

## 1 Introduction: the problem

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During 1988 the national newspapers of Britain began to carry allegations that children were being sexually abused and murdered by secret organisations during rituals variously described as witchcraft, black magic or satanism. Television and radio programmes, national, local and weekly papers all carried stories linking the sexual abuse of children to witchcraft, 'the occult' and devil worship. Alarming indications of the nature of the rituals and their incidence were quoted: at an international conference in 1988, the founder of a British children's charity expressed her belief that 'at least 4,000 children were being sacrificed a year in Great Britain alone' (Core 1988). A British psychiatrist, Norman Vaughton, was reported as saying that there were 10,000 cases a year in the United States.<sup>1</sup> A little later, early in 1989, another newspaper article had stated that the Adam Walsh Centre in the United States claimed there were 10,000 young American children involved in demonic cult activities, 200 unsolved murders by satanic cults and 'thousands of similar cults in Britain'.<sup>2</sup> Extreme versions of the allegations asserted the existence of an international conspiracy and were even reported in *The Times* (Gledhill 1990).

Children taken from their parents by the social services in a number of Midland towns were said to have been rescued from such cults. They were victims of 'satanic abuse', a shorthand phrase which became a label for the new allegations. It implied the most depraved rites, whether or not these were directed at the devil and whether or not the person using the label believed in the devil. 'Ritual abuse' was used as a synonym for 'satanic abuse' and sometimes the two labels were combined as 'satanic ritual abuse'. There was considerable confusion over the meanings of the terms and the exact nature of what was said to be happening, which contributed to public alarm. Evidence for anything other than sexual abuse, neglect and deprivation was not forthcoming, but the conviction that there was a new and terrible threat to children became widespread as the last decade of the millennium began.

A controversy in the United States, over whether or not children had

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-62934-8 - Speak of the Devil: Tales of Satanic Abuse in Contemporary England

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been sexually abused in the course of the rituals of some occult or satanic cult, preceded that in Britain. Although the two phenomena have been treated as independent by some observers,<sup>3</sup> there are obvious connections between them. American writing on the subject circulated in Britain (Marrs 1989 is a late example) and American personnel visited Britain, attended conferences or gave seminars there. The author of the first book on the subject of the British scare, Philip Jenkins, pointed out that all the terms used as labels were American or influenced by American usage (1992: 220) but still rejected the view that the problem was a 'direct imitation of American concerns, disseminated by way of US cultural and political hegemony' (1992: 220). It is true that the traffic was, to some extent at least, two-way: British evangelicals, journalists and child protection workers also visited the United States; British books on the threat of satanism were also published (e.g. Anderson 1988). Lists of 'indicators', that could be used to tell whether a case was likely to reveal ritual or satanic elements, were widely circulated. Many of these originated in the United States and some were distributed by the American 'experts' who presented their cases at conferences or acted as 'consultants' in cases of child protection around the country. Accounts of apparently similar cases were widely publicised during this period and were referred to as proof of a continuing and widespread threat to children.

The allegations made in Britain resembled in broad outline the allegations made in the earlier cases in the United States: they indicated gatherings of robed and masked people abusing children and engaging in forced abortions, bestiality, human sacrifice and cannibalism. As in the United States, it was suggested that the lack of corroborative material evidence for the allegations was an indication that the perpetrators of ritual abuse, or satan-worshippers as some felt them to be, were either very clever or were protected by powerful members of society. Nevertheless, there are differences in the British allegations, which demonstrate that the outbreak was not simply a product of the American concern. As the sociologist Jenkins remarks, despite Britain's ever-increasing social and cultural resemblance to the United States, American material would only find acceptance in Britain if circumstances there made it seem appropriate (Jenkins 1992: 225–30). Nevertheless, American influence was, and continues to be, an important factor that cannot be ignored in the search for the origins of the events in Britain (see pp. 156–170).

