Journal of Anglican Studies (2024), **22**, 450–459
doi:10.1017/S1740355324000305

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1740355324000305 Published online by Cambridge University Press

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Crucible: Lessons Learned from Previous Centuries

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(Received 1 August 2024; revised 19 August 2024; accepted 19 August 2024)

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The past half-century has been a treasure trove for those fascinated by historical instances of moral panic, conspiracy theories and the enigmatic world of secretive satanic cults. The wealth of examples, ranging from the peculiar to the outright cruel, offers a captivating journey through the evolution of societal fears and beliefs. It is something of an irony that in the increasingly post-religious Developed World, the void has been filled with a multiplicity of speculative spiritualties, quasi-faith-based therapies, mystical curiosity and fascination with the paranormal. Little of the value ascribed to such a zeitgeist is evidence-based. Nor does it need to be. In a world of 'alternative facts' that has also steadily habituated the public into post-truth political discourse, evidence and veracity are not what they used to be.

In theory and practice, churches should stand out in these climes as a striking counter-cultural alternative. However, as is often the case, churches have been swept along with cultural currents. I recall a conversation with a senior Law Lord a few years ago, commenting on the Carlile Report regarding historic allegations made against Bishop George Bell, which found multiple failings, incompetence and coverups. Bishop Bell stood accused of child sexual abuse more than half a century after his death. A Church of England investigation subsequently took a single

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complainant and their allegations at face value, thereby traducing Bell's reputation and legacy at a stroke.

Lord Carlile was commissioned to review the original investigation and uncovered a culture of shoddy work, repeated bungling and gross negligence. In my conversation with the Law Lord, they opined that the Church of England was simply unfit for purpose in such fields. They reeled off a litany of problems. The Church of England did not know what constituted 'evidence' and could not discern or judge it. There was no coherent jurisprudence to work with. Resources and personnel were sub-standard. Church officers with considerable powers usually lacked appropriate external regulation, validation, or qualifications. Yet, the officers believed they were running systems that were of connate value and worth with standards found in secular spheres.

The terminology and rhetoric that the Church of England used fed such fiction. The church apparently had Core Groups, policies to determine 'best practice', regulations, procedures, appeal processes, reports, lessons learned reviews, external input and independent auditing. Read on paper and taken at face value, it could look convincing. But more nuanced readings revealed crucial caveats: 'professional standards, adapted for the church', with qualifying terms such as 'appropriate', 'usually' and 'normally' liberally deployed. No professional policy drafter is working for senior church officers. Not one of the two dozen lawyers working in the Church of England's Legal Affairs department specialises in safeguarding. Appearances, it seems, are indeed deceptive.

There is nothing new under the sun – nor in the modern world – about a 'Rumour of Satan' as Peter Berger noted (c.f., his classic text, *A Rumour of Angels: Modern Society and the Rediscovery of the Supernatural*, Doubleday, 1970). Berger was one of the first sociologists of religion to see that despite secularization and its grip on the modern world, its people remained curiously obsessed and convinced by the supernatural. The last 50 years bear this out and, in some respects, show how contemporary Arthur Miller's play *The Crucible* (Viking Press, 1971) was when first performed 75 years ago, in 1953.

Miller's play ostensibly centres on the tragedy of John Proctor, a settler in the Massachusetts Bay Colony during the Salem witch trials of 1692–93. A widower who had remarried, John Proctor was, along with several others, hanged for witchcraft. In the play, Proctor speaks out against the use of 'spectral evidence' in trial proceedings since such testimony lacked any material or corroborated proof and substantiation of what was alleged. Miller's play charts the grim process of individuals – merely awkward, principled nonconformists unwilling to comply with prevailing social or religious constructions of reality – from being outspoken and unyielding to their inevitable execution.

The play is unquestionably a jewel in the canon of American drama, with its intended target being the witch hunts of the time, including those prompted by Senator Joseph McCarthy's hunt for "Reds under the bed" in the Cold War climate. Miller indeed conceived the play as an allegory for McCarthyism, at a time when the US government targeted and persecuted individuals and groups accused of being communists or of 'un-American activities'.

In the post-war years, even mainstream denominations have dabbled in speculative demonologies and 'spiritual warfare' waged against allegedly hidden,

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1740355324000305 Published online by Cambridge University Press

controlling satanic powers. Some Christian groups have singled out commercial corporations such as Starbucks and Proctor & Gamble as hiding in plain sight, concealing their real identity and agenda as agents of the Anti-Christ, or as some cover for global satanic domination.

