

IN SEARCH OF SATANISTS: EXAMINING THE ACCOUNTS OF DEVIANT  
RELIGIOUS PRACTITIONERS

by

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## **ABSTRACT**

Despite the glut of literature focusing on numerous aspects of mainline American religious life, there is a surprising dearth of information regarding deviant religious practitioners. Importantly, there remains a lack of focus on the specificities of religious and spiritual deviance, and the accounts of those who engage in such practices. This exploratory study closely examines the members of one such religion; specifically, the Church of Satan. Despite the stigma associated with Satanism, individuals continue to willfully engage in such practices. Research uses face-to-face, semi-structured interviews to better discern the rationale behind Satanic worship as understood by modern-day believers. Particular attention is given to the accounts of Satanists to examine motivations for engaging in such practices, as well as identity management techniques for dealing with potential stigma. Results of the analysis show that Satanists utilize a variety of accounts when speaking about their spiritual choices and the potential stigma that surrounds such choices. These results are discussed and directions for additional research are presented.

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Religion is an important and oftentimes omnipresent spiritual and cultural force. For many individuals, religious preferences and practices often supersede other matters of import. Despite some claims about the dwindling impact of religion in postindustrial America, many citizens remain pleased with its place in society—as of 2009, a vast majority of citizens (81%) maintain that religion is important in their lives (Gallup.com).

While religion retains an important place in the lives of many Americans, it faces an uncertain future. Religious practice and religiosity are being reshaped by shifting cultural and technological forces (Wuthnow, 2007). Evangelicals and mainline Protestants struggle across opposing sides of an ideological divide, while religious minorities must find ways to cope with in-group pluralism that further splinters their already-slim numbers (Halim, 2006) or the very concept of spiritual identity itself (Shapiro, 1997). Examining religious practice requires looking beyond cover-all terms that lump potentially divergent groups under overcrowded spiritual umbrellas. Importantly, each religion may contain numerous factions that compete or cooperate with one another in various ways.

### Deviant Religions and Satanism

Despite the overabundance of literature focusing on assorted aspects of mainline American religious life, there is a surprising paucity of information regarding deviant religious practitioners. The majority of existing research on many deviant religions focuses almost entirely on attempting to define causal relationships in an effort to ameliorate what may be

perceived as a social problem (Clark, 1994; Emerson & Syron, 1995; Johnson, 1994). While such data may be useful for examining the social context of a behavior or as a predictor of certain patterns, it may oversimplify a complex issue by labeling all members of a population according to the egregious behavior of a visible or vocal minority.

This research closely examines a controversial, deviant religious practice; specifically, the official Church of Satan. Recognizing the continued significance of mainline religion, it would seem pertinent to better understand what many might perceive as its counterpart. Specifically, it observes the ways in which Satanists manage their deviant identities. Furthermore, it examines what draws individuals to Satanism, and what benefits are derived from such participation. Of course, any research on this topic must first begin with an explanation of Satanism. Due to limited research and non-academic claims, Satanism has emerged as dark and sinister, something that its practitioners may argue it is not.

## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Long the target of moral crusaders, Satanism remains a woefully understudied and misunderstood topic. While there is a small yet important body of literature absconding Satanists from the more heinous accusations leveled against them, there remains little information regarding actual modern-day adult Satanic practice. Essentially, the literature may explain what Satanists are *not*, but it does nothing to explain who they really *are*.

Satanism has served as an adversary and spiritual foil to dominant Christian ideologies throughout the years, at times utilized by moral entrepreneurs to either engender sympathy or elicit widespread fear among the population. Indeed, the fall of the anti-cult movement of the 1970s saw instead the rise of the similarly themed anti-Satanism movement of the 1980s and 1990s (Richardson, Best, and Bromley, 1991). Recognizing the damage this has done to the image of Satanism—not to mention the splintering of factions seen in many religions—it is perhaps necessary to critically examine the background of the official Church of Satan.

Satanism may serve as a cover-all term for a particular type of related beliefs and phenomena. Despite the numerous distinctions that separate various schools of worship, all followers are bound by their veneration for the figure of Satan. Conceptions of this figure vary; while some may see Satan as the cloven-hoofed adversary of a Judeo-Christian God, others use the term Satan merely as a reference point for the dark forces that they claim lurk within the minds and hearts of all men and women (LaVey, 1969). Importantly, the official Church of Satan counts its members among the latter of these groups; the current high priest of the Church has made a point of publicly denouncing “theistic Satanists,” or those who believe in a Biblical

Devil. The official Church of Satan website (<http://www.churchofsatan.com>) makes a point of distancing itself from such theistic belief systems, finding them as flawed as the Christian structure that Satanists seek to undermine.

The Church of Satan was founded in 1966, and claims to be the first organization to openly acknowledge Man's animalistic and carnal nature. Members claim that the average human being is mired in a life of pitiful mediocrity, limited by antiquated and ridiculous notions of morality. Instead of worshiping a God that exists separate from Man, the church claims to "flow naturally" in tune with the Dark Force. The Dark Force has been given many names; however, Church members recognize this force as Satan, the Prince of Darkness. Members claim to be their own Gods, attempting to find truth by releasing themselves from shackling inhibitions that prevent humans from reveling in the hedonistic lifestyle that the Satanists claim should come naturally. Thus, members of the Church of Satan consider themselves an "alien elite"; victims of misguided and jealous derision from those who secretly envy the freedom followers of Satan enjoy (<http://www.churchofsatan.com>).

The organization is not about shrieking, bloody sacrifices. It claims to be looking for leaders, strong-willed members who are willing to upset the mundane and modern status quo. It is again worth noting that the Church willfully distances itself from the concept of an "inversion of Christianity". The "Satan" that is being followed is merely the Dark Force that has existed since the dawn of time. The Church of Satan notes that in a Judeo-Christian society, Satan is the most appropriate example of darkness; indeed, they note that Satan is Hebrew for "adversary". Defining its members as atheistic Satanists, the Church claims to focus on critically examining



hypocrisies inherent in many religions (specifically Christianity), while concentrating on balancing animalistic carnality with careful moderation. Disregarding any notion of a ruling spiritual deity, this type of Satanism is centered on each individual being the god of his or her own universe. While vengeance on one's enemies is considered acceptable, the 11 Satanic Rules of the Earth focus mainly on self-restraint, respect for others, and personal accountability (Gilmore, 2007; LaVey, 1969). Satanists see themselves as the adversaries of foolishness, of the neutered masses. They seek instead to create a universe where each individual is his or her own God, and can enjoy life in whatever fashion is desired (LaVey, 1969).

Meanwhile, exact numbers regarding the prevalence of Satanism remain hard to find. Frightened detractors have claimed that there were as many as 100,000 Satanic cults spread across the United States during the 1980s, and that the number has since skyrocketed. However, these claims are not substantiated, nor is the term "cult" accurately defined. The official Church of Satan website meanwhile makes no mention of its numbers, claiming instead that it is a loosely-knit community built upon individualism. Thus, individuals might have very different concepts regarding what membership entails. While the Church does not solicit members, it does offer varying degrees of paid "official" membership. Such membership allows Church individuals to remain abreast of their fellow members' activities and essentially work toward promotion within the Church through actions that are deemed suitably Satanic. While the Church of Satan does not publicly release membership numbers, interviews with the current High Priest indicate the perception that interest in the religion is continually growing (<http://churchofsatan.com>).

Of course, attempting to discuss any supposed peculiarities or distinctions that may exist between conflicting lines of Satanic thought can seem a moot point. When examining preexisting notions regarding any school of Satanic thought, one must recognize the multitude of misconceptions that have colored the modern-day public perception of Satanism. The average layperson's estimation of these belief systems is almost inevitably distorted by centuries of labeling and stigma. Of course, it is worth mentioning that this may be precisely the point—some Satanists openly acknowledge the desire to forcibly confront their American mainline religious counterparts with what Satanism defines as unsettling, yet necessary truths (LaVey, 1969). Whatever dialogue—or, more likely, lack thereof—that may come from this game of one-upmanship, the simple fact remains that Satanism remains a controversial topic in the arena of American religion.

While the supposed influence of Satanism is perhaps most notable as a scapegoat in certain individuals' crusade against various types of music, many perceive the threat of Satanism in other, seemingly mundane activities. Certainly, a society that struggles to reconcile the sensual pleasures of an affluent capitalistic society with the tight restrictions of antiquated Puritanical norms is one that is rife with situations that breed this particular type of conflict. Indeed, the eighties and nineties saw a growing panic in many circles, as opportunistic daytime talk show hosts presented sensationalized accounts of widespread Satanism, including claims of infant sacrifice, sexual abuse, and mind control (Swatos, 1992).

