



An Organizational Analysis of the Schismatic Church of Satan

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Received: 6 January 2021 / Accepted: 8 August 2021 / Published online: 16 August 2021
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Abstract

Background The Church of Satan, the seminal example of organizational Satanism, was founded in 1966. During the 1970s, the Church of Satan was wracked by a history of numerous schisms. Despite the notoriety of Satanism in popular culture, few scholars have analyzed the Church of Satan as a religious organization. Furthermore, not many scholars have directly discussed the schisms that it has undergone.

Purpose The purpose of this research is to analyze the Church of Satan, an understudied case in American religious organizational history, and its schisms. A theoretical framework based on religious economies and organizational ecology is introduced to account for schism in Satanism, which hitherto has been dominated by European cultural milieu arguments.

Methods A historical case study is performed on the case of the Church of Satan, using primary and secondary documentation, in order to address four theoretical propositions.

Results Findings demonstrate costliness, authority, doctrine, and niche/environment were all potential causes for the schisms that impacted the Church of Satan.

Conclusions and Implications The Church of Satan conforms to religious economies and organizational ecology theory expectations of schism. Further research is needed to understand organizational aspects of Satanism and other avant garde religious groups.

Background

The Church of Satan was founded on a celebration of the Spring Equinox called Walpurgisnacht on April 30, 1966. The nascent Church focused on rationalistic Satanism, meaning members believed in Satan as an atheistic symbol rather than a literal deity. These beliefs were largely rooted in the works of Church of Satan founder Anton LaVey, such as his *Satanic Bible* (1969). Over time, the Church of

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Satan has spurred many schismatic groups such as Temple of Set, World Church of Satanic Liberation, Church of Satanic Brotherhood, and Ordo Templi Satanas. The impact of these schismatic organizations, the propagation of satanic ideas on the internet, and the reaction of the public make Satanism a fascinating case study for sociologists of religion and organizations.

Little previous research examines the organizational dimensions of Satanism or its history of schism. There is a robust literature on schism within Christian denominations. Drawing on religious economies and organizational ecology theories, prominent explanations for denominational schism in Christianity are costliness, doctrine, authority, and niche/environment. The Church of Satan, or any satanic group for that matter, has yet to be analyzed through this framework.

Using a case study of the Church of Satan, the merits of organizational theories to explain schism in a religious organization outside of Christianity are demonstrated. I begin by reviewing previous research on Satanism and denominational schism within Christianity, from which a set of propositions are applied to the Church of Satan. Findings show the important role of costliness, authority, doctrine, and niche/environment in schism. The conclusion discusses implications of this study for future research on Satanism and other avant garde faith groups.

Satanism

It has only been in the latter half of the 20th Century that “Satanic Thought” was institutionalized formally into a church. From its founding in 1966, the early Church of Satan focused on a hierarchical structure with members and priests led by High Priest/Magus LaVey out of San Francisco. As the Church expanded, it added the grotto system of highly decentralized, regional associations led by local leaders. At its height in 1971, the Church of Satan boasted international membership of several thousand and a dozen grottoes (Dyrendal et al., Petersen, and Lewis 2015). The majority of Church of Satan membership was maintained through mailing lists and the Church’s periodical, *The Cloven Hoof*. After the schisms of the 1970s, the grotto system was disbanded, and the Church of Satan became centralized.

The main academic attention to Satanism in the United States focused on the moral panic of the 1980s and 1990s, and the recent Satanic Temple (Laycock 2020). The Satanic Temple is largely known for its publicity stunts opposing the incorporation of religious ideals into state or legal frameworks. The Satanic Temple, founded in 2013, is one of multiple groups influenced by the LaVeyan Satanism of the Church of Satan. A thorough study of this politicized form of Satanism is discussed by Laycock (2020) in a recent book titled *Speak of the Devil*. Today, a proliferation of ephemeral new satanic groups occurs online. Little research exists on any of these internet satanic organizations to explain their origins.

One of the few studies of schism in the Church of Satan is Petersen (2009). Petersen adapted the concept of “cultic milieu” into “satanic milieu” to explain the Temple of Set schism in 1975. Petersen argued that there is a specific subsection within the environment of cults entirely dedicated to satanic ideas. The Church of Satan and the Temple of Set are among the few organizations that occupy the satanic

milieu. A limitation of the research by Petersen and other sources such as Faxneld (2014) and Dyrendal (2012) is that their analysis is decidedly European, and it is uncertain how aptly their ideas would fit the American context (White 2017). Hence, the sociological study of Satanism has been overshadowed by European arguments that downplay the specificity of the Satanic movement, arguing that it is an abstract cultural ideal rather than a competitive religious organization within a specific niche of the American religious market.

That being said, there are other texts relevant to schism in the Church of Satan. Per Faxneld (2014) has a wonderful analysis of how LaVey attempted to legitimate his views of Satanism through past esoterica while simultaneously deriding his sources (Faxneld 2014). Dyrendal (2012) prefigures this perspective by connecting modern LaVeyan Satanism back to famed British occultist Aleister Crowley's influence, even though Crowley himself was not a Satanist. Gallagher (2012) covered the legitimation processes that the sect Temple of Set underwent to connect itself to the heritage of the Church of Satan, LaVey, and *The Satanic Bible*. Lewis (2015) likewise hammered home the importance and legitimacy of LaVey and *The Satanic Bible* as central to the satanic movement. Good general resources when reading about organizational satanism, schisms, and beyond are found in Introvigne (2016) and van Lwijk (2016), although they focus on cultural history through the European milieu lens.

Finally, there are primary sources that come directly from the groups in question. For example, the majority of LaVey's work can be found for free online. Details about Church of Satan schisms are also told in Flowers' (1997) *Lords of the Left-Hand Path: Forbidden Practices and Spiritual Heresies*, *Satan Wants You: The Cult of Devil Worship in America* by Lyons (1988), Aquino's (2002) *The Church of Satan*, as well as Blanche Barton's (1990, 2014, 2021) accounts of LaVey and the Church.

