

Signs of the Devil: The Social Creation of Satanic Ritual Abuse

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Since the proliferation of reports in the 1980s, satanic ritual abuse¹ (SRA) has captured the interest of sociological, medical and legal communities, as well as the general public. This public and professional interest in SRA may derive from the extreme nature of allegations, which include thought programming and mind control, ritual sexual assault, cannibalism and human sacrifice.² The fear generated by the claims that this abuse is committed by large, organised groups of perpetrators,³ who infiltrate every strata of society and are identified by their association with Satanism, draws further interest to the issue and combines with pre-existing conspiracy theories regarding secret societies⁴ to generate momentum for further intrigue. Due to the severity of the abuse reported, police have undertaken extensive investigation of these accusations. Yet despite the proliferation of SRA reports, the investigators' genuine acceptance of the veracity of the reports⁵ and the sophistication of police investigatory methods,⁶ not a single case has been verified involving organised groups of Satanists. This fact defies the genuine

¹ For a definition of satanic ritual abuse, see V Sinason (ed) *Treating Survivors of Satanist Abuse* (London, 1994) 3-4.

² G B Greaves, 'Alternate Hypotheses Regarding Claims of Satanic Cult Activity: A Critical Analysis' in D Sakheim and S Devine (eds) *Out of Darkness: Exploring Satanism and Ritual Abuse* (New York, 1992) 45-72. See also J S Victor, *Satanic Panic: The Creation of a Contemporary Legend* (Chicago, 1993).

³ B Siano, 'Bad Satan Psycho-Juju False Memories, Broken Families, Child Sacrifice and the New Satanic Panic', *Satanic Media Watch and News Exchange*, accessed 16 April 2001, www.smwane.dk/content/category/5/82/30/.

⁴ For an example of anti-occult conspiracy writing, see Anonymous, 'Christians: Beware of Freemasonry', *Bible Probe: Non-Denominational For Christians and Jews*, accessed 15 December 2006, www.bibleprobe.com.

⁵ K Lanning, 'A Law-Enforcement Perspective On Allegations of Ritual Abuse' in Sakheim and Devine, *op cit*, 109-146.

⁶ *Ibid.*

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distress and trauma displayed by those that report the abuse,⁷ as well as the intensity of belief held by those who support these victims.⁸ This raises questions as to what is actually occurring to the victims of SRA and why Satanists have become convenient scapegoats for these experiences. When the particular constellations of accusations of SRA that are reported are examined from a historical perspective, it becomes clear that SRA is not a new phenomenon. Indeed, such accusations have been repeated across history,⁹ suggesting that SRA reflects a social theme, rooted in a Judeo-Christian concept of evil that is activated when Western society requires a social scapegoat.

Before any examination of SRA can be undertaken, the language used in this area requires clarification. Within SRA literature, discourses regarding SRA disclosures or investigations, and particularly media releases,¹⁰ the words 'ritual', 'satanic' and 'occult' are used in a generalised, non-specific and often incorrect manner. For example, in media releases documenting the murders committed by the serial killers Frederick and Rosemary West,¹¹ the terms 'satanic', 'ritual' and 'occult' were applied as generalised terms of abuse,¹² despite the fact that these murderers were neither occultists nor Satanists, nor were their behaviours ritualised. Indeed, these terms are bandied about by the mass media without any reference to their defined meaning. It is important to understand the definitions of these terms in order to develop some idea of why they misrepresent

⁷ W C Young, 'Recognition and Treatment of Survivors Reporting Ritual Abuse' in Sakheim, *op cit*, 249-278.

⁸ See Anonymous, 'Christians: Beware of Freemasonry', *op cit*; K Kidwell, 'Satan Stalks Your Children', *The Fatima Network*, accessed 12 December 2006, www.fatimacruzader.com and D Carrico and D Carrico, 'Ritual Abuse Free: Christians Wake Up', *Followers of Jesus Christ Ministries*, accessed 12 December 2006, www.ritualabusefree.org.

⁹ For an overview of the historical roots of SRA, see Victor, *op cit*, Chapter 14.