As with *The Crucible*, the accused's denial is taken as de facto proof of guilt and the underlying conspiracy that those with 'spectral intelligence' claim to possess. From the 1970s to the end of the 20th century, leaders within evangelical charismatic renewal movements tended to endorse practitioners of exorcism and deliverance, training in spiritual warfare and 'therapies' that included the 'healing of recovered memories', genealogical deliverance from trauma, curses and other demonic influence passed down the family line and more besides. With such prevalent spiritual constructions of reality abroad in the public domain, the conditions for establishing a culture open to moral panic and rumours of satanic ritual abuse were apparent and established.

Trials and inquiries were held. But the public moved quickly from hysteria to scepticism, as outbreaks of satanic conspiracy accusations, notably in Rochdale and Orkney (1990–1991), failed to produce any evidence, let alone a conviction. The allegedly abused children that had been taken into care by social workers, supported by the police, were promptly returned to their parents.

In the UK, prurient public hunger for stories confirming the reality of satanic ritual abuse (see: https://www.heraldscotland.com/news/12549108.girl-tells-court-of-sacrifices-in-epping-forest/) eventually collapsed with a trial that focussed on two sisters (aged 10 and 14 years at the time) In Epping Forest, who had 'remembered' that their parents, godparents and a family friend had subjected them both to rape, buggery, indecent assault and bizarre Stanic rituals. These included being drugged and sexually assaulted, witnessing rabbits being butchered and being forced to drink their blood from a chalice. They also claimed they had witnessed babies sacrificed and been forced to eat their flesh.

The prosecution admitted from the outset that despite extensive searches the police had found no evidence of satanic rituals, dead animals or murder. Despite that, this was a criminal trial at the Old Bailey. After the fifth day of the trial – those accused faced more than 20 charges – the Judge instructed the jury to return 'not guilty' verdicts. Counsel for the prosecution admitted that the sisters' testimony was unreliable and lacked evidence despite detailed forensic searches of the alleged sites where the acts occurred. The younger sister had, in any case, admitted to making the stories up.

For most of the UK public, this represented an end to a disturbing wave of episodes that could have led to serious miscarriages of justice. However, for hardened conspiracy theorists invested in stories of satanic ritual abuse, the acquittal of the accused merely confirmed and strengthened their conviction in the truth of their claims. The lack of evidence was held to indicate that such abuse was more deeply concealed than ever, protected by the establishment, and appearances bound to be illusory, as that is how Satan works. Conspiracy theorists still argue that just because no evidence of satanic rites has come to light, it does not follow that the child should be disbelieved.

Thus, no evidence of satanic rites simply confirms how secret such rituals are. Whilst this theoretical argument is perhaps best left to a common-room discussion,

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it is another matter when an enforcement officer is asked to decide to prosecute, and the chances of securing a conviction in court depend on the weight of evidence. Q-Anon is essentially another iteration of such thinking.

Closer to home, I recall a colleague confiding some years ago that they had been involved in 'prayer ministry' with a woman who had traced her pastoral needs back, eventually, to recovered memories of witnessing newborn babies being sacrificed in a field during satanic ritual. Their mothers – 'broodmares' was the term used – were repeatedly impregnated so more such sacrificial rituals could be repeated. I was told that the woman recalled where several foetuses and newborns had been buried, as she'd witnessed this.

So, the prayer ministers prayed for the healing of the woman and her memories, and then accompanied her to the place where the slaughter had allegedly happened. There at the site, they spent time interceding for spiritual healing, cleansing and peace, as well as prayers to exorcise the ground of its evil past and satanic control. This had been, I was informed, and intense spiritual season, in which much good work had been done of the highest order.

Naturally, I wanted to know why the prayer ministry team had not contacted the police to report the alleged crimes and excavate the ground for evidence that could lead to criminal convictions. Their reply indicated that I had entirely missed the point of this prayer ministry. The woman was now at peace and healed. The dead babies were at peace. And that through their prayers, the area where they had been buried was freed from satanic bondage. This was not a matter of involving secular bodies such as the police, or for autopsies. This was spiritual warfare, and now that the past, present and ground were restored to God's sovereign dominion, life could continue. Naturally, my inquiries about the site of this mass-burial of babies was met with silence.

