

When Good People Do Nothing

by James Randall Noblitt and Pamela Perskin

Almost sixty years ago, a very similar situation evolved in western Europe, and the resulting catastrophe was responsible for the annihilation of six million innocent men, women, and children. These six million people were beaten, starved, tortured and murdered in an area considered to be the heart of European civilization and in the midst of a people proud of their civilized heritage. They died not so much because a few evil people were able to exert control over their countrymen, but because good people failed to speak out or take appropriate action.

History will have to record that the greatest tragedy of this period of social transition was not the vitriolic words and violent actions of the "bad" people—but the appalling silence and indifference of the "good" people. Our generation will have to repent, not only for the words and actions of the children of darkness, but also for the fears and apathy of the children of light.

Ritual abuse is an ugly label for acts frequently reported but rarely well defined. Reports of ritual abuse permeate the media and the courts, but what do they mean? Are these claims indicative of a conspiracy of evil-worshippers preying upon the most vulnerable members of society? Or are they the consequence of a virtual witch-hunt instigated by an over-reactive mental health industry?

Despite sensational media reports depicting a contentious psychotherapeutic community rallying suggestible psychiatric patients to blame their dysfunctional, unsatisfying lives on newly recovered memories of horrendous childhood abuse, there is no sufficient evidence to support such a theory. In all the cases that we have investigated where a therapist was accused of implanting "false memories" we found that the allegations were disputed and the false memory theory was prompted by dubious or questionable motives (e.g., the prospect of financial gain via civil suit). In some cases, we found that the allegations of implanting false memories were patently false, e.g., the client had the memories before ever consulting a therapist. The theory that thousands of therapists are deliberately promoting false memories in their patients is ludicrous and unsupported by data.

It comes as no surprise to note that some people's recollections can be affected by deliberate procedures used in a laboratory for that purpose. However, no study has ever demonstrated that therapists are deliberately or intentionally working to alter the memories of their clients as the researchers have done in the few analog studies available on this subject. Rather, child abuse is an accepted, though regrettable, fact of life.

In fact, even though child abuse is recognized as the primary cause of traumatic death among children, experts in the fields of medicine, law enforcement, and social services believe that child abuse is vastly under reported and that fatalities among children are commonly misidentified as being the consequence of natural causes rather than abuse related trauma (U.S. Advisory Board on Child Abuse and Neglect, 1995).

Some of this abuse is described as "ritual" or "ritualistic" abuse. In a study reported by Finkelhor, Williams, Burns, and Kalinowski, the authors found that 13% of a national sample of 270 cases of child abuse in a day care setting involved allegations of ritual abuse. We have defined ritual abuse as "deliberate abuse carried out in a circumscribed manner in order to cause dissociation or to manipulate already-created dissociated states of mind" (Noblitt & Perskin, 1995, p. 168).

But does ritual abuse actually occur? It would be beyond the scope of this article to cite all the evidence we have found that ritual abuse does exist. However, we have summarized our findings in *Cult and Ritual Abuse: Its History, Anthropology, and Recent Discovery in Contemporary America* (Noblitt & Perskin, 1995). Furthermore, an excellent scholarly review of the research on ritual abuse has been published in the *American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children Advisor* (Faller, 1994).

Suffice it to say, we find there to be a very strong case in the scientific and scholarly literature which shows that ritual abuse is an unfortunate feature of modern life in Western as well as preindustrial cultures. We also find that cases of ritual abuse are often mishandled and victims continue to suffer in the legal system and the labyrinth of social service agencies which are poorly equipped and rarely trained in this area. In spite of the evidence, skepticism and apathy are still prevalent obstacles to the safety and well-being of ritual abuse survivors and their advocates.

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We are writing as secular individuals, and are puzzled by the reluctance of the Christian fellowship to come to the aid of individuals alleging ritual abuse. Too often, we hear of cases where survivors feel abandoned and alienated from the clergy and the religious community. Instead of embracing survivors, supporting them emotionally and spiritually, and acting as their advocates, the Christian community and its leadership have often turned their backs on victims, even to the extent of supporting individuals alleged to be perpetrators of such abuse. In the case of the Nazi Holocaust, six million Jews as well as many other innocent victims were killed while the world looked on apathetically. Few important church leaders challenged this atrocity. Are we witnessing a similar shameful silence?

We are hopeful that the Christian community will not only become the case of current and ongoing ritual abuse? active in confronting ritual abuse, but that they will take a leadership role in eliminating such practices. Consider how much could be accomplished if the clergy would adopt an advocacy role in promoting public awareness and in assisting in the desperately needed fund raising which would support research, treatment and legal assistance for those victimized by ritual abuse.

References

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