

The Devil Goes to Day Care: McMartin and the Making of a Moral Panic

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A new type of sex crime was discovered during the 1980s—the abuse of very young children in rituals performed by robed and hooded satanists who also happened to be their day care providers. Satanic ritual abuse, as this new sex crime quickly came to be termed, appeared to be epidemic during the 1980s, and the McMartin Preschool was its first *locus delicti*.

The cultural response to the McMartin case had all of the characteristics of what sociologists call a moral panic:¹ it was widespread, volatile, hostile, and overreactive (Goode and Ben-Yehuda 156-59). From Texas to Tennessee, New Jersey to North Carolina, Maine to Michigan, hundreds of local day care centers were investigated for satanic ritual abuse and scores of day care providers, as many males as females, were arrested and put on trial. From the witness stand, their accusers, the three- and four-year-old children once entrusted to their care, accused them of sexual abuse during satanic ceremonies that included such ghastly practices as blood-drinking, cannibalism, and human sacrifices. Despite the absence of evidence corroborating the children's accounts, many of the day care providers were convicted, and to the cheers and jeers of their deeply divided communities, were sentenced to what often were draconian prison terms.

In the accusatorial post-McMartin climate, day care providers, surrogate parents to this country's youngest children, took measures to protect themselves from their false allegations (Bordin 80-81). They installed video cameras to record all of their activities, opened up private spaces to public view by taking down doors to bathrooms and closets and, fearing the act now could be misinterpreted, stopped hugging and holding their young charges. State legislatures also took measures. They hurriedly passed laws that mandated the fingerprinting and criminal records check of all current and prospective day care providers; state licensing agencies tightened regulations and by legislative fiat were given more teeth to enforce them. Yet insurance liability premiums soared, forcing many small day care centers out of

business and many more, unlicensed and uninsured, to go underground.

Heralded at the start of the decade as playgrounds for children, day care centers were feared at its end as playthings of the devil.

The aim of this present article is to analyze the moral panic about satanic day care centers that spread across this country during the 1980s. First, it examines the cultural context of the moral panic by focusing on the social forces and strains peculiar to that decade that not only gave rise to it, but that made what at first blush must appear to be the most innocuous of social institutions, the local day care center, the scene of the most horrific of sex crimes. Second, it interprets the McMartin Preschool case as the trigger that set off the moral panic, and then analyzes the roles that interest, grassroots, and professional groups played in spreading it across the country. Third, the article explains why, after nine long and bitter years, the moral panic finally ended and what "moral," if any, can be derived from it.

Cultural Context of the Moral Panic

An insightful examination of the social change most critical to the rise of the satanic day care center moral panic during the 1980s is provided by David Bromley and Bruce Busching who examine the changing relation between what they call the *convenantal sphere* and the *contractual sphere* of social life at the beginning of that decade. The *convenantal sphere* is that of the family. Within it, relations are built upon mutual commitment, bonding, and emotional expressiveness, and are articulated through the logic of moral involvement and unity. The *contractual sphere*, in contrast, is that of the market economy where relations are based upon mutual agreement, negotiation, and exchange, and are articulated through the logic of vested interest and shrewd involvement.

By historic necessity, the *convenantal* and *contractual* spheres have been always, and uneasily, interdependent. As the *locus* of socialization, the family

always has prepared children for successful participation in the market economy which, in turn, always has provided the legitimate opportunities for gaining the resources needed to sustain the family. In the early 1980s, however, the tension between these two spheres of social life intensified and that most innocent of social institutions, the local day care center, ended up being situated right on the faultline.

This heightened tension between family and market economy was largely the result of cultural forces and strains peculiar to that decade. Significant among them were the ideological force of the women's movement that made participation in the market economy an attractive and increasingly accessible alternative to unpaid housework, and the economic strains that made it a necessity.² In 1980, in fact, 45% of women with young children had entered the labor market, and because the forces and strains that compelled their doing so had the same impact on their extended families, they had to turn away from relatives as a source of child care, and to public and private day care centers (Hofferth and Phillips 560-63).