In 1980, a Canadian book, *Michelle Remembers*, written by Michelle Smith and Laurence Pazder, caused a minor media storm. Pazder was Smith's therapist, and following 600 hours of hypnosis and Christian counselling, Smith 'recovered' multiple memories of satanic ritual-sexual abuse. The book swept through the burgeoning legions of new-right evangelicals, who were increasingly prominent in public life within the USA and UK. Bolstered by an empathetic political climate – Thatcher, Reagan, the Cold War in a new phase with a nuclear arms race, the Russian invasion of Afghanistan, socialist parties in decline, and revolution in Iran – conspiracy theories abounded. Pazder and Smith's book ignited a satanic panic, with consequential right-wing concerns resulting in proactive measures.

A decade later, journalist Andrew Boyd's book added fresh impetus to the idea that hiding in plain sight within seemingly ordinary, decent, respectable communities, there lurked covens and cults devoted to satanic ritual abuse, paedophilia and child sacrifice. The lack of hard evidence was confirmation for the conspiracy theorists, who argued that this indicated the involvement of the police, law courts and others ('at the highest level') who were party to these activities, so easily able to ensure there was no evidence.

Boyd's book claimed to have interviewed specialist professional counsellors across Britain, with expertise in unlocking suppressed memories and trauma wounds relating to satanic ritual abuse. In 1991, when his book was published, he calculated that more than 600 victims of ritual abuse were in counselling. The layers

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1740355324000305 Published online by Cambridge University Press

of hierarchy protecting the satanic ritual abuse meant that truth and justice by normal secular channels were not possible. However, as some victims had made credible disclosures, what was being said 'must be true'.

In several cases – Rochdale, Orkney, Nottingham (Congleton) and Epping Forest – social workers, child protection officers and even the police somehow became convinced of the veracity of the claims. Children were removed from the parental homes of the accused. On South Ronaldsay (Orkney) in February 1991, nine children from four families were removed from their parents during dawn raids led by the police. The allegations made against the accused even extended to the local church minister, with all accused of being part of a 'Satanic Ring of Ritual Abuse'.

Several weeks later, the case came to court, with Presiding Judge (Sheriff) David Kelbie dismissing it and ordering the children to be returned home to their parents immediately. Judge Kelbie criticised the social workers involved, noting their handling of the case had been fundamentally defective and that the processes in operation were 'so fatally flawed as to be incompetent'.

What used to be a relatively obscure fringe topic – a belief in so-called satanic ritual abuse – has taken off as a global conspiracy theory, amplified and spread through social media and the dark web. Extremist proponents of the theory claim the world is run by an elite international network of paedophile Satanists who rape and sacrifice babies and children, drink their blood and eat their flesh. Practitioners include senior royals, politicians, judges, police and the military – virtually anyone considered an establishment figure or role. Nonetheless, reports persist that children and adults are being systematically abused during satanic rituals.

The proponents of satanic ritual abuse conspiracy theories concede that no forensic evidence – such as DNA, bodies, bones or bloodstains – has ever been found. Specious theories are advanced to explain why, with some 'experts' engaged in intellectual somersaults to argue that no evidence is proof. In the USA in April 1989, for example, police lieutenant Lawrence Haake from Richmond, Virginia, informed the *Richmond News Leader* that police found no evidence of sacrifices because the Satanists were so skilful at disposing of bodies and cleaning up: 'No evidence can be evidence', he said.

Some therapists have also followed this same logic. Dr Roland Summit, an American psychiatrist involved in the earliest cases in the USA and whose literature strongly influenced the field, developed an explanatory theory. Known as the 'Child Sexual Abuse Accommodation Syndrome', it postulates that a child may find it hard to disclose abuse if they have accommodated it. Other stages in Accommodation Syndrome theorists account for denial or even retracting disclosure. Thus, Summit's theory confirms the reality of abuse – even when the alleged victim denies it.

In the UK, organizations sprung up to offer counselling to victims and promote awareness of the reality of satanic ritual abuse to local authorities, police forces, government and faith leaders. RAINS – the Ritual Abuse Information Network and Support – was set up by a group of social workers and psychotherapists convinced that satanic abuse exists. The founder members were committed to alerting agencies and the public to dangers they believed to be prevalent.

