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“Un-demonizing” the Satanists: The True Function of Satan in Religious Satanism

There are often misconceptions when people think of ‘Satanism’ as a religion. With Judeo-Christian traditions dominating culture, Satan, or the Devil, is a figure that people have pre-conceived ideas about. Specifically, Satan is commonly known as a figure that embodies all evil, and is the ultimate opposer of God. Satanism then, has been perceived in a similar way because of its association with the name of Satan. For instance, in the 1980s there were many accusations of Satanic Ritual Abuse (SRA). These accusations connected the emergence of underground satanic cults to reports of sexual abuse, and forced satanic rituals, including drinking blood and murder.¹ While it has been shown that these accusations have virtually no proof or substance, these claims (mainly made by Christian fundamentalists) have made a lasting impression on the image of Satanism, putting out a moral panic about the religion and those involved with the occult.²

Since these are misconceptions, what then, are the true views and values of Satanism?

For starters, there are three important sects within Satanism: The Church of Satan, The Temple of Set, and The Satanic Temple. Each of these have variations on the main ideas of Satanism started

¹ S.P. Robbins, 'The Social and Cultural Context of Satanic Ritual Abuse Allegations', *The Encyclopedic Sourcebook of Satanism*, (New York: Prometheus Books, 2008), pp. 141-156, (p.141).

² P. Jenkins, and D. Maier-Katkin, 'Satanism: Myth and Reality in a Contemporary Moral Panic', *The Encyclopedic Sourcebook of Satanism*, pp. 64-88, (p. 65-66)

by Anton LaVey and the Church of Satan. What they all have in common is the alternative use of Satan as a figure. Both the Church of Satan and The Satanic Temple use the figure of Satan as a metaphor for their values and principles, rather than believing in the supernatural evil force of the Devil known in the Christian tradition. What's interesting about the Temple of Set is that for them, Satan is a real supernatural force in the world taken in the form of the Egyptian god, Set. But, rather than worship him as a deity, he is viewed as a teacher or a guide to learn from. Therefore, religious Satanists as a whole do not worship Satan as the traditional evil deity, but use him as a representation for their way of living.

To begin defining what Satanism is, it is important to look at the origins of the religion. In the New Age movement of the 1960s, Anton LaVey formed the Church of Satan in 1966 to display an alternative view of the world and humanity. Before this time, it is hard to pin point any formal, organized groups of Satanists, so the Church of Satan is attributed as the beginning of the religion.³ Anton LaVey did not believe the Devil existed but rather, uses Satan as a metaphor for his viewpoint. This viewpoint, as Lewis and Peterson note, 'advocates a blend of Epicurean hedonism, and Ayn Rand's philosophy of selfishness, flavored with a pinch of ritual magic.'⁴ They point out that Satan represents the opposite of what the Christian traditions have formed into the status quo, which can be very attractive to those wanting to steer away from this rigidity.⁵ Satan represents sex, vengeance, pride, and non-conformity. LaVey takes these 'sins'

³ J.R. Lewis, and J. Aa. Petersen, (eds.), *The Encyclopedic Sourcebook of Satanism* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2008), pp. 9-23, (p. 9).

⁴ J.R. Lewis, and J. Aa. Petersen, *The Encyclopedic Sourcebook of Satanism*, (p. 10)

⁵ J.R. Lewis, and J. Aa. Petersen, *The Encyclopedic Sourcebook of Satanism*, (p. 10-11)

and turns them into virtues to live by because he believes that these are at the core of human's natural state.

This idea is what makes Anton LaVey's Satanism (LaVeyan Satanism) as a type of self-religion. Asbjørn Dyrendal explains that LaVeyan Satanism focuses on humans reverting back to their more natural, carnal state, and that our culture socializes us to repress these instincts.⁶ Satanism then, rather than focusing on being sinful or evil, focuses on being more authentic. This focus on finding the authentic nature of the Self and de-socializing from the dogma of Christian and Islamic religions, aligns Satanism with parts of Paul Heelas' idea of self-religion.⁷ Dyrendal also regards Satanism as quite materialistic, with the focus being the individual's desires and indulgences.⁸ This self-sufficiency is also displayed in the structure of the religion. Because the main focus is on individual development, there are no local chapters or churches. Rather, The Church of Satan is governed by The Council of Nine who assist in the administration of the organization. Although there is a hierarchy, the focus remains on improvement of the individual and those who display interest and adept knowledge of Satanist theory can work towards higher positions.⁹ Because the focus is on individual improvement, Satan functions as a metaphorical figure, representing carnality and authenticity. LaVey then is not proposing one to be evil or perform terrible deeds, but he intends on the individual to indulge in their own desires and to reject conformity.

