PART 1

RITUAL ABUSE--THEORIES, DEBATES AND DEFINITIONS
CHAPTER I

CHARACTERISTICS OF RITUAL ABUSE DISCOURSE

In June 1997, a discussion of Elaine Showalter’s newly-published book *Hystories* was broadcast on ABC Radio’s “Late Night Live” program. In the course of the program, the British psychologist Valerie Sinason criticised Showalter’s argument that ritual abuse was one of a number of hysterical syndromes which individuals manifest in response to contemporary stresses and anxieties (Showalter 1997: 15, 203-5, 171ff.). According to Sinason, the claims of ritual abuse survivors had been proven in a number of cases heard in British courts. She also stated that a careful examination of a report by Professor Jean La Fontaine showed that the anthropologist had identified several cases of ritual abuse in Britain (Late Night Live, ABC2RN 26 June 1997).

This claim would have surprised La Fontaine. She had presented her report on the issue to the UK Department of Health in 1994, and believed that her research had disproved claims that British children were being ritually abused. After examining eighty-four cases in England and Wales where ritual abuse was alleged to have taken place, La Fontaine had concluded that “there is no evidence that [ritual abuse has] taken place in any of the . . . cases studied” (La Fontaine 1994: 30). Sinason was obviously referring to certain cases where, according to La Fontaine, perpetrators had indeed sexually abused children while conducting some sort of occult ritual (La Fontaine 1994: 30). For Sinason, these were cases of ritual abuse. La Fontaine had not considered them as such since the ritual had not been “directed to a magical or
religious objective" and because the perpetrators' activities in no way resembled characteristic elements of ritual abuse as reported by supposed victims, their advocates or other experts (1994: 30).

This exchange between Sinason and--by proxy--La Fontaine has three characteristics which make it typical of discourse about ritual abuse, and these characteristics will form the basis of the first part of the thesis. Firstly, the theorists fundamentally disagree with each other.[1] Secondly, an important point of disagreement between them concerns what they believe actually constitutes "ritual abuse". Although it is not immediately obvious, the competing definitions used in this exchange also show how ideas about ritual abuse--and ideas about what ritual abuse actually is--have changed significantly since allegations were first made in the early 1980s. Finally, the views of participants in the debate have been qualified by a wide variety of factors, including--as in the case of Sinason and La Fontaine--their professions. Participants also typically have different fields of practice or areas of expertise within particular professions, as well as a variety of political, philosophical and religious beliefs, personal histories and psychological states.

These differences ensure that discourse about ritual abuse is extensive, but also somewhat amorphous. It is extensive in the sense that a range of viewpoints is involved. It is widespread--international, in fact--and occurs in a wide variety of sites. Ideas about ritual abuse flit between the academy, the clinic and other forums. Arcane debates between theorists can have profound and far-reaching consequences. Yet the professional, political, philosophical, religious, psychological and personal differences between theorists not only shape the discourse about ritual abuse. They also affect the ways in which theorists--and those influenced by them--interpret the symptoms and even the "disclosures" of victims and survivors, the ways in which allegations are typically made and, as I will argue, the nature of these allegations.
Belief versus Disbelief

Participants in the debate about ritual abuse not only dispute each others' definitions of what constitutes ritual abuse. Writers and activists—even those who are in broad agreement about ritual abuse—may not actually refer to this alleged activity in the same way. Those who agree that “survivors” have been subjected to gross sexual and physical abuse, for example, and that such abuse is perpetrated in the context of Satanic rituals, refer to “ritual abuse”, “Satanic abuse”, “ritual Satanic abuse”, “Satanic cult abuse”, “Satanic cult activity”, “cult ritual abuse” and “occult abuse”. Subtle differences of opinion about the identity and motivations of alleged perpetrators are encoded within these various terms, and their merits are themselves sometimes the subject of debate. The term "ritual abuse", however, adequately encompasses this variant terminology. It is used by some writers who regard various kinds of “Satanic” groups as responsible for such abuse, as well as by those who propose that the perpetrators are actually dissident Christians, Freemasons and others (RASSA 2000 “What is Ritual Abuse”; Scott 2001; Ryder 1992: 11ff.). “Ritual abuse” is also accepted within much of the literature as a generic term for this activity; Sakheim and Devine, for example, used the term in the title of the collection of essays they edited in 1992, even though their contributors used numerous other terms.

From the mid-1990s, many writers and activists began to use terms such as "organised sadistic abuse" instead of "ritual abuse" and its variants (e.g. ASCA 2002; Halpern and Henry 1994; Summit 1994). These terms refer to the same sorts of alleged activities, but their advocates were proposing some new ideas about the typical identities of perpetrators and their motivations. The writers and advocates using the newer terms had become very sensitive about the criticisms to which earlier arguments had been subjected, and they claimed that sceptics had misrepresented certain ideas which had been proposed in the past about the identity and motivations of perpetrators. In some of these later texts, however, terms such as "ritual abuse" and "cult abuse" are used alongside—and even interchangeably with—"organised sadistic abuse" (e.g. ASCA 2002: 4).
Greaves’ Typology of Ritual Abuse Theories

The major subjects of disagreement about ritual abuse are, of course, whether such abuse actually occurs and whether the various methods by which it is diagnosed in children and adult “survivors” are valid. In a 1992 essay, the American forensic psychologist George Greaves argued that theories about ritual abuse could be divided into four categories—those of the “nihilists”, “apologists”, “heuristics” and “methodologists” (1992:46-7).

According to Greaves, “nihilists” deny that those who claim that they have suffered ritual abuse have actually been subjected to such activity. “Apologists”, on the other hand, affirm such claims, and frequently believe that the claims indicate widespread and highly organised activity by Satanists (Greaves 1992:46). Greaves also distinguishes between “hard” and “soft” apologism. “Heuristic” theorists believe that the validity of reports of ritual abuse is irrelevant compared to the benefits for victims if therapists treat their disclosures and other presentations as based in fact. The “methodologists” address reports of ritual abuse strictly in terms of their disclosure and diagnosis (Greaves 1992:47).

This scheme has some value, since Greaves has accurately conveyed the combative nature of the debate about ritual abuse and identified the basis of the disagreement between theorists. In other ways, however, the scheme is unsatisfactory. Greaves’ way of labelling theorists—and, indeed, the labels invented by others participants in the debate about ritual abuse—is inherently judgmental and does not aid a sober and scholarly analysis of an already heated debate.[2] Greaves himself compounds this problem by using somewhat intemperate language to describe the characteristics of the various theorists. Greaves describes nihilists, for example, as actively seeking to disprove reports of ritual abuse, “sometimes, it seems, at any cost” (Greaves 1992:58). He does not accept that these theorists are simply not satisfied with the evidence for ritual abuse, or that they believe that patient presentations have alternative explanations.
Many of the problems with the scheme arise from the fact that Greaves is using his analysis of the theories of ritual abuse to advance his own "apologetic" position in the debate (1992:46). The prejudicial way that Greaves allocates the various theorists into his categories, for example, has the effect of theoretically neutralising numerous critics of the "apologetic" view of ritual abuse. He also tends to categorize certain theorists according to what they claim to be the aims of their analyses, rather than what they actually propose in such analyses. Numerous theorists who would be categorized as "heuristics" under Greaves' scheme, for example, actually argue--or strongly imply--that ritual abuse is part of a Satanic conspiracy.

Greaves' scheme also privileges the role of mental health professionals in the debate about ritual abuse. The various theories that Greaves discusses are mostly those proposed by therapists, and he suggests that the root of the disputes about ritual abuse lies in whether therapists accept patient presentations as accurate or reject them as delusions resulting from psychopathology or poor therapeutic practice. Here Greaves privileges the theories and methodologies of his own profession--as well as his "apologistic" attitude to ritual abuse. Greaves fails to acknowledge that many of the most influential proponents of theories about ritual abuse do not base their arguments on analyses of patient presentations, and he gives inadequate consideration to historical and socio-cultural factors which may qualify or even precipitate patient presentations. He also puts grossly undue emphasis on the value of clinical "evidence" for ritual abuse, especially where outside evidence is poor or even absent (Greaves 1992: 50).

Greaves' failure to adequately consider non-clinical factors leads him to treat the question of poor therapeutic practice in a somewhat idiosyncratic--and dismissive--manner. He believes that there are certain types of presentations--such as the presence of Multiple Personality Disorder--which quite strongly suggest that patients have actually been subjected to ritual abuse (Greaves 1992: 59-60). Although he acknowledges that some such presentations may not actually indicate ritual abuse, Greaves discounts the problem of therapists uncritically assuming that abuse has taken place. He regards the possibility that patients' symptoms have been caused by the activities of therapists to be a problem comparable in scale and seriousness to
other therapists’ sceptical treatment of actual victims (1992: 50). He does not mention the controversy about the various “multiple personality” disorders, let alone consider criticisms of the validity of these disorders.

Greaves fails to address issues such as the effect that professional orthodoxies, therapists’ religious or other beliefs, or even self-interest have on their attitude to patients’ claims of ritual abuse. He is also unreasonably dismissive of the various alternative theories proposed to account for patients’ memories or other supposed signs of ritual abuse (1992: 50, 58ff).

Perhaps the most serious shortcoming of Greaves’ scheme is that it is an artifact of a certain stage of the debate about ritual abuse. It was written immediately before the appearance of some of the most influential methodological critiques of “apologetic” approaches to ritual abuse and before many instances of alleged ritual abuse were examined or re-examined by courts in the United States and elsewhere (Pendergrast 1995: 362ff). Apart from anything else, these developments made Greaves’ distinction between nihilists and methodologists unsustainable. Some of the most persuasive sceptical arguments about ritual abuse that subsequently emerged were based on painstaking research into the ways in which ritual abuse and child sexual abuse were typically disclosed and diagnosed (e.g. Ceci and Bruck 1993; Clearing House on Child Abuse and Neglect Information Fall 1994; Cohn 1991; Gardner 1992; McCann et al. 1989; 1990; SDGJ Report 1992; see also Atabaki and Paradise 1999; de Rougemont MJ Jan-Feb. 1993).

Two Theoretical Trends

I do not simply disagree with Greaves’ particular classification scheme. I believe that grouping theories and theorists under rigid classificatory labels is basically problematic.
I accept the contention made by Greaves and others that there are some similarities between certain theories of ritual abuse. There are, however, so many differences between what are generally consistent theories that excessively broad labels will significantly misrepresent the views of theorists, their relationships with others and the changing nature of the positions adopted by participants in the debate. I have also found that it is virtually impossible to find terms for various groups of theories that are not ambiguous or in some way disparaging.

There are two generally consistent categories of theories about ritual abuse. Some therapists, writers and activists believe—to use Scott’s facetious phrase—that some form of ritual abuse “really happens” (2001 : 1).[3] These theorists typically accept that accounts of ritual abuse are true. Such accounts are given by those who claim to be survivors and by the parents of and advocates for young children who have supposedly been more recently abused.[4] Some such theorists may not have been exposed to these accounts in a clinical setting, or they may not even have heard first-hand versions of them. On the other side of the debate are theorists who are sceptical of such claims. Sceptics believe that “child victims” have not spontaneously disclosed ritual abuse and that “adult survivors” have either erroneously convinced themselves that they have suffered ritual abuse or have incorporated “false memories” generated by others into their recollections.

Theories that Ritual Abuse “Really Happens”

Although there are some significant apparent differences between them, it is very rare for open disputes to occur between theorists who believe that ritual abuse “really happens”. These theorists express different levels of certainty about the issue, they have different ideas about whether the claims of victims and survivors are completely
and literally true, and, of course, they interpret these claims in quite different ways. Yet there is a paradoxical quality to these differences. Theorists may be more certain that ritual abuse occurs than they claim, for example, or their deliberations about the issue may not be entirely consistent with the theoretical conclusions they draw from them. Theorists also avoid rejecting the ideas of de facto allies in the debate about ritual abuse—even when they regard such ideas as inadequate or even erroneous. They may instead simply superimpose their own views over earlier theories, or even ignore the fact that such theories were ever proposed.

As I will show, an important factor precipitating inconsistencies within these theories is the ongoing tension between the seemingly incredible nature of victims and survivors’ claims—and the efficacy of sceptics’ demonstration of this fact—and theorists’ belief that it is essential that they accept such claims. Theorists who believe that ritual abuse “really happens” are also unavoidably affected by the political implications of the issue. They must discipline their own theories and the attitudes they express towards those of “allies” so as to avoid jeopardising law reforms, public awareness of sexual violence and sympathy for its victims and survivors. These theorists also feel that it is imperative that they give no succour to those they believe are the perpetrators of such violence or to their apologists.

Caution and Conviction

When the Canadian psychiatrist Lawrence Pazder first coined the term “ritual abuse” in 1980, he meant it to denote only a possible explanation for the “symptoms and bizarre memories” of one of his adult patients (Tate 1991: 2; Kahaner 1988: 200). The majority of theorists who believe that ritual abuse actually occurs express a degree of circumspection about the issue—although this varies considerably. There is, however, considerably less variation in the degree of caution that theorists actually exercise when discussing ritual abuse.
In the later 1980s, a number of theorists followed Pazder by using the term "ritual abuse"--or variations of it--as a possible explanation for the bizarre claims supposedly made by young children. These theorists stated that they were inclined to accept the claims of victims, but that there was not enough evidence to definitely do so. In 1988 the sociologist Finkelhor and his colleagues published an influential analysis of the growing reports of child abuse in American preschools in which they attempted to interpret the fact that the abuse of some children "included . . . ritualistic activity" (1988: 61). Finkelhor proposes a "threefold [explanatory] typology" for these claims--that they indicate that either "true cult-based ritualistic abuse", "pseudoritualistic abuse" or "psychopathological ritualism" was taking place (1988:61ff.).

Finkelhor is scrupulous in referring only to “allegations" of ritual abuse or to cases that “appear to have . . . ritualistic" elements. He also acknowledges that his analysis had to remain speculative until "further knowledge about this phenomenon increases" (1988: 57, 59, 61). Yet for all his caution, Finkelhor fails to consider the possibility that the supposed disclosures of ritual abuse may have resulted from the prolonged and suggestive questioning of young children by panic-stricken parents or zealous child protection workers (Guillatt 1996: 28).

It is also quite obvious that Finkelhor is expecting contemporary--and subsequent--investigations to uncover evidence to support these “allegations”. He does not seem to have been discouraged by the problems--already obvious in the mid-1980s--with the allegations and with attempts to investigate them. Charges against five of the seven defendants in the notorious McMartin case, for example, had been dropped after the preliminary hearing in 1986, and the original complainant had died that same year of alcohol-related liver disease (Kahaner 1988: 224; Tate 1991: 293-4 ). Even Roland Summit--a psychiatrist who advised the McMartin prosecutors--acknowledges that it had been quite easy for the defence attorneys to “discredit the investigation”. Interviews with the children, Summit admits, “had . . . a fairly intensely leading quality” (1994: 11).[5] Finkelhor, however, discusses the disclosures of the McMartin children as if they had been made spontaneously and suggests that the long delay between the commencement of the investigation and the children’s disclosures of ritual abuse occurred because the children did not initially “feel safe enough to remember or reveal
these circumstances”. He also accepts the incredible claims that emerged from the interviews with considerable equanimity (Finkelhor et al. 1988: 59).

A number of theorists were publishing quite similar analyses of ritual abuse at this time. Like Finkelhor, these theorists found the allegations credible, but acknowledged that they were as yet unverified. Although they proposed the same sorts of explanations as Finkelhor for the allegations, writers such as Crewdson and Kahaner were more prepared to speculate about the identity and motivations of perpetrators, and their rhetoric was less restrained than Finkelhor’s dry academic jargon.

Crewdson—an American journalist—describes “ritualistic” child abuse as the activity of perpetrators who were motivated solely by their sexual drives, but who embellished the abuse. He argues that such abuse has some distinctive features, such as a high degree of organisation and the production of pornography as perpetrators record their activities (1988: 118ff.). Yet Crewdson also makes a rather speculative attempt to analyse reports of child abuse—including the McMartin case—with more explicitly metaphysical elements (Crewdson 1988: 120). He regards abuse of this type as characterised by even greater embellishment than ritualistic abuse, and he proposes that perpetrators use ritual to recruit victims and to ensure secrecy (1988: 128-9). He makes some very tenuous connections between these reports, religious Satanism and the crimes committed by notorious devil-worshippers (Crewdson 1998: 122ff.). In his discussion of the Fuster-Escalina case, Crewdson seems convinced that the discovery of unambiguous evidence linking religious Satanism and the ritualistic abuse of children was imminent (1988: 129).[6]

Kahaner, also an American journalist, discusses ritual abuse as part of an examination of “occult crime”—rather than of child abuse (1988: vii). Unlike Finkelhor and Crewdson, therefore, he does not consider the possibility that ritual abuse might be perpetrated by sadists, cunning pedophiles, the decadent or the deranged. He is also more clear-sighted—or candid—about some of the shortcomings of cases such as McMartin (e.g. Kahaner 1988: 224). Like Finkelhor and Crewdson, however, Kahaner argues that reports of ritual abuse are probably true, although he acknowledges that there is no evidence which unambiguously supported them (Kahaner 1988: 199). He also
extensively cites such problematic ritual abuse experts as Pazder and the notorious American "cult cop" Sandra Gallant.

