

# Witchcraft, Satanic Abuse and the Myth of Pure Evil

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In 1984 Christina Lerner, the distinguished historian of European witchcraft, wrote a short piece about twentieth-century “satanists”. She argued that the magical rites performed by such people were not likely to provoke a modern-day witch-hunt, since the fear of harmful sorcery – or *maleficium* – was largely absent in western societies. Even those who sought to harm others by casting spells could inspire only ridicule or indifference:

If ten covens were to . . . inform me that my name was being pronounced backwards while they danced widdershins around a casket containing a milk tooth from my younger son, a hair from the underbelly of my cat, and sealing wax from my desk, I would not be unduly dismayed; nor would I be in any way remarkable for not being dismayed. The social backing essential to the effective performance of *maleficium* simply is not there.<sup>1</sup>

Lerner’s assertion that western societies are immune from the fear of evil magic was probably correct. But events since 1984 suggest that the persecution of witches is not, after all, a thing of the past. In the conclusion to the most recent general history of witchcraft, Robin Briggs warns that something very like a witch-hunt is taking place in our own time. The targets are not evil magicians, but the alleged members of a devil-worshipping cult, and their supposed crimes are disconcertingly similar to the most extreme acts attributed to witches in sixteenth and seventeenth-century Europe: secret devil worship, orgies, child-murder and cannibalism. Briggs is impassioned in his condemnation of these “misguided and dangerous” claims:

The descriptions of [satanic] rituals are like identikit pictures, slightly varied combinations of precisely the same elements found in the charges against heretics, Jews, witches and other scapegoats of the past. To anyone who recognises their antecedents, it is incredible that this tawdry collection of recycled fantasies can be mistaken for anything but inventions . . . Real people in our own world have their children taken away, and are sometimes convicted, on this flimsy basis. How long will it be, one wonders, before the renewed enthusiasm for the death penalty in the United States leads to someone being executed for, in all but name, being a witch?<sup>2</sup>

In the paper that follows, I wish to explore these apparent parallels between pre- industrial witchcraft and contemporary allegations of satanic abuse.<sup>3</sup> This enquiry is motivated by two principal concerns. First, I wish to shed light on the thinking behind witch persecutions in past societies by relating them to our own experience of satanic abuse allegations. As the anthropologist Philip Stevens has argued, the appearance of these claims in the modern age presents an “unprecedented opportunity” to understand the mentality of those who believe in satanic conspiracies, and the means by which such ideas achieve widespread acceptance.<sup>4</sup> Before they emerged, the only examples of such beliefs came from the distant past and from African tribal cultures. In both cases, there was a temptation among western thinkers to regard them as “primitive” or “irrational”.

It is much harder to sustain this view when the advocates of a “satanic underworld” are western professionals, and their concerns are given space in serious newspapers and academic books. Thus the modern experience of “satanic abuse” abolishes the distance between ourselves and the demonologists of a previous age, and forces us to approach their concerns with new sympathies.

The second aim of this piece is more speculative. I wish to raise questions about the possible origins of witchcraft beliefs. Why have different groups of people, in different times and places, come to accept essentially the same ideas about clandestine, child-murdering cults? Why has Briggs’ “tawdry collection of recycled fantasies” proved so enduring? Before addressing these themes, however, it is necessary to provide a brief survey of the history of European witchcraft, and to set out the connections between this phenomenon and “satanic abuse”.

## I

The history of witchcraft has attracted a huge and expanding literature.<sup>5</sup> Any generalisations based on this work are rightly open to criticism, since they obscure the differences between individual historians, and tend to impose an artificial unity on an extremely diverse body of evidence. Nonetheless, some broad observations can be made. The most severe period of witch persecution occurred in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, with the most intense panics taking place in Germany and central Europe between around 1560 and 1660. With marked regional variations, trials continued throughout much of Europe until the last decades of the seventeenth century. Thereafter, prosecutions declined in number and intensity, with the last major panic occurring in Scotland in 1697. The total number of executions is impossible to determine, but the best recent estimate places the figure at around 50,000. Roughly three quarters of this total were women, and most came from the lower ranks of European society.

