

Hell in Paradise Street

I was a Catholic. I say 'was' because as soon as I became old enough to be master of my own mind I decided I was an atheist. The idea of a Superior Being in Heaven didn't really ring true, I feel that I am much too sensible for any of that religious nonsense. But I do admire my mother for still proudly wearing her *I met the Pope* badge from when his divine light shone upon her during his 1982 tour. I can't remember if his visitation was a Wembley extravaganza or a free gig at Hyde Park, but along went mum to pray for her wayward sons.

Bless her.

Even so, I still resent the fact that I was compelled to accept another person's beliefs at an age when I could not argue.

What chance did I have? Born in the bedroom of my nan's house on Millpond Estate, my first journey into the outside world was three weeks later when I was carried - *screaming* - round to St. Peter's Roman Catholic church to be christened. Not even allowed the benefit of fresh air until I was baptised! The church was in Paradise Street, of all places, which added a more biblical touch to proceedings, and I would like to think that my screaming was in protest at my unsolicited predicament. The truth being I was one of those babies that cried a lot.

My next encounter with the esoteric rituals of the Catholic Church was as a toddler. On Sunday mornings I would be scrubbed clean for when my ultra-religious Aunt Liz came to take me to Mass. She gave me pennies to put in the collection box as it went up and down the pews. I was dying to catch someone pinching one of the half-crowns that I would've liked to have purloined for myself. My greedy eyes must have gave me away because Aunt Liz always checked that I had put all the pennies on to the plate and not held any back to buy sweets later.

Being a Catholic came easy to Aunt Liz. Unlike me she knew exactly what was going on and used to tell me when to kneel, when to stand up, when to sit down, when to hold my hands together in prayer. It was all a mystery to me. Each different command was accompanied by an elbow in the ear; nudge - kneel, nudge - sit, nudge - stand up... Two nudges meant I had forgot to say Amen. But I was never praying, I was too busy worrying about what I had to do next.

Aunt Liz would also give me pennies to "light a candle for your father up in Heaven, gawd rest his soul". I always wanted to light one of the new, long candles that would be there, but Aunt Liz would always make me re-light a small used one. Aunt Liz never smiled much; I think she still had the hump about Jesus being crucified.

Life got worse on the religion front. After being *christened* at St. Peter's Church, being mentally *tortured* every Sunday at St. Peter's Church, I then reached the age when I was sent to be indoctrinated at the school *adjoining* St. Peter's Church - St. Joseph's Roman Catholic School. Where - surprise, surprise - religion was laid on like a teenage girl's make-up: Prayers in the morning, prayers in the afternoon, prayers for homework, prayers before I went to bed... *and*

learning the Latin Mass in order to follow the service and make the responses in the appropriate places. There was church God knows how many times a week and plenty of it at Easter and Christmas when other kids seemed to be having holidays.

Then came confession. Confess? What did I have to confess at that tender age? I had to make stories up just to keep the priest happy! There was not much else I could do, not once I had originally made the mistake of saying that I had *nothing* to confess, that I had done nothing wrong. The priest was having none of it...

“Come on boy, surely you’ve sinned in the eyes of the Lord.”

“No, Father, honest I ain’t”

“You must’ve swore at your mother under your breath.”

“Don’t know any swear words, Father.”

“Have you told any lies?”

“Course not, Father.”

“Have you not been playing with yourself in bed?”

“Don’t know what you mean, Father.”

“What about stealing from your father’s pockets?”

“I ain’t got a father, Father.”

Well, on and on he went, getting more and more exasperated, until eventually he began to work his way through the Ten Commandments - “Have you killed anyone?” ... Finally he got fed up and shooed me out of the confessional - after asking my full name for future reference - but now I had the hang of it. The next time I was due to make confession I knew exactly what had to be done... “Forgive me Father for I have sinned...” I told him I shout ‘Wanker’ to people out of my bedroom window; that I steal trains and drive them to the seaside; play with myself all day in class when the nun isn’t looking; and covet my neighbour’s wife!

I was saying Hail Mary’s as penance for hours after that little *faux pas*, and I think he threw in a few laps of the rosary as well.