

Sacred & Profane Season 3, Episode 3

The Devil's Advocates

[00:00:01] **Kurtis Schaeffer** I'm Kurtis Schaeffer.

[00:00:02] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** and I'm Martien Halvorson-Taylor. aAnd this is Sacred & Profane, a show where we explore how religions shape us and how we shape religions.

[00:00:14] **Kurtis Schaeffer** And our story today, like so many other unexpected headlines, starts in Florida.

[00:00:22] **News tape** An ironic twist of support for Florida Governor Rick Scott.

[00:00:28] In 2013, Scott championed a law that many saw as an end run against long standing Supreme Court rulings that banned prayer in public schools.

[00:00:39] **Joseph Laycock** Of course, the Supreme Court has said that you cannot have compulsory prayer in schools.

[00:00:44] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** That's Joseph Laycock.

[00:00:46] **Joseph Laycock** I am Joseph Laycock and I'm an associate professor of religious studies at Texas State University.

[00:00:51] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** Back in 2013, he was covering religion as a reporter for Religion Dispatches.

[00:00:58] **Joseph Laycock** So Gov. Rick Scott in Florida passed a law basically running an angle around this and saying, well, the teachers cannot lead prayer, but students can lead other students in prayer and they can use the resources of the school to do that. And clearly, they had Christian prayers in mind. This is how we're going to get the Christian God back into public schools.

[00:01:19] **Kurtis Schaeffer** Florida Scott's bill drew support from Christian conservatives, but it also drew the attention of a group few people had heard of.

[00:01:28] **News tape** A satanic temple fully supports Governor Scott's proposal and is planning to hold a rally later this month. That's right. Satan pushing for prayer and backing a Tea Party favorite.

[00:01:41] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** It wasn't just a press release. Satanists really did show up at Florida State Capitol to rally in support of the governor.

[00:01:50] **News tape** Why are you here today? We're here to spread a message of goodwill and benevolence and open mindedness and free expression.

[00:01:59] **Joseph Laycock** It had a handful of people in sort of classical horror or black satanic robes chanting Hail, Hail Satan and hail Rick Scott.

[00:02:11] **News tape** It's a beautiful day here at the state capital. A great day to be a Satanist. A great day to be a human being.

[00:02:20] **Joseph Laycock** And they hired an actor who appeared as kind of their supreme commander and gave a speech.

[00:02:26] **News tape** We honor Gov. Rick Scott. Hail Satan, Rick! For providing us this opportunity to make the Satanic cause clear and make our presence known.

[00:02:37] **Joseph Laycock** And it is funny, it's very funny to watch.

[00:02:42] **News tape** You're going to Hell!

[00:02:42] **News tape** I believe it and I'm very excited about it.

[00:02:47] **Joseph Laycock** But Jarry would say the humor is kind of a side effect, really. His point was to see how people would respond if you oppose this kind of challenge to to what Rick Scott was trying to do.

[00:02:59] **Kurtis Schaeffer** The Jarry that Joe mentioned is one of the founders of the Satanic Temple. He goes by the pseudonym Malcolm Jarry. Jarry and Satanic Temple co-founder Lucian Greaves quickly developed a reputation for crashing the party when they saw legislation that threatened to erode the separation of church and state.

[00:03:21] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** Since that rally in 2013, the Satanic Temple has shown up with a bronze statue of Baphomet in Arkansas.

[00:03:30] **News tape** Good people, American sons and daughters of religious liberty. I present to you, Baphomet,

[00:03:37] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** They've attempted to hold a black mass at Harvard.

[00:03:41] **News tape** But student groups say, a black mass that was to be planned for last night, was canceled after locals became outraged by it.

[00:03:51] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** and they've sued the state of Missouri over a restrictive abortion bill on the grounds of religious liberty,

[00:03:59] **Satanic Temple Announcement** the Satanic Temple proudly announces to all of its followers that within the states that have enacted the Religious Freedom Restoration Act, religiously performed abortions are exempt from legal requirements that are not medically necessary.

[00:04:16] **Kurtis Schaeffer** Now, the media often cover the Satanic Temple as an elaborate prank, trolling of the highest order - and all pulled off by people who openly admit they don't believe that God or the devil actually exist. But despite those public perceptions, in 2019, the IRS recognized the Satanic Temple, now headquartered in Salem, Massachusetts, as a tax exempt religious organization.

