

## Diabolical Authority: Anton LaVey, *The Satanic Bible* and the Satanist "Tradition"<sup>1</sup>

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We have a bible. We have a *pro-human* dogma. We have a church. We have a tradition.  
- *From the Church of Satan's official website.*

The status of *The Satanic Bible* as an authoritative scripture-or, perhaps more accurately, as a kind of *quasi-scripture*-within the Satanic subculture was initially brought to my attention during my first face-to-face encounter with Satanists in the Spring of 2000. Via the internet, I had found a small Satanist group in Portage, Wisconsin, which was about an hour south of where I resided at the time. This group, the Temple of Lylyth, distinguishes itself from Anton LaVey's brand of Satanism chiefly by its emphasis on feminine nature of the Dark Power. I arranged to meet with them in Portage on a Friday evening in connection with a research project on which I was working at the time.

Over the course of our conversation, the founder and then leader of the group mentioned that on Friday evenings he was usually downtown where a small group of fervent Christians regularly set up what might be called a "preaching station" to spread the Gospel. This young fellow (he was nineteen at the time) would confront them as a practicing Satanist. He always carried a copy of *The Satanic Bible* with him, not just so he could quote some of accusations LaVey leveled against Christianity, but also so he could correct anything these evangelists might say about Satanism by citing an authoritative source. I'm sure this is something of a caricature, but I was left with the impression of dueling religionists, Christians hurling Bible verses at my informant as he matched blow for blow with quotes from *The Satanic Bible*. This experience led me to pay attention whenever other Satanists mentioned *The Satanic Bible*.

The Temple of Lylyth is part of a loose, decentralized Satanic movement that coheres as a distinct religious community largely by virtue of adherence to certain themes in the thought of Anton LaVey, founder of modern Satanism, though few movement participants outside the Church of

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1 The basis for the current article is a paper on "The Satanic Bible" presented at the International CESNUR Conference, "Minority Religions, Social Change, and Freedom of Conscience." Salt Lake City and Provo, June 20-23, 2002. Also, certain parts of this article have been adapted from sections of my earlier article, "[Who Serves Satan?](#)" (Lewis 2001)

A special word of thanks to Satanists who provided me with thoughtful feedback on earlier drafts of this paper, particularly feedback from several members of the Obsidian Enlightenment and the Temple of Lylyth. One comment of particular note was that the social organization (or, perhaps more appropriately, *disorganization*) of modern Satanism cannot accurately be characterized as a "movement," "community" or "subculture." I have nevertheless used these terms throughout for lack of more adequate terminology. Another comment was that "conversion" is not appropriate in the context of Satanism. Again, however, I left this term in the article for lack of a better word. Finally, I was informed that Satanists prefer to refer to their community as the *Satanic* community (movement, subculture, etc.) rather than the *Satanist* community; I have tried to adhere to this convention throughout the present article.

Satan would regard themselves as "orthodox LaVeyans" (something of an oxymoron). Following the dissolution of the Church of Satan's grotto system in 1975 and before the explosion of the internet in the mid-nineties, the Satanic movement was propagated almost entirely by *The Satanic Bible*, which has continuously been in print as a widely-available, mass market paperback. Rather than being a guide to Devil-worship, LaVey's work advocates a blend of Epicureanism and Ayn Rand's philosophy, flavored with a pinch of ritual magic. Couched in iconoclastic rhetoric, *The Satanic Bible* has always held particular appeal for rebellious adolescents. The title seems to have originally been chosen for its shock value rather than from any pretense to scriptural status.

The present article examines issues of authority within the Satanic movement and among LaVey's successors in the Church of Satan. The basis of this analysis will be Max Weber's discussion of the legitimation of authority. LaVey was a charismatic individual who appealed to the authority of reason and attacked the authority of tradition. However, LaVey, and particularly *The Satanic Bible*, soon became sources of authority for a new Satanic tradition-part of the process Weber referred to as the *routinization of charisma*.

### **The Legitimation of Authority**

Satanists do not consciously regard *The Satanic Bible* in the same way traditional religionists regard their sacred texts. However, in the course of a research project on modern Satanism conducted in 2000-2001, I discovered that *The Satanic Bible* is treated as an authoritative document which effectively *functions* as scripture within the Satanic community. In particular, LaVey's work is quoted to legitimate particular positions as well as to de-legitimize the positions of other Satanists. This legitimation strategy appears to have been unconsciously derived from the Judeo-Christian tradition, which locates the source of religious authority in a sacred text. In other words, being raised in a religious tradition that emphasizes the authority of scripture creates an attitude that can be unconsciously carried over to other, very different kinds of writings.

The classic discussion of the issue of legitimacy is Max Weber's tripartite schema of traditional, rational-legal, and charismatic legitimations of authority. The dynamics (in the sense of upsetting rather than reinforcing established authority structures) of this schema are largely confined to the factor of charisma, a form of legitimation Weber viewed as particularly-though not exclusively-characteristic of new religious movements.

