

■ AND IN THIS CORNER...

Columbus and his Supporters — the Eurocentric Savages

Once more into the breach, dear friends...

I should never respond to particular columns or letters in the *Observer* — but this week, I'll make an exception. Of course, it may be libelous to mention the names of the writers in question, so I'll just say that their initials are Charles Rice and Fred Kelly.

I am not affiliated (yet) with the Native American Student Association of Notre Dame, or with any other Native American rights activist group. Still, I find myself agreeing with, if not outright approving of, their recent actions regarding the Columbus murals inside the Main Building. Apparently, my Catholic upbringing didn't properly train me to follow my innate natural law.

This is what the concept of "natural law" appears to be: you always know what good and evil are, even if you are there

is no such thing, because the Catholic Church, which is Truth embodied, will tell you what is right and wrong. At least, this appears to be what Professor Rice says about natural law, basing his absolute moral dictum upon the teachings of a monk who's been dead for almost 600 years.

(Philosophically speaking, Thomas Aquinas' teachings, particularly the spectacularly pathetic "argument from design," were subsumed by Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Judgment*. Then again, I don't suppose the Catholic Church could possibly read the works of a Protestant.)

Or as the allegedly infallible pope says, "The Catholic Church is, by the will of Christ, the teacher of Truth." A rather expedient system of ethics, wouldn't you say? Of course, it makes utter sense that you have to be Catholic to understand what good and evil are. Or at the very least be from a Western culture.

Next, we find Mr. Kelly referring to this definition of Truth to support his demotion of Native Americans to the status of second-class citizens. According to the moral law of Aquinas, he says, Native Americans should have realized that torturing people and forcing them to eat their own flesh was immoral. Therefore they were "savages," and it was a good thing for Columbus to have "saved their mortal souls" by introducing Christianity to the Americas. After all, he was only doing the Work of God, and who can argue with God?



What we have here is a clear example of two individuals who desperately need the benefits of multiculturalism. Mr. Kelly shows an impressive knowledge of some practices of various Native American tribes, selectively detailing the more vicious aspects, of course, and never really explaining the reasons for these practices.

Just as it is improper to refer to Europeans or Asians collectively, it is narrow-minded to refer to Native Americans as if the hundreds of tribes had the same exact culture. And just as it is improper to label Australian aborigines "savages," it is pure Western arrogance to claim Native Americans were "uncivilized." This is a display of a lack of cultural awareness and sensitivity on the part of the supposedly compassionate "Christian" author.

Since I am from New York State, which requires high schools to teach the history of the Iroquois and Algonkian, most of my knowledge of Native American culture is of those two groups of tribes. Although I by no means claim expertise of either culture, I can say with certainty that the Seneca tribe, one of the five Iroquois nations, did not "exterminate" their relatives the Huron. Disbelievers can ask the descendants of the Huron who live in small pockets in Quebec City, the area surrounding Detroit, and on the Wyandotte Reservation in Oklahoma if their ancestors were utterly annihilated.

To understand the significance of the sensationally quoted torturing incident of the Jesuit by an Iroquois tribe, one must first understand the Iroquois culture. Since both previously mentioned writers took the liberty to quote at length from various sources, I choose to quote from a slim anthropological volume entitled *The Huron*, by Bruce Trigger of McGill University:

"Three principles motivated traditional warfare among all the Iroquoian-speaking peoples... First, it was the principal means by which young men acquired personal prestige and won a respected place for themselves as adult members of society.

"Second, warfare was the way in which injuries inflicted by members of one people or confederacy upon members of another were avenged.

"Third, Iroquoian warfare was inspired by religious ideals. It was the means by which prisoners were obtained who were sacrificed by ritually torturing them to death. Among the Huron the spirit in whose honor this ritual was performed was louskeha, who also made the crops to grow and fish and game to thrive...

"The method of sacrifice, in turn, provided the Huron with an opportunity to vent their hatred of the enemy on a particular victim, and gave the victim, as warrior, a final, spectacular opportunity to display his courage."

Trigger then describes the method of torture and eventual death, a ritual very similar to the one this Jesuit supposedly underwent. This torture was not specifically designed for the priest, and was definitely not meant to be a "parody" of any Christian ritual. The Jesuit, who undoubtedly lived with his intended converts, would have been considered a member of the enemy's tribe by the raiding Iroquois and subsequently treated as such. The Jesuit should have realized the personal risk involved the moment he set foot within the Huron village.