And they did so with more than a little ambivalence. Although day care centers packaged themselves as attractive alternatives to family care, with their use of educational toys to stimulate the mind, playground equipment to develop the body, excursions to cultivate aesthetic taste and, only when needed, just the right kind of discipline administered by trained professionals to shape socially correct behavior, most working parents considered this alternative a change for the worse from their parents' generation (Hutchison 73-74).

Economic strains of a different type only reinforced that view. For one thing, as the baby-boomer generation went out to look for day care for its own children, it was confronted with a harsh reality: there simply were not enough reputable, licensed, affordable day care centers to meet its needs. Deep cuts in federal funding that over half of the public day centers had received just a few years before now resulted in high costs to working parents, overcrowded facilities, low wages for child care providers, and high staff turnover (Hofferth and Phillips 563-67). Dramatizing this dilemma was a blitz of day care horror stories in popular parents' magazines. Their images of toddlers in soiled diapers forlornly waiting for attention from overworked day care providers in overcrowded centers did little to assuage the anxiety or the guilt of working parents.

Trapped as they were between necessity and risk, working parents reluctantly began transforming the

covenantal duty of caring for their young children into contractual arrangements with day care providers. And many feared that in doing so they were relinquishing some control over the socialization of their children. When Kenneth Kenniston wrote of this dilemma a decade before, he was presenting a musical metaphor; now, in the early 1980s, he was describing a discordant reality:

The parent today is usually a coordinator without voice or authority, a maestro trying to conduct an orchestra of players who have never met and who play from a multitude of different scores, each in notations that the conductor cannot read. If parents are frustrated, it is no wonder: for although they have the responsibility for their children's lives, they hardly ever have the voice, the authority, or the power to make others listen to them. (18)

So, here is the essence of the dilemma experienced by working parents in the early 1980s: on the one hand, the time and energy they were investing in the covenantal sphere of the family was jeopardizing their economic success in the contractual sphere of the market economy; on the other hand, the time and energy they were investing in the contractual sphere of the market economy was diminishing their control over the socialization of their children in the covenantal sphere of the family. And situated on the faultline of this dilemma, where these two once separate spheres of social life were now uncomfortably overlapping, was the local day care center.

The tension produced by this imbrication of covenantal and contractual spheres made the local day care center a target of conflict. But a trigger was needed to set off a moral panic, some kind of spark that in the words of Jeffrey Adler "would link ethereal sentiment to focused activity" (262). That spark was ignited in 1983 at the McMartin Preschool.

Trigger of the Moral Panic

Hardly the dark satanic mill of cultural imagination, the McMartin Preschool was a rambling building on the main boulevard of the southern California town of Manhattan Beach where, if the Chamber of Commerce brochure were to be believed, residents enjoy "small town living, friendly neighbors, and community spirit." Established in the mid-1960s by Virginia McMartin, the family-owned and run day care center had a certain cachet among young, upwardly mobile parents and it filled early each year. So when Judy Johnson³ went to enroll her two-year-old son in the spring of 1983, there were no openings. She dropped him off anyway. The day care providers

arrived early one morning to find him in the yard of the center, and taking pity on the weebegone little boy and his recently separated mother, took him in.

Over the next several months, and without incident, the boy occasionally attended the center. But one day in August of that year, he came home with a reddened anus. His mother, stressed, emotionally unstable, and drinking heavily, immediately suspected that he had been sexually abused (Hubler A1). She questioned him relentlessly, but to no avail, before she decided on a different tact. Having noticed how her son often pretended to be a doctor like the one who was tending his terminally ill older brother who was living at home, she asked if Raymond Buckey, the only male staff member and grandson of the day care center's founder, had ever given him an injection. The boy said no, but when the question was asked again and again, he finally told his mother that what Buckey really had done was take his temperature. Judy Johnson concluded that the "thermometer" her son described was actually Buckey's penis, and that he had been sexually abused after all (Nathan and Snedeker 67-70).

