Crime, Law and Social Change **17**: 53–75, 1992.
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Satanism: Myth and reality in a contemporary moral panic

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Abstract. In the last decade, there have been many allegations about the prevalence of occult or "Satanic" criminality, which is believed to be involved in many offenses ranging from vandalism to child abuse and serial murder. Some have advocated the creation of specialized police units to combat the supposed threat. On the other hand, most of the alleged evils are very poorly substantiated, and highly questionable statements have been widely circulated. In fact, the current concern about the occult appears to have all the hallmarks of a classic moral panic, where a peripheral issue is suddenly perceived as a major social menace. This paper discusses the limited foundation of truth underlying the present "crime-wave"; and suggests that the panic reflects the moral and political agenda of extremists from the fundamentalist religious Right.

> They take the aborted offspring and grind it up with a mortar and pestle. And they season it with honey, pepper and other spices, and with aromatics, so as not to nauseate themselves. Doing this, all the participants ... partake with their fingers of this ground-up baby ... And they consider this to be the perfect Passover.
> (St Epiphanius on the heretical "Borborite" sect, c.375AD, adapted from Bentley Layton, *The Gnostic Scriptures*, New York: Doubleday, 1987).

> From thenceforth the Jews have conspired
> This innocent out of the world to chase
> An homicide thereto have they hired
> That in an alley had a privy place
> And as the child began thereby to pace
> This cursed Jew seized him, held him fast
> And cut his throat, and in a pit him cast
> (Adapted from Chaucer's *Prioress' Tale*)

> That witches who are midwives in various ways kill the child conceived in the womb, and procure an abortion; or if they do not do this, they offer new-born children to devils.
> Question XI of the *Malleus Maleficarum*, c1480

> (The Mother Superior) gave me another piece of information which excited other feelings in me ... Infants were sometimes born in the Convent, but they were always baptized, and immediately strangled. This secured their everlasting happiness; for the baptism purifies them from all sinfulness, and being sent out of the world before they had time to do any wrong, they were at once admitted into Heaven ... How different did a Convent now appear from what I supposed it to be!
> *The Awful Disclosures of Maria Monk*, c.1835

Proofs of a conspiracy

In the 1960s, Richard Hofstadter identified the "paranoid style" as a dominant theme in American history. For two centuries, successive political and social movements have been galvanized by fears of dangerous "outsiders" and their conspiratorial assaults on the American polity. The alleged culprits have included a kaleidoscopic array of social, religious and ethnic groups, from the Illuminati in the 1790s through Catholics, Freemasons and slaveholders in the nineteenth century, to Communists in more recent times.[1] Studying this conspiracy tradition has produced some powerful and rewarding scholarship, such as David Brion Davis' classic account of the "Slave Power Conspiracy" in the antebellum years.[2] Often, such a movement should be understood not as a response to a genuine problem, but as a symbolic campaign reflecting the interests of particular movements and pressure groups, regardless of the objective basis of the alleged danger.[3] Frequently, the issue provides a vehicle which permits these groups to impose their views on law or social policy.

Since the 1970s, sociologists have often applied the term "moral panic" to such generalized fears, and there have been several impressive case-studies.[4] Apart from the intrinsic interest of such an account, it also illuminates the values, fears and conflicts of the age which apparently needs to imagine such an external threat.[5] Observing the construction of such "conspiracies" and problems therefore provides a powerful tool for social analysis. If in fact a society can be understood in terms of its fears, then America in the last decade offers a rich mine for social scientists. There have been wildly exaggerated claims about threats as diverse as child abuse and abduction, serial murder, drug abuse and even satanism or devil worship. We wish to use the last of these to understand some of the forces which are producing such far reaching claims about current threats and conspiracies.[6]

In the late 1980s, it was increasingly alleged that the United States was facing a serious crime-wave associated with the occult or satanism. Charges of devil-worship have occurred sporadically throughout American history, but the origin of the current concern can be dated to 1983–1984, and the "cult" allegations associated with the McMartin preschool case in southern California. Dozens of similar cases of "ritual abuse" followed, the most celebrated perhaps being that in the small Minnesota community of Jordan. This was also the time at which memoirs purported to tell of recalling ritual abuse suffered during childhood or adolescence; and serious attention was paid to accounts of human sacrifice and cannibalism.[7]

From mid-1985, the various allegations were publicized on network television programs, especially ABC's *20/20*. Journalistic and popular studies naturally followed, and there was an explosion of books on the subject from 1988 onwards.[8] By no means all the accounts were uncritical, but most agreed that

there was a serious problem.[9] Satanic or occult crime (the terms were used with little distinction) was apparently associated with numerous acts of vandalism and juvenile delinquency, but also with heinous offenses like serial murder and mass child abuse. The victims might run into many thousands each year, with children especially likely to be mutilated and sacrificed. Kenneth Wooden writes of "a flood of child molestation, ritual torture and murder".[10] The corollary was that urgent action needed to be taken to deal with the problem, and that police and prosecutorial agencies would have to play the leading role in the proposed reforms.

By contrast, the present paper contends that "occult crime" and satanism are fringe activities that the vast majority of agencies will never encounter. The alleged problem is a classic moral panic, with political roots that can be easily traced to the fundamentalist religious Right. The whole issue was devised and defined in such a way that reflected the concerns and ambitions of Christian fundamentalists at a time when this movement was undergoing rapid expansion, especially in the early 1980s.[11] The sensationalistic charges were explored enthusiastically by mass media then experiencing economic challenges and rivalries which encouraged a "tabloid" presentation of events. This uncritical acceptance of the problem by the media led to widespread dissemination of the charges, without recognition of the wider social and political connotations.

