



A Culture of Fear: Religious Panic and Modern Society

Senior Project

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By

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Abstract

Modern culture has been largely influenced by Christian influence, and notably through the event called the Satanic Panic. What could cause such a influential moral panic in the modern world? A perfect storm of events composed of the anti-cult movement of the 1960's-1990's, the rise of the New Right political party, and the enactment of the Child Abuse Protection and Treatment Act (CAPTCHA). This is not the first time the public has gone to extreme measures over concerns of Satanic influence, but the world is much more interconnected than it ever has been before. The Satanic panic and the anti-cult movement have influenced how Americans treat new religious movements and how the public treats media. Seemingly innocuous things such as genres of music and role-playing games were targeted and are still thought negatively of in religious communities. With how interconnected the modern world truly is, it might be possible to combat moral panics by spreading information and making it easier for the public to check information they are given.

A Culture of Fear: Religious Panic and Modern Society

Introduction

Culture and religion have always interacted throughout history, including in relation to charismatic religious leaders and movements. Some religious movements have more of a lasting impact on modern culture than others, especially those that are not associated with or are the perceived opposite of the prominent religion of that culture. Normally, the public would refer to these religious groups as cults, but scholars have attempted to give them a more appropriate term that separates *cultus*, the ceremony and ritual of religion, from ‘cults.’ The most common features of these religious movements that cause people to brand them this way can include but are not limited to: strange or unheard of religious beliefs, communal living, limited outside communication, media manipulation, scamming or using other immoral means to make money, or presenting immediate danger to their members or outsiders. In short, people label religious movements that they view as strange or unorthodox as cults. Scholars, however, have begun to label these ‘cults’ New Religious Movements (NRMs).¹ To distinguish peaceful NRMs from more dangerous movements this paper will refer to “cults” as Dangerous Religious Movements (DRMs).

If someone on the street was asked if they could name a ‘cult,’ they likely could, and it is very likely many people would name the same DRMs. This is because the actions of these DRMs had proven them to be ‘cults’ in the popular sense, and their actions were so heinous that they had left an immense impact on modern culture.² But what if these actions had never truly happened? What if the evidence of this DRM’s monstrous nature was completely fabricated? This was the

¹ Phillip Lucas, and Thomas Robbins. *New Religious Movements in the Twenty-First Century Legal, Political, and Social Challenges in Global Perspective* (New York: Routledge, 2004) 231.

² Ibid 236

case with a well-known cultural scare in the United States called the Satanic Panic. Over some time, Satanism was targeted and labelled dangerous while the idea of Satanists being the monsters lurking next door was planted in American's heads. If this panic was spurred by fabricated evidence, what caused America to already be so fearful of fringe religious movements?

Shortly before the Satanism movement was targeted the Satanic Panic started, DRMs were appearing across the United States and were proving themselves to be a threat. Religious movements such as The Family International and Heaven's Gate were gathering followers and drawing attention for some time before proving to be dangerous to their followers. This paper will posit that the formation and danger of DRMs primed the United States for the Satanic panic and will investigate the sociological and psychological causes for these forms of cultural fear. To understand why culture is so easily shaped by fear, one needs to understand the importance of religion to everyday life and why humans are prone to being overly cautious. In short, what caused the Satanic and Cult Panics in the United States, and what can be done to prevent cultural fear and outrage in the future?

What is: The Anti-Cult Movement?

Leaving aside the Satanic Panic, the "cult movement" in America was segmented into two different time periods, the 1960-70's and the 1990's. These are the time periods in which notable DRMs were in action, such as when The People's Temple shifted to more extreme beliefs and cemented themselves as a 'cult,' or when notable events took the public's conscience, such as Heaven's Gate's deaths being in the late 90's or the death of the People's Temple at Jonestown in 1978.³ The two periods are separated because of a minor decrease in *notable*

³ Lucas and Robbins 232.

“cultic” activity during the 1980’s, meaning few large events caught the public’s interest. The growing fears of a Satanic cult during the 1970’s and 1980’s, known colloquially as the Satanic Panic, might have had something to do with this, but no one knows for sure.

Some more notable examples of dangerous religious movements all tend to share many characteristics. Common features of DRMs can include (but are not limited to): communal living, danger to group members and/or outside population, manipulation, control or deception, and strange beliefs. As an example of a DRM, Heaven’s Gate will be used and explained in detail because it also pertains to later discussion of public perception. Heaven’s Gate is an NRM founded by Marshall Applewhite and Bonnie Nettles in 1974.⁴ It is a “UFO [Unidentified Flying Object] religion” whose religious beliefs centered around extra-terrestrials. Applewhite and Nettles (Bo and Peep or Do and Ti, respectively) believed themselves to be humanoid aliens sent on a Christ-like salvation mission to Earth. The group believed that they would shed their human bodies when they died and would return to their natural alien state aboard a UFO following the Hale-Bopp comet. This is an example of exceptionally strange beliefs. Not all strange beliefs are dangerous, but in the case of Heaven’s Gate, they were.

