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Hail Satan?

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Abstract

This is a film review of *Hail Satan?* (2019) directed by Penny Lane.

Keywords

Satanic Temple, Religious Freedom, Pluralism, First Amendment, Satan

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Author Notes

John Lyden became Editor of the Journal of Religion & Film in 2011. He was Professor of Religion at Dana College from 1991-2010 and is now the Director of the Liberal Arts Core at Grand View University. He is the author of *Film as Religion: Myths, Morals, and Rituals* (NYU Press), and the editor of the Routledge Companion to Religion and Film and co-editor (with Eric Michael Mazur) of the Routledge Companion to Religion and Popular Culture. He was the 2008 recipient of the Spiritus Award for Outstanding Contributions to the study of Religion and Film.



Hail Satan? (2019), dir. Penny Lane

The Satanic Temple is certainly not subtle. Whenever a state legislature proposes to place a monument of the Ten Commandments on the property of a state capitol, they follow with a proposal to place a statue of Baphomet (see above), a Satanic figure, flanked by two children. They do this to defend the First Amendment and to point out that American governments cannot give any religion preferential treatment: if you would have one, you cannot disallow the latter, and that is the battle they fight in the courts and in the media. They have also fought for the right, as a religious group, to give the invocation at Phoenix city council meetings. And they have introduced an afterschool Satan Club in Portland schools as an alternative to a Christian afterschool program. The Satanic Temple has used theatrical, deliberately offensive, and often hilarious tactics of excess and parody to make political criticisms of religious hegemony, but they are not just a political movement: they have their own set of religious beliefs, even if they do not seem to fit into what most people view as religion.

Lucien Greaves (not his birth name) is the founder and leader of the movement, and he and other members of the group do not always court publicity. At the Q and A following the showing

at Sundance, he said that he has turned down opportunities for The Satanic Temple to become the object of a television reality show or documentary, but he responded to Penny Lane's request as he thought that she would more accurately represent them. For Lane's part, she indicated that her interest in the movement was that it effectively combined political activism with some intellectual depth in its beliefs. The members she interviews for the film, many of them remaining anonymous (through blurred or concealed faces), were surprised that they found any "religious" movement that they wanted to join at all; but they did, because it expressed their values better than anything they had found previously, and it gave them a sense of community and purpose.

And, appearances notwithstanding, it *is* a religious movement. The opponents of the movement may view it as a parody and a critique of religion filled with theatrical gimmicks designed to attract attention. It is this; but, who is to say that religions have ever been without a sense of theatre and performance, or parody of the views from which they distinguished themselves? It is a community with strongly held beliefs and values that are acted upon intentionally and ritualistically, and although it does not defer to any "higher reality" such as a god, it does have strongly held principles that rather closely resemble those held by groups like the Unitarian Universalist Association. Among these are those that value justice, reason, compassion, and freedom; if Unitarianism can be a religion, why not this? Religion does not require a belief in a single God, although the opponents of The Satanic Temple often do not understand this. Lane's documentary shows Christian protesters claiming that America is a "Christian nation" and that prayers to Jesus by government officials are completely appropriate. The Temple challenges and deconstructs that naïve idea, arguing that freedom of religion means that no set of religious beliefs can claim priority in the public space.

The film is very funny, enjoying the discomfort of those targeted by the Temple's actions, but also demonstrating the genuinely held convictions of its adherents. They point out that "Satan" (who they clearly do not believe to be a literal figure) just means "the adversary," not an evil being, and they seek to be that adversary, the opposition to the conservative Christians who deprive LGBTQ people of their rights, who seek to restrict a woman's right to an abortion, who seek to impose their religious views on others. The hatred they inspire in conservatives by their demonstrations simply shows them that they are right to oppose their narrowness and bigotry.

The documentary also points out correctly some of the ironies of American religious history. The motto, "In God We Trust" on American currency, and the "Under God" in the Pledge of Allegiance, are repeatedly cited as evidence by those who oppose the Satanic Temple's efforts to dislodge Christian or theistic language from public contexts. But as the film shows, these were added in the 1950s as part of the Cold War to distinguish the US from the USSR and "godless communism." Neither is in the Constitution or any founding documents of the nation. In addition, the film points out a fact well known by those of us who study the history of religion and film, that most of the Ten Commandments monuments on public property were put there as part of the marketing for Cecil B. DeMille's 1956 film. Media and film shape religion in our modern era just as much as the reverse, which we should realize as we try to determine what is "authentic" or original religion. There may be no such thing, but precisely for that reason we should not prioritize those religions that simply have had better marketing.

Some of the members also point out the irony that imaginary "Satanists" were accused of child abuse in the 1980s even while the Roman Catholic Church covered up its own priests' abuse of children. "It's projection," notes one member; the evil lies within the Christian churches that accuse an imagined adversary rather than face their own sins. Those who join The Satanic Temple

seem to have almost always had some bad experience with Christianity, and in this way their beliefs are shaped by Christianity as *their* adversary. But perhaps that is precisely what Christianity needs. In our increasingly pluralistic world, religions need to be able to live together with acceptance and appreciation without feeling threatened. It is ironic that it has taken a postmodernist concocted “Satanist” movement to point this out to some people, as they have missed the ways in which their actions betray a privilege over Muslims, Jews, Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs, and others. Yes, many of those are monotheists, but they are not identical, and they do not all subscribe to the views of conservative Christians. For that matter, neither do all Christians, but the opposition of “liberal” Christians to their more conservative counterparts often disappears as the media fails to cover them; many Americans don’t even know that non-fundamentalist Christianity exists. On the other hand, a Baphomet statue on the capitol lawn tends to make the evening news.

This film entertains while it educates, and I hope that for this reason it gets enough distribution and viewership to have some impact. More Americans need to understand their own Constitution and the right of religious freedom. A church or school daring enough to show this will have lively discussions, which might be difficult, but all the more fruitful for that reason.