The scale of occult crime

Recent accounts have suggested that the threat of occult crime is all the more serious because it is linked to many other contemporary dangers. Some of the more extreme charges derive from *The American Focus on Satanic Crime*, a compilation from the works of several leading claims-makers. Satanists are said to be connected with:

> the murders of unbaptized infants, child sexual abuse in daycare, rape, ritual abuse of children, drug trafficking, arson, pornography, kidnapping, vandalism, church desecration, corpse theft, sexual trafficking of children and the heinous mutilation, dismemberment and sacrifices of humans and animals. (they are) responsible for the deaths of more than 60,000 Americans each year, including missing and runaway youth.[12]

The following remarks are from Ted Gunderson, formerly a senior member of the Los Angeles office of the FBI, and a contributor to the *American Focus*:

> I can say that there is a network of these people across the country who are very active, they have their own rest and relaxation farm, they are in contact

> with each other, it ties in loosely to the drug operation, it ties into motorcycle gangs and it goes on and on. They have their own people who specialize in surveillances and photography, and in assassinations.[13]

Gunderson wrote:

> I have been told it is a common occurrence for these groups to kidnap their victims (usually infants and young children) from hospitals, orphanages, shopping centers and off the streets. I have been informed that satanists have been successful in their attempts to influence the Boy Scouts and, in recent years, have concentrated their efforts in recruiting Little League baseball players by infiltrating the coaching staffs and establishing preschools throughout the US.
>
> A Boise, ID police officer believes that fifty thousand to sixty thousand Americans disappear each year and are victims of human sacrifices of satanic cults... Most of the victims are cremated, thus there is no body and no evidence. I know of an occult supply store in Los Angeles, California that sells portable crematories.[14]

The practice of satanism could draw literally millions into deviant and hazardous practices, with the young especially at risk. Geraldo Rivera claimed that:

> It is teenagers who are most likely to fall under the spell of this jungle of dark violent emotions called satanism, and in some cases to be driven to committing terrible deeds... There is no doubt that teenage satanic activity in this country is increasing dramatically.[15]

The commonplace view is that occult "dabbling" will lead to serious cult involvement: young people will become "self-styled satanists", or even "Religious satanists" and "Cult satanists".[16] This last category – who are seen as the most dangerous and most inclined to criminality – are seen as part of a sinister clandestine network, possibly of national proportions, Journalist Maury Terry[17] has suggested that "There is compelling evidence of the existence of a nationwide network of satanic cults, some branched into child pornography and violent sadomasochistic crime, including murder". (Terry, incidentally, has worked closely with Gunderson.) This national cult is linked not only to major incidents of child sexual abuse, but to celebrated serial murder cases, including the Manson "family" murders and the "Son of Sam" affair in New York City.

All the accounts of occult crime draw a connection with serial murder, generally focussing on the same four or five celebrated cases. Undoubtedly,

some of these offenders were strongly influenced by occult ideas, most dramatically in the cases of Leonard Lake and Charles Manson.[18] On the other hand,

> Berkowitz, Lucas, Ramirez, and Manson are the all-stars in the halls of infamy but the vast majority of these ritual murders are not the work of the celebrated psychopaths – there are literally hundreds of cases most of us have never heard of.[19]

In the face of this danger, police agencies and prosecutors are "uninformed" or naive, and fail to follow leads that would lead them to the conspiratorial networks behind certain outrageous crimes.[20] In the words of Geraldo Rivera, "Many satanic crimes are not recognized as such. . . . These ritualistic crimes are everywhere, and yet in most communities they are either overlooked or under-reported".

Police scepticism in these matters is natural; but other writers have suggested that satanic cults may have infiltrated police agencies and local government authorities:

> Satanists often hold key or prominent positions in the community, positions which sometimes have access to power, information and evidence. As a result of this infiltration into the system, it appears as if they have developed a complex national and international network.[21]

In particular, their role as coroners may explain why so many satanic murders remained undetected.

These charges may appear to be outrageous hyperbole, but it is worth stressing how commonplace they are in the contemporary media. The most controversial account was probably a Geraldo Rivera special at Halloween 1988, entitled *Devil Worship: Exposing Satan's Underground*, which might be disregarded as mere sensationalism or "trash television".[22] But Geraldo and Oprah Winfrey were by no means isolated in promoting this hysteria. Satanism was exposed in equally lurid terms on network programs like *20/20* (for example, "The Devil Worshippers", May 16, 1985) and NBC's *1986* (as on August 19, 1986). Such views also earned the respectful attention of more sober news programs, even on National Public Radio's *Morning Edition*. In March, 1988, this program presented a lengthy and sympathetic account of an Indiana detective and his unsuccessful efforts to make his superiors appreciate the real dangers of local satanic cults, who supposedly undertook sacrifice and grave-robbery.

Many police officers took the danger seriously. Charges concerning "occult crime" were publicized in a number of celebrated trials; and there were cases where murders did appear to be connected with the practice of satanism. The

apparent "wave" of occult crime was discussed in the specialized press directed at the law enforcement community, in journals like *Police, Police Chief* and *Law Enforcement News*.[23] The topic was covered in numerous training seminars directed at police officers and supervisors. "Satanic" and cult crime has become a specialization of a number of police experts ("occult cops"), who are widely quoted in the media as urging public recognition of the new threat. Even more remarkable, the danger of satanism was cited by a growing number of therapists, who accepted the reality of ritual abuse, and who cited this type of crime as a causal factor in multiple personality disorder.

