



JOSEPH P. LAYCOCK

THE *Seer* OF
BAYSIDE

VERONICA LUEKEN
& THE STRUGGLE TO
DEFINE CATHOLICISM

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*Veronica Lueken and the Struggle
to Define Catholicism*



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OUR LADY—“There sits in your country masters of great magnitude! Recognize the Grand Masters in control! As it was in the time of My Son, they now control your country. A synagogue of Satan is covering your land.”⁴⁷

Folklorist Bill Ellis, in his book on Satanic conspiracy theories, explains that “Mr. Rockefeller” refers to then vice president Nelson Rockefeller, a man who became vice president without being elected. Rockefeller was previously implicated as being near the pinnacle of a Satanic conspiracy in such sources as Canadian Catholic William Guy Carr’s *Pawns in the Game* (1958).⁴⁸ Lueken was likely exposed to Carr’s ideas by the Pilgrims of Saint Michael. An article in the group’s publication, *Michael Journal*, describes *Pawns in the Game* as “the best single work available on the evil conspiracy that has been responsible for the devastating wars and continuing conflicts of the past century, and which is now close to its ultimate goal of total world domination through a dictatorial One World Government.”⁴⁹ Carr’s theories also resonated with the anti-communist zeal shared by many American Catholics in the 1950s. Robert Welch, the founder of the John Birch Society, was particularly impressed with Carr’s theories. He paraphrased Carr’s ideas about the Illuminati in *American Opinion*, the society’s magazine. According to Welch, half the members of the John Birch Society were Catholic.⁵⁰ Thus, the inclusion of Nelson Rockefeller alongside the imposter pope in an emerging pattern of the octopus of evil represents a further process of assembling diverse elements into a coherent whole.

Stalking the Son of Sam

Lueken’s involvement with the investigation of the Son of Sam murders in 1977 is a particularly interesting chapter of Baysider history. Between July 1976 and July 1977, serial killer David Berkowitz, “the Son of Sam,” perpetrated eight shooting incidents across New York City, killing six people and wounding seven more. Berkowitz taunted police and media with a series of cryptic and lurid letters. Both during the killing spree and after his arrest the media spoke of little else. There remains a widespread conspiracy theory that Berkowitz had not acted alone but was part of a network of criminal Satanists. At one point Berkowitz confessed to this

narrative, but in a 2013 interview he explained that he had never had an accomplice or been part of a cult.⁵¹ It now seems that Baysiders had a significant role in advancing and legitimizing the theory that Berkowitz did not act alone.

A Bronx homicide detective named Henry “Hank” Cinotti is credited with sparking speculation that Berkowitz had an accomplice. Cinotti was not only a Baysider, but served as one of Lueken’s bodyguards for ten years.⁵² In 1979, a photographer named Walter Karling from the *North Queens Observer* attended a vigil in Flushing Meadows. In an attempt to get a better shot of Lueken, he climbed over a rope set up around the monument by shrine guards. This led to a brief physical altercation with bodyguards, apparently led by Cinotti. Karling and his editor, Rick Moran, threatened to take the group to court for infringing on their freedom of the press. Moran published a series of negative articles about the Baysiders and claimed that this led to retaliation in the form of phone calls threatening the lives of his family members. He also alleged that several police and firemen were zealous Baysiders and that they had formed a nationwide “intelligence network” for Lueken’s security.⁵³ Presumably, this network included Cinotti.

In 1980, the New York Police Department called a hearing regarding Cinotti’s investigation into Berkowitz’s possible involvement in Satanism. Cinotti was placed on clerical assignment as punishment for what the department considered to be an embarrassing waste of resources. While reporters and detectives were seeking evidence of a criminal Satanic network, Lueken offered tips to some of the investigators and even implicated one of her neighbors in the murders. This episode shows how Baysiders collaborated to rapidly incorporate new developments into an existing narrative of conspiracy and spiritual warfare. It is also an early example of law enforcement becoming entangled in conspiracy theories advanced by conservative Christian groups—a phenomenon that became increasingly common throughout the 1980s.⁵⁴

As the murders were happening, Lueken described the Son of Sam as a manifestation of supernatural evil. A locution on February 10, 1977, stated, “My children, the man you call ‘Sam’ is satan in a human body. He has powers beyond what most human beings could understand.”⁵⁵ In the 1970s and 1980s, many Americans believed in an organized network

of criminal Satanism. Lueken frequently referred to the threat of Satanic cults. In fact, one of her earliest public locutions given in August 1970 mentioned Satanic cults conducting human sacrifices.⁵⁶ A locution delivered in 1985 reported that no fewer than thirteen Satanic covens were active on Long Island within a sixty mile radius of each other and practicing human sacrifice.⁵⁷ These cults represented one more tentacle of the octopus of evil.

