

Editorial: Any sympathy for the devil out there?

Alan Choate

Originally Published: February 7, 2016 6 a.m.

Hail Satan!

(Don't stone me yet. I have a point.)

I thought the Arizona Legislature was our only public body that really likes doing things to get sued. Nope - turns out the Phoenix City Council has quaffed that peculiar Elixir of Boneheadedness too, and all because of a group that wanted to give the invocation at the Feb. 17 council meeting.

Sure, the group is the Satanic Temple, which is bound to get some attention. The full-fledged freakout that followed would be hilarious if it didn't expose so much intolerance, as well as a fundamental misunderstanding of what religious freedom in this country really means.

Hail S.A.T.A.N.!

(That is, the Society of Agnostics, Thinkers, Atheists and Nonbelievers. I don't know if such a group exists, but if anyone wants to form it, feel free to use the name. Just give me proper credit.)

Members of the Satanic Temple went to the city of Phoenix and were approved to offer the invocation at the start of the council meeting. Representatives of many religions have done so over the years - Christians, of course, but also Jews, Muslims and Sikhs, according to news accounts.

Once this particular development was reported, some people reacted as though naked people with curved knives were going to sacrifice a black lamb in the council chambers and, you know, use a cauldron to summon demon-beastlings that would seize the minds of the innocent and make them ... do, uh, "politically correct" things. Or something.

Oh, my. The horror.

I am neither a conjurer nor a mystic. I do not practice demonology. I don't know what the objectors thought. All I know is that naysayers were possessed by an unconstitutional presence - and it was not the D.E.V.I.L.

(That's the Drinkers of Extremely Varied & Interesting Libations. Again, I don't know if such a group exists. But it should.)

This is Constitution 101. The First Amendment lays out religious freedom, specifying that government shall not establish an official religion in America. Be as religious or nonreligious as you want, but when it comes to our governmental units - councils, legislatures, schools, Congress, the presidency - stick to human-made concerns, such as roads and sewers and math curricula and the military and treaties and the tax code.

Besides, don't religions have more important matters to address? If the city of Kingman adds more people to the wastewater system, does God really need to be involved?

The Satanic Temple folks say they don't literally worship Satan. Here's what member Stu de Haan told the Arizona Republic:

"We come from a place of reason over superstition and supernatural. That's our message. Our set of beliefs revolve around reason and science and not harming any human being. We adhere to those. Therefore it is a religion.

"The city council doesn't get to pick and choose religions."

Go tell it on the mountain, good sir.

As for that invocation, which the Phoenix City Council has taken steps to quash - steps that could get them sued - here's what Satanic Temple member Michelle Shortt said she planned to say, as read to FOX 10 Phoenix news. If you follow religious freedom cases, you may have seen this before:

"Let us stand now unbowed and unfettered by arcane doctrines born of fearful minds and darkened times. Let us embrace the Luciferian impulse to eat of the tree of knowledge and dissipate our blissful and comforting delusions of old. Let us demand that individuals be judged for their concrete actions, not their fealty to arbitrary social norms and illusory categorizations. Let us reason our solutions with agnosticism in all things, holding fast only to that which is demonstrably true. Let us stand firm against any and all arbitrary authority that threatens the personal sovereignty of one or all. That which will not bend must break, and that which can be destroyed by truth must not be spared its demise. It is done. Hail Satan."

That takes less than a minute to speak out loud. The Phoenix council could've just let the statement be said and moved on to the mundane management of a municipality.

Instead, they went full L.U.C.I.F.E.R.

(Looking for Universal Control, Initiating Fear-Exacerbated Response.)

Don't worry about starting that group.

It already exists.