

# **Left-Hand Path and Right-Hand Path**

**From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia**

The terms Left-Hand Path and Right-Hand Path refer to a postulated dichotomy between two distinct types of religion. The exact meaning of the terms has varied over time; the most modern usage regards religions which focus upon the worship of one or more deities and the observance of strict moral codes as belonging to the Right-Hand Path, while considering religions which value the spiritual advancement of the self over other goals to belong to the Left-Hand Path. This usage of the terms is invoked almost exclusively by self-proclaimed followers of the Left-Hand Path; followers of religions described as "Right-Hand Path" argue that this means of dividing religions is a mislabeled or false dichotomy.

## **Origins**

Throughout history, many cultures have regarded the left hand and left-handedness as evil. This tendency can be seen in the dual meaning of the word right, in the etymology of words such as sinister, which in Latin means both left and unlucky, and in taboos such as the Islamic prohibition against touching holy texts with one's left hand. Consequently, the left hand has often been used as a symbol for the rejection of traditional religion. The word right as used with hand in the Old Testament is generally the Hebrew word yamin meaning stronger, more dextrous. The word for left is smowl meaning dark. God gives and creates with his right hand, it is his wonderful ability to do all things. With his left hand he punishes. This hints at the Obic nature of the LHP.

It should be noted that the terms "left" and "right" as applied to politics, meaning "liberal" and "conservative" respectively, have an independent origin; they are derived from the seating in the French Legislative Assembly in 1791.

## **Usage in Tantra**

Tantra, a set of esoteric Indian traditions with roots in both Hinduism and Buddhism, is often divided by its practitioners into two different paths: dakshinachara and vamachara, translated as Right-Hand Path and Left-Hand Path respectively. Dakshinachara consists of traditional Hindu practices such as asceticism and meditation, while vamachara also includes ritual practices that go against the grain of mainstream Hinduism, including sexual rituals, consumption of alcohol and other intoxicants, animal sacrifice, and flesh-eating. The two paths are viewed as equally valid approaches to enlightenment; vamchara, however, is considered to be the faster and more dangerous of the two, not suitable for all practitioners. This usage of the terms is still current in modern Tantra.

## **Adoption by Western occultism**

The prevalence of these terms within the New Age movement, particularly occultism and Satanism, is often attributed to the influence of Helena Blavatsky, who first used the term Left-Hand Path to describe "immoral" religions. This usage was popularized by Aleister Crowley, who maintained that his religion, Thelema, was, despite appearances, not of the Left-Hand Path. It is not known whether she borrowed these terms from Tantra or from a different source; some have suggested that she, or perhaps Crowley, borrowed the terms from the Kabbalah, which speaks of the Left Hand Pillar of Severity, the Middle Pillar of Balance, and the Right Hand Pillar of Mercy.

While this usage of the terms is still current in some occult circles, many occultists now see the Left-Hand Path as encompassing all modern occult practices, while the Right-Hand Path is considered to encompass traditional religions, such as Christianity, though most Christians would disagree with such a classification.

New religious movements which describe themselves as followers of the Left-Hand Path inverted much of the symbolism that they associate with the more "traditional" Right-Hand Path, such as the following Biblical passage:

*And he shall separate them one from another,  
as a shepherd divideth his sheep from the goats.  
And he shall set the sheep on his right,  
but the goats on his left.*  
- Matthew 25: 32-33

Taking a cue from this, modern followers of the Left-Hand Path in the West sometimes utilize the symbol of a goat or Baphomet, and sometimes refer to followers of Right-Hand Path religions as sheep, implying that they exhibit a "herd mentality".

### **Usage in modern occultism**

Today, the terms Left-Hand Path and Right-Hand Path are almost exclusively used by self-proclaimed followers of the Left-Hand Path, who hold varying opinions of the Right-Hand Path; some see the two Paths as equally valid approaches to truth, whose relationship is akin to the balance between Yin and Yang, while others criticize the Right-Hand Path for being too restrictive. According to the latter view, the Right-Hand Path's imposition of formal dogmas and codes of behaviour upon an individual takes away one's ability to be truly responsible for one's own life, thereby destroying a part of one's identity. According to some, this is the main difference between the two Paths: the Left-Hand Path preserves individuality, while the Right-Hand Path destroys it. Conversely, some accuse Left-Hand Path religions of narcissism while praising the Right-Hand Path for its altruism.

Right-Hand Path religions are usually said to share the following properties:

- Belief in a higher power, such as a deity.
- Obedience to the will of the higher power.
- Belief in the existence of a supernatural mechanism, such as Karma, divine retribution, or Threefold Law, which causes the moral decisions that an individual makes to be reciprocated upon himself.
- The ultimate goal of having the individual consciousness be absorbed into a greater or cosmic whole.

Left-Hand Path religions are usually said to share the following properties:

- The belief that some people can, by attaining spiritual insight, themselves become akin to gods.
- An esoteric understanding of concepts such as karma, divine retribution, or Threefold Law, resulting in fluid, rather than strict, codes of morality.
- The belief that the individual self is preeminent, and that all decisions should be made with the goal of cultivating the self (though not the ego).
- The belief that each individual is responsible for his own happiness, and that no external force will provide salvation to reward actions which do not advance one's happiness in this life.
- The belief that the forces of the universe can be bent to one's personal will by magickal means, and that power gained in such a manner is an aid to enlightenment.
- An agnostic view of the existence of deities, or a Platonic view of deities as "first-forms."

Those who believe in the existence of this dichotomy usually classify most of the established religions of the western world, as well as such eastern traditions as Hinayana Buddhism and Confucianism, as Right-Hand Path religions, while regarding such religions as Vajrayana Buddhism and Taoism as members of the Left-Hand Path. Mahayana Buddhism is seen as a mixture of Left-Hand Path, since its ultimate goal is the attainment of enlightenment for the individual, and Right-Hand Path, since it regards good deeds as the means by which enlightenment may be attained.

### **Criticism**

The existence of the dichotomy between the Left-Hand Path and the Right-Hand Path is

not generally accepted by scholars of religion. Critics of the dichotomy argue that it is derived from a rather limited subset of the world's religions and that it fails to encompass the variety of religious beliefs and practices found throughout the world, and that the terms are too loosely defined to be of much use in formal study and too loaded with pejorative connotations to be useful in ordinary discourse between people holding different religious views. Defenders of the dichotomy reply that the terms may still be useful when it comes to examining the effect that different religions have upon their adherents