

MODERN VAMPIRES, BAYSIDER CATHOLICS, D&D, AND THE SATANIC TEMPLE

An Interview with Professor Joseph P. Laycock



WRSP: Your first book was *Vampires Today: The Truth About Modern Vampirism* (Praeger, 2009), and both there and elsewhere you've written about people identifying as vampires and the broader Otherkin movement. Could you tell us more about these movements and what led you to investigate them?

Prof Laycock: This was a "crime of opportunity." I was teaching high school in Atlanta when I learned of the existence of the Atlanta Vampire Alliance. I was really fascinated by this group because they were collecting data on their community, trying to understand why they weren't like other people. There would be no need for a group to do that if they were just playing at being vampires or delusional. I had planned to give a paper on this group to the American Academy of Religion (AAR), but Praeger approached me about a book contract. (Unlike me, they knew *Twilight*-mania was on the horizon). So this became my first book and I had 15 minutes of fame as a "vampire expert."

Basically, vampires feel they aren't like other people and they use the word "vampire" as a kind of shorthand to describe that difference. Some of them drink human blood (consensually) and report health issues if they go without blood for too long. A related group are the "Otherkin," who identify (on a metaphysical level) as non-human entities like angels, elves, or dragons. Previous scholarship on the vampire community was abysmal: It was basically part of the Satanic Panic literature, warning that vampires are a "cult" who hate Christians, commit murders, etc. Many of the vampires I met *were* Christians! That research was also getting published without ever having met a self-identified vampire, which seems pretty unacceptable. One reason the Atlanta Vampire Alliance was doing this research project was to raise the standard of evidence for making claims about the community.

I found that the vampire community members are neither mentally ill nor practicing a “religion” in the way that word is traditionally used. Our culture doesn’t have a box yet for this kind of identity. By studying vampires, I came to realize that the history of Western society is one of more and more options becoming available for thinking about and talking about ourselves. Foucault argued that the concept of “sexual orientation” was invented in the nineteenth century. And in only the last ten years or so I have seen an unprecedented number of students who identify as “non-binary.” Of course, I am not equating vampires with the LGBTQ community. But I argue that vampires are what Foucault called a “technology of self.” In this sense, they aren’t abnormal at all, but are part of much larger trend as our culture evolves.

WRSP: Your next monograph, *The Seer of Bayside: Veronica Lueken and the Struggle to Define Catholicism* (Oxford University Press, 2015), explored the Baysiders, a Roman Catholic group established in 1960s New York. Can you tell us a bit more about this group and why you decided to study them?

Prof. Laycock: *The Seer of Bayside* began as my dissertation. Beginning in the 1960s a woman from Bayside, Queens, New York named Veronica Lueken began to experience visions of the Virgin Mary. A group called simply Baysiders, followed her and collected her messages from Mary until her death in 1995. Most Baysiders were traditionalist Catholics reeling from the changes of Vatican II (1962–1965). Through Lueken, Mary condemned Vatican II and even said Pope Paul VI (papacy, 1963-1978) had been replaced by a KGB agent altered with plastic surgery. The Baysiders had a contentious relationship with the Diocese of Brooklyn, which eventually condemned Lueken’s visions as fraudulent. They still meet regularly in Flushing Meadows Park where they believe Mary is still present on Catholic holy days.

On one level, this was simply an ideal dissertation topic. There was enough data in archival sources to do the dissertation, but not so much that it would take years to complete. More importantly, no one had done a book on Bayside before. There’s a saying, “If you want to stand out in your field, pick an empty one.”

WRSP: One thing that I found interesting in *The Seer of Bayside* was your point that one of the Baysider groups said that they would not respond to your phone calls and emails, something you felt was possibly because they disapproved of your previous research topics. I wonder if you had any additional thoughts about the ways in which the topics that we as scholars cover results in other religious groups not wanting to communicate with us? Are there ways of overcoming this?

Prof Laycock: Negotiating entry with the Baysiders was extremely difficult. There are two rival groups active in Flushing Meadows Park. (They literally hold services a few meters apart and aggressively ignore each other). They notice which group you approach first. They also have a “fortress mentality” in which most institutions and media are corrupted and corrupting, so they can be mistrusting of outsiders. But the biggest issue is that the media has not been kind to them. Even academic researchers who interviewed them have been dismissive in their writing. This sort of “poisons the well” for future researchers seeking to engage with these groups. Of course, the answer can’t be to never say anything critical about the groups you study. But there are costs when academics or the media interview groups like the Baysiders just to get a quote for a derisive story about a kooky group.