The idea of witchcraft involved various elements, and it is important for this paper to distinguish between them. The first and most common component was the fear of harmful magic, or *maleficium*. All those who acknowledged the existence of witches accepted their ability to perform wicked spells, most often involving disease, the destruction of crops or disturbances in the weather. Allegations of this kind made up the bulk of the accusations levelled by ordinary people against suspected witches. The emphasis in these allegations was overwhelmingly on the harm caused by the witch, rather than the origins of their power. In contrast, university-trained lawyers and churchmen tended to emphasise the satanic nature of the witch’s magic, and insisted that their abilities derived from a pact with the devil. There is some evidence that folk traditions linked *maleficium* with the devil, particularly in English witchcraft and cases involving demonic possession; but even in these instances, the victims of witchcraft were far more concerned with the effects of *maleficium* than the supposed pact between Satan and the witch. Another important distinction was between solitary and collective witchcraft. The allegations of ordinary villagers tended to focus on individuals rather than groups.<sup>6</sup> The idea that witchcraft was a collective enterprise involving nocturnal gatherings – or witches’ Sabbaths – for devil worship, ritual acts of desecration and infanticide was largely confined to the higher ranks of European society. This idea played a central role

in the works of learned demonologists like Henri Boguet, Jean Bodin and King James VI of Scotland.

Thanks largely to the pioneering work of Norman Cohn, we know that the idea of a satanic cult pre-dated the European witch-hunts by several centuries. It can be found in allegations against heretics and Jews from the early Middle Ages, and emerged in charges against the dissident followers of St Francis of Assisi - the *Fratricelli* – in the mid- fifteenth century.<sup>7</sup> Significantly, these early allegations were not linked to the practice of sorcery. Thus the belief in a satanic cult could exist quite independently of the fear of harmful magic. Even at the height of the persecutions, only a minority of the European population ever linked the two ideas together; and as late as the seventeenth century, allegations of devil-worship and child-murder were occasionally made against groups not associated with magic at all, such as Jews and native Americans.<sup>8</sup> As several historians have noted, the willingness of educated men to combine fears of *maleficium* with the idea of a secret satanic organisation proved disastrous in early modern Europe, since it transformed simple accusations of bewitchment into hunts for the alleged confederates of witchcraft suspects. When the accused were persuaded to confess to attending the Sabbath – often under torture or psychological pressure – large-scale panics could develop, sometimes claiming dozens of victims.<sup>9</sup>

It is this idea of the Sabbath, shorn of the magical associations it acquired temporarily in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, that closely resembles allegations of satanic crime in our own age. Indeed, this is probably the only aspect of Renaissance witchcraft that can flourish in western societies, since fears of *maleficium* have largely receded.<sup>10</sup> It is now time to consider the parallels between the Sabbath and contemporary ideas of satanic abuse.

## II

The present concern with a “satanic underworld” can be dated to the publication in 1980 of *Michelle Remembers*, a “survivor’s testimony” of life in an abusive cult in Montreal. This chronicles the experiences of Michelle Smith, who claims as an infant to have witnessed acts of paedophilia and infanticide in the context of satanic worship, involving members of her own family and an extensive network of diabolists in the local community.<sup>11</sup> In the decade after this work appeared, a series of reports concerning satanic abuse were made to police and social workers in north America and the United Kingdom. Many of these, like *Michelle Remembers* itself, came from adult survivors of mistreatment that had apparently occurred in childhood. Other allegations, including most of those in Britain, were made by children taken into care on suspicion of abuse. Some of these disclosures resulted in the removal of children from other families, and the prosecution of adults for alleged participation in satanic rites. The British experience of satanic abuse culminated in 1990, when the children of two families were removed from their parents on the Orkney Islands in Scotland. Amid a storm of media interest, the children were returned when a judge ruled that there was no case to answer. This episode prompted a government enquiry into eighty-four cases of alleged child abuse in a ritual context, which concluded that there was no evidence of organised satanism in the U.K.<sup>12</sup> There is, nonetheless, a continuing debate about the

existence of the phenomenon, which has inspired passionate contributions from therapists, police officers and academics.<sup>13</sup>

