

A Satanist Hugs a Christian in Rural Mississippi

On Friday, April 5th, seven volunteer members of The Satanic Temple (TST) and I traveled to the small rural town of Morton, Mississippi, where we planned to gather at a cemetery near Morton High School to talk to the local community about the harms of corporal punishment, as well as TST's religious objections to it. As Campaign Director of The Satanic Temple's "Protect Children Project," my mission is to protect students from corporal punishment, seclusion, restraint, and denial of bathroom access in public schools. Through the Freedom of Information Act, I discovered that students were hit 641 times during the 2022-2023 school year in Scott County School District, the most of any school district in Mississippi. At Morton High School, students were hit 186 times (in a student body of just 461) for minor infractions such as tardiness, dress code violations, and profanity.

We were taking a risk going where we were certainly not welcome, and our religion might be seen as having dark ulterior motives other than protecting students from harmful practices. We are used to threats and accusations of being "evil." Last December, a failed Mississippi politician traveled to Iowa and destroyed a Satanic holiday display TST had erected in the state capitol, an act of malicious vandalism -- he is now being charged with a hate crime. On April 8th, an Oklahoma man threw a homemade pipe bomb onto the porch of Satanic Temple headquarters in Salem, MA -- he is now in custody.

We pulled up at 7 am and saw a large opposition group already gathered at the cemetery. Feeling surrounded, we unloaded and began setting up our materials and signs in the chill morning air. But then a surprising thing happened. Person after person from the Christian group approached us in an apprehensive yet friendly manner, affirming our right to be there and welcoming us with warm handshakes. There was an atmosphere of Christian love instead of intolerance, respectful of our views even as they disagreed. We responded with equal respect, letting them know we weren't there to attack their faith but to talk about the harmful policies of the school district that were unintentionally hurting students.

Medical experts and social scientists widely agree that corporal punishment causes great harm and produces no benefits. Just last year, the American Academy of Pediatrics published a policy statement concluding that "The use of corporal punishment in schools is not an effective or ethical method for management of behavior concerns and causes harm to students...corporal punishment in all school settings [should] be abolished in all states by law and replaced by alternative forms of student behavior management."

Confronted by the community, I realized that quoting data points wasn't effective when questioning their way of life, passed down through generations. It's hard for anyone to accept that your parents were wrong to hit you as a child, and equally challenging to stomach the idea that paddling your kids caused harm, even in the spirit of tough love. Most corporal punishment, at home and in school, is done with the mistaken idea it will improve children's behavior. And it's all many of these people have ever known.

Almost immediately, people began opening up to us, demonstrating the importance of their faith. I listened carefully and with empathy, as folks shared stories of surviving substance abuse, broken homes, and mental health challenges and finding strength in their religious community. I shared how members of The Satanic Temple fight addiction through peer support (TST's Sober Faction) and find self-empowerment in the 7 Tenets. They may worship a literal God, and we honor a symbolic Satan, but our deeply held values are closer than one might think. I'll never forget one interaction: A big man approached, shyly asking to speak to me. "I used to be a hateful person," he said as tears began to roll down his cheeks, "I was racist; I hated homosexuals. But becoming a Christian helped me learn to accept people's differences...I hope it doesn't offend you, but I just want to say I'll be praying for you."

We hugged, and I told him he should be proud of changing his life for the better through the help of religion. Sincerely, we Satanists feel the same way. The more we talked and connected with the crowd, the simmering tension dissolved. There was a compassionate sense of wanting to be understood and genuinely wanting to understand each other.

Being a Satanist can allow you to harness a counterintuitive communication superpower. By invoking the name of Satan and then subverting expectations by being reasonable, respectful, and kind, you create profound cognitive dissonance that cracks people open to let some light in. And where there is light, new seeds of knowledge and understanding can grow. In Morton, Mississippi, I felt cracked open, too.

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