Weber's work on the legitimation of authority provides a useful starting point for understanding the legitimation strategies deployed by contemporary new religions, but it should immediately be noted that his analysis is also inadequate. For example, in contrast to what one might anticipate from the discussion of charismatic authority in Weber's *Economy and Society*, one often finds new religions appealing to tradition-though the explicit nature of such appeals means that they constitute a variation from what Weber had in mind by the traditional legitimation of authority (which he viewed as more implicit than explicit). Also, when nascent movements attempt to justify a new idea, practice or social arrangement by attributing it to the authority of tradition, it is usually through a reinterpretation of the past that they are able to portray themselves as the true embodiment of tradition. Such variations on what one might anticipate from his schema indicate that Weber did not have the last word on this issue.

Charisma-which, in Weber's use of the term, includes everything from direct revelations from

divinity to the leader's ability to provide both mundane and supernatural benefits to followers-may be the keystone in a new movement's initial attractiveness, but charismatic leaders typically appeal to a variety of other sources of legitimacy. For instance, many modern movements appeal to the authority of reason as embodied in natural science.<sup>2</sup> This is because the general populace of industrialized countries tend to give science and science's child, technology, a level of respect and prestige enjoyed by few other social institutions-to the point where, as a number of observers have pointed out, science has come to be viewed quasi-religiously. Thus any religion that claims its approach is in some way *scientific* draws on the prestige and perceived legitimacy of natural science. Religions such as Christian Science, Science of Mind, and Scientology claim just that.

There is, however, a distinct difference between popular notions of science and science proper. Average citizens' views of science are significantly influenced by their experience of technology. Hence, in most people's minds, an important goal of science appears to be the solution of practical problems. This aspect of our cultural view of science shaped the various religious sects that incorporated "science" into their names. In sharp contrast to traditional religions, which emphasize salvation in the afterlife, the emphasis in these religions is on the improvement of this life. Groups within the Metaphysical (Christian Science-New Thought) tradition, for example, usually claim to have discovered spiritual "laws" which, if properly understood and applied, transform and improve the lives of ordinary individuals, much as technology has transformed society.

The notion of spiritual laws is taken directly from the "laws" of classical physics. The eighteenth and nineteenth century mind was enamored of Newton's formulation of the mathematical order in the natural world. A significant aspect of his system of physics was expressed in the laws of gravity. Following Newton's lead, later scientists similarly expressed their discoveries in terms of the same legislative metaphor-e.g., the "law" of evolution.

This legislative rhetoric was carried over into Metaphysical religions, particularly New Thought. Groups in the Metaphysical tradition view themselves as investigating the mind or spirit in a practical, experimental way. The self-perception of the early New Thought movement as "science" is expressed in Lesson One of Ernest Holmes' 1926 classic, *Science of Mind*, in the following way:

Science is knowledge of facts built around some proven principle. All that we know about any science is that certain things happen under certain conditions. Take electricity as an example; we know that there is such a thing as electricity; we have never seen it, but we know that it exists because we can use it; we know that it operates in a certain way and we have discovered the way it works. >From this knowledge we go ahead and deduce certain facts about electricity; and, applying them to the general principle, we receive definite results. ...

The discovery of a law is generally made more or less by accident, or by some one who, after careful thought and observation, has come to the conclusion that such a principle must exist. As soon as a law is discovered experiments are made with it, certain facts are proved to be true, and in this way a science is gradually formulated; for any science consists of the number of known facts about any given principle.... This is true of the Science of Mind. No

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2 "New Religious Movements...articulate themselves, often with a popular fluency, in the discourses of the natural sciences and seek to justify their beliefs by means of para- or pseudoscientific investigation or argument." (Sentes and Palmer 2000)

one has ever seen Mind or Spirit, but who could possibly doubt their existence? Nothing is more self-evident.... (Holmes, p. 38)

Modern Satanism is in some ways in continuity with, and in other ways a departure from, this particular line of development. Although Satanism also appeals to science, its focus is not on developing a pragmatic science of the mind. Rather, when LaVey founded the Church of Satan, he grounded Satanism's legitimacy on a view of human nature shaped by a secularist appropriation of modern science. Unlike Christian Science, Scientology and other groups that claimed to model their approach to spirituality after the *methods* of science, LaVey's strategy was to base Satanism's "anti-Theology" in the secularist *world view* derived from natural science.<sup>3</sup> This world view provided LaVey with an atheistic underpinning for his attacks on Christianity and other forms of supernatural spirituality. At the same time, LaVey went beyond contemporary secularism by suggesting the reality of mysterious, "occult" forces—forces he claimed were not supernatural, but were, rather, natural forces that would eventually be discovered by science. In his notion of mysterious forces that could be manipulated by the will of the magician, LaVey was really not so far from the mentalistic technology of Christian Science, Scientology, etc.

The human nature to which LaVey appealed was humanity's animal nature, viewed through the lens of Darwinism. The human being in this view is little more than an animal with no ultimate morality other than law of the jungle and no purpose other than the survival of the fittest. In terms of Weber's schema, we would say that LaVey's appeal to human nature (meaning, for LaVey, the Darwinist vision of human nature) was a rational legitimation of authority. In other words, LaVey claimed that Satanism was a legitimate religion because it was rational. As a corollary, traditional religion was irrational (unscientific) and therefore illegitimate.

