

1 What Is Satanism?

In 1992, supervisory special agent Kenneth Lanning of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) published a guide for law enforcement officials investigating allegations of satanic ritual abuse (SRA). The guide was published in response to conspiracy theories claiming that a highly organized group of criminal Satanists was systematically torturing and murdering children in blasphemous rituals – a conspiracy theory now remembered as the Satanic Panic. Many police departments assumed stories about satanic cults were true and began attending conferences on what they called ritualistic or satanic crime. Lanning specialized in investigating cases of child abuse and child sex rings, which definitely exist. However, his guide cautioned that labeling crimes as satanic was a distraction that hindered investigation rather than helping it. In a chapter titled “Definitions,” Lanning explained he could not determine what it would even mean for a crime to be satanic because it is such a subjective category:

It is difficult to define satanism precisely. No attempt will be made to do so here. However, it is important to realize that, for some people, any religious belief system other than their own is satanic. The Ayatollah Khomeini and Saddam Hussein referred to the United States as the “Great Satan.” In the British Parliament, a Protestant leader called the Pope the anti-Christ.¹

Lanning added that law enforcement training materials list a book called *Prepare for War* (1987) by Rebecca Brown as a reliable source about Satanism. But this book names “fortune tellers, horoscopes, fraternity oaths, vegetarianism, yoga, self-hypnosis, relaxation tapes, acupuncture, Biofeedback, fantasy role-playing games, adultery, homosexuality, pornography, judo, karate, and rock music” as manifestations of Satanism.² Brown’s definition of Satanism is not only subjective; it is so broad as to be nearly meaningless.

Next, Lanning noted that while there are people who self-identify as Satanists, it is still difficult to make objective claims about what Satanism actually is: “Who decides exactly what ‘satanists’ believe? In this country, we cannot even agree on what Christians believe. . . . The criminal behavior of one person claiming belief in a religion, does not necessarily imply guilt or blame to others sharing that belief. In addition, simply claiming membership in a religion does not necessarily make you a member.”³

Indeed, various satanic groups including the Church of Satan (CoS), the Temple of Set (ToS), the Order of Nine Angles (ONA), and The Satanic

¹ K. V. Lanning, “Investigator’s Guide to Allegations of ‘Ritual’ Child Abuse” (FBI/US Department of Justice, 1992), p. 9.

² *Ibid.*, p. 9. ³ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

Temple (TST) often accuse one another of being fake Satanists or failing to understand what true Satanism is, much as Christian denominations accuse each other of heresy. True Satanism is subjective from within as well as without.

This problem of definition is a serious obstacle for anyone attempting to understand or even to make accurate statements about Satanism. However, it is an assumption of this Element that Satanism is a meaningful category and that it is possible to make generalized claims about what Satanism is and is not. With this in mind, what is needed is an operational definition of Satanism. Religion scholar Ruben van Luijk defines Satanism as “intentional, religiously motivated veneration of Satan.”⁴ This is an effective operational definition and it has several features worth noting. First, and most importantly, Van Luijk’s definition assumes some flexibility about how Satanists define Satan. Most Satanists do not imagine Satan in the same way that Christians do, as a fallen angel dedicated to evil and the destruction of humanity. In fact, most contemporary Satanists are nontheistic, meaning that they regard God and Satan as fictional characters, not supernatural realities. To nontheistic Satanists, the story of Satan’s eternal defiance and rebellion is not literal but symbolic: it functions as an important myth that articulates their values and orients them toward the world. So-called theistic Satanists may understand Satan as a metaphysical reality – although not necessarily a god – that may or may not be evil. Whatever else Satanists may think about Satan, Satan is above all a powerful symbol of their values and ideals, and the centrality of this symbol is a prerequisite for anything to be considered as Satanism.

Second, the criterion that Satanism must be intentional disqualifies accusations of Satanism used to smear one’s political or religious opponents, such as Brown’s claim that vegetarianism is satanic. Even if there is a literal Satan who is pleased whenever someone eats a veggie burger, vegetarianism would still not meet this definition of Satanism unless someone is a vegetarian with the *intent* that their diet venerates Satan.