It is likely that official awareness of this perceived problem will increase sharply in coming years, in part because of the continuing media enthusiasm, but also because the "ritual" element will be part of the VICAP form submitted to the FBI's analysts in cases of unsolved homicide. The specific question asks about "symbolic artifacts" suggesting that "any unusual ritual/act/thing had been performed with or near the victim (such as an orderly formation of rocks, burnt candles, dead animals, defecation, etc.)". Once responses to such a questionnaire are collated, an increased incidence of "ritual criminality" might well be discerned nationwide; and there could be growing pressure for an official response.

The Claims-makers

As with any social problem, it is essential to identify the "claims-makers" who introduce the themes and define the shape of the ensuing controversy; and to observe the means by which they present their particular issue to a wider public.[24] In the case of a sensational panic like satanism, it is especially interesting to see the rhetorical devices used to dispel incredulity about these remarkable charges. A writer will commonly introduce a theme, and suggest that the occult might play "some" role in this particular problem. An example might then be given to support this idea. Other quotes then gradually build up the scale of the occult role until the reader is convinced that the whole problem is in fact little more than a facet of the immense satanic menace.

These quotes are judiciously chosen, and few can be described as untrue in specifics. Larson, for example, quite rightly notes that "Some cult watchers and police agree that a large number of missing children are victims of human sacrifice cults".[25] Of course, these "experts" may be utterly wrong in their belief, but his actual sentence is quite true: they do indeed agree on this. He then develops his argument as if the initial opinion is established as factual. "According to the few survivors, children are abducted and subjected to the terrible intimidation of drugs and brainwashing before being sacrificed." (We might note here that brainwashing a person one intends to kill anyway seems a

massive waste of time and energy.) "Innocent children and guiltless babies are perfect victims." As a clincher, he then produces the remark of a police officer in Beaumont, CA., to the effect that "*95 percent of all missing children are victims of occult-related abductions*" (*sic*: italics in original). The unwary reader may well leave the page with the impression that this is the opinion of a well-known or widely respected police authority, instead of one individual in a specific department.

These "law enforcement sources" are repeatedly used, and a small number of "experts" are quoted time and again, as are a handful of therapists and medical writers. Obviously, the initial writers are not to blame for the ways in which their legitimately expressed opinions are later used or quoted; but the limited number of sources is worthy of note. Even when other sources are cited, it often turns out that these are in fact basing their statements on one of the major claims-makers. One of the most influential of the group is the FBI's Ted Gunderson. Another is Lieutenant Larry Jones of Boise, Idaho, who runs a "Cult Crime Impact Newsletter" to track the progress of occult-related offenses. Jones believes firmly in the reality and seriousness of the danger, and deserves praise for his attempts to quantify the scale of the problem. However, he remains one isolated claims-maker, a "moral entrepreneur", who appears to work from a perspective that is strongly Christian and evangelical.

Equally widely quoted is Kenneth Wooden, who investigated "cult crimes" for the Rivera special on devil worship, and who appears in the video documentary *America's Best Kept Secret*. Wooden was a real pioneer in forming the contemporary view of "devil-cults". In the aftermath of the Jonestown massacre in Guyana, Wooden's investigations placed particular emphasis on the link between the Jim Jones movement and formalized or "ritualized" child abuse, a striking and influential innovation at this time (c.1980–81). Without mentioning satanic groups, Wooden argued that cults engaged in deviant sexual practices to undermine family links and cement group loyalty. Moreover, "Babies, born into cults, their births unregistered, are reported to have died of unnatural causes and to have been buried in secrecy, like pets".[26] The groups themselves deliberately undertook gross and excessive acts in order to reduce the credibility of anyone who attempted to expose them. There was an urgent need for intensive investigation of "cults", here identified as movements like the "Moonies", the Children of God, and Scientologists. All these charges would shortly recur in the context of satanism.

Wooden was well-placed to ensure that his concerns were presented to a wider audience. As an investigator for *20/20*, he was involved in 1983-84 in producing a number of reports on topics like the disappearance and murder of children. These had titles like "The lures of death" and "They are murdering our kids".[27] Wooden is the founder of a "National Coalition for Children's Justice"' and he testified to a Congressional subcommittee in 1984 on the

alleged problems of mass child disappearances and the serial murders of young people.[28] From about 1984, his deeply-felt concerns came to focus on the menace of "satanic" cults, which appeared to unify the previous threats; and the shift in interest can be discerned in the content of *20/20*. It was Wooden who encouraged the controversial occult "survivor" Lauren Stratford to publish her influential memoirs of satanic abuse.[29] Like the Rivera program, Stratford's account also incorporates in its title the ominous phrase "Satan's Underground".

Other major activists include the "Cult Awareness Network", based in Chicago; and groups concerned with child abuse issues, like "Believe the Children" or "ACT-Affirming Children's Truth". Accounts of satanic and occult crime thus rely on a handful of sources, often with a strong political agenda in a particular locality. Believe the Children is based in Manhattan Beach, CA., where it originated in direct response to the McMartin farrago.

Tracking sources is essential if we are to understand some of the most remarkable aspects of the current panic, especially the view that the number of sacrificial victims might run to fifty thousand or so each year in the United States alone. This statement appears grotesque, especially when we recall that the *total* number of homicide victims annually is around twenty thousand. On the other hand, "fifty thousand" was also the figure widely quoted in the equally disreputable claims made about missing children in the mid-eighties, so it was in the public consciousness. It is uncertain who first applied the number to sacrifical victims. Gunderson cites Jones as his source, but others attribute the figure to Al Carlisle, a consulting psychologist at the Utah State prison.[30] Whatever the source, the statistic had entered the literature by 1986 at the latest, and the story began a life of its own.