⁶ A. Dyrendal, 'Darkness Within: Satanism as a Self-Religion', in J. Aa. Petersen (ed.), *Contemporary Religious Satanism: A Critical Anthology* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), pp. 59-73, (p. 61).

⁷ P. Heelas, as referenced in A. Dyrendal, 'Darkness Within: Satanism as a Self-Religion', (p. 61)

⁸ A. Dyrendal, 'Darkness Within: Satanism as a Self-Religion', (p. 62)

⁹ Church of Satan, *Official Church of Satan Website*, 2018 <<https://www.churchofsatan.com/>>

LaVey explains this philosophy further in his many works, but in particular, in *The Satanic Bible* (1969). In this text, LaVey outlines the Nine Satanic Statements, which sum up the Satanist doctrine:

1. Satan represents indulgence, instead of abstinence!
2. Satan represents vital existence, instead of spiritual pipe dreams!
3. Satan represents undefiled wisdom, instead of hypocritical self-deceit!
4. Satan represents kindness to those who deserved it, instead of love wasted on ingrates!
5. Satan represents vengeance, instead of turning the other cheek!
6. Satan represents responsibility to the responsible, instead of concern for psychic vampires!
7. Satan represents man as just another animal, sometimes better, more often worse than those that walk on all-fours, who, because of his “divine spiritual and intellectual development”, has become the most vicious animal of all!
8. Satan represents all of the so-called sins, as they lead to physical, mental or emotional gratification!
9. Satan has been the best friend the church has ever had, as he has kept it in business all these years!¹⁰

In eight of these statements Satan is followed by ‘represents,’ making Satan a metaphor for these ways of living. Despite the fifth statement about vengeance, these beliefs are not particularly evil. Even still, it promotes vengeance only to those who are believed to deserve it. Peter H. Gilmore, who is the current High Priest of the Church of Satan, further emphasizes that Satanism is not about devil-worship:

Satanists do not believe in the supernatural, in neither God nor the Devil. To the Satanist, *he is his own God*. Satan is the symbol of Man living as his prideful, carnal nature dictates. The reality behind Satan is simply the dark evolutionary force that permeates all of nature and provides the drive for survival and propagation inherent in all living things. Satan is not a conscious entity to be worshipped, rather a reservoir of power inside each human to be tapped at will.¹¹

¹⁰ LaVey, A. *The Satanic Bible* (New York: Avon, 1969), p. 2

¹¹ P.H. Gilmore, ‘Satanism: The Feared Religion’, in *Official Church of Satan Website*.

Gilmore emphasizes the importance of Satan as a symbol, and regarding oneself as a god. While some may view this as selfish or egotistical, it is certainly not harming anyone else, nor is it evil. Therefore, right from its origins, Satanism flips the traditional notions of Satan into a symbol for carnal nature and the rejection of current methods of socialization.

In 1975, Micheal Aquino formed The Temple of Set, rejecting some of the beliefs of the Church of Satan. He originally was a high-ranking member of the Church of Satan but was dissatisfied with the direction the Church was going in. He allegedly formed the organization after the Egyptian god Set's 'revelation', which Aquino believes is Satan's true form.¹² Set is believed to have '[expanded] the borders of existence and then [returned] that Chaotic energy to the center.'¹³ Because of this revelation, the people of the Temple (or Setians) believe that he is a real force in the universe. One Setian gave this response to Graham Harvey's questionnaire about being a member of the Temple: 'Set is a real being who has offered his Gift of the Black Flame to mankind. This means that man can become fully Self-conscious rather than remain tied to the cosmic order. Set is not worshipped as a god, but is approached as a friend.'¹⁴ What Satan/Set is representing here is still a rebellious and carnal figure, but now becomes a supernatural force in the universe. Harvey also notes that there is more emphasis on mysticism and magical practices within the Temple.¹⁵ So, while they do believe in the supernatural, Setians still offer an