¹⁰ L Johnson, 'Surviving Satanism: Overcoming Self-Destructive Behaviour in Rural Adolescents', *Youth Studies Australia* 13:3, 1994, 46-52; S Masson, 'The Danger of Inviting Evil Into Your Life', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 27 October 2004.

¹¹ J Bennett and G Gardner, *The Cromwell Street Murders: The Detective's Story* (Gloucestershire, 2005).

¹² B Ankarloo and S Clark (eds) *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe: The Twentieth Century* (Philadelphia, 1999) 124.

reality in the case of SRA. The term ‘occult’ refers to the body of knowledge that is hidden or secret in the areas of the paranormal, preternatural or the supernatural. It in no way reflects a moral imperative surrounding the actions of an occultist. The popular connotation of ‘occult’ to mean ‘black magic’, ‘sorcery’ or ‘witchcraft’ is blatantly inaccurate. The term ‘ritual’ refers to a formalised, predetermined set of symbolic actions, generally performed in a particular environment;¹³ ‘satanic’ refers to a specific religious and/or philosophical movement whose adherents recognise Satan, either as an archetype, literal being, pre-cosmic force, or anything between.¹⁴ Thus, ‘satanic rituals’ are predetermined symbolic actions used by Satanists only within their religious practises. Although the term ‘satanic ritual abuse’ has been used extensively in the popular media and by certain governmental and social organisations, it is clear that, unless it describes prescribed and formulised violence carried out as a set part of satanic religious practise and embedded in a satanic liturgy, the expression is used incorrectly. The impact of this is that the religious movement of Satanism, along with those engaging in New Age ritual practises and those involved in occult study, are unjustly and dangerously associated with extremely serious criminal acts.

The intensity of the belief of those reportedly experiencing SRA and those supporting the victims is extremely high. Any objective argument about the reality and veracity of this issue is likely to create significant outrage. This paper will examine the following issues carefully: (a) what is involved in reports of SRA, (b) the facts concerning organised satanic groups, (c) what the police evidence suggests regarding the accusations of SRA, (d) how the phenomena may be explained if SRA is not occurring, and finally (e) how SRA fits into a historical social perspective. This paper does not suggest that those reporting SRA are not abused. It merely explores whether this abuse occurs in the course of satanic ritual and examines the socio-religious implications of Satanism being used as a social scapegoat.

¹³ A Delbridge *et al*, *The Macquarie Dictionary* (Sydney, 1981) 1492.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 1530.

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Accusations of SRA usually describe a wide range of criminal behaviours reportedly perpetrated by Satanists against unwilling ‘cult’ members, their children and abducted victims. These behaviours include severe physical, emotional and sexual abuse, both of adults and children, animal mutilation, forced drug use, the production of pornography, mind control or ‘programming’, incarceration, abduction, murder, cannibalism and sadistic orgies during the course of the Black Mass and other apparently satanic rituals.¹⁵ While any of these behaviours may appear in an SRA report, four particular elements occur more frequently than others; sexual abuse, sacrifice, cannibalism and satanic ritual.

The first common element of SRA – and to some extent, the most important – is sexual abuse. The sexual abuse described in SRA reports is usually severe and sadistic.¹⁶ It is often reported to involve children.¹⁷ It is so profound and pervasive that SRA can be considered primarily a sexual crime.¹⁸ The second feature, sacrifice,¹⁹ describes animal²⁰ as well as human sacrifices,²¹ reportedly made to Satan in the context of a ritual. Sacrificial victims are usually described as being abducted specifically for that purpose²² and are almost always unknown to, and separate from, the individuals perpetrating SRA. In these reports, the victims tend to be children or young women, although other groups, such as the homeless,²³ prostitutes or teenage runaways,²⁴ are sometimes mentioned. As an

¹⁵ Sinason, *op cit*, Chapter 4.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 34.

¹⁷ I K Weir and M S Wheatcroft, ‘Allegations of Children’s Involvement in Ritual Sexual Abuse: Clinical Experience of 20 Cases’, *Child Abuse and Neglect* 19, 1995, 491-505.

¹⁸ Personal communication with an employee of the Women’s Rape Crisis Centre of New South Wales. This employee does not wish to be named.

¹⁹ C A Ross, *Satanic Ritual Abuse: Principles of Treatment* (Toronto, 1995) 71.