The medical exam performed the following day, however, was inconclusive for sexual abuse and the boy disclosed nothing at all to the detective his mother had contacted. But the matter was far from over. Several days later, Judy Johnson called the detective again and informed him that in the privacy of their own home her son was talking about sexual acts of the most perverse kind perpetrated not only on himself, but on other children enrolled at the day care center as well. So convincing was she that the detective demanded she get a second medical opinion. This physician, inexperienced in performing sexual exams and finding nothing of significance anyway in the one she did perform, nonetheless erred on the side of caution and gave the diagnosis that finally confirmed what Judy Johnson was insisting had happened: her son had been sexually abused.

Detectives now took a new interest in what the boy allegedly was telling his mother. They telephoned parents with children enrolled in McMartin and asked them to question their young sons and daughters about whether they, too, had been sexually abused. None answered in the affirmative. But in the wake of those telephone contacts that same "small town living, friendly neighbors, and community spirit" that made Manhattan Beach a desirable place to live also assured that rumors would gather and roll. So when the detectives pressed on and later sent the following letter to two hundred families whose children were current or recent enrollees at McMartin, the rumors were reified:

Please question your child to see if he or she has been a witness to any crime or if he or she had been a victim. Our investigation indicates that possible criminal acts include: oral sex, fondling of genitals, buttocks or chest area, and sodomy, possibly under the pretense of "taking the child's temperature." (Cited in Nathan and Snedeker 72)

The letter also named Buckey as the prime suspect. Over the next several weeks as terrified and outraged parents questioned their children, met with each other to exchange facts and rumors, and questioned their children again, more and more of them answered in the affirmative. The assistant prosecutor appointed to oversee what too many already believed would turn out to be the case of the century, called a community meeting and encouraged parents to take their sons and daughters to the Children's International Institute (CII), a non-profit diagnostic and treatment facility, for evaluation. Over the next year, the CII social workers, already caught up in the fad and folly about satanic sex cults that was still rolling over southern California in the wake of the Bakersfield case,⁴ interviewed over 400 McMartin children and determined that 369 of them had been victims of a new and ghastly sex crime—satanic ritual abuse.

In February 1984, the same month that the prosecuting attorney quietly asked the grand jury to issue indictments against Raymond Buckey, as well as his grandmother, mother, sister, and three other McMartin staff members, a KABC reporter broke the story, plunging the local and the national news into what media critic David Shaw describes as "a feeding frenzy" (A1). Bent on proving satanic ritual abuse, the CII social workers kept relentlessly grilling the children who, despite their tender years, soon figured out that "round, unvarnish'd tales" were not what their inquisitors wanted to hear. And so they told other tales—tales about the ritualistic ingestion of feces, urine, blood, semen, and human flesh; the disinterment and mutilation of corpses; the sacrifices of infants; and the orgies with their day care providers, costumed as devils and witches, in the classrooms, in tunnels under the center, and in car washes, airplanes, mansions, cemeteries, hotels, ranches, gourmet food stores, local gyms, churches, and hot air balloons. And they named not only the seven McMartin day care providers as their satanic abusers, but their soccer coaches, babysitters, next-door neighbors, and even their own parents, as well as local businesspeople, the mayor's wife, who was said to drive around town with the corpses of sacrificed infants in the back of her stationwagon, news reporters covering the story, television and film stars, and members of the Anaheim Angels baseball team (Nathan and Snedeker 78-91).

In 1986, the same year that *Los Angeles Times* reporter Lois Timnick revealed that 80% of the surveyed residents of Los Angeles County were convinced that all seven of the McMartin day care providers were guilty of satanic ritual abuse, the criminal charges against five of them were dismissed for lack of evidence. Now only Raymond Buckey and his mother, Peggy McMartin Buckey, were left to stand trial.