Third, while this definition excludes claims of “unintentional Satanism,” it still allows for categorizing *imaginary* groups – groups that exist only in fantasies and conspiracy theories – as Satanism. During the Satanic Panic, it was alleged that cults were torturing children and sacrificing thousands of people to Satan. While no such groups actually existed, this conspiracy theory can be characterized as a claim about Satanism because the purported cultists were said to deliberately worship Satan.

⁴ R. van Luijk, *Children of Lucifer: The Origins of Modern Religious Satanism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 5.

The distinction between real and imaginary Satanists is important because it appears that for most of the history of the word “Satanism,” there were no actual Satanists. Van Luijk notes that the term appears for the first time in French and English in the sixteenth century during the European wars of religion. The available evidence suggests that Satanism began as an imaginary religion Christians invented to demonize their opponents. For this reason, Van Luijk suggests it is useful to think about the history of Satanism as “a continuous process of attribution and identification.”⁵ People like Brown have *attributed* Satanism to various people and activities. Meanwhile, people like Anton LaVey of the CoS have *identified* as Satanists. The public conversation about what Satanists are and do has changed over time and is shaped by these two forces.

While a useful starting point, Van Luijk’s definition is not perfect. The criterion that Satanists venerate Satan can imply Christian notions of faith and worship that do not apply to nontheistic forms of Satanism. Per Faxneld, another Satanism scholar, simply avoids assumptions about the nature of religion by defining Satanism as “a system in which Satan is celebrated in a prominent position.”⁶ However, some of the groups discussed in this Element do not celebrate Satan. The ToS’s mythology focuses on an Egyptian deity, yet it is a key group in discussions of modern Satanism because it splintered away from the CoS. Satanism scholar Kennet Granholm has proposed the term “post-Satanism” to describe groups such as the ToS. Furthermore, Satanism is part of a larger constellation of dark esoteric traditions that practitioners frequently refer to as the left-hand path. This term originated in Indian Tantra, which makes a distinction between *vāmamārga* (heterodox practices) and *dakṣiṇāmārga* (orthodox practices). *Vāmamārga* can be translated as “left-hand way” and beginning in the nineteenth century, Western occultists adapted this term to their own esoteric context. It is now used to refer to traditions that emphasize individuality, antinomianism, and self-deification.⁷ Jesper Aagaard Petersen notes that discourse surrounding the left-hand path points toward “an emerging field of correspondence between Satanism, Paganism and ceremonial magic, borrowing from all,” and that “Satan seems to have limited importance the further we move along the esoteric axis and into the ‘Left Hand Path milieu.’”⁸ That is, Satan shares the stage with other dark entities such as Set, Lilith, Hecate,

⁵ R. van Luijk, “Sex, Science, and Liberty: The Resurrection of Satan in Nineteenth-Century (Counter) Culture,” in P. F. and J. A. Petersen (eds.), *The Devil’s Party: Satanism in Modernity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 41–52 (p. 41).

⁶ P. Faxneld, *Satanic Feminism: Lucifer As the Liberator of Woman in Nineteenth-Century Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 25.

⁷ K. Granholm, “Embracing Others Than Satan: The Multiple Princes of Darkness in the Left-Hand Path Milieu,” in J. A. Petersen (ed.), *Contemporary Religious Satanism: A Critical Anthology* (New York: Routledge, 2016), pp. 85–102.

⁸ J. A. Petersen, “Contemporary Satanism,” in C. Partridge, ed., *The Occult World* (New York: Routledge, 2015), pp. 396–406 (p. 402).

and Chaos. In practice, scholarship on Satanism generally proceeds in terms of historical connections and family resemblances that link ideas and movements rather than specific beliefs or practices that might constitute Satanism.

Anton LaVey and the Invention of Satanism

Until the twentieth century, the history of Satanism was almost entirely attribution, with no identification. In the imagination of early modern Christians, Satanists were people who had turned away from God and knowingly sided with a fallen angel who hates not only God, but the entire human race. As such, Satanists literally worshipped evil for the sake of evil. Any church or government that opposed Satanism was acting not only in its own interest, but in the interest of humanity, because it was combating a force of pure evil. Since the Christian religion also teaches that Satan and his followers are destined to lose their battle against God and suffer eternal punishment, it is difficult to imagine why anyone would actually be this sort of Satanist. In early modern Europe, most people who confessed to worshipping Satan did so only under torture or other forms of coercion.