This group lived communally in Santa Fe, California, though most notably they moved to a mansion together shortly before they died. The group members were also required to dress similarly and were found in identical outfits after their death. During their time living communally, members were shut off from their family members and tended to avoid intimate contact with the outside world, though not to the same extent as other DRMs.⁵ Compared to other dangerous religious movements, this form of control over their members was not as

⁴ Wendy Robinson “Heaven’s Gate: The End.” *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 3, no. 3 (1997). No page numbers supplied, all information about Heaven’s Gate was gathered from this source.

⁵ Robinson “Heaven’s Gate: The End.”

extreme. Lastly, the group was dangerous to themselves. The idea of shedding one's body as if it was a shell is a form of belief in life after death, which means that to achieve it by the time the Hale-Bopp comet passed, they would need to die at a specific time. In 1997, the members of this movement took heavy sedatives called barbiturates and drank vodka to numb themselves before they suffocated themselves to death with plastic bags over their heads.⁶ Their deaths are well known and often referenced in the same breath as the Jonestown massacre.

It is important to pay attention to the public reaction to the deaths of Heaven's Gate, because of their involvement with the internet and the timing (right after the Satanic Panic was just dying down). The group used the internet during their later years (the late 80's and the 90's) to recruit and put their ideas out into the public eye. After their deaths, the media reported on the group as if they were *entirely* an internet cult, despite this being far from the truth. Despite using the internet for some small amount of recruitment, Applewhite and Nettles largely recruited through pamphlets, presentations, and meetings. Applewhite was reported to be a charismatic and convincing speaker and the primary driving force behind recruitment into the group.⁷ The group also ran a web design and coding business in their earlier years named Higher Source, the skills of which they also used for their own webpage and promotion.

The internet was a newly widely available resource that wasn't entirely understood by the public by 1997, and people tend to be wary of things they are unsure about. Before the group's demise, the internet was already being demonized over pornographic content and cult activity (perceived or actual). The media's reporting of Heaven's Gate as a dangerous cult that proved the internet couldn't be trusted shifted the public perspective from "It's poisoning our minds with

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Ibid

pornography” to “it’s dangerous and strangers are trying to harm you with it.” Even at the time, a New York Times article called, “From Porn to Cults, the Net Looks Nasty,” points out how absurd these fears are, because they attribute maliciousness to a nonliving thing and extend its capabilities past what is real.⁸ That article was written in 1997, the same year this reporting was happening, meaning that people at the time even noticed how quickly the public changed their opinions.

So, what was the panic about cults at the time? In the 1970’s, parents rallied together to try to get the government and other authorities to take action against NRMs (though they perceived them as DRMs). It is widely believed to have largely been parents because college aged youths were widely targeted and “loners” were easier for groups to recruit. As a reaction to the lack of help from the government and the deaths at Jonestown, these parents formed many groups, the most important called the Citizen’s Freedom Foundation [CFF] and the American Family Foundation [AFF].⁹ These groups mostly appealed to churches and political figures and did not have much luck until psychologists started to join their cause and use their authority to further it. During this time, the anti-cult movement latched onto the theory of brainwashing, which was proposed by Margaret Singer. This theory was widely accepted across these groups because it justified a tactic they called “deprogramming,” which is a form of non-professional therapy that is meant to solidify an individual’s decision to leave a cult and strengthen or remind them of their want to return to mainstream society.¹⁰

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Lucas and Robbins “New Religious Movements in the Twenty-First Century Legal, Political, and Social Challenges in Global Perspective” 232.

¹⁰ Ibid 233-234.

The idea of brainwashing was originally invented in the Cold War to try to explain why people would betray their morals with seemingly no reason,¹¹ while Singer's later influence was what focused it on cults. When writing up her research to send to the APA, Singer used definitions that were vague and that the APA members argued could include things such as advertising or Alcoholics Anonymous meetings (as she used a different, broader definition than the one presented above).¹² Reviewing the cold war research, it seemed that Singer's (and now the public's) understanding of brainwashing was a misunderstanding of the effects of totalitarian reign on public morals.¹³ With this in mind, it can be argued that the popular definition of *brainwashing* is a sensational cultural term instead of a psychological term, similar to how *cults* is a sensational cultural term now.

In the end, the APA rejected Singer's research for low scientific standards and deeply flawed methods of testing and recording data. The investigation was short and the evidence presented by the board was clear and highly critical, saying at the end that she could not refer to her report as APA research, which proved to be the death knell for the brainwashing theory. Instead of simply dropping the theory and losing credibility in their movement, the anti-cult movement quietly distanced itself from the idea of brainwashing, giving it an arguably slow death.¹⁴ Deprogramming also suffered for this, becoming much less popular in favor of exit counseling, which was much gentler on the patient.¹⁵ Over time, it seemed the focus on cults by these groups moved from the idea that they were dangerous religious fringe groups to the psychological idea that they were brainwashing followers, finally to the idea in the 90's that they

¹¹ Massimo Introvigne. "Advocacy, Brainwashing Theories and New Religious Movements." *Religion* 44, no. 2 (2014) 304

¹² Ibid 309.