While LaVey was a charismatic individual, and while this charisma was undoubtedly crucial for the successful birth of the Church of Satan, in the present discussion I am less interested in analyzing the initial emergence of religious Satanism than in the transformations that have taken place in the post-charismatic phase of the Satanic movement. Weber was also interested in this kind of transition, which he discussed in terms of the routinization of charisma. By this Weber meant that, because personal charisma tends to be unstable, charismatic authority must eventually move toward dissolution, legal-rational authority or traditional authority.

With respect to modern Satanism, the waning of LaVey's charismatic authority, particularly after he dismantled the Church of Satan (CoS) as a functioning church in 1975, led to a number of interesting—though somewhat paradoxical—developments. In addition to numerous splinter groups, a decentralized, anarchistic movement emerged that was shaped by the central themes in LaVey's thought, particularly as expressed in *The Satanic Bible*. This book became a doctrinal touchstone of the movement, though independent Satanists felt free to selectively appropriate ideas from *The Satanic Bible* and to mix them with ideas and practices drawn from other sources. LaVey's book became, in a sense, a kind of quasi-scripture, which is a form of what Weber meant by traditional authority (despite the fact that it seems odd to refer to a religion less than forty years old as a "tradition!"). However, many independent Satanists also adhered to LaVey's program of the

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3 Although the Raelian Movement is very different from Satanism, this particular UFO religion similarly appeals to the world view of secular science for its legitimacy and, like Satanism, attacks other religions as unreasonable because of their lack of a scientific basis. (Chryssides 2000; Sentes and Palmer 2000)

authority of rationality, feeling free to criticize and even to reject aspects of the LaVeyan tradition. Thus the Satanic movement's legitimacy is based on a dual appeal to independent rational authority and to the authority of the LaVeyan tradition.

In contrast, the remnants of LaVey's church-which is still technically the largest single Satanist group in terms of formal membership-quickly solidified into a doctrinally-rigid organization focused on maintaining the purity of LaVeyan Satanism. This was partly in response to the challenge presented by non-CoS Satanists. In the ongoing argument over legitimacy, LaVey's successors have come to place excessive stress on their role as bearers of his legacy, even asserting that only CoS members are "real" Satanists and characterizing Satanists outside the fold as "pseudo" Satanists. In terms of Weber's analysis, one would say that CoS's legitimation strategy has narrowed to focus almost exclusively on CoS's claim to traditional authority.

### **Anton LaVey and Modern Religious Satanism**

To comprehend religious Satanism, one must first understand that Satan has become an ambivalent symbol within the modern world. Part of the reason for the attractiveness of LaVeyan Satanism is its ability to hold together a number of diverse meanings found in this symbol. In the Western cultural tradition, the Devil represents much more than absolute evil. By default, the Prince of Darkness has come to embody some very attractive attributes. For example, because traditional Christianity has been so anti-sensual, Satan became associated with sex. The Christian tradition has also condemned pride, vengefulness and avarice, and, when allied with the status quo, has promoted conformity and obedience. The three former traits and the antithesis of the latter two traits thus became diabolical characteristics. LaVeyan Satanism celebrates such "vices" as virtues, and identifies them as the core of what Satanism is really all about.

LaVey founded the Church of Satan in 1966, the first organized church in modern times devoted to Satan. As a consequence, Anton LaVey has sometimes been referred to as the "St. Paul of Satanism." LaVey has two biographies, one historical and one legendary. This dichotomy has only become apparent in recent years. His real life was far more prosaic than the story he fabricated for the benefit of the media. LaVey effectively promoted his carefully crafted pseudo-biography through conversations with his disciples, media interviews, and two biographies by associates that he appears to have dictated-*The Devil's Avenger* (1974) by Burton Wolfe and *Secret Life of a Satanist* (1990) by Blanche Barton. LaVey's fictional biography was clearly meant to legitimate his self-appointed role as the "Black Pope" by portraying him as an extraordinary individual.

According to the official biography, he was born Howard Anton Szandor LaVey in Chicago, Illinois. His parents, Joseph and Augusta LaVey, moved to San Francisco while LaVey was still an infant. He was introduced to the occult by his Transylvanian gypsy grandmother. As a teenager he pursued various avenues of occult studies, as well as hypnotism and music. He also played an oboe in the San Francisco Ballet Orchestra. He dropped out of high school at 17 to join the Clyde Beatty Circus and worked as a calliope player and big cat trainer, later learning stage magic as well. While an organist in a burlesque theater, he had an affair with the young Marilyn Monroe shortly before she became famous.

He married in 1950 and about that time took a job as a police photographer, but in 1955 returned to organ playing. Until he formed the Church of Satan in 1966, he was the city of San Francisco's

official organist. He divorced in 1960 in order to marry Diane Hegarty. He purchased his house- eventually becoming the Church of Satan headquarters, later dubbed the "Black House"-after he found out it had been the former brothel of the madam Mammy Pleasant.