²⁰ Victor, *op cit*, 11.

²¹ Ross, *op cit*, 71.

²² R Moonstone, “Why I Don’t Believe the ‘Survivors’ of Occult Groups”, *Satanic Media Watch and News Exchange*, accessed 16 April 2001,

www.smwane.dk/content/category/5/82/30/

²³ Siano, *op cit*.

²⁴ *Ibid*.

alternative to abduction, some satanic ritual abusers are described as deliberately impregnating willing or unwilling women, known as ‘brood mares’ in the United Kingdom²⁵ and ‘breeders’ in the United States,²⁶ to provide babies or aborted foetuses for the purpose of sacrifice and/or cannibalism. Indeed, many alleged survivors of SRA describe themselves as having served this role within the group.²⁷ Another recurrent feature is the cannibalisation of sacrificial victims’ bodies.²⁸ Reports of cannibalisation are often secondhand,²⁹ and describe the eating of raw human flesh³⁰ such as hearts.³¹ The fourth feature that is recurrent in reports of SRA is the actual ‘ritual’, often involving the inverted crucifix, desecration of holy places using faeces and urine, reversals of Christian rituals,³² robed satanic ‘priests’,³³ as well as ritual instruments such as bells, candles, altars, knives, wands and chalices.³⁴

It must be emphasised that the definition of SRA, as popularised by the Christian Right and the various groups within the anti-occult movement, has always involved organised groups of perpetrators, acting in concert. These groups reportedly engage in very deliberate behaviours, often involving long-term planning, such as kidnapping and ‘reprogramming’ victims and breeding children, in order to engage in rape, violence and murder within the context of satanic ritual. SRA does not describe the perpetration of crimes of this sort by an individual who considers himself or herself to be a Satanist, nor does it describe other organised abuse such as paedophilia rings, international child pornography, inter-familial child abuse and

²⁵ Siano, *op cit.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ E Bass and L Davis, *The Courage to Heal: A Guide for Women Survivors of Sexual Abuse* (New York, 1988).

²⁸ Ankarloo and Clark, *op cit.*, 124-125.

²⁹ See Sinason, *op cit.*, 20, 34, 242, 246, 293 for examples of hearsay reports of cannibalism in SRA cases.

³⁰ Siano, *op cit.*

³¹ Victor, *op cit.*, 18-19.

³² Sinason, *op cit.*, 38.

³³ *Ibid.*, 246.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

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institutional abuse.³⁵ These forms of abuse have been well documented and investigated; their reports are legitimate and verifiable. It is clear, however, that they have nothing to do with Satanism or ritual practices. In order for these alleged crimes to constitute ‘satanic ritual abuse’, they must be committed by organised groups of Satanists as part of a known satanic ritual practice.

In order to determine whether SRA is truly perpetrated by Satanists in the course of ritual practice, it is essential to investigate what the beliefs and practices of satanic groups actually are. Due to widespread misunderstanding of Satanism, it is also important to consider what Satanism is not. Despite popular media images and the impression provided by anti-occult groups, Satanists are not teenagers who listen to ‘heavy metal’ music,³⁶ neo-Pagans³⁷ (including the adherents of Wicca, Druidism, Asatru and other New Age forms of spirituality), those practicing esoteric practices or magical traditions,³⁸ individuals who are engaged in occult study³⁹ (such as tarot reading or divination), those practicing Eastern traditions such as *reiki*, *qi gong*, *tai chi* or *feng shui*, nor any known serial killers. The misuse of these terms, and the blurring of concepts and religions it implies, seems to be the result of a campaign conducted by the anti-occult movement, which began in the 1980s as a merging of the Christian Right and specific parent groups. This movement’s stated agenda includes the eradication of supposedly ‘occult’ social elements, such as fantasy role playing games, heavy metal music, fantasy and science fiction literature, genuine magical practices, New Age spirituality, neo-Pagan religions, as well as the social acceptance of divination and astrology, along with other religious practices such as meditation, *Ayurveda*, *qi gong* and *tai chi*. It is important to be clear that these practices cannot be considered to be interchangeable with those of Satanism.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Victor, *op cit*, 161-163.