For a significant number of people to willingly identify as Satanists, it was first necessary to reimagine Satan as a figure who is opposed to God, but not humanity. This reimagining occurred primarily in the early nineteenth century at the hands of Romantic writers. In poetry, plays, and novels, these figures cast God as a tyrant who used his omnipotent power to bully others. In rebelling against such a God, Satan was brave, noble, and a friend to humanity. These writers did not believe in a literal Satan, but speaking about God and Satan in these terms became a way of criticizing the power of churches and governments and championing the values of reason and liberty. The Romantics' poetic celebration of Satan was still not Satanism as defined by Van Lwijk because it was not "religiously motivated veneration." But it was likely a necessary prerequisite to the development of religious Satanism.

Most scholars of Satanism accept that Satanism as a self-declared religion did not truly begin until 1966 when LaVey founded the CoS. LaVey openly and publicly declared himself a Satanist, and although he did not believe in a literal Satan, his books contain essays and rituals celebrating Satan. Van Lwijk writes, "Genealogically speaking, every known Satanist group or organization in the world today derives directly or indirectly from LaVey's 1966 Church of Satan, even if they are dismissive of LaVey or choose to emphasize other real or alleged forerunners of Satanism."⁹ However, other historians have suggested that various figures or movements that preceded LaVey may qualify as expressions of Satanism. As discussed in Section 3, following the Romantics came

⁹ Van Lwijk, *Children of Lucifer*, p. 305.

a series of esoteric religious movements that presented increasingly sympathetic attitudes toward Satan. At exactly what point this trend produced the first Satanist is somewhat subjective. At any rate, these were obscure groups and their influence on contemporary Satanism is minimal.

Satanism scholars Asbjørn Dyrendal, James R. Lewis, and Jesper Aagaard Petersen have suggested that self-declared Satanism is an “invented religion” – in the sense that it was consciously created in the 1960s and 1970s through a process of bricolage or combining different elements. LaVey and other early Satanists drew on the Romantics’ glorification of Satan, legends of black masses and other “satanic” activity, and numerous other sources to create a new religion. Dyrendal, Lewis, and Petersen also note that the invention of Satanism is not a finished process, but remains ongoing.¹⁰

The Varieties of Satanic Experience

Almost as soon as the CoS was founded, numerous rival satanic groups began to emerge, as well as lone individuals who identified as Satanists. These groups shared some similarities, but they also disagreed on many points of belief and practice – including whether Satan really exists. Dyrendal, Lewis, and Petersen note that there is not just one Satanism but a range of Satanisms they call “the satanic milieu.” As they put it: “Satanism is not a movement with the single voice of doctrine, but a ‘milieu’ with a multiplicity of debating voices. What they have in common may be as much the intentional act of declaring oneself a Satanist as any specific point of view.”¹¹

However, this does not mean Satanism is a meaningless category. Certain approaches to Satanism bear a family resemblance, creating distinct subregions within the satanic milieu. Petersen finds it helpful to theorize Satanism in terms of three ideal types: rational, esoteric, and reactionary.¹² Rational Satanism is nontheistic and emphasizes reason and materialism as antidotes to superstition and arbitrary authority. Both the CoS and TST can be called rational expressions of Satanism. Esoteric Satanism holds that Satan refers to some sort of metaphysical reality and often emphasizes magical ritual with the goal of personal transformation. The ToS can be located within this category. Reactionary Satanism is characterized by an oppositional orientation toward Christianity. Extreme examples of reactionary Satanism include figures like serial killer Richard Ramirez. Religion scholar J. Gordon Melton once referred to

¹⁰ A. Dyrendal, J. R. Lewis, and J. A. Petersen, *The Invention of Satanism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 3.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

¹² J. A. Petersen, “Introduction: Embracing Satan,” in J. A. Petersen (ed.), *Contemporary Religious Satanism: A Critical Anthology* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), pp. 1–24 (p. 6).