I should also say here that I don't believe in "covert research." I could have feigned religious interest in the Baysiders, but this would be unethical. It could also contaminate the data and, when the book came out, they would feel that their paranoia was justified!

WRSP: In *The Seer of Bayside*, you describe a personal background in Roman Catholicism and also relate that as a scholar you are "drawn to groups that are understudied, misunderstood and maligned," something that is very evident in the choice of movements you have studied. What is it that draws you to "alternative" religions as a topic? Was this an interest that led you towards religious studies at university?

Prof Laycock: I think all academics *should* be studying things that are understudied. I think religious studies is profoundly perverse in that it discourages research on understudied groups. We love to moan about the "world religion" paradigm,* but the job market is king and if you don't study a so-called "major world religion," you won't get a job. Good advisors know that, so they discourage their PhD students from studying anything that hasn't already been written about for generations. Can you imagine if another discipline did this? Can you imagine a PhD in biology discovering a new kingdom of animals at the bottom of the ocean and being told not to study it? That you can only get a job if you focus on one of the six or seven accepted animal kingdoms?

When I wrote my first book, I was a high school teacher and I figured I would never get a job as a professor anyway. When I started my PhD I tried to market myself as an "Americanist," but the Americanists never seemed interested in the topics I was studying. I kept being told that I studied "new religious movements" (NRMs). That annoyed me because I never made a conscious decision to be a scholar of new religious movements—others just labeled me as such. And, of course, there are no jobs for NRM scholars. So I fell on the Baysiders as a topic almost out of defiance. It was sort of like, "Go ahead, I dare you to tell me the Roman Catholic Church is an NRM."

I have since given in and accepted the label of NRM scholar. And I now believe research on NRMs is one of the most important things religion scholars do. The groups we study are the ones most in need of "worldview translators,"* the ones whose rights are the most vulnerable, and the ones where—as with the Branch Davidians—there are preventable episodes of violence.

* = WRSP: The World Religions Paradigm is a framework for studying religion that only focuses on five or six religions, chosen for their numerical size and/or influence upon Western history (i.e. Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and sometimes Sikhism).

* = WRSP: The term "worldview translator" was used in by Phillip Charles Lucas, "How Future Wacos Might Be Avoided," in *From the Ashes: Making Sense of Waco*, ed. James R. Lewis (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1994), 209-12, to refer to the role that religious studies scholars could have played in the negotiations between the FBI and the Branch Davidians in the conflict outside Waco in 1993.

WRSP: You have also looked at moral panics over role-playing games, primarily in your book *Dangerous Games: What the Moral Panic over Role-Playing Games Says about Play, Religion, and Imagined Worlds* (University of California Press, 2015). Could you tell us more about this project?

Prof Laycock: I grew up playing Dungeons and Dragons (D&D) in Texas in the 1980s. I basically lived through *Stranger Things*, minus the monsters and psychic powers. As a child, I kept encountering authority figures who were certain my favourite pastime was evil and involved Satanic worship. I knew empirically that these claims were absurd. Looking back, this was my first inkling that adults acted like they had all the answers but actually had no idea what they were talking about. They were ignorant and frightened—traits they attributed to children.

I knew for a while I wanted to write *something* about religion and D&D, but I wasn't ready to write this book until I got my PhD. This book tries to explain why conservative Christians focused on this game (as opposed to thousands of other social issues). D&D was created by two devout Christians and I also found it odd that when Christian critics found Christian elements in the game (cleric spells with names like "atonement," for example) they interpreted this as evidence of Satanism. I conclude that on some level this was what Freud called "the narcissism of small differences." In convincing themselves they were fighting demons and Satanic cults, these conservative Christians were playing a game very much like D&D. They were the ones lost in their game of heroic fantasy! But I also think D&D resembles a religion in that it involves human beings joined together in a state of play creating an alternate reality. I think that's as good a definition of religion as any: An alternate reality brought about through the collective effort of human beings engaged in a unique mode of communication and activity. I also think on some level, the conservative Christians were right to fear D&D. Antonio Gramsci argued that the ability to imagine things as being different than they are creates a radical form of autonomy that makes people harder to control. So D&D is a problem if you're trying to raise a generation of children that will remake society in your image.

WRSP: Your most recent monograph, *Speak of the Devil: How The Satanic Temple is Changing the Way We Talk About Religion* (Oxford University Press, 2020), is devoted to The Satanic Temple, a U.S.-based organisation that has attracted quite a bit of attention over the past few years. Could you give us a brief introduction to what The Satanic Temple is? What led to your decision to study it?