³⁷ Lanning, *op cit*, 109-146.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*

Indeed, Satanism is a very specific religion, currently only practiced by two major groups: Anton LaVey's Church of Satan⁴⁰ and the Temple of Set.⁴¹ Small satanic groups temporarily rise into existence, such as The Satanic Community⁴² and the First Church of Satan.⁴³ There are also a number of individuals who consider themselves to be Satanists but do not follow either of the established groups. It is unclear whether the latter are truly to be categorised as Satanists; as in any religion, simply saying that one belongs to the religion is not sufficient for membership. Satanists are required to follow the prescribed beliefs and practices of a satanic group, such as the Church of Satan or the Temple of Set, or at least hold beliefs and practices that conform in some way to general satanic practice.

According to the Church of Satan, Satanists believe in human indulgence, vital existence, undefiled wisdom and self-awareness, kindness to those deserving of it, appropriate vengeance, self-responsibility, gratification of desires and the role of human beings as 'just another animal'. Satanic practice, according to the Church of Satan, rejects prayer, which, it says, distracts people from useful activity. It abhors the killing of humans or animals and discourages suicide. However, it encourages indulgence instead of abstinence, demands obedience to the secular law, encourages responsibility of the individual and follows an ethic of reciprocity. The *Satanic Rituals*⁴⁴ is a work outlining the rituals and ceremonies of the Church of Satan. It suggests that a nude woman be used as an altar, since Satanism exalts in the flesh not the spirit, and recommend the use of one white candle to symbolise the hypocrisy of 'white magicians' and at least one black candle to symbolise the power of darkness, as well

⁴⁰ J R Lewis, *Legitimizing New Religions* (New Brunswick, 2003) Chapter 5, *passim*. See also Anonymous, *Official Church of Satan Website*, accessed 14 December 2006, www.churchofsatan.com.

⁴¹ Anonymous, *The Temple of Set: Official Site*, www.xeper.org. See also D Webb, *Mysteries of the Temple of Set: Inner Teachings of the Left Hand Path* (Austin, 2004).

⁴² Anonymous, *The Satanic Community*, accessed 21 December 2006, www.the600club.com.

⁴³ J Allee, *The First Church of Satan*, accessed 21 December 2006, www.churchofsatan.tv.

⁴⁴ A S LaVey, *The Satanic Rituals*, (New York, 1976).

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as a bell, rung nine times at the beginning and end of the ceremony. These ceremonies often use instruments such as a chalice, gong, sword, wine, phallus and parchment; ritual clothing such as full length robes or sexually suggestive clothing are also used. The most common symbol used is the Sigil of Baphomet, a goat's head superimposed over an inverted pentacle. Furthermore, while there are references in LaVey's writings to use of the Black Mass as a mockery of the Catholic Mass used for publicity purposes, there is no suggestion that this is a genuine part of satanic ritual practise. The Church of Satan's rituals and ceremonies do not include other reversals or mockeries of Christian ceremonies, such as reciting the Lord's Prayer backwards. Aside from the use of robes, candles and bells in the ritual, the Church of Satan's beliefs and practises do not bear any resemblance to the experiences described in SRA reports.

The Temple of Set is a more private group than the Church of Satan, sharing fewer of its rituals with the public. It describes itself as an 'initiatory magical order of the Left Hand Path'⁴⁵ advocating self-advancement through a series of levels of self-knowledge. It focuses on the refinement of the self and the increase of individuality, self-responsibility and freedom.⁴⁶ The Temple rejects worship, seeing the figure of the Egyptian god Set as a universal force. Among the beliefs held by the Temple are that illegal activity, the use of illegal drugs or excessive use of legal substances like tobacco and alcohol, are not permitted. Individual freedoms and respect for other's freedom to live as they choose are actively encouraged. The primary goal of Setian ritual practise is to share knowledge and support self-development, often using psychodrama. The primary symbols of the Temple of Set are the Pentagram of Set, an inverted pentagram within a circle, and the scarab beetle, representing the transformation expected of religious practise.

