Satanic cults: ritual crime allegations and the false memory syndrome

Citations

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Date
1993

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Metadata
Show full item record

Document Type
Masters Research thesis

Citations

Access Status
Open Access

URI
http://hdl.handle.net/11343/39502

Linked Resource URL
http://cat.lib.unimelb.edu.au/record=b1878936

Description
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Abstract
My interest in criminology was inspired by Dennis Challinger who tolerated a student taking ten years to finish the Diploma in Criminology, and Stan Johnson who encouraged broad-mindedness to which I was unaccustomed. Stan challenged my attitudes, beliefs and conclusions. My interest in cults was inspired by Anne Hamilton-Byrne whose “children” especially Sarah, taught me a great deal. They introduced me to their personal experience of growing up in strange isolation from the world. I received assistance and constructive criticism from the police Task Force investigating the Hamilton-Byrne “Family” especially Detective Sergeant DeMan. I began this task searching to understand “The Family”, its origins and its meaning. The path towards an understanding of cults took me in unexpected directions. I learned about the Satanic allegations and began accumulating material. Initially, some therapists with an interest in this area saw me as a potential ally, but as I began to question there assumptions I was rejected as a disbeliever, on the basis that “anyone who is not with us, must be against us”.

The "Satanic Ritual Abuse" scare (and the larger child sex abuse panic) of the 1980's and early 1990's. by Diane Vera. Copyright © 2006 by Diane Vera.

What was discredited was child abuse accusations based on "recovered memories" or on the testimonies of children who had been asked lots and lots of leading questions. Yet some of the accused still languish in prison due to lack of money for appeals. Others were never imprisoned but had to deal with the heartbreak of being shunned by their own adult children thanks to "recovered memories." The SRA scare was also part of another larger panic: about "Satanism," "occult crime," and the occult in general. In the 1980s, allegations of ritual abuse at a preschool in Southern California led to the longest, most expensive trial in U.S. history. The McMartin Preschool case — which resulted in zero convictions — became emblematic of a much more widespread phenomenon known as Satanic Panic. "In Satanic occultism, that which is good is bad.  Thus begins The Law Enforcement Guide to Satanic Cults, available for viewing on YouTube under the tag "Occult Hilarity." It's impossible to know if this 1994 oddity was ever used as an actual police training tool (hopefully not), but it's presented matter-of-factly. So these allegations of ritual abuse in day-care centers came from the combination of legitimate awareness of a previously hidden problem, and completely unfounded hysteria.