[00:04:44] **Joseph Laycock** The Satanic Temple is openly challenging a lot of our assumptions about, first of all, what is religion for a lot of the public, that's their assumption. Religion is about God, and the same temple is openly saying we are a religion, we have tax exempt status from the IRS and we don't believe in anything supernatural. And then they're also forcing a conversation about what do you think

religious freedom should look like? I see their opponents responding with statements like, well, religious freedom is only for good religions. So these these provocations are forcing conversations in the public square that I think otherwise wouldn't happen and the people would go to a lot of effort to actually avoid having if it were not for the Satanic Temple.

[00:05:31] **Kurtis Schaeffer** So let's start by backing up just a little Joe, you talk in your book about how Satanists challenge American sensibilities about religion, but what are we really talking about when we talk about Satanism as a set of beliefs if they say they don't believe in any sort of dirty.

[00:05:49] **Joseph Laycock** Sure, so so Satanism, for most of the history of this word, it has been simply an accusation leveled against other people. Write the word Satanism really begins in the wake of the Protestant Reformation, where you have Catholics and Protestants accusing each other of posing as Christians, but actually being Satanists. And so it really wasn't until 1966 when Anton Levay founded the Church of Satan in San Francisco and was basically the first person to openly say, I am a Satanist, you can call me that. It's OK. I'm not offended

[00:06:29] **Anton Levay Interview** Some of your critics say Satanism is an excuse for sexual and orgiastic excesses.

[00:06:38] **Anton Levay Interview** Yes, I fully agree that it is an excuse. But then I also agree that Christianity has been an excuse for many, too.

[00:06:49] **Joseph Laycock** Levay's form of Satanism is called non-theistic Satanism, and that he did say, I am an atheist. And when we sort of perform all of the trappings of Satanism, when we have black masses and we we we perform rituals and we chant in Latin and so forth, this is all basically just psychodrama, right. That this is all a therapy. We we sort of resents being indoctrinated with this deferential view towards Christianity. And by doing these rituals, it reminds us of our own autonomy.

[00:07:21] **Anton Levay Interview** In your book, The Satanic Bible, you say, hate your enemies, with your whole heart and if a man smites you on one cheek, smash him on the other. Do you believe this?

[00:07:34] **Anton Levay Interview** Yes, very much so. I think everyone does, except they cloaked in forms of false altruism or morality because of teachings such as turning the other cheek.

[00:07:55] **Joseph Laycock** The Satanic Temple are nontheistic and in some ways their idea of what Satanism is comes from Levay's Church of Satan. So they would say ritual has value, but we don't believe that these rituals are supernatural. We believe their benefits are basically psychological.

[00:08:14] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** The Satanic Temple has also come to embrace seven tenets meant to guide their members behavior. The tenets include striving to act with compassion towards all creatures, respecting the freedoms of others, respecting science and reason, and the belief in bodily autonomy. That is to say, individuals have control of their own bodies. None of the tenets include an actual belief in the devil or one of the common accusations lobbied against Satanists that they practiced human sacrifice or pedophilia.

[00:08:51] **Joseph Laycock** Satan is basically their favorite fictional character. It's also important to point out that this is not the Satan of the Bible. This is the Satan of Milton and the romantic poets of the 19th century. So this is a Satan who is standing up for justice against overwhelming odds on the side of the oppressed, against the monarchy, against the power of the church. I'll say one more thing, which is that although the temple is in many ways beholden to the Church of Satan, these two groups are now pretty bitter rivals. So even though their ideas about Satanism are similar, they're diametrically opposed politically. So Anton Levay was a big fan of Ayn Rand's and her philosophy of Objectivism. And the Temple is pretty progressive and their ideas about tolerance and other kind of left wing issues. So there's kind of no love lost there as a result.

[00:09:48] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** Well, that's another way of saying that it's religion, right? It's prone to schism.

[00:09:52] **Joseph Laycock** That's right. And of course, while I was doing my research, several chapters broke away from this temple and kind of formed their own progressive, politically engaged satanic religions. And the reasons that they left were many, and I think it was to some extent inevitable.

[00:10:10] **Kurtis Schaeffer** Give us an example. Tell us a story of one of the groups that split off from the Satanic Temple.

[00:10:17] **Joseph Laycock** Sure. So one of the groups that split off was the L.A. chapter. So they had chapters kind of all over the United States and Canada and abroad. And the L.A. chapter left citing a variety of reasons. There were a lot of people who were concerned that the leadership, especially was too white, that the membership was too white. Satanism is traditionally a white male affair. There aren't a lot of people of color in Satanism, but also because I think they were further to the left and temple right. They disagreed on issues like free speech versus deep platforming, right wing voices that they considered to be to be dangerous. So so those schisms were happening while I was doing my ethnography, which was interesting as a as a researcher.