Satanists like Ramirez as “sickies” to distinguish them from law-abiding groups like the CoS.¹³ Reactionary Satanism would also include certain black metal bands, whose music invokes Satanism primarily as a rebuke of Christianity, as well as teenage dabblers, whose engagement with Satanism is motivated by shock value or a desire to defy authority and social norms. It should be noted that these are ideal types – categories scholars invented as a framework for comparison. As such, it is not uncommon for satanic groups to selectively utilize elements from all three types.

In addition to the three ideal types, a more recent division within the satanic milieu concerns whether Satanism is more focused on the individual or on transforming society through political action. LaVey often spoke of Satanism as a way of self-improvement and undoing damage caused by overbearing authority figures. For example, he framed ritual blasphemy as a form of deconditioning to liberate the individual from the stifling effects of socialization. Sociologist Edward Moody, a friend of LaVey and one of the first ethnographers of the CoS, described satanic rituals as “magical therapy” that helps Satanists be more confident and successful.¹⁴ Despite its sinister appearance, by emphasizing the idea of “restoring one’s authentic self,” Satanism shares a common lineage with the New Age and human potential movements. Blanche Barton, a former high priestess of the CoS and the mother of LaVey’s third child, acknowledges this connection in her biography of LaVey, although she claims LaVey’s ideas came first. Barton explains, “Visit the ‘New Age’ section of your nearest bookstore. You’ll see the entrepreneurs who have taken up LaVeyan ideas, slapping a more palatable name on them to their critical and financial profit.”¹⁵ Petersen has described Satanism as a “self-religion” in that it sacralizes the self, much like the human potential movement.¹⁶

Since 2013, TST has demanded the right to give prayers before city council meetings, erect satanic statues on government property, distribute satanic materials in public schools, and generally claim all the privileges the government affords to Christians. As the movement grew, TST congregations began

¹³ J. G. Melton, *Encyclopedia of American Religions*, 7th ed. (New York: Thomson-Gale, 2003), p. 204.

¹⁴ E. J. Moody, “Magical Therapy: An Anthropological Investigation of Contemporary Satanism,” in I. I. Zaretsky and M. P. Leone (eds.), *Religious Movements in Contemporary America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1974), pp. 355–82. Chris Mathews notes that Moody is mentioned in the original dedication page of *The Satanic Bible (Modern Satanism: Anatomy of a Radical Subculture* [Westport, CT: Praeger, 2009], p. 173).

¹⁵ B. Barton, *The Secret Life of a Satanist: The Authorized Biography of Anton LaVey* (Los Angeles, CA: Feral House, 1990), p. 14.

¹⁶ J. A. Petersen, “Modern Satanism: Dark Doctrines and Black Flames,” in J. R. Lewis and J. A. Petersen (eds.), *Controversial New Religions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 423–57 (p. 424).

campaigns to clean highways and help the homeless, in part because these actions showed they were not evil and possibly more compassionate than their Christian opponents. In my own work on TST, I have described such activity as “socially engaged Satanism” because the primary focus is on transforming society rather than transforming the self.¹⁷

The CoS regards TST essentially as plagiarism of its movement and has suggested that Satanists should be above politics instead of trying to force Satanism into the public square. The Satanic Temple, in turn, accuses the CoS of doing nothing aside from posting on social media. However, there are examples of the CoS weighing in on social issues and TST focusing on self-care.

In the final analysis, it is difficult to make claims about Satanism because it is not a single, stable thing but a milieu that continues to evolve as it is invented and reinvented, drawing on whatever materials are around it. Understanding Satanism therefore requires paying attention to a larger constellation of ideas and discourses as they have intersected and influenced each other over time. However, this situation is not so different from more familiar religious traditions such as Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism. These traditions also vary widely across times and cultures and cannot be neatly separated from other aspects of culture such as economics, politics, law, and art. In this sense, analyzing Satanism is not only useful for its own sake or for responding to claims of the Satanic Panic; it is also a mental exercise that can help theorize other religious traditions in a new light.

