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RITUAL CHILD ABUSE:

UNDERSTANDING THE CONTROVERSIES

by

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RITUAL CHILD ABUSE: UNDERSTANDING THE CONTROVERSIES

The phenomenon of "ritual child abuse" has created a major national controversy. The general public is confused by media reports of notorious cases with different outcomes in California, Florida, and Massachusetts, and other states. Professionals in the fields of child welfare, mental health, law enforcement, and law disagree about the definition of "ritual child abuse", how frequently it occurs, and what we know about the individuals and groups who commit it. Positions have thus become polarized among professionals in these fields and among professionals within the same field.

This paper is intended to explore that controversy, and some of the myriad issues involved.

WHAT IS "RITUAL CHILD ABUSE"?

Currently there is no consensus definition of "ritual child abuse." The term has been applied by both the media and professionals to such different situations as

- any bizarre or especially sadistic act(s) of physical, sexual and psychological abuse committed on one or more children,
- group acts of religious worship to demonic powers in the course of committing physical, sexual, and emotional abuse of children, and
- psychological intimidation of children, including attempts to make them perform acts of religious belief in demonic powers or to abuse other children or animals, accompanying physical, sexual, and emotional abuse of the children.

However, the term has been applied inconsistently to the physical, sexual, and emotional abuse of children that may result from religious beliefs. In general, it has been applied only to those practices of comparatively obscure and secretive sects and cults.

This lack of a clear definition contributes to the controversy in several ways:

(1) it hinders our understanding of the variety of phenomena that are occurring. We may need different approaches to address different problems. "Sadistic child abuse of numerous children by a group requires a different approach to investigation and

intervention from that for sadistic child abuse of one child performed by only one individual.

(2) it hinders our assessment of the harms to the child. Children who are physically abused, sexually abused, and neglected also suffer some psychological harm. However, children subjected to repetitive acts of sadistic psychological intimidation reveal symptoms of severe psychological harm.

(3) it hinders our understanding of the motivation of the abuser(s). For example, the perpetrator(s) may have performed such acts in order to achieve completion of the crime ("modus operandi" or "M.O." in law enforcement parlance), namely to intimidate the child(ren) into obedience and secrecy, or in order to gratify sexual and other psychological needs of the abuser(s) and not as part of any belief system. For example, some individuals practice such deviant sexual behaviors as eating feces and drinking urine, and may be seeking group legitimacy of their own needs by pressuring children to do the same. Others may be mentally ill and acting under the influence of religious delusions, while others may be deliberately attempting to convert children to religious sects.

In addition, an emotional reaction to the allegation that demonic worship was part of the child maltreatment may hinder our exploration of alternative explanations. We need to be aware of our own religious beliefs and biases and our prejudices against other sects and religions in this area.

One proposed definition of "ritual child abuse" that may help address these concerns is

the intentional physical abuse, sexual abuse or psychological abuse of a child by a person responsible for the child's welfare, when such abuse is repeated and/or stylized and is typified by such other acts as cruelty to animals, or threats of harm to the child, other persons, and animals.

This definition focuses on the acts done and the harms to the child, not on the individual's motivation (which may never be known) underlying the intentional acts of psychological abuse.

WHAT IS "CULT RITUAL CHILD ABUSE"?

The term "ritual child abuse" is often used interchangeably with the term "cult ritual child abuse" when more than one individual is committing the abuse. Like "ritual child abuse" the term lacks precision, and has been used to describe such different situations as:

- a religious sect, which may have broken away from the mainstream beliefs of some religion, whose lifestyle and secrecy endanger the physical and psychological health of its children,
- a group who involves children in acts that may be offensive to some but are not illegal while conducting religious worship to demonic powers,
- a group who physically, sexually, and emotionally abuses children and has developed a common belief system to justify the psychopathological acts,
- a group with no discernible religious or philosophical beliefs who psychopathically abuses children physically, sexually, and emotionally,
- a group who performs acts of religious worship to demonic powers in the course of performing acts of physical, sexual, and emotional abuse on children, and vice versa, and
- a group using psychological intimidation of children, including attempts to make them perform acts of religious belief in demonic powers, while physically, sexually, and emotionally abusing children.

The dangers in such imprecision of terms are that:

(1) it may divert the attention of investigating agencies (including child protective services and child care licensing agencies) away from the illegal acts and harms done to the child and toward investigation of the unusual beliefs and religious practices of the group,

(2) we may inappropriately apply our knowledge of one cult's behavior to a different group. Although little is known about small groups who abuse children, there is a widespread assumption that the groups are Satanic cults. This may be due to the historic record of the practices of Satanic cults rather than to any current evidence.

(3) it may lead to inappropriate discrimination against groups whose beliefs and practices are unusual but are neither illegal nor detrimental to the welfare of their child, adolescent, or adult members. Unfortunately, some groups do things that are psychologically harmful to their adolescent and adult members, as well as to the younger children subject to their influence. It is not always easy to distinguish between the two types, especially if they are secretive about their practices.