Schism

Despite the lack of research on schism in the Church of Satan, there is a sizable literature on schism, both outside and inside the sociology of religion. Religion scholar Bruce Lincoln (2014) offers a good way to view schism: "When the normal instruments for achieving or maintaining social integration fail, the likelihood of an open breach becomes great. One form that such breaches may take is schism: the formal separation of two (or more) irreconcilable parties that had earlier been contending segments within one encompassing society" (2014, 11, Ch. 6). The role of hegemonic discourse, ritual, and dominant structure all have an influence on whether schism is avoided, mediated, or left unchecked societally. Religious schisms in America are unlikely to be mediated and resolved by the dominance structure (separation of church and state), so we must dive further into the American religious context to refine this position.

The theoretical foundation of schism in the sociology of religion usually focuses on American Christian Protestant denominations through the framework of religious economies theory. Religious economies theory highlights the importance of

the religious market in organizational growth. It attempts to account for all levels of analysis—from macro to micro—to explain why certain religious organizations do better on the market than others. Stark and Finke (2000) introduce the idea of a “religious demands standardized curve”. This theory posits that there is always a constant amount of demand for religious goods, and that various religious organizations fulfill these demands in different ways. Included in the religious economies perspective are concepts of “church/sect”, “tension”, and “strictness.” Each of these concepts helps explain why schism happens in religious organizations.

Costliness

Religious denominations undergo schism when moving from a “sect” phase into an institutionalized “church” phase. This is due to the lower strictness and environmental tension present within the organization, leading some members to break away to form new organizations that maintain more tension with secular society. Strictness is determined through costs imposed on the membership of a voluntary organization. Tension with surroundings also increase these costs. The higher a group’s tension is with society, the higher the member commitment. High levels of commitment fuel growth in religious denominations (Stark and Finke 2000).

An example of schism due to changes in costliness is the Holiness movement, which broke off the Methodist Church. The main reason for these breaks were due to perceived worldliness in the Methodist Church (Finke and Stark 2005), which was lowering its costs and tension with society as it moved into a church phase. This included bureaucratization and centralization of the denomination and lighter stances on controversial social issues. Holiness denominations including the Church of God (Anderson, Indiana) and the Church of the Nazarene emerged in the late 1800s.

Proposition 1 Schism occurs when members become dissatisfied with the institutionalized, less costly nature of their religious organization.

Authority and Doctrine

Attempts by denominational elites to achieve organizational consolidation and professionalism as membership grows can birth schism (Liebman et al. 1988; and Sutton and Chaves 2004). Ingroups and outgroups form (Starke and Dyck 1996). Leadership succession is a time especially ripe for schism in religious organizations (Sutton and Chaves 2004). Bruce (1990) similarly recognized that individuals perceiving that they would be worthy of leadership as a source of schism.

Essentially, centralization of authority is associated with more emphasis on professional clergy. Professionalization moves an organization from sect to church, lowering tension with society. Thus, professionalism hurts membership commitment (Iannaccone 1988a, b, 1992; Finke and Stark 2005). The transition from church to sect similarly involves changes in belief and doctrine. The strict beliefs of a sect tend to soften over time. As the group grows, it can be difficult to impose beliefs that

keep members separated from the larger society. Subtle accommodations start to enter the organization, which for some members are tantamount to heresy. They then seek to retain the costly beliefs and distinctiveness of the organization in its early years. If they are unable to reform the organization internally, they exit to form a new, more theologically fundamental organization. Of course, authority and beliefs are intertwined in complicated ways. Consequently, in a schism, the parent group sees the break as an issue with authority, whereas the splinter group sees it as a disagreement over doctrine (Starke and Dyck 1996).

Disputes over authority and doctrine have been the source of some of the largest splits in Christian history. The Protestant Reformation is a prominent historical example of a religious organization splitting over beliefs and authority. Martin Luther and his 95 Theses were an attempt to reform the Roman Catholic Church doctrinally in the sixteenth century, and later became a rejection of Papal authority altogether.

Proposition 2 Schism occurs when members disagree with the direction of existing authority figures.

Proposition 3 Schism occurs when members question the legitimacy of doctrine.

Other Niche/Environmental Conditions

Organizational ecology theory is another useful basis for understanding organizational schism. Organizational ecology theory is the application of biological ecology to social organizations (Hannan and Freeman 1977). It emphasizes organizational fitness and survivability within a context of competition for resources with other similar organizations. These similar organizations represent a population that resides within an environment. Comparable to different food sources consumed by animals in the natural environment, an organizational environment has different resource niches, for example, age, race, socioeconomic status, etc. In this context, niche would be defined as a dedicated sector of a market designated for a particular service. Organizations that manage to monopolize resources found within the niche survive and grow. Organizations attempt to secure resources through generalization (spanning multiple niches) or specialization (operating within one specific niche).

Specialization is connected to strictness and commitment. Organizations may seek to expand membership by reaching across niche resources. This results in a loss of distinctiveness for the organization. Internal decision-making processes determine this choice, whether through individual charismatic leaders or a bureaucracy. Leaders within denominations can make decisions in order to increase or decrease strictness/costs among membership, thus raising or lowering distinctiveness and membership commitment at the cost of tension with society.

“Catchall” churches with a large amount of bureaucratized leadership will focus on niche generalization, gaining membership but lowering the average commitment of members because professionals replace volunteers in many functions of the organization. The generalist church then has to compete with other churches in the niche,

including those that operate as specialists thereby generating high levels of commitment. This can lead to schism in the generalist church because members desire a more distinctive church with fewer “free riders” (i.e., members who belong but do not contribute to the operation of the church) (Iannaccone 1992).

Catholics post-Vatican II and most mainline Protestant denominations fall into niche stretching. These “catch-all” churches seek to maintain the largest memberships as generalists within the religious market, and to do so naturally lower their distinctiveness and specialization. This is to ensure a constant stream of organizational resources, such as voluntary membership, that can come from a variety of different niches, such as age or race. To contrast, an example of niche specialization is the Black Church tradition in American Protestantism, with denominations such as the National Baptist Association, African Methodist Episcopal Church, and Christian Methodist Episcopal Church (Lincoln and Mamiya 2005).

Proposition 4 Schism occurs when niche conditions push organizations to seek resources outside their original niche.

