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Gabriel Andrade

ANTON LAVEY'S SATANIC PHILOSOPHY: AN ANALYSIS

THE SATANIC MYSTIQUE

The history of Satanism goes back to at least 2500 years. Yet, only in the seventeenth century, was the devil perceived in more sympathetic terms, in large part due to John Milton's *Paradise Lost*.¹ In the twentieth century, Aleister Crowley assumed the name of "The Beast 666," as well as owning the title of "the wickedest man in the world."² But, it was during the second half of the twentieth century, when an openly Satanic movement arose and gained significant attention from mass media with the enigmatic and sensationalist Anton LaVey at its helm.³ In this article, I examine the charisma and life of Anton Lavey and explore how he drew on philosophy and literature to create a religious movement that challenged Christian morality and systematic power.

¹ Danielle St Hilaire, *Satan's Poetry: Fallenness and Poetic Tradition in Paradise Lost*, Duquesne University Press (2012).

² Marco Pasi, *Aleister Crowley and the Temptation of Politics* New York. Routledge (2014).

³ Chris Matthews, *Modern Satanism: Anatomy of a Radical Subculture*, New York: Greenwood Publishing Group (2009).

LaVey was born in Chicago in 1930 to a middle-class American family. His family moved to San Francisco while he was a teenager. At the time, San Francisco was a booming metropolis, and would soon become the cradle of the counterculture movement from which LaVey's eccentric Satanic sect would rise. From an early age, LaVey displayed a skilled propensity for music, and his parents supported him in developing his gift.⁴

LaVey eventually took an interest in the organ, which he used to acquire employment throughout his young life. For a time, LaVey even played the organ in a circus. He purported that his playing tamed lions and other felines.⁵ LaVey's eccentricities and interest in the carnivalistic developed during that era of employment.

Later, after he became famous, LaVey often exaggerated the details of his experience in the circus. For example, he claimed to have had a romantic affair with the young Marilyn Monroe. The veracity of this claim has never been verified and has been disputed by virtually every biographer who has written about LaVey's life. LaVey also claimed to have been a photographer and psychics researcher in San Francisco's Police Department. There are no records that confirm that claim either. In fact, many years later, LaVey admitted to embellishing the details of his life in talking with biographers to charm the public.

LaVey, however, did have a major presence in San Francisco, because of his charisma. He was similar to Aleister Crowley in that regard, but was arguably more successful in establishing a following. LaVey managed to accumulate social connections and important friendships within the community. He skillfully navigated counterculturalism and became the face to a major faction of the movement.

⁴ Blanche Barton, *The Secret Life of a Satanist: The Authorized Biography of Anton Szandor LaVey*, New York: Feral House (2014).

⁵ Maxwell Davies, "Self-Conscious Routinization and the Post-Charismatic Fate of the Church of Satan from 1997 to the Present". In *Contemporary Religious Satanism: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Jesper. Aagaard Petersen, Ashgate Publishing, Ltd (2009).

Followers began to flock to LaVey, and in 1966, he believed that he had enough resources to start a new religion. Thus, he founded the Church of Satan on April 30, the same night, according to the European imagination, witches held their *Sabbaths*. This was designed to be on *Walpurgisnacht*, the Medieval Christian festivity that celebrated Saint Walpurga from the sunset of that same day to the sunset on May 1.

From the very beginning, the Church of Satan garnered enormous media attention. LaVey had, by this time, begun to master his public presence, and used those techniques to create religious scandal, not only San Francisco, but eventually worldwide.⁶ He shaved his head and proclaimed his titles as a high priest of the new Satanic religion. He invited journalists to attend Satanic rituals, such as those that imitated the ceremonies of witch hunters in previous epochs. Nude women served as altars, in emulation of various aspects of the Black Mass.⁷ However, the ceremonies did not incorporate all the repugnant elements that some would later attribute to them.