For Baysiders, the threat of Satanists was linked to the liturgical changes of the modern mass. The Baysider “Blue Book” contains an article, “Satanists Seek Holy Eucharist to Defile It.” The article concerns Mike Warnke, an evangelical minister whose book *The Satan Seller* (1972) describes how he was once a high priest in command of some 1,500 devil worshippers in Southern California before his conversion to Christianity. In 1992, Warnke’s claims of involvement with Satanism were debunked as fiction by the evangelical magazine *Cornerstone*.⁵⁸ But for twenty years *The Satan Seller* was a seminal text for a national panic over Satanism. Warnke identified as an evangelical Protestant but explained that the new Catholic practice of communion in the hand was a gift for Satanists. He explained, “One thing that Catholics and devil worshippers have in common: they both believe that Jesus Christ is really and truly present in the Holy Eucharist.” Warnke described how during his days as a high priest of Satan, he would regularly send Satanists to attend Catholic mass in order to steal consecrated communion wafers, “Then we step on It to desecrate It, and pass It around while drinking blood or whatever.... If the Bishops approve Communion in the hand, it will be even easier to palm the Wafer. I don’t think Communion in the hand is a good idea.”⁵⁹

Several of Lueken’s messages also warn that communion received in the hand facilitates desecration of the host by Satanists. More recently, David Martin described communion in the hand as “the greatest thing that ever happened” to Satanists. These rumors are actually a revival of medieval stories about host desecration in which Jews, rather than Satanists, sought to acquire and desecrate holy wafers.⁶⁰ In their modern incarnation, host desecration stories serve to integrate such diverse elements as Catholic liturgical reform, youth counterculture, and stories of Satanic serial killers, into a single coherent narrative.

Maury Terry was an investigative reporter working with the Queens police force. After Berkowitz was arrested, Terry became convinced that there was a national Satanic organization to which both Berkowitz and Charles Manson had connections. His search for evidence brought him into contact with many people making dubious allegations about criminal Satanism. In his book, *The Ultimate Evil*, he describes how Steve Dunleavy, a columnist for the *New York Post*, was regularly receiving anonymous phone calls and letters from a woman who provided detailed accounts of a Satanic cult to which Berkowitz had allegedly belonged. The calls continued for five months and provided some very specific information about the most recent murders. The source also named the cult's leader, an accountant who maintained two addresses: one in Forest Hills, where two of the murders had occurred, and one at 583 Van Duzer Street in Staten Island. The Staten Island address was described as a "major cult safe house" where black masses were conducted. In one phone call the mystery source mentioned she was leaving town for fear of her life. With no other leads, Terry and his associates decided to investigate these claims. Only after investing substantial time and energy on this lead did Terry discover that the mystery caller was Lueken, who at that time was living on 577 Van Duzer Street, in a room rented from one Erna Wagner.⁶¹

Jim Mitteager, a journalist who had previously worked for the New York City Police Department, drove past the alleged cult safe house and ran the license plate numbers of any cars that visited. Eventually, Terry and Mitteager met a bartender named Jim Duffy, who, in an astounding coincidence, had rented a room at 583 Van Duzer Street while he attended Wagner College in Staten Island. He identified the owner of the house as John Meehan. Duffy agreed to accompany the journalists to the house and get them inside. The alleged cult safe house turned out to be home to a normal middle-aged couple and their son. When Terry asked if they had ever had any trouble with neighbors, John Meehan described a "strange woman" in a long robe who had regularly come by to stare at the house. At one point she had stopped their son, saying, "I know who you are and what you're involved with. Don't think you're going to get away with it."⁶² The strange woman—who turned out to be Lueken—had moved out of the neighborhood a few months prior.

This tip led Terry and Mitteager to Wagner's home, where Arthur and Veronica had recently been living in a rented room. Terry noted that the home "was filled with statues of various saints and the Blessed Virgin." Wagner gave the investigators a letter from her former tenant, who was once again living in Bayside. Terry described the letter as "rife with crosses and symbols." It outlined an elaborate plot connecting the Son of Sam to a cult on Van Duzer Street. Lueken also described being on a "secret mission" for the police.⁶³ This claim had some basis in truth, as Lueken did have several friends in law enforcement, including detective Cinotti. She was working "with" police, but not in an official capacity.

Terry and Mitteager next went to Lueken's house in Bayside, using the return address on the letter they had examined. Veronica would not leave her bedroom, but Arthur let the reporters in and answered some questions. Terry quotes Dunleavy after learning his mystery caller was Lueken, "The whole thing is Lueken's hallucination. ... She sounded believable; she really did." Terry answered, "To her, it probably *seems* real. That's why she was so convincing." This was not the end of Terry's dealings with Lueken. In 1979, Terry was still seeking evidence for his theory that Berkowitz had been part of an organized Satanic cult. One day, he received an anonymous call providing the same details that had been given to Dunleavy a year before about an accountant who was really a Satanic cult leader, etc. Terry cut her off declaring, "Cut it out, Veronica. I know just who you are. I was at your house last year, but you ducked under the bed." Lueken hung up, but later called back and apologized, explaining that she had "made a mistake." Lueken had surveilled the Meehans' house and had gotten a friend of the Meehans' son confused with the accountant that she claimed was Berkowitz's accomplice. Arthur picked up the phone to support Veronica's explanation.