Finkelhor and Crewdson were exclusively concerned with ritual abuse that they believed had been recently perpetrated on young children--rather than on adults many years before. Kahaner only briefly considered adult survivors of ritual abuse--whose appearance was at that time very recent--but focused his attention on child victims (1988: 231). The investigations which these theorists believed would verify allegations of ritual abuse subsequently failed to do so, and later studies showed that the claims made in these cases were based on problematic investigative and therapeutic techniques. Cautious theorists like Finkelhor, Crewdson and Kahaner therefore absented themselves from debate about ritual abuse, while other theorists and victims' advocates began to concentrate their attention on the claims made by adult survivors.

A number of other theorists who had originally been reasonably certain that ritual abuse occurred--but who were cautious in their discussions of the issue--subsequently became sceptical about the claims. The FBI special agent Kenneth Lanning, for example, tended to believe the claims about ritual abuse which proliferated after the arrest of the McMartin suspects. After an extensive investigation of the issue, however, Lanning began to express such strong scepticism about ritual abuse that some activists accused him of being a Satanist who had infiltrated the FBI (Lanning 1992:109-110).

Lanning's experience is eerily similar to that of the Australian forensic scientist and police surgeon Edward Ogden. Ogden had also tended to believe that ritual abuse was occurring and had given a much-reported speech warning delegates at the 1990 conference of the Australian and New Zealand Association of Psychiatry, Psychology and Law about the issue (Ogden 1993: 29). He subsequently took part in a Victorian police investigation of ritual abuse, as well as conducting research of his own (Ogden interviewed by Adams LNL ABC2RN 20 Sept. 1994; Ogden 1993: 29ff.). Ogden's subsequent scepticism about ritual abuse precipitated rumours in the mental health community that he, too, was a Satanist (Guilliatt 1996: 224).
Most theorists who accepted that ritual abuse was occurring—however cautiously they expressed this belief—did not become sceptics. Some, in fact, became more definite in their assertions. Pazder himself became convinced that his patient’s symptoms and incredible memories indicated that abusive activity had indeed been perpetrated (Lanning 1994: 152; Pendergrast 1995: 361; Tate 1991: 2). Valerie Sinason had been critical of therapists whom she believed too readily diagnosed ritual abuse—especially given the ubiquity of Satanic fantasies among the mentally ill (Sinason interviewed by Adams LNL, ABC2RN 20 Sept. 1994). She even wrote the introduction to Wright’s (1994) personal account of the dire consequences of precipitating false memories of ritual abuse. Yet Sinason was also very critical of the methodology used by sceptics, and she edited a collection of essays that strongly promoted the idea that ritual abuse really occurs (La Fontaine 1998: 176; Sinason 1994). This work was written to preempt La Fontaine’s sceptical report into ritual abuse allegations in Britain. Although she was a child psychologist, Sinason responded to the fact that belief in the ritual abuse of young children became increasingly unsustainable by becoming exclusively involved in advocating for adults who had “recovered” memories of ritual abuse (La Fontaine 1998: 176).

Many of the theorists who expressed a degree of circumspection about ritual abuse were actually more definite about the issue than they admitted. They were also convinced that most victims and survivors had suffered what Finkelhor would describe as “true cult-based ritualistic abuse”. In their writings, theorists such as Greaves and the Australian paediatrician Booth insisted, for example, that they were dealing only with “allegations” or “strong suspicions” of ritual abuse (Booth and Horowitz 1992: 156, 158; Greaves 1992: 45ff). Writing in the early 1990s, Greaves was also critical of colleagues whom he regarded as credulous or engaging in sloppy clinical examinations of survivors’ accounts or symptoms (1992: 45-6, 51-2). Yet Greaves himself uses a questionable “internal validity” method and some very scanty “physical evidence” to argue that abusive “cults . . . do indeed exist” (1992: 65ff.). Booth examined a group of Australian preschoolers who had allegedly been subjected to ritual abuse—although most of them showed no physical signs of abuse. She found, however, that the children showed signs of abuse similar to those described by a speaker at an American ritual abuse conference, and concluded that perpetrators were practising
"non-penetrating types of sexual assault" (Booth and Horowitz 1992: 159-60).

Although the American psychologist Gould also expresses a degree of caution, she is absolutely certain that the children she examined were being subjected to ritual abuse. She is careful to explain that hers was a clinical study, rather than an objective one, and--like Booth--she notes the consistencies between her clinical findings and the "formal research findings" on ritual abuse (Gould 1992: 207-208). This "formal research" consists, however, of two unpublished manuscripts, and Gould's conclusion is that ritual abuse is "perpetrated by . . . cult[s]"--generally Satanic cults (Gould 1992: 207). Gould also warns other therapists that the parents of some ritually abused children may be "unwittingly active" in abusive cults (1992: 210).

Literal versus Distorted Truth in the Accounts of Victims and Survivors

A second important difference among theorists who accept that ritual abuse really occurs is their attitude to the "truth" of the accounts of young victims and adult survivors. The stories told by adult survivors about their abusive pasts--and supposedly told by young victims about their more recent abuse--have invariably contained details that were very bizarre and improbable. Australian children have claimed, for example, that they attended occult rituals and witnessed the appearance of demons, murder, the mutilation of bodies and acts of cannibalism (see Report WRC Vol. IV 1997: 675-6). Adult survivors in this country have commonly reported witnessing--or suffering--similar atrocities, as well as forced abortions, bondage, confinement, suspension, crucifixion and near drowning (ASCA 2002; Arena 2002: 260-1, 297; Halpern and Henry 1994; Richardson and Meyer 1992; Report LCSCPPE Vol. 3 (Transcripts) 1998: 44, 129-30).

Theorists who believe that ritual abuse occurs may not accept the literal truth of these sorts of claims. Some theorists believe that accounts are affected by the fact that victims and survivors--quite understandably--misinterpreted what perpetrators were doing or the exact nature of their own experiences. They supposedly failed to realise,
for example, that the supernatural entities--or celebrities--attending rituals were actually costumed cult members, or they were confused about the age at which they gave birth to sacrificial infants because their cult used an unconventional calendar (Scott 2001: 149, 159n.; Tate 1991: 14). Theorists also propose that the impossible aspects of some reports are the result of victims and survivors being drugged, terrified, or subjected to sophisticated "mind-control" techniques (Halpern and Henry 1993: 29; Johnson 1992c; O'Donovan 1993: 8; Tate 1991: 13-15). It is also argued that perpetrators include certain elements in their rituals which are intended--partly or in whole--to make any accounts by victims and survivors incredible (Halpern 1992; Summit 1994: 9; Raschke 1994: 148). Children who report that "Mickey Mouse" had been present at abusive rituals, according to a recent Australian publication, were accurately reporting the activities of perpetrators who had quite deliberately dressed as this fictional character (ASCA 2002: 5).[7]

Although these theorists take a more critical attitude to the more bizarre claims of victims and survivors, it should be noted that they most definitely accept the substance of their claims. They believe that victims and survivors have actually been raped and tortured by perpetrators. Some also believe that victims and survivors have witnessed activities such as human sacrifices and that they belonged to groups--"cults", "sects", "covens" or "organised perpetrator groups"--whose members have mastered sophisticated mind-control techniques and/or technology.

There are other theorists who argue that victims and survivors have indeed experienced the very bizarre events they describe and that their reports are quite literally true. Ryder, for example, argues that Satanic cults actually engage in the abusive, orgiastic and murderous activities reported by victims and survivors (Ryder 1991: 14). Ryder's informants--whom he approvingly cites--also explained that cultists avoid detection because they have highly placed and influential members of society among their number, because they have access to sophisticated technology and because they are expert practitioners of mind-control techniques (Ryder 1991: 14,16ff.). One such informant--a Minneapolis police officer--also claimed that "intergenerational" Satanic cults select children with "some psychic ability (telepathy, telekinesis, or other paranormal abilities)..." for channelling roles (as a conduit to the
‘spirit’ world . . .)” (Ryder 1992:15). Ryder himself recounts detailed reports of the physical transformations which cult victims undergo while possessed by demons, and he describes how Satan is supposed to periodically visit earth to preside at cultic jamborees. Ryder argues that because “they are so prevalent, the stories from those who report seeing . . . demons and appearances of satan [sic] are hard to overlook” (1992:174-5).

Differing Interpretations of Victims and Survivors’ Accounts

Theorists who are comparably certain that ritual abuse “really happens” may have different ideas about what it is that exactly “happens”. Theorists interpret the accounts of victims and survivors—especially what they believe victims and survivors are revealing about the identity and motivations of perpetrators—in different ways. Some argue that the ritual abuse reported by survivors was motivated by perpetrators’ Satanic religious beliefs. Others propose that victims and survivors are reporting the activities of perpetrators motivated by other, unorthodox—but genuinely held—religious beliefs, or that perpetrators were indulging perverse sexual desires or arcane predilections. There is, however, a paradoxical quality to these “non-Satanic” interpretations of ritual abuse—especially those whose proponents self-consciously repudiate explicitly “Satanic” theories. Theorists may argue that ritual abuse is not exclusively perpetrated by Satanists, but claim that Satanists are mostly responsible. They may choose to focus on the abuse perpetrated by Satanists because that is the particular form of ritual abuse with which they are familiar. Theorists may describe non-Satanist perpetrators in ways that make them virtually indistinguishable from Satanists, or they may regard the non-Satanic groups nominated as perpetrators as essentially—or even secretly—Satanic.
Interpretation 1--A Variety of Perpetrators

It is quite common for theorists who are certain that ritual abuse occurs to cite Finkelhor's earlier and essentially speculative typology of ritual abuse (e.g. Kinscherff and Barnum 1992: 90ff.; O'Donovan 1993: 20; Scott 2001: 3; Tate 1991: 3). According to Finkelhor, perpetrators were either motivated by "an obsessive or delusional [belief] system", or they used ritual "as a means of intimidating children into participat[ing in sexually-motivated abuse] and deterring them from disclosure", or they possessed "an elaborate belief system and attempt[ed] to create a particular spiritual or social system through practices that involve physical, sexual and emotional abuse" (Finkelhor et al. 1988: 61ff.).

Kinscherff and Barnum closely--and earnestly--follow Finkelhor in the way they differentiate between various forms of "ritualized" abuse (1992: 73, 75). These American mental health professionals and academics express no doubts about the claims made by their patients and those of other therapists, and Kinscherff is a strong advocate for the validity of certain controversial mental health disorders. Ironically, these theorists regard the results of investigations into ritual abuse made by therapists and law enforcement officials with a good deal more caution than Finkelhor.

Kinscherff and Barnum regard abuse that has a "metaphysical" context or purpose to be one specific form of "ritualized" abuse, and they believe that it can be distinguished from activities whose perpetrators are delusional or attempting to facilitate sexually-motivated abuse (1992: 73). They accept that certain patients have been victims of Satanic cults, but they regard abuse perpetrated by "cults"--Satanic or otherwise--as an even more specific form of ritualized abuse (Kinscherff and Barnum 1992: 73, 80). Patients, they believe, could have been abused by deranged individuals, or by individuals whose religious beliefs--though sincerely held--are not part of an established or coherent belief system. Perpetrators may also belong to groups which are not well enough organised or lack the necessary longevity to be validly recognised as "cults" (Kinscherff and Barnum 1992: 73-4). Kinscherff and Barnum also point out that ritual abuse could be perpetrated by members of orthodox religions (1992: 73, 75). Although Kinscherff and Barnum seem here to be referring to devotees of
orthodox religions whose activities are motivated by sexual perversion, their
categorization could also be applied to orthodox Christian sects which over time
develop unorthodox sexual practices or even to abusive practices which are accepted
both within orthodox religions and in the wider society (see Eco 1987: 99-100; Lanning

Interpretation 2--Abuse as Religious Ritual

There are other theorists, however, who are convinced that there is a definite link
between the bizarre and ceremonial abuse reported by victims and survivors and the
supposed religious beliefs and practices of perpetrators. These theorists sharply
differentiate ritual abuse from child abuse motivated by sexual or sadistic drives. For
them, the “ritual” which victims report indicates religious ceremony rather than the
sexual and other idiosyncrasies of abusers. These theorists may, however, disagree
about the significance of factors such as the degree of perpetrators’ religious devotion,
or even the sincerity of their beliefs.

According to some such theorists, factors such as victims and survivors’ accounts of
their experiences, and the signs and symptoms that they exhibit, indicate that they
have been subjected to a distinct--and distinctively “Satanic”--form of abuse.
Generally, these theorists--whose ideas were first published or in other ways
disseminated in the 1980s and early 1990s--propose that the peculiarities of the
reports made by victims and survivors indicate that perpetrators were engaging in
particular types of worship, that they were attempting to indoctrinate children into a
group, that the group was committed to a “counter-deity”--rather than to an unorthodox
vision of a conventional deity--and that the group held a coherent and consistent set of
beliefs (e.g. Gould 1992: 207; Johnson 1992c; Ryder 1992: 11). These theorists also
proposed that accounts of multiple perpetrators and well-attended rituals indicate either
that the groups are large, or possibly that numerous people who are not group
members frequent their gatherings (e.g. Johnson 1992c; see also Boyd 1991: 161ff.,
334-5; Young 1992: 250).
Other theorists were at this time convinced that ritual abuse was an essentially religious activity, but acknowledged that it might be perpetrated by devotees of a variety of faiths. These theorists tended, however, to focus on the activities of Satanic cults. Gould, for example, states that ritual abuse is not the exclusive preserve of Satanists, but that according to survivors, it is mostly perpetrated by them (1992: 207). The psychiatrist Young, on the other hand, mentions other perpetrators only in passing, and proceeds to analyse the abusive ceremonial and mundane religious activities of Satanic cults—that is, the activities of "intrafamilial transgenerational groups that engage in explicit Satanic worship" (1992: 249-50). theorists such as Noblitt and Perskin (1995) suggest that the various non-Christian groups whose members perpetrate ritual abuse—especially syncretic Afro-Caribbean religions—are essentially "Satanic".[8]

Another group of theorists acknowledged that ritual abuse is perpetrated by deranged individuals and cunning perverts—as well as the devotees of various religions. Yet their analyses, too, are almost exclusively concerned with abuse perpetrated within Satanic cults. Some of these theorists actually used Finkelhor's "threelfold" definition of ritual abuse, but then proceeded to concentrate on the most bizarre of reports made by victims and survivors and to propose theories of the most conspiratorial kind (e.g. O'Donovan 1993: 3-4, 23; Tate 1991: 3, 5ff). Such theorists were essentially citing Finkelhor in an attempt to refute contemporary critics who claimed that activists were pursuing conspiracy theories rather than addressing actual child abuse or dealing with the needs of victims. In the process, some of these theorists quite crudely misconstrued Finkelhor's arguments and conclusions (e.g. Tate 1991: 3, 5ff.).

The Religious Studies academic Raschke made an explicit attempt to reconcile survivors' reports that they had been abused by Satanic cults with the more credible scenario that perpetrators had other motivations. Raschke—who himself regarded ritual abuse as the work of Satanic cultists—speculated that Satanic beliefs could be attractive to perpetrators of child abuse or to other criminals. They may adopt "Satanism" as a sincerely held belief system. They could also regard it as a set of appealing ideas, or as a means of achieving sexually or criminally-motivated ends (1994:148). Generally, however, the earlier theorists did not explicitly address the
issue of the exact relationship between the religious, criminal and sexual motivations of abusive “Satanists”. Theorists either ignored the issue, or assumed that abuse which is directed towards the worship of Satan and the creation of a new generation of Satanic devotees is virtually inseparable from that which is motivated by forbidden sexual desires (e.g. Gould 1992: 207; Ryder 1992: 12; Sakheim and Devine 1992: xii).

From the mid-1990s, however, a newer crop of theories emerged whose proponents emphasised that ritual abuse may be perpetrated by people other than Satanists. These theorists also attempted to explain why ritual abuse had been previously regarded as the work of Satanists. Some proposed that their colleagues had understandably misinterpreted what victims and survivors had attempted to reveal about their abusive pasts (e.g. Henry and Halpern 1993b). Others argued that the idea that ritual abuse was exclusively perpetrated by Satanists was actually a characteristic of sceptical discourse (e.g. Scott 2001: 39ff.).[9]

These theorists typically proposed that victims and survivors had been abused by a variety of quite small and relatively unstructured groups--sometimes a single extended family, or a small network of such families. Perpetrators were identified as the members of unorthodox Christian sects or the offshoots of other “mainstream” religious movements, as well as Satanists, occultists, pagans and Freemasons. It was proposed that where connections existed between individual groups, they were tenuous and occurred only periodically. Some theorists also proposed that some of these groups had commercial relations with sexually motivated perpetrators (ASCA 2002; Halpern and Henry 1993; Scott 2001: 3-4).

Some of these theorists were therapists whose patients were increasingly claiming that the ritual abuse which they had suffered had not necessarily been perpetrated by Satanists. Others were researchers whose informants made similar reports (e.g. Henry and Halpern 1993b; Scott 2001: 86).

These theorists were quite clearly responding to the effective arguments against the “Satanic cult” theory of ritual abuse mounted by sceptics, as well as the results of recent official investigations and criminal trials. Interestingly, however, they were not
totally rejecting the idea that abusive Satanic cults were active, nor were their arguments about the “non-Satanic” nature of many perpetrators entirely cogent. The Australian therapist and activist Ruth Christie, for example, told a 1998 conference that Satanists ritually abused children, but that they were not the only perpetrators. She also claimed that although other perpetrating groups may not be Satanists, they worship evil entities or attempt to gain supernatural power through them. Others supposedly practise evil acts in an attempt to achieve benevolent religious objectives. At this conference--and at one in 1996--Christie extensively used the earlier literature whose authors, she had argued, misunderstood the nature of ritual abuse. At the 1998 conference, she distributed literature including Children for the Devil and Understanding Satanism and Ritual Abuse.[10]

These theorists rejected--or never seriously considered--the possibility that the accounts of ritual abuse survivors and victims could have been the result of suggestive interrogation, poor therapy or psychopathology. They were also as contemptuous as other theorists in their attitude towards sceptics (e.g. Scott 2001: 39ff.).