RAINS also appear to adopt the more flexible approach to truth and language exemplified by the Church of England's safeguarding literature. RAINS may claim

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to have 'acted as advisors' or 'advised' the police, 'expert organizations', local authorities and other groups. Whether such bodies had ever asked for, commissioned or listened to advice from RAINS is left unsaid. Likewise, 'worked alongside statutory agencies' in abuse cases and 'counselling and supporting victims' are spongy and opaque rather than concrete and clear claims. Similar organizations (e.g., Survivor Voices and ReShapersCIC) follow the same pattern and lack regulatory oversight.

A common denominator for the Church of England and other faith-based bodies committed to raising awareness of satanic ritual abuse is that there is no independent external regulation of the services being promoted, and those delivering them typically lack any requisite external qualifications or validation to support their claims of professional expertise. These groups and bodies are untrained, unaccountable, unregulated and unlicensed. They usually lack any cognisance of data protection legislation (e.g., GDPR) or equality obligations under the law (i.e., EqA 2014). Typically running with very low-income levels, these bodies and the individuals running them are inherently committed to promoting and amplifying their concerns to stay solvent in business. They are, therefore, bound to believe most, if not all, disclosures of abuse made, no matter how unlikely or fantastical they might seem to others. Or, as seems apparent, encourage disclosures that might simply be fanciful.

Academics engaging in the field of ritual sexual abuse, such as Jean la Fontaine, Rosie Waterhouse and others, have consistently highlighted the evidential issues one encounters in investigating allegations. The Church of England, though hardly alone as a denomination here, lacks the resources, due process, methods, forensic skills and jurisprudence to conduct such work. It is also now increasingly apparent that it cannot manage this in safeguarding investigations, nor ever could. Organizations recruited to consolidate – or instead camouflage this significant lacuna – will also lack the requisite external validation credentials, proper regulatory oversight or professional qualifications.

What marks the Church of England's safeguarding practice out is the near-complete and total absence of any professional standards or qualifications that alleged victims or accused could rely upon. The Church of England, being (literally) a 'law unto itself', can function as complainant, representative of the complainant, investigator, prosecutor, judge, jury, enforcer of penalty or awarder of redress (NB: but not to the falsely accused). Furthermore, such tasks may be undertaken by the same person 'authorised' by the church to do so.

Allegations of satanic ritual abuse often dwell in a jurisprudence-free zone. Like safeguarding allegations, they cause chaos, are not easily contained, and, whether true or false, are extremely serious and life-changing for both the accused and the alleged victim. The Church of England, operating mainly from a default native pastoral template, will struggle to resolve even the most ordinary interpersonal arguments in congregations or commonplace HR disputes within dioceses. So, it has no prospects of discerning and resolving allegations or disputes that are far more serious.

The lessons learned from Rosie Waterhouse and Jean La Fontaine could, however, be instructive for the Church of England's (deplorable) practices and policies in safeguarding going forward. Waterhouse (1990) noted how the very idea

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1740355324000305 Published online by Cambridge University Press

of 'ritual' or 'satanic' abuse originated among evangelical groups in the USA and crossed the Atlantic through the Evangelical Alliance and other agencies, who were briefing journalists in 1990 that several cases were being formally investigated by the police. The subsequent hysteria proved to be a contagion. So, in 1993, Jean La Fontaine was commissioned by the government to investigate the subject, and her report was published in 1994. Her subsequent book provided the research findings that underlie the report and are instructive.

First, allegations of 'ritual' or 'satanic' abuse were usually initiated by groups of Christian fundamentalists and only later taken up by psychotherapists, social workers and eventually the police.

Second, there were similarities between the allegations made and those in early modern European and early colonial American witch-hunts, with the same evidential vacuums overcome by 'spectral' testimonies and salacious accusations (i.e., always sexual, harmful or abusive). Curiously, witches and others with alleged satanic powers never use their abilities to win the lottery or place a winning bet at the races. Such cognitive dissonance is extraordinary. Though there are differences between witch-hunts in different eras stretching back thousands of years, we should note that similar allegations of murder, cannibalism and incest were made against followers of Bacchus, the early Christians, the Cathars, early modern European witches and adults today.

Third, such allegations are usually intended to explain something which cannot be explained in any other way at the time. Allegations will typically tend to arise in periods of general social unease, with the accused being projected onto (e.g., anti-social traits and demonic) and singled out as culpable, as the history of antisemitism testifies. The identity or traits held to be contra-social will usually lead to the authorities being complicit in the allegations for fear of being accused of shielding perpetrators.