2 Imagining the Black Mass

Long before there were self-identified Satanists, European Christians spread rumors about satanic cults. These cults were said to operate in secret, often posing as respectable Christians. They performed blasphemous rituals and plotted to overthrow the social order. The most enduring of these legends concerned the black mass. This was believed to be an inversion of the Catholic mass in which a consecrated communion host was trampled upon and scorned instead of adored. Black masses were also said to involve orgies, the sacrifice of babies, asperging the congregation with urine instead of holy water, nude women serving as altars, and other practices deemed evil, blasphemous, or salacious.

While a minority of contemporary historians have suggested that black masses may have occurred before the modern period, albeit rarely, most

¹⁷ J. P. Laycock, *Speak of the Devil: How the Satanic Temple Is Changing the Way We Talk about Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

historians assume they were entirely invented by Christians.¹⁸ Van Luijk suggests that Satanism and the black mass were imaginary and invoked by competing churches for propaganda purposes.¹⁹ Rumors that Satanists infiltrated communion services to steal consecrated hosts for desecration in black masses helped support the doctrine of transubstantiation, promulgated after the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215 CE, which asserted that consecrated hosts are the physical body of Christ. The logic was that Satanists would not go to such lengths to abuse the host unless they knew transubstantiation to be true. Accusations of Satanism peaked during the wars of religion that followed the Protestant Reformation, demonstrating their value in disparaging rival Christians. However, just because claims of Satanism were politically and theologically useful does not mean that early modern people did not genuinely believe there were Satanists.

Sociologists have noted that conspiracy theories about witchcraft, Satanism, and other forms of “evil ritual” often arise during periods of rapid social change. Conspiracy theories frequently claim that Satanists engage in inverted or backward versions of normal values. One function of these fantasies of inversion seems to be to shore up the idea that the current social order and its values are the way things must be and cannot be questioned or challenged.²⁰ But even though early stories of satanic activity were false and functioned as propaganda, they nevertheless laid the groundwork for the later invention of religious Satanism and they continue to influence the satanic milieu today. Folklorists have noted that stories have a strange way of becoming real through a process referred to as “ostension.”²¹ Legends of Satanism provide scripts that a variety of people have drawn upon, thus bringing these stories to life. Charlatans and entertainers began to perform black masses to sell magical services to paying customers or (more often) amuse tourists. In some cases, disturbed individuals have imitated stories of satanic atrocities in a process that David Frankfurter has called “mimetic performance of evil.”²² One example of this kind of ostension is Pazuzu Algarad (né John Alexander Lawson, 1978–2015), who murdered two people between 2010 and 2014. Algarad, who was diagnosed with severe mental illness following his arrest, named himself after a demon from the film *The Exorcist* and professed an idiosyncratic version of Satanism drawing largely from horror films and sensationalist media.

¹⁸ J. G. Melton, *The Encyclopedia of Religious Phenomena* (Detroit, MI: Visible Ink, 2008), p. 38.

¹⁹ Van Luijk, *Children of Lucifer*, pp. 43–5.

²⁰ N. Ben-Yehuda, *Deviance and Moral Boundaries: Witchcraft, the Occult, Science Fiction, Deviant Sciences, and Scientists* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1985); D. Frankfurter, *Evil Incarnate: Rumors of Demonic Conspiracy and Satanic Abuse in History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006).

²¹ B. Ellis, *Aliens, Ghosts, and Cults: Legends We Live* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2003).

²² Frankfurter, *Evil Incarnate*, p. 176.

Figures such as LaVey also drew on satanic conspiracy theories and imagery associated with the black mass, but in a more deliberate and creative fashion. LaVey understood that stories of black masses were merely legends, but he saw in them the potential for new religious rituals that celebrated individual autonomy and defiance of religious authorities. He kept elements of the legend that seemed interesting or fun and discarded those that seemed dangerous or pointless. In this way, rumors of satanic activity set the stage for the eventual rise of self-identified Satanism.

The Affair of the Poisons

The episode remembered as the Affair of the Poisons occurred in France during the reign of King Louis XIV between 1677 and 1682. Several prominent members of the aristocracy were accused of witchcraft or poisoning – understood at the time to be closely related practices. In total, thirty-six people were executed. The details of their confessions were printed in the gazettes, further popularizing satanic conspiracies. The Affair was certainly an example of a panic over rumors of Satanism. It is also possible that some of those accused were practicing a form of proto-Satanism.