These new ideas about the identities of ritual abuse perpetrators did not totally displace earlier theories. The earlier “Satanic cult” theories of ritual abuse remained influential, while newer but nevertheless unrevised interpretations of victims and survivors’ accounts were published or in other ways promoted well after the mid-1990s.

Interpretation 3--Conspiracy Theories (Cosmic and Earthly)

Some of the theorists who propose that ritual abuse is perpetrated by “cults” are unabashedly concerned with Satanic conspiracy. They perceive virtually all accounts of what Finkelhor would call “ritualistic abuse” to be indications of activity by cultists. They also regard such factors as the supposedly simultaneous appearance of the initial allegations of ritual abuse and the ubiquity and similarity of reports of ritual abuse
as evidence that perpetrating cults are widespread and highly organised. Many such theorists also believe that the cults have powerful and influential members, or that they have formed alliances with powerful political figures (e.g. Johnson 1992c; O’Donovan 1993: 9-11; Ryder 1992 i 14, 16ff.) Conspiracy theorists believe that the power and organisation of such cults account for the lack of definite evidence for their activities. They argue that highly placed cult members can stymie investigations, while cultists who are expert in scientific or other fields can ensure that no evidence of human sacrifices or other bloody activities can be detected by authorities. Experts also ensure that victims of abuse initially have few, if any, clear memories of the atrocities committed against them (Blume 1990: 60; Ryder 1992:16-17).

The precise nature of the conspiracy conceived by theorists of this kind is not uniform. Generally, however, these theorists perceive either a “cosmic” or an “earthly” conspiracy. It is common for theorists to describe the criminal and antisocial activities supposedly perpetrated by Satanic cultists in religious terms. Gould, for example, argues that Satanists use ritual abuse in a deliberate attempt to inculcate children with anti-Christian beliefs and emotions. Abuse supposedly convinces victims that values such as cruelty and deceit are normative and desirable, and that they are children of Satan (Gould 1992: 207, 212). Other aspects of the abuse are meant to symbolically contradict Christian beliefs and rites. According to a therapist quoted by Ryder, Satanists sacrifice human beings, for example, then crucify their bodies in order to “discount that Christ was the final sacrifice by continuing to sacrifice to satan [sic] . . .” (Ryder 1992:12-13). These theorists, furthermore, perceive Satanic socialisation as a perverse attempt to deny children their rightful access to the profound truth of Judeo-Christian cosmology (Gould 1992: 207, 212, 227; Ryder 1992: 11-12, Powell n.d. [c.1999]: 6).

A number of these theorists, however, also propose that perpetrators of ritual abuse conspire with evil supernatural entities to attack God and humanity. I have already discussed the views of Ryder and his informants, who believe that ritually abused children were being used to bring demons to Earth (Ryder 1992: 15, 174-5). Ryder also suggests that the agency of demons is a possible explanation for the ability of Satanists to practise their “atrocities” with virtual impunity (1992:176). The very first
account of ritual abuse--Smith and Pazder's *Michelle Remembers* (1981 [1980])--actually described an attempt by Satanists to use the abuse of a five-year-old girl to allow Satan to visit the Earth. The memories "unearthed and relived" by Michelle Smith included accounts of cultists allowing themselves to become possessed so that demons could direct and participate in rituals (Smith and Pazder 1981 [1980]: 142ff.). Smith also recalled how Satan had attended certain rituals. Christ, the Virgin Mary and --possibly--the Archangel Michael also appeared, however, and the plans of the Devil and his followers were thwarted (Smith and Pazder 1981 [1980]: 225ff).

Smith’s incredible tale of a cosmic conspiracy has been very influential. The first reports of ritual abuse occurred within three years of the publication of her book in the United States (Jenkins 1998: 166ff.; La Fontaine 1998: 56). Lawrence Pazder--Smith’s psychiatrist--was active in the next few years advising parents about the signs of ritual abuse and helping investigators detect and prosecute "perpetrators". Pazder also appeared at numerous conferences on occult crime and child protection, educating participants about ritual abuse, its signs and symptoms (Lanning 1994: 152; Pendergrast 1995: 361). Pazder’s ideas, and even certain details from the account that he helped Smith to recall, have been reproduced in other theorists’ books, articles and conference presentations.[11]

Another group of theorists suggest that perpetrators of ritual abuse are part of an "earthly" conspiracy. They regard perpetrators as "evil" only in the sense of being criminal, destructive and antisocial. Some of these theorists regard the cults as essentially motivated by the desire to continue to practise their religion. For this they need to recruit new members, obtain funds and sacrificial victims, and maintain discipline among existing members. Strict secrecy needs to be maintained, since many of the groups’ religious, fund-raising and recreational activities are--quite obviously--seriously criminal (e.g. Boyd 1991: 208-9; Johnson 1992c; Ryder 1992: iv). Abusive cults, it is believed, also feel that they are not bound to recognise laws or conventional social mores, or even that they have a religious obligation to violate laws and conventions (Johnson 1992c; Ryder 1992: 12-14).
Other "earthly" Satanic conspiracy theorists believe cults are attempting to gain control over the world--or even that they already secretly control the world. Central to the argument of these theorists is the belief that Satanic cults have the ability to effectively "program" their members. Particular alternate personalities can thus be created to perform specialised tasks of which cult members remain unaware, and reluctant members can be compelled to remain active within the cult (e.g. Gould 1992: 207; Ryder 1992: 15; Noblitt and Perskin 1995: 53, 166; Powell n.d. [c.1999]: 45ff.). Theorists acknowledge that cults are more expert in the use of hypnosis than conventional therapists, and that they have access to the most advanced and effective programming techniques (e.g. Noblitt and Perskin 1995: 53). It is proposed that cultists somehow learned these techniques from sources such as "Nazi doctors" and the American Central Intelligence Agency (e.g. Noblitt and Perskin 1995: 167, 171n.; see also Harrington 1996). These theorists link their beliefs about abusive cults with a variety of other conspiracy theories. They believe either that Satanic cults are the vehicles whereby entities such as the CIA or "the Illuminati" attempt to control the world--or maintain their preexisting control of it--or that these entities are themselves doing the bidding of secret, powerful Satanists.[12]

A variety of such "world-domination/ritual-abuse" theories were aired at the 1995 conference in Dallas of the Society for the Investigation, Treatment and Prevention of Ritual and Cult Abuse. The conference was addressed by some influential ritual abuse therapists and activists, including Noblitt and Perskin, Catherine Gould, and the crusading US senator John de Camp (see Harrington 1996). Delegates attending the conference--titled "Cult and Ritual Abuse, Mind Control and Dissociation: A Multidisciplinary Dialogue"--could, in addition, gain continuing education credits through the Texas State Board of Examiners of Licensed Professional Counsellors. Although a number of conspiracy theories were proposed at this conference, all were predicated on the belief that a secret political elite controlled the United States and/or the world, and that this elite was seeking to enhance its control. Ritual abuse was presented as the religious worship actually practised by this group and their minions, and/or the mechanism--via "mind-control"--whereby the group's political and economic interests were advanced.
Harrington (1996) argues that although these “world domination” conspiracy theorists may be “a fringe element”, they are quite influential. While I accept that these theorists may well be a fringe element among activists concerned with the wider issue of “recovered memory”, I do not believe that this description accurately reflects their status among ritual abuse theorists and activists. It is, for example, very common for theorists of ritual abuse to use some of the less outrageous ideas proposed by the conspiracy theorists. Gould’s published works, for example, include immensely influential reports for the L.A. County Commission for Women Ritual Abuse Task Force. Her definition of ritual abuse and her list of its signs and symptoms in children are extensively utilised in the ritual abuse literature (e.g. ASCA 2002: 3; Boyd 1991: 7; Hodgins 1992; O’Donovan 1993: 13; Ryder 1991: 11).

Conspiracy theorists’ ideas about cultic mind control have also been very influential. Many theories about ritual abuse, in fact, depend on the idea of “mind control” to explain why survivors who have been subjected to such horrendous abuse could have only recently recalled it, and why they have been able to lead relatively normal lives following their abusive childhoods (e.g. Boyd 1991: 81ff.; Halpern and Henry 1993; Johnson 1992c). A surprising number suggest that perpetrators use sophisticated psychological techniques and advanced technology in their “conditioning” of victims (Halpern and Henry 1993; Hodgins 1992; Johnson 1992c; Powell n.d. [c.1999]). These theorists—or the survivors whose accounts they report—have clearly been influenced by the “conspiracy” literature and discourse, although only some of them actually discuss where perpetrators may have learned these techniques or acquired this technology (e.g. Halpern and Henry 1993; Johnson 1992c; RASSA 2000 “Indoctrination”).

Even theorists who quite obviously recoil from the idea that perpetrators of ritual abuse are in league with the CIA or secret societies, or who are conscious of the effective criticisms which have been levelled at this interpretation of ritual abuse, have been influenced by the “world conspiracy” theorists. They seek more “reasonable” explanations for survivors’ claims of conspiracy and brain-washing. They propose, for example, that survivors have been subjected to “mind control” techniques—such as threats or killing pets—that individuals or members of small and unsophisticated groups
could easily conceive and carry out, or that perpetrators use bizarre and horrific—but theoretically possible—acts of violence to condition victims (Boyd 1991: 81ff; Hodgins 1992; Jackson 1992; Katchen and Sakheim 1992: 30; Richardson and Meyer 1992; Young 1992: 251ff.).

Yet the very idea that perpetrators of ritual abuse are able to commit the most outrageous crimes with complete impunity—which is central to the belief that ritual abuse “really happens”—obviously suggests that a conspiracy is taking place which is well beyond the capacity of all but the largest, best organised and most impeccably connected organisations. As FBI Special Agent Lanning has pointed out, successfully committing crimes of this kind and on this scale—and avoiding detection, let alone prosecution—would be a massive and formidable undertaking (1992: 130-132).

Theorists who reject vast conspiracy theories—or who are, at least, unwilling to propose them—sometimes argue that society is in denial about the nature and vast extent of child abuse, so that the reports of survivors and victims are immediately and unthinkingly rejected (e.g. Tate 1991: xiv-v ). Many others, however, seem to consider the fact that survivors report the presence of influential citizens among the perpetrators to be an adequate explanation for survivors’ claims, or simply provide no justification for their acceptance of them.

Participants in the debate about ritual abuse thus disagree—often violently—about a wide range of issues. Even those who share the belief that ritual abuse “really happens” may disagree about the precise meanings of the accounts of victims and survivors—especially about what these accounts reveal about the identities and motivations of perpetrators. These theorists avoid criticising their putative allies in the debate, however, and focus their enmity onto sceptics. The bitterness of the debate is in part a consequence of the extreme seriousness of the issue. Theorists who believe that ritual abuse “really happens” believe that sceptics exacerbate the suffering of victims and survivors and hold back essential law reform and social change. Sceptics in turn point to the suffering caused to both those falsely accused of perpetrating ritual abuse and those who have come to falsely regard themselves as survivors. They also fear the loss of precious legal protections and civil liberties. Another reason for this bitterness—which I will examine further in the next chapter—is that theorists have
strong and multifarious professional, philosophical, political and even personal interests invested in the debate about ritual abuse.

Notes

[1] I will use the term "theorist" to refer to therapists, researchers, writers and activists who have publicly proposed explanations for ritual abuse in print or by such means as addressing seminars. I do not mean to imply that all these participants in the debate have formulated extensive or sophisticated theories about ritual abuse. It should also be noted that a number of these theorists are not exclusively concerned with ritual abuse. They propose theories about ritual abuse while deliberating on such issues as child sexual abuse, the nature of memory or the various crimes supposedly committed by occultists.

[2] The activist, feminist and sociologist Sara Scott, for example, condemns sceptical theorists as the promoters of a “discourse of disbelief” which “helps organize courses of concerted social action such as parental opposition to the investigation of certain child protection cases, or the maintenance of wronged respectability by alleged abusers” (2001: 35). The sceptic Elizabeth Loftus, on the other hand, labels those who believe that ritual abuse occurs as “true believers”. This implies that they are zealots and uncritical in their acceptance of survivors’ accounts (Loftus and Ketcham 1991: 31). The American psychologist Katheryn Faller criticises her colleague Richard Gardner for his use of the term “validator” to describe certain child protection activists whom he believes too readily interpret children’s statements, physical symptoms or other signs as indications that they have been sexually abused (Faller 1998: 105). Faller regards this term as pejorative, although—as Gardner points out—certain ritual abuse activists do argue that it is important to “validate” the claims of survivors (Gardner 1996: 212). Some even invite survivors to submit their memories for validation (e.g. RASSA 2000
"Main issues", "Acceptance and Validation").

[3] Scott claims she is attempting to transcend the question of whether ritual abuse "really happens". Instead, she is seeking to examine the ways in which the accounts of those who claim to have suffered ritual abuse are interpreted through "dominant cultural frames"--and deemed incredible (Scott 2001: 1-3, 194). I believe that Scott misconstrues the bases of these "dominant" interpretations of survivors' accounts. I will argue in Chapter III that Scott can only sustain her argument by using a very particular definition of "ritual abuse" and by concentrating on particular accounts by particular survivors.

[4] Many texts differentiate between adults who have "survived" the horrors and indoctrination of a ritually abusive past, and child "victims", whose abuse is ongoing or has been very recently interrupted by diligent parents, therapists and investigators (e.g. O'Donovan 1993: 4).

[5] The trial of the fifty-eight year old proprietor of the McMartin preschool and her son began in July of 1987. The defence accused the prosecution of withholding information about the mental instability of the original complainant and the fact that she had a history of making questionable accusations of child abuse. After a series of hung juries and retrials, the Manhattan Beach district attorney abandoned further prosecution of the single remaining defendant. This man had spent more than five years in gaol (Kahaner 1988: 224; Pendergrass 1995: 360; Tate 1991: 293ff.).

[6] The arguments of the British writer Renvoize are very similar to those of Crewdson, although she is more definite than him that child abuse with occultist overtones is occurring. She regards reports of such activity as an indication that perpetrators are cynically using ritual to facilitate or heighten sexual activity with children rather than engaging in activities that were metaphysically motivated or significant (1993:118-9). Yet, like Crewdson, Renvoize uses some very problematic data to suggest that ritual abuse which is highly organised and motivated by specifically metaphysical factors could have been occurring (Renvoize 1993:120).
Interestingly, Renzoize was writing some five years after Finkelhor and Crewdson. At that stage, La Fontaine’s definitive—and sceptical—report about ritual abuse in Britain was yet to be released. Renzoize would, however, have been aware of the fact that numerous police investigations there had failed to uncover evidence of ritual abuse, that prosecutions had collapsed, and that the Law Lords Butler-Sloss and Clyde had issued scathing reports on individual cases where organised child sexual abuse and ritual abuse had been alleged.

[7] According to the Australian therapist Gillian Johnson, children reporting the presence of “Father Christmas” at rituals have not been deliberately deceived. They are actually referring to the title of a “high ranking position” within Satanic covens (Johnson 1992b).


In their 1995 “anthropology of ritual abuse”, Noblit and Perskin expressed particular concern about the activities of “destructive cults” that “embody the traditions of pre-industrial cultures” (1995: xiv, 59ff., 166). These include “Native Americans, Hawaiians, and Australian Aborigines”—although Noblit and Perskin concentrate on uncovering the supposed “African connection” to ritual abuse (1995: 73). They suggest that there are strong similarities between the abusive Satanic rituals described by American survivors and the “African-derived” rites practised by the devotees of Vodoun, Santeria and other Afro-Caribbean religions. These rites supposedly precipitate forms of Multiple Personality Disorder in participants, and they are an important means by which Afro-Caribbean religious leaders—like high-ranking Satanists—maintain their positions and protect their secrets. Noblit and Perskin claim, furthermore, that Satanists are working in concert with Afro-Caribbean perpetrators—or are at least in contact with them. Devotees of Afro-Caribbean faiths in North America are also supposed to ritually abuse people from outside their own ethnic group—including Noblit’s white, female

Fig. 1. A Drawing by a Client of Gillian Johnson depicts "Father Christmas" as a Perpetrator of Ritual Abuse. (From an appendix to the paper "Multiple Personality Disorder and Satanic Ritual Abuse" presented by Johnson at the Australian Association of Multiple Personality and Dissociation Conference, Melbourne. Sept. 1992).
[9] In their paper presented at a “Multiple Personality and Dissociation” conference in Melbourne in 1993, Halpern and Henry reported that the survivors with whom they worked had called for activists to avoid using terms such as “Satanic Ritual Abuse”. These survivors reported that they “had been ritualistically abused in the name of Jesus, Jehovah, the Goddess or others” (Halpern and Henry 1993).


At the 1998 workshop, Christie stated that some past theories of ritual abuse were understandably mistaken, and blamed “the media” for promoting the view that ritual abuse was exclusively perpetrated by Satanic cults. The texts distributed there were Sakheim and Devine (1992) Out of Darkness, Understanding Satanism and Ritual Abuse, and Tate (1991) Children for the Devil, Ritual Abuse and Satanic Crime.