Indeed, the 1980s and 1990s saw the rise of the anti-Satanism movement. This moral panic, which came to be known as "The Satanic Panic," began in 1980 as the result of a (since-

discredited) autobiography by Michelle Smith, entitled *Michelle Remembers*. In this book, Smith made claims linking child sexual abuse to Satanic ritual. Panic spread, and allegations of ritual sexual abuse became more widespread. One such example is the McMartin preschool trial, during which Kee McFarland—the Director of Children’s Institute International—made the rather ridiculous claim that a nation-wide conspiracy of Satanists was sexually abusing children (Nathan, 1991). Upon closer examination, legitimate researchers picked such stories apart (Best, 1991; Martin & Fine, 1991) however, their influence still lingers.

Meanwhile, others decry the presence of perceived Satanic influence when threatened with new types of expression, entertainment, and recreation. The distributors of film, fantasy literature, and videogames have all been seen as purveyors of Satanic influence (Dyrendal, 2008; Lancaster, 1994). Attacking these mediums of artistic expression seems to assuage the fears of those who worry that complacency will lead to the continued degradation of America’s youth.

While it can be argued that children and young adults are inundated with higher degrees of satanic imagery than previous generations, it is pertinent to remember that such exposure could very well be the result of the opening of new avenues of information (Dyrendal, 2008). Widespread internet access has granted a powerful forum that is capable of legitimizing any individual or group with even the slightest degree of technical acumen. Meanwhile, it is almost impossible to ignore the proliferation of grittier forms of entertainment, as competitors consistently attempt to push the envelope in ways previously unseen (Dyrendal, 2008). With such a wealth of “dangerous” information available to any savvy teenager, the panics regarding Satanism almost seem reasonable. However, it is important to remember that mere exposure to

information—while likely to promote a greater understanding—does not necessarily constitute the acceptance of said information. While data would indicate a greater general knowledge of Satanism, little was found indicating that this knowledge was a precursor to consistent practice (Dyrendal, 2008).

Despite the acknowledged existence of the more horrifying customs in which some followers indulge, evidence would seem to support the official Church of Satan's claims that Satanism itself is not necessarily a violent or hateful practice. At its core, it seems focused on individual development, and maximizing the enjoyment possible in the physical world (<http://www.churchofsatan.com>). While media consumption does play a necessary role in satanic recruitment, there is little in the way of formal organization. Activity is largely determined by the local scene, which may be nearly nonexistent. Consequently, Satanic identities are formed individually, without the benefit of traditional socialization (Dyrendal, 2008). Online forums are the most likely communities, in which new members are socialized and trained in the proper cultivation of a satanic identity. While religious imagery remains important, the sharing of secular art remains a valued pastime. Indeed, anything that derives pleasure may be valued; however, Satanists as a whole tend to distance themselves from what they consider “mainstream” products. There is a general frustration with what is perceived to be a mindless, herd-like mentality of many Americans, in practices both spiritual and secular (Dyrendal, 2008). While many fear the base influence of popular culture on Satanists, it is interesting to note that most traditional practices seem to focus instead on the rejection of that very culture. While popular culture does remain an important force in the shaping of a Satanic identity, it seems more likely to find use as a tool to connect with other Satanists, as opposed to a

widespread instigator of spiritual practice (Dyrendal, 2008). Of course, if the acceptance of Satanism constitutes a rejection of traditional cultural norms, one must examine those who find such forceful rejection necessary.

It would seem intuitive to conclude that, for many, Satanic belief is borne of rebellion and frustration. Indeed, there is evidence that would indicate that teenage Satanists share similar backgrounds and characteristics with gang members (Emerson & Syron, 1995). On the whole, many teenage Satanists are highly intelligent, in search of spiritual alternatives in what they consider a damaged society (Moriarty & Story, 1990). While there have been reported instances of extreme violence among teenage Satanists—including ritual torture, bestiality, necrophilia, and rape (Emerson & Syron, 1995), it is important to remember that this is in direct conflict with the basic tenets of Satanism, which state that life is precious. This is not to say that Satanists do not believe in the validity of revenge and punishment—indeed, one of the most basic distinctions between Satanism and its various spiritual counterparts is its doctrine that one should *not* turn the other cheek to an adversary. However, the official Church of Satan website makes a point of distancing its believers from those who take part in such vile practices. Instead, these extreme cases are seen as statistical aberrations that cannot realistically be expected to justify anything—positive or negative—about Satanism (Swatos, 1992).

Of course, it is entirely reasonable to assume that teenage followers may choose to instead focus on some of the more violent aspects of the belief system. Confusion, misinterpretation and distortion of preexisting belief systems seem almost a rite of passage for frustrated teenagers. The psychosocial needs of confused teenagers may be easily met through

Satanism, and its reliance on self-empowerment, individuality, and personal strength (Clark, 1994). However, in such cases, it is important to remember that Satanism itself is not the issue—the teenager’s very real—and normal—frustration is. While there is a tendency to immediately panic once the word “Satan” is uttered, it is possible that any youthful follower is simply attempting to work through feelings of confusion and alienation (Clark, 1994).

While there would appear to be a comparatively large amount of literature dealing with the supposed rise of Satanism among teenage groups, it is interesting to note that the official Church of Satan makes a point of refusing membership to minors, in an effort to avoid any potential legal entanglements (<http://www.churchofsatan.com>). Nevertheless, current literature seems to focus on analyzing the psychological makeup of young believers, or instead examining social conditions that may contribute to Satanism’s continued growth. However, there seems to be little in the way of hard data concerning the actual prevalence of teenage Satanism, other than citations involving some less than reputable sources, including scare-mongering newspaper articles that offer little more than vagaries or anecdotal evidence while boldly proclaiming that Satanism is on the verge of destroying modern American society. It is also worth noting that some of these articles were published over twenty years ago—during the height of the aforementioned Satanic scare (Frankfurter, 2003; Swatos, 1992).

Again, it is worth noting the lack of relevant research regarding modern-day Satanic practice. Much of what is published in non-academic settings remains an archaic reminder of the moral panics of the 1980s and 1990s. Although some of the more sensational claims have since been discredited, much of the existing literature still focuses on the more shocking aspects of

Satanic thought. Admittedly, scholars from various disciplines have begun to question the validity of this flawed research; however, there does not appear to have been any further attempt to rectify past misconceptions. It is not enough to merely discredit such faulty research; it is important to better understand those who were targeted in the first place.

If one considers Satanism as a legitimate practice, it would be astute to further examine the subtleties and nuances of the belief system. A cursory examination of Satanic literature shows a vast breadth of in-group pluralism similar to those experienced by mainline spiritual counterparts (<http://churchofsatan.com>; <http://www.xeper.org/>). Further research may legitimize Satanism by giving it a chance to be seen as a serious religious practice. Furthermore, it has the potential to demythologize a frightening and taboo population.

### Labeling Theory

Labeling theory posits that deviance is not absolute; rather, events are deemed as such at the whim of a dominant group. Thus, definitions of deviance may in fact be transitory, as conceptions of social acceptability shift over time. There exists no positivism to the act itself; importantly, the focus is on the label of deviance—as well as those who give and receive such labels. Famously proposed in the pages of *Outsiders* (Becker, 1963), labeling theory focuses not on the particularities of an act or situation, but those who define others—and perhaps themselves—as deviant. While some might accept their deviant identity, the concept of labeling theory is predicated on the notion that those who define the proper boundaries and limitations are often powerful agents of social control. At its heart, labeling theory recognizes deviance as a social construction (Pfohl, 1994).

Goffman (1963) later focused on the ways in which individuals must manage potentially deviant identities to avoid stigmatization. He noted that those who were labeled deviant were unable to fully integrate themselves into society. These individuals had to make use of unique techniques to manage what he termed a spoiled identity.

### Stigma

Stigma is the disapproval one receives for deviating from societal norms; this has the potential effect of spoiling an individual's identity. While such techniques are theoretically useful for moderating undesirable behavior, they may in fact have the unfortunate side effect of perpetuating deviance (Goffman, 1963). For instance, an individual may find it extremely challenging to shed a deviant label, thus hindering any efforts to reintegrate into normal society. While some might question the individual's sincerity, others will forever focus on even the most minor behavioral infractions, allowing these instances to continue to define the entirety of one's deviant identity (Lofland, 1969). As such, it is possible for an individual to remain "trapped" in a deviant identity, such that adheres to the negative expectations placed on him- or herself by society at large.

Goffman (1963) distinguishes between three types of stigma: the physical (such as deformities or handicaps), issues of character (such as a past career as a criminal), and tribal (such as race or ethnicity). Depending upon the visibility or prominence of one's stigma, his or her deviance may be defined differently.

Persons already deemed to be deviant are seen as discredited; this may be a result of an inability to hide one's deviant characteristics (such as the case of a severely handicapped



individual), or a previous (willing or unwilling) divulgence of said characteristics (Goffman, 1963). These are individuals who have already been “outed” as undesirable. Meanwhile, discreditable individuals have the potential to hide that which might cause others to label them as deviant; thus, they have a greater array of options available when attempting to deal with any issues that might arise from potential stigmatization. Such individuals may potentially be stigmatized if their stigma is known to an audience, but are capable of hiding their “defects” (Goffman, 1963).