When the actual beliefs and practises of genuine satanic groups are examined, it becomes clear that, while some of the peripheral ritual

⁴⁵ Webb, *op cit.*

⁴⁶ US Department of the Army (ed), 'Temple of Set' in *Religious Requirements and Practices of Certain Selected Groups: A Handbook for Chaplains* (Honolulu, 2002).

elements described in SRA reports are genuinely part of some satanic ritual practise, the majority are not: in particular, animal and human sacrifice, cannibalism, sexual assault and abuse as part of the ritual; nor the Black Mass and other mockeries of Christian ceremonies. Furthermore, the beliefs held by genuine satanic groups are directly opposed to unlawful behaviours such as sexual abuse, mind control of others, cannibalism, abduction and murder. Indeed, unlike most major religions, adherence to human law is an important part of satanic belief. It is not surprising, then, that both the Church of Satan and the Temple of Set deny any knowledge of these alleged satanic crimes and claim that ritual abuse does not fall within the beliefs and practises prescribed by satanic groups. The term 'satanic ritual abuse' dangerously and incorrectly associates Satanists with ritual abuse, unfairly placing this religious group in the role of scapegoat, and encouraging religious discrimination against it.

Thus the question arises as to who, if anyone, is actually perpetrating this abuse? The first step in answering this is to investigate whether the events reported in SRA are actually occurring at all. When a crime is committed, a criminal will leave some tangible physical evidence behind, however small. This is an axiom of modern forensic science and consequently crime scene investigation is now an important part of much police work.⁴⁷ In no single case of alleged satanic ritual abuse has a forensic investigation team found any conclusive evidence of the reported crimes.⁴⁸ This is staggering, if such abuse truly occurs. Often, the alleged abuse sites have been found not to exist⁴⁹ and the alleged 'occult' symbols have been proven to be the names of heavy metal bands⁵⁰ or the 'tags' of juvenile gangs.⁵¹ In fact, at no time has blood, human remains, hair, fibre or other physical evidence been recovered from a site of alleged SRA.⁵² This includes searches conducted by local police groups in the

⁴⁷ Lanning, *op cit*, 109-146.

⁴⁸ Siano, *op cit*.

⁴⁹ D Nathan, 'The Ritual Sex Abuse Hoax,' *The Village Voice*, 12 December 1990, 36-44.

⁵⁰ Victor, *op cit*, 137.

⁵¹ *Ibid*, *passim*.

⁵² Siano, *op cit*.

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United States, Britain, Europe, South Africa, Australia and New Zealand, as well as investigations by a number of high level FBI and Interpol task forces.⁵³ Indeed, the FBI agent Ken Lanning investigated over three hundred cases of claimed SRA without finding any corroborating evidence for a single case.⁵⁴ The lack of crime scene evidence, taken on its own, suggests that SRA has no objective existence as an organised conspiracy involving a large group of perpetrators.

Furthermore, a numerical breakdown of the numbers of victims that are said to be involved in such abuse⁵⁵ reveals significant problems for the belief in SRA. According to the victims of reported SRA, the average satanic 'cell' or sub-group contains approximately one thousand members, a number not reflected in the actual membership of any known satanic group. According to the most commonly reported procedure, each member is welcomed into the cell with a human sacrifice, ensuring the new member's silence through fear and/or the knowledge of their complicity in the crime. This means that each member of a satanic cell must sacrifice at least one person in their lifetime in the group. Satanic abuse survivors further contend that each member of a satanic cell would sacrifice an average of one person per year after their initial sacrifice. According to satanic abuse victims, the number of cells in the United States alone is at least five hundred. This means that in the United States, at least five hundred thousand people are sacrificed to Satan each year, with a further five hundred thousand being murdered as initiatory sacrifices. This is a staggering number of missing persons and homicides, which defies belief and pure practicality, when one considers the time, space and expenditure required to dispose of so many victims. Unless secret satanic groups are funding vast crematoria without the knowledge of the relevant authorities, then these numbers are preposterous. The suggestions of body disposal given by supporters of SRA, such as the complicity of funeral directors, large bonfires in isolated areas, vats

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ W Middleton, *Reconstructing the Past: Trauma, Memory and Therapy*, unpublished Phd manuscript, 2006, 18. See also Lanning, *op cit*, 109-146.

⁵⁵ Siano, *op cit*.

of acid or the use of industrial mincers,⁵⁶ are not believable given the lack of any crime scene evidence.