Drawing on his circus and occult backgrounds, he began to conduct "midnight magic seminars" at his house. This proved popular enough for him to found the Church of Satan in 1966. The basis for his rituals were Nazi rituals recorded on top-secret films he had seen as a teenager. LaVey's showmanship encouraged significant media coverage of such events as the first Satanic wedding and the first Satanic funeral, worship with a nude woman as an altar, and a cameo appearance as the Devil in the movie "Rosemary's Baby." LaVey made much of being a close friend of Sammy Davis, Jr. and of having had an affair with Jayne Mansfield, two celebrity members of the Church of Satan. At its peak, he claimed that the Church had hundreds of thousands of members. LaVey passed away in 1997.

LaVey's historical biography overlaps his legendary biography at several points. He was born in Chicago and his family did move to San Francisco. He did make his living as a musician and, of course, he actually did found the Church of Satan and died in 1997. He had several marriages. Almost everything else, however, seems to have been a fabrication.

LaVey's self-created legend was not seriously challenged until a 1991 interview in *Rolling Stone* magazine, entitled "Sympathy for the Devil." The author of that article, Lawrence Wright, did a little investigative footwork and discovered that: LaVey was born Howard Stanton Levey to Gertrude and Mike Levey; there never was a "San Francisco Ballet Orchestra"; no one by the name Levey or LaVey worked as a musician or cat trainer for the Beatty Circus during the period he claimed to have been an employee; neither he nor Monroe ever worked for the Mayan "burlesque" theater; he never worked for the San Francisco Police Department; and there was no such thing as an official San Francisco city organist. These discoveries led Wright to remark toward the end of his article:

Later, as I began to take apart the literary creation he had made of his life, I would realize that "Anton LaVey" was itself his supreme creation, his ultimate satanic object, a sort of android composed of all the elements his mysterious creator had chosen from the universe of dark possibilities. (Wright 1992)

These findings were considerably amplified in "Anton LaVey: Legend and Reality," a 9-page "fact sheet" compiled a little more than three months after LaVey's passing by his estranged daughter Zeena LaVey Schreck and her husband Nikolas Schreck (1998). In addition to repeating the points made by Wright, the fact sheet dismissed most of Anton LaVey's other claims, such as his claims to have had a Gypsy grandmother, seen films of secret German rituals, purchased the "Black House" (it was given to him by his parents, who had lived there, and had never been a brothel), appeared in "Rosemary's Baby," had affairs with Monroe and Mansfield, and so forth.

The current leadership of the Church of Satan has disputed some of these challenges to LaVey's official biography. Their strategy has been to vigorously dispute undocumented challenges while ignoring LaVey's documented fabrications. As one might anticipate, splinter groups from CoS as well as other independent Satanists have seized upon these revelations to challenge the Church leadership's implicit claims to be the only authentic Satanist religious body.

Thinly disguised claims to exclusive legitimacy are peppered throughout CoS documents, such as in some of Blanche Barton's remarks in her "Sycophants Unite!" essay (composed prior to LaVey's death) posted on the CoS official website:

We're lucky to have a leader like Anton LaVey. He has ensured that his philosophy will not die with him; it has been and will continue to be codified, expanded and applied in new areas *by his organization*. (emphasis in original)

The scope and significance of this dispute is reflected in the *many* attacks on non-CoS Satanists found on the Church of Satan website, particularly in the "Satanic Bunco Sheet," "Sycophants Unite!," "The Myth of the 'Satanic Community,'" "Pretenders to the Throne," and "Recognizing Pseudo-Satanists." Even a superficial perusal of these documents makes it clear that CoS is *obsessed* with shoring up its own legitimacy by attacking the heretics, especially those who criticize LaVey. For example, the unnamed author of the "Satanic Bunco Sheet" blasts non-CoS Satanists for "LaVey-baiting," and then goes on to assert that such pseudo-Satanists deal with LaVey and the Church of Satan by playing "the Christian game of handing out laurels with one hand while stabbing their progenitor in the back with the other. ...they must somehow convince you that the author of *The Satanic Bible* wasn't practicing pure Satanism [and] that his Church has gone awry in the hands of his successors...."

The Church of Satan began generating splinter groups as early as 1973 when the Church of Satanic Brotherhood was formed by group leaders in Michigan, Ohio, and Florida. This Church lasted only until 1974, when one of the founders announced his conversion to Christianity in a dramatic incident staged for the press in St. Petersburg. Other members of the Church of Satan in Kentucky and Indiana left to form the Ordo Templi Satani, also short lived. As more schisms occurred, LaVey decided to disband the remaining grottos, the local units of the Church of Satan, which left the Church as little more than a paper organization generating a meager income for LaVey through sales of memberships. There are many presently-existing groups which derive directly or indirectly from the Church of Satan, the most important of which is the Temple of Set. The conflict (mostly on the internet) between the original Church of Satan and new Satanist groups accelerated after LaVey's death.

