The Controversy over Satanic Ritual Abuse

Jean La Fontaine

In the late 1980s reports began to appear in the press that children were telling 'bizarre' stories about having been sexually abused in the course of rituals that were described variously as witchcraft or satanism. The terms 'satanic abuse' or 'ritual abuse' came to be used for such cases. In addition adults were claiming that they had been abused in such rituals when they were children, and their stories were given widespread credence. Some people even claimed that there was an international conspiracy of satanists that aimed to destroy Western civilisation.

Yet in no case so far has material evidence been found to corroborate these allegations. Given that the rituals were said to have involved the sacrifice of animals, babies, children and adults in the presence of sometimes large numbers of people dressed in robes and masks, who participated in cannibalistic feasts, blood-drinking, bestiality and other deviant sexual practices, the absence of evidence for these activities in every case was, to say the least, surprising. Sceptics argued that the allegations were fantasies or the inventions of certain fundamentalist evangelical Christians who, to begin with, were at the forefront of the campaign for 'recognition' of the problem.

To an anthropologist, the allegations were strongly reminiscent of the accusations of witchcraft that are made in other societies. Witches are creatures who symbolise all that is evil; they are endowed

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with characteristics that are only partly human and are believed to have more than human powers to kill and harm people, their animals and crops. Since the means by which witches effect their evil are mystical or magical, anthropologists have not been concerned with whether the beliefs are factually correct or not, but with the part they play in social life. We had also generally accepted that, although beliefs in witchcraft had been a part of European culture in the past, the spread of education and the rise of science had caused them to be dropped and forgotten. Yet in the late 1980s there seemed to be proof that this last assumption was incorrect.

My study of the allegations was funded by the Department of Health and aimed to show who was being accused, who was doing the accusing and why the beliefs found such ready acceptance. It focused on cases involving children and used material from local authorities, the police and from the Office of the Official Solicitor who acted for some children who were made Wards of Court. It documented all cases over a four-year period that were reported in a survey of police, NSPCC and social services in England and Wales. While there was evidence that some of the children had been sexually abused, in all but three cases there was no evidence of rituals. In these three cases the rituals were all different from each other, had been invented by the central (male) figure in the case and did not include the more horrific elements of the allegations, such as human sacrifice or cannibalism. They were not rituals of devil worship, nor were many people involved, but there was material evidence to support what the victims had told the police.

In some cases for which there was detailed information, it became clear that the stories allegedly told by children were for the most part interpretations made by adults from information extracted from children in repeated interviews, from informal contacts and from observation of the children's (often extremely disturbed) behaviour. Research on children as witnesses and on their performance in interviews has also made it clear that children may be induced, for a variety of reasons, to say what they think adults will want to hear. A case history quoted by Richard Ofshe of the only man convicted on a confession of having committed satanic abuse, in the United States, shows that this may also be true of adults.

My report of preliminary findings was published by the Department of Health in 1994 and caused a short-lived furore, but the fact that it was corroborated in every respect by a much larger-scale study in the United States received little publicity. The main effect in Britain was to shift the emphasis from children to adults, whose stories have since been taken up by some psychotherapists under the influence of 'experts' from the United States. The prominence of fundamentalist evangelical Christians in the movement has greatly diminished and it is now psychotherapists, psychologists and psychiatrists who are in the forefront of the controversy.

The issues raised now are rather different, too: firstly, whether it is necessary for the therapist to accept that the account given by the patient is factually true, as distinct from emotionally real. Some therapists think it is necessary for patients to be believed so that they are not re-traumatised, and that the needs of the patient must be given primacy. In a book edited by Valerie Sinason, she and Rob Hale set out this theory; while the opposite, more traditional, view is given by Gwen

Adshead.

Secondly, there has been major controversy over whether it is possible for a victim to repress until years later all memory of the terrifying rituals in which they were abused. Sceptics have pointed out that it is only certain techniques (hypnosis and regression therapy are the commonest) that seem closely associated with the 'recovery' of these memories. In the United States a number of 'survivors' have recently sued their therapist for what they now allege is the construction of false memories during therapy. False memory societies, here and in the USA, have been established; their members include parents who claim to have been falsely accused by adult children under the 'guidance' of their therapists as well as psychologists and other professional who are sceptical about 'recovered memories'.

A third connected issue that has also been developing, following the pattern of the United States, is the concept of 'multiple personality disorder', now more often referred to as 'identity dissociative disorder' or 'identity dissociative syndrome'. Here again the extremely rapid increase in the number of patients appears to be the work of a small group of therapists, including a number of Christian therapists. The patient presents with a number of personalities, many of whom may represent stages of an earlier life when the child is believed to have dissociated to deal with traumatic episodes such as satanic abuse. In some circles the condition is seen as diagnostic of satanic abuse. Some Christian psychotherapists may assert that some of the 'personalities' are intrusive demons or spirits. A similarity to another widespread healing practice, the cult of spirit possession, is apparent in this new development.

To anthropologists, allegations of satanism resemble quite closely the accusations of witchcraft that have been documented very widely across the world. In these other societies they ascribe the misfortune and harm suffered by undeserving people to the existence of extreme evil and to the malice of human beings. Those who sexually abuse children are the folk-devils of modern society, so that it is not surprising if they become the central enemies on which movements to cleanse society are based. However, such attitudes do not merely stimulate interesting academic debates: they have inspired actions that alter the lives of children and of adults, often with damaging results. Before children are taken from home and adults accused of unspeakable crimes, it is important to be sure that such charges are based on sound evidence, not merely on accusations of witchcraft.

Further Reading

Sherrill Mulhern, 'Satanism and Psychotherapy: A rumor in search of an inquisition' in J. Richardson, J. Best and D. Bromley (eds) *The Satanism Scare*, Aldine de Gruyter, 1990

Richard Ofshe and E. Watters, *Making Monsters*, Scribner, 1994

Rob Hale and Valerie Sinason, 'Internal and External Realities: Establishing parameters' and Gwen Adshead, 'Looking for Clues: A review of the literature on false allegations of sexual abuse in childhood' in Valerie Sinason (ed) *Treating Survivors of Satanist Abuse*, Routledge, 1994