There are multiple techniques that deviant individuals may utilize to alleviate the stress of dealing with normals. Discredited individuals may engage in what is known as “covering,” wherein they make a point to illustrate (to normal individuals) that their deviance is indeed manageable (Goffman, 1963). Thus, a sort of uneasy truce can be negotiated between normals and deviants. This can potentially grant normals a degree of satisfaction, as they convince themselves that they are accepting of those labeled deviant. Thus, normals may see themselves as open-minded and accepting toward otherwise-unseemly individuals. Meanwhile, the stigmatized are responsible for continually illustrating that they are capable of carrying their burdens, without threatening the normals’ level of comfort. Goffman (1963) argued that the discredited should adopt a cheerful, pleasant demeanor to assuage any concerns normals might have toward them; this is deflection as discussed in the preceding literature review. Thus, these peaceful interactions can only operate under controlled circumstances that remain nonthreatening to those defined as normal. This type of social facilitation (wherein individuals interact without infringing upon one another’s comfort zones) is known as two-headed role playing (Goffman, 1963).

Another type of identity management is “passing;” this involves masking one’s deviant status from normals (Goffman, 1963). As noted in the preceding literature review, there are distinct and unique forms of passing. Discreditable individuals with character-related issues (and even some with physical or tribal stigmas) may engage in passing to disguise their potentially deviant identities from normals. Ideally, this type of management allows the deviant to blend in with both deviant and normal groups. Of course, discreditable individuals must remain cognizant of the fact that carelessness (and revelation of any specificities regarding their deviance) may result in stigma, and a discredited identity (Goffman, 1963).

### Discreditable Individuals and Passing

Those afflicted with mental illness, sexually transmitted diseases, or contrary belief systems have all found themselves the victim of labeling that has resulted in the need for stigma management strategies. Much has been written about the manner in which discreditable populations handle such situations.

While interviewing 17 feminized post-op transsexuals, Kando (1972) sought to test two hypotheses. The two hypotheses were thus: first, deviant transsexuals would compartmentalize their social circles (listed as family and close personal friends) more than normals; second, transsexuals experience greater incompatibility in their social circles than do normals. While he found statistically significant support for the first hypothesis, the same could not be said for the second. The inability to achieve statistically significant evidence of the second hypothesis is due perhaps in part to the fact that transsexuals might limit their contact with family or friends, or instead segregate the two. It was concluded that the transsexuals’ identities were based on a

continuum; the definition of self was fluid, rather than concrete (e.g. male or female). Importantly, this fluidity was believed to be a result of the unique and dynamic culture in which the transsexuals were involved (Kando 1972).

Another type of discreditable identity might involve suffering from a (hidden) sexually transmitted disease. Inhorn (1986) interviewed eight young adults afflicted with genital herpes. She examined the coping mechanisms that these discreditable individuals used to alleviate inner turmoil. She found that sufferers limited sexual contact (and thus disclosure of any potentially stigmatizing information), while also joining support groups that allowed an emotional outlet for their pain. She also found that many of the individuals divided their social worlds into two groups—“insiders” and “outsiders”. Similar to Goffman’s (1963) distinctions, the insiders are individuals “in the know,” either due to their status as trusted friends, or the similarity of their plight. On the other hand, outsiders were individuals from whom the sufferers chose to hide potentially stigmatizing information, to avoid resultant embarrassment, fear, or shame. Of course, the stressors were constant, as every new relationship again brought forth the question of whether or not to divulge the specificities of one’s deviant status (Inhorn, 1986).

Another potent type of stigma revolves around mental illness. Forrester-Jones and Barnes (2008) conducted a qualitative, interview-based study of 17 individuals diagnosed with severe mental illness. Their aim was to ascertain the importance of social support in rectifying issues of damaged identity among the mentally ill. Perhaps unsurprisingly, they found that higher degrees of social support led to the development of more socially “acceptable” identities, while lower levels of support often resulted in individuals’ increased struggle to come to grips

with their illnesses. Some individuals suffered from “courtesy” stigma from well-intentioned normals. Some who appeared to move beyond their identity as a mentally ill deviant were unable to manage their identities in normal society, and returned to the confines of the mental health institution. It was concluded that social support played a larger role than even the individual patient on shaping healthy identities (Forrester-Jones & Barnes, 2008). This would coincide with Lofland’s conclusion that the Actor (individual) relies on Others (separate individuals) to create a conception of self; Others’ support (or lack thereof) is largely responsible for shaping the individual Actor’s identity (Lofland 1969).

Renfrow (2004) examined college student narratives to ascertain possible internal effects of passing. Importantly, he made a distinction between various types of passing. One such distinction involved the strength of the stigma (was the stigma seen as truly threatening to other individuals, or was it a more minor, manageable issue), while another focused on proactive passing (where individuals intentionally set out to define their identity in a fashion that masks potential stigma) versus reactive passing (where individuals step into a role that others have mistakenly labeled them with). Rather than utilizing passing merely to alleviate potential stress and stigma, these individuals reported emotional turmoil resulting from the masking of one’s preferred identity (Renfrow, 2004). This would seem to be confirmed by Iphofen (1990), who noted similar signs of psychic distress in epileptics who chose to mask their discreditable status through the use of passing. Thus, there exists an abundance of literature that supports the need of a strong social network if an individual is to adequately manage a deviant identity.

Such a conclusion was further reinforced by Taub, McLorg, and Fanflik (2004), who interviewed 24 handicapped university-age women to assess their stigma management strategies. Some of these women utilized disidentifiers (Goffman, 1963); that is, they attempted to define themselves as separate from the deviant group by downplaying aspects of their own personal stigma. Thus, these women focused on normalization, or limiting the discredibility involved with their stigma. Others engaged in deflection, which involves disarming the normals through a cheerful and nonthreatening demeanor that can charm and perhaps calm threatened normals. This technique involves behavior that normals might find surprising; thus, it allows the disabled (deviants) further advantage when attempting to manage stigma. Importantly, the women felt distress over the university's lack of sponsored activities that could potentially shape a stronger group identity.

Of particular import to this study is the concept of religious deviance, and the techniques individuals use to manage this particular form of stigma. While interviewing 36 atheists to ascertain their own stigma management strategies, Fitzgerald (2003) found even more passing techniques. First, she concluded that these atheists often felt marginalized, stigmatized, and deviant. Furthermore, she witnessed assumptive passing, contradictory active participation, label substitution, and declaration of half-truths. Importantly, she noted a pattern of stigma disclosure based on the closeness of a relationship (Fitzgerald, 2003). It is interesting to note the sheer number of coping techniques (which could potentially have adverse effects on the deviant individual); this would seem to support the importance of religious conformity to maintaining peaceful and pleasant social interactions. Of course, if such individuals (who merely reject the themes inherent in dominant religion) require such techniques for healthy identity management,

one must wonder what is required of those individuals who directly challenge those very same themes.

Still, it can be argued that while “passing” might be a coping mechanism to avoid stigmatization, it does not necessarily constitute a forceful internal rejection of one’s identity. When interviewing 29 lesbians and gay men of color, Kanuha (1999) found that many individuals employed passing techniques to avoid unpleasant social consequences. Thus, passing may be seen as a defense mechanism, rather than an internalization of one’s deviant status. However, it is possible that the individuals in this study (who claimed to suffer no adverse internal effects during the process of identity management) enjoyed their successes due to the presence of strong social support networks. Importantly, the abundance of aforementioned literature confirms the importance of Others in shaping the Actor’s perception of self (Lofland, 1969).

Whatever the methods of managing stigma, one must remember that deviant individuals are going to be engaging in interactions involving both their fellow deviants—or in-group—and normals—or out-group. Negotiation between two groups can be problematic, as one can easily be caught between the pull of divided loyalties. The individual might be told that happiness can be achieved if certain criteria are met; obviously, such criteria will differ depending upon which group the individual is negotiating with at the time. Furthermore, a deviant who strays too far from his or her in-group may be perceived as a traitor to his or her “real” group. However, disavowal of the out-group (comprised of normals) can be disastrous, considering their strength as the agents of social control (Goffman, 1963).

### In-Group and Out-Group Alignment

Goffman (1963) mentions social, personal, and ego identity. These concepts deal with how an individual may be perceived by others and in turn, him- or herself. Social and personal identity deals with the individual as seen by others; such conceptions can exist even before the individual's conception, and long after death. A personal identity can typically be affected by scenarios, while ego identity is more akin to a master status and will remain unchanging (Goffman, 1963). While this is obviously informed by the other types of identity, the end result is dependent upon how these individuals view themselves. An example of retaining portions of one's ego identity might involve an artist using parts of a given nickname (itself a social identity) as a pseudonym (the ego identity by which the individual wishes to be perceived).