In addition to attacking non-CoS Satanists as illegitimate, LaVey's organizational successors have also sought to legitimate their positions by appealing to the authority of LaVey and his writings. These kinds of appeals are rather ironic, given the Black Pope's rejection of traditional religious authority. As indicated earlier, LaVey himself did not attempt to legitimate his new religion with appeals to tradition or to the supernatural. Rather, he grounded Satanism's legitimacy on a view of human nature shaped by a secularist appropriation of modern science.

### Genesis of *The Satanic Bible*

The most significant single document for the Satanic "tradition" is *The Satanic Bible*. The idea for this volume came not from LaVey, but from an Avon Books editor named Peter Mayer. As a direct result of the success of the popular film "Rosemary's Baby" and the subsequent increase of popular interest in Satanism and the occult, Mayer decided that "the time was right for a 'Satanic bible'" and he approached LaVey about authoring it. (Aquino 1999, p. 52)

LaVey and his wife took the material they had on hand, wove it together and expanded on these writings to form what became the core of *The Satanic Bible*. This pre-existing material consisted of:

- A short, mimeographed paper that they had been distributing as an "introduction to Satanism."
- The so-called "rainbow sheets," which were "an assortment of polemical essays" the LaVeys had been mimeographing on colored paper. (Ibid., p. 52)
- A handout describing and containing instructions for the conduct of ritual magic.

The LaVeys then ran into a problem, which was that, even after expanding upon all of their available material, they were still *substantially* short of having a manuscript of sufficient length to satisfy their publisher. So, either because the deadline was coming up quickly or because LaVey just didn't want to write anything else at the time (Aquino describes their situation in terms of the former), LaVey tacked materials written by other authors onto the beginning and end of his manuscript.

Without acknowledging his sources, he took sections of "an obscure, turn-of-the-century political tract," *Might is Right* by New Zealander Arthur Desmond (writing under the pseudonym Ragnar Redbeard), added in a few sentences of his own, and incorporated it as a prologue. He also added the Enochian Keys ("a series of Elizabethan magical incantations") as they had been modified by Aleister Crowley, and "further altered them by replacing their Heavenly references with diabolical ones." Traditional occultists immediately recognized LaVey's source for the Keys, but it was not until 1987 that the source of LaVey's prologue was discovered. (Ibid., p. 65)

It should also be mentioned that, in circles critical of CoS, one often comes across the accusation that LaVey's "Nine Satanic Statements", one of the Church's central doctrinal statements, is an unacknowledged "paraphrase...of passages from Ayn Rand's *Atlas Shrugged*" (Schreck and Schreck 1998), specifically a paraphrase of the character John Galt's lengthy speech in the latter part of Rand's novel. However, when one actually examines these parallels (which are conveniently laid out in Appendix 11 of Aquino's *The Church of Satan*), one finds that this is a caricature of LaVey's indebtedness to Rand. For example, the first Satanic Statement is:

Satan represents indulgence, instead of abstinence!

The Rand passage presented as the source of this statement is:

A doctrine that gives you, as an ideal, the role of a sacrificial animal seeking slaughter on the altars of others, is giving you death as your standard. By the grace of reality and the nature of life, man-every man-is an end in himself. He exists for his own sake, and the achievement of his own happiness is his highest moral purpose.

This passage is rather more lengthy than LaVey's supposed "paraphrase." The second Satanic Statement is as brief as the first Statement:

Satan represents vital existence, instead of spiritual pipe dreams!

The Rand passage said to correspond with this Statement, though shorter than the first, is similarly distant in style and content from LaVey:

My morality, the morality of reason, is contained in a single axiom: existence exists-and in a single choice: to live. The rest proceeds from these.

And there is a similar disparity in the other "parallels" between the Satanic Statements and Rand. Thus, even if it is true that LaVey was looking at *Atlas Shrugged* when he composed the Nine Satanic Statements, it would be more proper to say that he was *inspired* by Rand rather than to assert that he *paraphrased* her work.

I should finally note in this regard that the title of the appendix (which originally appeared as an article by George C. Smith in 1987) in which the LaVey/Rand connection is delineated, "The Hidden Source of the Satanic Philosophy," similarly implies that Rand's philosophy was the *unacknowledged* core of LaVey's thought. This is, however, incorrect; LaVey himself explicitly acknowledged that his religion was "just Ayn Rand's philosophy with ceremony and ritual added" (cited in Ellis, p. 180). (Refer also to the "Satanism and Objectivism" essay on the Church of Satan website where this connection is examined at length.)

Despite the book's diverse source material and piecemeal assembly, it nevertheless coheres as a succinct-and, apparently, quite attractive-statement of Satanic thought and practice. As Aquino observes, "the *Satanic Bible* was somehow 'more than the sum of its parts.' Its argument was an argument of common sense, assembled in part from pre-existing concepts, but the excellence of the book lay in its integration of these into a code of life meaningful to the average individual-not just to occultists and/or academic-level philosophers." (Aquino 1999, p. 52)

One measure of *The Satanic Bible's* appeal is that it has continuously been in print since it first appeared in 1970, and has been translated into a number of other languages. I have been unable to obtain recent figures, but in his 1991 book, *In Pursuit of Satan*, Robert Hicks mentions a sales figure of 618,000 copies (p. 351). There were also a number of illegal foreign language editions. These include a Spanish translation published in Mexico in the 70s and a Russian translation in the late 90s. Legal editions include Czech and Swedish translations in the mid 90s and a 1999 German edition. The French translation has been completed but not yet printed. Also, the rights for a Greek translation were purchased, but the book does not seem to have appeared.<sup>4</sup>

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4 Information on foreign language editions courtesy Peter H. Gilmore, High Priest of the Church of Satan.