It is difficult to discern how exactly Lueken came to believe that her neighbor was involved in the Son of Sam murders. Significantly, Lueken never claimed to have received this information through revelation. Instead she felt she had detected a Satanic criminal through her own investigation and by speaking with her sizable network of contacts. She explained to Terry, "People come to me, they confide in me. That's how I know about the cult." Lueken also directed Terry to Cinotti, who she said could vouch for her story. Cinotti defended Lueken's observations and

theories as credible. He explained Lueken's behavior to Terry, "She's eccentric and she was scared."⁶⁴

Terry continued to work with Cinotti, even though his fellow journalists found the detective's behavior disconcerting. Terry was particularly perturbed by a meeting where a group of journalists and law enforcement agents acting independently agreed to do a late night stake out in a park, hoping to witness a Satanic cult meeting. Cinotti arrived accompanied by two friends armed with baseball bats. He then distributed holy medals to everyone and delivered a lecture on demonology. But despite Terry's skepticism about Cinotti, his book draws heavily on his theories. *The Ultimate Evil* was wildly popular and went through several editions. Meanwhile Cinotti, after being reprimanded by the police department, went on to discuss his conspiracy theory on *Unsolved Mysteries* and in other popular media. The conspiracy theory has persisted to this day.

In 1980, reporter Roberta Grant managed to get an interview with Lueken, who told her, "That David Berkowitz, he's *not* the real Son of Sam! He's an imposter, part of a conspiracy. He's covering up for the real murderer." She added that there were witch covens all over Staten Island.⁶⁵ Today, media and law enforcement are far more skeptical of stories about criminal Satanists. However, the SMWA shrine leaders I spoke with were still very much concerned about the threat of Satanic cults. One explained to me that several Baysiders are police officers who work in or around New York City. They believe there are still Satanists active on Long Island but have been instructed by their superiors not to discuss the threat of cults with the public. He also mentioned that Baysiders had been involved in the Son of Sam investigation.

Lueken's adventure demonstrates a degree of self-aggrandizement: In a city of seven million people, she felt that she alone could solve a series of high-profile murders. This may seem narcissistic, but it also demonstrates the powerful sense of agency that can be experienced through conspiracy theory. Finally, it is significant that Lueken did not form her theory about Berkowitz alone. She incorporated information she received from a variety of sources and "companionable spirits," including police officers. Much of the Baysider worldview reflects a similar collaborative project in which diverse elements are assembled into a pattern that, while frightening, holds great personal meaning.

Baysiders still believe they are threatened by a global conspiracy that has many branches and takes many forms but is ultimately Satanic in nature. Today, they are more likely to refer to this entity as “the New World Order,” a term that has become increasingly popular in conspiracy theory discourse. Baysiders explained to me that the New World Order seeks to establish a one-world government that will enslave the population and demand adherence to a single religion. The nebulous term “New World Order” provides a useful grammar onto which new threats can be grafted. Some Baysiders regarded the immolation of the Branch Davidian compound in 1993 as an attack on Christians by the forces of the New World Order. The bombing of the Oklahoma City Federal Building the following year was regarded as a “false flag” attack carried out by federal agencies in order to provide an excuse for further persecuting conservative groups.⁶⁶ A shrine worker from SMWA described a meeting in which they had gone through documents from FEMA’s website that discuss the suspension of normal government in the aftermath of a catastrophic emergency. In June 2012, the HHS Mandate of the Obama healthcare plan was also seen through a conspiratorial worldview. Shrine director Michael Mangan described the mandate as one step closer to the “reign of antichrist.”⁶⁷ For Baysiders, the pattern continues to emerge with each new development.

A Theology of History

While conspiracy theory allowed Baysiders to find patterns in social and political developments, a Marian theology of history allowed them to discover patterns in time, connecting current events to both the past and the future. In Flushing Meadows, Baysiders began to develop techniques for discerning prophetic significance in dates and events. This became a tool through which Baysiders could locate new developments within an unfolding divine plan, culminating in the return of Christ. The connection between Marian piety and millennial expectations was firmly established in the seventeenth century by French missionary Louis-Marie Grignion de Montfort (1673–1716). Montfort founded two Marian religious orders, the Montfort Fathers and the Daughters of Wisdom. His book, *Treatise on the True Devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary*, was discovered by a priest in 1842 at the bottom of a chest in a house on Saint Laurent-sur-Sevre. The