### The source of allegations

There have been two different sources of allegations of satanic abuse: one derived from the work of child protection and the other from therapy and counselling. The first, which was the more publicised to begin with, was what children were believed to be saying, the second depended on stories told by adults, mostly women. Social workers, police, foster-parents and therapists were responsible for telling the public about the cases involving children. In the second type of case, adults have claimed that they were involved in witchcraft or satanic cults as children or adolescents; the stories resemble those told by the older children in the cases of child protection that provided data for this book. In the United States those adults who had been sexually abused as children came to be called 'survivors', by analogy with the Jews who survived the Holocaust.<sup>4</sup> This term has also been adopted by those who allege that their sexual abuse was part of the ritual of a satanic cult. They describe rituals directed to the worship of Satan, children bred to be sacrificed, either as aborted fetuses or as newborn babies, human sacrifice, cannibalism, torture and the administration of drugs to children, and perverted sexual orgies including the transport of the children to various places where men and women sexually abused them. The accounts include references to rich and powerful participants, to perpetrators dressed in robes and masks and to paraphernalia such as candles and altars, symbols such as the pentagram and the number 666. The use of urine, faeces and blood in the rituals is also a feature of allegations. Some survivors confess to having participated in the abuse, not merely as victims but as perpetrators. Some even refer to very recent murders in which they say they took part (Davies n.d.; *Guardian* 3 October 1990; Dawson 1990; Coleman 1994).

Survivors tell their stories to therapists and counsellors but may also speak directly to social workers or the press or on television. It is rare for them to tell the police. Those who believe that both survivors and children have had similar experiences take the existence of adult survivors as showing that satanism has been established for many years. None of the allegations made by adult survivors has been tested in the courts to date, and some stories have been proved false. Even so, survivors' accounts have been said to explain and corroborate the evidence of children. In fact, the dates of the cases show that adult stories came into the public domain before the children's cases. The survivors must therefore be seen as creating the mental climate in which what children are alleged to be saying is accepted as truth. Now that

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children's cases are no longer given the credence they formerly had, the cases of adults are once again being said to be the key to understanding what is happening.

The extreme accounts in both the United States and Britain have come from adults – Christian fundamentalists, or survivors and their therapists, some of them Christians themselves, but others agnostic or even atheist. Some campaigners and consultants have become well known and gained prestige through their claim to have specialist knowledge of ritual abuse. Most are convinced of the existence of a large conspiratorial satanistic organisation, which is powerful enough to protect and conceal its members. The minutest details of the rites are described to their audiences, even where they seem of little relevance to the subject under discussion; they appear to have a strong rhetorical effect, inducing belief in the audience by the sheer emotional experience of hearing the horrors recounted.

There are also less extreme views of the ritual abuse of children (see the definition by Finkelhor cited below) whose holders do not subscribe to beliefs in large and powerful satanic organisations, and who are open-minded about whether the rituals are the main focus of activities or whether they merely facilitate the sexual abuse. The whole range of views depends on an uncritical reliance on what professionals or other adults allege that children have said; criticisms of this are seen either as 'denial', an unwillingness to accept reality, or as rejection of the victims in refusing to believe what they say. As Nathan has pointed out the secular versions all provide reinforcement for the more extreme religious version; by providing alternatives for those who are unable to accept the idea of a satanist conspiracy, they discourage consideration of the evidence and inhibit any questioning of underlying assumptions (Nathan 1991: 77).

#### **The development of controversy**

The allegations have not been accepted uncritically. Scepticism in general and over certain cases in particular, has been expressed by a variety of individuals including members of police forces, lawyers and academics, some of whom have begun to study what has been happening (Carlson and LaRue 1989; Hicks 1991; Langone and Blood 1990; Richardson et al. 1991). In the United States, the only self-confessed satanic abuser has been the subject of a detailed study that has convincingly demonstrated how suggestible people are liable to construct entirely false accounts of satanic rituals under pressure from interviewers (Ofshe 1992). Such revelations have damaged the

credibility of statements of belief in the existence of satanism but have not prevented them from being disseminated more widely. One book on the subject, even though largely accepting the idea of satanic abuse, refers to 'The hysteria, for that is what it became . . .' (Parker 1993: 287).

