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Take religion. Remove God. Add #resistance. Meet The Satanic Temple.

The Satanic Temple might be the religion for 2017.

By Tara Isabella Burton | @NotoriousTIB | tara.burton@vox.com | Oct 31, 2017, 2:20pm EDT



A wicker sculpture of Baphomet stands on the terrace of the Satanic Temple's headquarters. | Tara Isabella Burton

SALEM, Massachusetts — On a quiet New England street, just steps from a yoga studio, a giant wicker sculpture of Baphomet — a demonic entity often associated with Satan — looked down on passersby.

The statue is perched upon a historic colonial-style house, filled with occult and diabolical-themed art. And that house is the national headquarters of The Satanic Temple, a national

organization that's equal parts performance art group, leftist activist organization, and anti-religion religious movement.

The house, which opened to the public in 2016, doubles as an art gallery. Each room is filled with unsettling, subversive art pieces that critique organized religion. One piece, by a local tattoo artist, depicts the victims of the Magdalene Laundries, nun-run institutions in Ireland where unmarried mothers and “fallen women” were confined in often brutal conditions. A small room off the gallery, filled with newspaper clippings and other historic items, is devoted to the “Gray Faction,” a branch of The Satanic Temple that focuses on covering and dispelling hoaxes like those that caused the **“Satanic Panic”** of the 1980s. Back then, mass hysteria over imagined ritual Satanic abuse caused the closure of a number of child day care centers across the US despite the fact that no reports of abuse were ever substantiated.

Despite the occult trappings, The Satanic Temple's headquarters function just like any other museum or public organization in Salem, where **thousands flock each year** to mark the town's storied history of witch trials during the late 17th century. The Ouija boards on the walls and the goth attire of most of the visitors notwithstanding, what is, perhaps, most surprising about The Satanic Temple is its normalcy.



The Satanic Temple's Gray Faction room at the Salem headquarters. | Tara Isabella Burton

Such a no-nonsense approach is part of the core values of The Satanic Temple, which, despite its name, is an explicitly nontheistic, rationalistic religion. In other words, TST does not believe in a supernatural God or a supernatural Satan. Rather, its members are committed to evidence-based belief — promoting scientific literacy, say — and to humanistic values. Satan is celebrated as the symbolic opposition to organized religion, which they see as an authoritarian, superstitious system.

As a quasi-political advocacy organization, it's devoted to exposing hypocrisy and what it deems to be irrationalism and cultic group behavior in all its forms, from the Christian right to “sham” mental health practitioners who, as during the Satanic panic, use “recovered memories” to convince patients they have suffered childhood sexual or spiritual abuse at the hands of imaginary cults.

Nonetheless, political Satanism is hardly new. In the late 1960s, there was the Church of Satan — founded by Hungarian writer Anton LaVey as a kind of occult take on Randian objectivism. LaVey venerated Satan as the ultimate “adversary,” the symbol of individualism and personal liberty. (One of the church's 11 tenets: “If a guest in your lair annoys you, treat him cruelly and without mercy.”)

But TST, which organizers stress shares “no lineage” with LaVey's Church of Satan, is a far more overtly political and left-wing entity. It's popular with those attracted to the symbolic nature of honoring the world's most famous rebel, but uncomfortable with what they see as the Church of Satan's regressive perspectives on gender and race (one TST member dismissed the group as nothing more than “alt-right neo-Nazis”).

TST is gaining prominence at an opportune moment. The largest single religious movement in America is that of the “nones,” or **the religiously unaffiliated**. Those who identify as spiritual but not religious are likewise **on the rise**.

For many in that category, institutions that offer some of the benefits of theistic religions — a moral framework, an opportunity to engage in community action with like-minded individuals — may well be particularly attractive. A Harvard Divinity School study earlier this year found that CrossFit occupied **a similar place** in participants' lives. But TST, with its codified opposition to organized religion, may prove an even more alluring option: a chance for those who have been disillusioned, excluded, or left behind by mainstream religion to create intentional communities — *a religion*, even — that speaks to their needs.

The Satanic Temple began as a troll to the religious right. Now it's part of the resistance.

The group was founded in 2012 by two friends, Malcolm Jerry and Lucien Greaves (both pseudonyms). Greaves serves as the organization's public spokesperson.

TST first made headlines when a **handful of its members** held a January 2013 mock rally in Tallahassee, Florida — Satanic black robes and all — in honor of Republican Gov. Rick Scott, who had recently signed into law a bill allowing students to read inspirational (in practice, Christian) messages at assemblies and other school events.

A typically wry press release put out by the TST heaped praise on the governor. "Rick Scott ... has reaffirmed our American freedom to practice our faith openly, allowing our Satanic children the freedom to pray in school."

Since then, TST has taken advantage of laws designed to serve the Christian right to shine light on hypocrisy. Last year, TST members in Texas threatened to file injunctions against any enforcement of the state's new **"fetal burial rule,"** which mandates that all fetal remains — including those from abortions — receive official burial or cremation, because such a rule violated TST's religious conviction that fetuses were not people.

The group has also lobbied for "after-school Satan clubs" — secularist counterparts to Christian evangelical school organizations like the Good News Club, which are permitted in public schools. More recently, they've also developed a program to "troll" bakeries that refuse to serve LGBTQ couples (the subject of an ongoing **Supreme Court case**) by demanding that **they make Satan-themed cakes**. While sexual orientation is not a protected class under the Civil Rights Act of 1964, religion is, which means bakeries cannot legally refuse Satanists' religious free expression.

Political activism on the part of churches is nothing new — from the anti-segregation work of many mainline Protestant communities during the civil rights movement to the anti-abortion efforts of many evangelical groups today. But at TST, opposition to organized religion provides the impetus for action for more progressive causes like abortion rights and anti-racism.