Since all Iroquoian tribal societies were based upon the same societal structure and language, it is safe to assume that these tribes had no vested interest in totally eradicating each other. As Trigger points out, before the arrival of the French, indications are that the warfare between the various tribes was equal. Only after the Iroquois Five Nations obtained guns from the Dutch settlers did the tribal warfare

begin to become one-sided, as the Dutch pushed the Iroquois into western New York and the Iroquois pushed the Huron further North and Southwest.

In addition to aspects of Iroquois warfare, Trigger details the intricate societal makeup of the Huron, which may be compared in part to that of most Northeastern Native American tribes. For example:

- the chieftains were chosen by elder women of each tribal clan, and the chieftain's reputation as a leader was determined by how many gifts he gave to those families in his village.

- unmarried young men and women were not required by religious law to be chaste, as the Huron considered premarital relations to be healthy, yet if an unmarried woman became pregnant, it was customary for all the unmarried men to claim the child as his own, and the woman would select one to be her husband.

- no one in Iroquoian society was allowed to coerce another into doing things opposite to his or her expressed wishes.

- no family was allowed to have substantially more material possessions than another.

Seems to me Western "civilized" society could learn a few things from these "savages."

If any Native American tribes were completely eradicated, it was the numerous tribes who once occupied what is now Long Island and Connecticut. The plight of the Mohegan is vaguely familiar to anyone who read James Fenimore Cooper or watched the movie *Deerslayer* (not counting the recent farce of a movie, which was only a vehicle for Daniel "Look At My Chest Hair" Day-Lewis). In these instances, it was the white settlers who literally wiped out the local tribes, despite overtures of peace from the Native Americans. Through America's history, the Native Americans have only wanted to live in harmony with the white man, while the white man sought any excuse possible to antagonize and slaughter the Native Americans.

Despite the stories of gruesome warfare, it is a misapprehension to call pre-Columbian Native Americans "savages." Any half-decent historian will tell you that every culture in every corner of the globe throughout the history of mankind has been obsessed with killing each other. Medieval historians in particular should be able to recite an appalling compilation of the rape, the pillaging, the attempted cultural genocides, and the cannibalism perpetuated by Crusading Christians upon Muslims and Christians alike. Closer to our time, one has only to glance across the fields of rape and genocide in Bosnia-Herzegovina for an example of "modern civilization." And the Bosnian-Serbs aren't pagan, they're Christian.

As Thomas Hobbes put it, life is "nasty, brutish, and short." He wasn't referring to Native Americans.

And I hope I don't have to mention the numerous atrocities and betrayals committed by Uncle Sam against Native Americans during the late 1800s. The U.S. government looks for a battleground every twenty years or so to keep their brainless, hormonally rabid youths occupied. Count the number of years between the end of the Civil War and the "Indian Wars." Dee Brown's book *Bury My Heart At Wounded Knee* should provide enlightenment to all the General Custer admirers out there.

To wrap up, it is the differences between the religions of Native American tribes and Christianity which are responsible for the refusal of the white man to accept a different culture's right to exist. Whereas Native



Americans always sought to live in harmony with nature, to maintain the balance of power between man and woman, tribe and tribe, white man has always sought "progress," which he sometimes calls "civilization," to prove himself master of all he sees by enslaving it to his desire. Christianity has always sought to prove the superiority of one system of morality and one man's opinion; white man has always used his beliefs to justify the conquering of technologically weaker cultures and the rapping of their lands.

For Native Americans, as for nearly all indigenous peoples, the opposite is true: they believe that the land does not belong to them, they belong to the land. Native Americans do not set themselves above animals in some sort of perverted patriarchal hierarchy; they recognize

that humans are merely another form of animal, which, like all other animals, is dependent upon the cycles of nature for survival as a race. I cannot speak for NASA-ND, but I doubt that they desire a radical change in the (hopefully) compassionate religious nature of Notre Dame. What they seek is cultural awareness and respect, like any other culture or historically disenfranchised people, a sentiment that anyone familiar with the history of the Emerald Isle should share.

Rudyard Kipling would probably agree with the statement that Columbus ought to be praised for "bringing the Indians back to the natural law." I have to wonder if Notre Dame, as an institution, is proud to shoulder the white man's burden. The murals in the Main Building puzzle me. Why anyone should consider them works of art, and why in the world they are in northern Indiana, which last I knew was at least two thousand miles from the Caribbean, remains a mystery to me.

Still, I suppose it must be true that God blesses Columbus; after all, God helps those who help themselves, and, thanks to Columbus, the Europeans helped themselves to whatever they could get.

Matthew Apple is a Creative Writing graduate student at Notre Dame. Additional excerpts from *Native American lore and culture* are available at matthew.t.apple.1@nd.edu.

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