Many people reporting SRA overcome this statistical problem by stating that the women in the group are forced to produce children for sacrifice. While disposal of infants faces the same problems as that of any other victim, examinations of women who claim themselves to have been used as 'breeders' have sometimes found that these women have never borne children. Despite the absolute belief on the part of those reporting SRA, this kind of evidence raises doubts about the veracity of these reports. The lack of crime scene evidence, the statistical improbability of such large groups of victims and incidental inconsistencies all strongly suggest that the crimes reported as cases of SRA do not take place.

There are also significant problems with the veracity of the reports made by children, mostly due to the context within which these reports are made. Studies examining child interviews have demonstrated that children adjust their stories to fit what they believe an adult authority figure, such as a pastor, parent, therapist or police officer, is expecting.⁵⁷ It appears that children pick up subtle, non-verbal cues from adult authority figures, which subliminally tell them either to follow or to discard a particular train of thought.⁵⁸ Slight nods of the head or almost imperceptible frowns can inform a child whether or not to elaborate on their thoughts or to try to find a more acceptable story. The result of this is that, unless interviewing is done with utmost care and expertise, the information gleaned is likely to be more a product of the interviewer's expectations than of reality. One case of this blurring of fact and fiction is demonstrated in the 'Li'l Rascals' case⁵⁹ where, upon leading questioning, a child reported being sexually abused on an ocean liner guarded by trained sharks

⁵⁶ Sinason, *op cit*, 246-247.

⁵⁷ P M Coons, 'Reports of Satanic Ritual Abuse: Further Implications About Pseudomemories' *Perceptual and Motor Skills* 18:3, 1994, Part 2.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ G Passantino, 'Innocence Lost in Landmark Child Abuse Case', *Cornerstone Magazine*, 1995.

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which ate another child while he watched.⁶⁰ Such a story may seem credible to a child, but clearly had little basis in reality, and indeed was found to be unsupported by evidence.

It has often been argued by anti-occult activists that children lack the requisite knowledge base to concoct consistent stories about SRA.⁶¹ In other words, SRA must be real because children do not have the background knowledge to fabricate such convincing stories. Contrary to this argument, research has found that children possess substantial casual knowledge about the occult, Satanism and related topics.⁶² Furthermore, children have significant experience, via television, films and video games, of violence, death and illegal activities⁶³ such as drug dealing and even sexual assault. This research indicates that the average child possesses the required background knowledge of violence and the occult to fabricate a convincing satanic ritual abuse story, if given a reason to do so. It is essential to emphasise that there is no doubt that child sexual abuse (CSA) occurs, and children who disclose CSA must be taken seriously. However there is a significant difference between a child who spontaneously discloses abuse and a child who builds a picture of SRA at the encouragement and investigation of adults who hold a vested interest in maligning Satanism. If the events reported as SRA are not true representations of reality, and those involved are not Satanists, what is actually occurring? The answer is twofold: it appears, firstly, that there is likely to be sexual abuse at the core of adult SRA reports and possibly those of children as well and, secondly, that there is a social power dynamic occurring to scapegoat specific groups within Western Judeo-Christian culture.

The one thing beyond doubt is that the adults reporting SRA are genuinely traumatised, demonstrating significant symptoms of trauma

⁶⁰ Anonymous, 'Release Set Later This Month For Figure in Day-Care Sex Cases', *Charlotte Observer*, 10 November 1994.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² G Goodman *et al*, 'Children's Religious Knowledge: Implications for Understanding Satanic Ritual Abuse Allegations', *Child Abuse and Neglect* 21:11, 1997, 1111-1130.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

such as dissociation, amnesia, trauma intrusions and emotional numbness. This strongly suggests that something has happened to these individuals. In order to understand what may have occurred, it is important to understand the phenomenon of dissociation. Dissociation is a powerful strategy adopted by the human mind when pushed to its limits by abuse or other trauma; it is the loosening of associations within the mind, producing a separation of the individual's consciousness from other parts of the mind, such as the emotions, memories, physical sensations and connection to the current reality. Amnesia is one form of dissociation, which protects the individual from being overwhelmed by experiences that are too difficult or dangerous to attempt to comprehend, and is a common feature of all forms of trauma.⁶⁴ While most memories return after a period of amnesia outside the therapy context, it has been found that some practises of 'memory recovery', especially those inducing dissociation through hypnosis or semi-hypnotic states,⁶⁵ can create false or iatrogenic memories.⁶⁶ The nature of memory in general is imperfect and reconstructive,⁶⁷ and this process can become problematic when over-zealous therapists begin to hypothesise abuse scenarios such as SRA for clients who are in highly dissociative or suggestible states.