The Nature of Satanism

This paper will not directly address the reality of human sacrifice charges, as these have been thoroughly rebutted in many other sources.[31] "Ritual abuse" remains equally unsubstantiated, and wholly improbable.[32] But if such events did occur, then who are the cultists who would be responsible? Most of the believers in occult crime stress the role of a network of satanic groups, possibly many thousands strong. However, a curious distinction is drawn between "public" or Religious satanists, and the more sinister "Cult" satanists who actually undertake the crimes.

Among the religious satanists, we find well-established national groups like the Church of Satan, the Temple of Set and the Church of the Process, as well as a dozen or so local churches and sects.[33] The theorists rarely accuse these

groups of criminal acts, for a number of reasons that include fear of libel: in the 1970s, the Process successfully rebutted charges that it had been linked to the Manson family murders.[34] It has also been pointed out that satanist leaders like Anton LaVey and Michael Aquino are too much in the public eye to undertake any serious crime, even if they wished to. In other words, there is a paradox that virtually any publicly admitted or active satanist must be regarded as a "Religious" believer, and hence not active in the serious actions such as ritual abuse and child sacrifice.

Who then are these "Cult satanists"? As so often, the evidence for such a clandestine network in any particular community is thin to the point of non-existence. Whenever a particular offender is arrested in a "satanic" crime, then he is almost invariably a self-taught teenage dabbler like Pete Roland, Ricky Kasso or Sean Sellers, whose notion of the occult derived from horror films or the game "Dungeons and Dragons". Moreover, these crimes often seem closely related to the activities of teenage gangs and petty drug dealing. There is no suggestion that these youths had been drawn into any more sophisticated cult; and the evidence of wider or national links is, if possible, even weaker.[35]

Even if there was such a cult, the accounts of their supposed practices, beliefs and rituals have many problems and inconsistencies. We may initially be troubled by the impressive continuity of the charges made against such groups from the accusations against out-groups throughout history, from ancient Christians and Gnostics through medieval Jews and heretics[36] (compare the quotations at the beginning of this paper). This would tend to suggest that the alleged behaviors are imaginary, perhaps based on archetypal fears. On the other hand, this would not in itself prove that the actions have not occurred. However, the theorists of occult crime have described as "characteristic" of this type of offense such a wide range of acts and symbols that almost any activity could be seen as fitting.

Particularly outrageous here is the "satanic calendar" included in many sources, the list of specially significant days on which sinister rituals might occur. Police officers would thus be alerted to the true significance of peculiar acts occurring on such a day. There are indeed such special days, such as April 30 or All Hallow's Eve; but some recent calendars include forty or more dates, most with no known connection to any occult tradition. If we further include acts occurring "near" a special day, then it would be almost impossible to avoid suggesting some ritual significance to a routine crime. Alleged occult graffiti are equally spurious. Among a vast and proliferating number of examples, it is especially startling to see the familiar 1960s "peace" symbol co-opted as the satanic "Cross of Nero"! Some sources include the Star of David as a symbol of what is anti-Christian, and thus satanic.

In summary, the evidence presented for a satanic crime-wave in the United States seems wholly unconvincing, a tissue of improbable charges based largely on the assertions of questionable witnesses. Also dubious is the vocabulary employed by the various authors, and the lack of precision they so often demonstrate in their definitions. Other writers have discussed the problems in using terms such as *ritual, ritualistic, sacrifice*, and so on;[37] but other words are even more troubling, and the most hazardous of all is probably *occult*. However, the misuse of the term is highly revealing because it suggests a great deal about the political and religious agendas of those most active in creating and exaggerating the "satanic threat". *Occult* and *satanic* are confounded in a way that reflects the views of the narrowest Christian sects, for whom all religious experience outside mainstream evangelical Christianity is suspect; and anything beyond Judaeo-Christian monotheism is quite literally of the devil. And it is these fundamentalist groups whose interests and concerns are reflected throughout the whole satanism panic.

The term "occult" is very flexible. Literally, it implies the study of what is hidden, usually esoteric religious or mystical doctrines, and there is the suggestion that such studies would not be suitable for the great mass of people. The word might cover long-established activities such as palmistry, spiritualism, tarot card reading, fortune telling, and divining, to say nothing of ritual magic and unorthodox religious sects. All have certainly increased since the 1960s with the emergence of a New Age movement interested in astrology, reincarnation, astral projection and unconventional medicine. For some recent critics, however, these diverse practices are part of a spectrum which extends into serious criminality and devil-worship. "Channeling", for example, is seen not as a harmless fad but as a modern form of shamanism, where literal demons are permitted to take possession of the human mind.

The *American Focus* comments indiscriminately that "There are over five thousand occult groups in the US and Canada who have a general interest or active practice of pagan religious lore, witchcraft and satanism". The theme of the New Age as the gateway to satanism is frequently represented in the books on sale in a typical "Christian bookshop". In the last decade, it has often been disturbing to witness these religious concerns and prejudices spilling over into the "secular" mass media. Network television programs have illustrated reports on the growth of satanism and satanic crime by depicting flourishing occult and New Age bookstores, and implying a link between the phenomena. It has also been common for police sources to cite the presence of occult books in a suspect's home to buttress claims of "ritual" criminality in a particular case.