[00:11:10] **Kurtis Schaeffer** it seems impossible to talk about their religious views without also talking about their politics. We mentioned earlier they've become known for petitioning to put up a statue of Baphomet, who's sort of a goat headed version of the Christian devil in front of state houses that put up Ten Commandments monuments. Lucian Greaves, who's one of the founders of the temple, is pretty clear that the temple's goal is less about putting up the Baphomet statue than in ensuring you don't walk into a government building that's promoting exclusively Christian symbolism.

[00:11:43] **Satanic Temple Announcement** We do not bring Baphomet here in hopes of replacing the Ten Commandments monument. We have is no interest in forcing our beliefs and symbols upon you as we do and having the police of others forced upon us. What we are asking for is only that the public square, these capitol grounds remain an area in which free speech, religious liberty and equality under the law be respected by the holders of public office who swore to uphold those values.

[00:12:09] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** And another one of the Satanists ongoing campaigns is suing states that are trying to restrict abortion. The campaign is framed through the lens of religious freedom because they claim that restrictions on abortion favor Christian groups, that they prevent the expression of Satanist religious beliefs and practices.

[00:12:31] **Satanic Temple Announcement** The Satanic Temple advances many just causes that protect the religious rights of our members. We champion pluralism and have repeatedly taken legal action to ensure that Satanists receive the same treatment as members of other faiths. As an expression of our deeply held beliefs, the Satanic Temple has created a religious ritual that involves terminating an unwanted pregnancy during the first trimester. The ritual provides spiritual comfort and affirms bodily autonomy and self-worth.

[00:13:07] **Kurtis Schaeffer** I think a good First Amendment lawyer might see these actions as using freedom of religion arguments to advance their political goals, fighting what they see as an uncomfortably close relationship between Christian groups and the state. What do you say to people who look at that and say it's all about provoking a reaction and pushing their political agenda, that it is more about trolling conservative Christians than an actual religion?

[00:13:32] **Joseph Laycock** So I think there's there's a couple of important points to make here. One is just because something is one thing doesn't mean it can't also be a religion. So in theory, you could be a troll and that could also be your your religion. And the claim that he has a political agenda and therefore they can't be a religion is is kind of absurd, right? I mean, what what religious group in America does not have a political agenda? And Malcolm Jarry is very adamant that he has goals that he's trying to reach and he's working backwards from there, trying to come up with strategies to reach the goal. So he would say the fact that this is upsetting people or the fact that this is funny, those are kind of just side effects. What I'm really trying to do is to battle Christian hegemony and the crumbling of the separation of church and state. So I actually don't think that they are trolls, even though their tactics may resemble that at times.

[00:14:35] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** Joe, you mentioned earlier that the Satanic Temple has actually been recognized as a church by the IRS, did these questions of whether Satanists are sincere in their beliefs come into the decision at all?

[00:14:49] **Joseph Laycock** So the government is very resistant to ever actually defining what religion is. The Supreme Court has essentially refused to do this. However, at the end of the day, the IRS has to decide who counts as a church and who doesn't when it's when it's tax time. The Satanic Temple, every time that they claim they had religious rights, people would respond and say, you're not a religion, you don't have religious rights. And so they figured the best way to not fight this battle over and over again would be to get recognition from the IRS. So the IRS technically is not defining whether your religion they're defining whether you're a church, but they have a list of, I think, 14 things. And it's sort of like, you know, you might be an alcoholic, right. If you have a certain number of things on this list, they'll be persuaded that you're a religion has most of the things. So, for example, they have a program for children and it's called After School Satan, but they have a full year long a curriculum of education and basically science and critical thinking for for for young people. They have rituals that they gather together to perform. They have fellowship. They have a physical headquarters. They have literature. They're currently working on a full fledged ordination program that requires training and testing and so forth to become a minister. So the IRS really had no reason not to grant this to them. They met, I think, every single item on their on their checklist. I think that's surprising to people who only know about these big political provocations that they do. But if you actually look at this timetable, the way the IRS sees them, it looks very much like a so-called mainstream or normal religion in terms of what they're what they're doing and what they're offering.

[00:16:38] **Kurtis Schaeffer** So as a scholar of religion, Joe, you called the category of new religious movements the trash bin of the study of religion. But I suspect you don't really think that and you think that the Satanic Temple really tells us something interesting about new religious movements and about religion in general. What is it about the Satanic Temple that helps us understand new religious movements?