Individuals do not exist in a vacuum; thus, there are other forces influencing their decisions and ego identity. This involves groups, of which Goffman (1963) establishes two types. First is the in-group; this consists of the individuals enduring the same particular stigmatization as the individual in question. One's in-group identity is dependent upon the particular stigma from which one suffers, and it is seen to supersede all other matters of identity. For example, one's status as a criminal is imagined to carry more importance than one's status as a retail clerk. The stigmatized group (in this case, fellow criminals) is seen as the individual's "real" group, the group to which one truly belongs. While the individual may find such an in-group alignment comforting, it is also possible that this perpetuates the plight of the stigmatized by further perpetuating the notion of the group as separate or deviant.

Alternatively, there is the out-group. This may consist of the normals that define an individual as deviant, or those that a deviant defines as not of his or her group. When examining normals as an out-group, the stigmatized individual must examine him- or herself according to the labels affixed by these normals. Goffman (1963) contends that the out-group by and large means no harm against the stigmatized in-group; rather, any issues that arise are likely the result of confusion and misunderstanding. While exploring the difficult interactions that may occur between normal and stigmatized individuals, Goffman (1963) notes that successful interaction is dependent upon the stigmatized individual attempting to view oneself as normal, yet retreating when the cause of the stigmatization begins to make normals uncomfortable. It is thus necessary to perform a delicate balancing act wherein the deviant individual allows normals to assume that the burden of stigma is not too heavy to bear. The deviant or stigmatized individual must show themselves capable of dealing with their issues in a manner similar to that of normals; yet they must always be ready to retreat when the normals begin to feel threatened. Those that handle this process well are said to have made what Goffman (1963) termed a good adjustment.

Stigmatized individuals may struggle to negotiate loyalties to both in-group and out-group alliances. Caught between the pull of divided loyalties, the stigmatized individual may be told that happiness and fulfillment can be achieved, if certain criteria are met; obviously, the criteria will differ depending on which group is making the demands. Importantly, the stigmatized individual is expected to conform to the desires of his or her in-group; this is seen as the “real” group. To ignore this group is to be considered disingenuous, or a fraud of sorts. Thus, certain circumstances may force the stigmatized individual to choose between in-group and out-group alignment.



## Accounts

When examining one's rationale for engaging in deviant behavior, it remains important to examine the sharing and receiving of accounts. Accounts refer to the linguistic expressions regarding behavior that may be defined as improper (Scott and Lyman, 1968). More simply, accounts involve the verbal devices used to explain deviant behavior, as linguistically devices that negate untoward behavior and align identities. This means that such accounts are not required when dealing with behavior that is deemed acceptable. Many daily interactions do not require the use of accounts to explain any untoward behavior; however, such accounts remain necessary when individual actors engage in deviant behavior. A successful account will restore equilibrium to a relationship that has been troubled by social gaffes.

Separate from accounts, there exist explanations. These are given by actors who do not believe that their potentially deviant behavior will have a negative impact on a relationship. Explanations of course differ from the two main types of accounts—*excuses* and *justifications*. Justifications involve an individual accepting responsibility for an action while denying it as immoral. For example, an individual who injures another in a bar fight may justify his actions by claiming that his actions were in self-defense. An excuse would instead involve an individual actor recognizing the act as wrong, but refusing to accept full responsibility for any action. Such an example might involve the aforementioned bar brawler claiming that alcohol influenced his decision to engage in violence; thus, he should be absolved of some responsibility.

## Excuses

When dealing with accounts, there are four different types of excuses. The first of these is claiming *accident*. This involves removing oneself from accountability by claiming unintentional failings of the body, perhaps due to a hazardous environment. This may involve claiming that one's lateness to work was caused by a traffic jam that was out of the actor's control.

Next is the appeal to *defeasibility*. This involves the rationale that actions require a mental element requiring both "knowledge" and "will". Knowledge of course involves an actor's understanding of rules regarding particular behaviors, while will involves the desire to take part in an action. One may feasibly claim that he or she was unaware of the rules regarding a situation, or that certain particularities—such as alcohol intoxication—limited their ability to make a willful decision. Another form of this denial may involve an actor claiming that they were unaware of the potential consequences of their behavior, such as the claim that they did not know that another could be hurt by rude remarks (Scott and Lyman, 1968).

The next type of excuse is to claim that one is compelled by a biological drive. This involves actors claiming that they are incapable of staving off intense biological desires; these in turn lead them to act in a manner that could be described as deviant. Examples include homosexuals explaining that they feel that their sexual desires are natural, or individuals who engage in sexual activity with a wide variety of partners.

The last type of excuse is known as *scapegoating*; this involves fatalistic reasoning that involves the actor claiming that he or she must respond in such a fashion due to the constraints

put upon them by others. For example, a teenager who is punished by adults after being outed by another teenager may claim that the accusations are exaggerations. This allows the blame to shift to the individual who brought the claim against the actor in the first place.

### Justifications

There are also numerous types of justifications. Justifications are distinct in that they argue for the positivity of an action against others who may make claims to the contrary. Justifications recognize the act as wrong, but make an exception for the particular circumstance. Use of these vocabularies may also be known as utilizing “techniques of neutralization” (Scott and Lyman, 1968).

*Denial of injury* is the first type of justification. This involves an individual admitting that a deviant act occurred, but justifying said act by claiming that nobody was hurt by the action. Such an example might involve an person who breaks a minor possession of an affluent citizen; the actor in question could conceivably contend that such an event did not adversely affect the other individual.

*Denial of the victim* follows the logic that the victim deserved the injury. This may be due to the victim being seen as an immediate enemy, such as an angry neighbor. The member may also be a member of a marginalized group; for example, if they are a prostitute or a pimp. Another group may involve tribal stigma such as that experienced by racial or ethnic minorities. The last group involves distant enemies who may remain vilified despite the perhaps nebulous details surrounding their roles. A past example might include communists, while a current would involve politicians (Scott and Lyman, 1968).

Two other justifications involve *condemnation of the condemners* and *appeal to loyalties*. In condemning the condemner, the actor recognizes the unseemly act, but claims that such an act is irrelevant because it was perpetrated against one who performs much more heinous acts. Similarly, an appeal to loyalties also recognizes the dubious nature of the act, but justifies it by claiming that it was performed out of loyalty to an individual to whom the actor owes an intense oath of loyalty.

Yet another type of justification involves the *sad tale*; appropriately, this involves a woeful story that justifies an actor's current state. For example, one may point to a tumultuous upbringing and limited work opportunities as creating stress that is too much to bear. This in turn leads to deviant behavior.

Lastly, there is *self-fulfillment*. This may involve an individual seeing nothing wrong with their action; the main crux of this reasoning is that the actor feels that their actions are leading them toward "true" peace or happiness, despite of the judgment of others. Such justifications may be used by drug users who claim to be seeking a higher sense of consciousness (Scott and Lyman, 1968).

Accounts involve a speaker and an audience. Examples may include a husband and wife, or a professor and student. Importantly, the identities of speaker and audience remain in constant negotiation, and accounts are dependent upon this negotiation. When an actor gives an account he or she is committing to an identity for the remainder of the encounter (Scott and Lyman, 1996). However, it is possible that accepting this account means locking oneself into an identity that cannot be easily shed. Accepting one identity and account may inhibit the ability to shift to

another account at a later time. If a speaker engages in multiple accounts that the audience deems wildly incompatible, they may risk damaging the credibility of these accounts. Thus, this identity switching must be undertaken with care (Scott and Lyman, 1996).

Thus, accounts are often phased. This involves adaptation and improvisation, as an account may give rise to a new question that in turn requires yet another account. Individual speakers may need to renegotiate the identity by formulating new accounts which in turn create even more questions, and so on (Scott and Lyman, 1996).

### [Identity Management Among Satanists](#)

It is reasonable to conclude that a Satanist is likely to be labeled deviant in almost *all* situations. Satanism remains a truly taboo subject, as evidenced by the paucity of literature focusing on its responsible adult practitioners. It also remains likely that a group so focused on individuality will produce actors who engage in distinct accounts regarding their behavior.

Although the Church of Satan's official website proudly proclaims that its members are a spiritual and alien elite—and thus the envy of the spiritual world, the fact remains that there understandably exist numerous safeguards to insulate and protect this deviant, fringe population. Unless one is raised in a Satanic household by Satanic parents, the Church does not accept minors as members. While the official site respectfully reports that there are many intelligent, reasonable minors who truly understand the “true” meaning of Satanism, specific mention is made of the potential legal entanglements, and the negative publicity that could arise if it appeared that members were attempting to shape and mold American youth ([www.churchofsatan.com](http://www.churchofsatan.com)).

