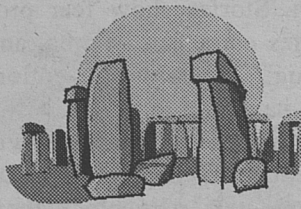


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STONEHENGE TO STONEWALL

by charlie emond



The Kids Are All Right

At the Northfield Labor Day parade in September, I overheard a beefy motorcyclist in a leather jacket say, as he fastened a "Take Back Vermont" sign to his Harley-Davidson, "We are doing this for the children."

I do not know what children he referred to (certainly not the gay kind!), but perhaps he thought civil unions somehow involve child marriage, or that two men might conceive and bear a child, or possibly that the sight of two women holding hands might scare the kids. I will bet that, not so deep down, he was buying into the age-old misconception that gay men prey on children.

He might be interested to know this is not the first time in history that a particular group of people has been accused of being "after our children." It has long been a useful rallying cry against an enemy. To quote John Boswell, "No charge against a minority seems to be more damaging than the claim that they pose a threat of some sort to the children of the majority."

This nefarious sin

Hundreds of years ago, Jews were accused of ritual murder of Christian children. One of these children, William of Norwich, was made a saint after supposedly being killed

by Jews in some sort of ritual. This kind of rampant misinformation resulted in horrible suffering for Jews throughout Europe in the late 12th century and beyond.

Muslims also accused Christians of this kind of thing, and Christians accused Muslims. In the 1330s, Jacob of Verona claimed that, for Muslims, "no sexual act was sinful." This kind of wild accusation fired up the noble Crusaders (for whom EVERY sexual act was sinful!).

Such ideas about Muslims were common into the 15th century. A letter purported to have been written by the Emperor Alexius asked the French for help: "They have degraded by sodomizing them men of every age and rank: boys, adolescents, young men, old men, and what is worse and more wicked, clerics and monks and even—alas for shame! something which from the beginning of time has never been spoken of or heard of—bishops! They have already killed one bishop with this nefarious sin."

Another Christian writer of this period proclaimed, "When the Saracens—corruptors of human nature, see the boys, they immediately burn with lust for them and, like mad dogs, race to buy the boys for themselves... so that they can

have their evil ways with them."

The "Take Back Vermont" crowd would LOVE to have this quote for their flyers! They might even identify it as coming directly from that infamous "Saracen Agenda."

Gypsies got the worst of it. "Europeans and some Americans, well into the 20th century, believed that gypsies would steal children." We love to threaten our children with witches, goblins, ghosts, and bogeymen. The last actually comes from the French "bougre," the active partner in a homoerotic coupling. From this word, we get "bugger," as well as "bogeyman," with which I was threatened as a child. Talk about the collective subconscious at work!

Teach your children well

"They are teaching our children to be homosexuals!" runs the accusation against embattled Outright Vermont. The rest of the charge aside, use of the word "children" always conjures up a vision of innocent second graders. But in reality, Outright is talking largely to a constituency of 16- to 18-year-olds, who, whether we like it or not, are probably sexually active and in dire need of information to stay safe, as well as support to deal with sexuality issues.



29% of HIV infection cases among women exposed through heterosexual contact are in young women ages 13-24. (Through 1999 in areas reporting confidential HIV results to the CDC.)

Many ancient cultures relied upon the body's own biological clock to indicate when a young person was ready for sex (when that puberty alarm goes off, watch out!), but Americans are remarkably inconsistent about the age issue. We don't want our own kids to have sex until their thirties, yet some states allow marriage at 14 or 16. I have met any number of 16- and 17-year-old mothers and fathers right here in Vermont. People can join the military at 18, after all, and you never hear it said that we have child soldiers.

As for sexual abuse of children, the statistics overwhelmingly document straight men abusing their own daughters, yet you don't see Harley dudes parading against this appalling social ill.

Walk a mile in their moccasins

For a refreshing contrast, consider the native Americans. In most tribes, the berdache, an androgynous spiritual shaman, took care of children and helped in their education. They "are recognized as having a special talent in educating children." These "gay men" were considered excellent teachers and caregivers. Walter Williams writes, "It was quite common for berdaches to adopt older children and adolescents. Even today berdaches are known to be very good

with children."

Indian children were also allowed to develop this "alternative lifestyle" unhindered, and the whole tribe rejoiced when a berdache was found. They believed that this is what the Great Spirit intended for the child, and that it would be an insult to doubt the wisdom of the creator.

After all, the Indians had so many things right. Consider their ability to live in their environment without destroying it; consider their respect for nature; and consider their total acceptance of "two-spirited" people—those between male and female as they saw it.

Maybe we really ought to Take Back Vermont... to the days before Europeans came in and made such a mess of it.

Next time: All the World's a Stage!

For more information on the subject of the native American berdache, read Walter L. Williams' superb *The Spirit and the Flesh*.

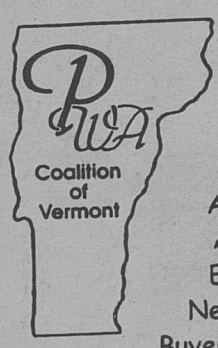
Charlie Emond has a bachelor's degree from Queens College and master's degrees from both Dartmouth and Keene State. He teaches college history courses in Springfield and White River Junction. ▼

Persons aged 13-24 years account for 15% of reported HIV cases, and women account for 49% of cases in this age group. (CDC, 1999)



Photo: Barb Dozetos

Alverta Perkins spoke on the Generations panel that started the VCLGR's annual conference on Oct. 21.



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