Fourth, in response, believers and sceptics will be drawn from various groups who do not always agree about the issues. For example, scholars agree that the practices of modern occultists bear no relationship to the practices described in the allegations, which are closer to modern fiction. Christian groups invested in believing in satanic ritual abuse will simply not accept these kinds of assurances.

Fifth, class plays a crucial role. In the USA, cases have typically involved small middle-class families with articulate children. In contrast, UK cases have primarily involved larger families from deprived backgrounds. The first recent UK case took place in Shropshire in 1982. Most of the cases identified after that are usually linked with social workers' experience of a previous case, much as early modern European cases mainly were linked with the presence of specific persons or entities engaged in the locality purporting to have the requisite knowledge and experience for handling and understanding this type of abuse. In other words, 'experts' will often be self-authenticating and self-validated. As such, their expertise is complex to interrogate and harder still to challenge or refute. Any evidential absence will be cited as indicative of a conspiracy and coverups. Believers will use a variety of explanations for the lack of evidence, including the extraordinary spiritual and temporal powers ascribed to the alleged abusers or the authority's failure to conduct a sufficiently thorough, extensive and professional investigation.

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Sixth, a familiar context in the media reporting allegations is that normative standards of family life are thought to be disintegrating, and normal obligations between family members have become corrupted. That is traceable in reports of incest and other types of abuse. While children may generally tell the truth, young children's memories are unreliable, and adults usually subject their stories to an interpretative framework. Failures in interviewing children and recording allegations are commonplace.

Seventh, Christian groups, organizations and individuals invested in verifying satanic ritual abuse have been unable to explain why the gender balance in allegations of ritual abuse is roughly equal when it is not for other abuse allegations. Nor can the Christian organizations explain why, when Holocaust survivors can remember many of the names and faces of their abusers in considerable detail, even decades after their suffering and trauma, with experiences including torture, malnutrition, and physical beatings, survivors of ritual abuse are unable to do so.

Eighth, and finally, the UK allegations of ritual abuse have gone through three specific waves (or phases). The original wave was from Christian organizations influenced by fundamentalist groups. Social workers primarily took up the subsequent wave, influenced by the earlier wave. The third wave saw social workers, often working in 'sink estates', with a focus on adults who were undergoing psychotherapy for unresolved trauma and behavioural difficulties.

Ninth, I should add that anything involving the Church of England, sex, alleged deviance and ritual is bound to end in a cataclysmic disaster. As with virtually every area of human sexuality, it wishes to establish normativity in general terms and never discuss what constitutes sex in specific terms. Stories of satanic sexual abuse paradoxically become the safest way for a church divided on sexuality and unable to speak about it in detail to unite in quite specific terms on what must be proscribed and condemned.

Tenth, the safeguarding sphere has an unwritten compact between charismatic or conservative Evangelicals and Anglo-Catholics. Keen to project (or deflect) their concerns over sexual impropriety or simply more openness on sexuality, the conservative elements of the church point the finger at central, broad and liberal elements occupying the middle ground. This is paradoxical, as most of the severe sexual abuse cases come from the wings of the church that struggle to talk about sexuality at all, except in regressive or suppressive terms. The sexual abuse of minors is sufficiently severe enough without being turned into something sensationalist and satanic or projected onto an imagined society collapsing under the weight of liberal values.

So unable to face the issues and face itself, the Church of England has chalked up a huge catalogue of botched proceedings against the accused from either end of its conservative wings. Recent examples include Peter ball, John Smyth, Jonathan Fletcher, Chris Brain and Mike Pilavachi. Often, justice comes years too late, as was the case with Peter Ball, where the Church of England again failed. In most cases, justice and truth never come. The cases of George Bell and Alan Griffin exemplify how inadequate and tragic safeguarding processes are. It makes examples of middle-of-the-road Bishops like Chris Lowson or Michael Perham, only then to be forced into apologising for getting it wrong. Again.

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In all this, the Church of England 'strains the gnat and swallows the camel' (Matthew 23: 24). Yet the severe sexual abuse of minors is taking place within paedophile rings, as recent inquiries in Rotherham and other northern towns have shown. And there have been examples of clergy and laity – and from all churchmanship – engaged in group abuse. However, the Church of England's safeguarding work seems to miss every opportunity to act with professionalism and proportionality. Such cognitive dissonance is striking.