But the strong religious agenda of the critics of "diabolism" is easily dis-

cerned. Again and again, the same protagonists appear. The most quoted authority is probably Sean Sellers a teenage parricide who blamed his crimes on his experimentation with diabolism; and who has become a media personality as one of America's youngest death-row inmates. He now asserts that full acceptance of Christianity is the only way to rescue youths from the occult, and who practises a "ministry" with this goal. He is closely advised by Tom Wedge, a fundamentalist minister termed "the Satan Hunter", who is a contributor to the *American Focus*.[38] The editor of this work began his list of dedications with an acknowledgement to Jesus Christ, while other contributing authors include Jerry Oglesby, of the "National Council Against the Antichrist Movement"; and "Citizens Against Ritual Abuse". Another is the Rev. Mike Warnke, who claims to be a former satanic priest.[39] Also influential is "occult researcher" Peter Michas, yet another "pastor", who has produced some of the more gruesome and far-reaching allegations.

One of the most quoted authorities is John Frattarola of *Passport* magazine, another source for claims about satanic activity, whose views are expressed in the video *America's Best Kept Secret*. Frattarola has attacked "the gradual but consistent displacement of Christianity by a hodgpodge of occultic, mystic, Eastern pagan, New Age spirituality".[40] It was *Passport* which published the widely quoted "WICCA" document, allegedly the blueprint of a satanic plan to subvert Christian America by 1999.[41] Jerry Johnston drew the obvious parallels between this piece and the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, and described the document as "genuine as a three dollar bill".[42] Another of the widely sold books is by Bob Larson, who advocates Christianity as the solution to "satanic" activities, and who is the author of books like *Straight Answers on the New Age* and *Larson's Book of Cults*. His *Edge of Evil* is a "crossover", sold both in religious as well as "mainstream" bookstores.

All the initial claims in the satanism panic can be found in the commonplaces of the religious Right in the 1970s. At that time, it was common to attack both the religious and political liberalism of mainstream American Christianity, and the theological tendency to deny the existence of a personal devil. Also to be condemned was the opening to other religions – the ecumenical *apertura* towards Rome, and the increased sympathy for Oriental and mystical religions.[43] For the fundamentalists of the last two decades, New Age and mystical movements have been the Devil's Trojan Horse in the subversion of America, a means to introduce the gullible young to anti-Christian concepts and practices. "These New Age techniques are not new at all, however, but are the same old sorcery under new labels."[44]

At the end of the 1970s, these conservative ideas grew stronger and also gained some wider social acceptance.[45] Increased reporting about cults and deprogramming led to public concern, while the People's Temple affair in Jonestown suggested the real and objective dangers of cult activity. An influ-

ential "occult cop" like Sandi Gallant describes this incident as a real turning point in her own attitude towards cults as a law enforcement issue. Ken Wooden was a prominent investigator of the case; while Ted Gunderson dated his interest in cult crime to 1980.[46] In addition, the religious Right was at the zenith of its political power in the early 1980s, and fundamentalist churches were rapidly gaining new adherents, to surpass the strength of established liberal denominations like the Episcopalians.

Networks of religious bookstores and electronic media ensured a public voice for the movement's concerns and prejudices. Evangelical and fundamentalist bookstores have long distributed works of religious controversy, with Catholics, Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses the usual targets. In the last decade, however, "cults", "satanism" and even "demonology" have acquired their own sections, often with literally dozens of recent titles on what are clearly felt to be topics of urgent concern.[47] The figures would be even larger if we include "occult" interpretations of the dangers posed by moral threats like abortion or rock music.

There exists a whole flourishing fundamentalist culture that is quite unknown to those who never frequent such bookstores. Several religious publishers have made minor industries out of attacking contemporary cults, satanism and unbelief. Huntington House is based in Louisiana;[48] Crossways in Illinois;[49] Harvest House in Oregon;[50] Chick in California.[51] Occasionally, their titles achieve sales in the hundreds of thousands, almost entirely through these religious outlets. One remarkable example of such success is Frank Peretti,[52] whose bestselling novels like *This Present Darkness* describe Christian communities besieged by satanic and demonic assaults disguised as "New Age" cults.

Central to fundamentalist rhetoric is the real power of the Devil in the world as the source of all evil. By the 1970s, there were indeed real satanists in America, and these theories may have had a particular appeal to some who became active in notorious crimes. Once a few cases were publicized, it was natural for the fundamentalists to incorporate them into their wider worldview, and to construct a major national or worldwide conspiracy, suitably buttressed by impressive statistics. This provided preachers and ministers with a series of powerful arguments. If the conspiracy view were accepted, then religious liberalism had failed and the churches must come to a more basic acceptance of the reality of the force of evil. Also, an upsurge of diabolism was believed to support the fundamentalist belief in the imminence of the Second Coming of Christ, which would be preceded by the triumph of Antichrist.

Satanism was thus intimately linked to the fundamentalist diagnosis of the secular ills of society:

The outbreak of satanic crimes and worship; an epidemic of killer diseases;

> the slaughter of over 22 million unborn children; the collapse of once solid financial institutions; the bankruptcy of American farmers; harsher and more unpredictable weather patterns; an increase of drug abuse, child abuse and pornography; the corruption and disintegration of morals, values, ethics and integrity . . . and the powerful rise of false religions right under our drooping eyes. . .[53]

The proposed remedies were as profoundly political as the analysis. A campaign against "satanism" would in reality be a sweeping endeavor to remold American social life on the lines advocated by fundamentalists and extreme conservatives. "Cult" and New Age activities were not only to be stigmatized, but might even be restricted or banned as leading to overt criminality. Censorship would be far ranging, extending to "occultic" (*sic*) influences in films and the media, even (or especially) in children's cartoons. The thought and education of the young must be regulated, and the clergy could justify religious intervention in the schools by the need to drive out "satanic" influences. It might appear trivial to most observers, but the mere existence of Halloween and its customs remains a source of deep scandal to religious fundamentalists, who would ideally prohibit it as a sinister initiation into devil-worship.