Among the texts used in the summary notes for her 1996 lecture was a paper on ritual child abuse in the child-care setting originally delivered by Kelly at the US National Symposium of Child Victimisation in 1988, Young’s 1992 article “Recognition and Treatment of Survivors Reporting Ritual Abuse” and Gould’s LA County Commission for Women [Ritual Abuse] Report.

[11] In many respects, the Satanic rituals “recalled” by Smith resembled those described in historical or mass media accounts and depicted in popular modern films and books. There are, however, certain features of the activities of the coven supposedly operating in British Columbia in the 1950s that were unique, and these have subsequently been reported by victims and survivors of ritual abuse. Hill and La Fontaine have noted how details such as the caging and burial of children, first reported by Smith, have become important elements in accounts of ritual abuse (Hill 1998; La Fontaine 1998: 194-5n.). Other such details include surgical or pseudo-surgical procedures, the presence of a nurse, the killing of kittens and other likeable animals, and the role of “Malachi”—either a person with that name or with that title—within the cult.
The idea that ritual abuse is linked with vast political conspiracies by Satanists is one of the few issues which provokes hostility among theorists who believe ritual abuse "really happens". The British journalist Tate, for example, directs some bitter criticism towards fellow-Briton and Christian activist, Diane Corr. Tate not only regards Corr as credulous and paranoid, he is also very critical of her association with ultra-right wing American political groups. Tate believes that the activities of such theorists have made the public unwilling to accept more moderate and accurate ideas about ritual abuse--such as his own (Tate 1991: 324). Katchen--a Religious Studies scholar--is similarly critical of the American journalist Terry, whose 1986 book linked the Manson and "Son of Sam" murders, a breakaway Scientology sect and a more general Satanic conspiracy (Katchen 1992: 17). Ironically, Tate links ritual child abuse with these very murders and with the Process Church of the Final Judgment--the sect supposedly behind them (Tate 1991: 172ff.)
"Ritual abuse" is obviously a very amorphous concept. There are varying and conflicting theories about what precisely it is, who—if anybody—perpetrates it or is subjected to it, and what is the value of particular methods of diagnosing and treating it. Differences occur and sometimes conflicts arise even among theorists who are—or who could validly be considered to be—allies in the debate about ritual abuse. The most obvious—and perhaps the most important—factor that conditions the differences between theories is the "profession" of their proponents. Theorists' differing professions—and their professional differences—may cause them to regard acts of ritual abuse as the cause of survivors' psychological problems, or to believe that survivors' allegations are themselves a symptom of their problems. Theorists may perceive such allegations as symptomatic of a social, rather than psychological problem. Some theorists may regard the claims of victims and survivors as inherently truthful, while others believe them to be fantasies or artifacts of poor interrogations and therapy. Their attitudes may also be conditioned by the particular "victims of ritual abuse" to which their profession exposes them: they may work with children, adult survivors, the wrongly diagnosed or the falsely accused. Theorists may disagree about the validity and value of various relevant scientific and social scientific concepts, and they may or may not fully understand these concepts.
Of course, these “professional” differences affect theorists’ ideas about ritual abuse in very complex ways and in combination with a variety of other factors. These include the theorists’ religious, philosophical or political beliefs, and their nationality. Theorists’ personal experience of ritual abuse—as a survivor, for example, or as someone accused of perpetrating abuse—may also affect their perspective, as may the particular time in which they devised and promoted their theories. According to some participants in the debate, there are also theorists whose ideas are affected by mental instability.

**Therapists**

A number of the theorists whose ideas about ritual abuse I discussed in Chapter I could be called “therapists”. Some are mental health professionals such as psychiatrists or psychologists. Others have been trained in fields such as social work or nursing, but also provide counselling and therapy to victims and survivors. Some providers of counselling or treatment have—by their own admission—no formal training which is relevant to their task, but they regard themselves as expert in other ways.

Therapists who share the belief that ritual abuse “really happens” also very commonly share the experience of having had first-hand contact with victims and survivors. It is also very common for them to believe that therapists need to accept the seemingly incredible stories of victims and survivors—both to aid their recovery and to counteract the widespread societal denial about sexual violence (e.g. ASCA 2002; Johnson 1992c; Sakheim and Devine 1992: xvii).

The particular attitude to ritual abuse expressed by these therapist-theorists can, however, vary considerably. Therapists tend to work with either young victims of ritual abuse or adult survivors—and to propose theories about one group or the other. This
specialisation is generally the result of such factors as therapists’ particular profession or field of expertise within a profession and the exact nature of their professional practice. Catherine Gould, for example, who concentrates her attention on the abuse which she believes is being perpetrated by Satanists in preschools, is a psychologist in private practice in Southern California. Gould’s observations have led her to believe that ritual abuse occurs primarily in an extrafamilial context (1992: 207, 210). Cynics might suggest that Gould’s ideas have also been conditioned by certain commercial considerations (see Pendergrast 1995: 504ff.). Walter Young, on the other hand, is a psychiatrist and expert in the recognition and treatment of Multiple Personality Disorder in adult survivors. The presentations of Young’s patients lead him to address ritual abuse allegedly perpetrated in the past and in an intrafamilial setting. He does not consider himself qualified to comment on allegations of ritual abuse in preschools, and so specifically excludes this issue from his considerations (Young 1992: 250).

This specialisation—and the particular perspectives on ritual abuse which it precipitates—does not generally lead therapist-theorists to explicitly reject each others’ conceptions. Therapist-theorists who specialise in either “child” or “adult survivor” cases may actually cite each others’ findings and insights. Although Gould concentrates on child victims of ritual abuse, for example, many of her ideas have been influenced by theories originally used to explain why successful and seemingly well-adjusted adults suddenly “recover” memories of the ritual abuse they suffered in childhood. Gould uses these theories to explain how abused children may not only be unwilling to spontaneously disclose that they had been abused, but may actually be unable to immediately recall such abuse (Gould 1992: 208-9). Other “child” theorists explain children’s reluctance to “disclose” ritual abuse using earlier, more “child-case-specific”—though generally consistent—explanations, such as the Child Abuse Accommodation Syndrome (see Summit 1983: 158ff.; Summit 1994: 3).

Therapist-theorists who lack Gould and Young’s extensive qualifications, professional status or officially recognised expertise may regard themselves as “expert” in other ways. The therapist Daniel Ryder, for example, stresses the fact that he himself has suffered ritual abuse, and that he has had extensive first-hand dealings with victims and survivors (Ryder 1992: ii-iii).[1] He does, however, extensively cite the theories
of mental health professionals and points out that his own experience and observations about ritual abuse are generally consistent with the findings of their experiments and clinical studies (e.g. Ryder 1992: 39ff.). Reviews of Ryder's book indicate that numerous professionals are, in turn, enthusiastic about his insights and activism.

Some of the most influential proponents of sceptical theories about ritual abuse are also therapists—although sceptical therapist-theorists are almost exclusively mental health professionals. Some of these therapist-theorists have had first-hand dealings with patients who are convinced that they have "recovered" memories of an abusive past when they seek treatment. Sceptical therapists regard such conviction as either an indication of psychopathology, or as symptomatic of more common psychological problems which patients have themselves diagnosed as signs of abuse. Sceptics regard certain symptoms commonly believed to indicate the presence of repressed memories of abuse—depression, relationship problems or concerns about weight and appearance, for example—to be ubiquitous or the indications of other psychological problems (e.g. Lucire 2000; see also Wakefield and Underwager 1994: 92-93).

Sceptical therapist-theorists, in fact, strongly criticise their opponents' reliance on problematic clinical data to diagnose ritual abuse and their use of this data to substantiate the subsequent claims made by other therapists and their patients. Sceptics argue that clinical practice should be based on properly-conducted research data (e.g. Wakefield and Underwager 1994: 67ff.). Therapists who believe that ritual abuse occurs counter that the clinical evidence for ritual abuse is compelling and that there is no body of research data which presently verifies their theories and diagnoses only because such abuse has been so recently discovered (Gould 1992: 207; 218; see also van der Kolk, testimony in Dale vs. R.C. Diocese of Burlington et al. 26/7Sept. 1997).[2]

Other sceptical therapist-theorists may not have first-hand dealings with victims or survivors, but with other people who have been affected by allegations of ritual abuse. These therapists have campaigned against the acceptance of "recovered memories" by the courts, for example, or have acted as advocates for those who
have been accused of perpetrating ritual or other abuse. They have also treated—and publicised the stories of—people who at one time regarded themselves as survivors of abuse, but who subsequently "retracted" their accusations (e.g. Wakefield and Underwager 1994: 3ff.). These theorists are subjected to particularly vituperative criticism by advocates for victims and survivors (see Briggs 1994: 44-5; Summit 1994: 14-15, 21).

Scientists

In most ritual abuse discourse, debates about whether this activity "really happens" are virtually inseparable from debates about the validity of certain symptoms, syndromes and disorders. Theorists who believe that ritual abuse occurs argue that victims and survivors manifest Child Abuse Accommodation Syndrome or show signs of Repressed Memory Disorder, Multiple Personality Disorder or Dissociative Disorder. The trauma suffered by victims of abuse, theorists argue, precipitates certain organic changes or psychological states that prevent them reporting the abuse—or even recalling it (e.g. Mangen 1992; Noblitt and Perskin 1995; Summit 1983). Sceptics, on the other hand, argue that children who were supposedly abused in preschool cases were reluctant to "disclose" abuse because they had not been abused. Some suggest that the parents of these children were exhibiting a form of Munchausen's Syndrome by Proxy (e.g Lucire 2000). Sceptics also propose that the claims and behaviours of adult survivors are symptoms of Munchausen's Syndrome, False Memory Syndrome or Abigail Syndrome (e.g. Mulhern 1991; Lucire 2000; Wakefield and Underwager 1994: 96).[3]

Some of the theorists who participate in these debates are therapists who propose these disorders or syndromes to explain symptoms exhibited by their own patients or
those of other therapists. The psychiatrist Roland Summit, for example, proposed the existence of a Child Abuse Accommodation Syndrome to explain why his own patients, and those of other therapists, did not immediately and spontaneously disclose that they had been subjected to severe abuse—and why they may have later retracted their disclosures. According to Summit, children “accommodate” themselves to the powerful adults who abused them (see Summit 1983; Summit 1994: 3, 20). Psychologists Wakefield and Underwager—who have worked with actual perpetrators of child abuse, with people who regard themselves as falsely accused and with accusers who retracted their claims—formulated the False Memory Syndrome. They were attempting to explain why adult were “recovering” false memories of childhood abuse and making accusations about events that had supposedly occurred years—or even decades—before (Wakefield and Underwager 1994: 96ff.).

Theorists subsequently promoted the validity of these disorders and syndromes in print, as they engaged in political campaigns and as they appeared as expert witnesses in court cases. They also attacked the validity of the disorders and syndromes formulated or promoted by their opponents.[4] Theories were subsequently taken up, promoted and used in diagnoses by fellow professionals, but also by less qualified theorists and advocates.

A number of the theorists who have formulated and/or promoted various relevant disorders and syndromes are predominantly research scientists. Some—such as the academic psychologist and expert on Dissociative Disorder, Richard Mangen—seek to use their theoretical expertise to test or treat survivors of ritual abuse (Mangen 1992: 147, 152, 156). Other scientists were not originally concerned with issues of sexual abuse. Psychologist Elizabeth Loftus, for example, had been researching the essentially “reconstructive” nature of memory for more than ten years before becoming involved in the debate about repressed memories of sexual abuse (Crews 1994: 55; Neimark 1996: 49, 51). She entered the debate by providing expert testimony for the defence in criminal trials, countering what she considered to be erroneous ideas about memory being proposed by other researchers and therapist-theorists. She questioned the validity of witnesses’ memories of—and thus their testimony about—instances of murder, sexual abuse and ritual abuse. Loftus subsequently attacked the proponents
of the various theories of "repressed memory" in print and in the popular media, as well on the witness stand (Garry and Loftus 1994: 82; Neimark 1996: 49, 80; Crews 1994: 54-5).

The work of Professor Bessel van der Kolk of Boston University (and visiting Professor at Harvard, McGill, Massey and Tokyo Universities) was also originally unrelated to the issue of child abuse. Using data from animal studies and studies of humans who had experienced severe and verifiable trauma, van der Kolk proposed that the brains of traumatised human beings underwent certain biological changes.

According to van der Kolk, "trauma memories" are--unlike ordinary memories--accurately but inaccessibly stored within the brain. They cannot be recalled by the usual processes, but are triggered by "sensory or affective stimuli that match sensory or affective elements associated with the trauma" (van der Kolk 1994; van der Kolk and Fisler 1995). They can then "emerge not in the distorted fashion of ordinary recall, but as affect states, somatic sensations or as visual images (nightmares or flashbacks) that are timeless and unmodified by further experience" (van der Kolk 1994).

van der Kolk subsequently began to participate in scholarly debates about the memories of adults who had supposedly been traumatised by sexual abuse in childhood, and he conducted a most problematic "confirmatory study" testing human subjects--two thirds of whom claimed to be "haunted by memories" of childhood sexual abuse or sexual assault (van der Kolk and Fisler 1995). van der Kolk also appeared as an expert witness at numerous court hearings--including some where bizarre forms of abuse by Catholic clergy were alleged (van der Kolk, testimony in Dale vs. Roman Catholic Diocese of Burlington et al. 26/27 Sept. 1997).

Although van der Kolk's theories are very complex and technical--involving as they do the possibility that "delayed onset [Post Traumatic Stress Disorder] may be the expression of subcortically mediated emotional responses that escape cortical, and possibly hippocampal inhibitory control"--he is readily and enthusiastically cited by less qualified or even unqualified theorists and advocates. The Western Australian psychologist who helped two sisters "recover" memories of ritual abuse in the early
1990s, for example, was using van der Kolk's theory when he told the press that memories of childhood trauma are actually more accurate if they have been repressed and then recovered (Hill 1998). Ruth Christie, on the other hand, uses van der Kolk's prestige rather than his theories in her own advocacy work. She cites van der Kolk's work with combat veterans to argue that there is scientific proof that "delayed memories" of sexual abuse are accurate—even though van der Kolk himself states that the memories reported by a victim of trauma may not accurately reflect "the indelible sensory and affective imprints" of trauma (Christie interviewed by Uhlmann ABC 666 (Canberra) 28 Feb. 2000; van der Kolk and Fisler 1995).[5] At a 1998 workshop, Christie suggested that van der Kolk was one of the "many, many, many credible people" who accept that ritual abuse occurs. She was attacking theorists whom she saw as proponents of certain "myths" about ritual abuse. However, van der Kolk has himself expressed some scepticism about ritual abuse (testimony in Dale vs Roman Catholic Diocese of Burlington et al 26/27 Sept. 1997).[6]

Social Scientists--and Others

Social scientists—including sociologists, anthropologists and criminologists—also propose theories about ritual abuse and are vigorous participants on both sides of the debate about the issue. They generally attempt to expand the debate about ritual abuse—examining claims in their social and historical contexts, rather than assessing patient symptoms and suggesting their probable cause. Social scientists who accept that ritual abuse occurs may investigate the historical or religious factors which they believe have led to secret, abusive cults being active in the contemporary West. They may also suggest why they believe certain experts and the general public unreasonably reject survivors’ true—or at least credible—accounts of ritual abuse (e.g. Katchen 1992; Scott 2001). Sceptical social scientists, on the other hand, examine the
reasons that people make false—and sometimes impossible—claims, and why such accounts are accepted by experts and the public (e.g. Jenkins 1998; La Fontaine 1998; Mulhern 1991, 1994; Patterson 1997). Journalists have also played an important role in the debate by formulating—or, at least, synthesising—historical and sociological theories about ritual abuse and introducing them into wider public discourse.

Certain social scientists have, like therapist-theorists, encountered first-hand reports of ritual abuse. Social scientists who accept that ritual abuse occurs, however, almost invariably come into contact with people who already identify themselves as survivors of ritual abuse. The British sociologist Sara Scott, for example, primarily based her arguments about ritual abuse on questionnaires that she distributed via “UK organisations providing support/counselling to adult survivors of sexual abuse . . . and to individual members of . . . [the] Ritual Abuse Information Network and Support” group. She subsequently had first-hand contact with about twenty survivors, and interviewed twelve who were generally representative of her respondents (Scott 2001: 195, 198). Of course, journalists also frequently meet survivors and publish their first-hand accounts in books and articles (e.g. Boyd 1991; Preston SMH 8 Dec. 1990; Tate 1991).

The access which theorists such as Scott—and crusading journalists such as Tate and Boyd—have to survivors raises an interesting methodological issue for the investigation of ritual abuse. Sceptical—or even uncommitted—social scientists are most unlikely to receive much cooperation from ritual abuse survivors, their therapists and supporters.[7] Scott, for example, was active in her support of ritual abuse survivors and attempted to have their accounts accepted by the police, the courts and the public. She then undertook her sociological examination of the issue (Scott 2001: 9). Scott’s stress on the theoretical and methodological importance of “taking seriously the accounts of survivors” is, furthermore, very consistent with other theorists’ conviction that it is therapeutically and ideologically essential that the claims of ritual abuse survivors be accepted (Scott 2001: 1).

