

POLITICS

Who Are the 'Satanists' Designing an Idol for the Oklahoma Capitol?

A New York-based group has plans to erect a giant demonic statue next to the Ten Commandments on the statehouse lawn. But the devil is in the details.

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An artist's rendering, released last month by the Satanic Temple, shows the design for the 7-foot monument. "We're talking with sculptors now," says the group's spokesman. (AP)

Shortly before 8 p.m. on a Wednesday night, I joined the Satanic Temple.

That is to say, I went through the process of becoming a member of the New York-based group, a two-step initiation that entails the whopping procedural rigmarole of putting in an email address and paying \$25 on PayPal. Becoming a part of a religious organization that affiliates itself with the Antichrist is about as easy as purchasing a t-shirt on Etsy.

The payment actually goes towards processing a membership card and certificate; membership itself is free for “any who are willing to name themselves as Satanic Temple members in their county of residence.” It's hard to imagine how the organization would verify that other than looking for declarations of faith on Facebook. There are innumerable communities devoted to Satan worship on the social media site. But the Satanic Temple has drawn more recent attention than any of these other groups—and the reason lies in Oklahoma City.

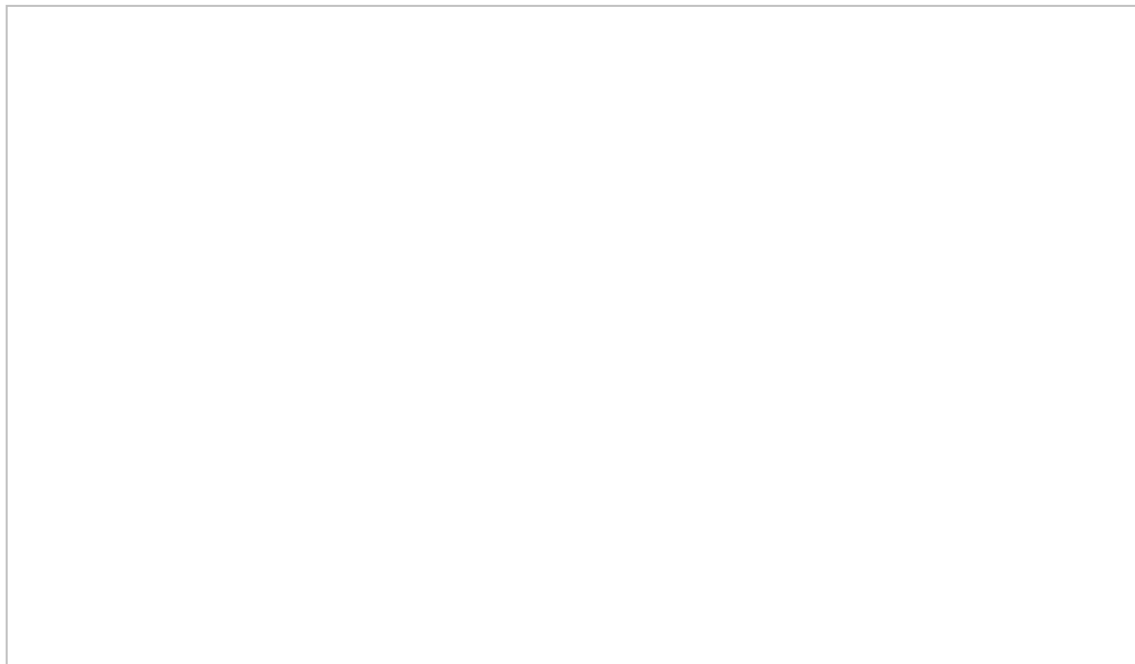
In November 2012, a 6-foot-tall statue of the Ten Commandments appeared outside the Oklahoma City state capitol. Mike Ritze, a Republican in the Oklahoma House of Representatives, paid \$10,000 of his own family's money for the statue's creation after sponsoring a bill in 2009 that legally allowed him to erect it there. Although the monument was funded by a lawmaker's private money, it has been perceived as a state-sponsored advertisement for religion. In January, a New Jersey-based nonprofit known as American Atheists Inc. filed a lawsuit in federal court claiming the statue is unconstitutional.

The Satanic Temple approached the matter a bit differently. In December, the group applied for its own plot of land, right next to the Ten Commandments, upon which it hopes to erect a Satanic statue. The Temple unveiled its design last month: a 7-foot monolith depicting Baphomet (a goat-headed pagan idol in a cloak) seated on a throne, with an adoring child gazing up at him from each side. There's even space for young visitors to climb up and to sit on the devil's lap themselves.

The Satanists aren't the only group trying to stake out a presence on the capitol lawn. The Universal Society of Hinduism has expressed an interest in placing a statue of Lord Hanuman, a popular deity with the face of a monkey, near the spot where the Ten Commandments monument now sits. But as uncomfortable as the Hindu proposal might make some Christian lawmakers, the Satanic Temple's plan clearly brings the issue to a whole other level. It also raises a question: Are these devil-worshippers for real?

With its colorful name and accessible membership plan, the Satanic Temple resembles the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster, which formed in 2005 to contest the teaching of Intelligent Design in Kansas. In 2008, “Pastafarian” artists erected a statue of the Flying Spaghetti Monster on a courthouse lawn in Crossville, Tennessee, next to a display of Jesus carrying a cross. (Both statues were later taken

down.) Like the Satanic Temple, the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster allows members to sign up online, even offering the opportunity to become an ordained minister for \$20.



