from the West Bank and Gaza Strip? Who runs the UN? Two days after the 1980 vote President Carter disavowed US support even though his representative had voted for it!

For those of us involved in "the great struggle" for "collective security", we were about defending the USSR, not oil. At that time it wasn't a mistake. But this time?

Betty Searle, Mosman, NSW

Witch-hunt

I read Yvonne Preston's article on ritual child abuse (ALR 126, March) with interest and concern. Protecting children from harm is a very human and commendable goal. But there is an old saying that the road to hell is paved with good intentions. In her last paragraph Preston derides "male columnists" who fear "witch-hunts". Yet her article itself demonstrates that it is not only males who are being accused. I refer to the allegations about the old Sydney woman whom children called "the hag".

A few centuries ago, witch-hunts were more than a figure of speech. "Hags" were regularly hanged or burnt at the stake for torturing the innocent to please the Devil. Children and adolescents were key witnesses in many of the classic witch-hunts, including the one at Salem, Massachusetts. Ann Putnam, 12-year-old leader of the group who identified the Salem witches and wizards, was later to admit that her evidence had been wrong—14 years after the trials and hangings.

While the Salem charges weren't identical to those in Preston's article, the purge demonstrated two important things. Firstly, that children aren't always reliable witnesses. Secondly, that fear of devilish religion breeds injustice. Out of such fears grew the "blood libel" against European Jews, the claim that they killed Christian infants for ritual purposes, especially at Passover. More recently, a nation's fascinated horror with the idea of child sacrifice led to the false imprisonment of a Seventh Day Adventist called Lindy Chamberlain. Rumour had it that the name Azaria meant "sacrifice in the desert". In this instance forensic experts, not children, came up with the prosecution evidence—demonstrating that adults can get things wrong too.

In the days of the witch-hunts there may well have been a few people who experimented with "satanic" inversions of church rituals, as there are in Christian countries today. Conceivably, some of these activities caused physical or psychological harm, either to children or to adults. But the harm done by well-meaning witch-hunters was (and perhaps will be) much greater.

I object to any practices (ritual, sexual or otherwise) which injure or upset children. Inquiry into children's allegations would be welcome, if only it could be accompanied by enough sensitivity to avoid worsening any trauma, and by enough scepticism to avoid smearing or convicting people who have done nothing wrong. Children are not little angels incapable of falsehood or confusion, nor are they imps perpetually full of mischief—they are human.

But Preston equates scepticism with "slander". She points to "the inappropriateness of the adversarial court system" for ritual abuse cases. She also approvingly cites "a member of a special investigating unit in the United States" as saying that "occult crime should be seen as the outcome of the decline in rationalism, disenchantment with traditional religion, the influence of Eastern religions, para-psychology, the popularity of pseudo-satanic heavy metal music and the proliferation of occult literature."

For consistent defenders of human rights there can be no exceptions to the principle that an accused person is innocent until proven guilty. The right to a defence and the benefit of the principle that an accused person is innocent until proven guilty. The right to a defence and the benefit of legislation must be granted even to such un-American elements as Buddhists, heavy metal fans and tarot card enthusiasts. Even to Jews and Seventh Day Adventists. Even to "hags".

Otherwise we are back in Salem.

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