LaVey did perform a Satanic wedding for two of his followers, and also organized a Satanic baptism and a funeral. He began a new calendar, making year 1 the same year his church was founded, which he referred to as the year of Satan (*Anno Satanas*). This recalendaring

⁶ Of course, only a secularized, democratic (but media saturated) country such as the United States, could guarantee that such a spectacle could be held. The most conservative religious groups, needless to say, were frightened by LaVey. But, the witch hunts were a thing deeply buried in the past (or at least, religious witch hunts; political witch hunts were still present, as there were some remnants of McCarthyism left). Therefore, someone openly claiming to be Satanic in a modern and democratic country could afford casting spells and invoking the Prince of Darkness, and still not be in risk of legal prosecution. LaVey, ever seeking attention, used this protection in order to exploit his creativity and imagination. On the other hand, the case could also be made that if the United States were truly a fully secularized country, the Church of Satan would probably have never arisen. For, it arose precisely as a reaction against the prevailing Christian worldview that dominates American life, especially politics and public opinion. It is precisely for this reason that, as opposed to Europe, studying Satanism still remains taboo in the United States.

⁷ Massimo Introvigne, *Satanism: A Social History* New York: Brill Publishing (2016), 40.

marked the beginning of the Age of Satan, similar to other religious traditions that have used a particular event to mark the beginning of a new era (e.g., the *Hegira* in Islam).

In addition to shaving his head, Lavey wore horns on his head to resemble the devil, and in front of cameras he frequently assumed a seductive and enigmatic gaze. Sometimes, he even walked around with a leashed lion. He adopted the title of the “Black Pope” (although, this title has also been used by the Superior General of the Society of Jesus).

The media ate his performance up.⁸ Many spectators were curious or amused by the new religious movement. In fact, the fledgling Church of Satan was thriving largely based on public perception. Its members’ actual beliefs were less important than the stigma that developed from Lavey’s performance. Its jarring rituals, the unique attire, and the counter-cultural environment that gave stage to Lavey’s new identity were integral to its growing success. Television programs regularly dedicated air time to the Black Pope, and Roman Polansky even piggybacked on the attention the Church of Satan was receiving to promote *Rosemary’s Baby*, the cult film about a woman who gives birth to a child fathered by Satan. In fact, LaVey claimed that he was a technical advisor to the movie, and that he had played the role of the Devil in one of the film’s most memorable scenes.⁹ Although, the truth was that he had no hand in the film’s production.

LaVey also drew on the broader occult and incorporated symbols frequently associated with Satanic groups, such as the pentagram—a sign that had been recurrently used by Eliphas Levi.¹⁰ The five-pointed star has also been used by many other traditions.

⁸Timothy Hall, *American Religious Leaders*, New York: Infobase Publishing (2014), 211.

⁹ James Lewis, *Satanism Today* New York: ABC Clio (2001), 229

¹⁰Donald Tyson, *Ritual Magic: What it is & how to Do it* New York: Llewellyn Worldwide (1992), 128

Even early Christians adopted the pentagram for a time. While the traditional pentagram has one up-facing and two down-facing spikes, LaVey revised the symbol for his church. He was aware that, during early colonial witch hunts, witches were often thought of parodying Christian rituals and symbols. Following that tradition, LaVey inverted the pentagram (two spikes up and one spike down).

LaVey also appropriated the image of Baphomet. This was an idol supposedly worshipped by the Templars (this accusation led to their destruction). Some believe the name “Baphomet” may have actually been a corruption of “Mahomet,” reflecting the medieval fear of Christians that a time would come when they would have to renounce their faith and convert to Islam.¹¹ In the nineteenth century, occultist Eliphas Levi embraced this idol (although not necessarily to worship it; he remained a non-conformist Catholic his whole life¹²), and designed an icon to represent Baphomet, a human body with a goat’s head and an eagle’s wings. In the western imagination, the goat had a close association with the witches’ *Sabbath*. LaVey modified the image. This time, he incorporated the inverted pentagram with the Hebrew inscription “Leviathan” on it. Leviathan was a biblical monster that eventually became associated with the Devil. While contemporary religious movements that claim descent from the Templars reject the groups connection to Satanism, LaVey was sympathetic to it.