It also appears that memories of abuse can be iatrogenically developed in the context of group discussions of abuse. A highly traumatic experience often leads to dissociation, where one's own reality is confused with another's. For this reason, professional guidelines⁶⁸ for working with CSA and dissociative clients insist that details of abuse must not be recounted in groups. Recent investigations of groups which do permit the sharing of abuse

⁶⁴ Middleton, *op cit*, 15-16.

⁶⁵ D J Mingay, 'The Effect of Hypnosis on Eyewitness Memory: Reconciling Forensic Claims and Research Findings', *Applied Psychology: An International Review* 36:2, 1987.

⁶⁶ E Loftus and K Ketcham, *The Myth of Repressed Memory: False Memories and Allegations of Sexual Abuse* (New York, 1994) Chapters 4 and 9, *passim*.

⁶⁷ Middleton, *op cit*, 32.

⁶⁸ Guidelines provided by the International Society for the Study of Dissociation, *ISSD Homepage*, accessed 12 December 2006, www.issd.org/index_actual.html.

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details⁶⁹ demonstrate an increase in the number of individuals reporting the same type of abuse, such as SRA. Case studies indicate that when an individual is removed from the source of the iatrogenic memory, there is often a degrading of the memory⁷⁰ or a recognition that the memory is false. Thus, one piece of the SRA puzzle seems to be that the individuals reporting SRA are suffering the ongoing impact of trauma, which results in a vulnerability to iatrogenic memories.

The second factor influencing the elaboration of CSA into SRA is the problem of attachment.⁷¹ The distortion of genuine childhood abuse into SRA can be seen as an adaptive process which protects the individual from the significant trauma of acknowledging the true perpetrators: usually family members and trusted adults. The problem of attachment occurs when a child requires an adult for its survival, yet this adult is simultaneously the source of abuse. The child is faced with the problem of needing to attach to the one person who is the source of greatest fear. While there are many processes that children develop to overcome this problem, the most relevant to SRA is displacement. The experiences of abuse and fear are displaced from the needed adult to a more suitable enemy, such as a culturally appropriate evil. In Judeo-Christian cultures, Satanists and other occultists fulfill this role admirably. This process is further replicated in the wider public. It is difficult for society to acknowledge the prevalence of CSA and to accept that the perpetrators are normal human beings unconnected to any grand criminal conspiracy. The bottom line is that it is easier for both victims and society in general to believe that only evil, satanic cults sadistically abuse children, rather than to accept the reality and prevalence of child sexual abuse. As Western societies tend to have a Judeo-Christian majority,⁷² the cultural concept of evil is inextricably entwined with notions of Satan. Satanists, real and imaginary, have become the focus of blame for the social problem of child sexual abuse. Thus, SRA is the

⁶⁹ R Guilliat, 'The Untouchables', *The Australian Magazine*, 23 September 2006.

⁷⁰ Middleton, *op cit*, 13-15.

⁷¹ C A Ross, *Satanic Ritual Abuse: Principles of Treatment* (Toronto, 1995) *passim*.

⁷² Australian Bureau of Statistics, *League Tables, 2001 Census*, Canberra.

folkloric ‘shadow’ of the real phenomenon of CSA, filtered through the religiously biased views of the anti-occult movements, and reflecting our society’s struggle to face the reality of child sexual abuse.