It was first pointed out in the United States that no material evidence of ritual or satanic practices had been forthcoming in any of the cases in which they had been alleged (Richardson 1991). In Britain the position has been substantially the same as far as allegations of satan-worshipping rituals are concerned (La Fontaine 1994). As one journalist put it, in a phrase that has become well-known: 'Investigations have produced no bodies, no bones, no bloodstains, nothing.' (Waterhouse 1990). In the United States, the only adult witness to corroborate the testimony of children in a case has continued to claim that her evidence was given 'to get it all over with' and was the result of plea-bargaining (Hollingsworth, 1986: 424, cited in Nathan 1991). An FBI agent, Kenneth Lanning, has reported that he has been unable to document any satanic murders in the United States (Lanning 1989). While this book was being written, a report of a very large study carried out by Gail Goodman and associates in the United States claimed that none of the cases reported to them produced any evidence of the existence of organised satanic worship that included sexually abusing children (Bottoms et al. 1996).

The controversy in Britain deepened with criticism of the investigators' techniques: using leading and suggestive questions, putting pressure on very young children to answer questions, and refusing to accept denials but offering inducements to encourage 'disclosures' were all alleged to have caused the children to construct bizarre accounts of what had happened. The report of a judicial inquiry into the Orkney case (Clyde 1992) lent substance to the accusations; the collapse of many cases against the accused were also cited as evidence of false accusations. Two opposing camps, who might be labelled 'believers' and 'sceptics', are now firmly entrenched.

### **The believers**

Christianity forms the basis of belief for many of those who are convinced of the existence of a cult of satanists. A firm belief in the reality of Satan and his activities in the human world enables belief in the existence of groups of his worshippers, dedicated to carrying out his ambition to dominate the world. The secret and cunning nature of the Prince of Darkness allows his followers to remain hidden and recogni-

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-62934-8 - Speak of the Devil: Tales of Satanic Abuse in Contemporary England

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sable only in the evil actions they have performed. Features of the contemporary world, such as abortion and sexual permissiveness may thus be seen as evidence of the presence of the devil and his agents. Observers have pointed out that the killing and sexual abuse of children are particularly suited to representing the quintessence of evil, the presence of the devil himself (La Fontaine 1992; Comaroff 1994; Cotton 1995).

The approach of the end of the millennium has revived the beliefs of certain Christian churches in the end of the world that is preceded by the triumph of Satan. An increasingly evangelistic, even militant stance is taken by many fundamentalist Christians belonging to the many small churches competing with one another in what appears to be a religious revival, now taking place both in the United States and Britain. The New Christians emphasise original sin and the power of God to save through faith; they expect miracles and the descent of the Holy Spirit or visions of God. They stress faith rather than reason, belief rather than argument. There has been a marked increase in concern with exorcising demons, and even the Church of England now has clergy appointed to advise and assist in 'deliverance' as exorcism is now usually called. They have become increasingly militant in attacking all that they perceive to be evil and publicising their views.

A popular account of the new, charismatic Christianity described the exorcism of a new recruit to the faith and emphasised how she said she was 'cleansed' and experienced 'the deepest, most sublime experience of peace' (Cotton 1995: 131). The author goes on to compare charismatic Christianity with new therapies, such as regression and primal scream therapy, that produce a similar result (Cotton 1995: 133–50). His point is important. Many of those who believe in the reality of the satanic rituals are not Christians; attitudes encouraging belief rather than scepticism may appear outside the new Christianity. Many believers are therapists or those, like social workers, who are trained in similar disciplines. Others are feminists, or campaigners on behalf of those they define as victims. Anyone in these categories may believe that the acceptance of the stories of victims as true, even or perhaps especially when they seem incredible, is a demonstration of support and may be experienced by the teller as healing. Therapists may assert that the only form of knowledge is that of clinical (that is, personal), experience and thereby deny the necessity of corroborative evidence. The position is well illustrated in the rejoinder made to an appeal from FBI Special Agent Ken Lanning for a study of the processes of investigation and disclosure in cases of alleged satanic abuse: 'I'm not a law enforcement person, thank God! I'm a psychology person, so I don't need the

evidence, I come from a very different place, *I don't need to see evidence to believe . . .*' (Dan Sexton 1989, cited in Mulhern 1991: 146; my italics).

Believers in satanic abuse may say, reasonably enough, that they themselves do not believe in Satan or practice witchcraft but other people do. They may point to beliefs in ghosts and monsters, to the popularity of cults and to celebrations like Halloween as evidence of surviving folk beliefs in evil forces. The fact that there are people who practise witchcraft or who call themselves satanists makes it seem plausible that some of them might be involved. However, as we shall see later this is too simple an argument.