¹³ Ibid 304.

¹⁴ Ibid 311.

¹⁵ Lucas and Robbins 235

were a specific kind of social group with their own religious values. It is theorized that this initial shift of focus away from NRMs as religious groups was to convince the government to take action, since the government did not involve itself in religious affairs.¹⁶

By the 2000's, modern research into new religious movements had turned the public's focus on charismatic leaders and their power.¹⁷ This was quickly forgotten by the public as a societal issue after the 9/11 attacks, instead turning the public's focus towards religious extremism.¹⁸ Looking at dangerous religious activity through the 1960's until the 2000's, researchers started to broaden their ideas of what a movement is to include their politics as well. As Lucas and Robbins state in their book, "Charismatic religious movements are more similar to charismatic political movements than they are to other religious movements that are not structured around charismatic authority."¹⁹ As such, the focus shifts from the beliefs alone, to how the leader converts others to those beliefs and how they convince them to act on them. Increasingly, the political sides of these groups were also increasingly considered in this research, such as Scientology's fight against the government and Rajneesh Puram's "ownership" of a town.²⁰

Public perception of new religious movements is still bad, as expected. Examples such as Scientology come to mind for many, but they do not realize that Wicca and neopaganism are also new religious movements. Due to increased public understanding of what new religious movements are, people tend to be more conscious of which could be dangerous and which could not. DRMs still exist in modern society, but they have taken on changes to fit the political and

¹⁶ Ibid 236.

¹⁷ Ibid 236

¹⁸ Ibid 238.

¹⁹ Ibid 321

²⁰ Ibid 314

social landscape of today.²¹ Still, younger people who are soul-searching tend to be recruited into DRMs, and the longer an individual is with a DRM, the statistically more likely they are to stay.²² Research into the topic of NRMs and DRMs has focused largely on who has left, so not much is understood about those who stay in these groups.²³

It could be argued that the anti-cult movement set the United States up to experience the Satanic panic by bringing public awareness to dangerous religion, but there is a key difference between these moral panics. A moral panic is when “a condition, episode, person, or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests: tis nature is presented in a stylized and stereotypical fashion by the mass media.”²⁴ Both panics used experts such as psychologists or social workers to validate their claims, and both panics concerned protecting the youths, but the major difference is the existence of the enemy. The anti-cult movement was a reaction to existing groups. The Satanic panic was, however, a reaction to nothing, as the perceived threat did not truly exist. Instead, a storm of circumstances brought the Satanic panic to fruition during the middle period of the anti-cult movement, when the United States was still on alert from the dangers of early DRMs.

What is the Satanic Panic?

The Satanic panic was a moral panic in the United States of America that occurred between the 1980’s and the 1990’s. Many things contributed to the creation of this panic, though some sociologists point to the rise of the New Right movement. The New Right movement was a

²¹ Ibid 316

²² Ibid 232.

²³ Ibid 232.

²⁴ Danielle Dunbar and Sandra Swart. “‘No Less a Foe Than Satan Himself’: The Devil, Transition and Moral Panic in White South Africa, 1989-1993.” *Journal of Southern African Studies* 38, no. 3 (2012) 605.

collection of conservatives uniting to go against the liberal attitudes of the late 60's and early 70's, in an attempt to "correct" modern society.²⁵ This movement influenced politics and media deeply by presenting liberal ideas in a negative light. Talk shows were one of the more common forms of media this group used to try to change the state of America, presenting "infotainment" (information presented in an entertaining way) as legitimate and trustworthy news coverage.²⁶ Largely, they targeted things that threatened the Christian ideal, such as science, which was depicted as bizarre and meaningless, while they attributed to scientists negative traits to make them seem untrustworthy.²⁷ Activists were also painted in a negative light while imagery favored the ideal of the nuclear family.

There are many interesting examples of how this was done, but the most interesting is perhaps the demonization of liberal ideas by associating them with the paranormal. Take for example slasher movies, which were at their height popularity in the 1980's. *Nightmare on Elm Street*, *Halloween*, and *Friday the 13th* were all produced around this time period (though *Halloween* was produced in 1978), and include many common characteristics. The "final girl" or the one who survives is a virtuous, innocent young woman who works hard. The ones who die first in these movies are often the ones distracting themselves with vices such as sex or alcohol.²⁸ Media shapes the culture it is in as much as it is shaped by it, and clearly defines the threats that the New Right thought everyone should demonize. The lower class was conflated with criminals in some of these programs as well, which is a lasting stereotype in American culture.