### **The Role of *The Satanic Bible* in Modern Satanism**

Although religious Satanism is interesting, academics have almost entirely ignored it. (The relevant academic literature consists of a handful of articles-e.g., Alfred 1976; Harvey 1995-and passing mentions in studies of the ritual abuse scare.) The principal reason for the lack of attention appears to be that Satanism is perceived as a trivial phenomenon rather than as a serious religion. The tendency seems to be to regard Satanists as immature adolescents who have adopted a diabolical veneer as a way of acting out their rebellion against parents and society. Does the phenomenon of adolescent rebellion, however, exhaust the significance of religious Satanism? Are most Satanists, in other words, just angry teenagers who adopt diabolical trappings to express their alienation, only to renounce the Prince of Darkness as soon as they mature into adults? While many youthful Satanists undoubtedly fit this profile, I came to feel that this was, at best, only a partial picture. Instead, I reasoned, there must be a core of committed Satanists who-for whatever reasons they initially become involved-had come to appropriate Satanism as something more than adolescent rebellion.

In order to test this hypothesis-and also because so little had been written on contemporary Satanism-I decided to collect some basic demographic data. To this end, I constructed a simple questionnaire that could be answered in 5 or 10 minutes. I began sending out questionnaires in early August 2000. By the end of February 2001 I had received 140 responses, which I felt was adequate to use as the basis for constructing a preliminary profile.<sup>5</sup>

When I sought feedback on preliminary write-ups of my findings from informants, a few voiced objections to the central role I assigned LaVey and his best-known work, *The Satanic Bible*, in the formation of modern Satanic religion. I was, furthermore, encouraged to shift my emphasis to the work of earlier literary figures ultimately responsible for fashioning the positive image of the Devil that LaVey later adopted for his Church of Satan. My survey findings, however, consistently indicated the centrality of LaVey to modern Satanism. This finding was a surprise, as I had initially assumed that contemporary Satanism had moved well beyond LaVey. I was thus led to conclude that-despite his dependence on prior thinkers-LaVey was directly responsible for the genesis of Satanism as a serious religious (as opposed to a purely literary) movement. Furthermore, however one might criticize and depreciate it, *The Satanic Bible* is still the single most influential document shaping the contemporary Satanic movement. As one of my informants noted, "I do not think Satanists can get away from LaVey, although some seem to take a real issue with him or try to downplay his importance. He wrote the book that codified Satanism into a religion, and for that he should be considered the central figure of the religion."

I do not intend to review all of my survey findings here (they are the subject of Lewis 2001), but I do want to note that I was startled to find that the average respondent had been a Satanist for seven to eight years. I also found that over two-thirds of the sample had been involved in at least one other religion beyond the tradition in which they were raised-usually Neopaganism or some other magical group. Both of these statistics indicate a level of seriousness I had not anticipated.

Because most respondents became involved during their teens, I inferred that many had initially

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5 110 (almost 80%) of my respondents were North American. Because European Satanism is a somewhat different phenomenon, one should be therefore be cautious about making inferences to European Satanism based on my survey findings.

become Satanists as an expression of teenage rebelliousness. It was clear, however, that their involvement did not end after they left home. Rather, they went on to appropriate Satanism as a serious religious option. The fact that the great majority of Satanists have looked into other religions shows that this was not an unconsidered choice, undertaken solely as a reaction against established religions. Also, though a reaction against Christianity may well have been a factor for some, too many respondents indicated that their religious upbringing was superficial, nominal or non-existent for this factor to explain why most people become Satanists.

Before I began collecting questionnaire data, I had received the impression from perusing the internet that contemporary Satanism had developed in different directions from the specific formulation developed by Anton LaVey in the 1960's. In particular, at the time it appeared to me that many contemporary Satanists had moved to a position of regarding Satan as a conscious being. I was thus surprised to discover that LaVey's humanistic approach-which rejects the real existence of personal spiritual beings, diabolical or otherwise-was the dominant form of Satanism professed by respondents.

At least part of the reason for this state of affairs appears to be the pervasive influence of Anton LaVey's *Satanic Bible*. A full 20% of respondents explicitly noted *The Satanic Bible* as the single most important factor attracting them to Satanism. For instance, in response to a questionnaire item asking how they became involved, a number of people simply wrote, "I read the *Satanic Bible*." It is also likely that this book played a major role in the "conversion" of other Satanists in my sample. One respondent elaborated by noting that she had been a Satanist in her "heart first, but I couldn't put a name to it; then I found the *The Satanic Bible*."