Although the official website boasts links to chat rooms and home pages of members and businesses that support the Satanic cause, it all appears extremely controlled, with specific guidelines for proper behavior outlined by the site's webmaster. Again, many portions of the site carry the constant reminder of what Satanism is *not*, and even warn against any consequences that might arise from one's involvement with groups or activities that are not officially sanctioned by the church. Essentially, the site serves as a hub of sorts to "approved" or "safe" Satanic information that can benefit members, while turning them away from influences perceived as harmful ([www.churchofsatan.com](http://www.churchofsatan.com)).

Meanwhile, high-ranking church officials make a point to vociferously distance themselves from stereotypical theistic Satanists. Perhaps in an effort to separate the official church from the violent and twisted imagery that colors many individuals' conceptualization of Satanism, theistic Satanism is perhaps met with even more disdain than mainline Christianity (Gilmore, 2007).

When one changes from normal to stigmatized, or vice versa, they are simply switching roles within the same general framework. Since human beings will all have the same general psychological makeup, it is recognized that people are capable of adapting and playing either role. This may involve retreating into one's own group, while belittling the other group—and in the case of the stigmatized, sometimes belittling one's own group. In the case of two-headed role-playing different groups tentatively work together to facilitate comfort when in each other's presence (Goffman, 1963). Recognizing this, one may ask how deviant religious practitioners

manage stigma as discreditable individuals. Furthermore, it remains important to recognize the potential use of accounts when such individuals are discussing their deviant behaviors.

Mainline spiritual practice is itself full of rampant in-group pluralism (Halim, 2006; McLeod-Harrison, 2009; Shapiro, 1997). One could intuitively conclude that Satanism will experience a similar degree of in-group pluralism, simply due to the variations inherent in all religions. When compared against the extant literature that both discredits the more hideous aspects of Satanic practice, and the official Church of Satan's proclamation that strong moral fiber is considered a necessity for membership (<http://www.churchofsatan.com>), one must ask if there is such a thing as a "good" Satanist. One may also potentially examine the similarities between Satanism and its mainline counterparts (as religions) and dissimilarities (owing to the potential for heavy stigmatization among Satanists). Strong in-group alignment may be seen as necessary to form a united front against mainline spiritual counterparts; this would result in lower degrees of in-group pluralism. Still, it is possible that some individuals would rather separate themselves from the in-group, considering their tenuous position as discreditable persons.

It is possible that these individuals will instead engage in tertiary deviance, wherein a person redefines their deviant acts to be normal. It is even possible that these acts can be defined as heroic; in such cases, the persons may reject the idea that they are discreditable and choose instead to focus on the virtuous aspects of their behaviors. Thus, some Satanists may decide not to pass, but rather define themselves as normal. All of this can of course be affected by the religiosity of the subject in question; this deals with how religious a person is (Wuthnow, 2007).

One may also consider how a person is religious. Of course, it is likely that higher degrees of religiosity and religious participation is likely to increase satisfaction among Satanists and perhaps increase rates of tertiary deviance.

Accounts may also be used as a way to justify or excuse deviant behavior. It is possible that Satanists use various accounts as a means of identity management. The particular methods used may be dependent upon the role as speaker, and the audience present. These accounts may even shift as new questions arise during the course of any interaction (Scott and Lyman, 1996). These techniques remain useful when discussing deviant behavior such as Satanic practice.

This research attempts to move beyond rhetoric in an attempt to better understand the modern-day adult Satanist. While such spiritual practices hold the potential for devastating stigmatization, the ability to pass may limit individual exposure to such stigmatization. It is possible that such discreditable individuals may pass as normals, and instead turn their frustrations to their more extreme in-group members who may be seen as exemplifying the worst of the group as a whole. Conversely, it is possible that some individuals refuse to define themselves as deviant, and instead redefine their deviant acts as normal. This is known as tertiary deviance (Becker, 1963). Furthermore, they may engage in a wide variety of accounts that either excuse or justify their deviant behavior.

Satanism remains an extremely taboo subject. While Satanist literature seems to redefine its members for the greater public, they generally remain hidden from the public eye. This is achieved through various techniques of stigma management, which this research will examine in greater depth.



## CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

Due to the lack of literature on this topic, I used an inductive approach. Such an approach allows the researcher to step back and allow the data to flow naturally and to speak for itself. Such an approach took the research in unexpected directions. Thus, it was important to remain reflexive and remember the initial purpose of the research, so that data collection was handled properly.

### Setting and Population of Sample

I conducted face-to-face, semi-structured interviews with a sample of 10 adult male Satanists living in central Florida. While the initial intent was to glean a larger and more varied sample, the extremely deviant nature of the subject matter meant that convenience and snowball sampling were necessary to find potential interviewees. The first of these interviewees were found using convenience sampling; from there, snowball sampling was utilized to find the rest of the participants. Of these interviewees, 8 were white and two were Hispanic. All were between the ages of 22 and 33. Due to the relatively loose requirements of the official Church of Satan, membership was not necessary; it was simply important that one self-identified as a Satanist.

Due to the controversial nature of Satanism, it remains understandable that many of its followers have decided to at least partially shield the particularities of their beliefs from a disapproving society. Those whose beliefs are revealed to others may in turn be met with scorn, hostility, or outright derision. One could be ostracized by disgusted family members, or fired by nervous employers. When examining all the potential dangers in practicing such a religion, one is also reminded of the potential struggles believers endured throughout their spiritual journeys.

As a researcher, it was necessary to remind any interviewees that their troubles would not be exacerbated by the sharing of potentially stigmatizing information.

It was also important to remember that interviewees or subjects may have experienced the aforementioned hostility many times over, before even coming into contact with the researcher. Again, it was necessary to stress the concept of voluntary participation, while recognizing that Satanism is a concept or belief system that may serve (for some) as a cause, or effect, of emotional trauma. In some cases, it was troubling but necessary to attempt to sidestep painful issues.

### Data Collection

Research involved a series of in-depth, face-to-face, semi-structured interviews. Content included open-ended questions that allowed the participants to direct the topic to areas that they felt were pertinent. The interviews focused on their personal concept of Satanic worship, including what brought them to Satanism. There was also a particular focus on the identity management strategies they employed in everyday life. The open-ended structure of the interviews allowed the participants to explain in depth the nuances of their own personal belief systems, and what it means to their interactions with others.

Interviews were conducted at each interviewee's time and location of convenience. The sensitive nature of the topic demanded that safeguards must be in place to protect all participants, and allow them to feel most comfortable. Individuals requested interviews at various locations in the area; some were granted within homes while others were given at local bars. In most cases, a digital recorder was used to record each interview. There was one exception where an

interviewee refused to allow themselves to be recorded. These recordings did not include the actual name of any participants and were anonymously saved in a password protected file. At the conclusion of each interview, the recording was transcribed without using identifying remarks. Each recording was then destroyed.

The interviews were supplemented with field notes about the process of conducting the interviews. These notes allowed for increased reflection upon the data collection process, as they further frame subjects and reincorporate meanings. Such notes granted an even deeper insight into the interview process, as they moved beyond even the interviewee's responses, and give a more fully-fleshed out interpretation of the interview process. These notes were typed into a password protected file at the end of each interview. This allowed for a rich experience that combined both the interviewees' responses with my own interpretation of the overall experience.

### Data Analysis

I began the coding process with open coding, which opens up the coding process (Berg, 2009), while looking for emergent patterns in the data. At this stage, it was important to remember that such codes are merely utilized as a guide, and the very next piece of data may blatantly contradict the one that preceded it. This stage involved intense analysis of the data, while leaving open the possibility of new theoretical insights—even those that might fly in the face of conventional wisdom.

During open coding the data are broken down into concepts, examined closely and compared. According to Corbin and Strauss (2008), concepts are abstract representations that

have been identified as significant. These concepts are generated during the coding process, wherein the researcher begins to notice emergent patterns in the data.

After enough similar themes have been established, I moved on to axial coding, which involved relating concepts to one another. While open coding may explain what is happening, axial coding allows for the answering of questions regarding the data. Thus, axial coding involves the conceptualization of information found during open coding. While open coding may involve the entirety of a transcribed interview, axial coding will involve finding more abstract meaning in the data. New themes were found, and hierarchal categories were created (Corbin and Strauss, 2008).

Memos were necessary to remain properly grounded in the data. These allowed the researcher to retain sight of when and why decisions were made, while promoting a self-awareness that limited the impact of personal biases (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

## CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Through the course of these interviews, a number of recurring themes were present.

1. Although some of the interviewees expressed frustration at perceived persecution, they did not appear overly frustrated with their status as discreditable individuals
2. The particulars of Satanic belief at times seemed secondary to the interviewees' desires to identify as Satanists
3. Accounts were used often; all were justifications
  - a. Of these, the accounts included condemnation of the condemners, sad tales, and self-fulfillment

### Stigma Management Strategies

One of the more interesting findings involved the seemingly contradictory nature of their perceptions and reactions regarding stigma. While the majority responded in a manner that indicated frustration with a perceived lack of understanding by normals, they nevertheless remained defiant and seemed to almost willfully seek out conflict with those deemed as ignorant.