²⁵ S. Hughes. "American Monsters: Tabloid Media and the Satanic Panic, 1970-2000." *Journal of American Studies* 51, no. 3 (2017) 693.

²⁶ Ibid 694.

²⁷ Ibid 694.

²⁸ Ibid 694.

The Satanic panic relied on dishonesty from its start. In 1980, stories about recovered memories became more popular after a woman named Michelle Smith published a book recounting her regression therapy sessions. During these sessions, she eventually revealed that her family was part of a Satanic cult that tortured her, including claims that they removed her teeth and surgically grafted a tail and horns onto her.²⁹ These claims were presented as true stories that were “too horrible to have been invented.”³⁰ This put the idea of Satanism immediately into the public’s mind, but accusations started after a schizophrenic woman named Judy Johnson accused a daycare worker named Ray Buckey of sexually abusing her son as part of a Satanic pedophile ritual at daycare.³¹ After initial inspection, doctors did not find evidence of assault on her 2-year-old son, but the Suspected Child Abuse and Neglect team supposedly did, leading to Buckey’s arrest. Before Buckey was given a trial, a letter was sent out by the police to 200 families in the area to warn them of his potential “crimes,” encouraging the parents to ask their children about it. The trial against McMartin daycare is still the longest and most expensive criminal trial in United States history at \$15 million dollars.³²

Predictably, publicity about this incident spread like wildfire through talk shows and news stations alike, which led to more accusations coming against daycare workers and those accusations becoming more and more severe. The sentences given to the accused were typically long, such as Frank Fuster who was given a 165-year sentence and Robert Kelly, who was given twenty life sentences.³³ During investigation, social workers came to interview the children without police oversight, using what we now understand as leading questions, which are

²⁹ Joseph Laylock. *Dangerous Games: What the Moral Panic over Role-Playing Games Says About Play, Religion, and Imagined Worlds*. Oakland, California: University of California Press (2015). 139.

³⁰ Ibid 139.

³¹ S. Hughes “American Monsters: Tabloid Media and the Satanic Panic, 1970-2000.” 697-698

³² Ibid 691.

³³ Ibid 698-699.

questions that are meant (purposefully or not) to lead the respondent to a specific answer.³⁴ The details these “professionals” gathered was given to media sources, who ran the stories on local and national news, causing the stories to seem more legitimate.³⁵ There was an hour long *20/20* crime investigation episode that focused on the original daycare cases, reported in a very dramatic and suspenseful manner.

The accusations thrown at the day care workers were about pedophilia, Satanic rituals, murder, cannibalism, underage pornography, and child abuse. Claims made by children included secret routes under the daycares, though when police investigated the daycares, no such thing was found.³⁶ Despite how some of these claims entailed physical evidence, such as dead bodies or children going missing from the specific daycares, it was extremely rare for any physical or damning evidence to show up in court. These cases relied entirely on memories and testimony,³⁷ usually from adults who claimed it happened long ago in their childhood and just remembered it or children who were quite young.

During this time, the anti-cult movement was attempting to stay relevant by claiming that Satanism was a cult, though their attempts at relevance were not successful.³⁸ National reporting of the Satanic abuse allegations started to decline in 1986 when the cases against the McMartin workers besides Ray Buckey and his mother were dismissed. The same year, a prosecutor called the case “an aberration” and joined the defense team while criticizing the organizations that handled the abuse cases.³⁹ As research started to come out proving that recovered memory is

³⁴ Ibid 701.

³⁵ Ibid 702.

³⁶ Ibid 691

³⁷ David Frankfurter “The Satanic Ritual Abuse Panic as Religious-Studies Data.” *Numen* 50, no. 1 (2003) 109.

³⁸ James Richardson, Jenny Reichert, and Valerie Lykes. “Satanism in America: An Update.” *Social compass* 56, no. 4 (2009). 557.

³⁹ Hughes “American Monsters” 703.

faulty at best and completely fabricated at worst, along with evidence of how easy it is to influence children to say what you want, judges and prosecutors also began to look more critically at the allegations and evidence presented to them.⁴⁰ Despite local television and tabloid media still reporting on it, the panic largely died down, though not without leaving some impact on the culture at large.

As mentioned before, the panic relied on dishonesty. On top of infotainment pretending to be legitimate news sources, some notable lies were presented in written media. An evangelical writer named Mike Warnke claimed that he was previously a Satanic priest who “controlled a secret empire of 1,500 Satanists throughout California, who dealt drugs, abducted people, and engaged in human sacrifice.”⁴¹ This information was later debunked when a Christian magazine named *Cornerstone* spoke to his college classmates. This same writer lied later about a man writing a second note before committing suicide that pledged him to Satan.⁴² Despite being proven false, people still claimed this for quite a while after.