Lucien Greaves—aka Douglas Mesner—stands silhouetted against the sky at the grave of the Westboro Baptist Church Founder's mother. (thesatanictemple.com)

The spokesperson for the Satanic Temple is a shadowy Internet figure called Douglas Mesner, who goes by Lucien Greaves in professional satanic contexts. (His cell phone number contains the digits 666.) Although he claims to have a fervent disregard for media attention and answers questions in a semi-hushed, monotone voice, Mesner widely and adamantly pushes his firebrand agenda. He's written for the [Skeptical Inquirer](#), a site published by the Committee for Skeptical Inquiry, which aims to debunk paranormal activities and "fringe science." He also had a [blog](#) on an online forum called Atheist Nexus.

His writings hardly seem like the work of an occultist. In fact, in a June 2013 [Daily Kos](#) article, Mesner wrote about the convicted murderer Sean Sellers, who claimed during his trial that he had been possessed by the devil. Mesner scoffed at the idea of Satan as a "supernatural" power, writing, "It's magical thinking, no more enlightened than a belief in the spiritual corruption of the left-handed."

It seems that the only magic Mesner conjures or believes in is the magic of media attention. In July of last year, Mesner officiated at a ceremony he referred to as a "[pink mass](#)," declaring that it would turn the mother of the founder of the

Westboro Baptist Church gay for all eternity. During the ritual, two couples (one gay and one lesbian) kissed over the grave of Fred Phelps's mother, Catherine Idalette Johnston, while Mesner presided over them, wearing a horned helmet that made him look like Loki from the Avengers. He later released photographs of his penis resting on the headstone, after which he was charged with deseccration of a grave, a misdemeanor offense.

At this stage, with a small flock and no defined structure, Mesner remains the primary mouthpiece of the Satanic Temple. (The Temple only has about 20 active members, according to Mesner, and most of them presumably joined in the same highly ritualized way I did—by filling out a basic email form.) The group's stated theology is vague and benign: Its website lists seven main tenets, including the devilish notion of “acting with compassion and empathy towards all creatures in accordance with reason.”

The group purports to view Satan as “the ultimate icon for the selfless revolt against tyranny, free & rational inquiry, and the responsible pursuit of happiness.” Its website doesn't directly reference Anton LaVey, the Chicago-born occultist who founded the Church of Satan in the 1960s and inspired a national “Satanic Panic.” In fact, its canon section lists just one text: a 1914 book called *Revolt of the Angels*, which frames Satan as a theological metaphor meant to bolster the human power of free inquiry.

When it comes to actual devil worship, Mesner has little faith. “I think that idea is silly,” he said. “I can't even conceive of that actually being the case.” Then he added politely, “I mean, I try to respect other people's beliefs as far as that kind of thing goes.”

Mesner refuses to distinguish politics from religion, even though that separation seems to be the very cause his organization is championing in Oklahoma. “To say your religion is completely separated from your politics is asinine,” Mesner said. “To me, there's no way to disentangle the two and I think the way our philosophy works, it ties in even more so. Our political actions are our religion.”

To bring the Oklahoma project to life, Mesner created an IndieGogo page to raise an estimated \$20,000. As of January 22, that fundraising goal had been exceeded, with 1,041 people contributing a total of \$28,180. People seemed less enthralled with the Temple's previous fundraising effort to “support religious diversity”—it

involved adopting a New York highway in Satan's name for the price of \$15,000. The deadline has long passed and the Satanic Temple raised just \$2,244.

Mesner says he hopes the monument will strengthen the position of the American Civil Liberties Union, which filed a lawsuit in August challenging the constitutionality of the Ten Commandments statue. "When the government literally puts one faith on a pedestal," wrote Ryan Kiesel, the ACLU of Oklahoma's executive director, in the press release announcing the suit, "it sends a strong message to Oklahomans of other faiths that they are less than equal."

But the ACLU has mixed feelings about the Satanic Temple's efforts. "For us, it's not about the notion of picking sides between different religions and different religious ideas," Brady Henderson, legal director of the ACLU of Oklahoma said. "Our whole position is that the state shouldn't be in the monument business at all. And so, because of that, we oppose the Temple's application—as we would anyone's application who thinks that the government needs to speak for their religion, whether that be the Ten Commandments or a statue of a Hindu deity or a Satanic statue."

On the other hand, Henderson does think that some positive outcomes can come from the Satanic Temple's efforts. "The good thing about what the Temple is doing is that it's making people really examine their own beliefs and really examine the rationale for the state or federal government being in the business of religion or monuments," Henderson said. "And that's something that is a very healthy thing."

Meanwhile, Mesner and his Temple have to wait to go ahead with their plan: The Oklahoma Capitol Preservation Commission has placed a moratorium on all statue proposals until the lawsuit with the ACLU has been adjudicated. "We're going to go ahead and start construction anyway," Mesner told me. "We're talking with sculptors right now and we have a promising prospect." (At this stage, Mesner doesn't want to reveal the foundry where the statue is going to be sculpted.) "If ultimately, it doesn't end up in Oklahoma," he added, "we're going to move on to the next place. This could go on for quite some time."

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