Repeatedly, the critics of satanic crime attribute its prevalence to the lax parental discipline of the generation that came of age in the 1960s; this problem could only be solved by a return to "traditional moral values".[54] One speaker who emphasizes this as the antidote to the occult is Samantha Smith, of the highly conservative "Colorado Eagle Forum". The assault closely reflected ultra-Conservative political opinions, as New Age ideas are often associated in fundamentalist critiques with "one-worldism", emphasis on international cooperation to the detriment of patriotism. Attacks on Oriental religions shade imperceptibly into critiques of Asian immigration into the United States.

More generally, "normal" criminal acts such as drug dealing were to be seen as loosely connected with the objective evil that was satanism, thus discouraging liberal tendencies towards lenient or rehabilitative efforts towards offenders. In fact, "devil-worship" became an all-embracing label with which to stigmatize any aspect of modern society with which the conservative religious leadership did not agree, especially in matters of the media. Pornography and explicit art or literature could be associated with child exploitation and ritual abuse; while rock music was blatantly connected with evil forces.[55] Those who might once have denounced rock as "jungle music" could now achieve wider social acceptance by stressing its satanic character, at the same time avoiding the taint of racism.[56]

It is also possible to suggest more speculative aspects of the religious agenda. For example, the religious Right strongly opposed any change in women's

traditional role as home-maker, and denounced the trend towards two-career families where children remained in day care. By emphasizing the widespread character of "ritual abuse", the claims-makers were attempting to depict day-care centers as an extremely dangerous place for the young. They enjoyed enormous success in this, as witnessed by a rash of prosecutions, scandals and school-closures across the nation. It is possible that the widespread credulity reflected genuine ambiguity about the surrender of traditional family concepts, and the abandonment of children to others. The ensuing parental guilt found expression in the urgent need to condemn an outsider preying on one's children. This may also explain the belief that children given up to adoption agencies might find their way onto the altars of sacrifical cults.

Another (admittedly speculative) explanation might also account for one of the most mystifying aspects of the curent panic, the emphasis on "breeders". These are women who claim to have bred children explicitly for the purpose of sacrificing them in a cult setting. The charge apparently originated with "survivor" Lauren Stratford, but there are now hundreds of individuals claiming to be breeders, and the idea has been widely publicized.[57] In the context of the fundamentalist world-view, the focus on the breeders and their guilt reflects outrage at the prevalence of abortion. Here too, women are seen to have bred children for slaughter and butchery, and the religious groups offer counseling and therapy for mothers who are "survivors" of this perceived crime. In the fundamentalist view, this post-Christian society expresses its hatred of God through many forms of child-murder; and abortion or euthanasia are concessions to the Devil little less overt than an actual ritual sacrifice. This may seem far-fetched, but the analogy is explicitly drawn in recent accounts of these "unholy sacrifices of the New Age".[58]

History and ideology

The panic thus draws on many different social and political concerns. The themes can be discerned clearly when we consider the historical discussions of "the occult" provided in many recent works on satanic crime, and repeated in the seminars offered to law enforcement. Most accounts attempt to place the movement in some kind of historical context, but the history presented is both wildly inaccurate, and heavily influenced by simplistic Christian fundamentalism. History is thus one of the foremost vehicles for the strong ideological content of the movement.

Typical accounts note that devil worship is a pre-Christian idea, and some might mention the frequent Biblical linkage between pagan religions and child sacrifices. This is ingenious as it provides a context for the alleged enthusiasm of modern satanists for ritual child abuse. The supposed movement went

underground in the Middle Ages, though it was often recognized in the widely reported crime of witchcraft. Modern satanism was the consequence of a revival engineered by English enthusiasts like Aleister Crowley and witchcraft entrepreneur Gerald B. Gardner. In the 1960s, a new synthesis was promoted by Anton LaVey of the Church of Satan, with its subsequent offshoots and imitators.[59]

Such an account is tendentious. It is medieval in its assumption that pre-Christian or non-monotheistic religions are in fact devil-worship. This was the sort of approach with which early missionaries set off for India and Africa. In fact, devil-worship is a simple outgrowth of the Judaeo-Christian tradition, and especially of Christianity itself; and the mere *belief* in a devil is much more likely to characterize fundamentalist critics than occultists themselves. The closest resemblance to "devil-worship" in early times was to be found among heretical Christian sects like the Gnostics, who argued that the devil was a misunderstood enemy of the truly evil and homicidal god of the Old Testament. Such ideas may have survived into the Middle Ages, but the vast majority of witchcraft persecutions were the result of social and economic pressures that led to the stigmatization of innocent victims.

It is unsavory to find the witch trials soberly adduced as evidence for the activities of modern cults. The *American Focus* offends especially badly in this regard, citing as factual the witchcraft cases of seventeenth century Sweden. These are chosen explicitly because the convictions were secured on the evidence of children; but the authors do not mention that the children's testimony is universally regarded as deliberately false. This was not a case where witnesses might have been misled, or their testimony misinterpreted: they lied, and for profit.