The criminologist Edward Ogden was able to hear the first-hand accounts of ritual survivors, but only before he became sceptical about their claims. Survivors who
learned of his speech at the 1990 ANZAPPL conference obviously believed that Ogden would accept their accounts and that he would be an effective participant in the ongoing campaign to aid survivors and pursue perpetrators (Ogden 1993: 29). Even so, the number of survivors willing to speak to this apparently sympathetic non-therapist was quite small, and they were very sensitive about having their accounts critically examined by him.[8] Ogden's project is one of the rare instances where social scientists were able to use the first-hand accounts of survivors in a sceptical investigation of ritual abuse, and Ogden was subsequently vilified by survivors, their therapists and supporters (Guilliatt 1996: 224).[9]

The analyses of ritual abuse made by Scott and Ogden are, like those made by therapist-theorists, relatively narrow in their focus. Scott brings a variety of sociological insights to the examination of her informants' accounts, but her often elegant arguments are used primarily to show that these accounts--and, to a lesser extent, those of other survivors--could well be true. Scott's rhetoric, furthermore, suggests that "taking survivors' accounts seriously" involves not so much allowing that that they could be true, as accepting that they are.[10] Scott most definitely explores the social and political context of the debate about ritual abuse, yet her considerations are almost wholly directed towards demonstrating that sceptics are mistaken or in denial about the veracity of survivors'--and especially her informants'--accounts.

Ogden began to examine survivors' accounts as part of an investigation of ritual abuse by the Victorian Police. He therefore initially treated the accounts of individual survivors as he would complaints of any serious criminal activity. Only when he was unable to find evidence supporting his informants' claims did Ogden feel compelled to examine ritual abuse in a wider psychological and historical context (Ogden 1993: 6, 39ff.).

Social scientists do not, however, generally base their theories about ritual abuse on accounts which they have heard first hand. Some--such as the sociologist and skeptic Jenkins (1998) have based their theories solely on published accounts of ritual abuse. Social scientists on both sides of the debate most commonly use accounts that have been obtained by police, child protection or sexual assault workers, and
therapists. Finkelhor, for example, based his speculative theories on official American case reports of abuse that he regarded as having been "substantiated" (Finkelhor et al. 1988: 16-17). La Fontaine's investigation for the British government was based on responses to questionnaires she sent to "Police Forces, Social Services Departments and to the [National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children]", as well as complete police, social services and court files (La Fontaine 1994: 5). Although she interviewed police, social workers and others in a selected number of cases, La Fontaine decided to spare the alleged victims any further trauma--a decision for which she has been strongly criticised (La Fontaine 1994; 6; Sinason interviewed by Adams LNL, ABC2RN 26 June 1997).

The sociologist Linda Williams actually compared documentary evidence with first-hand accounts. Williams--who was a co-author of Finkelhor's 1988 study--was investigating the veracity of recovered memories of sexual abuse rather than ritual abuse. Her study--initially a paper given to the American Society of Criminologists, then a journal article, and then a revised article--has, nonetheless, been used to argue that repressed memories of ritual abuse were accurate (see Loftus et al. 1994: 1177-8). Williams' team interviewed women who had been sexually abused as children in the mid-1970s, and whose abuse had been verified (Williams 1994: 1169, 1170). She found that 38% of her subjects did not report documented instances of abuse to interviewers. While Williams argues that her findings indicate that adults may not remember childhood abuse, others have interpreted her study as evidence that memories of sexual trauma abuse can be repressed (e.g Courtois 1997: 73; van der Kolk, evidence in Dale vs RC Diocese of Burlington et al. 26/7 Sept. 1997). Sceptics also cite Williams' study, arguing either that it does not show repression, or even that it indicates that repression has definitely not occurred.[11]

As they examine the issue of ritual abuse in a wider social and historical context, social scientists may attempt to explain the accounts of victims and survivors by comparing the supposed beliefs and activities of abusive contemporary Satanists with those of other so-called "totalising cults". They may also investigate abusive groups such as historical witches' covens (e.g. Katchen 1992). Sceptics also typically examine the beliefs and practices of the mental health profession and suggest reasons why poor
therapy is precipitating these particular explanations for patients' symptoms (e.g. Jenkins 1998: 171-2, 216-20; Mulhern 1991: 265-6, 271, 275ff.; Showalter 1997: 15, 17, 171ff.). They compare recent concerns about ritual abuse to other historical panics and examine the social conditions and historical factors that have created contemporary perceptions about the vulnerability of children and the worsening depravity of deviants (e.g. Jenkins 1998; La Fontaine 1998; Showalter 1997).[12]

As with the therapist-theorists, there are differences in the social scientists' theories about ritual abuse which reflect professional differences, and they too debate the validity and relevance of certain theoretical and methodological approaches to the issue. La Fontaine (1994; 1998), for example, limits her argument to instances where the ritual abuse of children has been alleged. Her approach was qualified both by the nature of her commission from the British government and by her previous research into child sexual abuse. The initial investigation of another anthropologist, Sherrill Mulhern, on the other hand, was commissioned by prominent therapists treating adult survivors of ritual abuse. They were attracted by Mulhern's expertise in the study of cults and "multiple personalities"—but were bitterly disappointed when she found that "repeated investigations of [ritual abuse] cases have not only failed to recover material evidence, occasionally they have demonstrated that at least some of what was alleged simply did not happen" (Mulhern 1991).[13]

The sociologist Scott was highly critical of her sceptical colleague Jenkins' argument that recent concerns about ritual abuse was one of many "moral panics" about the activities of "child molesters" that have occurred over the last hundred years (Jenkins 1998: 15ff.; Scott 2001: 41-3). Scott argues that Jenkins has erroneously identified certain groups—evangelical Christians and feminists—as allied "moral entrepreneurs" precipitating panic about ritual abuse. She believes that Jenkins has focused on these groups' shared rejection of a "sexual-libertarian" perspective on childhood, gender, morality and sexual deviance, and that he failed to adequately consider the often profound differences between them (Scott 2001: 41-2). Scott also suggests that Jenkins' argument about the panic being rooted in the increasing influence of feminist concerns about male sexual violence was illogical, given the fact—so troubling to feminists—that a relatively high proportion of those accused of perpetrating ritual abuse...
are women (Scott 2001: 42). La Fontaine agreed with the thrust of Jenkins' argument, but believed the anthropological theory of the "witch craze" was a more useful way of conceptualising the panic (1998: 20ff.). Comparable debates occur among social scientists and others about the validity of conceiving ritual abuse as a "rumour panic", a "hysterical epidemic", an "urban myth", a "contemporary legend" or a particular episode of historical--and ongoing--European legends about "secret organizations" and murderous rituals (see Hill 1998; Mulhem 1994: 267ff.; Olio and Cornell 2000; Scott 2001: 42-3; Showalter 1997; Victor 1998).

One very valuable contribution made by social scientists to the debate about ritual abuse is their more sophisticated treatment of the concept of "cults". The term "cult" actually has a wide variety of accepted uses--"from sociological-technical to popular-negative", as Richardson (1993) notes. Classicists, religious studies scholars and anthropologists may use the term to describe devotion to a particular deity within a polytheistic religion, or to a particular aspect of a deity, lesser supernatural entity or saint within a monotheistic one (Barrett 1996: 16; Barrow 1949 [1975]: 142-5; Becari 1907; Read 1952). Scholars examining the sociology of religion originally used the term to describe groups which objected to particular doctrines of and structures in orthodox religious movements and either broke away from or were expelled from them. Even this original and scholarly usage was problematic, however, and many sociologists of religion have been reluctant to use the term, or have used it to denote groups which were otherwise difficult to characterise (Richardson 1993: 348).

From the 1960s, scholars used "cult" to refer to certain religious, occultist, psychological or other movements which were gaining popularity in the West, especially among the young (Richardson 1993: 351; Singer and Lalich 1995: 37ff.). According to this usage, "cults" were characterised by highly charismatic leadership, the use of "coercive persuasion", and "pattern[s] of manipulation and exploitation . . . by leaders and ruling coteries . . . and idealism . . . on the part of supplicants and recruits" (Singer and Lalich 1995: xii). This "new" sociological definition is also problematic, since it is quite easy to point to these definitional characteristics in established and orthodox religions and in a variety of other movements (Hume 1997: 217; Singer and Lalich 1995: 58ff.).
The growth of "new" religious and other movements precipitated both an "anti-cult" movement in the West and a new--and very amorphous--popular definition of "cults". The term was widely used to denote unfamiliar religious groups or those whose activities were considered objectionable or frightening (Jenkins 1998: 172-3; Richardson 1993: 348; Scott 2001: 83). This discourse, as well as the activities of zealous Christians, the parents of recruits, disgruntled ex-cultists and others precipitated analyses by scholars whom Scott describes as part of an "anti-anti-cult" movement. These scholars were critical of the notion that the newer, unorthodox religious movements were inherently coercive, and they argued that--like any religious or quasi-religious movement--"cults" offered devotees and recruits a community, a belief system and the possibility of relief from life's dilemmas (Barrett 1996: 274ff., 279ff.; Scott 2001: 83).

Therapists-theorist of ritual abuse rarely consider these complexities when using the term "cult". They may report the accounts of their patients or other survivors who claim to have been abused by members of a "cult"--or, as in the notorious Donna Smith case in Maryland, by members of an "occult" (Schnabel Mode Aug.-Sept.1994). When interpreting less specific "accounts" by survivors, therapist-theorists may use "cult" as a generic term for a small religious group and/or one with unorthodox beliefs and practices. They do not consider the possibility that their own--or their patients'--use of the term reflect explicitly Christian ideas about the inherently deluded, malicious or even Satanic nature of new religious movements (Jenkins 1998: 172-3). In the rare instances where theorist-therapists do consider the problematics of the term, they are often responding to well-made criticisms of the notion that "abusive cults" are active (e.g. Halpern and Henry 1993).[14]

A number of social scientists who propose theories about ritual abuse, on the other hand, have expertise in the examination of new religious movements or have been active in campaigns to restrict the influence of certain "cults" (e.g. Katchen 1992; Mulhern 1991; Ogden 1994). Certain "anti-cult" social scientists speculate that the Satanic cults reported by survivors engage in extreme versions of the abusive, coercive and murderous practices of known "cults", and that they are motivated by beliefs which are similar to those espoused by known contemporary Satanic groups,
or those of supposedly “Satanic” groups in the past (e.g. Katchen 1992). Sceptical “anti-cult” activists and scholars of new religious movements, on the other hand, point out that the “cults” reported by survivors are wholly unlike even the most abusive and murderous of the known contemporary “cults” (Mulhern 1991).

Sceptical social scientists also confront the complex and highly constructed nature of the concept of “cults” as they examine the ways in which false--and even fanciful--ideas about the activities of social “outsiders” are periodically conceived and widely accepted. These theorists show that certain groups—widows, Jews and certain Christian religious orders, for example—have at different times been persecuted because they were believed to be secretly committing heinous crimes (e.g. La Fontaine 1998: 74, Mulhern 1994: 267-8). They note that in recent times, the newer religious movements have been similarly lumped together and demonised—as “cults” (e.g. Mulhern 1994: 273-5; Ogden 1993: 11ff., 39, 62-4). Some such theorists propose that concerns about ritual abuse emerged from—or as part of—this panic about the activities of the devotees of unorthodox religions (e.g. Jenkins 1998: 172-3; Ogden 1993: 10-11).

Religion

Although theorists’ professions most obviously qualify their various attitudes to the claims made by victims and survivors of ritual abuse, other factors are also very important. These factors—which transcend “professional” differences—not only affect theorists’ views of ritual abuse, they further complicate discourse about the issue. The religious beliefs of theorists, for example, most definitively affect the way reports of ritual abuse are interpreted. Catherine Gould includes an explicitly “spiritual” element in her list of the defining characteristics of ritual abuse. Perpetrators’ spiritual abuse of
children, she claims, "causes victims to feel that they are so worthless and evil that they can only belong to Satan" (Gould 1992:207). Gould argues that such activities are intended "to indoctrinate the victim into the cult’s antisocial and life-destructive belief system" (1992:207). Leaving aside her problematic claim that inculcating in children feelings of worthlessness and self-deploathing, and indoctrinating them with intense inhibitions are characteristics of anti-Christian belief and practice, Gould here proposes that raising children within unorthodox religions is intrinsically abusive. In this, Gould differs quite markedly from some other theorists who are both her colleagues in the mental health field and who share her belief that ritual abuse "really happens". Kinscherff and Barnum, for example, regard Satanists' dealings with their children as "ritual abuse" only if brutalisation and sexual mistreatment is involved (Kinscherff and Barnum 1992: 77). Gould's ideas are much closer to those of the evangelical Christians who campaign not only against ritual abuse, but against all occultist activity (see Tate 1991: i).

Theorists' precise religious beliefs—and the ways in which these beliefs qualify their ideas about ritual abuse—can be very complicated. The American therapists Noblitt and Perskin, for example, describe themselves as conducting a wholly secular and scientific examination of and campaign against ritual abuse (1995: xiv, 33-4, 169). Yet, Noblitt and Perskin claim evangelical Christian activists as their allies, and their theories are permeated with Christian ideas about the essentially diabolical nature of non-Christian religions. The conferences organised by the organisation they founded and lead, furthermore, provides a forum for a variety of conservative Christian and extreme right-wing individuals and groups. The 1995 conference of their Society for the Investigation and Treatment of Ritual and Cult Abuse featured an address by a "former . . . witch" who linked ritual abuse with a conspiracy by the Satanic "Illuminati", and who based his claims on the infamously anti-Semitic Protocols of the Elders of Zion. Pamela Perskin—who was chairing this session of the conference and who is herself Jewish—responded to complaints by another speaker and from the conference floor by stating that she did not find his remarks offensive (see Harrington 1996).
Politics

The most obvious political factor that affects theorists’ particular views of ritual abuse—and which conditions the bases of the disputes between them—is their attitude towards feminism. The approach of the sociologist Scott, for example, is typical of much ritual abuse discourse, both in its resolve and in the ways in which her argument has been influenced by specifically Cultural Feminist ideas. In particular, Scott emphasises the role of sexual violence—such as ritual abuse—in bolstering patriarchal social structures and culture and in precipitating an acceptance by women of their objectification and subordination (Dworkin 1987: 127-8, 137-8; Scott 2001: 10, 16ff., 20-22; see also Herman 1981: 36ff., 56; Scott 1998). Scott seeks to participate in another Cultural Feminist project by exploring the connection between pornography, sexual violence—in this case ritual abuse—and “male supremacy and female oppression” (Herman 1981: 3; see also Dworkin 1987: 138, 204; 1989: 203-4, 289ff.). She notes that most of her informants had been made to appear in child pornography and suggests that the production of pornography may have been the chief motivation for some perpetrators (2001: 64, 72, 77). Scott also seeks to “giv[e] a voice to particular groups of women rendered mute in patriarchal discourse” and to “explor[e] the complex ways in which accounts are produced, the interpenetrations of public and private stories . . . and the importance of the context of emergence to the story that gets told” (Scott 2001: 5).[16]

The published works of the sceptical psychologists Wakefield and Underwager, on the other hand, are not only hostile to Cultural Feminism—but seemingly to the feminist project more generally. Such fundamental anti-feminism is not really typical of sceptical discourse about ritual abuse, although criticisms of feminism are expressed by other theorists (e.g. Guilliat 1996: 88; Pendergrast 1995: 248-9; Satel 1998). Anti-feminism also appears to be reasonably common among those who believe themselves to have been falsely accused by adult survivors (see Elson 1998: 3.2.17, 4.2.4).
Wakefield and Underwager perceive heightened contemporary concerns about and activism against sexual abuse—including ritual abuse—to be illogical, and they see contemporary irrationality as linked to the rise of feminism. Current attitudes to child abuse are described as being rooted in “Radical”—or Cultural—Feminist ideas about the inherently violent nature of male sexuality, the valorisation of intuitive “female” knowledge and the rejection of traditional “patriarchal” jurisprudence (Wakefield and Underwager 1994: 38, 58-9; Paidika 1993). Wakefield and Underwager also perceive the rise of feminism as part of a more general rejection of the notion of progress and a decline in the value accorded to reason in the United States. American society and culture, they believe, are based on values of “personal freedom and the exercise of human reason”, which had their genesis in the ancient Athenians’ rejection of the “old matriarchal Greek tribal deities” in favour of “the patriarchal gods of Olympus”. According to Wakefield and Underwager, “the ancient Furies for whom justice is vengeance, reason is intuition and healing is rage” have now returned (1994: 19-20).

Personal Involvement

Another factor that qualifies some theorists’ perspectives on ritual abuse is their direct and personal involvement in the issue. The beliefs of these theorists are generally based on their conviction that they, or someone close to them, have either been subjected to ritual abuse or have been falsely accused of it. The innovative and influential theories of the Canadian psychiatrist Lawrence Pazder, for example, emerged from his dealings with his patient Michelle Smith, who was supposedly the survivor of a Satanic cult. Although Pazder at first had a professional relationship with Smith, she later became his wife and co-author (Pendergrast 1995:48-9; Boyd 1991: 270-1). Pazder also facilitated Smith’s conversion to Roman Catholicism, and her revelations about Satan’s presence in the World confirmed his strong and
conservative religious beliefs (see Smith and Pazder 1981 [1980]).