LaVey also adopted the inverted cross. While it is often interpreted as a Satanic symbol, the inverted cross was initially associated with Peter, Jesus’ disciple who asked to be crucified upside down, because he did not consider himself worthy of dying in the

¹¹ Sarah Newman, *The Real History Behind the Templars* New York: Berkley Books (2007).

¹² Julian Strube, “The “Baphomet” of Eliphas Lévi: Its Meaning and Historical Context”, *Correspondences* 4, 1–43 (2016).

same manner as Christ. However, Levay drew on the vernacular relationship between the symbol and anti-Christian sentiment.

THE SATANIC PHILOSOPHY

Even though LaVey enjoyed performing for the public, he also had a philosophical agenda. He wanted his ideas to be taken seriously. Not surprisingly, many debated this. For example, Gavin Baddeley, a fellow Satanist, acknowledged that LaVey was wildly inconsistent in his views, especially when it came to personal morals. He paid a great deal of lip service to personal freedom, yet as a leader, he micromanaged the lives of his followers.¹³ Others have asserted that LaVey's *The Satanic Bible* was commissioned as a marketing ploy to increase publicity for *Rosemary's Baby*.¹⁴ However, over the years, LaVey also remained committed to his religious worldview.

LaVey's religion was rooted in Romanticism. Many Romantic literary scholars had embraced Satan as a misunderstood hero that, although, ultimately ruined by his pride, inspired sympathy among readers.¹⁵ For example, Milton portrayed a charismatic Lucifer who opposed God's tyranny, Byron developed the "Satanic school", and Victor Hugo portrayed a very courageous Satan. While romantic authors did not intend to worship Satan, they did desire to lionize many virtues attributed to him: courage, individuality, audacity, and persistence. On the other hand, their works also warned readers that these traits could lead to tragedy. While LaVey was a marketing genius, I would argue that he had neither the literary talents nor the depth of his philosophical antecessors.

From the outset, LaVey clarified that Satan symbolized his dedication to atheism and materialism and that he did not believe in the actual existence of the devil. Initially, LaVey was interested in the

¹³ Baddeley, *Lucifer Rising*

¹⁴ Owen Davies, *Grimoires: A History of Magic Books*, Oxford: Oxford University Press (2010).

¹⁵ Carmen Casaliggi and Porscha Fermanis, *Romanticism: A Literary and Cultural History*, New York: Routledge (2016).

occult and magic. However, with time, LaVey moved away from occultist philosophy, and he became more interested in materialism and the reproof of the supernatural. For LaVey, Satan was a symbol of his central teachings and beliefs. Etymologically, Satan comes from the Hebrew *ha-Satan*, which means “the adversary.” And the adversary represented the counter-culture environment in which he was raised—the ultimate nonconformist.

The history of Satan, before he became the personification of evil as a result of Zoroastrian influence upon the Jewish religion and the Babylonian Exile in the sixth century B.C.E., Satan was simply an adversarial figure. That is also how he is portrayed in the Book of Job. LaVey sympathized with this early Hebraic figure. Thus, he drew on Satan to develop an adversarial ideology that rejected political systems and established orders.

For LaVey, the homage to Satan was not about committing deliberately evil acts—such as, human sacrifice—but about rebelling against an oppressive system. In this regard, LaVey’s Satan was much more similar to Milton’s Lucifer, than to the “Malign One” who Puritans perceived as making pacts with witches.

PHILOSOPHICAL INFLUENCES ON LAVEY

Philosophically, Lavey’s greatest intellectual influence was Friedrich Nietzsche.¹⁶ Similar to LaVey, Nietzsche had little regard for Christianity. He promoted a cult of ancient Greek gods. Nietzsche was especially fascinated by Dionysus, the god of wine.