Methods

Building off of this theoretical framework, I conducted a case study of the Church of Satan using content analysis of relevant primary and secondary sources. The content analysis included firsthand accounts and interpretations of the schisms, as found in letters, personal documents, publications, and biographies of Aquino (2002), Barton (1990, 2014, 2021), LaVey (various), and other key members (e.g. Flowers 1997; Lyons 1988). Other sources used in the content analysis were Massimo Introvigne’s (2016) *Satanism: A Social History*, James Lewis’s (2001a, b) *Satanism Today: An Encyclopedia of Religion, Folklore, and Popular Culture*, Dyrendal et al.’s (2015) *The Invention of Satanism*, and *The Devil’s Party: Satanism in Modernity* edited by Per Faxneld and Jesper Petersen (2012). This range of sources provided a startling amount of information into the internal perspectives on schisms in the Church of Satan (hereafter, CoS).

Aquino’s (2002) account is used liberally within this article, but it is not without its biases and limitations. I have attempted to corroborate Aquino’s autobiographical account with other primary source documentation to fact-check his opinions, specifically from LaVey and sources close to LaVey. All in all, Aquino may have inflated his importance in CoS, but he still remained indisputably a member of the inner circle. I have added Flowers and Lyons to moderate pro-LaVey sources such as Barton and LaVey himself. Nevertheless, it is difficult to ascertain the true historiographical nature of these works.

Results

Findings are presented in three sections. First, I list key characters in the Church of Satan and its schisms. Second, I provide a historical account of schisms in the Church of Satan. Third, I connect these schisms to the propositions derived from religious economies and organizational ecology theories.

Key Characters in CoS Schisms

Table 1 introduces founding figures in the Church of Satan and its splinter groups.

With the characters introduced, I turn to a historical summary of the major schisms in the Church of Satan. I describe the circumstances surrounding these schisms and highlight smaller breaks with the Church that could be seen as symptomatic.

Historical Account of CoS Schisms

There was a significant amount of internal conflict among the grottos and the main branch headed by LaVey in San Francisco in the early 1970s. In September 1971, the Babylonian Grotto in Detroit and its leader and Reverend Wayne West were excommunicated by LaVey due to disputes over money and West's authorship of articles criticizing LaVey's leadership (Aquino 2002, 41–3; Introvigne 2016, 321). West then went on to form the Universal Church of Man which went defunct almost immediately (Lyons 1988, 116). LaVey responded by improving the grotto system and adding regional "conclaves". CoS continued to grow; there were a dozen grottos by 1971 (Dyrendal et al. 2015; Flowers 1997, 178).

The first major schism occurred in 1971–72. In Dayton, Ohio, the Stygian Grotto, and its leader John DeHaven were accused of dealing in drugs, stolen property, and prostitution (Aquino 2002, 169, 179–82, 185; Lyons 1988, 116). It became known within the Church of Satan as the "Stygian Grotto Crisis.". In response to the potential public outcry, LaVey excommunicated the grotto and its leaders (Introvigne 2016, 322). This led to the foundation of the Church of Satanic Brotherhood, in 1973, with the help of banished leader Wayne West. Grottos of the Church of Satanic Brotherhood were then established in Dayton, Indianapolis, Louisville, New York City, and St. Petersburg (FL).

The offshoot did not last long. It was disbanded in 1974 due to John DeHaven's public conversion to Christianity. This dissolution spawned yet another offshoot, called the Ordo Templi Satanas, with grottos in Kentucky and Indiana (Lewis 2002, 7). This organization also dissipated within a few years. Recently, it seems as though the Church of Satanic Brotherhood has reestablished itself, as evidenced by its online presence- further research is needed.

Other minor schismatic groups also broke off of LaVeyan Satanism in the early 1970s (before the Temple of Set) but went defunct almost immediately. For example, the Order of the Black Goat, known for its neo-Nazi sympathies (Lyon 1988,

Table 1 Key players in the Church of Satan and its schismatic organizations

Key character name	Role
Anton LaVey	The founder and “Magus” of the Church of Satan
Diane Hegarty/Diane LaVey	Anton’s co-founder and “wife”, High Priestess of the Church of Satan until a bitter falling out and legal dispute in 1988
Wayne West	Ex-Catholic priest known for his immoderate views on Christianity and fervor as a Satanist. He was the Babylonian grotto leader until his excommunication by LaVey in 1971–2, West would later become a key member of the Stygian Grotto Crisis
John DeHaven	The inheritor of the Stygian Grotto after West’s excommunication. He initiated the schism that formed the Church of Satanic Brotherhood in 1973
Michael Grumbowski	Satanic priest, and later grotto leader after DeHaven’s excommunication. He operated as a “fixer” in the Midwest, working to resolve issues and controversies surrounding the Stygian and Babylonian Grottoes, but eventually left to form his own shortly lived organization
Michael A. Aquino	A military officer, high ranking member of the Church of Satan, and confidant of Anton LaVey who actively fought schisms in the early 1970’s. He was one time Editor in Chief of the CoS periodical <i>The Cloven Hoof</i> . He initiated the Temple of Set schism in 1975
Lilith Sinclair	The leader of the influential New York Lilith Grotto in the 1970s. She initially was an ardent supporter of LaVey, but she later sided with Aquino, with whom she was romantically involved, in the CoS schism of 1975
Blanche Barton	Anton LaVey’s biographer, last romantic companion, High Priestess, and inheritor of the CoS after his death. Later stepped down from this role after appointing Peter Gilmore and Peggy Nadramia as co-High Priests. Currently the Magister Templi Rex (leader of the Council of Nine) in the Church of Satan
Karla LaVey	Anton LaVey’s oldest daughter by a previous marriage, one-time High Priestess of the CoS, and founder of the First Satanic Church in 1999 after Anton’s death
Peter Gilmore	Member of the CoS who gradually grew to preside over it as the current High Priest/Magus. His influence was gained by further establishing the CoS through publications and an online presence, churchofsatan.com. Married to Peggy Nadramia
Peggy Nadramia	Member of the CoS and current High Priestess. Known for being the first online representative of the CoS on satanet.com, as well as her print publications. Also serves as the CoS’ archivist. Married to Peter Gilmore

117), was founded out of the Belphegor Grotto in the 1970s (Introvigne 2016, 325) by Reverend Michael Grumbowski. Grumbowski was an important player in the Midwest controversies functioning almost as a “fixer” until his departure. The World Church of Satanic Liberation was an exemplar organization that survived longer than most; it was founded in 1986 and lasted until 2011 (Introvigne 2016, 517). It is important to note that during those early years, as long as an organization gave credit to LaVey and his teachings, it would be considered a “satanic” movement by the CoS.