The effect that a theorists' personal experience has on their ideas about ritual abuse is often analogous to the sorts of effects which professional involvement may have. The theories proposed by members of the pseudonymous "Stone" family, for example, are explicitly based on their own experiences of being the "non-perpetrating parent" and step-parent of ritually abused children (Stone and Stone 1992). Their theories thus focus on ritual abuse which has allegedly been perpetrated on children by one parent--and by members of that parent's own family--after a marriage separation. They use essentially "Murrayist" theories about the survival of ancient witch cults to explain their childrens' allegations about what went on when they were in the custody of the "perpetrating" parent and his family, and they base their advice to other parents on these theories. They also propose a conspiracy theory to explain why their allegations were never adequately investigated (Stone and Stone 1992: 176, 179ff.; see Murray 1921).

Just as some theorists were motivated to analyse the debates about ritual abuse after becoming professionally exposed to cases of alleged abuse, so others were motivated by their personal involvement. Sara Scott, for example, actually became the foster mother of one young survivor some time before she conducted her study of ritual abuse in Britain (Scott 2001: 9-10). The American journalist Mark Pendergrast was motivated by accusations that he was a perpetrator of abuse. Pendergrast's decision to investigate and critique the theories of repressed memory was made after his adult daughters underwent therapy and recovered memories that he had sexually abused them (1995: 25ff.). Before this, Pendergrast had written some well-regarded books and articles on American commerce and popular culture.

Conflict between particular theorists may also be conditioned by their personal experience of ritual abuse. Theorists who believe that ritual abuse "really happens" take an obvious delight in pointing out that several high profile members of the False Memory Syndrome Foundation have been accused of involvement in child abuse, or have similarly problematic backgrounds (Noblitt and Perskin 1995:180-1).
In a few instances, a theorist’s choice of profession was actually precipitated by his/her exposure to the issue. Daniel Ryder, for example, claims he decided to become a “chemical dependency counsellor and . . . social worker specializing in the treatment of codependency and ritual abuse” after undertaking therapy, realising that he was himself a survivor of ritual abuse and struggling to overcome the effects of this past abuse (1992: i; ii; 210).

Psychology

The particular path that led Ryder to identify himself as a survivor of ritual abuse and become an activist raises another factor which may qualify the perceptions of some theorists of ritual abuse--their psychological state. Debates about the exact nature of the psychological problems afflicting survivors are a common theme of discourse about ritual abuse. It is also quite common for theorists to accuse each other of mental instability. Sceptics argue that theorists who accept that ritual abuse occurs are either exhibiting their own paranoia or reflecting the paranoia generally exhibited by contemporary society. Wakefield and Underwager argue that contemporary fears about the ubiquity of child abuse and its perpetration by dangerous “others”--such as Satanists--is the latest manifestation of the cyclical outbreaks of paranoia which they say have occurred in the United States at intervals of approximately forty years (1992:41-3). Gardner suggests that “validators” of sexual and ritual abuse not only exhibit paranoia, but also pathological sexual inhibition, sadism and repressed pedophilia (1996: 333-4, 336-7)! Sceptics cite numerous examples where activists have behaved in ways that appear to be motivated by something more than the passionate concern for victims, zealous determination to pursue perpetrators, naivete or credulity (e.g. Cuhulain 2003; Wakefield and Underwager 1994:157ff.).
In certain cases, sceptics’ arguments about the mental instability of their opponents are credible. In 1999, for example, the Minnesota Board of Psychology disciplined Renee Fredrickson—a very prominent therapist and theorist of ritual abuse—over her failure to keep proper records, her use of problematic diagnostic and therapeutic techniques, her use of hypnosis despite having no relevant qualification, and her failure to properly inform patients about their treatment and its possible effects. The Board also found that Fredrickson exhibited “signs of possible mental dysfunction” which could affect her professional conduct (Lerner ST 3 June 1999; MBP Stipulation and Consent Order 7 May 1999). Fredrickson had been influential in promoting the idea that memories of abuse which had taken place over years or even decades could be repressed, that robust intervention by the therapist was needed if memories of abuse were to be recovered, and that ritual abuse was occurring on a massive scale. Fredrickson’s theories were especially influential as activists became increasingly concerned about ritual abuse that was being reported by adult survivors, rather than child victims. She has been described as one of the “founders” of the recovered memory movement and is the author of a work which has been described as the “textbook” for therapists seeking to facilitate their patients’ recovery of memories of abuse (“The Founders . . .” Pandora’s Box 30 July 2000; Pendergrast 1995: 69; Wakefield and Underwager 1994: 126, 129). Fredrickson’s problems—both professional and personal—have been widely discussed in sceptical discourse.

Ryder’s explanation of how he realised that he was a survivor of ritual abuse is certainly open to an alternative interpretation. Ryder states that he discovered his ritually abusive background while undergoing therapy. He also argues that drug and alcohol dependency is a symptom of ritual abuse, and that he has personally benefited from “Twelve Step”-style self help programs for ritual abuse survivors. He strongly promotes such programs in his work counselling survivors of ritual abuse and/or victims of drug and alcohol dependency (Ryder 1992: ii, iii, 6, 210).

Sceptical theorists of ritual abuse are described by their critics as having psychological problems of their own. They are accused of failing to recognise the abundant evidence that ritual abuse occurs, and it is suggested that they are “unable to cope with reports of horror . . . [and so they] frequently escape into denial” (Noblitt

Feminist theorists of ritual abuse also point out that women who openly defy—or in other ways challenge—patriarchal conceptions of reality, society and propriety have historically been accused of being in some way "ill" (e.g. Scott 2001: 5; see Gearhart 1985: 105; Jackson 1988: 216; Nelson 1975: 346-7; Ramas 1985: 150). Feminist theorists obviously regard survivors as this sort of dangerous women—survivors who speak out against the horrific and highly organised abuse of children perpetrated within patriarchal families and by seemingly eminent and respectable men. Theorists, therapists and activists are also "dangerous women" of this kind, or the equally dangerous providers of support for them.

Time

One final factor which conditions the various theories about ritual abuse is the changing nature of the debate. Ritual abuse has been a discursive subject from 1980 to the present. In that time, the ways in which ritual abuse is generally perceived have changed significantly, as have the characteristics of discourse surrounding the issue. The theories proposed by participants in the debate about ritual abuse—or by their theoretical “fellow-travellers”—may differ markedly depending on when these theories were proposed. The particular nature of the disputes about ritual abuse have also changed over time. As I discussed in Chapter I, some theorists proposed speculative ideas about ritual abuse believing that unfolding events would provide a truer picture of the nature and extent of ritual abuse. When no such clarification occurred, these theorists either abandoned the debate or sought other means of supporting their contentions. Theories also changed in response to challenges posed by critics in an increasingly bitter debate.
Ritual abuse activists continued to use theories--especially those of Finkelhor--whose proponents had ceased to comment on the issue, however, or which had been effectively discredited. Furthermore, people who believed themselves to be survivors of ritual abuse, or were seeking explanations for their problems, had--and continue to have--access to problematic, "outmoded" theories promoted at conferences and, especially, on the internet.

The most noticeable change in the theories about ritual abuse, however, occurred in the late 1980s and early 1990s with the decline of the perception that ritual abuse was an activity which was currently being perpetrated--or had recently been perpetrated--on children of preschool age. Beginning around 1985--but especially after the publication of Bass and Davis' *The Courage to Heal* in 1988--theories about ritual abuse became overwhelmingly concerned with past activities recently recalled by adult survivors.

The debate about ritual abuse is thus complicated as well as bitter. Theories are affected by their proponents' various professions and field of expertise, and the different ways they are professionally involved in the debate. Theorists' religious and philosophical beliefs, as well as their personal experiences and states of mind, are also influential. Yet theorists share an intense professional and/or personal involvement with the issue, and strong feelings of empathy for those they believe to be survivors of ritual abuse or the victims of false accusations. Their theories very frequently reflect deeply-felt religious or philosophical beliefs. These factors sharpen the antipathy that theorists express--and indeed, feel--towards their opponents in the debate about whether ritual abuse "really happens". They also cause theorists to endorse--or, at the very least, refrain from criticising--those with whom they do not entirely agree.
Notes

[1] Ryder is described by the editor of his book as a counsellor, journalist and survivor of ritual abuse. Sue Powell, the Australian woman who founded and acts as chief "therapist" for the Women Inspiring Natural Growth and Support group similarly considers herself expert despite her lack of formal qualifications. (WINGS is a self-help group for survivors of ritual abuse.) Powell, in fact, considers herself more expert than many "professionals who think they are helping" survivors. She was herself a survivor of child abuse and has dealt first-hand with survivors of domestic violence, sexual abuse and ritual abuse for some years. Powell also feels that unlike many mental health professionals, she is free of the destructive tendency to instinctively "deny" the existence of ritual abuse (Powell n.d. [c.1999]: 2-3).

[2] There are also some disagreements between sceptical therapist-theorists over this issue. Psychologists Wakefield and Underwager argue that incredible claims, and invalid diagnostic and therapeutic techniques became widely accepted by mental health practitioners because of the decreasing role of psychologists—who are trained in scientific methodology—in the treatment of sexual abuse. They point to the numbers of untrained or inadequately trained "therapists" who have come to dominate the field. They also argue that psychiatrists—being inadequately trained in statistics, research methods and psychotherapy—are not sufficiently capable of diagnosing problems which do not have an organic basis, or of assessing the research on the issue (Wakefield and Underwager 1994: 152, 341ff).

The Australian psychiatrist Yolande Lucire, on the other hand, believes that it is the relative rarity of psychiatrists in the field that is problematic. Although she expresses admiration for the work of Wakefield and Underwager, Lucire argues that most therapists have neither the training nor the proper clinical experience to recognise the various "personality disorders" or other problems which afflict those reporting abuse which occurred years before. She believes that psychiatrists can recognise such patients, and that they have the capacity to critically assess the erroneous theories about the nature of memory and the symptoms of abuse which
abound in both the therapeutic and the wider communities (Yolande Lucire 27 March 2002; Lucire 2000).

[3] Lucire disagrees with the emphasis which many sceptical theorists place on the concept of “false memories”. Although she agrees that the claims of adults who believe that they have recovered memories of abuse in childhood are false, Lucire argues that conceiving this phenomenon as “False Memory Syndrome” reinforces the notion that memory is a fully-recoverable record rather than a reconstructive process. She argues that patients are reporting “false beliefs” from various sources—including poor therapy—and that such beliefs can be reinforced or spread to others via therapy or when their claims are uncritically accepted in other situations. She proposes that the “Abigail Syndrome”—referring to the troubled character in Miller’s play The Crucible—better describes the condition (Lucire 2000).

[4] Participants in the debates about these theoretical and often highly technical issues may challenge each other in the most intemperate language. Wakefield and Underwager, for example, take issue with the use of various theories of repressed memory to diagnose ritual and other abuse in patients who had no recall of such activity before undertaking therapy. Theories of repressed memory, they write, are “pseudoscientific balderdash supplied by unscientific mental health professionals” (Wakefield and Underwager 1994: 15). Therapist-theorists who accept that ritual abuse occurs are equally dismissive of Wakefield and Underwager’s own False Memory Syndrome and respond in comparably picturesque terms. Noblitt and Perskin describe false memory as “a pejorative expression” and “absurd” (1995: 178,179). Summit refers to Underwager as a “sudden expert” in issues of children’s testimony and someone who “is very persistent in coming back after crises that might well discourage a less devoted expert” (Summit 1994: 15, 21).

[5] In his 1995 paper and other public statements, van der Kolk’s principal argument was that “trauma memories” are quite unlike non-traumatic recall. He was here attempting to refute the arguments of other researchers and expert witnesses—specifically Elizabeth Loftus—about the inherent inaccuracy of memories of
distant events.


[7] Like some sceptical therapists-theorists, sceptical social scientists may, however, have encountered the first-hand accounts of people other than "victims" and "survivors". The sceptical sociologist Jeffrey Victor based his theory of the "Satanic panic" on the interviews which he conducted with the citizens of an American town who were alarmed by rumours that Satanists were planning to kidnap and sacrifice a young woman (see Victor 1998).

[8] Ogden—who is a medical doctor as well as a criminologist—was surprised to find survivors so "extraordinarily reluctant to allow even the most cursory of medical examinations". This was despite the fact that they claimed to have been tattooed or permanently scarred by perpetrators (Ogden 1993: 32, 32n.)

A friend and supporter of a defendant in the Seabeach (or "Mr Bubbles") ritual abuse case (see below, Chapters IV and IX) told me that one of the accusing parents exhibited attitudes that were somewhat similar to those of Ogden’s informants. A parent, who was taking part in a demonstration outside the Manly Courthouse as bail applications were made in 1989, castigated my informant. She listed the horrific crimes perpetrated by the defendants—including the claim that they had tattooed some sort of occult marking on her daughter’s forehead. The demonstrator did not respond to my informant’s observation that no such mark was visible (3 Dec. 1998).

[9] The sceptical Australian journalist Richard Guilliat was accused of being both a Satanist and a pedophile (Guilliat SMH 5 July 1997; van Dyke BS (20) Nov. 1996). Guilliat’s sceptical 1996 book included interviews with survivors and their supporters, as well as those accused of perpetrating ritual abuse.
Another sceptical journalist, Mark Pendergrast, devoted a large part of his 1995 book to the first-hand accounts of both “survivors” of ritual abuse and those who have retracted their claims (Pendergrast 1995). As with Ogden, survivors and therapists believed that contributing to Pendergrast’s work would aid in the wider acceptance of the various concepts of memory repression and in overcoming denial about ritual abuse. Pendergrast also presented faithful, first-person accounts by his informants and allowed them to check the accuracy of the transcript and any editing (Pendergrast 1995: 195).

[10] In the conclusion of her book, Scott cites some recent British cases where she believes investigators and the courts took the complaints of victims and adult survivors of ritual abuse seriously. The result was that the perpetrators were prosecuted, convicted and imprisoned (Scott 2001: 189-91). Although Scott does not discuss these cases in much detail—she relies on newspaper reports—they appear to be the kinds of cases for which La Fontaine believed there was reliable evidence, but which on closer examination were significantly different—in terms of scale, the types and severity of the abuse and, especially, the motivations of perpetrators—to those hitherto reported by ritual abuse survivors, their therapists and advocates (La Fontaine 1994: 30; La Fontaine 1998: 57-8, 87, 197n.; see also Tate 1991: 111-4).

[11] Sceptics argue that those of Williams’ informants who did not report the documented instances of abuse were not amnesiac. Some had forgotten particular—but not other—instances of abuse, while others may have simply forgotten less memorable, non-invasive forms of abuse. The memories of a significant proportion were affected by infantile amnesia rather than memory repression. Sceptics also point out that Williams did not conduct “clarification interviews” with the subjects who failed to report abuse, and they speculate that some informants may have recalled the abuse but for various reasons chose not to report it to researchers (e.g. Ofshe and Watters 1994: 305-7; Thomson 1995; Pendergrast 1995: 97-9; Wakefield and Underwager 1994: 247-9).
[12] Elaine Showalter is not, strictly speaking, a social scientist. She describes herself as a “literary critic and . . . historian of medicine” (Showalter 1997: 6).

[13] The sceptical social psychologist Richard Ofshe was, similarly and ironically, initiated into the debate about ritual abuse when he was recruited by the prosecution in the infamous Ingram case (Crews 1994: 60).

[14] These theorists’ considerations may also be quite facile. One of the reasons Halpern and Henry give for their rejection of the use of the term “cult” is the possibility that perpetrators benefit from the “aura of mystery and fear” generated by the term (Halpern and Henry 1993).

[15] There is considerable debate about how the various strands of feminism should be defined--and about their exact origin and relationship to each other. I will, however, use “Cultural Feminism” as a term synonymous with “Radical Feminism”. This arose in the 1970s as the second-wave feminist movement became increasingly fragmented. Its proponents included Andrea Dworkin, Catherine MacKinnon and Judith Herman. Cultural Feminists reject the liberal feminist aim of addressing the oppression of women through social reform and, unlike socialist feminists and others, regard sex as the foremost social division. Cultural Feminists perceive the oppression of women and a multitude of other social problems as consequences of the fact that social structure and culture are dominated by men and serve male interests. They argue in particular that sexual violence--especially rape, child abuse and pornography--bolsters such “patriarchy” and precipitates the acceptance by women of their objectification and subordination. Cultural Feminists also identify a resistant female culture and have proposed a program of female separatism. Much of their theorising and political activity is directed towards raising women’s consciousness of their oppression and its causes, and towards helping women to achieve ownership and control of their bodies (see Alcoff 1988; “Cultural Feminism” soc.feminism Terminologies; Dworkin 1987; Dworkin 1989; Herman 1981; “Radical Feminism” Wikipedia).
[16] Ruth Christie uses a similar argument to explain why the recovered memories of traumatised combat veterans have been accepted as accurate, but that women's recovered memories of sexual abuse have been subjected to intense scrutiny and scepticism (Christie interviewed by Uhlmann ABC 666 (Canberra) 29 Feb. 2000). Christie seems unaware of the intense controversy about Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and about the nature of the problems which have afflicted combat veterans (see Herman 1994 [1992]: 20ff.; Levy 1995; Lucire 2001; Stratton 1999; Yahuda and McFarlane 1995).
CHAPTER III

DEFINING RITUAL ABUSE--DIFFERENCES, DISPUTES AND BAD FAITH

In the early and mid-1990s, governments in the US, Britain and Australia sponsored inquiries into allegations of ritual abuse. These were well-funded and conducted by capable and respected academics or jurists.[1] They were also very influential--precipitating a more sceptical attitude about ritual abuse among the judiciary, police, media and public. The official British inquiry--conducted by Professor La Fontaine--considered only a selection of cases in England and Wales, all of which involved allegations of the recent ritual abuse of young children. Her 1994 report was subsequently cited by sceptical theorists of "child" ritual abuse, but it also precipitated considerable scepticism about the claims of "adult survivors of ritual abuse" (see Greenhalgh 2000; La Fontaine 1998: 175ff.). The report was influential in Australia and New Zealand, as well as in Britain.[2]

Theorists who believed that ritual abuse "really happens" found La Fontaine's study difficult to refute. La Fontaine was not open to the sorts of criticisms that had been--and continued to be--used to discredit other sceptics. Her scholarly status could not be faulted, nor could her ability to conduct social research. It was not possible to deny La Fontaine's expertise in the area of child sexual abuse--she had published a well-regarded book on this subject in 1990--nor could she be accused of having sexual
libertarian attitudes or of being unsympathetic to the suffering of abused children (see La Fontaine 1990). Influential British theorists had, in fact, welcomed their government’s decision to commission a study of ritual abuse, and they had applauded the choice of La Fontaine to conduct it (e.g. Boyd 1991: 20; Tate 1991: 341). Even those who were subsequently critical of La Fontaine’s findings were very careful in the way they dealt with her.[3]

The fact that La Fontaine was a woman, and neither a judge nor other judicial officer, closed off other potential avenues of criticism. Past decisions made in her court could not be used to criticise her research findings, and—unlike Australian Royal Commissioner James Wood—La Fontaine could not be credibly accused of being zealously or naively committed to upholding existing laws and legal procedures, or smeared with the allegation that she was protecting depraved colleagues, or even that she was herself a perpetrator.