During the 1990’s, attention turned back to DRMs, as there was a spike in dangerous events, such as the Waco siege of the Branch Davidians’ compound. Conservative Christian influence remained, but the nation seemingly evolved to accept criticism as the media and public began to criticize their own culture over the panic.⁴³ Ideas such as the nuclear family survived, but modern culture began inward reflection. Parodies of ideals and forms of media became common, such as the *Tonight Show* parodying talk shows, and sitcoms such as *The Simpsons* and *Married with Children* parodying the nuclear family and everyday life.⁴⁴ Of course, the internet

⁴⁰ Richardson, Reichert, and Lykes “Satanism in America: An Update.” 555-556

⁴¹ Locklay *Dangerous Games* 135.

⁴² Ibid 135.

⁴³ S. Hughes “American Monsters” 712-713.

⁴⁴ Ibid 716

became more accessible during this time, so it drew scrutiny of its own, as seen with the Heaven's Gate criticisms. In essence, the idea of the suburban world that the conservatives created was still there after the panic, but it was *substantially* changed.

How Did the Public React? How Did It Affect Culture?

The demonization of certain non-Christian cultural phenomena became quite common during both the anti-cult and anti-Satanic movements, though most notably with the Satanic panic. There are many obvious examples, such as black metal music that centers on Satanism and dark ideals, which was demonized by the public. As mentioned before, Harry Potter and other magic-based forms of media were also demonized by parents for trying to indoctrinate their children. Many forms of youth entertainment are based in fantasy, but teenage culture is often stereotyped as rebellious. Things that can be interpreted as Satanic are actually somewhat common in teenage culture, such as some teens wearing black and dyeing their hair, or even wearing Satanic symbols just to get a reaction, or even having a bad attitude. As Dunbar and Swart succinctly say in their article, "there is a dislocation... between the *portrayal* of white youthful rebellion and *actual* forms of rebellion at the time."⁴⁵

One target of the panic caused a surprisingly large stir. During the Satanic panic, parents claimed that role-playing games were luring their kids into Satanism. These role-playing games have "players imagine heroic characters for themselves and produce narratives of their adventures. The point is not only to produce a good story but to allow the players to experience an imagined world together."⁴⁶ These games are not limited only to fantasy settings, but criticism

⁴⁵ Dunbar and Swart. "No Less a Foe Than Satan Himself" 606-612.

⁴⁶ Laycock "Dangerous Games" 8.

has mostly fallen on the fantasy versions of these games with Dungeons and Dragons [DnD or D&D colloquially] in particular. This could be for many reasons, from curses and spells to actual Satanic imagery laid deep in the created environment to fictitious religions. The Satanic imagery in the game includes things such as the robes and hoods people claimed Satanists wore during the panic⁴⁷ to a species called Tieflings that may resemble Satan or demons, as they are meant to be an inherently evil race.

Now, it is important to remember why imagery like this is used in any media, from the extremely recognizable pentagrams in black metal designs to the angelic images in many designs. They are used because they are highly recognizable. In American society, culture has a heavy Christian influence, and so, for many people from American backgrounds, angels, demons and Satan himself are recognizable images, and those images have complex associations. To use the image is to evoke the associations without needing to create those associations for oneself. If a player draws up a Tiefling character with curled horns and a wicked smile, it is meant to evoke demonic associations. These images are not used to sway someone into converting to a religion, they are meant to play on preexisting feelings and understandings within modern culture.

This was not all that these games were criticized for. There was already a preexisting claim that these games were a form of cult and brainwashing that did not have *as* much traction before the Satanic panic changed the claim to say it was promoting Satanism (a recognizable “evil” religion) in particular.⁴⁸ Much more attention was drawn to D&D when a woman named Patricia Pulling’s son (Irving “Bink” Puling) committed suicide in 1983, and in reaction she created the advocacy group Bothered About Dungeons and Dragons [BADD], where she claimed

⁴⁷ Ibid 22.

⁴⁸ Ibid 136.

that the game was a “direct path to Satanism.”⁴⁹ She claimed that her son was seduced into the cult of Satanism by the game, driven mad, and killed by them. This stems from the fact that she allegedly found a suicide note from him, but the only reported note was a D&D prop from the Dungeon Master (the one who develops the story and oversees the player, like a narrator) that said, “Your soul is mine. I choose the time. At my command, you will leave the land. A follower of evil. Killer of man,” in reference to his character’s lycanthropic (werewolf) curse. She claims that this curse swayed her son’s mind and caused him so much distress that it led to him killing himself.⁵⁰ This, of course, was not her only story.

