchanging responsibilities like merchants in a marketplace of schemers. Most people are more sanguine. Many secret societies, they point out, are benign or even beneficial. Others may be deceptive, although this doesn't mean they are dangerous, just fraternal. Some, admittedly, are utterly treacherous in intent, but the risk they represent may be minimal. Should we worry about the Ku Klux Klan, for example, a once feared gang of lynchers that has morphed into a ragtag assembly of racist fools? Not very likely.

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Yet it would be foolish in the extreme to treat every clandestine group as though it were nothing more than a collection of adults playing childish games. If the price of liberty is indeed vigilance, then the prudent ones among us should be aware of societies that may be acting entirely in their interests and totally against our own. The challenge lies in knowing who is who. Or what.

Taking the long view, this book will examine the most prominent secret societies that have endured down through the ages. In every case their influence, and at least vestiges of any notorious actions, exists today. As we'll see, most are fraternal and benign, several remain tantalizingly suspicious, and some deserve to have their dark cloak of secrecy yanked away with a brilliant light shone upon them as they wriggle and squirm in an unfamiliar beam of exposure.

CHAPTER ONE

THE ASSASSINS



**NOTHING IS TRUE,
EVERYTHING IS PERMITTED**

In AD 1191 Conrad of Montferrat ascended the throne as King of Jerusalem, appointed to this position by the celebrated hero of the Crusades, Richard the Lion-Hearted. After instructing Conrad to rebuild Christian forces in preparation for his return, Richard departed for home, destined to achieve immortality as a fair-haired idol in tales of Robin Hood and fables of great heroics.

Conrad, who had campaigned against Henry, Count of Champagne, for the throne, planned to glorify his reign as King of Jerusalem by driving Muslims from the Holy Land forever, earning a hallowed place in history as a Christian hero, and a seat in heaven near the right hand of God.

He had precious little time to do it. Soon after Richard departed the Holy Land, three Christian monks entered Conrad's campsite, bowing and making the sign of the cross to all they encountered. Their pious actions persuaded Conrad and his warriors to let down their guard, a fatal mistake. As soon as the monks were within reach of Conrad, they withdrew daggers from beneath their cloaks and cut him to pieces, slashing and stabbing in a violent display

THE ASSASSINS

of butchery before the guards could intervene. With Conrad dispatched, the young men, who were not Christian monks but devout Muslims, made no attempt to escape. Surrendering to Conrad's guards, they suffered silently through a ghastly ordeal that included first flaying them alive, then slow-roasting them to death. Such were the penalties in that unforgiving world.

Later, while mourning the loss of their leader, Conrad's followers whispered among themselves about the odd behavior of his killers, especially their passivity after the deed was accomplished. It was strange how they dropped their weapons and simply stood awaiting capture while the king's death rattle faded. Even when informed of the agony that awaited them, the young men actually appeared to welcome the grisly experience of a torturous death. No one had seen such behavior before. No one could explain it. No one knew what it meant.

Henry, Count of Champagne, spent little time pondering the manner of the young killers. Conrad's premature death may have proved a tragedy to some, but it was an opportunity for Henry who, had he been born eight centuries later, might have become an outstanding corporate CEO. Soon after the last shovelful of Holy Land earth had been tossed onto Conrad's coffin, Henry took strategic action by marrying Conrad's widow, hoping to inherit the title that had eluded him and cost her husband his life. Whether through lack of support within Conrad's court or simple bad luck, Henry failed to win the crown as king of Jerusalem, settling instead for an administrative position that required him to make several trips east from Jerusalem into Persia. During one of these journeys, he encountered the source of Conrad's demise, and tapped one of history's most chilling secret societies.

It occurred when Henry and his entourage were following a rarely traveled road through the rugged Alborz Mountains, north of Tehran in modern-day Iran. During the Crusades, this land was occupied by Shiite Muslims who permitted Christians to pass with relative safety. Nearing a large fortress poised on the brink of an elevated bluff, Henry and his guards were met by representatives of the castle's resident, the Dai-el-Kebir. At first apprehensive, the Christians were reassured when the servants displayed every mark of honor to them before extending an invitation from their master to view the fortress and sample the Dai-el-Kebir's hospitality. Such an

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invitation could not be ignored without insulting the host. Besides, the impressive fortress captured Henry's interest. The prospect of both a tour of the intriguing structure and a good meal was irresistible.

Henry and his men followed the servants to the heights of the castle entrance, where their host greeted them with warmth and fanfare. The Dai-el-Kebir, a man of obvious wealth and power, took some pleasure in displaying the fortress to his guests, escorting them through extensive gardens and drawing their attention to the many stone towers that soared high above the rocky valley. At one point, he gestured at the tallest of the towers, asking if Henry was impressed by its height and magnificence.

Henry agreed it was an imposing sight, rising almost a hundred cubits over the edge of a steep rocky cliff. At the tower's summit, two sentinels dressed in immaculate white robes stood watching the Dai-el-Kebir's every move. Henry had noticed similar young men positioned atop other towers of the fortress, each smiling and nodding at their master and his guests, all apparently happy and contented. "These men," the Dai-el-Kebir said, "obey me far better than the subjects of Christians will obey their masters."

His guest appeared confused by his host's words. They had not discussed anything to do with armies or obedience.

At the sight of Henry's puzzled expression, the Dai-el-Kebir smiled, said, "Watch," and waved his arms in an obviously prearranged signal. Immediately, the men on the peak of the highest tower threw themselves from the ledge and into the air, dashing their bodies to pieces on the rocks below.

Henry was appalled. The two young men had been content and physically fit, yet they had died at the whim of their master without hesitation.

"If you wish," the Dai-el-Kebir said, "I shall order the rest to do the same. All the men atop my towers will do likewise at a signal from me."

Henry declined with thanks, shaken at the sight of the senseless waste of life.

"Could any Christian prince expect such obedience from his subjects?" the Dai-el-Kebir asked.

The count replied that no Christian leader he knew could exert such power over his men. His own warriors, like the warriors