I should make it clear at this point that I have no desire to question the existence of child abuse. Indeed, I will argue later that the reality of abuse – and the extreme reluctance of many people to accept its prevalence among otherwise “normal” families – is one of the main reasons for the acceptance of satanic abuse allegations. Moreover, the fact that very few “survivor testimonies” can be verified, and some have been disproved, does not mean that the crime has *never* taken place. Again, I will argue later that the very possibility of the crime makes it difficult for most people – including myself – to reject such claims outright. It is undeniable, however, that the great majority of accusations of satanic crimes against children that have been properly investigated have been found to be false. Even if satanic cults do exist somewhere in the world, we still have to account for the fact that virtually all of the statements made about them – including the seminal testimony of Michelle Smith – have been found wanting when submitted to empirical investigation.<sup>14</sup> Alongside the La Fontaine report, perhaps the most powerful critique of ritual abuse allegations is provided by Kenneth Lanning, an F.B.I. agent with experience of investigating satanic crime. Lanning notes that “many of those not involved in law enforcement do not understand that, while it is possible to get rid of a body, it is much more difficult to get rid of the physical evidence that a murder took place, especially a human sacrifice involving sex, blood and mutilation”. In the course of more than a hundred investigations into such alleged crimes, Lanning has never found evidence of a satanic murder, though this is one of the acts most frequently described in survivor accounts.<sup>15</sup>

If we accept, then, that many allegations of satanic abuse are unfounded, how do these myths relate to historical accounts of the witches’ Sabbath? First and most simply, the content of “survivor testimonies” are strikingly similar to the fantasies described in Renaissance demonologies. *Michelle Remembers*, for example, includes details that echo the earliest accounts of satanic cults: her recollection of witnessing blood sacrifices to demons, and the ritual violation of crucifixes, recall allegations made against Italian heretics in 1437, who “sacrifice to demons . . . [and] sometimes inflict upon the representations and other signs of the cross various shameful things by execrable means”.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, all satanic abuse allegations describe ritual acts of devil-worship, which take place in secret and usually at night. They normally claim that family members are involved in the cult, and children are initiated into its activities by their parents or other relatives. Most accounts also describe the ritual murder of babies or young infants, whose flesh is consumed as a centrepiece of the satanic rite.<sup>17</sup> All of these claims featured prominently in Renaissance depictions of the Sabbath. Another central feature of survivor accounts is the sexual abuse of children. This is found less often in demonological literature, though research from Germany shows that children were occasionally believed to participate in satanic gatherings.<sup>18</sup> It was very common, however, for learned writers on witchcraft to stress the transgressive sexuality that characterised the witches’ assemblies. Like many other features of the Sabbath, the idea of satanic orgies was present in the earliest accusations against mediaeval heretics, and remained a staple of demonological works throughout the period of witch persecutions. At least one historian has argued that this element was the cornerstone of early modern

representations of the Sabbath, and that witches were viewed primarily as “sexual servants” of the devil.<sup>19</sup>

There are also some procedural similarities between the investigation of witches’ Sabbaths and satanic abuse. Both crimes involve members of the same family or community, who conspire to keep their activities hidden. As Henri Boguet remarked in 1602, witches “always commit their crimes and abominations in the night and in secret, so it is only their kindred who are able to give evidence against them”. In such circumstances, it is necessary to attach enormous importance to the confessions or testimonies of supposed members of the group, which often provide the only evidence that secret meetings have taken place. Boguet attached particular value to the information provided by children against their relatives. He noted that “numberless witches have been discovered and brought to their just punishment by means of a child, and in this the glory of God is made manifest”.<sup>20</sup> In those cases where such testimonies were believed to be suspect, or were examined carefully for corroborating evidence, prosecutions could rapidly collapse. This was the case in the Basque region of Spain in 1611, when the inquisitor Alfonso Salazar investigated a series of witchcraft confessions, complete with detailed depictions of orgies, child murder and cannibalism. He concluded that the testimonies were unreliable, and those made by children were particularly doubtful; and his intervention put an end to witch persecutions in the region.<sup>21</sup> In the case of both Sabbath-related witchcraft and satanic abuse, it appears that the success of prosecutions depends largely on the willingness of investigators to accept the reliability of witnesses allegedly present at secret gatherings. In the late seventeenth century, witch trials ended in many countries when courts began to demand external evidence that Sabbaths had taken place. In the twentieth-century British cases of ritual abuse, and those investigated by Kenneth Lanning in America, it was the lack of corroborating evidence that prevented prosecutions from succeeding.