Patricia Pulling was just as likely to lie about things as other writers and influencers at the time. She used her image as a grieving mother to get invited to speak at everything from police meetings to court cases, and to sell books.⁵¹ The main book of concern was a dramatization of her finding her son’s body and being asked by the police if her family were Satan worshippers (which notably was not at the forefront of the public’s conscience when the incident happened). Comparing how she spoke between audiences, it was found that with spiritual audiences, Pulling would focus more on Satanism, but for public discussions, she presented the game as creating psychological trauma.⁵² Once in 1986, when Pulling was presenting to cult cops (cops who believed in Satanic conspiracies), she made the claim that her son displayed lycanthropic tendencies such as barking. She also claimed that within a month of her son’s death, the rabbits he raised were torn apart and a cat was found disemboweled.⁵³ Puller never referred to the either the subjects of psychology or Satanism to the other audience, keeping the two completely

⁴⁹ Ibid 137.

⁵⁰ Ibid 149.

⁵¹ Ibid 148.

⁵² Ibid 150.

⁵³ Ibid 151.

separated. While it is unclear about her intentions or beliefs, the mutual exclusivity she treats the two subjects with has led scholars and writers such as Laycock to suspect she was manipulating her audience. It is also important to note that she never sought psychological help for her son.

It is widely thought that role-playing games were viewed as Satanic because it gave children the ability to imagine being in evil places within their own minds, where their parents couldn't protect them.⁵⁴ The outrage towards D&D was not isolated either; in 1980, parents worked together to have D&D banned as an afterschool activity because it would corrupt their children.⁵⁵ Some Christians viewed it as their spiritual responsibility. In 1981, a man named Tom Webster collected \$1,000 in crowdfunding to purchase D&D books and burn them. The producers were still making a profit, which makes it seem counterproductive, but to him it was productive because he saw himself as releasing the demons within these books. Many other pastors were also reported burning D&D books.⁵⁶

This point may seem minor and long winded, but it points out how something as trivial as a fantasy game drew the ire of the public simply because it had magical imagery in it. The ire slightly decreased and moved on to video games when those became popular,⁵⁷ suggesting a free-roaming anxiety looking to find particular targets. Of course, there are still people who believe D&D and other fantasy role-playing games are Satanic devices, but these are likely the same people who believe that Harry Potter is drawing their children into Satanism. They do not have the same tangible evidence as video games *seem* to have. Much like the panic moving back to cults when they got dangerous again, video games are *still* a target of criticism today because

⁵⁴ Ibid 142.

⁵⁵ Ibid 142-144.

⁵⁶ Ibid 145-146

⁵⁷ Ibid 137.

they don't require imagination—they show the violence on the screen. It is notable that the effects of video games on violence is still a topic of study in psychology, but it is widely accepted that role-playing games such as D&D are not causing people to become more violent.⁵⁸

So, how do these moral panics affect new religious movements in the United States now? They are looked at in a predictably negative light, though there may be a number of reasons for that. Instead of looking at these panics as strict causes for these views, it is important to look at them also as *signs* of why these views happen. Alternative spiritualities are looked down on largely by mainstream religion despite the fact that they are growing quite quickly. Things change quickly in modern society and new religions can crop up and gain power seemingly at a moment's notice compared to how the world used to be. Despite many NRMs being new to us, they still represent the 'other,' which has routinely been shunned through history. As Possamai and Lee said, "While the persecution of fledgling religious movements based on fear of the 'other' is nothing new, the context in which it is taking place has changed."⁵⁹

New religious movements are new to us, though they can actually be quite old. Wicca and neopaganism are new forms of old religions that have been given new life and are therefore also new religious movements. These movements exist in a world with the internet, where ideas can be disseminated and accessed with ease, where someone can discover a religion and convert from exposure simply through a webpage. There is, still, a concern that the internet, like so many things before, could expose the youths to a dangerous religion.⁶⁰ This was notably a concern in both of the panics, because they perceive children as easily swayed by anything they find, which

⁵⁸ Ibid 12.

⁵⁹ Adam Possamai and Murray Lee. "Hyper-Real Religions: Fear, Anxiety, and Late-Modern Religious Innovation." *Journal of Sociology* 47, no. 3 (2011). 228.

⁶⁰ Ibid 231.

may be true in some respects, but children should not be allowed unsupervised on the internet if they are *that* young. This lingering fear gives credence to the idea that instead of panics being about anything in specific, they are truly just the societies' anxieties and insecurities brought to a boil.⁶¹

Though this is not directly connected to the internet, researchers have understood for a while now that negative views of new religious movements come partly from the idea that these religions aren't "real" religions like their own.⁶² The realness of a cult is what made them so immediately dangerous to people, but their perceived fakeness as a religion made them spiritually dangerous. As an opposite, Satanic cults were not real and therefore not immediately dangerous, but the people treated them as immediate and spiritually dangerous because of the familiarity with their own religion. Many people since 2000 have reported that they do not think of Satan as a physical being,⁶³ which highlights how the claims by children of Satan appearing during the cult rituals contrast with modern beliefs.