Definitions—Broad and Narrow

La Fontaine’s critics did, however, feel they could effectively respond to her findings by questioning her decision not to speak directly to the British children who had allegedly been the victims of the ritual abuse—even though she had made this decision for the praiseworthy motive of sparing the children further trauma. Theorists such as Scott and Sinason could also point to La Fontaine’s acknowledgement that there were cases on record where children had been sexually abused during occult rituals.
Rituals, Beliefs and Religious Groups

La Fontaine never disputed the fact that there were substantiated cases where British children had been subjected to such abuse. Indeed, it was a matter of public record that the accused had been properly tried, and had either pleaded guilty or had been uncontroversially convicted (La Fontaine 1998: 85ff., 197n.8; see also Scott 2001:189-90; Tate 1991: 111ff.). Among the reasons that she did not regard these cases as instances of “ritual abuse” was the fact that the perpetrators were neither adherents of a religion which sanctioned such abuse, nor were the children abused during bona fide religious rituals. Perpetrators were, rather, using self-created pseudo-rituals to seduce the children and prevent disclosure, or to heighten their own sexual stimulation (La Fontaine 1998: 85-7).

La Fontaine’s critics countered by stating that she had used too narrow a definition of ritual abuse. Sinason believed that the abuse of children during occult rituals obviously constituted “ritual abuse”. Scott proposed that La Fontaine was wrong to differentiate between cases where abuse was perpetrated by small, unorganised and doctrinally unsophisticated groups and those where “true” ritual abuse was alleged.

Scott points out that what her informants—all of whom considered themselves to be survivors of ritual abuse—were actually reporting was abuse by groups which were very similar to those in the substantiated “occult ritual” cases (2001: 84). Scott describes sceptics’ differentiation of these groups from the “truly” ritually abusive ones—which were supposedly large and well organised, and which had sophisticated religious doctrines—as an artifact of poor research methodology and of sceptics’ tendency to focus on more unusual claims of survivors, rather than examining them as part of a horrendously abusive upbringing (Scott 2001: 38ff., 79).

Scott also argues that there are certain similarities between the ritually abusive groups described by her informants and the perpetrators of other well-documented types of organised child abuse—incestuous extended families, pedophile rings, producers of child pornography and procurers of child prostitutes (2001: 63-4). Careful examination of the data on these perpetrators shows, furthermore, that they did not just subject
children to incest, sexual abuse, prostitution or the production of pornography. Victims had--like the survivors of ritual abuse--suffered a variety of "interlinked" forms of abuse (Scott 2001: 64).

Scott argues that sceptics have similarly misinterpreted survivors' reports about the religious beliefs of perpetrators. Here she is attempting to answer sceptics' claims that survivors' accounts were quite unlike those of children abused by perpetrators using pseudo-rituals as a ruse or erotic embellishment. Scott is also contradicting sceptics who argue that survivors' ignorance of their groups' supposed doctrines suggests that they were constructing accounts of their ritually abusive pasts from folklore or from depictions of Satanism in popular culture.[4]

Scott points out that, although the majority of respondents stated that their perpetrators had worshipped "Satan and other deities", a small number of the respondents to her survey reported abuse by members of known groups--Christian, Muslim and Masonic--which do not condone the sexual abuse of children (Scott 2001: 86). She also echoes Raschke's argument that precisely differentiating between antinomian religious beliefs and other motivations for sadism and sexual abuse is a most problematic task (Raschke 1994: 148; Scott 2001: 84, 89).

Scott argues that if the accounts of informants who claim to have survived specifically Satanic groups are taken seriously, their threadbare religious knowledge actually suggests that their accounts are credible. Survivors report having suffered abuse at an age when their understanding was limited, or that they were affected by overwhelming fear and horror during abusive rituals. They were further confused by being exposed to teachings at home that were diametrically opposed to those they received outside the home (Scott 2001: 84ff.). Scott also suggests that survivors' reports are quite consistent with the findings of historical and sociological studies of unorthodox religious groups. Survivors could be accurately reporting their groups' inconsistent and nebulous religious beliefs, or the scanty religious knowledge made known to children or other low-ranking devotees in secretive, hierarchical groups (Scott 2001: 84-5).
At first sight, these criticisms of La Fontaine’s insistence on a narrow definition of ritual abuse appear reasonable. As I have discussed, there is considerable apparent variety in the accounts of victims and survivors and in theorists’ attempts to interpret the meaning of these accounts. A number of the published theorists who propose that victims and survivors have indeed been subjected to “ritual abuse” of some kind are also emphatic about the speculative status of their proposals and suggest that perpetrators could be deranged or motivated by purely sexual drives. The generic definitions of “ritual abuse” formulated in the late 1980s were essentially distillations of the various accounts of ritual abuse and interpretations of these accounts—regardless of how common or influential particular accounts and interpretations actually were. “Ritual abuse” was therefore defined as constituting activities which were severely abusive, repetitious, and ceremonial. According to these definitions, perpetrators were motivated by a desire to achieve a high degree of control over their victims and to accomplish a variety of “malevolent” ends (see Gould 1992: 207; Lanning 1992: 115-6; Tate 1991: 2-3).

From the mid-1990s, some theorists of ritual abuse reiterated the more general and speculative aspects of these early definitions of and theories about “ritual abuse”. As I have argued, these theorists were responding to effective contemporary critiques and to the assertive political advocacy which was being mounted at that time by “false memory” organisations. It was also a way of addressing the increasing popular scepticism about ritual abuse. Regardless of what survivors were actually reporting—or what they themselves made of survivors’ accounts—theorists could quote well known and quite general definitions of ritual abuse and suggest that sceptics’ arguments about abuse perpetrated by Satanists were irrelevant and mischievous.

The mid-1990s also saw certain commentators beginning to use the term in other, and even more general, ways. These commentators were describing activities that they believed “really happened”—indeed there was uncontroversial evidence for them. These were, however, activities which had not previously been considered to constitute “ritual abuse”. The biographer of Fred West, for example, described this infamous British murderer as a perpetrator of “ritual abuse” (Wansell interviewed by Adams Late Night Live ABC2RN 15 Nov. 1996). He acknowledged, however, that
there were absolutely no metaphysical motivations for the crimes committed by Fred West and his wife Rosemary. The murders, abductions and sexual assaults committed at the Gloucester "House of Horrors" were probably the result of the couple's interest in sexual sadomasochism, Rosemary West's mental retardation and the effects of Fred West's brain injury (Souness 1995: 28ff., 40ff., 117). Their crimes—which went undetected for many years—were "ritualised" only in the sense of being well-planned, and perpetrated in an orderly and painstaking manner.

Other crimes were described as "ritual abuse" at this time because they involved appalling activities and because perpetrators were engaged in certain activities also reported by survivors of ritual abuse. The Belgian Marc Dutroux and his accomplices, for example, kidnapped and sexually assaulted six young women and girls and were responsible for the deaths of four of them. They imprisoned some of their victims in cells reached by hidden tunnels, and they produced child pornography. Investigations following Dutroux's 1996 arrest suggested that he led a very small criminal gang—although he was reputed to have connections with larger Eastern European criminal organisations—and that his motivation was sexual and ruthlessly economic (see OCRT 1999).[5]

Certain other crimes, which are quite dissimilar to the activities reported by survivors of ritual abuse, were described in terms obviously borrowed from or influenced by ritual abuse discourse. The Australian feminist criminologist Kerrie Carrington, for example, has written extensively about the murder of 14-year-old Leigh Leigh at a beachside party in 1989. She has also campaigned vigorously to have the case reopened. In her 1998 account of the case, Carrington argues that the youth who had been charged with carnal knowledge of Leigh should actually have been charged with rape, and that the young man who had confessed to the murder was not the only perpetrator. She proposes that Leigh had been murdered to prevent her from reporting that she had been raped a second time, more violently and by a group of young men. Carrington describes these alleged crimes as "sexual ritual[s]" by which Australian youths—especially working class youths—celebrate the attainment of maturity (1998: xiv). At the same time, she argues, girls such as Leigh—rather like those supposedly raised in abusive Satanic cults—are taught to accept their inferior social and sexual status by
being subjected to "ritual[s] of degradation" (Carrington 1998: 88). The police, judiciary, local community and even the mass media are described as being somewhat cult-like: part of a closed and interconnected system dedicated to perpetuating a vicious and unjust social order through violence and the sexual subjugation of young women and girls.[6]

La Fontaine is, however, right to insists on a narrower definition of what constitutes "ritual abuse". Given the various and changing theories about ritual abuse, it is quite a "slippery" concept. Yet, equally obviously, theorists utilise this definitional slipperiness in an attempt to rebut the arguments of sceptics. The idea that ritual abuse is a very specific type of activity--characterised by particular forms of severe abuse and perpetrated by well-organised groups of committed Satanists--was not originally proposed by the promoters of a "discourse of disbelief", but by theorists who believed that such abuse "really happens". The sceptics accused by Scott of "consistent[ly] coupling . . . 'satanism' and ritual abuse . . . trivialising . . . claims and hystericizing claim-makers" in order to "dismiss ritual abuse reports" were actually attempting to answer the claims of the numerous and influential "Satanic conspiracy theorists" of the 1980s and early 1990s (Scott 2001: 38-9).[7] Those who first formulated definitions of ritual abuse in the 1980s, furthermore, proposed quite definite ideas about the connection between Satanism and this horrendously abusive activity, even though they also suggested that a variety of activities and motivations could constitute "ritual abuse".

Virtually all of the theorists whom I discussed in Chapters I and II who believe that ritual abuse "really happens" have based their analyses on definitions formulated by Pazder, Gould or Finkelhor--or on various combinations of the three. In the early 1980s, Pazder defined ritual abuse as activity motivated by a desire to turn the child-victim "against itself, family, society, and God" (see Lanning 1994:152). The severity of the abuse, and its symbolic and ceremonial elements were directed towards this end--rather than to the satisfaction of sexual drives. Although he did not specify that these enemies of God were Satanists, Pazder had formulated this definition after working with a patient he believed to be the survivor of a large, and specifically Satanic cult--and he was fearful that other children were "being prepared for the next Feast of the
Beast” (see Smith and Pazder 1981 [1980]: 295). Like Pazder, Catherine Gould—who proposed a definition of her own in 1989—stressed the characteristic severity of the abuse, its ceremonial quality and perpetrators’ intention of using the abuse to control victims (Gould 1992: 207). Gould is also somewhat vague about the exact relationship between Satanism and distinctively “ritual abuse”, although she reports that survivors mostly identify the members of “Satanic cults” as their tormentors. She also asserts that the object of ritual abuse is to indoctrinate children with the cults’ beliefs and to cultivate a specifically Satanic disposition within them (Gould 1992: 207).

Finkelhor’s 1988 definition was seemingly broader and more speculative. He proposed that perpetrators could be sexual deviants or deranged individuals, as well as the members of cults (Finkelhor et al. 1988: 61ff.). Yet Satan and his followers lurk behind Finkelhor’s reasonable and highly qualified deliberations. Finkelhor had formulated his broader definition of “ritualised” abuse in an attempt to classify a spate of allegations about the abuse of children in American preschools. These had arisen after Pazder and other activists began campaigning to expose the abusive activities of militant Satanists. When discussing “true cult-based” abuse, Finkelhor notes that the details of certain allegations, and the fact that they were “clustered in certain regions, have suggested to some investigators the possibility that large scale organizations or cults” may be involved and that “organizations identified with traditional ‘satanist’ religion have developed a specific policy of using day-care to abuse, terrorise, and corrupt children” (Finkelhor et al. 1988: 61).

Some theorists were both rigorous about and consistent in following Finkelhor’s definition of ritual abuse as the activity of deranged, cunning or decadent perpetrators as well as the devotees of unorthodox religions (e.g. Kinscherff and Barnum 1992). However, most theorists—and certainly the most influential ones—were convinced that ritual abuse was perpetrated by Satanic cults.

As I have discussed, even theorists who used Finkelhor’s definition, who seemed cautious in their approach to the issue and who mentioned a variety of possible perpetrators have argued that ritual abuse was an activity perpetrated by “Satanists” of some sort. These theorists mostly concerned themselves with the abuse
supposedly perpetrated by Satanic cults. Some also speculated about possible
c connec tions between the secret Satanic cults responsible for ritual abuse and groups
of Satanists who were open about their activities and well-known to the public (e.g.
Crewdson 1988: 122ff.; Tate 1991: 104, 120ff.). Theorists who from the mid-1990s
proposed that ritual abuse was perpetrated by devotees of non-Satanic religions,
suggested that Satanists were also involved (e.g. Halpern and Henry 1993).
According to some such theorists, unorthodox Christians, Jews, pagans, occultists or
others are somehow secretly "Satanic" (e.g. Noblit and Perskin 1995; see also
Harrington 1996). In any case, non-Satanic perpetrators were described as having
beliefs and practices which were virtually indistinguishable from those of Satanists.

Even the commentators who have more recently used the term "ritual abuse" to
describe notorious murders and other crimes hint--or in some cases explicitly state--
that "Satanic" perpetrators are involved. The crimes committed by Dutroux and his
gang were so appalling that it was widely rumoured that Dutroux was part of, or in
some way associated with, a Satanic group. Although such rumours were disproved
by the police investigation, the belief that only Satanists could have perpetrated such
crimes has persisted (e.g. Nile Hansard (NSW LC) 17 Sept. 1997: 70-1; Sinason
interviewed by Adams Late Night Live ABC2RN 26 June 1996; see also OCRT
1999). Similarly, a BBC television documentary series which traced historical and
philosophical ideas about Satan devoted much of one episode to an examination of
what the crimes of Fred and Rosemary West reveal about the nature of "evil".[8]

The basis of Scott's rejection of the definition of ritual abuse used by La Fontaine and
others is her argument about what is revealed by a "serious" consideration of the
claims of survivors. Scott believes that survivors' actual descriptions of perpetrator
groups are very different to sceptics' characterisations of such reports. Scott's
informants and survey respondents, she claims, are describing groups which are
virtually identical to those described by the victims of the substantiated cases
acknowledged by La Fontaine, and very similar to the ones described in reputable
studies of other forms of organised child abuse. Scott is able to make this claim, I
believe, because she is comparing relatively recent claims of British survivors to
sceptical analyses of survivors' reports which had been made some years earlier--and
in America as well as Britain.

Scott began distributing questionnaires—to survivors' organisations rather than to survivors themselves—in 1994. Informants were selected and interviews conducted some time after this (2001: 195). The accounts of Scott's informants are quite different from those which British survivors of ritual abuse gave in the late 1980s and very early 1990s to comparably sympathetic researchers. Andrew Boyd, for example, published detailed accounts by four women who—like Scott's informants—were self-reported British survivors of ritual abuse.[9] He attempted to record these accounts "verbatim... with the minimum of editing... to avoid imposing another interpretation on their words" (Boyd 1991: 319). All of Boyd's informants had "recovered" their memories of ritual abuse—they must have been among the earliest British survivors to have done so—and two of them claimed that they were still being ritually abused.[10]

Boyd's informants all reported that they had been abused within large and very well-organised Satanic cults. Rituals were conducted in stately homes, purpose-built secret rooms in remote farmhouses, and massive temporary temples within warehouses or underground tunnels (Boyd 1991: 322, 329, 337-8, 375). Individual cults had between thirty and fifty members, but they periodically joined together to create congregations with hundreds of devotees (Boyd 1991: 327, 352, 375). Cults were wealthy, had powerful and prestigious members of society amongst their number, and were connected with Satanists in other countries (Boyd 1991: 327, 343, 349, 353, 375). Boyd's informants also report that cults conducted complex rituals—at which liturgical dress was worn, and which involved scriptural readings and the elaborate use of ritual objects (1991: 323-5, 338, 351-2, 354ff.) All report that that cult rituals were conducted in Latin or some other liturgical language (Boyd 1991: 324, 338, 351, 375).