In the case of Salem, the work notes that "undoubtedly innocent people were executed in the widespread panic, but, one must seriously consider the occultic practices which sparked the fear, and wonder how many innocent people were killed in a ritualized fashion".[60] This is to introduce a charge not imagined at the time, and undreamt of even by Cotton Mather; but it is fascinating to see how charges of "witch-hunting" are here turned against the sceptics.[61] There is a close parallel in the treatment of the "blood-libel", the alleged Jewish sacrifices of Christian infants throughout the years.[62] At first sight, the credence given to these earlier stories seems to cast doubt on contemporary tales of child sacrifice, and the medieval tales were widely reported and documented in similar terms – the criterion by which we are today asked to believe stories of ritual child abuse and murder. However, Raschke even tries to use the blood libels as a weapon against contemporary satanism. In a particularly contorted passage, he suggests that the Jews became the scapegoats for real sacrifices carried on through history by aristocratic satanists and occultists![63]

Equally unsatisfactory is the view that the mysticism at the turn of the century can all be categorized as "satanism". In reality, the key group was a highly respectable and intellectual circle known as the Order of the Golden Dawn, many of whom would in fact term themselves Christian. Undoubtedly, this claim would be dismissed by the modern Bible Belt "demonologists", but it is questionable if these experts would be intellectually qualified to judge the spiritual subtleties of such a brilliant and diverse group, which included some of the leading literary figures of the day.[64]

The Golden Dawn initiates were enthusiastic about Freemasonry, about Graeco-Egyptian and Oriental occult theories, but their main emphasis was on Qabalistic mystical practices and ritual magic. Qabalism is a strain of esoteric Judaism that may be two thousand years old; and although it represents a mere fringe of Jewish thought, it is a powerful tradition that has attracted brilliant minds.[65] Only the most bigoted fundamentalist could term these speculations "devil-worship", a term which could equally well be applied to Hindu or Buddhist ideas. The calumny of the Golden Dawn is reminiscent of the contemporary theory that "New Age" ideas are little but veiled satanism.

Aleister Crowley's groups, like the A.: A.: and the O.T.O., grew out of the Golden Dawn. He was primarily an eclectic pagan, who acknowledged no devil in any Christian sense.[66] He was also an outrageous self-publicist and practical joker, who loved to promote stories about his alleged evils, including child sacrifice. The stories about his "satanic" career are the result of an unholy encounter between his bizarre and obscene sense of humor and the credulous gutter press of the day. Even the far from credulous Jerry Johnston[67] takes seriously Crowley's boast to have sacrificed 150 children during his career. In fact, the magus admitted to five such sacrifices during a single day. He was actually parodying a statement by the Catholic church that each ejaculation contained a potential human life, and that masturbation or contraception thus ended this life. In this sense only, we can accept Crowley's macabre boast at its face value![68]

In reality, modern satanism is the creature of Christianity. It first appears in the France and Italy of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, where it may well have reflected anti-clerical sentiments within a society where the Catholic church was under attack. This was the time at which the "Black Mass" first appears.[69] These ideas enjoyed a revival in the "decadent" atmosphere of the 1890s, and it is this generation which marks the flowering of modern satanism[70] "Devil-worship" is not as old as religion itself: it has barely celebrated its centenary, and it is a wholly artificial and intellectual creation. LaVey, Gardner and the rest were thus drawing on a relatively recent tradition, upon which they could easily impose the seal of their distinctive ideas. It was Gardner, for example, who invented most of the terminology and ritual of modern witchcraft, and the Wiccan emphasis on ritual flagellation reflects nothing more

than his personal sexual predilections.[71] LaVey was equally successful in creating his own "immemorial traditions".[72]

The Invention of satanism

The antiquity and universality of satanism have been exaggerated by the religious critics to promote the image of a serious and deep-rooted threat to "Christian America". In reality, the phenomenon has emerged very recently, and has been largely shaped by a handful of entrepreneurs with a strong sense of public relations. The "satanic" movement of the 1980s has been powerfully influenced by factors deriving neither from ancient religion nor from misguided antiquarianism. In reality, mass media and popular fiction played a central role throughout.

Supremely important in creating the new mythology was Dennis Wheatley (1897–1977), author of novels like *The Satanist, They Used Dark Forces,* and *To the Devil-a Daughter.* Wheatley himself was not a believer in the occult, and merely used it as a source of material. On the other hand, it was his novel *The Devil Rides Out* (1934) which played a seminal role in the new occultism, introducing Crowley himself as a villain in the character "Mocata". In effect, this book imported French satanism into the English-speaking world of the 1930s, with powerful consequences for Gardnerian witchcraft. This is worth emphasizing. What most people mean when they refer to a "satanic ritual" is in fact a variant of the Black Mass, an institution wholly unknown in Britain or the United States before the mid-twentieth century. This is natural enough if we recall the strong Protestantism of earlier times: a blasphemous parody of the Mass only had the power to shock in a Catholic society. It was rather as if one expected Salman Rushdie's book *Satanic Verses* to shock in a society without Muslims.

At every stage, we find that the mythology invented for Wheatley's fiction had an enormous influence on current perceptions and practices of occultism. It was Wheatley for instance who synthesized the hitherto unrelated worlds of ritual magic (real) with the accounts of the medieval witch trials (largely fictitious). Thus the evil magicians in the novels do not work alone, as in tradition: they have followers who gather in covens at the great seasonal meetings, or Sabbats. This idea is fundamental both to the modern practitioners and critics of the occult, but it was invented within living memory. Wheatley grafted onto satanism such Oriental concepts as reincarnation and karma, themes which survive in much of the occult to this day. Another of his novels invented the idea that Crowley's son was killed during an unsuccessful invocation, an idea that is today repeated as sober fact by the "demonologists".