Prof Laycock: The Satanic Temple (TST) is a political and religious group of Satanists. They are essentially atheistic but regard the Satan of Milton and the Romantics as a powerful symbol for their values of resistance to arbitrary authority, reason, autonomy, etc. They are known for "stunts" (they might say "experiments" or "provocations") designed to change the conversation about topics like abortion or the separation of church and state. I think a lot of people first noticed them when they offered to donate a statue of Baphomet (a goat-headed deity) to be displayed at the Oklahoma state Capitol in 2014. Their argument was that The Ten Commandments monument placed at the state Capitol was illegal (the Oklahoma Supreme Court agreed with them on this), but that if they had a Satanic monument as well, the monuments would no longer constitute an illegal government endorsement of religion.

I first interviewed TST leader Lucien Greaves about the proposed monument for *Religion Dispatches* and basically asked him, "Are you serious about this?" It turned out, TST was pretty serious! The media loves TST and I kept covering their various campaigns and projects. As I did so, I watched the group evolve from basically a handful of political gadflies into a community with sincerely held beliefs, rituals, etc. I started to get annoyed when people who didn't know anything about this group told me they were "obviously trolls." I was also very interested in whether the things they were doing were having any effect. Were they changing laws? Were they getting people to think about the First Amendment differently? In many cases, they succeeded in getting their opponents to publicly admit that they did *not* believe in religious freedom and separation of church and state—they believed in Christian hegemony, but not rights for groups like The

Satanic Temple. So my book was intended as a definitive history of this group and how it formed, but also an analysis of the way TST has shaped public discourse about ideas like “religion” and “religious freedom.” That’s why the title is “Speak of the Devil” and not “The Satanic Temple.”

WRSP: Since *Speak of the Devil* was published, the U.S. Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade* on June 24, 2022, with significant ramifications for abortion access in many states. Given that abortion access was already an issue that The Satanic Temple was very involved with, have you observed the group changing or being significantly impacted by the court decision? Do you think this decision (and others that may follow on topics like same-sex marriage) will have a long-term impact on The Satanic Temple?

Prof Laycock: This is a big can of worms! This really begins with the 2014 decision *Burwell v. Hobby Lobby* where the Supreme Court ruled that the retail company Hobby Lobby was exempt from certain requirements of the Affordable Care Act because of their religious beliefs. The Satanic Temple said, “If Hobby Lobby can be exempt from some laws ensuring access to contraception, we should be exempt from laws restricting abortion access.” They filed a series of lawsuits in Missouri (and then Texas) arguing that state restrictions on abortion violated their sincerely held belief that one’s body is inviolable. Missouri and Texas both had 1) laws that made obtaining an abortion extremely difficult, and 2) Religious Freedom Restoration Act (RFRA) laws that essentially require the state to accommodate religions if they possibly can.

So far, no court has actually answered the basic question raised by TST: Does religious freedom mean Satanists can get abortion on demand, just as Hobby Lobby can be exempt from parts of the Affordable Care Act? Instead, their cases have been thrown out on procedural grounds. In one case, a judge sat on the case for nine months and then told the plaintiff (a pregnant Satanist) she no longer had standing to sue because she was no longer pregnant. TST created an “abortion ritual” that has to be completed in a certain amount of time, in an effort to prevent this sort of loophole.

TST has no plans to back down now that *Roe* was fallen, but it will change the situation in several ways. First, TST is nervous to approach this Supreme Court, which seems amenable to a Christian nationalist agenda. Taking a case to this Supreme Court could result in a really radical ruling, setting a disastrous precedent.

Second, RFRA laws require the government to provide a “compelling interest” to restrict religious freedom. When abortion was recognized as a right, Missouri had to claim its restrictions on abortion were necessary so that women could make an “informed decision about a medical procedure.” Now they no longer need to make such a pretence: They can simply state that abortion is murder and the state has a compelling interest in preventing it. This could mean TST members have no more right to get an abortion than to perform a human sacrifice. (In theory, TST could argue that claiming abortion is murder is itself a religious belief and therefore a violation of the establishment clause.)

Third, people are reasonably scared of what a post-*Roe* America will look like and some have turned to TST. This has resulted in both more interest in TST and more criticism. On social media, some people have wrongly claimed that by becoming a Satanist, you can legally get abortion on demand. Some of TST’s long-time critics are furious about this and claim TST is putting pregnant women in danger.