¹² G. Harvey, 'Satanism: Performing Alterity and Othering', in J. Aa. Petersen (ed.), *Contemporary Religious Satanism: A Critical Anthology* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), pp. 27-39, (p.32)

¹³ The Temple of Set, *Xepher.org*, 2012, <<https://www.xeper.org/>> [Accessed 18 December 2018]

¹⁴ G. Harvey, 'Satanism: Performing Alterity and Othering', (p.32)

¹⁵ G. Harvey, 'Satanism: Performing Alterity and Othering', (p.33)

alternative view on who Satan is. Rather than him being the embodiment of evil, he is a friend or a guide to improving upon oneself.

This improvement of the Self also aligns The Temple of Set with a type of self-religion. However, the main difference to the Church of Satan's self-religion is their ideas of the Self. As Dyrendal points out, The Temple of Set's philosophy is not focused on returning to the natural self, but rather, Setians are given a gift of self-consciousness so they have knowledge that other people do not.¹⁶ This makes the Temple of Set more esoteric than the Church of Satan. As well, the application process is quite different. The Church of Satan only requires a brief form and a fee.¹⁷ With the Temple of Set however, the higher members have to review your application and statement for your application to be accepted, and in some cases, meetings with higher members are required.¹⁸ This makes involvement of the higher members much greater. Harvey notes that although members are expected to reach a certain classification within the Temple, past that, there is no requirement to move further, and the focus remains on self-improvement.¹⁹ Their main goals also reflect the Temple of Set as a self-religion:

The Temple of Set is an organization with one task: to provide an environment in which individuals discover, pursue, and realize their unique purpose and destiny. Our philosophy holds that excellence and creative purpose are rooted in self-awareness, self-knowledge and self-creation. We name the experience of the willed unfolding of this individual potential *Xeper*.²⁰

¹⁶ A. Dyrendal, 'Darkness Within: Satanism as a Self-Religion', (p. 61)

¹⁷ Church of Satan, *Official Church of Satan Website*, 2018

¹⁸ The Temple of Set, *Xeper.org*, 2012

¹⁹ G. Harvey, 'Satanism: Performing Alterity and Othering', (p.33)

²⁰ The Temple of Set, *Xeper.org*, 2012

This concept of ‘xepher’ is not unlike the self-awareness of the Church of Satan. So, there is some agreement to the Church of Satan on what the self should be and what Satan/Set represents (carnality and rejection of current socialization). However, for them, Satan functions as a real, supernatural being, which distinguishes the Temple of Set from other forms of Satanism.

Lastly, The Satanic Temple uses Satan as a metaphor, similar to the Church of Satan, but in a different way. In 2012, Lucien Greaves started this sect of Satanism as an activist group to ‘encourage benevolence and empathy among all people, reject tyrannical authority, advocate practical common sense and justice, and be directed by the human conscience to undertake noble pursuits guided by the individual will.’²¹ So the focus of this group is on pragmatism and advocating social justice rather than the individual, carnal nature. Greaves regards his doctrine as building on the ‘Miltonic Satan’ of *Paradise Lost* that represents the rejection of the dominating theocratic values of our current society.²² The Satan in Milton’s work is regarded by these Satanists as the ‘Eternal Rebel in opposition to arbitrary authority’ and from this idea they create the seven tenets:

One should strive to act with compassion and empathy toward all creatures in accordance with reason.

The struggle for justice is an ongoing and necessary pursuit that should prevail over laws and institutions.

One’s body is inviolable, subject to one’s own will alone.

The freedoms of others should be respected, including the freedom to offend. To willfully and unjustly encroach upon the freedoms of another is to forgo one’s own.

²¹ The Satanic Temple, *The Satanic Temple*, 2018 <<https://thesatanictemple.com/>> [Accessed 18 December 2018].