The reports of ritual abuse made by Australian survivors in the mid-1990s—and Australian theorists' interpretations of these reports—are also different to those made earlier. Unlike their British counterparts, however, Australian theorists did not begin to compare survivors' reports to substantiated cases of sexual abuse during Satanic or occult pseudo-rituals. Indeed, there were no such well known cases in this country. The tendency in the revised Australian discourse was, instead, to reconfigure
survivors' reports of "ritual abuse" as extreme episodes of abuse by other sorts of perpetrators. Of course, some Australian ritual abuse discourse remained exclusively concerned with the activities of large Satanic cults, or with the activities of Satanic cults as well as other perpetrator groups (see ASCA 2002; Powell n.d.[c.1999]). Some Australian activists accepted survivors' claims of "Satanic" ritual abuse, but chose to publicly describe it in other ways.

In 1992, the theme chosen for the inaugural conference of the Australian Association of Multiple Personality and Dissociation was "Perspective[s] on Satanic Ritual Abuse". Conference organisers explained that they were aware that "non-satanic" ritual abuse occurred, but they had decided to focus on Satanic abuse because of the size and urgency of the problem (Henry 1992).[11] Organisers mentioned that some survivors had criticised the conference program, but not because there was a disproportionate or unreasonable emphasis on Satanic ritual abuse (Henry 1992; Spensley 1992b).

Only one of the papers presented at this conference was based directly on accounts by survivors of ritual abuse.[12] According to nurse-therapist Gillian Johnson, all of her clients related "very similar" accounts of abuse by "a highly organized criminal organization operating throughout Australia. It is money-making and it is very secret. The basis of this organization is the worship of Satan" (Johnson 1992c). These survivors reported, furthermore, that perpetrating cults had elaborate and hierarchical structures, that they held strong and well-established religious beliefs, and that they provided religious education for child members (Johnson 1992a, 1992b, 1992c). Johnson told conference delegates that her clients' reports were similar to those of other Australian counsellors working with survivors of childhood sexual abuse--and to overseas accounts (Johnson 1992c).

The very next year, however, speakers at the Second Annual AAMPAD conference--including conference organisers--were distancing themselves from the idea that specifically "Satanic ritual abuse" was ubiquitous. In their explanation of the aims of the 1993 conference and in the paper they presented, Halpern and Henry stressed the similarities between the cults reported by survivors and "organized crime"--albeit criminals using "sophisticated conditioning paradigms". They told delegates that groups
hold a variety of religious beliefs, but that these are "an adjunct to rather than the primary focus" of such groups, or even a "red herring" used to control subordinant members or "to scare and create disbelief amongst law enforcement, welfare agencies and the public at large" (Halpern and Henry 1993; Henry and Halpern 1993a). By 1995--not long before Australian politicians and journalists began to panic about the alleged activities of large, well-organised and well-protected pedophile networks--delegates to the organisation's Fourth Annual Conference were concerned almost exclusively with the issue of "organised sadistic abuse" (see AATAD Conference Program, September 1995). AAMPAD had also been renamed the Australian Association of Trauma and Dissociation.

There are some strong suggestions in Halpern and Henry's 1993 paper as to why theorists--in this country as well as in Britain--were revising their ideas about the nature of ritual abuse. Halpern and Henry make some veiled references to criticisms which had recently been made to the idea of "Satanic ritual abuse", and they attack the increasing public scepticism about the issue. They state, however, that the primary reason for the AAMPAD's change of focus was that survivors had objected to the emphasis on "Satanic" abuse at the initial conference--although such objections had not been raised before or during the conference.

It is probable that the accounts of the survivors who made this complaint were themselves affected by sceptical theories of ritual abuse. By 1993, the overwhelming majority of those claiming to have suffered ritual abuse were "adult survivors". Their accounts typically emerge after a period of interaction with therapists or with other survivors--at group therapy sessions, for example. Survivors may also learn about ritual abuse from media reports or other such sources and subsequently approach a therapist (ASCA Survey 1997: #6; Boyd 1991: 319ff; Elson 1998: 3.2.9, 3.2.10, 3.2.17; 4.1.3; Johnson 1992a; Lucire 2000; Pendergrast 1995: 253, 265, 316ff., 341ff.; Ryder 1992: ii; Scott 2001: 195, 197; Wakefield and Underwager 1994: 80). There is thus considerable capacity in these processes for survivors to be directed away from recalling more problematic ritual abuse scenarios. Since the "memory recovery" process also involves adults reexamining their childhoods or even their entire lives, there is also a capacity for survivors to incorporate specific biographical details--such
as their membership of an evangelical congregation or actual incidents of sexual abuse--into their recall.

Ritually Abusive Activities

Another reason that La Fontaine gives for using a more limited definition of ritual abuse is that victims and survivors report that their perpetrators have engaged in very distinct types of activities (1994: 30). Scott struggles in her attempts to respond to this argument--and she certainly spends much more time and expends far more effort in showing that her informants' claims about the structure and beliefs of their groups are credible. She is aware that some of the claims made by her informants are incredible, and she fleetingly acknowledges that they may be victims of sexual abuse who have incorporated bizarre suggestions from therapists into their recall (Scott 2001: 84-5). Scott does little--beyond asserting the need to "seriously" consider her informants' claims as integrated totalities--to justify her essential acceptance of these claims (Scott 2001: 190ff.).

Scott's informants--like other survivors of ritual abuse--claim to have suffered some forms of abuse which are similar to those perpetrated in the substantiated British "occult ritual" cases, and by incestuous families, pedophiles and others. Scott cites newspaper reports of a 1993 case in London where a girl was raped by cloaked and hooded perpetrators in a churchyard during Halloween. In another such case, the mother in an incestuous Devonshire family had monitored the menstrual cycles of her daughters, and their father performed abortions on them (Scott 2001: 189-191). Scott places considerable emphasis on the fact that the perpetrators in these cases had been tried and convicted. This shows, she argues, that sceptics are wrong to dismiss the seeming improbable claims of survivors, and that her informants' claims of even worse abuse could well be true (Scott 2001: 190-1).

Scott fails, however, to address some glaring inconsistencies in her argument here. The abuse reported by her informants is really quite unlike that perpetrated in the
substantiated “occult ritual” and other cases. Scott’s informants claim that they have been subjected to abuse which is considerably more severe and on a greater scale than even the worst horrors alleged in these cases. They report horrendous sexual abuse, being chained and tortured, forced to ingest excreta, forced to sexually abuse infants, and being given ritual abortions. They also claim to have witnessed other cult victims who were kept in cages from birth, sacrificially murdered, cooked and cannibalised (Scott 2001 108, 120, 132ff., 139ff.).[13]

The more bizarre allegations made in the substantiated cases—which were most similar to claims of ritual abuse survivors—were also ones which were either rejected by juries, or which prosecutors did not put before the court. Scott explains this as the result of there being a “general pattern of abuse” in these sorts of cases, but only a “few instances” in which “specific corroboration or forensic evidence was available” (Scott 2001: 191). Yet the pattern of abuse reported by Scott’s informants is punctuated by such serious and multitudinous crimes that corroboration and forensic evidence would be readily available to investigators. Such crimes would also be unavoidably obvious to neighbours, police, teachers, welfare workers and even casual observers.

Scott also fails to heed La Fontaine’s warning that descriptions of “ritual” elements that appear in media coverage of substantiated cases should be treated with considerable caution. La Fontaine’s examination of official documents revealed that the “ritual” in some of the cases which the journalist Tate regarded as substantiated instances of ritual abuse consisted of perpetrators teaching victims self-composed demonic bedtime prayers, using a Ouija board, and announcing a visitation by the Virgin Mary (La Fontaine 1998: 85ff., 197 n.4).

The Australian theorists who have similarly sought to revise their views about ritual abuse have not had to face these particular problems. In Australia, revisionists never claimed that survivors were reporting abuse comparable to that perpetrated in substantiated cases. Instead, they argued that ritual abuse was perpetrated by secret religious groups, groups secretly operating within known religions, secret criminal organisations and large—and secret—pedophile networks whose activities were
protected by corrupt politicians and officials. Theories about the identities of all these perpetrators, the structure of their groups, and the exact motivations for their abusive activities were as vague and ambiguous as those relating to Satanic cults. Unlike their British counterparts, Australian “revisionists” continued to pursue secretly active “sinister figures” (Marwick 1982 [1970]: 11).

In summary, the disagreements about what precisely constitutes “ritual abuse” are a crucial part of the debate about the issue. Sceptics typically argue that survivors and their advocates have been reporting organised abuse of the most extreme kind perpetrated by Satanists or other self-consciously dissident groups. They therefore insist on a somewhat narrow definition when analysing claims of “ritual abuse”. These sceptics’ theoretical opponents, on the other hand, have increasingly argued that those reporting “ritual abuse” simply mean a particular form of severe—but not totally exceptional—abuse. They thus suggest that this abuse does—or, at least, could—“really happen”. These theorists make some persuasive points. There is good evidence that children have on occasion been abused in occult rituals of some kind, for example, and some “survivors of ritual abuse”—such as those who provided information to Scott in the later 1990s—have indeed reported being abused in very small groups with relatively little organisation and whose members held idiosyncratic, often incoherent religious beliefs.

Disagreements about how “ritual abuse” should be defined are—like other aspects of the ritual abuse debate—complex and very bitterly contested. The definition proposed by theorists who believe ritual abuse “really happens” has changed over time—in response to the arguments of sceptics and the absence of evidence to support the original claims of survivors and their advocates. In a fashion typical of the debate, these theorists not only accuse sceptics of proposing an inadequate definition but also of doing so willfully (e.g. Scott 2001: 38-9).

These theorists are, however, acting in bad faith when they mount this attack on sceptics and when they insist that a broad definition of ritual abuse be used. Sceptics developed a definition “coupling . . . ‘satanism’ and ritual abuse” as they were analysing—and attempting to answer—the claims made by survivors and their
advocates (Scott 2001: 38-9). The influential theorists of the 1980s and early 1990s—whose broad, circumspect definitions of ritual abuse are much cited as a retort to sceptics—themselves strongly implied that “ritual abuse” was an activity perpetrated by well-organised Satanic cults. A careful examination of the more recent accounts of “ritual abuse” shows, furthermore, that survivors are still reporting activities that are in fact distinctly different from those in substantiated cases of abuse.

This bad faith arises in large part from the strong empathy that theorists feel for those who claim to have suffered ritual abuse, as well as the dedication of theorists to their particular political, philosophical and religious beliefs. They are committed to believing the accounts of victims and survivors, and so to finding ways of accepting their often incredible claims. Theorists are also convinced that severe abuse of women and children is ubiquitous and that certain groups are able to engage in appalling behaviour with virtual impunity. They thus regard the points raised by sceptics—the lack of evidence which substantiates claims of Satanic activity, for example, or the changing nature of ritual abuse allegations—as pedantry or the arguments of apologists for evil and oppression. Some theorists also have philosophical objections to established methods of conceiving—let alone investigating—the abuse of women and children (e.g. Scott 2001: 5; see also Herman 1981: 9ff.).

It is no doubt clear from my discussion so far that I do not accept the arguments of theorists who believe that ritual abuse “really happens”. I feel, however, that I should openly declare it—as well as my scepticism about the claims made by “survivors” of ritual abuse. I have, after all, been critical of certain theorists whose proposals are ambiguous, either because they do not adequately examine the implications of their theories or even because they will not openly admit the beliefs behind their deliberations. I also believe—unlike Scott—that a consideration of whether such appalling, fundamentally transgressive activities “really happen” is an essential part of any anthropological or “sociological approach” to allegations of ritual abuse (Scott 2001: 1, 4ff.; see also La Fontaine 1998:14ff.; Needham 1978: 27). In Part 2 of the thesis, therefore, I will critically examine allegations of ritual abuse in Australia and the numerous attempts that have been made to verify them (for a list of Australian cases involving allegations of ritual abuse which were examined by the police, subjected to
judicial or other official examination or which were brought to public attention, see Appendix 1). I will also examine the problematic ways in which these allegations typically arise, and the controversial theories used to explain why children "accommodate" perpetrators of ritual abuse and why adult survivors are unable to spontaneously recall it.

Notes

[1] Relevant American reports include those by FBI Special Agent Lanning, the San Diego Grand Jury and the National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect. In Britain, there were reports by Professor La Fontaine and Lord Clyde. In Australia, the NSW Wood Royal Commission examined ritual abuse as part of its "Paedophile Inquiry".

[2] La Fontaine's report has been approvingly cited by sceptical Australasian scholars such as Hill (1998). In the years following 1994, a range of Australian media used La Fontaine's report in their critical examinations of both "child" and "adult survivor" ritual abuse (e.g. Guilliat SMH 1 Feb. 1995; Kennedy She April 1995; Late Night Live ABC2RN 20 Sept. 1994).

[3] In her 2001 book, for example, Scott treats La Fontaine with considerable respect and contrasts her work with that of other sceptics. Scott applauds La Fontaine's use of detailed empirical data, for example, and at times attempts to show that the anthropologist's findings actually support her own position rather than the conclusions that La Fontaine draws from them. She approvingly cites certain of La Fontaine's findings, such as her rejection of the idea that victims are describing a single, huge Satanic cult and her distinction between ritual abuse and "abuse that is ritualized either for the purposes of frightening the children or for the pleasure of the adults". Scott states that La Fontaine here shows a sophistication that is rare in the "disbelief literature" (2001: 46, 60 n.6 84).
[4] La Fontaine had examined accounts by older children and young adults who claimed that they had belonged to abusive Satanic groups. She suggested that their rather hazy understanding of their groups' beliefs suggested that these youthful survivors' accounts had been prompted by credulous counsellors or that they were using their general knowledge of Satanism and the occult—or knowledge gleaned from popular culture—to construct accounts which would please sympathetic counsellors and police officers (La Fontaine 1998:139ff.).

[5] Although the Dutroux case is often cited to prove that claims of ritual abuse are credible, it actually suggests the opposite. Dutroux and his gang engaged in the kidnapping and sexual assault of girls and young women on a scale substantially smaller than that reported by survivors of ritual abuse. Two of the murder victims were not deliberately killed, but died of neglect when Dutroux was in gaol for other offences. Certain claims made about Dutroux--his involvement with a large and well-connected pedophile ring and his alliance with Eastern European crime syndicates—are now considered very dubious ("Dutroux victim ... " Guardian 24 Feb. 2003; OCRT 1999; Wikipedia 2003 ). The Dutroux case shows that—as Lanning has pointed out—it is improbable that perpetrators in the contemporary West could secretly and with impunity commit the crimes reported by victims and survivors of ritual abuse (1992:130-32).

In Australia, cases such as the disappearance of Samantha Knight and the much earlier abduction of the Beaumont children have also been described as probable instances of "ritual abuse" or have been compared to the claims of ritual abuse survivors.

[6] When certain sceptics' arguments are taken into consideration, defining "ritual abuse" becomes even more complex. Sceptical theorists believe that ritual abuse "does not really happen", and so use the term to denote the false belief that Satanists or others are committing outrages. Another class of sceptics, however, suggest that a very particular form of ritual abuse "really happens". These commentators—who are often themselves occultists—propose definitions of their own as a way of attacking Christians' claims about the dangers which "Satanists"
pose to children. They also object to what they see as Christians attempting to use child protection issues to further their religious aims. These sceptics point out that the most common form of child abuse motivated by religious beliefs—and which most commonly takes place at ritual sites—is that perpetrated by immoral Christian clergy, or abusive Christian parents and educators (e.g. Hypocrites 2000; Tokus 1999; Villanueva 2002). A 1994 study commissioned by the US government’s National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect actually supports the claims of these writers about the prevalence of child abuse by Christians (Characteristics and Sources of Allegations of Ritual Child Abuse, 1994).

[7] Ironically, the revised and extended ideas about what constitutes “ritual abuse” are very similar to the arguments of the sceptical FBI Agent Kenneth Lanning (1992). He pointed out that “ritualized abuse of children” most certainly occurred—perpetrated by disturbed offenders, for example—as did variously organised “child sex rings”. Lanning also suggested that Christians and other devotees believed that certain abusive activities were sanctioned by their religions. He went on to argue, however, that allegations of ritual abuse—as it was described in the contemporary literature and at the conferences and seminars that he himself attended—were not credible.


[9] In Scott’s study, 36 questionnaires were returned, and Scott interviewed 12 survivors—all British women. Her three male informants were recruited separately and from the US (Scott 2001: 195).

[10] According to La Fontaine, a number of British Christians had identified themselves as former members of abusive Satanic cults before this time, but they were not claiming to have recovered memories of their pasts (1998: 38, 137).

[11] Organisers felt that it was essential to address “the extensive and highly sophisticated international criminal organization behind” Satanic ritual abuse, and because it “IS [sic] happening right now in kindergartens, churches and homes”
(Henry 1992).

[12] Other papers at the conference dealt with such issues as the symptoms of ritual abuse, ways of treating victims and survivors, and methods for detecting and prosecuting perpetrators.

[13] Interestingly, some of Scott's informants also relate the elaborate—incredibly elaborate—steps which perpetrators take to either avoid detection or to ensure that victims' disclosures will not be believed. Mulhern (1991) regards such explanations as characteristic of ritual abuse accounts. One of Scott's informants describes the way in which her parents had recorded instances of abuse by taking seemingly innocuous photographs immediately prior to the commencement of the abuse. They also labelled photographs showing her reaction to abuse with innocent captions. Measures such as these allowed a normative "presentation of children and family to the outside world" (Scott 2001: 109).