The largest organization that broke from the Church of Satan is the Temple of Set. LaVey had decided after the Stygian Grotto Crisis to disband the grotto system, and the announcement was set to release during the summer of 1975 through the CoS periodical, *The Cloven Hoof*. Personal conflicts heightened in June 1975 between Anton LaVey and his lieutenant Michael A. Aquino over editorial and administrative practices, centralization of training (Aquino 2002, 150–151), bureaucratization/selling/giving of priesthoods to outsiders (Flowers 1997, 179), focus on worldly possession,¹ and philosophical differences² (Lyons 1988, 119; Petersen 2009, 236).

Aquino recounted a specific occurrence where a chauffeur managed to suddenly acquire the highest rank of priesthood in the organization:

Later in January Lilith Sinclair and I finally took Dale Seago on his first visit to 6114 California Street, at whose marvels he was predictably impressed. Unfortunately he- and Lilith and I- were also somewhat taken aback when the LaVeys' chauffer, Tony Fazzini, walked into the Purple Room sporting the blue medallion of a Magister IV°. ...Hence it was surprising- to say the least- to see him formally elevated **above** III° Priesthood. As soon as the three of us left 6114, two pairs of questioning eyes were turned in my direction. I hardly knew what to say. I myself had known nothing of Tony's IV°, nor anything of whatever he might have done to qualify him for this degree in Anton LaVey's judgement. All I could say was that I trusted that judgement, and that Tony must have deserved it. Since Lilith and Dale had also trusted Anton's judgement for many years, they nodded pro forma acceptance. But it left all three of us uneasy nevertheless. The unspoken objection was that we knew damn well that Tony Fazzini was **not** qualified to be a Satanic Priest, let alone a Magister. (Aquino 2002, 399, bolded in original)

After voicing his concerns to the LaVeys, Diane LaVey responded with vitriol: "How dare anyone place you in a position of having to defend Anton's 'gift' [no gift-it was earned] of the IV° to Tony? Who are they to set themselves up as judges of the worth of a man whom they either don't know or barely know?" (Diane LaVey in Aquino 2002, 829, brackets in original). This further exacerbated the divide growing between Aquino and the LaVeys.

Aquino claimed that Anton LaVey led the Freedom of Man Movement as a dictatorship (Introvigne 2016, 327). LaVey himself did not disagree with this assessment: "I'm a self-confessed tyrant, I don't tolerate denominationalism among my ranks. I figure if people want to be part of this movement they'll have to lead, follow or get the hell out of the way. We don't have room for factions" (LaVey in Barton, 2021, 144).³ Aquino broke by publicly declaring that LaVey had lost the "Infernal

¹ Focus on worldly possession refers to "professional services, funds, real estate, objects of value, etc., which contribute to the tangible, worldly success of the Church of Satan are qualification for elevation to both II° and III°" (Diane LaVey in Aquino 2002, 407).

² Aquino disliked LaVey's move from "authenticity" to "surface imagery" (Aquino 2002, 336).

³ The majority of CoS members today seem to share this mentality. Barton herself explained: "One key to the staying power of the Church of Satan is the fact that Anton LaVey structured his organization as a dictatorship. The leader has supreme power. Though the Council of Nine is essential to the organization, the leader (in our case, the High Priest) has no legal or ethical constraints to follow their advice. There

Mandate” to lead from Satan (Aquino 2002, 833–834; Flowers 1997, 179). The Temple of Set was then incorporated out of the Aquino’s Nineveh grotto and largest CoS grotto in Spotswood, NJ, with other important grottos and leaders from the U.S. and Canada joining, most notably Lilith Sinclair and her New York Lilith Grotto (Introvigne 2016, 326–327; Lewis 2001a, b, 256). LaVey would later claim that Aquino only took “28 people with him and started spreading rumors that the Church of Satan was defunct” (Introvigne 2016, 326).

The Temple of Set distinguished itself from the Church of Satan, highlighting the deistic nature of Set (which they claim is the original name of Satan) with more traditional esoteric and mystical inclinations. The total number of members in the Temple of Set, around 500–600, was highest at its founding, and today numbers around 200–300 (Introvigne 2016, 350). The Temple of Set would even have its own schisms beginning largely in May 1982 with Ronald Barrett founding the Temple of Anubis, with many more coming later (Introvigne 2016, 351, 355).

The last major break from the Church of Satan occurred when Anton LaVey died on October 29, 1997. The Church of Satan was supposedly willed to LaVey’s son Satan Xerxes Carnacki LaVey by Blanche Barton, who would administrate it on his behalf. Karla LaVey, Anton’s eldest daughter, contested the will and it was found to be invalid in court. A settlement was reached that kept the Church of Satan in Barton’s hands, and Karla LaVey formed the First Satanic Church on October 31, 1999. It is run out of San Francisco, CA, where the original Church of Satan was first formed. It claims to be a “re-establishment” of the original ideals of LaVeyan Satanism (Introvigne 2016, 517).

After the schism with Karla LaVey, Barton ruled as High Priestess. The Church became active online in the 1990s, and a couple distinguished themselves in representing the CoS online and in print. This couple was Peter Gilmore and Peggy Nadramia. Gilmore first starting writing in CoS internal publications and was put in charge of *The Cloven Hoof’s* replacement magazine, *The Black Flame* (Barton 2021, 217). His wife Nadramia, meanwhile, established herself as a horror fiction writer with her magazine *Grue*, and began representing the CoS officially in online chatrooms such as satannet.com (Barton 2021, 230). They soon co-founded an influential publishing company named Hell’s Kitchen Productions (Barton 2021, 222). Gilmore followed this up by establishing the CoS website (churchofsatan.com) in 1999 (Barton 2021, 251). All of these accomplishments impressed Barton, who was looking for a successor. Barton officially appointed Gilmore as High Priest of the Church of Satan on Walpurgisnacht, 2001. Nadramia shortly followed, replacing Barton as High Priestess, on Walpurgisnacht 2002 (Barton 2021, 265–6). Gilmore and Nadramia have since been defined by their many publications, archival work,

Footnote 3 (continued)

is no committee or board of directors to answer to, nor any legal responsibility to run vital decisions through trustees for approval...LaVey knew the pitfalls of ruling by committee- how slow and cumbersome it could be, and how, like grottos, it can lead to ego conflicts, political posturing, and power wrangling. Of course, since LaVey was protecting his own legacy, he was a benevolent and wise dictator, as his successors have been. The members of the Church of Satan have had absolute trust in our leaders’ judgement and integrity, and have not been disappointed” (Barton 2021, 319–20).

musical compositions, and public role within the CoS. Gilmore has particularly distinguished himself as a vocal critic of other satanic groups, which he believes lack the authority of the authentic LaVayen/CoS lineage (Barton 2021, 269).