Another point of comparison between witchcraft and ritual abuse concerns the process of interrogation and confession. Most confessions to explicitly satanic witchcraft were obtained through physical or psychological coercion, but an important minority were not. The initial confessions in the case investigated by Salazar, for instance, appear to have been completely spontaneous. Similar voluntary confessions from seventeenth-century Germany and England have been studied in depth. This research suggests that the subjects’ initial admissions were elaborated in the context of lengthy interrogations, and the final narratives emerged from a dynamic interaction between the questioner and his subject. As a result, confessions incorporated elements of personal fantasy within the framework of demonological theories. The feminist analysis of these texts by Lyndal Roper and Louise Jackson suggests that alleged witches - who were normally poor women – used the idea of satanic pacts to fashion their own identities and make sense of traumatic events in their lives.<sup>22</sup> This process was ultimately self destructive, as the only models of identification available to them were created by men, and the result of their narratives was execution for witchcraft. In a similar vein, Malcolm Gaskill has argued that Margaret Moore, a Cambridgeshire woman who confessed to witchcraft in 1645, co-operated with her accusers to create a satanic fantasy that helped her to overcome feelings of social powerlessness.<sup>23</sup> The parallels with “occult survivors” are suggestive. They too appear to have developed fantasies in the context of supportive questioning, and used these to express their own personal needs. Most adult and child

“survivors” also come from deprived or marginal backgrounds, and it is possible that their testimonies provide them with a sense of authority in their otherwise powerless lives.<sup>24</sup> Instead of assuring their own destruction, however, the narratives of alleged survivors effectively condemn others as witches.

It would be tempting at this point to suggest that another feature common to the Sabbath and satanic abuse was that both ideas were pursued by over-zealous individuals, whose passion to root out evil blinded them to the obvious shortcomings of their own arguments. But I think this would be a serious mistake. Any account of pre-industrial witchcraft – or satanic abuse allegations for that matter – must consider the cultural context in which these beliefs emerged. When this is taken into account, the claims of writers like Henri Boguet can be viewed as entirely reasonable. Indeed, I want to argue in the section that follows that sixteenth-century demonologists actually had more reason to believe in the Sabbath than most contemporary proponents of satanic abuse. This proposition forces us to re-evaluate our own assumptions about witch trials, and also highlights the extraordinary nature of modern-day allegations of satanic crime.

### III

The arguments supporting the existence of satanic witchcraft were developed within the conventions of Renaissance scholarship. These conventions tended to favour the accumulation of authoritative sources over empirical investigation. Within this widely accepted framework, demonologists could construct extremely persuasive accounts of the existence of a witch cult. The New Testament provided copious evidence of the power of Satan and his determination to pervert God’s people; and the scriptures, the Church Fathers and numerous classical texts offered examples of the reality of harmful magic.<sup>25</sup> Since the authenticity of these sources was never in question, the sheer volume of received authorities made it difficult for skeptics to challenge the idea of a satanic conspiracy. As numerous historians have shown, this intellectual climate began to change in the middle years of the seventeenth century, when empirical methods became fashionable in the higher ranks of European society.<sup>26</sup> With this in mind, it is instructive to compare the arguments of early demonologies like Heinrich Kramer and James Sprenger’s *Malleus Maleficarum* (1486) with late publications such as Richard Baxter’s *The Certainty of the World of Spirits* (1692). While the Dominican inquisitors were able to present a convincing case based largely on Biblical and classical precedents, Baxter was forced to rely on empirical “evidence” of witchcraft such as eye-witness accounts of *maleficium*.<sup>27</sup> The result was a much less persuasive work, as Baxter’s sources were open to question in a way that those in the *Malleus* were not. Since the scholarly methods adopted by Kramer and Sprenger were dominant in the period of witch persecutions, it would be wrong to suggest that demonologists had no evidence for the witches’ Sabbath. Rather, the kind of evidence they used was different to that accepted today.

