

Has the Church A Future Among the Indians?

What future does Christianity have among American Indians?

A News Analysis

The tide of Indian civil rights militancy, accompanied by rediscovery of indigenous religious heritage, is forcefully raising this question.

Tentative answers range from blunt declarations by Indians that Christian faith is foreign, white and "inferior" to assertions that Christian and native forms can be harmonized.

A final answer will most likely depend on two interrelated factors: the degree of respect within non-Indian church structures for renewed Indian pride in Indian culture, and the initiatives of Indian Christians.

In the meantime, many voices are pleading with the churches to help the "legitimate Americans" break the cycle of poverty and discrimination that has existed for decades.

Few challenge the assertion that the treatment of Indians in North America is one of the most wretched episodes in human history.

It is the links between Christianity and the European culture which first subdued and then incarcerated Indians that causes some Indians to denounce the churches today.

Clyde Bellecourt, an official of the Washington, D.C.-based American Indian Movement (AIM) says the church is one of the "three main enemies" of his people. The other two he lists are the educational system and the U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs.

A Chippewa, Bellecourt explains that Indians are not against "the concept of Christianity, but we are against the way it has been used against the Indian people. Christianity was taught to the Indians by persons who broke all Ten Commandments."

He says that before the coming of whites the Indians were better able to put into practice a "culture based on sharing and compassion . . . practiced seven days a week."

Dr. Ed McGaa, an Oglala Sioux who is assistant director of Indian education for Minnesota,

is harsher in his criticism. While seeing all races as equally loved by the Great Spirit, he claims that Christianity is the religion of "warlike" Europeans and is "fantastically inferior to the Indian religion because of its structured, elevated priesthood."

According to Dr. McGaa, Indians are returning "en masse" to their own faith and will be "prouder, happier, more independent people" when the process of return is finished.

The extent of return, which is also reported by others, is difficult to measure. Since nearly one-half of all Indians now live in urban areas, statistics are not easily tabulated.

Census Bureau figures for 1970 show that the U.S. has nearly 800,000 Indians, up 51 per cent since 1960 and triple since the number counted in 1900.

How many of the present total are Christian is a matter of guesswork. The majority of the Indian Christians are Roman Catholic. In 1970, the Commission for Catholic Missions among the Colored People and the Indians reported 143,122 Catholic Indians. This number related primarily to persons on government reservations, where 55 per cent of the Indians lived in 1970.

Protestant Indians are many fewer, with the largest concentration of about 20,000 in the United Methodist Church. There are also Indians in the memberships of the several Baptist, Presbyterian and Lutheran denominations, as well as the Episcopal Church, the United Church of Christ and the more conservative and Pentecostal groups.

It is fair to estimate Indian Christians in the U.S. number between 200,000 and 250,000.

Among the Churches engaged in what was once called "Indian work" and among the Indian constituencies, efforts are underway to lessen the white, European identity of Christianity.

For the most part, the churches are not opposed to non-European forms in worship. Institutions are also beginning to listen to the advice Indian members give on mission efforts and church-related educational and social programs. For example, United

Methodist Indians have won a major voice in how mission funds for Indians are spent. It came as some shock to denominational leaders, after an Indian task force was named, to learn that Indians were not always benefited by the programs to "help" them.

The Churches are learning they are not blameless in the atrocities and injustices inflicted on Indians in the processes of American colonization and nationalism. While kind and sympathetic missionaries labored on behalf of Indian welfare, thousands of red men and women were murdered in the name of Christ by Spanish, French and English explorers and settlers.

In the 19th Century, Christians generally backed the ideology of "manifest destiny" — extending the U.S. from ocean to ocean — and voiced little protest when the government broke treaty after treaty with the Indians and,

finally, herded the remnants onto reservations.

The bestseller, *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*, by Dee Brown depicts how churchmen were among teams of treaty negotiators whose purposes were usually to swindle Indians out of land.

Realization of the grisly history of white treatment of Indians can produce guilt, yet it is not guilt that militant Indians are requesting, either of the government or the Churches, which are the two institutions most integrally involved with Indians. They are asking for rectification today of discrimination and conditions that keep Indians impoverished and oppressed.