That trial began the following year and lasted twenty-eight months, the longest and, at a cost of \$13 million, the most expensive criminal trial in the history of the country (Shaw A1). The jury listened to 124 witnesses, fourteen of them children, examined 974 major exhibits, and reviewed 64,000 pages of transcripts before returning its verdict after nine weeks of deliberation (DeBenedictis 29). It acquitted Peggy McMartin Buckey of all of the fifty-two charges against her, and acquitted Raymond Buckey of thirty-nine of the charges, but deadlocked on the remaining thirteen. His second trial on eight of those dead-locked charges ended with a hung jury after two weeks of deliberation. A month later, despite the vehement protests of the parents and many others across the country, the prosecutor dismissed all of the charges against him.

And what of Judy Johnson? The mother of the little boy who never shared his dark secrets with anyone, and who never could even pick out Raymond Buckey's picture from a photo lineup, was institutionalized for a while with the diagnosis of paranoid schizophrenia after she told detectives that her ex-husband also had sodomized her son, and that an intruder had broken into her house and sodomized the family dog. By the time of her death in 1986 from massive liver failure brought on by alcoholism, there had been at least fifty "little McMartin's" across the country; by the fifth anniversary of her death, there were fifty more (Sauer D1).

Spread of the Moral Panic

The "moral" of the moral panic is now accounted for: the disturbing overlap between the covenantal and contractual spheres of social life had made local day care centers a site of conflict; the McMartin case set the moral boundaries of that conflict by casting day care providers into the role of evil satanists, their young charges into innocent victims, and the parents, social workers, prosecutors, and police into heroes. The "panic" that ensued, however, must be accounted for by yet another set of factors.

First, a clarification of the word "panic." While it tends to conjure up images of frenzied folks franti-

cally fighting more devils that hell can hold, its sociological meaning is different. Panic refers to what Jeffrey Victor describes as a "collective stress reaction in response to a belief in a story about immediately threatening circumstances" (59). For the McMartin Preschool case to set off that collective reaction, that panic, it first had to be narrated, and here the role of interest, grassroots, and professional groups in telling, re-telling, and spreading the McMartin satanic day care story is important to consider.

The major interest group was the news media. After the KABC reporter broke the McMartin story early in 1984 during the local "sweeps week," other press, radio, and television reporters scrambled to surpass his exclusive. "The story had a life of its own," recalled one of them. "We didn't even think at the time about what we were doing. It was, 'We gotta get something new on McMartin; look how big this thing is getting'" (Shaw A1).

Splattered with words like "grotesque," "bizarre," "chilling," "horrific," and "nightmarish," the early local news stories set the hysterical tone that would be mimicked by the national media and that would resound for nearly a decade throughout the country. And that tone hyperbolized the moral dimensions of the case through the process of what sociologists refer to as role amplification: in each re-telling of the story, the day care providers became more evil; the young children more innocent; the parents, social workers, police, and prosecutors more heroic.

The mass media certainly did nothing to temper that hysterical tone. *People* magazine titled its first feature on the case, "California's Nightmare Nursery"; *Time* magazine's headline was a single, sinister word: "Brutalized!" And on the primetime news magazine, *20/20*, the McMartin Preschool was dubbed "the sexual house of horrors" and the reporter, appearing deeply affected by his own reportage, somberly predicted that the children would never psychologically recover from what they were saying they had experienced.

McMartin had become a household word, synonymous with evil, by the end of 1984. But a household word does not a moral panic make. What yet was needed was that sense of imminent threat that Jeffrey Victor described, that shuddering fear that the mischief the devil had found in a day care center in southern California also was going on in centers in Oregon, Florida, Massachusetts, Iowa, and all places in between. What dissolved the boundaries on the map of imagination was the 1984 Congressional testimony of the CII social worker who had diagnosed satanic ritual abuse for the largest number of the McMartin

children. In a widely quoted statement, she told Congress that the McMartin Preschool actually was an “organized operation of child predators” that “serves as a ruse for a larger, unthinkable network of crimes against children” that has “greater financial, legal, and community resources than any of the agencies trying to uncover it” (Brozan A21). A touch of conspiracy was added to the story.