The methods of Renaissance scholarship were complemented by wider cultural assumptions that made the existence of a witch cult seem highly plausible. Perhaps the most important of these was the tendency to perceive the world in terms of absolute opposites, and to affirm social values by imagining their “inverted” counterparts. This principle of “turning things upside down” was expressed in much Renaissance theatre and literature, and underpinned popular festivals like the “feast of fools”. The same

idea characterised depictions of the Sabbath, which was viewed as an inverted version of a Christian service. Consider, for example, the *Daemonologie* of King James VI of Scotland in 1597:

The devil, as God's ape, counterfeits in his servants this service and form of adoration that God prescribed and made his servants to practise. For as the servants of God publicly . . . convene for the serving of him, so [the devil] makes them in great numbers to convene . . . for his service. As none convenes to the adoration and worshipping of God, except they be marked with his seal - the sacrament of baptism - so none serves Satan, and convenes in the adoring of him, that are not marked with [his] mark . . . As the minister sent by God teacheth plainly at the time of their public conventions how to serve Him in spirit and truth, so that unclean spirit, in his own person, teacheth his disciples at the time of their convening how to work all kinds of mischief.<sup>28</sup>

In a brilliant study of the principle of inversion in Renaissance culture, Stuart Clark has argued that such representations of a demonic "anti-society" were essential to the conceptualisation of Christian values. It made perfect sense for those attempting to build a God-fearing society in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries to believe that a satanic anti-church might also exist. Indeed, Clark concludes that the conventions of Renaissance thought make it "difficult to explain, not how men accepted the rationality of the arguments, but how occasionally skeptics doubted it".<sup>29</sup>

While these cultural norms encouraged educated Europeans to accept the existence of a witch cult, other factors worked against the emergence of skepticism. To twenty-first-century eyes, many features of the witches' Sabbath appear to be obviously false: it was normally argued, for example, that the devil's servants arrived at their nightly gatherings by flight. Such details figured prominently in witchcraft confessions, and therefore appear to cast doubt on their reliability. This problem was not apparent to contemporary observers, however, since they accepted the reality of the devil and his ability to create "unnatural" phenomena. Even the most trenchant critics of demonology conceded that the feats attributed to witches were theoretically possible. Thus Johann Weyer admitted that the witches' flight to the Sabbath was within the devil's power, though he denied its reality in particular instances.<sup>30</sup> Only the most extreme skeptics, like the English writer Reginald Scot, denied the existence of satanic magic completely; and Scot's work appears to have been disowned by more moderate thinkers.<sup>31</sup>

One final point should be made about the willingness of Renaissance intellectuals to accept the reality of a witch cult. The development of print from the late fifteenth century allowed information about the satanic threat to spread quickly and widely among the literate minority of the European population. It also helped to consolidate the myth of a satanic cult, since accounts of trials were reproduced in demonologies that were subsequently used by those responsible for conducting further prosecutions. The result was a largely self-referential and self-perpetuating body of literature, which encouraged exactly the kind of confessions that could be fed back into the genre as supplementary evidence. On occasions, scholarly writers referred explicitly to the consistency of confessions as proof of a satanic cult. In 1595, for example, Nicholas Rémy observed that witches often described how they smeared an ointment on their

bodies to enable them to fly to the Sabbath. He noted that “they are even particular in describing its colour, which provides further evidence that the matter is no dream, but visible and perceptible to the eyes”.<sup>32</sup> With the benefit of hindsight, it is tempting to mock the apparent naiveté of such claims; but we should remember that the potentially distorting effects of print culture were impossible to anticipate, much as the impact of the internet cannot be adequately predicted today.

When all these factors are considered, it is easy to see why skeptics like Johann Weyer and Reginald Scot were generally ignored by their contemporaries. The rational basis for witch beliefs was secure. We can, perhaps, understand the sentiments of Henri Boguet in 1602: “It is astonishing that there should still be found today people who do not believe that there are witches”.<sup>33</sup> What is truly shocking is that educated men and women in our own time can espouse virtually the same beliefs, despite the apparent disappearance of the cultural foundations that once supported them. How is this possible? I will now suggest some tentative answers to this question.