### The sceptics

The sceptical position appeals to those for whom reason and evidence form the only acceptable basis of understanding. Academics, lawyers and the police are the main professionals whose training leads them to require evidential support for the conclusions they draw, but other individuals may take a rationalist standpoint, for many different reasons (Victor 1993: 248). Rationalists are appalled by the easy credence given to unsubstantiated and bizarre allegations and by the acceptance of conclusions that are based on no independent evidence. Pocock (1985: 50–51) has pointed out the difference in attitudes to explicability between those who are prepared to characterise an act, and hence the perpetrator of it, as evil and a minority who regard 'evil' as a term so strong that it is inappropriate if there is a chance that explanation might be possible. For the majority, by contrast, explanation could not be separated from excuse and so to judge something to be evil was to proclaim that it could not be explained or excused. Hence attempts at explaining how allegations of satanic abuse had come about might be dubbed apologies for the abuse itself (Victor 1993: 213).

However, there are varying degrees of scepticism about the claims of anti-satanists, just as there are degrees of 'belief'. The most extreme sceptics say that the whole problem is the result of mass hysteria. The allegations may be dismissed as fabrications; the children's evidence may be labelled fantasies or lies. The inability of the police to find evidence showing that sacrifices, whether animal or human, have taken place, is taken to mean that the accounts of ritual, including the sexual abuse of children, were inventions. The most thorough-going sceptics emphasise the wilder claims which by association discredit the less lurid ones; in some cases, doubt has even been cast on the existence of any cases of the sexual abuse of children. This extreme position seems to

Cambridge University Press

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owe as much to hostility to the proponents of the idea of satanic abuse, particularly social workers, as to knowledge of the cases themselves.

The ranks of the sceptics in Britain are also swelled by those who are concerned, less with the ritual abuse of children, than with the protection of an ideal of society from attack. The fact that most of the cases involve the removal of children from their homes is felt to be deeply significant. Intervention by the state in what is seen as the 'private' domain of the family is considered illegitimate and state employees who do this are believed to be guilty of attempts to undermine a 'traditional way of life'. In particular there is concern among some people to deny that children are ever sexually abused within their own homes. For a large number of people parental care is assumed to be both natural and altruistic, so that to accuse parents of inhuman acts such as sexual abuse appears not merely a malicious lie but evidence of a dangerous conspiracy to undermine the family (La Fontaine 1990). By reversing cause and effect, social workers can be seen as part of a movement responsible for the manifest changes in domestic organisation and movement away from 'traditional' ways of life. Attacks on social workers are also popular among those who traditionally have most to fear from them and who tend to be readers of the tabloid newspapers that regularly publish tales of wicked social workers.

The most extreme scepticism denies the reality of *any* form of the sexual abuse of children; holders of such views may claim that children lie to get adults into trouble and deny the need for child protection. The believers, on the other hand, argue that the scepticism about ritual or satanic abuse mirrors the earlier unwillingness to believe that children were sexually abused. Those who have been personally involved in this earlier issue are persuaded to feel sympathy for their colleagues 'on the front line'. The fear of being accused of damaging the credibility of children's disclosures by encouraging scepticism has probably induced some people to keep quiet about their doubts or to stifle them. Attitudes have polarised. Few, having changed their minds as the evidence has built up, have had the courage to make this changed view known.

The terms in which the public discussion of these allegations have been couched are confused. Discussion has been obscured by the use of terms in very different ways, so that one authority on the subject has frequently remarked that people say that they believe in it, without saying what 'it' is (Sherrill Mulhern, personal communication). Before going any further some clarification of terms is essential.