The plot thickened with its introduction. Not only did the conspiracy theory neatly explain why local and federal investigators were never able to find any evidence of satanic ritual abuse in the McMartin case, but it primed the larger culture’s compact and conspiratorial imagination. Now the threat of satanic day care centers was real and exigent, and no community could consider itself immune from it.

That became the message of the grassroots group that also played a significant role in the telling, retelling, and spreading of the McMartin story. “Believe the Children” was formed in 1984 by a coterie of McMartin parents whose activism grew in sophistication from wearing buttons and carrying hand-painted signs to establishing a clearinghouse on satanic ritual abuse, replete with a speakers’ bureau, a support network for parents, police, and prosecutors involved in other satanic day care cases, and a referral list of sympathetic professionals (“Believe the Children” n.d.).

Those sympathetic professionals also played a notable role in spreading the moral panic about satanic day care centers across the country. During the bitter years of McMartin, they not only received a great deal of local, national, and international news attention, but also appeared on television talk shows and primetime news magazines. They took to the lecture circuit, gave testimony in government-sponsored hearings, addressed conferences of child abuse professionals, consulted with other professionals as other satanic day care cases began cropping up across the country, and testified as experts in the criminal trials of day care providers. And in each interview, each presentation, each consultation, the story of McMartin was told and re-told in communities that were being primed for the moral panic by the telling.⁵

Originating in cultural anxieties about the socialization and protection of young children, triggered by the McMartin Preschool case, and spread across the country by interest, grassroots, and professional groups, the satanic day care center moral panic swept across the country. It lasted just a year short of a decade. Its longevity, actually quite remarkable by historical standards, is explained not by any corroborative evidence of satanic ritual abuse in day care, there never was any of that, but by its continuing resonance with the prevailing cultural conflict.

Make a Moral of the Devil

The moral panic ended in 1992 when the last of the alleged satanic day care providers, a wife and her husband, were led off in handcuffs to begin a nearly half-century-long prison sentence.⁶ Any temptation to celebrate its end as proof that the forces of good finally and forever triumphed over the forces of evil is best resisted. Instead, its dissolution is better explained in sociological terms: the cultural conflict that spawned and sustained it finally was somewhat ameliorated by it.

But only somewhat. The cultural conflict in question, of course, is that disconcerting overlap between the convenantal and contractual spheres of social life, and that conflict was not at all altered by the satanic day care center moral panic, if any measure of alteration can be found in the rate of public and private day care usage during the years of its duration. The number of working mothers increased both steadily and rapidly between 1983 when the McMartin case started and 1992 when the moral panic finally subsided, and so did the number of young children who were enrolled in public and private day care centers (Hofferth and Phillips 561). Even with its dramatization, even demonization, of the tension between these two spheres, the moral panic could not thwart the steady encroachment of the contractual sphere into the convenantal. But it could, and did, reduce the irritation of its intrusion.

It did so by provoking fear-based changes that had the interesting effect of smoothing the sharp edges of the contractual sphere’s penetration into the convenantal sphere by replicating in the former some of the ever so familiar and much valued characteristics of the latter. More to the point, these changes made day care centers more like families, and thus more subject to parental control.

Several examples are particularly noteworthy. In reaction to the moral panic, many states hurriedly passed legislation that required the screening of all prospective day care providers not only for criminal and psychiatric histories, but for “good moral character.”

The intent behind the legislation was almost transparent: it assured that day care providers would have the kind of right-mindedness and trustworthiness of the very best of the working parents who were contracting with them for the care of their children. The care of their children still may be a matter of contract, but it also was being carried out by people with character.