#### IV

There are, I think, four main reasons for the re-emergence of the Sabbath in the late twentieth century. Each one represents the survival - in a modified and weakened form - of a cultural tendency present in the age of the witch-hunts; and in each case its effect has been limited by other social conventions that make skepticism much easier. First of all, those who believe in satanic abuse have been reluctant to submit “survivor testimonies” to empirical scrutiny. This attitude is quite understandable in the case of therapists working with alleged survivors, since they need to win the confidence of their clients. Tragically however, some counsellors have taken at face value disclosures that subsequent police investigations found to be untrue. In other cases, their desire to put their subjects at ease has led them to overlook claims that cast doubt on their testimonies. The psychoanalyst Lawrence Pazder, for example, was apparently unfazed by the supernatural details in the testimony of Michelle Smith - including the physical manifestation of a demon - and accepted her other disclosures as unproblematic.<sup>34</sup> In an attempt to defend their practices, some therapists have argued that corroborative evidence is unnecessary to establish the validity of their subjects’ accounts. Others, such as George Greaves, have acknowledged that the failure to secure convictions for satanic offences lies in the different standards of proof adopted by psychotherapists and the criminal courts.<sup>35</sup> Broadly speaking, it is much harder to accept the existence of satanic cults when one demands physical proof of their activities.

The uncritical acceptance of “survivor testimonies” is related to the second main reason for the spread of satanic abuse allegations. As in the sixteenth century, writers describing the existence of devil-worshipping cults have produced a *genre* of self-referential literature. It is only by stepping outside this body of theory, and testing the claims of alleged survivors against external evidence, that the idea of a satanic conspiracy can be effectively challenged. Thus the alleged experiences of Lauren Stanford were cited by other “occult survivors” in the late 1980s, and aired on British and American television to support claims of a “satanic underground”. It was only when Stanford’s background was explored in detail that her contribution was exposed as a fantasy.<sup>36</sup> As Jean La Fontaine noted in the British government report into ritual



abuse in 1993, the existence of a specialist literature on the subject probably encouraged therapists and social workers to identify new cases of the phenomenon, while the availability of this material sometimes “contaminated” the disclosures of alleged victims.<sup>37</sup> In this way, new “evidence” could be created to feed back into *genre*, and this could in turn encourage further allegations.

While these factors help to explain the acceptance of satanic abuse claims, they cannot account for their origins. My third reason attempts to do this. The psychologist Roy Baumeister has argued that most people in western societies subscribe to what he calls “the myth of pure evil”. In both news reports and fiction, this myth presents those responsible for terrible crimes as sadistic, chaotic “others”, who exist outside the boundaries of normal society. The existence of “pure evil” provides an explanation for acts that we find abhorrent, while erecting an uncrossable barrier between ourselves and their perpetrators.<sup>38</sup> This concept recalls the Renaissance idea of “inversion”, and has the similar effect of affirming social norms by creating an imaginary “anti-society”. By applying Baumeister’s model, we can view the idea of satanic child abuse as an extreme instance of the myth of pure evil. If we assume that its function is to differentiate “normal” parents from child-abusers, this begins to explain why the allegations first emerged in the early 1980s. Prior to this period, much of the literature on the sexual abuse of children focused on the threat posed by predatory strangers; it was only in the late 1970s that abuse within the home began to receive widespread publicity.<sup>39</sup> From around this time, then, the need arose to distinguish between ordinary parents and abusers; and the myth of “wicked families”, explicitly devoted to the worship of evil, offered one arrestingly simple way to do so. This point was highlighted in the conclusion of the La Fontaine report:

People are reluctant to accept that parents, even those classed as social failures, will harm their own children, and even invite others to do so, but involvement with the devil explains it. The notion that unknown, powerful leaders control the cult revives an old myth of dangerous strangers. Demonising the marginal poor and linking them to unknown satanists turns intractable cases of abuse into manifestations of evil.<sup>40</sup>

My final explanation for the return of the Sabbath is also the most simple. It is incredibly difficult to deal objectively with secret crimes that allegedly involve terrible acts of brutality. However skeptical we might be in the face of apparently outlandish claims, we find it hard to dismiss them completely. This problem is summed up eloquently by the American counsellor, Patrick Casement:

What if some of these accounts *are* true? Not to believe someone who has actually been a victim of such abuse leaves that person still alone in the torment of their own experiences, and leaves the perpetrators free to continue these practices undeterred. At the very least, I believe we must keep an open mind when we begin to hear of such things: sometimes we may be hearing the truth - as far as these victims are able to risk telling that truth to anyone.<sup>41</sup>

It is Casement’s opinion that the horrific nature of allegations of satanic abuse means that most people are reluctant to believe them. But I suspect that the opposite is true: the awful content of these disclosures puts a high price on skepticism, since to disbelieve the alleged victim is to allow the atrocities to go on. In common with most witchcraft historians, I find it easy to dismiss the Renaissance idea of the Sabbath as a lurid and dangerous fantasy; but I feel far less certain when faced with identical, unsubstantiated allegations from my own contemporaries. Since I have less reason to believe in witchcraft than any sixteenth-century person, I find this an extraordinary and humbling thought.

