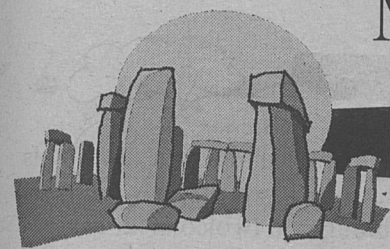


Mission Unconscionable

Stonehenge to Stonewall

By Charlie Emond



A missionary hymn from my Episcopal hymnal goes something like this: "From Greenland's icy mountains, from India's coral strand/From many an ancient river, from many a palmy plain/They call us to deliver their land from error's chain."

Well, I have been on many a palmy strand myself and I don't recall hearing anybody calling Christians to deliver them. In fact, it was very refreshing to be in Buddhist Thailand last year. Buddhists tend to leave you alone when it comes to religion. No cheap pamphlets on your windshield; nobody yelling about salvation; no sappy TV preachers.

It is an incalculable human tragedy that the Christian ideal reflected in this hymn was put into action during the last five centuries against the native tribes of the Americas. The forcible conversion and general slaughter of those who clung to "error's chain" has had terrible repercussions—including today's total rejection of the two-spirit person or berdache by nearly all Indian tribes.

"We have always had some of 'them' around, nobody really hurt them," says a Pima tribal elder. "Oh, they were always teased, especially as children, but they are just a part of life, so no one really thinks anything about it."

According to all I have read, however, the truth here is that homophobia is rampant on most reservations as a result of white Christian values. Most tribes are in denial that they ever even had these kinds of people, and that is tragic for native gay men and lesbians trying to live honestly and stay true to their heritage.

From many an ancient river

Not long after writing a column introducing We-Wha of the Zuni, the remarkable Navajo berdache of a century ago, a news item caught my eye: "Openly gay student murdered in New Mexico." It was a short story detailing the beating death of a young Navajo, but it struck a chord that still vibrates in my heart.

According to Navajo tradition and culture, the berdache (*nadleeh* in Navajo) was a special creation with special functions. This boy was actually a gift to the people of his tribe, like We-wha, yet they rejected him.

His name was Fred

Martinez, Jr, "openly gay, outgoing, and happy." He wore a dress and carried a purse to school. A hundred years ago, his tribe would have rejoiced in his presence among them and thanked the Great Spirit for this "nadleeh." In our time, after a brief lifetime of considerable taunting and abuse, he was killed as a direct or indirect result of twisted Christian teachings. He was 16 years old.

We whose souls are lighted

He is only the latest in a long line of such killings. Horrifyingly, many were carried out under the direction of Catholic priests in the name of a loving Jesus. Walter Williams reports that missionaries came to have such power on Indian reservations in the 19th century that their condemnation of berdaches led many to commit suicide.

Just as horrifying is the fact that so many of the priests were gay themselves. In his autobiography, *Gay Priest*, Malcolm Boyd says, "I assumed my own closetedness, and that of scores of other priests and seminarians whom I knew to be gay, to be completely natural. Our closetedness seemed to be accepted at the heart of the Establishment as a basic part of the life of the church." Boyd says some estimates put the numbers of gay clergy as high as 50 percent—which will not surprise you if you are a regular reader of this column. John Boswell's *Christianity, Social Tolerance and Homosexuality* carefully details gay clergy in every time period of western civilization.

I can't count the number of gay priests I have known since childhood; I know two who currently live with their boyfriends in their respective parishes. I recently saw an extensive list of gay men that included the names of Cardinal Cooke and Cardinal Spellman, both of New York. (Now there are stories I will have to look into!) I know of two gay bishops, one of whom is very publicly anti-gay. He is reported to have a male lover and a retirement home on Cape Cod. (Can you say the word "hypocrite," Your Eminence?)

Deliver their land from error's chain

I have never been able to understand the incredible hubris of Christian proselytizers. Driving through

Springfield, VT, the other day, I had to run a gauntlet of people shouting things at passing cars and waving huge wooden crosses and Jesus banners. Somehow I don't think that any of this is what Jesus had in mind. I don't doubt for a second that should he return, he would immediately change his name.

Unlike such Christians, I accept all religions to be equal, including the traditional native American beliefs. My boyfriend is Buddhist, and I regularly join him in prayer. I believe there is room in every human soul for all saints and all manifestations of a higher power, including the spirits of the natural world. I was once asked what my church (Catholic) thought about my singing in a United Church of Christ choir. I was taken aback by the question and quickly replied that my spiritual life is none of the church's damn business.

Before the coming of Christian missionaries, the native American tribes had so much right. We should have respected that and learned from them. They respected the different among them, they appreciated a gift when they got one, and they didn't expect their sacred cross-dressers to "hide beneath the lodge skins!"

Next time: On Walden Pond: was it something in the water?

For More Information: This gay history column is the 33rd in a series that began in prehistory. If you are a new OITM reader, or have not followed this column from the beginning, you might want to catch up by checking the OITM Archives online at www.mountainpridemedia.com and clicking on "Stonehenge to Stonewall."

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