A final important note about the societal implications of these panics is the sentencing of individuals during the Satanic panic. Though not a scholarly source, turning to news outlets highlights that the panic and the sentencing of individuals is still in the public conscience. An article written in 2016 lays out the background of the Satanic panic, what happened, and who was sentenced. Frank Fuster, who was mentioned before for receiving 165 years in prison total, is still serving his life sentence. At this point in time, he is the most famous victim who is still serving his prison sentence and a simple Google search of his name yields dozens of articles that prove he is innocent. Dan and Fren Keller were released after serving 21 years in prison. Glen

⁶¹ Ibid 233.

⁶² Ibid 238.

⁶³ Richardson, Reichert, and Lykes. "Satanism in America: An Update." 557-558

Toward was released at the age of 80 in 2010 but was harassed by the media so much that he left the country. The West Memphis Three were arrested on charges related to the Satanic panic, accused of killing three boys for a Satanic ritual. Whether these boys are innocent or not, the permeation of the Satanic panic into their case taints the credibility of any evidence but forensic evidence.⁶⁴

Why Did This Happen?

To understand the outrage of the cult panic, it is easy to see why families would be scared for their loved ones, but delineating the differences in the causes of the fear in the anti-cult and anti-Satanic movements, respectively, is important. The Satanic panic had to have a reason for starting in some form and there needs to be a reason allegations spread so easily. Besides the rise of the New Right, what else was happening in society below the surface that would have made people much more likely to fear for their family's safety? And why worry for the children so much when college youths were the most likely target of cult recruitment?

At the time, Richard Nixon had passed an act called the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment act, which was the first initiative to target and combat child abuse in American history.⁶⁵ Instead of using reliable sources, the act relied on bad research from unqualified doctors. Despite the finding of a link between economic struggle and child abuse, it was ignored in favor of a theory that "bad mothering" caused child abuse.⁶⁶ This hits on a similar note as earlier problems, such as the conflation of low economic status with criminal activity. Even if it was true, pointing fingers like this and forcing ideals on people is not addressing the real issue

⁶⁴ Aja Romano. "The History of Satanic Panic in the US – and Why It's Not Over Yet." *Vox*. (2016) All information in this paragraph refers to this source and has been verified with other sources.

⁶⁵ Hughes "American Monsters" 692.

⁶⁶ *Ibid* 692-693.

with society. Choosing evidence that supports the conservative narrative was not going to help stop child abuse, especially not with the reason they gave for child abuse happening.

Nevertheless, it was a good thing that the CAPTCHA act was passed because it brought attention to the fact that child abuse happens and that people should be vigilant about it. On the other hand, the effect it had on daycare workers who were implicated in abuse allegations was devastating. The fact that the government was willing to accept the wrong reason for abuse happening despite being presented with evidence of *some* reasons why it happens, says a lot about the political and cultural landscape at the time, falling in line with the idea that the New Right had a lot of control over much of American culture then. The idea that child abuse only happens because someone does not fit into the perfect nuclear family stereotype likely harmed a lot of people who needed help because they were suffering from child abuse.

So, with the possible building blocks of a moral panic spoken about above, it is important to note moral panics that have happened in the past, as it shows that they are not entirely unique to their given setting. Again, the cult panic was reasonably concerned with the safety of their loved ones in the face of seemingly unexplainable tragedies, so this section also largely concerns the Satanic panic. There have been moral panics, specifically about Satanism, in the past and in other countries that are very similar to what was experienced in America. In fact, in 1997 shortly after the Satanic panic had truly died down, an article was written focusing on a previous case of moral panic in a Swedish village in the late 1600's. In short, this panic consisted of children confessing that their neighbors and sometimes family members brought them to a Sabbath ritual that involved pledging themselves to Satan. The allegations are similar to the 80's American

Satanic panic, as they consisted largely of child abuse, murder, ritual abuse, and sexual abuse.⁶⁷ These children were also a similar age group to the kids that were in day care in the Satanic panic. Across Sweden during this time, children accused hundreds of adults, largely women, of being witches and forcing them to take place in rituals. Almost two hundred of the accused were beheaded or burned at the stake,⁶⁸ meaning that the effects of this panic were far more dangerous than the effects of the modern Satanic panic. There were other similarities such as unqualified questioners (a pastor questioned the children) and children telling alarmingly specific, similar accounts.

Research into this witch panic revealed that children were more likely to lie if they were younger, male, and if they were experiencing social pressure from their peers.⁶⁹ Children in this panic also implicated other children by mentioning that they were also there, meaning that this likely spread by word of mouth and by others being brought into it by being accused.⁷⁰ Similar to the recovered memories in the Satanic panic, the children in this panic would not remember until they were extensively questioned about it and brought to where the meeting supposedly happened.⁷¹ One report from the time said about a child that “the more the other children testified against him, the more he was able to remember.”⁷² It is also important to remember that these allegations were often mentioned in front of others, so other children would hear and spread it to one another. One boy was reported to have denied it until the adult was gone, then other children had told him he was there so much that he confessed.⁷³

⁶⁷ R.L. Sjöberg. “False Allegations of Satanic Abuse: Case Studies from the Witch Panic in Rattvik 1670-71.” *European Child and Adolescent Psychiatry* 6, no. 4 (1997) 220.