WRSP: Another of the topics that has attracted your interest has been spirit possession and exorcism, resulting in two volumes that you have edited, *Spirit Possession around the World: Possession, Communion, and Demon Expulsion across Cultures* (ABC-CLIO, 2015) and *The Penguin Book of Exorcisms* (Penguin Classics, 2020). What do you find particularly interesting about this and are you pursuing the topic further?

Prof Laycock: As a PhD student I wrote a paper on *The Exorcist* that became one of my first publications. Then ABC-CLIO tapped me to edit an encyclopaedia on possession and exorcism across cultures. That's a pretty good introduction to the topic! I created a course on exorcism to attract students to our new Major in religious studies. This led to some media interest and eventually an invitation from Penguin to do another book.

I find it fascinating that spirit possession occurs in nearly all cultures. Of course, cultures disagree profoundly on what exactly happens when people enter a state of possession and whether it is a good thing or a bad thing. In the end I am interested in possession because it shows that we as human beings really don't understand ourselves. As inheritors of the Enlightenment, Westerners are led to believe we are autonomous individuals with distinct personalities that are solid and consistent. But this isn't really true. We can effectively be different people depending on our mood, and especially the social situation we find ourselves in. We adopt social roles and conform with others without even realizing we're doing it. Spirit possession can be one way of talking about these changes, as can various diagnoses of so-called "dissociative disorders." But both these explanations assume there is some stable personality that is "really you" to begin with. In the end, I think we don't understand the spirits because we don't understand ourselves!

WRSP: What has the feedback been like following publication of your various books? Have you had much of a response, for instance, from The Satanic Temple, the Baysiders, or the modern Vampires? Moreover, what has the response been like from other academics? Do you feel that those scholars of religion who focus on "mainstream" movements have been receptive?

Prof Laycock: Overall, I would say the feedback has been very positive. I wrote these books with other scholars in mind, and they have generally spoken well of them. Several PhD students had *Speak of the Devil* on their exam lists, which is about the biggest honor I can imagine. I also still have a lot of friends among these communities. The Baysiders are a contentious group and the first two comments on Amazon both trashed the book—one for implying Veronica Lueken might not be a mentally ill con artist, and the other for implying she might not be a genuine Marian seer sent to save the world from divine chastisement. So I guess I did my job right!

Some right-wing troll heard my interview about *Speak of the Devil* on the New Books Network and wrote to tell me I'm "a progressive liberal satanist chucklehead douchebag." More recently I have received some attacks from former members of The Satanic Temple. They claim the group they joined is actually a greedy cult and that despite being publicly progressive it secretly supports anti-Semitism and the alt-right. Even though I discussed many of these accusations in my book, these critics feel that if I'm not with them, I'm against them. Therefore, I must be a shill for the group I study. I actually find these accusations perversely flattering. Nobody is anybody in NRM studies until they have been accused of being a "cult apologist" by ex-members of the group they study. So I guess I've made it!

WRSP: You've been writing for *Religion Dispatches* since 2009. What do you see as its role in disseminating information about religious topics to a wider readership? Do you think scholars of religion as a whole are doing enough to engage wider audiences outside the academy?

Prof Laycock: Two of my mentors were Diane Moore at Harvard and Stephen Prothero at Boston University, both of which have called attention to the dire need for religious literacy. The media is largely part of the problem here. For example, when Notre Dame Cathedral caught fire in 2019, a priest told the media he had rescued "the body of Christ" from the burning building. *The New York Times* reported that the priest had rescued a *statue* of Jesus, because what else could "the body of Christ" refer to? So I think it's really important that scholars have an outlet to discuss contemporary issues involving religion. I've also written for a lot of outlets and I find the editors at *Religion Dispatches* the easiest to work with.

I think religion scholars are more open to the public than ever before with podcasts, YouTube channels, etc. But I also think there is still an attitude that these efforts are working against your career instead of with it. A media article that informs the public about an important issue doesn't carry the same weight as a dense academic monograph that costs \$200 and will only sell a dozen copies.

WRSP: Since 2016 you have been co-editor of *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions*, and in 2019 you also became co-chair of the American Academy of Religion's New Religious Movements Unit. What do you see as the importance of having the study of new religions as a distinct sub-field and where do you think it currently stands in relation to the study of religion as a whole?

Prof Laycock: As I've already said, I feel like NRM studies chose me more than I chose it. NRM studies emerged out of "the cult wars" when there was a moral panic that "cults" possessed secret techniques of brainwashing and were taking over America in the form of an "information disease." Expert witnesses were making a fortune testifying about the dangers of brainwashing and religious freedom as we know it seemed to hang in the balance. NRM studies began as a group of religion scholars and sociologists who sought to combat this nonsense.