Paris was home to a sizable class of fortune-tellers and diviners whose services included selling aphrodisiacs and providing abortions. Some were also assumed to sell poisons. In February 1677, a fortune-teller named Magdelaine de La Grange was arrested on charges of murder. Pleading for her life, she claimed to have information about other crimes and conspiracies. The claims reached the king, and the Paris chief of police was ordered to root out poisoners. Police began arresting fortune-tellers and, under torture, several of them offered up lists of clients who had allegedly purchased poison to murder their spouses or rivals in the court. Each new arrest offered the names of more potential suspects to authorities, eventually necessitating the creation of a special court called the *Chambre Ardente* (Burning Chamber).

In 1679, authorities arrested a fortune-teller named Catherine Deshayes Monvoisin, better known as La Voisin. La Voisin also worked as a beautician and abortionist and was said to have several members of the aristocracy as clients. An astrologer named Lesage claimed that La Voisin hosted a mass in her home where a priest named Davot performed mass over a woman's abdomen. Davot then copulated with the woman and kissed her "shameful parts" while saying mass.²³ This may be the first report of a satanic mass using a woman as an altar. La Voisin was burned at the stake in 1680.

²³ Van Luijk, *Children of Lucifer*, p. 46.

Next, La Voisin's twenty-one-year-old daughter, Marie Montvoisin, was brought in for questioning. She implicated an elderly priest named Étienne Guibourg as another accomplice of her mother. Marie claimed the two organized strange masses for clients said over women's abdomens. Furthermore, the king's mistress Françoise Athénaïs, Marquise de Montespan, was one such client. She feared losing the king's favor and sought help through La Voisin's magic. Marie claimed she had seen Montespan strip naked and serve as an altar. Marie also said she had seen Guibourg slit a baby's throat, pour the blood into a chalice, consecrate it along with the host, and offer it as a sacrifice to the demons Astaroth and Asmodeus. Guibourg eventually admitted to doing these things. He also claimed he saw another of the king's mistresses fill a chalice with her menstrual blood, which was mixed with bat blood, flour, and the semen of an Englishman. This concoction, it was claimed, was intended as a poison with which to murder the king. The king shut down the *Chambre Ardente* after his mistress was mentioned in the confessions and the *Affair of the Poisons* wound down. Guibourg and Marie Monvoisin were spared execution and were instead chained to a dungeon wall for the rest of their lives.

It is difficult to interpret these accounts. One possibility is that none of these masses ever took place and that these confessions were essentially sexual fantasies elicited under torture. It is also possible La Voisin was engaging in some sort of magical practice. If wealthy clients expected La Voisin to know how to invoke demons and were willing pay for such services, she could have thrown a ritual together to oblige them, making these rituals a form of ostension. Van Lwijk argues that, whatever happened, the events described are not, strictly speaking, a black mass. No one confessed to adoring Satan or condemning Christ. Rather, these rituals resemble "an odd mixture of classic necromancy, alternative Eucharistic devotion, and sexual magic of unclear origin."²⁴ LaVey wrote about La Voisin in *The Satanic Bible*, calling her activities "organized fraud" that "stifled the majesty of Satanism for many years to come."²⁵ But contemporary Satanists note that subversive figures like La Voisin were the only ones who could provide abortions and remember the *Affair of the Poisons* as foreshadowing the connection between Satanism and the defense of reproductive rights.²⁶

Lá-Bas

Paris continued to be the epicenter for speculation over satanic conspiracies and the black mass. In 1891, novelist Joris-Karl Huysmans published his novel *Lá-Bas*. Huysmans's protagonist, Durtal, is also a Parisian novelist who has grown

²⁴ Ibid., p. 53. ²⁵ Anton S. LaVey, *The Satanic Bible* (New York: Avon, 1969), p. 102.

²⁶ La Carmina, *The Little Book of Satanism: A Guide to Satanic History, Culture, and Wisdom* (Berkeley, CA: Ulysses Press, 2022), p. 61.