

Book Review^{*}

SPEAK OF THE DEVIL: TALES OF SATANIC ABUSE IN CONTEMPORARY ENGLAND by J.S. La Fontaine. Cambridge University Press, 1998. 224pp. £19.95

‘I’m misunderstood, just like...um...what’s-his-face?’ complains Dilbert’s boss in the newspaper cartoon strip.
‘Satan?’ suggests Dilbert facetiously.

In the 1980s a misunderstanding of occultism was one of the preconditions that led to the widespread belief that adults were sexually abusing children in rituals of Devil worship. A phenomena made more surprising by the fact that it occurred, not in 15th and 16th century Europe, but in modern day Britain and America.

Written by the author of the 1994 report *The Extent And Nature Of Organised And Ritual Abuse: Research Findings* commissioned by the *Department of Health*, this book discusses in greater detail the phenomenon of the UK satanic ritual abuse allegations which manifested themselves in the 1980s and early 1990s. La Fontaine found that, whilst in *some* cases there was evidence of abuse, there was no evidence of satanic ritual, whether organised or not.

Jean La Fontaine, professor of anthropology at the *London School of Economics*, asks why people came to believe and act upon allegations of abuse in which children were alleged to have been assaulted as part of rituals devoted to the worship of Satan. She examines the roles of the media, Christian fundamentalists, social workers, the police force, foster-parents, and the children themselves, in a process which resulted in damaging consequences for many of those involved. Indeed, the fact that these allegations had real-world consequences is emphasised; some children were erroneously separated from their families and taken into care, relationships between the Police and social workers broke down, and successful prosecution of genuine child abusers was jeopardised.

La Fontaine outlines the development of the ritual abuse allegations in three phases. The initial impetus was largely provided by Christian fundamentalists and the circulation of adult ‘survivor’ accounts in sermons and literature imported from the USA. Such satanic ‘survivor’ accounts were common currency in such circles and even inspired best-selling books and films, for example *Michelle Remembers* (Smith & Pazder, 1980) now discredited as a work of fiction, and the horror film classic *Rosemary’s Baby* directed by Roman Polanski. The second phase was the appearance of accounts from young children which then necessitated action by the authorities. Finally, the third phase was the transition of the phenomenon back into the adult world in the context of psychotherapy when material evidence for the child abuse allegations failed to materialise.

In performing her analysis La Fontaine compares the ‘satanic panics’ with the witch-hunts of earlier European history and also cross-culturally with Third World beliefs in witches and witchcraft, suggesting that the main similarity is an unverifiable belief in

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mystical evil.

This book is an important and necessary work, especially in showing how religion can impact on the day-to-day life of real people in the real world, rather than being just the concern of the faithful or of academics. I would recommend that anyone who is under the mistaken impression that religion is irrelevant in today's modern world should read this book. The observations made by Professor La Fontaine may go some way towards preventing such mistakes before they arise again in the future. *Speak of the Devil*, whilst being of a high academic and very readable standard, is best read in conjunction with Professor La Fontaine's original research findings mentioned above. However, she was not the only sceptic willing to air her critical views. Kenneth Lanning of the FBI has summarised his own findings from the American side of the phenomenon and published them in the *Investigator's Guide To Allegations Of 'Ritual' Child Abuse* (1992) and *Satanic, Occult, Ritualistic Crime: A Law Enforcement Perspective* (1989). A further report by a team of Police and social services personnel based in the U.K. resulted in a highly critical analysis of the role these organisations took in the Nottingham cases. This report, known as the Joint Enquiry Team (JET) report was initially suppressed but is now publicly available on the Internet (Gwatkin, J.B. et al. 1990).

A significant factor in the precipitation of the SRA phenomena was ignorance about a subcultural minority; occultists and pagans. Part of Professor La Fontaine's book examines this subculture in the UK and demonstrates that its participants bear little, if any, resemblance to the alleged Satanists of the SRA hysteria. Whilst such simplistic and erroneous connections can be dismissed as fundamentalist Christian propaganda, it should not be forgotten that intolerance in these cases is actually a secondary issue. Neither should the main issue be one of wasted tax-payers' money spent on fruitless searches for bizarre and non-existent evidence. Our primary concern should be to learn from the mistakes, made on all sides, in order to guard more effectively against genuine cases of child abuse.

Aside from fundamentalist propaganda La Fontaine also considers other factors to be significant in 1980s Britain including; confusion over terms such as 'ritual', our heritage of European folklore, the newly publicised threat of child abuse in the home, misleading lists of 'satanic abuse indicators', poor interviewing techniques, and confusion between standards of evidence used by the Police and therapeutic practices.

It should not be thought that these issues belong solely to the past. Christian fundamentalism is reported to be on the increase as believers leave the pews of the traditional churches to fill the ranks of the more evangelical organisations of the 'new Christianity' as La Fontaine calls it. It is amongst such organisations where the SRA allegations, or elements of them, are still discussed in less critical terms. Added to the fertile ground provided by public ignorance towards, and suspicion of, New Religious Movements, plus a sprinkling of socio-economic factors and we have the potential for renewed growth of the SRA phenomena.

For those of us interested in the study of religious experience the SRA phenomena serves to remind us of the mistakes that can be made from careless interviewing techniques or projecting our own biases onto the accounts which we are given, especially where young children are concerned. It also reminds us that a religious

experience need not necessarily be a pleasant one.

Of course, as La Fontaine realises, no amount of material evidence to the contrary, or lack of it, will sway the opinions of the faithfully convinced. Especially those who have a vested interest in sustaining the myth, whether for theological reasons or for psychotherapeutic ones.

References

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