Since the cult wars, NRM studies has tried to find a new purpose. One of the important functions of the AAR group and *Nova Religio* is to platform research on emerging religious movements in the Global South: Africa, Asia, and South America are teeming with movements that no one else is paying attention to. We also provide a space for research on all manner of magical traditions, parody religions, entheogenic practices, and other sundry religious phenomenon that have fallen through the cracks of the world religion paradigm.

But I also think history is repeating itself and that the cult wars are beginning anew. QAnon and the January 6 attack on the Capitol in Washington, D.C. were so bizarre and so scary that the public was once again turned to the facile narrative of "brainwashing" to explain this behaviour. Figures like Steve Hassan, who was a deprogrammer in the 1970s, have resurfaced as "cult experts" who can explain "the cult of Trump." (To be clear, I think Trump-ism is both toxic and dangerous, but this is all the more reason to take a nuanced, rational approach to its causes.) Adding to this problem is a glut of sensationalist media about "cults." It feels like everyone with access to Wikipedia and a microphone is starting a podcast about cults these days. It's a stark example of the Dunning-Kruger effect in which incompetence leads to a feeling of confidence. These podcasts often amount to little more than pornography describing the abuses of cult leaders, but there is never thought given to what makes a group a "cult" or even whether this is a valid

category. Furthermore, the deprogrammers and anti-cultists are much more adept than NRM scholars at getting their message out in the popular media. So I think we will need the wisdom of old school NRM scholars once again.

WRSP: Are there topics to do with new and “alternative” religions more broadly, or with the groups that you have studied specifically, that you feel are in crying need of more research?

Prof Laycock: One thing NRM studies has inherited from the world religions paradigm is a focus on organizations. We still ask questions like “Who is the founder of this religion? How many members does it have?” etc. But with the internet, we are dealing less with organizations and more with networks, ideas, and (dare I say it) *memes*. These are cultural flows that are methodologically much harder to study. How do you do an ethnography of Tik-Tok where everyone has a unique algorithm feeding them videos catered to their viewing history? How do you study subversive groups that meet primarily on the dark web? But I think such work is important so that scholars can study things like QAnon that have serious consequences for democracy.

More broadly, I think what is being called “Conspiratoriality” needs to be taken more seriously. Kooky conspiracy theories are fun to talk about, but these ideas have now entered the mainstream. I think a lot of the ideas associated with QAnon begin as “play,” then somehow metastasize into belief, and finally conviction. How exactly does one go from talking to their friends on Facebook to attacking a pizza parlor with an assault rifle looking for Hillary Clinton’s satanic torture dungeon? In some ways I think religious studies is uniquely suited to answer this question and in other ways I think it is unprepared. Religious studies scholars understand the power of belief, but not enough about where new beliefs come from—especially in an age where “prophets” flourish on sites like 8chan.

WRSP: Do you have any projects on the horizon that we should be looking out for?

Prof Laycock: I have been kicking around an idea for a book on hoaxes. Charles Fort once said it is possible that all religions began as hoaxes. I am not interested in making claims that certain religions were founded by con artists or false prophets or anything of that sort. Rather I am interested in the collective nature of a hoax in which multiple people construct an alternate version of reality. Many of the exorcism cases I studied clearly began with adolescents engaged in play—but once religious leaders labeled that play as demonic possession, that interpretation became a social fact. It was thereafter impossible for the adolescent to be anything other than demonically possessed. So the people labeling the play are in a way more the authors of the hoax than the players themselves. I think there is something important going on in these cases that can help us understand how human beings go about performing the social construction of reality.

Professor Laycock, thank you for participating in the WRSP Forum!

**This interview is also being made available at the personal blog of the interviewer,
Dr Ethan Doyle White (<http://ethandoylewhite.blogspot.com/>)**

Professor Joseph P. Laycock is an associate professor of religious studies at Texas State University. He received his PhD from Boston University in 2012 and has published on a wide variety of subjects. His publications include the monographs *Vampires Today* (2009), *The Seer of Bayside* (2015), *Dangerous*

Games (2015), Speak of the Devil (2020), and New Religious Movements: The Basics (2022), as well as the edited volumes, Spirit Possession around the World (2015), The Penguin Book of Exorcisms (2020), The Religion Matters Reader (2021), and Religion, Culture and the Monstrous (2021). He also writes for Religion Dispatches and is co-editor of Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions.

WRSP Interviewer:

Dr Ethan Doyle White