



The Rev. Percy Gray inspects desecrated Nunhead Cemetery in London. (RNS)

WITCHCRAFT...It's Booming in England

London—(RNS)—Candles burning near skulls in eerie cemeteries . . . family vaults and tombs are desecrated . . . a man with a cross hunts "vampires" . . . "evil rites" drive a rector away from an ancient chapel.

These are but a few of the outward signs of Britain's latest "in" craze—witchcraft and black magic. Behind the scenes are the witches' secret meetings, complete with altar, masks, death curses and ceremonial nude practices.

All bunk, as one news columnist charged? Or a serious business, as "king witches" and some churchmen maintain?

The answer may lie somewhere between the two. The facts are that witchcraft and black magic—or "white magic," some say—are booming in Britain's current "permissive society."

A leading authority on the subject is Charles Pace, known to witches as "Hamar-At." He estimates there are 30,000 practicing witches in Britain and more than 500,000 ordinary people interested in black magic.

"Unlike the churches, many of which get emptier each year, witchcraft is steadily gaining adherents," he wrote after taking part in an investigation sponsored by the racy Sunday newspaper News of the World.

"Church leaders who blame television for their empty pews are altogether too complacent," said Pace. "Although VT . . . will satisfy people of limited imag-

inations, there are others who demand something more positive."

Witchcraft in England, of course, is not entirely new. Dating back to ancient times, it received a modern push in the 1950s from Gerald B. Gardner who organized witches' covens and developed a ritual. His book, "Witchcraft Today," is enjoying a revival. In his later years, he became the director of the Museum of Magic and Witchcraft on the Isle of Man.

Gardner, who died in 1964, explained that black magic was "simply the use of some abnormal faculty." Witches, he said, believed a power within them would be released by rituals, and more rapidly when naked.

What has caused the present interest? Canon J. D. Pearce-Higgins, acting provost of Southwark Cathedral and an Anglican expert on psychological studies, told Religious News Service that the cause was "the failure of the churches to have any reasonable eschatology." He was not prepared to discuss the whys or hows of the cults.

The Rev. Percy Gray, 38, vicar of St. Crispin's church, however, has been concerned with what some believe to be magic rites. He says he was asked to re-bury the body of a child which had been taken from a coffin in the now-closed Nunhead Cemetery. He believes the body was removed for a "black-magic ceremony."

The vicar reported several incidents in which gravestone crosses were smashed and tombs were broken open. He is now organizing a society for the protection of the dead.

In May, a 113-year-old vault in St. Gregory's churchyard, Canterbury, was opened and bones scattered. The words "Lucifer" and "Pigs" were written on a skull.

Workmen sent to prepare a grave in a little used chapel in a Score Valley cemetery near Ilfracombe found circles on the floor, six-pointed stars and black candles.

The Rev. Louis Barker of Clophill, Bedfordshire, quit his Anglican parish because "the non-stop black magic rituals" got him down. Mr. Barker, 67, told of graves being opened, bones placed in a circle, skulls on iron bars, and circles enclosing Maltese crosses and black candles on the gates to the church.

In August, magistrates in Clerkenwell, in central London, were told that police found a man in a cemetery carrying a large wooden crucifix to which was hooked a piece of rope and a stake. He told police he was looking for a black magic meeting to see what transpired.

Witchcraft is not illegal, since the ban on it was revoked 200 years ago. It is now worrying some politicians, including Gwilyn Roberts, the former Labor delegate to Parliament from South Bedfordshire. Just before he was defeated in June, he made a plea to outlaw witchcraft again. It was rejected.

The incidents in lonely churchyards are small compared to the "real orgies" confined to the big cult circles and covens according to Mr. Pace. A coven customarily has 13 members, 12 witches and high priest or priestess. Pace says every town of any size in Britain has at least one.

New witches are initiated at ceremonies involving magic circles, scourges, altars and sexual intercourse between the new witch and the initiators.

There is apparently a dispute over the proper claimant for the title "King of the Witches" in Britain. Alex Sanders claims he holds that distinction and threatens any challengers with death curses.

Meanwhile in Wales, Eric J. Humphrey—known as Janus of Monmouthshire—says Mr. Sanders is not recognized there as he, Janus, holds authority and is directly answerable "to our God, Lucifer, Prince of Darkness, just as a priest or bishop is answerable to God."

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