The *Independent Report* by Moira Gibbs on the crimes of (the Church of England) Bishop Peter Ball in the Diocese of Chichester (see Dame Moira Gibbs Independent Review of the case of Bishop Peter Ball; M. Gibbs, *An Abuse of Faith*, (London: Church House Publishing, 2017). Gibbs points out that (pp. 60–61)):

> 'When Ball was first a priest, and a bishop, homosexuality was the subject of clear legal and religious proscription. There was also a higher and more overt level of societal prejudice against homosexuality than there is today. For clerics and the faithful, these religious, legal and social pressures reinforced a strong taboo. It was extremely difficult for those such as Ball's victims to speak openly to family members, others in the church or in authority about their experiences and concerns. They had good cause to fear legal action, social ostracisation and damage to their careers. This gave Ball confidence that his victims would remain silent about their experiences. The taboo may have contributed to what appears to be his denial and self-deceit.
>
> There was, in some parts of the Church, an inexperience and naïveté in relation to homosexuality, certainly during the early years under review. Ball successfully conflated abusive sexual activity with practices which were towards the margins of intense spirituality. There was also a trivialization in the Church of the nature and consequences of conduct which was known to be wrong – Roy Cotton was ordained despite having an acknowledged conviction for the sexual abuse of a boy, while, for the same matter and in the same era, he was permanently excluded from the Scouting movement. That overall context of confusion and denial contributed to the inadequacy of the Church's response to Ball's misconduct. It promoted the view that a person of Ball's religious stature was incapable of truly abusive behaviour, so that the accusations against him must be misguided or malicious.
>
> This issue continues to be a source of division and debate in the Church, and an important concern for some of Ball's victims. We would simply emphasise that the Church must promote an open and accepting culture in which everyone, regardless of their sexuality or their views about homosexuality, is clear about their responsibilities towards those who might be abused or who might want to raise concerns about abuse'.

The Ball case highlights several very real problems for the church and its victims. The church cannot honestly and openly discuss sex, so safeguarding is bound to be corrupted in such an ecology. Furthermore, the church is too willing to defer to the

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power and authority of bishops. They are often perceived to hold 'ace cards': mystique, preference and broader knowledge bases.

An ecclesial culture that colludes with trusting their mellifluous assertions is unwise. Clergy and laity assume bishops to be almost omniscient. But, without evidence, assurances and assertions from bishops carry far too much weight. Furthermore, there must be significant doubts about their competencies in areas where they lack any externally validated qualifications, registration or professional training. The safeguarding of children is a conspicuous example.

Yet bishops, and only because they are bishops, often retain positions of 'oversight' in fields they simply do not comprehend – education, safeguarding and public policy – to name a few. They feel they need to defend their comprehensiveness and role in such oversight, even when it is manifestly the case that they are many miles out of their depth or sometimes just plain wrong. All too often, the exposure of any weakness, failure or wrongdoing in them is met with defensive assertions and reassertions. They keep digging deeper into the holes they have become entrenched in.

This 'lessons learned review' has sought to highlight the underlying complexities embedded in such well-documented phenomena as satanic ritual abuse. Our survey shows that churches uniformly lack the expertise and resources to deal with unevidenced allegations. They are not alone in that, as the Congleton, Orkney, Epping Forest and Rochdale cases demonstrate – the police and social services will often be flummoxed by the allegations and struggle to contain and process them. They tend to respond to accusations disproportionately, instinct-led and evidence-free, lacking due process.

However, the crucial difference between churches or Christian organizations and the grouping of social services, police and other statutory agencies is that the latter is regulated, accountable and responsible (i.e., legally, financially, etc.) and subject to procedures that allow for appeals, reparation, and compensation. Churches and Christian organizations engaged in promoting (or even profiting from) satanic ritual abuse are not subject to any control. They are unregulated and unaccountable, and their 'experts' lack external validation, registration, or the relevant qualifications – legal, therapeutic, or social care.

These same dynamics pertain to safeguarding in the Church of England today. Unlike social services, medical practitioners, police and law courts, there is no independent oversight of the Church of England's safeguarding. Its operations are undertaken by unregulated, unaccountable, unlicensed and unqualified persons with no externally validated certified training. That is some safeguarding crucible. It is inherently *unsafe*.

Cite this article: Percy, M. (2024). The Crucible: Lessons Learned from Previous Centuries. *Journal of Anglican Studies* **22**, 450–459. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1740355324000305

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