This supported by the statement of a 26-year-old male:

*"I don't care who knows I'm a Satanist. You, him, her. Who cares. Nobody knows shit, so why should I care? I want people to know, because they don't know what the hell they are talking about. They know stupid shit; lies they hear. Everybody thinks I worship the Devil, but that isn't what it's about. I believe in no god, and I will tell anybody. I mean, how is this worse than somebody reading the Bible and all that happens with that? I like talking about this, but people get scared and (mockingly*

waving arms around) *'Ooh, do you murder babies'?. Are you kidding? Stupid people. That's not what it's about.'*

Others also expressed frustration with a perceived lack of understanding, yet went on to explain a desire to challenge those who he believed were disrespecting him. Rather than pass and potentially maintain a “safe” status as a discreditable individual, the majority of those interviewed expressed a desire to implicitly and explicitly challenge those they believed to be wrong. Another male, age 30:

*“People don't know anything about LaVey; they don't understand anything he said. It isn't about worshipping a Devil; that is ignorant. It is about recognizing hypocrisy and stupidity... People should do what they want if they aren't acting like dumbasses. I don't care if people disagree with me, just don't be stupid about it. I will play my music and keep my hair (long) and wear my clothes like this because I like it. I don't care if it pisses people off.*

Again, there appears to be a great deal of frustration with a perceived lack of understanding, but little is done to mitigate this. Vague claims are made about wanting to instruct others on the realities of Satanism, but these claims are filled with venom that means further lack of communication remains unlikely. Cursory lip service regarding conciliatory measures (*“I have no problem with Christians,”; “If they listen to me, I will tell them what I am about”*) was offset by the desire to utilize shock tactics to intimidate normals (*“Fuck yeah (giving the hand gesture symbolizing devil horns), I play in a band”*).

It would be tempting to say that the combative nature involving stigma management is inherent in Satanism; however, it is unlikely that the conclusion is that simple. While the official

Church of Satan does not release official membership numbers, they have nevertheless claimed a large number of adult follower. The simple fact is that one does not often see adult Satanists affecting combative stances to rail against perceived injustice. In fact, interviews with high-ranking Church members have shown a perhaps-surprising degree of reason, understanding, and compassion (<http://www.churchofsatan.com>). It is instead perhaps likely that the willful attempt to openly unnerve others is due to the nature of the interviewees themselves. It is again worth noting that all interviewees were males between the ages of 22 and 33. Rather than established older professionals, it is perhaps understandable to see these interviewees react in such a fashion. However, even the attempts at shock and awe seemed relatively harmless.

### Satanism as Subculture

What began as an attempt to better understand the specificities of Satanism as understood by its practitioners instead turned into discussions involving the numerous rituals, symbols, and artifacts that Satanists used to express their identities. Beyond the basic tenets of Satanism, only two individuals mentioned a more in-depth understanding of Satanic thought (such as mention of the 9 Satanic Statements, and the 11 Satanic Rules of the Earth). Instead, many were focused on symbols that identified them as Satanists. In the majority of cases, it appeared as though being able to define oneself as a Satanist was more important than the actual meaning behind such a label. This can perhaps be evidenced in the words of a 31-year-old male, who spoke at great length about the benefits of being in a Satanic band. This was in response to a question about what topics a Satanic band covers musically:

*“It’s awesome. Check this chick out. (Shows picture on cellphone.) Isn’t she hot, dude? I fucked her and a friend of hers after a show. She was down for some crazy shit, dude. These girls will do some of the nastiest shit you can imagine. I’m serious.”*

The nature of the actual belief system appeared to be secondary to the desire to share stories of sexual conquest. While this in no way invalidates the interviewee’s spirituality, it may possibly call into question the rationale for said spirituality. Questions regarding symbols were given token answers (*“This (piece of art) symbolizes the demon who is going to come and rain destruction on the Earth”*; *“I wear this (t-shirt with demonic design) to let individuals know that I am not the ignorant hypocrite they might imagine”*) that seemed to almost fly in the face of what Satanism purports to be. The official Church of Satan does support such artifact and ritual, particularly if an individual feels the need to be “cleansed” from an abundance of the wrong type of spirituality (<http://www.churchofsatan.com>). However, the majority of interviewees seemed more interested in the notoriety that would be achieved from labeling themselves as Satanists. Thus, it becomes prudent to ask if Satanism was important to these individuals, or if they merely enjoyed the idea of being called Satanists.

This is not to say that Satanism held less value for them than for others. It is possible that they believe themselves to be following the Satanic call for individualism; this recognizes that each person needs to experience all the earthly delights that he or she may conceivably enjoy. The majority of interviewees responded in a manner that indicated that they were attempting to do just that. What is interesting is that these responses came up in scenarios that did not



necessarily warrant them. After being asked, “How many of your friends are Satanists?” a 24-year-old-male answered:

*“A few... They are cool. A lot of people I know are cool. When people meet me, they might not care about me being a Satanist. Sometimes, they freak out though. You get Christians who can be a pain in the ass, but it can be funny sometimes. It’s funny if they try to argue. Others are cool, but they (Christians) can be annoying. Mostly because they don’t listen, because they are brainwashed and don’t like the way I look.”*

Again, the points made are basic to Satanic thought. It does remain important to challenge hypocrisy and those who the individual believes are blindly following authority. However, the answer was telling in that the interviewee spent a great deal of time focusing on those who were perceived as ignorant or unknowledgeable. While adamant points were made about the nature of friendship, the actual connections were again vague and nebulous. Satanic unity seemed to be built more on general acceptance and style (as clothes were again mentioned), as well as the disdain directed toward those who remain unaccepting of this style. There seems to be a recurring theme that individuals who are seen as tolerating Satanism are recognized as acceptable individuals, while those who do not are vilified as hypocrites or fools.

Many respondents answered a majority of questions in similar fashion; conceptions of Satanism seemed built around 1) intelligence and open-mindedness, 2) a sense of brotherhood, and 3) selective use of symbols that enhanced connections with selected others while illustrating individuality from the vast majority, and 4) frustration and a combative relationship with those

seen as the opposing force. Rather than the terrifying scourge of civilized society, this form of Satanic thought seems instead like an amped-up example of a rebellious teenage subculture, like the next evolution or the punk movement or heavy metal fans (which may draw its members from the same pool of individuals). While this may not entirely clarify what Satanism is, it importantly recognizes that young adult Satanists may be engaging in minor acts of rebellion, but this is likely preferable to animal sacrifice and ritual sex abuse, both of which Satanists have been regularly accused in the past. Again, Satanists need not be labeled as frightening or wildly malicious individuals. Even the frustration with nonbelievers can take on a muted tone. A 29-year-old male:

*“I don’t give a shit if people don’t get it. I understand why they don’t, and I respect that. I realize that it is hard to question reality. It took me a long time to do it myself. Sure. There are some scary things out there... I still don’t care if they don’t understand.”*

The above response remains frustrated, but is almost apologetic for the inability to reach an understanding with those who do not understand Satanism. While the recurring themes of individuality (from the mainstream) and brotherhood (within the Satanic community) remain, even the combative message remains largely nonthreatening. This level of Satanism seems to be a plea for understanding from people who remain willfully outside the lines of behavior that society has deemed acceptable.

### Use of Accounts

The use of accounts weighed heavily into the discussions. Despite the continued expressions of disdain toward mainline spiritual counterparts, the vast majority of interviewees engaged in various levels of account sharing. The accounts were all justifications, and they fell into three categories: *condemnation of the condemners*, *sad tales*, and *self-fulfillment*.

Many of those interviewed engaged in condemnation of the condemner. This is perhaps unsurprising considering the combative nature of the Satanic mantra, combined with its espousal of humankind's folly and failings—including those of Satanists. Thus, it is relatively easy to see why such individuals would accept the deviant nature of their acts while at the same time vilifying others.

A 26-year-old male:

*“If people think I am bad; fine. We are all bad, or whatever. We are all animals and we all desire bad things. At least I know why. So what? I am not off starting wars and shit. How is that better?”*

A 30-year-old male:

*“Give me a break. We all screw shit up, all the time. At least I am honest about the things I do. Most people aren't.”*

These justifications again reiterate the point that Satanists recognize their failings. Although it may be possible that the failings they are discussing are more related to what they perceive as the general sensual and carnal nature of man, they are often mentioned while sharing

attitudes toward mainline religious practitioners. This appears to be the one tenet of Satanism that was common throughout all interviews: accept the hypocritical and foolish nature of humankind.

Interestingly enough, the *sad tale* was only used by one individual. Even this was mentioned in a fashion that did not sound entirely remorseful or woeful. Thus, this type of justification remains conspicuous by its absence. The limited use of this type of account indicates that the majority of Satanists are not necessarily self-pitying or unhappy individuals. While past events were used to explain influences and the like, they were not used to the level of justifying a current state of behavior.