Theoretical Connections to CoS Schisms

To explain the origins of schisms in the Church of Satan, I return to religious economies and organizational ecology theories. The starting point for this theoretical application is the religious demand curve. Satanism and its respective niche operate under the religious demand curve of U.S. society as theorized by Stark and Finke (2000). In essence, the Church of Satan is an option that people may choose, alongside other forms of Christian and non-Christian religious groups. Due to the non-traditional beliefs of the Church of Satan and its schismatic groups, these organizations may be understood as carrying a stigma in broader society. As such, they impose high tension on members and provide unique religious goods.

The following analysis estimates the tension these various organizations have had with external society based off of personal accounts and what little historical data on membership could be gleaned. The Church of Satan and its schismatic organizations have always obscured membership data to overestimate their influence (Barton 2021, 228). The reality is that the Church of Satan never expanded more than a couple thousand active members, and the Temple of Set never gained more than roughly 600 members (Introvigne 2016, 350). Their membership rolls may be larger, however.

Costliness

CoS was founded within the context of the 1960s counterculture movement. The occult niche within the religious demand curve already existed and was represented by various organizations, such as the Rosicrucians. CoS was initially anti-establishment while touting law and order through a social Darwinist lens, and framed itself as taking on both the mainstream society as well as the counterculture using Satan as a symbol and defining the previously underdeveloped *satanic niche*. Furthermore, reactive/violent Satanists often increased tension with society, making it more difficult for mainstream Satanism to take hold (Petersen 2016, 10). As Aquino once said in his correspondence with fellow priest Michael Grumbowski, “When you get right down to it, true Satanism is in fact a religion of ‘pressure’ and controlled ‘irritation...’” (Aquino 2002, 187). This means that the group was initially high on distinctiveness, cost, and tension, as it existed on the societal fringe. As a sect, it gained members rapidly (Flowers 1997, 178) due to the high commitment of members in keeping with the consequences of costliness suggested by Stark and Finke (2000, 282). A few qualitative reports by Aquino’s (2002) during this period (from 1966 to 1972) demonstrate this effect:

As things presently stand, we are actually in better shape than ever before... True, there is much deadwood, but they do not concern me unless they kick up a fuss... Now that we have given inquirers a choice of membership or subscrip-

tion, so far every respondent has chosen membership, despite the discouragements presented. (LaVey in Aquino 2002, 200)

Since November of VI/1971 I have maintained and updated the entire Hoof mailing list, for the simple reason that it had previously been in such a mess that 6114 [LaVey's house] was inundated with...new memberships not included on the list. (Aquino 2002, 854, brackets added)

Outsiders seem to believe that Satanism is just a passing fad, growing rapidly because of social unrest mingled with deprivation and dissatisfaction with standard Judæo/Christian tenets. (DeCecco, as quoted in Aquino 2002, 769)

During this time, CoS dominated the newly formed satanic niche as a specialist organization. Applicants to CoS were vetted thoroughly. Three letters, a written exam, and an interview with a member of the inner circle was required for admission to CoS (Lyons 1970, 174).

As new members joined the Church, the initial distinctiveness associated with being a Satanist lowers. Satanism as a concept became more normalized in the public discourse, which lowered tension with society. Aquino, Diane LaVey, and Anton LaVey discussed ways in which they could raise barriers to entry into the membership to improve its quality. They proposed ideas such as increasing the cost of application and yearly membership fees, adding a lengthy application essay, etc. (Aquino 2002, Ch.18).

Authority and Doctrine

LaVey began experiencing financial success (Petersen 2009, 236) and he commenced centralizing priesthood trainings and selling/giving away priesthods.⁴

LaVey's original attitude toward initiation, grades, and so on, appears to have been subjective at first. If he felt a person was worthy of being named- or "elevated" as he liked to call it- to the Priesthood or Magistracy, he simply "elevated" them on his own personal authority as High Priest...This tendency re-emerged in LaVey in 1975 when he, after previously authorizing and endorsing the idea that the Priesthood of the Church as to be Recognized on merit alone, reverted to the idea that it could be "bought" through donations to the "Church" (i.e. to LaVey himself) or merely on his personal judgment. The resultant fallout from existing members of the Clergy led to

⁴ The sale and gifting of priesthods was not common, only really in cases of family friends (like the aforementioned chauffeur) and Sammy Davis Jr. LaVey specifically started pushing for a centralization of a trained and formalized priesthood, which had been up to this point appointed more informally and democratically (if the majority of key members of CoS approved of the elevation of a member to priesthood, it was typically done with LaVey having the final say). LaVey started developing purely administrative or bureaucratized priesthods, and additionally created a regimented training program in occultic/satanic practices held only at the central grotto under LaVey. The new priesthood was thus expected to either have had this training or demonstrate a command of both satanic materials and occult ritual knowledge through testing.

what might be called a schism in the Church in the summer of 1975. A large percentage of the non-San Francisco membership and Clergy resigned from the Church at that time. (Flowers 1997, 179, quotes and capitalization in original).

This is an example of denominational elites attempting to centralize authority and achieve organizational consolidation over the movement (Sutton and Chaves 2004). Greater size of membership coupled with LaVey's push to centralize authority through his own status and appointed/bureaucratized priesthoods birthed schisms, similar to schisms in Protestant denominations (Liebman and Sutton 1988, 351). These CoS schisms began in the 1970s within the local grottos, notably the Stygian Grotto, and led to the largest schism in 1975, forming Aquino's Temple of Set.

In a response specifically to the Stygian and Temple of Set schisms, LaVey disbanded the grotto system and formed a looser organization with lower membership standards (Aquino 2002; Lyons 1988; Petersen 2016, 6). LaVey claimed the break with Aquino was an issue of authority (Lyons 1988, 126), whereas Aquino saw it as a disagreement over doctrine, with him favoring "Deistic Satanism". This is in line with the findings of others regarding the origins of schism (Starke and Dyck 1996; Liebman et al. 1988). There is, however, evidence in Aquino's own work that he rejected theism/deism initially, not seeing Satan as a deity until after the split (Aquino 2002, 122). There is also evidence that LaVey saw Satan theistically, leading to an inference that the Church of Satan at its height tolerated either opinion and this difference was only pronounced after the split with Aquino.