In the cultural history of Satanic iconography, Dionysus is one of the antecessors of Satan in Greek mythology. To Nietzsche, Dionysus represented rage and hedonistic disinhibition, as opposed to the moral restrictions of Christianity. Nietzsche admired what Dionysus represented. During his battle with mental illness, Nietzsche even signed some of his letters as “Dionysus.” Nietzsche did not

¹⁶ Stephen Flowers, *Lords of the Left-Hand Path: Forbidden Practices and Spiritual Heresies*, New York: Simon and Schuster (2012).

endorse the literal existence of Dionysus, but he did affirm the Greek god's values.¹⁷

Satan and Dionysus share similar attributes. As a result, LeVay and Nietzsche's philosophies have a number of parallels. Nietzsche believed that good and evil were concepts imposed by early Christians. He also considered the Christian ethical system that valued mercy and charity as a "slave's morality" and that Christianity limited humanity's potential for self-realization. By emphasizing mercy and denying people the pleasures of life, Christian morality had diminished human vitality. According to Nietzsche, but also LaVey, human instinct is geared towards domination, but Christian morality attempts to repress that instinct. In Nietzsche's view, in order to achieve self-realization, individuals must reaffirm aristocratic virtues and reject the herd mentality that Christianity attempts to instill. He proposed a new set of values that he believed would lead to eventual self-realization. He referred to these as the "master's morality" and centered on basking in the pleasures of life, domination, non-repressed vitality, and creativity.

LaVey took Nietzsche's philosophical worldview very seriously. He integrated these concepts into his own book, *The Satanic Bible*, which became the doctrinal foundation of his new religion. In this work, the Nietzschean influence is explicit. He repeatedly criticizes Christianity for diminishing man's potential, such as in this oft-repeated aphorism: "Behold the crucifix; what does it symbolize? Pallid incompetence hanging on a tree."¹⁸

LaVey's Bible often appears to mock Christian scripture. For example, instead of blessing the poor and the weak (as found in the gospel of Matthew) he writes: "Blessed are the strong, for they shall possess the earth - Cursed are the weak, for they shall inherit the

¹⁷ Peter Durno Murray, *Nietzsche's Affirmative Morality: A Revaluation Based in the Dionysian World View*, New York: Walter de Gruyter (1999).

¹⁸ Anton LaVey, *The Satanic Bible*, Createspace Independent Pub (2011), 17.

yoke!... Blessed are the iron-handed, for the unfit shall flee before them - Cursed are the poor in spirit, for they shall be spat upon!"¹⁹

Like Nietzsche, LaVey was not wholly a nihilist. He did not teach the death of morality, but instead, imposed a new morality. He replaced the Ten Commandments with a new set of rules. The following comes is referred to as the *Eleven Satanic Rules of the Earth*:

1. Do not give opinions or advice unless you are asked.
2. Do not tell your troubles to others unless you are sure they want to hear them.
3. When in another's lair, show them respect or else do not go there.
4. If a guest in your lair annoys you, treat them cruelly and without mercy.
5. Do not make sexual advances unless you are given the mating signal.
6. Do not take that which does not belong to you unless it is a burden to the other person and they cry out to be relieved.
7. Acknowledge the power of magic if you have employed it successfully to obtain your desires. If you deny the power of magic after having called upon it with success, you will lose all you have obtained.
8. Do not complain about anything to which you need not subject yourself.
9. Do not harm little children.
10. Do not kill non-human animals unless you are attacked or for your food.
11. When walking in open territory, bother no one. If someone bothers you, ask them to stop. If they do not stop, destroy them.²⁰

¹⁹ Anton LaVey, *The Satanic Bible*, 20.

²⁰ Matthews, *Modern Satanism*, 50

Surprisingly, LaVey's rules of conduct appear reasonable, especially for a proposed Satanist—it calls for human decency, respect for children and condemns sexual violence.