*Self-fulfillment* was a common form of justification, often used in concert with condemnation of the condemners. When giving their own accounts of what drew them to Satanism, the vast majority of interviewees indicated that some degree of self-fulfillment was largely responsible. In this way, there can be seen an interesting parallel to mainline religious practitioners who talk about their choices simply “feeling right”. Interviewees described similar situations to this 29-year-old male:

*“It isn’t that my family were big Christians or anything, but they weren’t like I am now. I feel right, now. It isn’t like I didn’t before, or that I was unhappy or anything. I just didn’t think about that stuff. Then I read some books my friends showed me, and I was hooked.”*

This type of justification is perhaps inevitable considering the fact that it involves a spiritual conversion of sorts. Considering the magnitude of the decision, it is understandable that

individuals may simply go with what makes them “feel right”. However, it is again interesting to note that finding Satanism is not necessarily spurred by traumatic events, but rather may unfold in a fashion similar to that of any spiritual journey.

### Summary

Again, the majority of interviewees appeared to remain unburdened by their status as discreditable individuals. Rather than using passing techniques to hide their identities as Satanists, many instead seemed intent on reveling in their outsider status. The importance of defining oneself as “Satanist” often seemed to be borne out of a desire to rebel and upset the status quo through potentially shocking—if relatively harmless—means. Many interviewees made only vague mention of the particulars of Satanic thought, focusing instead on more nebulous concepts like individualism and the desire to be properly understood. In many cases, these desires—and the way that Satanic thought thrust such issues into the spotlight—seemed as important as any spiritual practice or belief system.

This is not to say that they did not understand the potential ramifications of their deviant behavior. The vast majority of interviewees used a variety of accounts—specifically, justifications—when discussing their actions. Mainline Christians were most often the target of justifications such as condemning the condemners, although many expressed similar frustrations at any who did not perceive them as they wished to be treated. While such frustration is certainly reasonable, it seems that any perceived lack of understanding remains useful for the desire to define oneself as a member of the alien elite. When behavior willfully deviates to challenge the majority, one must recognize that any reconciliation might undermine the deviants’

wishes to be seen as unique. In such cases, it is possible that the deviant behaviors are being used as a tool to express individuality against perceived injustices from an out-group.

Whatever the rationale for such behavior, it appears to remain a valid tool for self-fulfillment. The majority of interviewees continually mentioned the importance of finding some sort of system—spiritual or otherwise—that made them feel proper. Rather than malicious and dangerous individuals, these persons instead seem focused on finding some sort of peace with themselves and their worlds. In that way, they remain nothing like the antiquated stereotype of the hideous, devil-worshipping monster. They meant no harm to anybody, and were peacable, reasonable, and calm. Importantly, they seemed like any number of individuals searching for a unique way to define themselves.

## CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

As is perhaps the case with qualitative research, the data went in a completely different direction than that was originally anticipated. Rather than finding a cohesive spiritual framework, the researcher instead found a majority of interviewees to instead be focused on the importance of Satanism as an ideal. Of particular importance was the way that a deviant identity allowed a sort of “weekend warrior” mentality among individuals who expressed no desire to more closely examine the nuances of their chosen spiritual belief system. Little focus was paid to the details surrounding Satanism, beyond selected mention of certain artifacts, rituals and symbols; these varied by individual. Admittedly, the official Church of Satan makes no claims that such individuals are anything but strong Satanists, as long as these individuals remain focused on understanding the absence of any true spiritual deity, and the open acceptance of humankind’s carnal nature (<http://www.churchofsatan.com>). However, I remain surprised at how little attention seemed to be paid to Satanism itself, beyond quoting widely available literature (such as Anton LaVey’s *The Satanic Bible*), or passing mention of myths involving demons or similar symbols.

Meanwhile, the majority of interviewees seemed to almost relish their outsider status. Rather than engage in passing to hide their positions as discreditable individuals, many of those interviewed made a willful intent to openly discredit themselves. This was achieved through the use of controversial clothing, jewelry, and tattoos. Despite the seeming lack of cohesion, interviewees expressed a sense of pride in their fellow Satanists, believing them to be somehow above the mundane nature of those afflicted with other spiritual preferences. This is perhaps

another reason for the use of accounts, as interviewees expressed frustration with what they perceived as a misunderstanding and ignorant public. Thus, despite their claims that they were in fact in the right, the majority responded to discussions about their behaviors with justifications. Thus, an interesting dichotomy was observed; one wherein individuals appeared to almost revel in the discomfort they caused, while at the same time reacting harshly to any and all criticism.

### Limitations of this Study

Despite careful planning, the research includes numerous limitations. The data's focus on in-depth interviews means that the sample is not statistically representative. Although the results are extremely valid, they lack reliability. Even for a qualitative study involving face-to-face interviews, the number of interviewees remains small, although it is perhaps understandable considering the nature of the topic. Furthermore, the use of convenience and snowball sampling means that the interviewees' were more likely to be drawn from similar backgrounds; this limited the opportunities to hear opposing perspectives from those with wildly differing experiences. Interviewing a number of individuals who not only know each other but are in some cases friends further homogenizes the responses. Indeed, a number of the interviewees (three) performed in a local band together; while their information was useful, all accounts were very similar. Furthermore, all respondents were male, and eight of 10 were White non-Hispanics. To gain a greater understanding of the population, one would need to utilize more sophisticated sampling techniques that draws from a more diverse sample within the population. Responses regarding the interviewees' rebellious desires to identify with the "dangerous" and



exciting image of a young Satanist would perhaps be different if they were coming from a different population sample.

### Strengths of this Study

It seems odd that there is an almost nonexistent body of literature involving something as controversial as Satanism, particularly considering the attempts that official Church members (and academics) have made to distance the official church from the sensationalized and outrageous accounts of “The Satanic Panic” (Balch, 1991; Richardson, Best, & Bromley, 1991; Mulhern, 1991; Victor, 1993.)

The first strength to recognize is that this exploratory study fills a gap in the literature by examining a woefully understudied population. The aforementioned limitations involving both sampling and sample size are at least partially offset by the rich data collected from in-depth face-to-face interviews with an extremely deviant fringe population. Such interviews were conducive to building a strong rapport that allowed for the emergence of ideas that could not have been gleaned from a survey. Furthermore, the open-ended questions quickly took the study in unexpected directions not originally anticipated by the researcher. What began as an attempt to understand morality among Satanists turned instead into an examination of deviant religion as a sort of social aesthetic, similar to what may be found in the punk rock movement. Many of the respondents seemed proud to identify with something they perceived as unique and different. Supposed frustration with a misunderstanding public was at least partially offset by a sense of pride that seemed to stem from that very misunderstanding. In this way, one may still view some

Satanism as rebellion. Still, this particular type of rebellion appears much less harmful than might have otherwise been imagined without firsthand accounts.

Although the research failed in its efforts to find what defines “the moral Satanist”, it nevertheless indicated that all Satanists need not be considered amoral. Although the interviewees may not have achieved the lofty standards of intellectual superiority set by official Church of Satan literature, they still refuted the outdated public perception that has often painted Satanists as animalistic predators. Rather than focusing on violent or harmful attitudes, those interviewed came across as normal, balanced individuals, considering their ages and socio-demographic statuses. They showed compassion and intelligence and reasonably explained their rationale for engaging in what many perceive to be frightening behavior. A newfound understanding of even a segment of this deviant population remains important.

### Suggestions for Future Research

Although the above research achieved some useful findings, there are still many ways to build upon these conclusions. Rather than focusing on accounts and identity management, it would be useful to instead examine the greater specificities of Satanism, and why it is appealing when compared to other religions. This was attempted, with limited success. Many of the interviewees responded in manners that indicated that they were less concerned with the specificities of Satanism, beyond relatively nebulous claims that, as multiple individuals phrased it, it was more “honest” and “less hypocritical than Christianity”. Still, these individuals seemed more focused on a small number of selected symbols (such as pictures, t-shirts, and tattoos) and the ways that these symbols and artifacts allowed young Satanists to perceive themselves.

To find something beyond the results mentioned above, one would likely need to find a more varied group of interviewees, to examine the issue as perceived by members of different races, age groups, and social classes. Even staying within the fairly limited demographic of this study, it remains possible to further examine the similarities between Satanism and other forms of rebellious group activity such as musical movements. It is possible that the threats of Satanism corrupting youths are true, in the same way any remotely “dangerous” fad or trend might. However, Satanism as examined here remains less like the terrifying image of Satanism mentioned during the moral panics of the 1980s, and more like a simple youth subculture. Further examination might provide greater insight into this topic.

It also remains possible to find the “moral Satanist” who is as frustrated with theistic Satanism as with mainline religion. These Satanists may share much in common with atheists (albeit with a focus Satanic on Satanic imagery). The aforementioned conclusions would support the idea that Satanists may share many similar traits with their mainline spiritual counterparts. Moving beyond the middle-class young adult male, further research could instead focus on Satanism as practiced by older adults who remain even further removed from the concept of teenage rebellion. It is possible in such circumstances that atheistic Satanists share even less in common with their theistic Satanic “brethren” than they do with mainline spiritualists.