### Definitions and labels

The terms used for what is alleged to have happened in these cases – ‘satanic abuse’ and ‘ritual abuse’ – have been used in a variety of different ways. The use of the labels ‘satanic’, ‘satanist’ or ‘satanic ritual abuse’ implies that the perpetrators of it are engaged in devil-worship or are the devil’s agents. This is what some campaigners, in Britain and in the United States, do indeed mean by the term. Yet many of those who are convinced of the reality of a new form of sexual abuse of children are not prepared to use terms which seem to imply Christian convictions of a rather extreme fundamentalist nature. They prefer to use ‘ritual abuse’ as an alternative, implying merely that the children are sexually abused during, and as part of, rituals (McFadyen, Hanks & James 1993: 37); in this sense it means sexual abuse in the context of practices that a more fundamentalist religious view might still label devil-worship or witchcraft. A recent book prefers to use the term ‘satanist’ or ‘satanistic’, arguing that ‘satanic abuse’ implies a belief that the devil himself is involved, whereas ‘satanist’ does not. The most commonly cited definition is that used by Finkelhor and his associates: sexual abuse that took place ‘in contexts linked to some symbols or group that have a religious, magical or supernatural connotation, and where the invocation of these symbols or activities, repeated over time, is used to frighten and intimidate the children’ (Finkelhor, Williams & Burns 1988: 59). This definition leaves open the possibility that ritual abuse could be a strategy used by the abusers of children and not an involvement in satanism. Other definitions make clear that the ritual is linked to beliefs in witchcraft or satanism. For example, Sakheim and Devine use the term ‘ritual abuse’ as a generic term but characterise it as taking place in a context which is justified by the perpetrators’ religious beliefs; these are ‘usually satanic in nature’ (Sakheim & Devine 1992: xii).

The use of ‘ritual abuse’ as an alternative to ‘satanic abuse’ still leaves an area of ambiguity. The term ‘ritual’ has more than one meaning: in the lay sense it may be used to refer to any behaviour regularly repeated in certain circumstances such as ‘bedtime ritual’. In a technical psychological sense, which also has some general currency, it refers to compulsive and repetitive behaviour often associated with sexual gratification; sexual abuse which appears to follow a set pattern may be described as ritualised or ritualistic. For the social sciences, ritual refers to practices embodying symbols that refer to fundamental social meanings and beliefs, to religion in its widest meaning. It is in this sense that the term is used in this book. It resembles the definition of McFadyen,

Cambridge University Press

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Hanks & James (1993) which makes the religious component clear, although the authors appear to include all forms of abuse, not merely the sexual.

What I have called the social science meaning of 'ritual' seems similar to that in common use. In the national survey of cases that was part of the study on which this book is based, the majority of respondents who were working in the field of child protection associated 'ritual abuse' with a form of religious belief or practice. Most associated the rituals with the occult, or with witchcraft or satanism. In nineteen cases respondents indicated the involvement of 'a cult'; this term refers to the small, new religious groups that grew up in the 1960s and 1970s (Beckford 1985: 1). It is also used, more commonly in the United States than in Britain, for the groups referred to in some allegations of satanic abuse. In the case of Christian campaigners, involvement in new religious movements or an interest in the occult generally are seen as leading inevitably to satanism and rituals in which every form of evil is practised (Davies n.d.; Parker 1989: 50).

Only a small minority of survey respondents used the term 'ritual' with no religious connotation. However, they did not all use the term in the same way: in one case, 'ritual abuse' was said to consist of the children's abusing (masturbating?) each other in front of the perpetrator, who had dared them to; two cases involved sadism, bestiality or the use of faeces; one concerned pornographic videos, another referred to organised prostitution, including sadistic sex and the making of videos. In two cases it was enough that one or both of the parents of a child about whom there was concern, were interested in the occult, for the case to be labelled ritual abuse. In a few of the survey cases it was not clear what the ritual was, or the allegation was recorded as having been false. Only one person used 'ritual' in the psychological sense of compulsive, repetitive routines.

The wide range of meanings contained in the term 'ritual' is characteristic of the campaign to promote recognition of it as a new threat to children. Lack of precision allows the inclusion of a correspondingly wide range of reported behaviour as 'ritual abuse' and prevents people realising how wide this is and how different the reported cases are. The identification of real cases as 'ritual abuse' seems to confirm the existence of satanic or ritual abuse in general, because of, rather than in spite of, the lack of clarity as to what exactly is entailed. People of many different professional and religious opinions can support the claim that ritual abuse exists as a distinct form of sexual abuse, because they can define it in the ways that they themselves find credible and acceptable. In this manner the support for