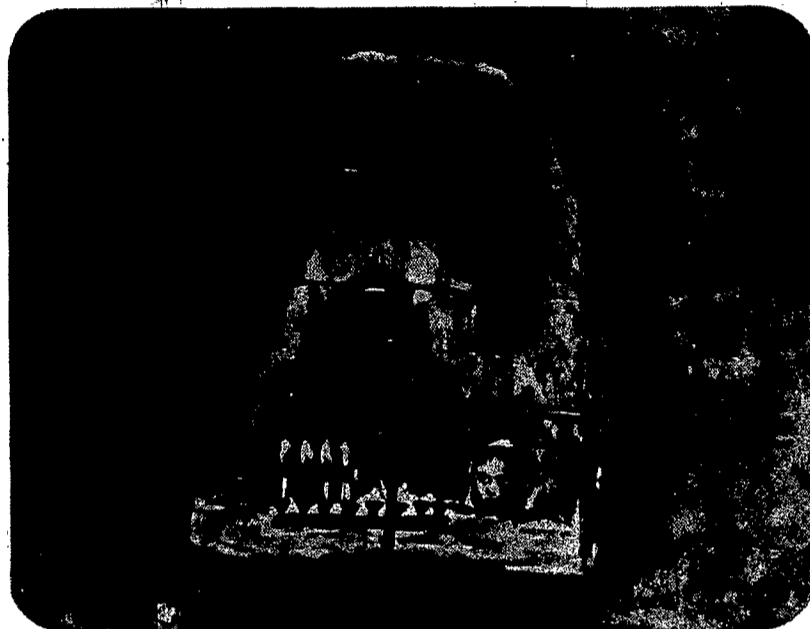
More listening would benefit Indians, Bellecourt suggests to churches. It was listening by government, Churches and other institutions that led to several recent and successful attempts by Indians to protect land and water reserves threatened by commercial and recreational enterprises.

Another suggestion to churches is the appeal by Vine Deloria, Jr., for assistance in setting up an independent agency to monitor Indian concerns. The author claims that the government is not always the Indians' best friend.

Mrs. LaDonna Harris, president of Americans for Indian Opportunity and a Comanche married to former Sen. Fred Harris of Oklahoma, has urged church aid in preserving the cultural heritage of Indians and

in rectifying the "poor" job done in writing about Indians in U.S. history.

But above all, says Mrs. Harris, church people can encourage Indians in their strides for justice, self-reliance and economic improvement by understanding "Indian-ness." Understanding will go a long way, she maintains, toward helping Indians regain what they need: cultural identification without discrimination.



Hanukkah
By S. KARCAMAN

Over the centuries, Jews have commemorated the Maccabean victory over the Syrians in 165 B.C. and the rededication of the Temple which had been defiled by the King of Syria during Hanukkah — the "Festival of Lights" or "Festival of Dedication." Since that time Hanukkah has been celebrated by lighting candles on a Menorah for eight days as a reminder of the miracle of a container of oil in the Temple which burned for eight

days instead of one.

When Hanukkah begins this year, on Dec. 1, special prayers will be recited by the father of the household and candles will be blessed. Then, using the ninth candle, called "Shammash," one of the eight candles will be lit. This ritual will be repeated for successive nights until all eight candles on the Menorah are ablaze. In addition, gifts are given and special games are played by the children.

For 17 Teachers... A Learning Experience

By BARBARA MOYNEHAN

For the past eight Saturday mornings Mrs. Patricia Mummert of the Lakeview Elementary school, held classes at St. Boniface on the theory and practice of individualized education, for 17 teachers from 12 schools.

According to one participant who was sorry to see the workshop end, Mrs. Mummert didn't have to teach much because the teachers were so enthused about

the new concept, they came up with their own ideas.

Mrs. Mummert has a master's degree in education from the State University College at Brockport and a lot of experience teaching and observing individualized education programs from traveling around the country for New York State research foundations.

The former Sacred Heart Academy faculty member feels an ancient Chinese proverb best explains the basis of individual-

ized education: "I hear and I forget. I see and I remember. I do and I understand."

Mrs. Mummert showed the teachers how to establish, in their classrooms, useful alternatives to conventional lessons, called learning centers.

A learning center is composed of brightly colored canisters filled with exercises in reading comprehension, self-expression, color and geometric figure matching, disguised as games.

Packaged learning is a natural thing to give children in an age when Madison Avenue has made merchandising and selling a science, the teachers and Mrs. Mummert agree.

One of the participants who implemented a learning center in her intermediate classroom three weeks ago, Mary Agnes McCann of Blessed Sacrament, said the idea is to supplement the children's regular work.

Since setting up the center for her 24 pupils she has noted "fewer discipline problems" and thus "more time to teach." While some of the class is doing regular lessons, the rest can be involved in learning center activities.

Miss McCann also noted that her pupils adjust better to more conventional lessons when seasoned with time spent in learning center activities.

Wednesday, November 29, 1972



Timothy Connor, in Miss McCann's class, plays "Compound Fracture," making up long words from short.

Courier-Journal



William Dato checks out completed puzzle.

But learning centers do not cure classroom commotion. "Sometimes it gets noisy because the kids get excited and want to share what they are working on. But it's nice noise," qualified Miss McCann. "It's nice to see kids excited about learning."

Other schools that participated were Sacred Heart, Christ the King, Holy Redeemer, Immaculate Conception, St. Francis Xavier, St. James, St. John the Evangelist, St. John's in Greece, Holy Trinity and St. John's in Spencerport.

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