One possibility is that we define "cult ritual child abuse" to mean

the intentional physical abuse, sexual abuse or psychological abuse of a child by persons who are in a religious cult and are responsible for the child's welfare, when such abuse is repeated and/or stylized and is typified by such other acts as cruelty to animals, or threats of harm to the child, other persons, and animals, and is performed to reinforce the cult's religious cohesion.

and that we define "group ritual child abuse" to mean

the intentional physical abuse, sexual abuse or psychological abuse of a child by a group of persons responsible for the child's welfare, when such abuse is repeated and/or stylized and is typified by such other acts as cruelty to animals, or threats of harm to the child, other persons, and animals, and is performed to reinforce the group's cohesion.

HOW WIDESPREAD IS "RITUAL CHILD ABUSE", ESPECIALLY BY CULTS?

There is widespread disagreement about the incidence and prevalence of "ritual child abuse," for a number of reasons:

(1) There is no central public or private agency identified as the repository of information about allegations, nor is there any legal requirement that individuals or agencies make reports of allegations to any such central point;

(2) Since the term "ritual child abuse" has been so imprecise, and has been applied to so many different situations, it is difficult to count cases;

(3) Since only a few states are attempting to define and prohibit "ritual child abuse", the convictions for behavior that seems to fit the phenomena is classified under existing criminal statutes prohibiting physical and sexual assault;

(4) Public support for the reporting of child abuse and child sexual abuse are only a few decades old. Only recently have adults who experienced such severe abuse many years ago begun overcoming the effects of psychological intimidation and come forward relating their experiences;

(5) Children and adults who have experienced sadistic psychological intimidation may have symptoms of post-traumatic

stress disorder or multiple personality disorder that are similar to those of severe mental illness. Depending on the investigative, forensic, and/or clinical skills of those intervening, accurate reports may be discounted, and delusions may be accepted as factual; and

(6) Although some people have speculated that there are a number of such groups who ritually abuse children in a large conspiratorial network, there is no evidence of such a linkage.

Part of the controversy over such cases as the Manhattan Beach, California (McMartin) case is the inability of the professionals, to say nothing of the general public, to agree upon how a claim of cult ritual child abuse is "validated." Many knowledgeable professionals are understandably upset that the media applies the standard of proof in criminal prosecutions--proof beyond a reasonable doubt--as the criterion as to whether such acts occurred. It is unclear whether the lesser legal standard in civil proceedings--proof by a preponderance of evidence--is acceptable, given the legal doctrines that govern admissibility of evidence. Therefore, the debate about the number of "valid" allegations of ritual child abuse and cult ritual child abuse is based on complex, and perhaps insolvable, philosophical debates about how we determine "truth."

WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT CULTS THAT RITUALLY ABUSE CHILDREN?

Although there is a growing body of knowledge about various cults, we know very little about groups that ritually abuse children. Our limited knowledge is derived from:

(1) clinical and forensic study of teenagers who dabble in the occult, especially in Satanic symbols and rituals (in part through the influence of "heavy metal" rock music and the drug culture), their acts of vandalism and animal mutilation, and the psychological effects of such activities on the participants;

(2) clinical and forensic study of adults who voluntarily join the thousands of religious, quasi-religious, and mystical cults and secret groups in American society, their practices, and the harmful effects of such cults and groups on the participants;

(3) historical study of symbols and rituals associated with Satanic worship; and

(4) what is reported by clinicians who treat children and adults who have been (or allege to have been) victimized physically, sexually, and emotionally in such a bizarre way by a group of people that someone--the children, or adult survivors, or the clinicians--has labeled a cult.

Whether the knowledge from the first three sources is useful or even very relevant in helping us understand anything about groups that abuse children is one of the major controversies in the field.

For example, most religious cults and secular cult-like groups that have been studied have a craving for increased membership, for both financial and psychological needs, and therefore have some public visibility, usually with a charismatic leader. However, with respect to groups alleged to molest children there is no such visibility. They seem to be extremely small "family-based" groups who are so hidden that their numbers are impossible to estimate. In particular, there seems to be no identified charismatic leaders of the various Satanist groups around the country.

Some visible cults and cult-like groups are dangerous to the emotional and physical well-being of their members, and may financially harm gullible contributors; their practices may be harmful to children of the members. For example, a cult's insistence on a subsistence diet and a prohibition of bathing may injure their children's health. Similarly, a cult's fear of the outside world may hinder their children's psychological development. However, there is no evidence that such visible cults and groups are ritually abusing children.

Religious and secular cults are dynamic groups that can change over time. Many appear to be currently benign, but can devolve into activities that are harmful to their members or outsiders. Many were once considered to be dangerous, but have now become accepted; some of the major religions of the world--Christianity, Buddhism, and Islam--were once considered to be cults. Cults and sects splinter off from major faiths, and from other cults and sects periodically. In addition, scattered groups that worship demonic powers have emerged throughout history. Unfortunately, many people assume that any religious cult that is not part of a major faith is devoted to Satanism, is dangerous to adolescents, and may be performing illegal acts, including ritual abuse of children.