⁶⁸ Ibid 219.

⁶⁹ Ibid 220.

⁷⁰ Ibid 221.

⁷¹ Ibid 222.

⁷² Ibid 222.

⁷³ Ibid 223.

Though children of this age are not as susceptible to outside forces as psychologists originally thought, their memories are still susceptible to shaping. Preschool aged children also have trouble discerning reality from fantasy, unlike adults.⁷⁴ It was also found that children are prone to lying when they are under pressure and are expected to say a certain thing, especially when they're too young to realize the moral implications of their lie.⁷⁵ On top of how memories can be manipulated and how children can be forced to lie simply through social expectation, it was also found that the children seemed to show signs of psychiatric problems. Though not directly recorded, they are implied to have sleeping problems due to the stress, and children were reported to have emotional breakdowns.⁷⁶ Adults reported having distressing dreams of ghosts blaming the whole thing on them and their way of living, which was likely a result of severe prolonged stress, so it would have also likely affected the children in a similar way.⁷⁷

Another alarmingly similar example happened in South Africa, almost entirely contained within the Caucasian community there. Evidence suggests that the ending of the apartheid and the movement into true democracy was such a stressful political change that it caused mass alarm amongst the community, leading to alleged Satanism spreading easier.⁷⁸ Again, the allegations are largely the same, and this was happening as the American Satanic panic was dying off. Because this event was largely the same, and resembles other Satanic panics that have happened in Europe, researchers are beginning to think these kinds of moral panics are not entirely sensitive to the area an individual lives in. These panics are “a hybrid creature encoded with underlying social anxieties through the actions of interest groups, moral entrepreneurs and

⁷⁴ Ibid 219.

⁷⁵ Ibid 219.

⁷⁶ Ibid 223-224.

⁷⁷ Ibid 224.

⁷⁸ Dunbar and Swart “No Less a Foe Than Satan Himself” 603.

the media.”⁷⁹ As the religion of the area a person lives in does play into the panic, there are many places where Christianity is or was the predominant religion and Satanism would inherently be a worry. There are culturally specific elements, such as in South Africa where Afrikaans Voelvry music was targeted for its influence from American rock,⁸⁰ but it still held largely conservative Christian elements such as the targeting of homosexuals, prostitution, pornography.⁸¹

What Can Be Done?

It is hard to say what can be done to prevent such panics in the future, especially considering that they have happened so similarly across different time periods and in different countries. From the examples examined above, it seems to be conservative Christian groups who trigger these panics and are predisposed to it because of a societal stress or pressure, from political stress such as in South Africa or media induced stress in America. The effects of these panics linger in the demonization of things that truly do not cause any harm to people. Afrikaans Voelvry music was not likely to harm anybody and role-playing games are not indoctrinating the children, but they are still looked down on by some for being associated with these panics. With the rules set in place and experience learned from the Satanic panic in the United States, wrongful prosecution of individuals should not happen in the same way again. Forensic evidence has helped exonerate some people over the Satanic panic allegations, in fact, but that does nothing to stop the accusations from happening and from somebody’s reputation getting ruined along the way.

⁷⁹ Ibid 605

⁸⁰ Ibid 613

⁸¹ Ibid 603.

The anti-cult movement very likely assisted in making the Satanic panic happen in the United States, as it gave political and social power to the parent groups that were formed during that time. Despite their shortcomings, these groups also proved that banding together against something at least brings it to people's attentions and at most gets things changed. Both contain examples of how media twists things to persecute whoever or whatever they like, however. From D&D being said to be a cult *and* Satanic recruiting device to murderers being treated as Satanic/cultic loners by the media,⁸² the effects of both movements meld together in some strange ways. Attention tends to sway from topic to topic as one movement ends and another may begin.

The worry about a loved one entering a DRM is nigh unavoidable once a person is already in that situation, but proper education about how to spot when your loved one is being deceived by a religious group would help, as well as education on how to confront them about the issue in a manner that does not drive them further into believing in the group. As for moral panics about Satanism, wider cultural understanding is needed. The public needs to differentiate between rebellious or simply different behavior and deviant or unstable behavior. For example, the difference between a minor graffitiing a wall and a minor hurting others or acting in a way that would harm others. These distinctions may not always be clear cut, but it is important for people to start with realizing that rebellion and demonic or Satanic possession are two entirely different things. Wider use of the internet is already helping prevent some forms of moral panic, because individuals can check the information they are getting, but more work would be needed to prevent another moral panic of this proportion.

⁸² Hughes "American Monsters" 714.

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