Similar stories attributing their infernal "conversions" to *The Satanic Bible* can be found in other sources. The popular book *Lucifer Rising*, for instance, recounts the story of how Martin Lamers, founder of the CoS-affiliated Kerk van Satan (Holland), was initially inspired by his discovery of LaVey's volume. (Baddeley 1999, p. 104) However, not everyone who is converted to Satanism via *The Satanic Bible* feels prompted to join the Church of Satan. *Lucifer Rising* also notes that "the Church of Satanic Liberation was established in January 1986 after its founder, Paul Douglas Valentine, was inspired by reading *The Satanic Bible*." (p. 153) Other stories of conversions directly inspired by *The Satanic Bible* can be found in Michael Aquino's *The Church of Satan* (e.g., the conversion of Robert DeCecco, who would later become a Master of the Temple, p. 69; and Lilith Sinclair, who would eventually become a Priestess and Aquino's wife, p. 82).

To return to the survey, LaVey's influential publication was also referred to a number of times in response to other questionnaire items. For example, one person noted that, "because I agree with and practice the majority of the beliefs set forth in *The Satanic Bible* and other works of Dr. LaVey, I VERY MUCH consider myself just as valid a Satanist as any 'official' priest." Another respondent wrote, "Satan is merely a word, a representative concept that encompasses all that the *Satanic Bible* teaches." And yet another individual stated: "To me, Satan is the personification of mankind's carnal nature. More information can be found in *The Satanic Bible* by Anton Szandor LaVey."

My strong impression was that *The Satanic Bible* was a doctrinal touchstone for most participants in this movement, despite the fact that the great majority of my sample were not formal members of Anton LaVey's Church of Satan. (One respondent, noting that he was not a member of any organization, wrote, "[It's] just me and my *Satanic Bible*.") And whatever LaVey had in mind when

he (or his publisher) entitled this publication, in certain ways *The Satanic Bible* has truly come to play the role of a "bible" for many members of this decentralized, anti-authoritarian subculture.

In a follow-up questionnaire, respondents were explicitly asked how they regarded *The Satanic Bible*, and to what extent their personal philosophies aligned with the ideas expressed in its pages. Most stated that their view of the world aligned significantly with *The Satanic Bible*. One Satanist said that *The Satanic Bible* was about the realities of human nature, so that there was "nothing [in *The Satanic Bible*] that I didn't already know or believe myself prior to reading it." Only one respondent completely rejected the LaVeyan tradition. Two respondents asserted that they regarded *The Satanic Bible* as just another "self-help book." Some respondents diminished (without disparaging) *The Satanic Bible* as an "introductory text" or "primer" of Satanism. Most hastened to add that they did not regard it as "dogma."

One can acquire a sense of how *The Satanic Bible* is regarded as a doctrinal touchstone by perusing the official website of the Church of Satan (<http://www.churchofsatan.com>). For example, the "Satanism FAQ" section of the "Church of Satan Information Pack" states that "critically reading *The Satanic Bible* by Anton Szandor LaVey is tantamount to understanding at least the basics of Satanism." Similarly, the Church's "Church of Satan Youth Communique" asserts that "LaVey wrote *The Satanic Bible* so that people could pick up a copy, read it, and know everything they need to know about Satanism and how to put it to work in their own lives."

In addition to these general assertions, one can find other essays on the Church of Satan (CoS) website in which authoritative tenets are cited from *The Satanic Bible*, as when the "Satanic Bunco Sheet" notes that "*The Satanic Bible* advises to 'question all things'...." or when, in an essay entitled "Satanism Needs an Enema!", an individual writing under the pseudonym Nemo introduces a series of citations from *The Satanic Bible* to support a point he is arguing with the words, "Other quotes from LaVey's own pen in *The Satanic Bible* reiterate this theme." The clear implication of this statement is that because these quotations come from "LaVey's own pen in *The Satanic Bible*," they are authoritative; thus, there can be no further discussion of the issue. Toward the end of the same essay, Nemo also asserts that,

We have a bible. We have a *pro-human* dogma. We have a church. We have a tradition. We have ceremonies and rituals. We have a High Priestess.

In other words, with respect to the theme I am pursuing here, Nemo is asserting that CoS has an authoritative scripture, dogma and tradition which support his argument. And it is obvious that Nemo regards his appeal to CoS *tradition* as stronger than direct appeals to science or common sense, which were the touchstones of LaVey's philosophy.

Finally, I found it interesting that one of the accusations leveled against non-CoS Satanists in Nemo's "Recognizing Pseudo-Satanism" essay was that in such groups, "The words of *The Satanic Bible* become twisted and distorted until they no longer have useful meaning!" Furthermore, in his "Satanism Needs an Enema!" essay, the same writer exclaims,

I am calling for a closing of the ranks and a throwing out of the heretics. I am asking for the Purge! I am asking for a *reverse* Inquisition.

Both of these sets of passages-the first quoting *The Satanic Bible* to make a point and the second

accusing heretical breakaways of warping *The Satanic Bible's* meaning (even going so far as to call for an "Inquisition" against heretics within the ranks!)-exemplify all-too-familiar patterns found in the theological conflicts of traditional religions like Christianity.