Firsthand accounts from Aquino highlight this argument further. There are examples of LaVey regarding Satan as a theistic entity:

I'm in league with the Devil as much as any mortal can possibly be. Let it be known that every man who delves into the Arts of Darkness must give the Devil and His Children the due their years of infamy deserve! Satan's Name will **not** be denied! Let **no** man shun or mock His Name who plays His winning game, or Despair, Depletion, and Destruction await! (LaVey in Aquino 2002, 414, capitalization and bold in original)

LaVey was also known to have signed and possessed an actual "pact with Satan" (Barton 2021, 150).

After the schism with Aquino, LaVey seemed to change his claims about Satan as a deity.

Magic is a way of life, not a divine right uniquely assumed by Mr. Aquino, or myself either. Let those who can, do. The Church of Satan is an organization dedicated to rational self-interest, indulgence, and a glorification of material and carnal elements. I held these beliefs in the beginning as I do now. If others re-interpret my organization and philosophy into a fundamental kind of supernaturalism, it stems from their needs to do so. (LaVey in Aquino 2002, 850).

Aquino likewise shifted in opinion. Before the split, Aquino seemed to waver on the issue of Satan as a deity, similar to LaVey.

We as individuals have no need for religion in the traditional sense, but we have no reason to force others to our way of thinking. If we did, we should fall into the same category as the theists. Then we should be the greatest of hypocrites, and we would have no true mandate to title ourselves Satanists. (Aquino 2002, 122)

After the split, Aquino expressed a different view.

Anton LaVey then asserts that he never claimed to hold anything resembling an ‘Infernal Mandate’ and that he regards his titles as High Priest and Exarch of Hell as ‘symbolic and not literal’...For years Anton LaVey has spoken and written of the Prince of Darkness as an intelligent entity- not necessarily anthropomorphic, but quite real. This conviction of his is quite evident in both the Satanic Bible and many other documents of record. If he now seeks to pretend that he never meant any of it, it is probably because that is the only way he could hope to excuse his betrayal of that entity...The Church of Satan did concern itself with experimentation in both formal and informal magic-being metaphysical assumptions and philosophical hypotheses for which there are not yet demonstrable scientific laws. The Temple of Set will carry this forward, because it is interesting, stimulating, educational, and just plain fun to do so. (Aquino 2002, 852).

It is easy to conclude that this issue was not philosophical until after the break. Aquino had a significant amount of power in CoS, essentially acting as a third or second in command to LaVey and running *The Cloven Hoof*. This arrangement went well for both until the centralization of priesthoods was brought to print. After, LaVey retrospectively said that Aquino abused his editorial power and that there were frequent editorial conflicts (Aquino 2002, 853). The schism, then, was likely due to authority issues. LaVey on the matter, in an account titled “Hoisted by His Own Patois,” explained:

As you know, Michael Aquino has severed his connection with the Church of Satan. I have been increasingly aware that Mr. Aquino has become too large for his trousers, and have attempted to subdue him as tactfully as possible. (LaVey in Aquino 2002, 850).

The Temple of Set, founded in 1975 by Aquino, could be considered a *sect* of CoS (Gallagher 2012, 15). This new sect was distinctive due to its *deistic interpretation*, which was unusual to the nascent niche. Aquino claimed that Satan himself came to him and commanded him to write *The Book of Coming Forth by Night* (Aquino 1987). Aquino later attempted to unmask the compositional history of *The Satanic Bible* to place the Temple of Set as the true successor to CoS (see Gallagher 2012, 12). This is a legitimization strategy (Petersen 2019 234–8). Aquino, however, accepted that LaVey’s *Satanic Bible* was *inspired* by Satan, so he could wholly deny its legitimacy. For example, CoS only had 1000–2000 active members at its height, but *The Satanic Bible* sold 60,000 copies over 28 editions prior to 1993, not to mention the free copies propagated online (Introvigne 2016, 320). Thus, Aquino accused LaVey of plagiarizing the majority of *The Satanic Bible*, even though Aquino

recognized that the assemblage was inspired by Satan and valuable to Satanists. This way Aquino could undermine Anton LaVey's authority in writing *The Satanic Bible* while accepting the legitimacy and usefulness of the text itself and linking the text to a proposed spiritual inheritance within the newly created Temple of Set.

Aquino also situated his church within the broader occult niche by appealing to what may be considered *occult fundamentalism*, an incorporation of more ritualistic, *deistic* types of worship (such as the use of kabbalah) based on established individuals within the broader niche such as Aleister Crowley. In comparison to the CoS and LaVey, which shunned what they called “occultnik-ism” (Barton 2021), the Temple of Set sought to reincorporate established historical occult ritual. This was a conservative measure to resist the unchecked ritualistic developments of LaVey and the CoS and bring the satanic movement into more agreement with other more established occult groups.

At the same time, this also served as a legitimation strategy that sets the Temple of Set at a higher level of stigma (using “conservatism” in the satanic niche) within the broader culture, as elaborate ritual is often stigmatized, in keeping with the expectations from religious economies expressed by Finke and Stark (2005). Altogether the Temple of Set has maintained a high level of tension and secrecy from the social order, forming its own separate subculture. This process follows the models explained by Stark and Bainbridge (1985), and Iannaccone (1988a, b). The total number of members (around 600) in the Temple of Set was highest at its founding which also is in line with sect theory, although the Temple of Set would even have its own schisms, perhaps hinting that the Temple of Set may have become a church in later years.

After the death of a charismatic leader LaVey in 1997, an internal power struggle within the CoS began between Blanche Barton and Karla LaVey (supported by Zeena LaVey and Diane Hegarty) (Barton 2021, 244–5). This led to another schism. A dispute over LaVey's will encouraged LaVey's daughter Karla to found the First Satanic Church (Introvigne 2016, 517). This follows the predictions of Sutton and Chaves (2004).