On a more local level, many day care centers reacted to the moral panic by adopting open-door

policies. Parents were invited to drop in any time to chat with the staff and administration, observe their children, or even spend time with them. This policy had the effect of replicating within the local day care center the kind of easy informality of interaction that characterized the families from which their young charges had come. Accustomed to that style, and practiced in it, parents could monitor, even supervise to some extent, the care of their children by the agents whom they paid to provide it. And they could control that care as well. Day care centers invited parents to play more active roles in the centers, by sitting on their boards of directors, volunteering their time as classroom aides, chaperoning outings, and recruiting other parents to enroll their young children into the happy family that local day care centers fast were becoming.

One less obvious, but certainly sociologically significant, change that occurred in day care during the satanic day care center moral panic was its refeminization. In 1983, the year Judy Johnson's paranoid delusion transmogrified Raymond Buckey into an evil satanist, only 5% of day care providers were male (Weinback 32). During the nine years of the moral panic, an alarming number of those male providers were accused of that new and horrific sex crime, satanic ritual abuse.⁷ As a result of these allegations, males left the profession in droves, seeking the comparative safety of male sex-role stereotyped employment. Day care was refeminized. Once again, and in the time-honored and very familiar tradition of the family, the primary responsibility for the care and socialization of young children was placed on the shoulders of low-paid women.

The satanic day care center moral panic is a fascinating slice of cultural history. Yet in so many ways, this moral panic is really no different from all of the others that have preceded it, and all of the others that inevitably will follow. It originated in an unsettling cultural conflict peculiar to its era and was sustained by that same conflict over time. It set the moral boundaries of that conflict by casting antagonists into the role of evil satanists, and then spread the fear that casting generated. And it ended when it ameliorated that cultural conflict. If there is a moral to this or any other moral panic, it is perhaps nothing more than this: for a little sense of familiarity, a touch of order, a bit of control, the culture always seems willing to pay a most exacting price.

Notes

¹There is a rich sociological literature on moral panics. Ben-Yehuda (1980), for example, treats the European witchhunts as a moral panic; Cohen (1972) uses the concept to analyze the the British reaction to juvenile gangs in the early 1960s; Sindall (1987) uses it to explain the London garroting panics of the 1800s, and Adler (1996) the Boston garroting panics just few years later; and Victor (1993) treats the antisatanism movement of the 1980s as a moral panic.

²For an extended discussion on the changing relationship between family and economy, see Negrey (1993), Rubin (1994), and Stacey (1990).

³Judy Johnson is her real name. Both her name, and the name of her young son, have been widely reported in the media from the very beginning of the McMartin case.

⁴Eight child sex rings were uncovered in the greater Bakersfield area in the early 1980s. The largest would come to be known as the Satanic Church case, and would implicate more than sixty adults and seventy-seven children. Virtually every conviction in all eight of the cases has since been overturned. See Nathan and Snedeker (53-66) for an analysis of the Bakersfield cases.

⁵Communities really were primed by conferences and workshops conducted by professionals. That priming effect is particularly evident in the Little Rascals Day Care Center case in Edenton, North Carolina, where seven adults, five of them day care providers and the other two unaffiliated with the center, were charged with sexually abusing nearly a hundred children in satanic rituals. Just a few months before the case began, the detective who would go on to investigate the Little Rascals case, the prosecutor who tried it, and the social workers who repeatedly interviewed the children, had attended a three-day conference on satanic ritual abuse in day care centers.

⁶That case was Fran's Day Care in Austin, Texas. Day care owner Fran Keller and her husband Dan were each convicted of one count of aggravated sexual assault on a child and were sentenced to 48 years in prison, where they remain today. For a thorough examination of this controversial case, see Gary Cartwright's investigative report, "The Innocent and the Damned."

⁷In a sample of 35 major satanic day care center cases, 30 (49%) of the 61 criminally charged day care providers were male.

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