## NOTES

1. Christina Lerner, *Witchcraft and Religion* (Basil Blackwell 1984), 83.
2. Robin Briggs, *Witches and Neighbours* (London 1996), 410-11.
3. This paper is brief, and can offer only a preliminary sketch of the implications of satanic abuse for witchcraft research. I hope that others interested in this field will investigate these implications more fully.
4. Philip Stevens, "The Demonology of Satanism", in James Richardson, Joel Best and David Bromley, eds, *The Satanism Scare* (Lexington Books, New York, 1991), 35-6.
5. For two excellent general studies, see Briggs, *Witches and Neighbours*, and James Sharpe, *Instruments of Darkness: Witchcraft in England 1550-1750* (Hamish Hamilton, London 1996). Valuable collections of essays can be found in Bengt Ankarloo and Gustav Henningsen, eds., *Early Modern European Witchcraft: Centres and Peripheries* (Clarendon Press, Oxford 1990), and Jonathan Barry, Marianne Hester and Gareth Roberts, eds, *Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge University Press 1996). For a survey of important work in the field over the last twenty years, see Darren Oldridge, ed., *The Witchcraft Reader* (Routledge 2001).
6. Wolfgang Behringer has identified a significant exception to this pattern in Germany, where allegations of collective witchcraft often originated "from below". These allegations were, however, based on fears of *maleficium*, and did not focus on group devil-worship. Wolfgang Behringer, "Weather, Hunger and Fear: Origins of the European Witch Hunts in Climate, Society and Mentality", *German History*, 13 (1995), 1-27.
7. Norman Cohn, *Europe's Inner Demons* (Pimlico 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 1993), 61-73.
8. For example, the English divine William Gouge asserted in 1626 that American tribesmen "excelled in unnatural cruelty, sacrificing their children and offering them to devils". William Gouge, *Of Domesticall Duties* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 1626), 282.
9. The work of Christina Lerner, for instance, places particular emphasis on the role of learned fears of satanism in witch trials: see her *Enemies of God* (Chatto and Windus 1981), and *Witchcraft and Religion*. For a concise statement of the argument that fears of a witch-cult turned village-level accusations of *maleficium* into major panics, see H. C. E. Midelfort, "Heartland of the Witchcraze", *History Today*, Feb 1981.
10. Belief in magic continues, however, in the fascinating subculture associated with the "New Age". See T. H. Luhrmann, *Persuasions to the Witches' Craft* (Blackwell 1989).
11. Michelle Smith and Lawrence Pazder, *Michelle Remembers* (Congdon and Lattes, New York 1980).
12. Jean La Fontaine, *The Extent and Nature of Organised Ritual Abuse* (H.M.S.O. 1994). La Fontaine found that elements of "ritual" were involved in a small number of cases, but dismissed the idea of organised satanism.
13. For a collection of essays supporting the existence of satanic abuse, see Valerie Sinason, ed., *Treating Survivors of Satanist Abuse* (Routledge 1994). A critique of satanic abuse allegations, and the related subject of recovered memories of abuse, can be found in Hollinda Wakefield and Ralph Underwager, *Return of the Furies* (Open Court, Illinois 1994).
14. For a devastating critique of the claims of Michelle Smith, see Philip Jenkins and Daniel Maier-Katkin, "Occult Survivors: The Making of a Myth", in Richardson, Best and Bromley, eds, *The Satanism Scare*, 127-142.