Under the new authority of Gilmore and Nadramia beginning in the early 2000s, the CoS sought to legitimize itself claiming the “true orthodox” interpretation of LaVeyan Satanism⁵ and highlighted that the new satanic movements online are not genuine (Lewis 2002, 5, 7; Barton 2021, 11). An example of this could be seen in new CoS high priest Peter Gilmore's recent attacks on the Satanic Temple and other satanic organizations for not understanding the philosophy behind Satanism (Introvigne 2016, 513; Barton 2021, 269). An excerpt from Gilmore's post on the CoS website titled “Map for the Misdirected” is helpful here:

The Church of Satan has not in any way strayed from the philosophy created by Anton LaVey and espoused in his various writings and interviews...Some

⁵ This claim of orthodoxy is controversial within [Satanism](#). Many modern Satanists view the current CoS negatively in comparison to the original Church under LaVey's leadership due to Gilmore's frequent attacks on other Satanists/groups, calling them “pseudo-Satanists” (see also Dyrendal, Lewis, and Petersen 2015).

misguided individuals (who want to call themselves Satanists and clearly don't understand the definition of this term which, let us not forget, was pioneered by the Church of Satan) currently advocate some sort of New-Age...mish-mash of ideas masquerading as philosophy...If these [various pseudo-Satanic rip-off groups] had something to offer, something original, they wouldn't be using our imagery and names to play the old 'bait and switch' game. (Gilmore in Barton, 2021, 282-3 parentheses/brackets in original)

Environment/Niche Impact

Media attention on the satanic movement, specifically the Manson Murders (Introvigne 2016, 556), erupted into a moral panic. This was also known as the "Satanic Panic", and controversies over "ritual abuses" lasted roughly from 1983–93. In California where CoS was headquartered, this began with the Raymond Buckey case in 1983 and ended with the Californian state legislature making satanic abuse illegal in 1993 (Hughes 2016, 698, 713; Reinhold 1990). The media focused on violence related to Satanism and drove most Satanic organizations underground, even though these organizations rejected violent Satanism. Most persecution was propagated by predatory psychologists and the Religious Right, with the consequences being as severe as individual loss of employment, local legal measures, unjustified lawsuits and accusations, stigma and harassment, and threats of violence. Barton described this time period:

Many people reading...may not understand how extensive the Satanic Panic was. It wasn't just a few isolated kooks; it was nationally pervasive...State legislators in Pennsylvania and Washington state actually introduced a proposed law against the practice of Satanism in 1989. That's pretty sobering. It would have made Satanism, a legally recognized religion since 1966, illegal in those two states, and any other states that chose to follow their fine example...it shows that some people were taking the Satanic criminal conspiracy as a serious threat to our security. Police were looking for evidence of an international criminal Satanic conspiracy that regularly practiced human and animal sacrifices as part of their sacraments, as well as child pornography, child molestation and rape as a way of producing more babies to kill in their unholy rites. Task forces were created in most cities in the nation- their sole purpose was addressing the Satanic problem in America. It wasn't just Cops for Christ who were creating this fear through their seminars (paid for by various cities so their investigators would be armed for this new diabolical threat) or the daily talk show saturation keeping the Panic at a fever-pitch. (Barton 2021, 173, parentheses in original)

This increased the tension of society toward Satanists elevated the costs of belonging to CoS, leading even LaVey to shirk from the national limelight⁶ (Flowers 1997, 198; Barton 2021, 177–8). This reduced the number of people willing to identify with Satanism. Thus, the satanic niche shrunk, and membership within CoS fell. Evidence of these changes can be seen in the discontinuance of *The Cloven Hoof* periodical, the majority of membership in CoS becoming nonactive or mail only, and Anton LaVey's bankruptcy proceedings indicating a lack of financial resources generated from members (Aquino 2002, Ch. 37; Lyons 1988; Flowers 1997, 178).

The moral panic ended during the 1990s as the media realized that most of it was unsubstantiated. Only 13 convictions came out of the decade-long movement (Introvigne 2016, 408), with most having nothing to do with Satanism. This change in public perception lowered tension and the associated costs of identification for members. As a result, the satanic niche substantially expanded. This change is seen by the high rate of ephemeral satanic organizations being founded online and the resurgence of the Church of Satan under current Peter Gilmore and Peggy Nadramia's influence. The internet could be argued to be an extreme form of an unregulated belief economy (Finke and Stark 2001, 178). The change in the religious market enabled the recent Church of Satan to reverse the transition from sect to church after LaVey.

As aforementioned, Peter Gilmore's recent attacks on the Satanic Temple seek to define stricter boundaries within the satanic niche. Strict boundaries of doctrine and authority put a religious organization into greater tension with the external society (Iannaccone 1988a, b), as well as with other satanic organizations. By producing greater tension within the satanic niche, Gilmore seeks to reassert the exclusivity of CoS membership (and create a specialist organization). This raises both cost and distinctiveness for members. The process thus generates higher membership commitment and capitalizes on a larger population available in the niche (due to online satanism) by lowering niche overlap through exclusivity. Religious organizations that *specialize* and show a high degree of fitness in their niche have better organizational outcomes (Scheitle 2007, 23).

The Church of Satan recently has shown a shift back toward more "sectarian," higher tension beliefs when compared to other organizations outside and within the satanic niche (which it now is attempting to dominate through specialization). Gilmore has increased tension with external society through a variety of ways: social media, publications, major satanic gatherings, etc. A good example of this can be

⁶ LaVey was also at the time hit with both physical and mental illness, likely caused due to his public split with Aquino, shrinking membership, and a bitter marital dispute with his companion, Diane Hegarty, which would later culminate in a legal dispute (Barton 2021, 162, 243, 230). Flowers attributes this removal from public life to the split with Aquino: "This event [the schism with Aquino] brought an end to the wider experiment known as the Church of Satan- as it, and its leader, returned to the reclusive existence deep within the recesses of the Black House...Post-1975 accounts of the Church and LaVey emphasized the idea that the organization had 'gone underground' or entered a 'second phase', but continued to be strong. Little more was heard of LaVey on the public scene until the mid-1980's." (Flowers 1997, 178, brackets added, quotes original). Barton attributes this removal to three very different reasons: to make LaVey available to law enforcement, to focus on reaching people more acclimated to his beliefs, and to focus on writing and composing for existing members (Barton 2021, 177–178).

found on the CoS official Twitter page, where Gilmore attacks religious beliefs (and individuals) directly on a near daily basis. By setting the CoS also at odds with the external society Gilmore begins utilizing niche preference (Ferguson 2014) by catering to the core constituency at higher tension with the rest of religious America, leading to greater attractiveness to would be converts and higher internal commitment. This strategy for growth by CoS is mirrored by the relative ease of acquiring active membership in CoS now in comparison to the 1970s. Today, entrance requires a one-time fee of \$200, photo ID, and completion of a questionnaire (Petersen 2016, 4).