[00:17:02] **Joseph Laycock** I think the Satanic Temple shows that new religious movements matter because these groups are posing questions that haven't been asked before. The book is called *Speak of the Devil*, because I think what's really interesting is the conversation the temple is sparking around questions of the separation of church and state, religious freedom, religious pluralism. And this is a role that religious movements have served in the United States for a long time, right? Back in the 40s, all the Supreme Court cases on religious freedom revolving around the rights of Jehovah's Witnesses. And so in some ways, I think this temple is serving a similar function today of kind of causing us to think about things that we have never really thought about before.

[00:17:45] **Kurtis Schaeffer** I think one of the fascinating things about religion is its ability to erase its tracks, the the power of a given religion is in part based on its ability to come off as transcendent. And I think one of the things about new religious movements and the Satanic Temple in particular since it formed in the public eye, is that it makes that uncomfortable. We've seen a religion in the making and it's it's not that pretty some of the time.

[00:18:16] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** And and it makes us self-conscious of our own traditions. Right. Because it reveals how our own religions are constructed.

[00:18:23] **Kurtis Schaeffer** That's right. Through through struggle and negotiation a lot of the time.

[00:18:28] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** Yeah. And also as a reaction, it's not a timeless truth necessarily.

[00:18:34] **Joseph Laycock** So this is a question of strategies of legitimation. James Arthur Lewis said, if you want to people to believe your religion, you can only have three choices, which is you can say it's a revelation from God. You can say we've always done this for thousands of years. Or I made this up and it's it's rational, right? Think about what I have to say and see if you you agree. And Carole Cusack has written on the category of invented religions. And I do categorize this temple as invented religion. And she's basically argued this is going to become a lot more common, right, in the twenty first century. There really is no valid justification for a new religion other than that "we just made this up, if you like it, come along." But that strategy of legitimization is, as you pointed out, does cast certain aspersions on religions that defend themselves through revelation or ancient tradition.

[00:19:31] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** Speaking of inventing new religions, we've covered QAnon and the ways it draws on religion or could maybe even be considered a religious movement, do you think that the Satanic Temple and its rise over the last decade can help us understand QAnon?

[00:19:47] **Joseph Laycock** Yeah, that's a really interesting question, both this is Satanic Temple and QAnon are happening because America is going through very rapid

demographic changes and it's changing from being a predominantly white Christian country to one that is more ethnically and religiously plural. And I think. QAnon and the Trump phenomenon represents a backlash against that. And I think these Ten Commandment monuments going up all over the country represent a backlash against that demographic shift. And I see the Satanic Temple as a response to the backlash. And so I think it's very significant that after the election of Donald Trump in 2016, people began joining the Satanic Temple in droves. And, of course, QAnon began in 2017.

[00:20:35] **Kurtis Schaeffer** Right. So you've got this back and forth between fear of a diversifying country, progressive backlash against that fear and its consequences, and then new movements in turn popping up as a result of that.

[00:20:50] **Joseph Laycock** And I think both movements are reaching for this image of a kind of evil conspiracy theory, which I think is a really powerful sort of political lever in Western civilization, but they're doing different things with it. Right. So QAnon is saying don't vote for Democrats, not because of some political issue, but because they're Satanists and eat babies. And the Satanic Temple is basically saying don't put up monuments, the Ten Commandments, unless you want these horrible Satanists coming in and doing it, too. So they're both kind of using the same tool, but in very different ways.

[00:21:26] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** So so what is the future of the Satanic Temple?

[00:21:29] **Joseph Laycock** So, I mean, nobody knows the future. I think the Satanic Temple is much more positioned to endure than I think a lot of people realize. So they have put together a ministry training program, which I assume will survive in some form if something happens to Lucian Graves and Malcolm Jarry. So so there are those kind of leadership in place. I see no reason why the Satanic Temple couldn't go on for a long time. Even if it doesn't, I think we're now seeing this entire mileau of politically engaged left wing Satanist groups and I could see that going for a very long time.

[00:22:25] **Kurtis Schaeffer** Sacred &)rofane was produced for the Religion, Race and Democracy Lab at the University of Virginia. Our senior producer is Emily Gadek. Our program manager is Ashley Duffalo. Today's guest is Joseph Laycock.

[00:22:40] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** Music for this episode comes from Blue Dot Sessions. You can find out more about our work at Religion Lab dot Virginia dot edu or by following us on Twitter @thereligionlab.