Quoting *The Satanic Bible* to legitimate a point of argument is not, however, confined to representatives of the Church of Satan. The so called "Xloptuny Curse" is an interesting example of how some of the "heretics" have turned the message of LaVey's writings to their own purposes. A short essay on "The Xloptuny Curse," written by Joe Necchi, was posted on the official website of the First Church of Satan in the summer of 2000. (The First Church of Satan-FCoS-is a newer Satanist organization founded by a former member of CoS whose brand of Satanism is very close to *The Satanic Bible*.) The text discusses the circumstances of a seemingly effective suicide curse that was leveled by Lord Egan, founder/leader of the FCoS, against Xloptuny (John C. Davis), an internet pugilist and member of the CoS. Less than a year before Davis blew his brains out, Egan had cursed Davis, specifying in a public, online communication that he would die by shooting himself.

The passage I would like to focus on for my present purposes is where Necchi remarks,

What is interesting, however, is the way in which some have predictably tried to rationalize Xloptuny's suicide as a Yukio Mishima-inspired act of heroism. Ironically, those trying so hard to canonize Mr. Davis thusly now have decided to conveniently ignore the book they are always waving about like a black flag at most other times: *The Satanic Bible*. In this sense, we see that many Satanists really behave exactly like Christians: they follow the precepts of their religion when it's easy to do so, when it suits them, but are quick to abandon them when it really counts.

Page 94 of *The Satanic Bible* specifically states: "Self-sacrifice is not encouraged by the Satanic religion. Therefore, unless death comes as an indulgence because of extreme circumstances which make the termination of life a welcome relief from an unendurable earthly existence, suicide is frowned upon by the Satanic religion." There is little ambiguity in this passage. As there is no reason to believe that Xloptuny was in "extreme circumstances which make the termination of life a welcome relief"; he died as a traitor to the Church whose cause he so often trumpeted, the defense of which he used as a rationale for his often black and bilious attacks on his enemies. Apparently "the great Dr. Anton LaVey's" words meant little or nothing to John C. Davis when he arrived at the moment of truth.

Here again we see *The Satanic Bible* being quoted as an authoritative document in a manner similar to the way sacred texts are quoted in comparable conflicts within other religious traditions. In other words, "The Xloptuny Curse" is yet another example of how *The Satanic Bible* functions as a quasi-scripture within the Satanic community.

Almost all Satanists would deny that *The Satanic Bible* is an "inspired" document in anything like the sense in which the Christian Bible is regarded as an inspired book. Interestingly, however, there are a few individuals-most notably Michael Aquino, a former CoS leader and founder of the Temple of Set-who *would* regard this book as inspired. For example, in the relevant chapter in his history of the Church of Satan, Aquino asserts that:

The *Satanic Bible* [clothes] itself in the supernatural authority of the Prince of Darkness and his demons. Less this element, the *Satanic Bible* would be merely a social tract by Anton LaVey-not High Priest of Satan, but just one more 1960s'-counterculture-cynic atop a soap-box.

The substance of the *Satanic Bible* therefore turns upon Anton LaVey's sincerity in believing himself to be the vehicle through which the entity known as Satan explains the mysteries of mankind's existential predicament. To the extent that he did, the *Satanic Bible* deserves the dignity of its title. ...

Despite the haphazard nature of its assembly, ... we may therefore consider the *Satanic Bible* in its totality not as argumentative, but as inspired writing. Thus it assumes an importance by its very **existence**, not just by its content. (Aquino 1999, p. 53)

Although Aquino's position would be rejected by most other professing Satanists, something approaching this position seems to be unconsciously informing their attitude toward *The Satanic Bible*.

### **Conclusion**

Anton LaVey's primary legitimation strategy was to appeal to the authority of science, specifically to the secularist world view derived from natural science and to an animalistic image of the human being derived from the Darwinian theory of evolution. In light of his radically secularist legitimation strategy, it is ironic that his organizational successors have subsequently attempted to legitimate their positions by appealing to LaVey as if he had actually been some kind of "Black Pope," and to *The Satanic Bible* as if it was truly a diabolically-revealed scripture. It seems that being raised in a religious tradition that locates the source of authority in religious figures and sacred texts creates an unconscious predisposition that can be carried over to other kinds of persons and books-even in the unlikely context of contemporary Satanism.

Outside the institutional bounds of the Church of Satan, modern Satanism became a loose, decentralized movement that coheres as a distinct religious community largely by virtue of participants' adherence to certain themes in the published words of Anton LaVey, particularly in *The Satanic Bible*. Despite this volume's patchwork quality and haphazard genesis, it came to play an authoritative, quasi-scriptural role within the larger Satanic movement. Unlike members of the Church of Satan, however, non-CoS Satanists felt free to criticize and even to reject aspects of the LaVeyan tradition by appealing to the authority of rationality-a criterion of legitimacy LaVey himself put forward as the very basis of Satanism. Thus, in terms of this criterion, non-CoS Satanism is closer to the spirit of LaVey's philosophy than the contemporary Church of Satan.

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