

BELIEFS

A Mischievous Thorn in the Side of Conservative Christianity

By Mark Oppenheimer

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NORTHAMPTON, Mass. — It is hard to know what to hope for when meeting a couple of Satanists. Horns? Sulfurous fumes? Faint strains of organ music? But when they sit down in an organic food cafe and order plates of fettuccini Alfredo, it's hard to take them seriously as worshipers of the Dark Lord of the Underworld.

Nevertheless, the men who call themselves Lucien Greaves and Malcolm Jarry — pseudonyms for the two co-founders of the Satanic Temple — have done more for the Satanic brand than anyone since Anton LaVey, the San Francisco carnival worker who wrote “The Satanic Bible” (Avon, 1969). With only a website, some legal savvy and a clever way with satire, the two Bostonians’ new, mostly virtual religion has become a sharp thorn in the brow of conservative Christianity.

Their religion, or anti-religion, has about 20 chapters and 20,000 Facebook followers, they say. With no full-time staff, the Satanic Temple has in three years achieved the kind of social media exposure usually reserved for pets in distress.

Last month, the Satanic Temple claimed victory after a court ordered that a monument to the Ten Commandments be removed from the Oklahoma Capitol grounds. Although the Satanic Temple was not a plaintiff in the lawsuit, they say their plan to place a statue of Baphomet, a goat-headed deity of occult legend, beside the monument, on freedom-of-religion grounds, may have forced the court’s hand.

In April, the Satanic Temple used a crowdsourcing campaign to raise \$800 for a rural Missouri woman’s trip to St. Louis, to have an abortion. As legal restrictions have forced other clinics to close, the St. Louis clinic is the last abortion provider in the state.

And in 2013, the Satanic Temple achieved notoriety for its “pink mass,” enacted at the grave site of the mother of Fred Phelps, founder of the notorious Westboro Baptist Church. The ritual, involving same-sex couples kissing, was described on the Satanic Temple website as having turned Mr. Phelps’s mother “gay in the afterlife.”



The Satanic Temple's clay sculpture of Baphomet, which was used successfully in a lawsuit filed in Oklahoma. Mark Porter and Jessie Wakeman, via Associated Press

Mr. Jarry, a 48-year-old filmmaker, musician and academic, agreed to speak on the condition that I not use his real name. He does not actually believe in Satan, he said. But long ago he imagined the potential effectiveness of a Satanic organization.

“The first conception was in response to George W. Bush’s creation of the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives,” said Mr. Jarry, who was raised by irreligious Jews. “I thought, ‘There should be some kind of counter.’” He hit on the idea of starting a faith-based organization that met all the Bush administration’s criteria for receiving funds, but was repugnant to them. “Imagine if a Satanic organization applied for funds,” he remembered thinking. “It would sink the whole program.”

That idea percolated until 2012. At an event at Harvard, Mr. Jarry, who was taking graduate classes there, met the man who became “Mr. Greaves,” a man who, when not participating in Satanic Temple activism, is often called Douglas Mesner. He is now 39 years old and says he “does some odd jobs” for a living. Mr. Jarry and Mr. Mesner bonded over a shared distaste for organized religion and an inclination to fight back with mischief.

At the time, Florida's governor, Rick Scott, was pushing a bill to allow voluntary prayer at public school functions. After the bill passed, the two traveled to Florida to make their feelings known.

"So we created this mock rally in support of Rick Scott," Mr. Jarry recalled, "where we were coming out to say how happy we were because now our Satanic children could pray to Satan in school."

Mr. Mesner stood behind Mr. Scott on the steps of the state Capitol, holding a banner proclaiming, "Hail Satan! Hail Rick Scott!"

At the time, the name associated with the Satanic Temple's email account was "Lucien Greaves." When it became clear that the news media would want to interview someone from the organization, Mr. Mesner adopted Lucien Greaves as his pseudonym. In 2013, Vice magazine outed Mr. Greaves as Mr. Mesner, and since that time he has answered to both names — although in fact, "Douglas Mesner" is also a pseudonym, one he has used for many years. He, too, asked that his legal name not be published, to prevent threats to his family.

Mr. Mesner insists that his attraction to the Satanic label is not just opportunistic. Although he, like Mr. Jarry, is an "atheistic Satanist," meaning that he no more believes in a literal Satan than he does in a literal God, he finds special meaning in Satanism, which represents to him the solidarity of outsiders, those judged and excluded by the mainstream.



Mr. Jarry, left, and Mr. Greaves of the Satanic Temple in front of Memorial Hall on Harvard University's campus where they planned to stage a satanic "black Mass" last year. Shiho Fukada for The New York Times

As a child in the 1980s, Mr. Mesner noticed how suspected Satanists were accused of inciting child abuse and how Satanic music was considered a culprit in juvenile delinquency.

"And as a kid, in the midst of that, you are playing Dungeons & Dragons, listening to certain music, and you wonder, 'What is Satanism?'" Mr. Mesner said. "And you find it to be this syncretism, this amalgam, and it's something you can't walk away from. It's not arbitrary to us. It's a way of celebrating an outsider status, to look where other people won't, to look for the obscure, the bizarre, the anomalies. To see the beauty in the ugliness."

The Satanic Temple's founders do not believe in tax exemptions for religious organizations, so have not asked for one; they also refuse to say what the Satanic Temple's budget is. The organization has seven fundamental tenets, which the founders say are a work in progress, subject to change.

"It could be eight tomorrow, it could be six," Mr. Jarry said. The tenets include humanistic statements like "One's body is inviolable, subject to one's will alone" and "Beliefs should conform to our best scientific understanding of the world. We should take care never to distort scientific facts to fit our beliefs."

Satanic Temple plans include the ultimate in strait-laced, law-abiding activism: lawsuits. It is looking into using the Religious Freedom Restoration Act to oppose abortion waiting periods, claiming that it violates Satanic doctors' belief in the sanctity of good science.

And they are looking for plaintiffs, willing to identify as Satanists, who will file suit against public schools' use of in-school isolation and deprivation of bathroom access. Such punishments "are physical or psychological abuse," Mr. Mesner said, "which violates the Satanic Temple principle of sovereignty of body and mind."

The two Satanists are also trying to figure out what to do with their statue of Baphomet, by the sculptor Mark Porter, since they no longer plan to place it on the grounds of the Oklahoma Capitol. It was to be unveiled on July 25 at a theater in Detroit, but under pressure from Christian activists, the theater has withdrawn its permission. Which is the kind of oppression that Mr. Mesner has come to expect will be visited on his kind.

"We've been talking a lot of comedy," Mr. Mesner said, "but I genuinely feel this is every bit a religion — this cultural identity, this narrative that contextualizes your life, your works, your goals. And you have these deeply held beliefs, that if they are violated, it compromises your very self."