This is not the first time that accusations of satanic ritual abuse have been used to overcome a social problem and to scapegoat unpopular social groups. Ironically, the oldest known allegations of ritual abuse were made in the second century CE against the Christian community in Rome,⁷³ who were accused of infanticide, cannibalism and ritual murder, in the same manner as in current SRA reports. One consequence of these accusations was the massacre of the entire Christian community of Lyons in 177 CE.⁷⁴ After the triumph of Christianity in Europe, similar charges were leveled against pagans and Christian heretics. For example, the Manicheans were accused of making bread by mixing flour and the blood of sacrificed children⁷⁵ and the same claims were made about Jews in later centuries.⁷⁶ By the medieval period, the concept of the Black Mass had evolved⁷⁷ and accusations of indulging in it were regularly made against any who offended the Church.⁷⁸ In 1307 CE, the Knights Templar, a knightly order of crusading monks, were charged with heresy involving satanic practices.⁷⁹ They were found guilty, their assets seized and a great many were tortured and burned to death.⁸⁰ Among the charges levelled at the Templars were accusations that the knights had rendered down the fat of slaughtered infants for ritual purposes,⁸¹ committed sexual acts with willing and unwilling partners⁸² and eaten human flesh.⁸³ The weight of historical evidence indicates that the

⁷³ Ankarloo and Clark, *op cit*, 119.

⁷⁴ *Ibid*, 120.

⁷⁵ *Ibid*, 120.

⁷⁶ Victor, *op cit*, 75.

⁷⁷ Guiley, *op cit*, 26.

⁷⁸ *Ibid*, 27.

⁷⁹ Barber, *op cit*, 41.

⁸⁰ E Burman, *Supremely Abominable Crimes: The Trial of the Knights Templar* (London, 1998) *passim*.

⁸¹ *Ibid*, *passim*.

⁸² Barber, *op cit*, *passim*.

⁸³ Ankarloo and Clark, *op cit*, 120.

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charges were false.⁸⁴ In the seventeenth century, a number of witch trials saw the same accusations levelled against a fresh crop of alleged Satanists,⁸⁵ many of whom were convicted by use of forced confessions and burned to death or hanged.⁸⁶ Again, these charges echo very closely the charges of satanic ritual abuse made by modern accusers. The allegations made against present day Satanists are remarkably similar to these earlier examples, suggesting that the claim of SRA is an older, more culturally and socially ingrained phenomenon which recurs across history and is designed to scapegoat unpopular social groups. The lessons of history suggest that such scapegoating has severe consequences. SRA is arguably a folkloric motif that floats in the human psyche, a concept which emerges at certain times and then disappears into the cultural consciousness, only to reappear at a later time. It is a self-perpetuating social organism, developed in the archetypal well of Judeo-Christian and Western cultural symbology.

Those who report satanic ritual abuse are extremely likely to have been the victims of some sort of sexual abuse in the past and should be treated with the greatest kindness and compassion. It must be made clear, however, that Satanists, or occult and New Age groups mislabelled as satanic, are not responsible for this abuse. Firstly, the actions described in SRA reports do not correlate with any known satanic belief or practise held by current organised satanic groups. Secondly, the overwhelming forensic and statistical evidence suggests that it is not possible for large, organised groups to perpetrate the kind of abuse reported. Thirdly, there is evidence of SRA reports being produced in contexts that create iatrogenic memories, such as high levels of dissociation, group discussion of abuse details and leading interviews with children. Fourthly, the problem of attachment explains the displacement of real perpetrators onto cultural symbols of evil. Historical evidence suggests that accusations of SRA have been used in the past as a mechanism for eradicating unpopular social groups and so managing social

⁸⁴ *Ibid*, 120.

⁸⁵ Guiley, *op cit*, 43-44.

⁸⁶ *Ibid*.

problems. The phenomenon of satanic ritual abuse has become popular in the last thirty years because denial is the first stage of trauma; as the sexual assault of children has been more widely acknowledged and reported by the news media, members of Western society have become traumatised by these disclosures. The reaction to this has been a generalised attempt to relegate this behaviour to outsiders, evil forces and criminal conspiracies, rather than to admit that the perpetrators are likely to be our neighbours, colleagues or relatives. Satanists are a perfect scapegoat for the average Westerner's inability to accept the depth of real horror in their world. The anti-occult movement has encouraged this displacement, as it serves their stated aim in the eradication of alternative religions and New Age groups. As a consequence, the real issue of child sexual assault is forgotten in the sensationalised search for secret satanic societies. And occult and minor religious groups are unable to practice their religion without discrimination, attack or social condemnation.