Art at the Satanic Temple's headquarters. | Tara Isabella Burton

That's what makes Satan central to the tenets of TST — Satan is “the rebel against tyranny,” and a powerful symbolic figurehead with a rich cultural legacy to boot.

“What things have been demonized in our culture?” New York TST chapter head Hofman Turing asked me. Individualism, free thought, resistance to authority; Satan, he said, represented all of them.

Some members' longing for the rituals conflicts with TST's focus on individualism

When I attended a meeting in Brooklyn earlier this year, in a taxidermy-themed bar in Bushwick, the New York TST chapter was focused on the specific challenge of supporting civil liberties in the Trump era.

“It's going to be a busy couple of years for us,” one participant sighed; everybody agreed.

Most of the 20-odd participants knew one another; nevertheless, they all introduced themselves, along with their preferred gender pronouns and length of their affiliation with Satan. The attendees ran the sartorial gamut, from Brooklyn-casual (jeans, T-shirts) to full-on Gothic (black *Clockwork Orange*-style face paint, piercings, Sisters of Mercy band T-shirts, pink mohawks).

About half were former Christians from families of varying degrees of religious intensity, but many came from secular or agnostic backgrounds. Many were Jewish. (Turing identifies as a “Jew-Bu-Satanist,” the *Bu* shorthand for Buddhist.) The group was racially mixed, with most members in their mid- to late 30s or early 40s. One attendee referenced his passionate hatred for the religious right. “Any group that’s going to stand up against that sort of bullshit, you know,” he said, “count me in.”

Most people alternated between ignoring the evening’s potentially transgressive aesthetic and playing it up with a wink (“Hail Satan” was frequently, casually, exchanged). One buoyant member, seeing my notebook, grinned at me. “If anything,” he said, “I’d like you to overestimate any sort of connection I have to other conspiracy storylines. If possible, reference Grey’s, Reptilians, the CIA...”

Everybody laughed.

The discussion during the hour-long meeting alternated between social club and committed activist brainstorming. Turing ran briskly through TST’s recent victories: a fundraiser for Standing Rock at a local occult bookstore, and a burlesque fundraiser for Black Lives Matter. Events on the horizon included a fundraiser “with burlesque, maybe a little magic” for the Reproductive Rights Fund (“we were thinking of Good Friday as a date?”), an outing to a local deescalation and conflict resolution workshop offered through the Center for Anti-Violence Education, and a group bonding trip up to TST’s Salem offices for the pagan festival of Walpurgisnacht.

It was clear that for many of TST’s members, the group served as a major, or even primary, avenue for social interaction. Members appeared to be generally familiar with one another, and discussed upcoming informal events, like birthday drinks, alongside more formal chapter meetings. It was, in other words, not unlike the traditional coffee hour after church.

At the end of the meeting, Turing handed out membership forms. While initial membership in TST just requires signing up and subscribing to the temple’s tenets, the chapter encourages regular members to sign a statement of intent: among other commitments, agreeing not to speak publicly on behalf of TST or frame an event or action as TST-certified without approval.

The reasoning, Turing said, was twofold. “Because we’re Satanists, we all value individualism,” he said. TST members are encouraged to organize and act alongside other

members on their own behalf, rather than that of the organization. More prosaically, TST also has to worry about lawsuits.

Though it began as internet trolling going mainstream, TST is becoming a “more serious” organization, and delineating the boundaries of TST has become more complicated. At chapter leadership meetings I attended, for example, council members debated which literary texts featuring Satan — from Milton’s *Paradise Lost* to the writings of Anton LaVey — should be on TST’s recommended reading list. Debates over whether TST should host more rituals are also common. TST tends to be divided between those who embrace the imagery of Satanic ritual, whether for political or personal reasons, and those who find the pomp and circumstance distracting; the organization takes no formal stance but doesn’t currently officially host any.

“We always try to walk the line between maximal autonomy and making sure that our message isn’t misunderstood,” said Greaves in an interview at TST’s Salem headquarters last week. Greaves recognizes that all organizations — theistic or not — can easily turn into the very toxic social structures TST was set up to counter.

After the meeting, as everybody filed upstairs for a night of drinking under antler chandeliers and smoking various substances on the bar patio, a woman with long black hair and a staccato Midwestern accent named Amber Raine lobbied Turing for more ritualistic events in New York.

As a young trans woman in the Midwest, Raine found in witchcraft and the occult — and later both LaVeyan Satanism and political groups like TST — an alternative to her childhood Lutheranism, a faith that had once given her comfort. As a child, Raine said, she’d even wanted to become a Lutheran minister.

After her parents kicked her out of the house 12 years ago at age 16, Raine sought more accepting communities. She found TST after reading about the Rick Scott rally online. She identifies as an atheist now, she said, but participating in ritual — whether attending a Black Mass, honoring pagan high holidays, or going ghost hunting — gives her a sense of order.

“It’s the best time you can have with your friends — performing a ritual with people who have *chosen* what they’re doing,” Raine told Vox in a subsequent follow-up interview.

For her, TST seemed to function as more than just a political advocacy organization or a social club. Rather, the effect it had on her and her desire to participate in more structured

and even ritualistic Satanic activities was more all-encompassing. Theistic or not, Satanism was, for Raine, a religion — a way to structure her existence and values, affirm those things through ritual, and develop an intentional, committed community where she could feel she belonged.

Raine told me she hoped to become ordained as a Satanic minister one day, should TST eventually work out what and how training for such a role would entail (currently, TST doesn't have ministers or equivalent figures at all). Ultimately, Raine is finding a way to reconcile her childhood faith with her chosen community.

“Imagine it,” she says, “the first Satanic minister in New York!”

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