LaVey's hedonistic approach also seemed to draw on Epicurean philosophy that taught individuals to live life to the fullest through balancing pleasure and self control.²¹ As one example, LaVey exalted life's pleasures, but also rejected the consumption of drugs, as opposed to Aleister Crowley, an early twentieth century occultist with whom LaVey is frequently compared. This is especially fascinating considering the counter-culture, from which LaVey's movement arose, was largely defined by experimental and recreational drug use.

LaVey was a major dissident of herd mentality.²² LaVey rejected any collectivist attempt to regulate individuals' lives. According to LaVey's teachings, the truly virtuous person is not concerned about what others think; instead, they accept the consequences and do not evade responsibility. The link of LaVey's ideology with existentialism has seldom been explored by historians, but it certainly warrants further research.

His approach was often crude and retributive. Infact, LaVey did embrace Crowley's well-known slogan, "Do what Thou wilt shall be the whole of the Law."²³ For this occult leader, it was not about applying the golden rule i.e., "do unto others as you would have them do unto you," but do unto others as they actually do unto you—as in, an eye for an eye.

One of the greatest defenders of enlightened self-interest—the philosophy in ethics that proposes individuals act in the interest of others ultimately as a means of serving one's personal self interest—

²¹ Tim O'Keefe, *Epicureanism*, New York: Routledge (2014).

²² Anton LaVey, *The Devil's Notebook*, New York: Feral House (2000).

²³ Richard Kaczynski, *Perdurabo: The Life of Aleister Crowley*, New York: North Atlantic Books (2010), 517

was twentieth-century novelist and philosopher Ayn Rand.²⁴ LaVey openly admired her work. This reasons seem clear, given the content and the style of her writings. While her ideas are not taken seriously by academic philosophers, in reading her work, it is easy to find parallels between LaVey and Rand's worldviews. For example, Rand proposed that "the purpose of morality is to teach you, not to suffer and die, but to enjoy yourself and live."²⁵

"My religion," LaVey once noted, "is just Ayn Rand's philosophy with ceremony and ritual added."²⁶ However, there were aspects of Rand's philosophy the he did not give much merit toward such as her belief that cooperation was needed, and generosity was the proper way to satisfy individual pleasures. His version of egoism was staunchly rigid in comparison. What becomes clear in studying LaVey's teachings is that there were numerous philosophical influences that shaped his belief system and that his rejection of Christianity played a major role in developing his religious identity.

OTHER LITERARY INFLUENCES ON LAVEY

Another author who influenced LaVey was novelist Jack London.²⁷ London was an affluent writer whose work was popular in its time. However, I would argue that his success was based on his ability to adjust to the needs of the readers' market, because the quality of his works was inconsistent, and his philosophical views were, at times, unclear.

In some of his writings, London embraced Marxist views, and viewed himself as a representative of the working class. In other

²⁴ Ben Burnane, *Ayn Rand and the Posthuman: The Mind-Made Future*, New York: Springer (2018), 180

²⁵ Ayn Rand, *For the New Intellectual: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand*, New York: New American Library (1963), 123.

²⁶ James R. Lewis, "Who Serves Satan? A Demographic and Ideological Profile", *Marburg Journal of Religion*, Volume 6, No. 2 (June 2001), 18

²⁷ Ruben Van Lujik, *Children of Lucifer: The Origins of Modern Religious Satanism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press (2016).

writings, London portrayed individuals as heroes based on their charisma. London's *Sea Wolf* has been especially attractive to members of the Church of Satan. *Sea Wolf* tells the story of a philosophically-minded mariner that uses corporal punishment to discipline and gain the control of his crew. This narrative depicts a world that favors the strong and the elimination of weakness in the world.