The 1968 Hammer film of *The Devil Rides Out* (known in the United States as *The Devil's Bride*) was as influential as the book, and the magic disseminated by popular occultism in 1960s Britain drew heavily on Wheatley rather than Crowley. This was certainly true in the lyrics of the pioneering occult rock group, Black Widow. Better remembered were other groups who drew both on Wheatley and Crowley. Black Sabbath was one such: their lead singer was the later notorious Ozzy Osbourne, whose name regularly features in "satanic" graffiti. More sophisticated were Led Zeppelin, whose leader Jimmy Page was a highly intellectual Crowleyite, who even purchased his hero's Scottish estate. With Black Sabbath, Led Zeppelin were the most powerful influences on the new "heavy metal" music of the 1970s. The modern "occultism" of groups like Venom, Megadeth, Slayer and Iron Maiden thus derives indirectly from Crowley; but with a large dose of Dennis Wheatley acquired en route.

The profoundly literary and synthetic character of modern satanism is also illustrated by the frequent references to that mighty book of dark magic, the *Necronomicon*, the work of the "mad Arab, Abdul Alhazred". The book never had an authentic existence, and was the invention of the early twentieth century pulp horror author, H.P. Lovecraft. Largely as an extended intellectual joke, a book entitled the "Necronomicon" was compiled from ancient Mesopotamian texts, and published in a mass market paperback as recently as 1977. LaVey also created rituals based entirely on Lovecraft's fictions.[73] Of such is the "ancient tradition" of devil-worship.

The cinema was another powerful force in the 1970s, the time of a boom in "devil-pictures" following the commercial success of *The Exorcist* (1973). It was the film of *The Omen* (1976) which introduced the crucial figure of the Antichrist and the number 666, themes were quite unknown in "classical" continental satanism. In fact, this element is only possible in the more heavily Bible-influenced tradition of Crowley, whose parents believed resolutely in the prophecies of Revelation. The modern popularity of "666" in satanic graffiti would not have been possible before *The Omen* series, and the rock music derived from it. More recently, the "satanic" drug gang active in Matamoros undoubtedly drew on Afro-Hispanic magical traditions like Palo Mayombe; but their specific beliefs in human sacrifice were apparently drawn from the popular Martin Sheen film, *The Believers*.

The curious interaction between life and art is nicely illustrated by a curious incident reported in Milwaukee in May 1989.[74] It was alleged that Deborah Kazuck lured a man to a house where she and some other women attempted to kill him. The "sacrifical" group – if such they were – chanted REDRUM, which is MURDER backwards; Kazuck believed herself to be a reincarnation of Jack the Ripper's mother; and a poster of Hitler played a role in the ritual. If this was accurately reported, this is a fascinating melange of themes entirely

drawn from fiction. *Redrum* is from the Stephen King novel (and 1979 Stanley Kubrick film) *The Shining*; and it allegedly occurs as a "satanic" graffiti. There is no evidence that Jack the Ripper was in any sense an occultist, but a "satanic" or sacrifical context for the crimes was suggested by Crowley (in what was almost certainly a joke); and by the horror author, Robert Bloch.[75]

Similarly, the link between Hitler and the occult is an old canard used in sensationalistic books of little scholarly merit. (Fundamentalist writers assert the dictator's membership in a "Black Order of Germany", which influenced LaVey.[76]) The idea was finally laid to rest by an impressive recent study.[77] In other words, the Milwaukee incident may be regarded by some as one of the best authenticated modern examples of an attempt at "ritual murder" according to the strictest definitions; but it was clearly not the work of mysterious or sophisticated "Cult satanists". This particular crime appears to owe more to the horror-fantasy section of the local chain bookstore than to any clandestine sect or church.

It is common for fundamentalists to criticize occult influences in the media because they allegedly lead young people into deviant and violent ways. In fact, the argument can be turned against them. If American cults are so very weak and ill-informed that they are ever-ready to adopt the latest gimmick from a current film, fantasy game or television series, it hardly suggests that they are a serious or deep-rooted menace. (British magicians are a more substantial and intellectually credible group.[78]) Far from being a manifestation of an ancient and wide-ranging evil, American satanism appears to be overwhelmingly a game for teenage dabblers and mentally unstable adults. To treat it as anything more should be to invite ridicule.

Conclusion: the implications for policy

Those who attempt to warn society of the dangers of satanism have also been swift to propose solutions. The *American Focus*, for example, suggests the formation of powerful "Ritual Crime Task Forces", made up of local state and federal agencies; while groups like the Cult Awareness Network should provide "experts" for the extensive training of law enforcement officers. In addition, the full resources of the FBI should be used in profiling "ritual" offenders. By contrast, we have argued that "occult crime" is very different from the menace that is sometimes portrayed, and most of the serious charges are mythical. Whenever a police department has been tempted to credit the allegations, it has usually been embarrassed by the utter failure to produce results. There have been numerous local examples of "wild-goose chases" after alleged satanic altars and cults; and attempts to dig for the bodies of

satanic victims have been humiliating failures. The most notorious was the Lucas County affair in Ohio in 1985, when an expensive search for sixty or more bodies produced nothing.[79]

In conclusion, satanism is neither "the seduction of America's youth" nor "America's best kept secret", and it is not "terrorizing our communities". It is a tiny fringe movement worthy only of treatment in the least responsible and most sensationalistic media. It should have no place in the agendas of contemporary police agencies, or in the files of responsible therapists. The satanism panic is of value chiefly for what it reveals about the enduring power of both conspiracy politics and fundamentalist religion in American life.

Notes

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