The limited knowledge we have about child-abusing groups, combined with the spread of literature and training about the dangers of cults, may send an erroneous message to the general public--especially to families whose teenagers have dabbled in Satanism or whose adult children are members of cults: that anyone involved in a group outside the mainstream is at high risk for ritually abusing a child. There is no evidence that such fears are true.

WHY AREN'T THERE CRIMINAL CONVICTIONS FOR "CULT RITUAL CHILD ABUSE"?

If a phenomenon has not been specifically defined and prohibited in a state's criminal code, there is no reason for law enforcement agencies to investigate it. Instead, police officers generally investigate only the allegations of specific crimes; in the area of groups alleged to maltreat children the police will only investigate the sexual and assaultive offenses alleged to have been committed upon the children. Only a few states have attempted to define and prohibit the crime of "cult behavior" or "ritual child abuse." When such legislation is enacted, law enforcement agencies will be obligated to investigate the broader phenomenon.

Cult ritual child abuse is often alleged to have occurred in out-of-home care settings, thus complicating the investigative process. The roles of the police, child protective services, mental health therapists, and child care licensing agencies are frequently unclear, creating the potential for repetitious interviews, withholding of information and evidence, and inappropriate disclosure of investigative information to the media.

The bizarre nature of the reported events frequently raises questions about the veracity of the children. The children may be in acute mental health crisis, which compounds the assessment of their credibility, and may be especially difficult to interview due to their young age and the use of terroristic threats against disclosure by the abusers.

Thus prosecutors have concerns about filing charges in these cases, since they must prove the defendants are guilty beyond a reasonable doubt. The combination of unsatisfactory investigations and children whose credibility can be easily challenged tends to assist the defendant(s). Nonetheless, there have been convictions in Florida, Massachusetts, Nevada, Illinois and other states for various forms of child maltreatment in cases where the broader form of ritual child abuse allegedly occurred.

HOW CAN YOU TELL WHEN A CHILD HAS BEEN A VICTIM OF RITUAL CHILD ABUSE?

There is no single symptom or group of symptoms that conclusively prove that a child has been a victim of ritual child abuse. If the child has been physically or sexually assaulted there may be medical evidence, but frequently this has disappeared by the time the child is able to disclose what has happened.

The child may show behavioral signs of stress, such as sleep disturbances; aggression toward toys, pets, and humans; regression to such behaviors as thumb sucking and bed wetting; and especially fears and phobic reactions.

There may be bizarre statements. He or she may talk about demons and monsters who are watching him/her constantly and have the power to harm him/her and family members. The child may become preoccupied with the topic of death, and discuss animals and humans being killed and/or mutilated. He/She may discuss eating feces and drinking urine or blood, masked and robed figures, chants, rituals, candles and incense.

Some of these behaviors may be attributable to other stressors in the child's life, such as a move, illness or death in the family, or family separation. Other behavioral symptoms may be symptoms of mental illness. It is unclear whether some behaviors and statements are reactions to exposure to films and videos depicting graphic violence, Satanic cults, and demonic powers. Unfortunately, it is difficult to differentiate between children who have delusions, children who have vivid night terrors, children who are incorporating fictitious film and video content, and children who recount real events of ritual child abuse by groups. Some child victims of alleged "cult ritual child abuse" report events that are clearly erroneous; e.g., "people were flying around the room, people were cut up and put back together", etc. Whether these reports are hallucinations due to a diagnosable psychiatric illness, from having unknowingly ingested hallucinogens, misperception of magical illusions performed by the group, or from an unknown cause may be difficult to determine.

ARE THE ACCOUNTS OF ADULTS WHO CLAIM TO HAVE EXPERIENCED "CULT RITUAL CHILD ABUSE" AS CHILDREN ACCURATE?

There is some debate about the accuracy of reports by adults who claim to have been childhood victims of Satanic cults decades ago.

Those with doubts argue that if these cults were in existence 20 and 30 years ago, at the time these adults were children, we should have heard the same rumors of child maltreatment that we hear today. Instead, there is little or no evidence of their existence--no corpses, Satanic paraphernalia, or diaries by participants--and there have been few identified survivors that could independently corroborate each other's accounts of experiences in the same location. Further, these individuals frequently suffer from multiple personality disorder or from post-traumatic stress disorder as a result of some traumatic childhood experience, but state that they had no conscious memories of

these events until they had undergone hypnosis. A number of forensic experiments with hypnotic suggestion raise doubts about the accuracy of recall of events after hypnotic trances.

On the other hand, since the effects of psychological intimidation can be long-lasting, survivors of ritual child abuse may not have felt safe in coming forward until recently, when the public has been more able to accept the reality of child sexual abuse. In addition, we have only learned about post-traumatic stress disorder and multiple personality disorder within the last few years. It is possible that those children and adults in previous decades who dared to report their childhood victimization were disbelieved and sent to mental health professionals where they were misdiagnosed as psychotic, without any meaningful investigation by law enforcement officials.

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Since we lack consensus as to the nature of the phenomena we are faced with, including a lack of consensus regarding terms and criteria to measure incidence and validity, it is likely that the controversies will continue. In the meantime, we should exercise our critical judgment in evaluating what we see and hear from those who deny the existence of ritual child abuse and those who claim that it is widespread.

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