²² L. Greaves (2017) ‘I’m a founder of the Satanic Temple. Don’t blame Satan for white supremacy.’ *The Washington Post*, 23rd August. Available at: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/posteverything/wp/2017/08/23/im-a-founder-of-the-satanic-temple-dont-blame-satan-for-white-supremacy/> [Accessed 18 December 2018]

Beliefs should conform to one's best scientific understanding of the world. One should take care never to distort scientific facts to fit one's beliefs.

People are fallible. If one makes a mistake, one should do one's best to rectify it and resolve any harm that might have been caused.

Every tenet is a guiding principle designed to inspire nobility in action and thought. The spirit of compassion, wisdom, and justice should always prevail over the written or spoken word.²³

These tenets are quite different to the views of The Church of Satan and The Temple of Set.

Satan is not mentioned once in these tenets, unlike the Nine Satanic Statements. If these tenets were taken out of the context of this group, it would be hard to make the association with Satan as a figure. But, in regards to the social justice movements they advocate for, Satan becomes a powerful symbol for social justice and the separation of the church and state.

The Satanic Temple often uses the symbol of Baphomet on their merchandise as well as their protests and political stunts. Baphomet is a deity that is associated with the image of a Sabbatic Goat and represents occult and mystical traditions. For The Satanic Temple, Baphomet is a symbol of pluralism, legal equality, tolerance, freedom of conscience and reconciliation.²⁴ In August of 2018, The Satanic Temple put forth a rally to try and erect a statue of Baphomet alongside the Ten Commandments monument in Little Rock, Arkansas. This was a protest of the Ten Commandments monument because they believe it violates the first amendment of the separation of church and state.²⁵ They believe that if we live in a truly pluralistic society with

²³ The Satanic Temple, 2018 <<https://thesatanictemple.com/>>

²⁴ 'The Satanic Temple's Protest for First Amendment Rights' Vice, YouTube, 3 December 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6AOX-_HdFKQ> [Accessed 18 December 2018]

²⁵ Selk, A., (2018) 'A Satanic Idol goes to the Arkansas Capitol Building,' *The Washington Post*, 17 August. Available at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2018/08/17/a-satanic-idols-3-year-journey-to-the-arkansas-capitol-building/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.4dc037f944f3 [Accessed 18 December 2018]

freedom of speech and freedom of religion, they should be able to erect their religious symbol as well. So for them, Satan and Baphomet are symbols for their activism. There were many Christian fundamentalists and white supremacy groups there to protest this rally because they believed that they were trying to bring forth Satan.²⁶ As one of their seven tenets encourages scientific and pragmatic thinking, this was obviously not the intent of the Satanic Temple. Rather, what Lucien Greaves tries to encourage, is non-theistic practices and the separation of the supernatural from religion.²⁷ Thus, Satan functions for the Satanic Temple as a symbol for a type of activist atheism.

Each of these sects within the overarching religion of Satanism provides an alternative view on the figure of Satan. From the beginning, the Church of Satan makes Satan a figure that represents the carnal nature of human beings. They see this carnality as a more natural way of living, rather than suppressing the desires that many other religions view as ‘sinful.’ Therefore, for the Church of Satan, Satan is a metaphorical figure for rejecting conformity and encouraging indulgence. For the Temple of Set, Satan/Set, is a real force in the universe. He encourages improvement of the Self as well, but rather than be a deity to be worshipped, he is more of a teacher. Set, for them, has given them self-consciousness and thus they can reject the traditional ‘cosmic order.’ Lastly, The Satanic Temple uses the Satan of Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, as a figure for the rebellion against tyrannical authority. They use him as a symbol for movements of social justice and the separation of church and state. Overall, among the modern Satanists, Satan is a figurehead to represent their worldview. However, within the fundamentalist Christian

²⁶ ‘The Satanic Temple's Protest for First Amendment Rights’ Vice

²⁷ ‘The Satanic Temple's Protest for First Amendment Rights’ Vice

community, Satanists are still demonized to be 'devil-worshippers.' Hopefully with more research and literature about Satanism in the public sphere, people can be more open to learn about what Satan actually represents within these doctrines.

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