Much as a Bible passage cannot begin to encapsulate the complexities of even one particular strand of Christianity, a fair examination of Satanism means that one must look further than the stock answers presented on the Church of Satan’s official web page, or printed within their approved texts. Considering the fact that the complexity of most any religious belief

system almost ensures the likelihood of spiritual pluralism among in-group members, it would seem important to make a point to critically examine the nuances and distinctions that oftentimes make such believers seem as dissimilar as members of completely different faiths. Of particular import is the idea of overcoming taboos and presumptions built on a history of misconceptions and misunderstandings (if not outright dishonesty). To continue to discredit the outrageous and baseless accusations that drove the moral panics of the past, it is important to examine this perhaps-not-so-frightening belief system as a legitimate religion, rather than further marginalizing it by simply labeling it as “other”.

## REFLEXIVE STATEMENT

I have found myself constantly frustrated with the concepts and practices of American mainline religions. It seems that many organized religions have done a remarkable job of pressuring conflicted or confused followers into obedience. This does not even have to entail serious challenges to the religious structure; it can simply involve innocent queries that could in turn bring light to troubling contradictions.

When examining such an issue, it seems impossible to ignore the social construction of dominant ideologies, and the ways such ideologies were enforced. Indeed, it is most interesting to see a population accept as absolute truth its own construction of reality, often while taking any necessary precautions to discredit any competing or threatening realities.

Of course, this type of behavior extends to even the most mundane aspects of daily life; basic tenets of popular culture are driven by shifting cultural trends that allow individuals to redefine themselves as necessary. However, I find that religion remains the most interesting of these realities; for many, it simply cannot be questioned. While it is possible to have open—if heated—debates on numerous political issues, religion remains, for the most part, unchallenged. I refer to religion not as a political or motivational tool, but as a common, everyday practice among individual citizens in a relatively peaceful society. I have no grand desire to see any religion toppled; rather, I remain curious in the ways in which followers use the boundaries created by others to define themselves. While I cannot help but remember how uncomfortable it was simply struggling through church sermons with which I disagreed, I understand that it was a relatively simple process of “disguising” my role as a nonbeliever. Examining a much more

extreme example, how does one reconcile one's role as a Satanist with one's role as a parent, or an employee?

The official Church of Satan claims to be more than a mere inversion of Christianity, yet their official website specifically mentions that its name was chosen to represent the “dark force” of Judeo-Christian mythology. Thus, it is quite obvious that the very name of the church is chosen with the intent of unsettling others. While certain portions of the official site include pleas for greater understanding, others read like combative manifestos. This seems the most extreme example of religious deviance; wherein one group knowingly surrounds itself with iconography that is in direct challenge to that of the dominant belief system. The Church of Satan seems to almost revel in its subordinate status; thus, one must wonder if this conflict provide benefits that may be potentially more important than the specificities of the belief system itself.

When examining the official Church of Satan website, one is once again met by seemingly contradictory details. One essay in particular details the insightful and intelligent letters that have been received from minors who wish to convert; however, in the next breath, the author is blasting the lack of understanding by the misinformed majority. It was obvious that open-mindedness was a necessity; further, it was important to attempt to mask any preconceived notions that could potentially incite those who I was attempting to interview. It is possible that my status as a middle-class White male from a relatively stable two-parent marriage could have proven problematic; the aforementioned essay specifically targets wannabes who lack a true understanding of Satanism. Considering the simple fact that I am not a Satanist, it was prudent

to allow any subjects to know that I was legitimately curious, and I wished to be informed by those that truly understand the specificities of the system—the believers themselves. Furthermore, my power as a researcher might have been off-putting to some, considering the abundance of negative literature (scholarly and otherwise) regarding Satanism; of course, patience, honesty, and respect were necessary at all times.

It was important to remember my biases. I was reminded of one of the criticisms of labeling theory; and the idea that it romanticizes the criminal (or deviant, or whomever). While I do not desire the complete destruction of the current religious institution, I do gain a perverse sense of joy when I see it challenged in unique ways. It was important to curb my frustration with what I consider to be antiquated conservative belief systems. It is important to remember that keeping an open mind does not simply mean siding with whomever one defines as the “underclass”; importantly, it involves an honest attempt to understand individuals with whom one might not naturally sympathize. With regards to this particular study, it was important to remember that American mainline religions are more than bloated, ineffectual entities. At the same time, I remembered that Satanism *is* combative in numerous ways; thus, it is not simply a case of a pitiful, disadvantaged group who remains powerless against larger social forces.

## **APPENDIX A: IRB APPROVAL**





University of Central Florida Institutional Review Board  
Office of Research & Commercialization  
12201 Research Parkway, Suite 501  
Orlando, Florida 32826-3246  
Telephone: 407-823-2901 or 407-882-2276  
[www.research.ucf.edu/compliance/irb.html](http://www.research.ucf.edu/compliance/irb.html)

### Approval of Human Research

From: **UCF Institutional Review Board #1**  
**FWA00000351, IRB00001138**

To: **Chris P. McDaniel**

Date: **February 04, 2011**

Dear Researcher:

On 2/4/2011, the IRB approved the following human participant research until 2/3/2012 inclusive:

Type of Review: Submission Correction for UCF Initial Review Submission Form  
Project Title: In Search of The Moral Satanist: An Examination of Pluralism  
Within A Deviant Religion  
Investigator: Chris P. McDaniel  
IRB Number: SBE-11-07419  
Funding Agency:  
Grant Title:  
Research ID: N/A

The Continuing Review Application must be submitted 30 days prior to the expiration date for studies that were previously expedited, and 60 days prior to the expiration date for research that was previously reviewed at a convened meeting. Do not make changes to the study (i.e., protocol, methodology, consent form, personnel, site, etc.) before obtaining IRB approval. A Modification Form **cannot** be used to extend the approval period of a study. All forms may be completed and submitted online at <https://iris.research.ucf.edu>.

If continuing review approval is not granted before the expiration date of 2/3/2012, approval of this research expires on that date. When you have completed your research, please submit a Study Closure request in iRIS so that IRB records will be accurate.

Use of the approved, stamped consent document(s) is required. The new form supersedes all previous versions, which are now invalid for further use. Only approved investigators (or other approved key study personnel) may solicit consent for research participation. Participants or their representatives must receive a copy of the consent form(s).

In the conduct of this research, you are responsible to follow the requirements of the Investigator Manual.

On behalf of Joseph Bielitzki, DVM, UCF IRB Chair, this letter is signed by:

Signature applied by Joanne Muratori on 02/04/2011 12:14:32 PM EST

IRB Coordinator

## **APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

How long have you been a Satanist?

What attracted you to Satanism?

What is your spiritual history?

What are some details of your religious upbringing?

How similar are your friends' and family members' beliefs to your own?

Have you told your family and friends about your beliefs?

If so, how did you do it?

How did they react?

How many of your friends are Satanists?

Are you or have you ever been a member of an organized group?

If so, how often does this group meet?

What type of activities do you engage in with other members?

How similar are your friends' beliefs to your own?

Do you believe in a literal interpretation of the devil?

How do you feel about people who do/do not worship a literal devil?

What symbols do you feel are important to express your spiritual beliefs?

What are your feelings toward individuals who practice other belief systems?

## **APPENDIX C: DEFENSE ANNOUNCEMENT**

Announcing the Final Examination of Mr. Chris P. McDaniel for the degree of Master of Arts

Date: June 29<sup>th</sup>, 2011

Time: 2:30 PM

Room: HPH 406i

Thesis title: In Search of Satanists: Examining the Accounts of Deviant Religious Practitioners

Despite the glut of literature focusing on numerous aspects of mainline American religious life, there is a surprising dearth of information regarding deviant religious practitioners. Importantly, there remains a lack of focus on the specificities of religious and spiritual deviance, and the accounts of those who engage in such practices. This exploratory study closely examines the members of one such religion; specifically, the Church of Satan. Despite the stigma associated with Satanism, individuals continue to willfully engage in such practices. This research uses face-to-face, semi-structured interviews to better discern the rationale behind Satanic worship as understood by modern-day believers. Particular attention is given to the accounts of Satanists to examine motivations for engaging in such practices, as well as identity management techniques for dealing with potential stigma. Results of the analysis show that Satanists utilize a variety of accounts when speaking about their spiritual choices and the potential stigma that surrounds such choices. These results are discussed and directions for additional research are presented.

Major: Sociology

B.S., 2009, University of Central Florida

Committee in Charge:

Dr. John P. Lynxwiler

Dr. David A. Gay

Dr. Fernando I. Rivera

Approved for distribution by John P. Lynxwiler, Committee Chair, on June 14<sup>th</sup>, 2011.

The public is welcome to attend.

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