15. Kenneth Lanning, "A Law-Enforcement Perspective on Allegations of Ritual Abuse", in David Sakheim and Susan Devine, eds., *Out of Darkness: Exploring Satanism and Ritual Abuse* (Lexington Books, New York 1992), 130.
16. These allegations were made in a letter from Pope Eugenius IV to "inquisitors of heretical depravity". The text is reproduced in Alan Kors and Edward Peters, eds, *Witchcraft in Europe: A Documentary History* (University of Pennsylvania Press 1972), 101.
17. The prevalence of allegations of child killing is noted in the La Fontaine report, 22. For a detailed survivors' account from America making similar allegations, see Linda and David Stone, "Ritual Abuse: The Experiences of Five Families", in Sakheim and Devine, *Out of Darkness*, 175-83.
18. Robert Walinski-Kiehl, "The Devil's Children: Child Witch-Trials in Early Modern Germany", *Continuity and Change*, (1996), 11 (2).
19. Joseph Klaitis, *Servants of Satan* (Bloomington 1985).
20. Henri Boguet, *An Examen of Witches*, trans. Montague Summers (John Rodker 1929), 7-8, 162.
21. This episode is reconstructed in great detail in Gustav Henningsen, *The Witches' Advocate: Basque Witchcraft and the Spanish Inquisition* (Reno 1980).
22. Lyndal Roper, *Oedipus and the Devil* (Routledge 1994), ch.10; Louise Jackson, "Women, Wives and Mothers: Witchcraft Persecutions and Women's Confessions in Seventeenth-Century England", in *Women's History Review*, 4 (1995), 63-83
23. For the impoverished backgrounds of most English families involved in satanic abuse accusations, see La Fontaine, *Extent and Nature of Organised Ritual Abuse*, 15.
24. Malcolm Gaskill, "Witchcraft and Power in Early Modern England", in Jenny Kermode and Garthine Walker, eds., *Women, Crime and the Courts in Early Modern England* (UCL Press, London 1994), 125-45.
25. For a brilliant exposition of this point, see Sydney Anglo, "Evident Authority and Authoritative Evidence", in Sydney Anglo, ed., *The Damned Art* (Routledge and Kegan Paul 1976), 1-31.
26. For the intellectual changes in late seventeenth-century Europe, and their impact on witch beliefs, see Brian Easlea *Witch Hunting, Magic and the New Philosophy* (1980). A good general survey is provided in Brian Levack, *The Witch-Hunt in Early Modern Europe* (Longman 1987), 217-24.
27. Heinrich Kramer and James Sprenger, *Malleus Maleficarum*, trans. Montague Summers (London 1928); Richard Baxter, *The Certainty of the World of Spirits* (1692).
28. James VI of Scotland, *Daemonologie* (Edinburgh 1597), 35-6.
29. Stuart Clark, "Inversion, Misrule and the Meaning of Witchcraft", *Past and Present*, 87 (1980), 127.
30. For a discussion of Weyer's thought, see H. C. E. Midelfort, "Johann Weyer and the Transformation of the Insanity Defence", in R. Po-Chia Hsia, ed., *The German People and the Reformation* (Cornell University Press 1988), 234-61.
31. Scot's arguments were rebuffed in the preface to James VI's *Daemonologie*, but their impact outside the British Isles appears to have been limited. See Levack, *Witch-Hunt*, 56-7, 218. For an extract from Scot's work, see Barbara Rosen, ed., *Witchcraft in England, 1558-1618* (University of Massachusetts 1991), 161-2.
32. Kors and Peters, *Witchcraft*, 245.
33. Boguet, *Examen*, preface, xxxix.
34. Jenkins and Maier-Katkin, "Occult Survivors", in Richardson, Best and Bromley, *The Satanism Scare*, 134.
35. George Greaves, "Alternative Hypotheses Regarding Claims of Satanic Cult Activity", in Sakheim and Devine, *Out of Darkness*, ch. 3.
36. Lauren Stanford, *Satan's Underworld: The Extraordinary Story of One Woman's Escape* (Harvest House, Oregon 1988); Jenkins and Maier-Katkin, "Occult Survivors", in Richardson, Best and Bromley, *The Satanism Scare*, 132-3.

37. La Fontaine, *Extent and Nature of Organised Ritual Abuse*, 20, 27, 31.
38. Roy F. Baumeister, *Evil: Inside Human Violence and Cruelty* (Freeman 1996).
39. See Lanning, "Law-Enforcement Perspective", Sakheim and Devine, *Out of Darkness*, 119-21.
40. La Fontaine, *Extent and Nature of Organised Ritual Abuse*, 31.
41. Patrick Casement, "The Wish Not to Know", in Sinason, *Treating Survivors*, 23.