Conclusions and Implications

The Church of Satan has had a tumultuous history of schism. Just as Christianity has splintered into Catholic, Orthodox, and hundreds of Protestant groups, Satanism has splintered. Figure 1 summarizes the major splits within the Church of Satan over its half-century history. Surprisingly, Satanism and its organizational forms have rarely been the subject of research for American sociologists of religion. This purpose of this study is to address this omission.

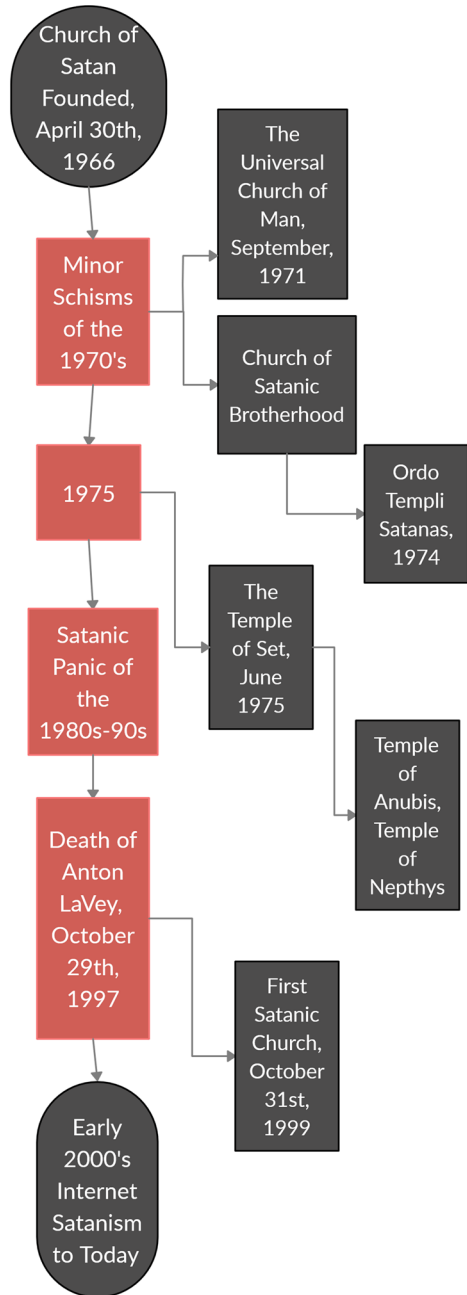
As demonstrated from the findings, religious economies and organizational ecology offer a valuable explanation for schism in the Church of Satan. As predicted by religious economies, the church-sect process was at work in the Church of Satan. The analysis reveals many temporal fluctuations in both the number of schismatic groups deriving from the Church of Satan as well as the size of membership. Tension and commitment were particularly important during the incipient years of the Church as well as the Satanic Panic. As the Church of Satan became more mainstream, sect-like schisms started to appear, many of which did not survive. The case with the Temple of Set and Aquino lends credence to Starke and Dyck's (1996) assertions that parent churches view schism as an issue of authority whereas schismatic sects view it as an issue of belief.

Concepts of niche fit and strictness also help explain schism in the Church of Satan. Through the idea of *occult and satanic niches*, it can be hypothesized that the Church of Satan performs a specific role within the broader religious demands curve and the occult; the Church of Satan dominates the satanic sub-niche. Its fit depended largely on its tension with society, which fluctuated in the past. During the Satanic Panic, for example, the satanic niche shrank substantially, intensifying competition between the remaining satanic organizations over dwindling membership resources. Even in this environment the CoS endured. Other satanic organizations do not last long within the satanic niche and are generally muscled out by CoS. Online groups have significantly lowered tension between Satanists and society leading to a broadening field. This is why CoS saw the need to elevate strictness in order to create higher membership commitment to attract new converts from the growing niche.

The conclusions from this study inform both the theoretical literature on schism as well as scholarly understanding of Satanism and its organizational forms. As demonstrated in this historical case study, the Church of Satan is as an interesting example of church/sect. Updating the study of organizational Satanism to the model

Fig. 1 A schism tree of the Church of Satan

Major Church of Satan Schisms, 1966-Today



of religious economies and organizational ecology will be beneficial to the field of Satanism studies, as it focuses on a uniquely Anglo/U.S. dominated population. Future researchers should focus on Karla LaVey's schism with the Church of Satan after the death of LaVey, and the modern Church of Satanic Brotherhood. The literature on Satanism has not covered these organizations at length. By giving more attention to it, we could gain additional knowledge about the effect of a charismatic leader's death and succession crisis on religious organizations outside Christianity, as Sutton and Chaves (2004) have noted.

This preliminary study of the Church of Satan deserves to be expanded. A likely starting place would be interviews with a snowball sample of CoS leaders and members. Connections could be made through emails listed online, as well as through key members who played a role in these schisms (expert opinions). A qualitative study on the Church of Satan is feasible, but it is contingent on the receptiveness of Church leaders and members—a group that tends to be secretive and aloof.

The Church of Satan is an important case for inquiry into the impact of religious economies and organizational ecology theories on religious organization outside of Christianity. Organizations that have politicized Satanism, such as the Satanic Temple, continue to be influential in state and national conversations over the role of church in state within the public sphere (Laycock 2020). Modern movements such as QAnon also seek to target Satanism and use it as a political rallying cry (Barton 2021, Foreword and 205–6). Scholars of religion should not underestimate the impact of the Church of Satan, its schismatic organizations, or the power of LaVeyan ideas on the internet, as their impact is global and noticeable. As Aquino (2002) finished his treatise on *the Church of Satan* with: “The Church of Satan is too significant to humanity to be unknown and unremembered. It grappled with intense questions of mankind's nature, capabilities, and consequence with a boldness and a tenacity never previously approached.” (435).

Acknowledgements My thanks to Kevin Dougherty, Gordon Melton, Paul Froese, Jason Burt, and Christopher Pieper for their assistance with this project. Finally, I am grateful to my anonymous peer reviewers for their thoughtful suggestions.

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