LaVey was moderately educated but, he was not a scholar. In writing the *Satanic Bible* he plagiarized *Might is Right*, by an author under the pseudonym of Ragnar Redbeard.²⁸ If it were not for LaVey, that book would likely have been forgotten. The book is a Social Darwinist philosophy, typical of the late nineteenth century. LaVey's plagiarism was extensive. The book's main thesis is that the poor and weak will disappear based on their biological inferiority, asserting that the sooner they do, the better it will be for humanity. The book has strong classist and racist overtones. Redbeard also claims that slavery should be reinstated, because inferior races cannot govern themselves. It also condemns miscegenation. To his credit, however, LaVey removed some of the more offensive passages and there are no racist undertones in the *Satanic Bible*. Although, it has been used by some neo-fascist groups that explicitly embrace racist ideologies.²⁹

SATANIC PHILOSOPHY AND MAGICAL PRACTICES

LaVey also plagiarized part of a text that was popularized by Aleister Crowley known as the *Enochian Keys*³⁰. In the sixteenth century, the English occultist John Dee attempted to recover the "Enochian" language. He alleged that the biblical patriarch Enoch was the last person to use the language and that it was the antive tongue of

²⁸ Per Faxneld and Jersen Petersen, "Introduction", in *The Devil's Party: Satanism in Modernity*, ed. Per Faxneld and Jersen Petersen, Oxford: Oxford University Press (2012), 12

²⁹ Gerd Bayer, *Heavy Metal Music in Britain*, New York: Ashgate Publishing, Ltd. (2009), 83

³⁰ Introvigne, *Satanism*, 347.

angels. *Enochian Keys*, also discussed in the book, were songs sung to conjure spirits. Crowley used these songs in his magic, and LaVey incorporated them into the *Satanic Bible* and later, ritual.

While LaVey did not believe in a literal Satan, he did perform Pseudo Satanic rituals. He viewed these performances as a form of catharsis or psychodrama therapy. Ritual provided LaVey's followers with the opportunity to embody the virtues of Satan and to reject the cultural expectations placed upon them by religion or society.

Throughout his life, LaVey's relationship with magic and alchemy remained ambiguous. During one of his romantic affairs, LaVey developed an enmity with a man named Sam Brody, the partner of LaVey's lover.³¹ Brody died in a traffic accident. However, LaVey insisted that it was his use of magic that hastened his death and brought on the fatal collision. Whether LaVey maintained his belief in the efficacy of magic is unclear.

LaVey seemed to be more concerned with the therapeutic purpose of magic. As it states in the *Satanic Bible*: "Visual imagery utilized for emotional reaction is certainly the most important device incorporated in the practice of lesser magic. Anyone who is foolish enough to say "looks don't mean a thing" is indeed deluded. Good looks are unnecessary, but "looks" certainly are needed!"³²

LAVEY'S RATIONALISM AND LEGACY

As rationalism became firmly established in the West, and hysteria over Satan diminished, most rationalist proposed that the best way to approach the devil was by mocking him. In the past, anxieties surrounding Satan gave rise to inquisitions and witch hunts. Through the lens of rationalism, humor was a tool for dismantling fear associated with the malign figure.

³¹Joyce Mercer, *Behind the Mask of Adolescent Satanism*, New York: Deaconess Press (1991).

³² LaVey, *Satanic Bible*, 62.

From a similar vein, LaVey's beliefs developed. On one hand, Satan embodied attributes that, he believed, would enhance life and give way to autonomy and self-realization. On the other hand, in denying Satan's literal existence, LaVey challenged Christian morality. If Satan did not exist, furthermore, hell did not exist either—a provocative double entendre. Perhaps unwittingly, LaVey carried out an intellectual exercise that Michel Foucault might have referred to as “archaeology.”³³ LaVey, in his portrayal of Satan, unearthed the multifaceted depictions of Satan throughout history—an overzealous celestial prosecutor in the Book of Job, an archenemy of the Divine, a hero portrayed by authors throughout the era of Romanticism. In adopting Satanism as an ideology, LaVey proposed that rebellion in the face of despotism can be heroic.

While the value of LaVey's teachings are debateable. In examining his life and writings, we can see how the power of his charisma and how his use of philosophy and literature opened the door to a new, and widely spread, religious movement that challenged Christian ideologies and systematic power.

³³ Michel Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge*, New York: Psychology Press (2002).