# Selective memory as curse

## Christian missionaries part of tribal heritage

As the Mashpee Wampanoag strive to "preserve their heritage," I would remind them of the English Protestant element in their heritage:

- The Christian missionaries preached the Indians' right to land.
- They brought the Indians into literacy. In 1643, Roger Williams published "A Key Into the Language of the Natives in New England." John Eliot introduced Wampanoag (Algonkin) to writing, wrote a grammar, then a dictionary, then a catechism for Christian instruction (1653), then the whole Bible (1663).
- Jonathan Edwards, whom many consider America's greatest religious thinker, so concentrated on work with Indians that he had to cease work among whites.
- The "Indian Meetinghouse" mentioned in your paper was built as an Indian Congregational church when Congregational churches were all called meetinghouses.
- Princess Evening Star, whom I knew, was of English Protestant (specifically, like Roger Williams, Baptist) conviction, though this was unmentioned in the romantic-native eulogies when she died.

I hope the Wampanoag will preserve their whole heritage, not just their pre-Christian roots.

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Re your ltr. to editor of 6-21-02: I don't wish to get into a debate over missionary "motivation" or "romantic" views of history v. historical "amnesia", But I do have a brief comment.

Yes, the English Protestant heritage gave the Mashpee Wampanoag a meeting house, preaching on the Indian "right-to-land" (and even a statute in 1652 from the MA General Court "... rights to land by possession or improvement, by subduing of same... according to Genesis 1 and 28, chap9:1 and Psalms 115:16."*) and the Wampanoag learned to read and write the catechism due to efforts of Eliot & Edwards. But, did they learn to read the legal documents that the Court issued in land disputes? And, after the epidemics of 1616 and 1633, how many Wampanoag were left of the original 14 tribes to provide political clout in legal disputes?

Today's delay proceedings on Mashpee Tribal recognition is ample evidence of the "legacy" we've given the Wampanoag. The tribe has been out-numbered economically, out-manned politically, out-maneuvered legally and denied its right to due process. What have we Christian neighbors done to help? We've given them a meeting house, plumes of poison and put them at the bottom of the list. I'm not sure the Wampanoag want us as part of their heritage.

* Carolyn Merchant, Ecological Revolutions, Nature, Gender and Science in N.E., p. 91

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Not thinking I might want to put my response to this letter into a Thinksheet, I marked it up for phone response. I'll still have oral conversation with the writer, but for that he will have gotten this written response. You, too, care about our Amerind problem (which the Amerinds can call their problem of non-Native-American Americans).

HUMOROUS NOTE: The CAPE COD TIMES letters editor made nonsense of my ¶3 phrase "reduced...to writing" (a regular locution) by substituting "introduced"! By e-mail, I immediately exposed the culprit. I have enough friends, but would have more were I to break my lifelong habit of trying to improve others' performance.

Dear_____,

I am grateful for your thoughtful letter & hasten to thank you for increasing my knowledge of Mass. Amerind history. Neither of us is in the "debate" mode on the matter of the Mashpee Wampanoag's right to land. My ¶2 affirms that right by showing it as a part of the English Protestant missionary heritage. I do have these further comments:

1 Implicit in the right to land is legal standing. Corporations (unfortunately, I believe) achieved legal standing by becoming recognized as "persons"; Amerind groups have legal standing when they are recognized as "tribes"--the status the Mashpees are now (properly, in my opinion) pressing for. As my home is on ex-

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Mashpee land, theoretically I lose it to them if they are added to the U.S.Bureau of Indian Affairs list of tribes: actually, possession being 9/10ths of the law, I have squatters' rights. (How much fairness & injustice is in that 9/10th rule!)

2 In 1652, the Mass. General Court (properly) used Scripture as support for its ruling. First, Gn.1 (one of my three Bible-study presentations at Criagville Theological Colloquy next month): by creation, all land is God's. Next, Gn.28: vs.13: "I will give you & your descendants this land." Next, Gn.9.1, to Noah: "your descendants will live all over the earth." Finally, Ps.115.16: "Heaven belongs to the LORD alone, but he gave the earth to man."

You credit the Christian missionaries with Wampanoag literacy (though Squanto learned to speak English in England), but do you imply that they should have taught them wider reading than Bible & catechism? Or that the Indians were forbidden access to "the [pertinent] legal documents"?

3 You say "I'm not sure the Wanpanoag want <u>us</u> as part of <u>their</u> heritage." Surely you don't mean to support their selective memory--e.g., in the case of selecting "us" out of memorials to Princess Evening Star, so that she was remembered (memorial-ized) as what she wasn't, namely a pagan (pre/non-Christian) Indian. Selective memory, one aspect of what pundits now call "spinning," proves "at the end of the day" a curse to humanity (see, e.g., right now, the Middle East!). My last ¶ has two motives: (1) to witness, vis-a-vis Amerinds, against this curse; (2) to fight historical amnesia about the Christian roots of America--roots (an extensive recent study showed) largely selected out of public-school texts in Am.history.

4 As you know, the genetic fallacy is badmouthing something because of its past (e.g., humans are "nothing but" hairless apes). Are you not committing that fallacy in reverse, implying the Mashpees should forget the English-Protestant strand of their heritage because they've suffered so much from successors (as in Hawaii it's said "The missionaries came to do good & their children stayed to do well")? Or at least, are you justifying (or only explaining the reason for) the Indians' selecting-Christianity-out memory?

5 The soul abhors a vacuum: Amerind suppression of Christian-benefits-past joins the present push (promoted by general U.S. taxation!) for the return of stone-age paganism to be the heart of retribalization. Something sick here, even without the stench of special-privilege tribal gambling (as though the government were to set out to corrupt the Indians, parallel with yesteryear's practice of giving them free smallpox-infested blankets to kill them off). As for Christian benefits present, I am familiar with what's going on in the Dakotas; & was involved, when in the UCC national office, with Mandan Christian education. You ask "What have we Christian neighbors done to help?" Surely not enough. But evangelizing the Indians (& all other nonChristians) is a note too little struck among most of the Christians concerned about the Amerinds.

6 The world knows the Palestinians are getting nowhere by blaming. Please look at the blame-game vis-a-vis the Amerinds, who also are getting nowhere by blaming. Who's to blame? Amerind Vine Deloria (under whom our son Bill studied) says "Basically, nobody." 1492-1629 & all that, a stone-age culture was hit by an expanding technologically-developed civilization & was (1) decimated by its diseases (as U.S. hardwood forests are threatened by a recently-imported bug from China). Tough luck, (as we say now ) "Get over it; don't sweat it; life's not fair; buck up & get to work." Good preaching? Yes, as far as it goes. But biblical religion suspects some repenting many be in order, & those who should repent should be blamed (as the Hebrew prophets first condemned, then called to repentance). So (beyond, & grateful for, Deloria's realism) who's to blame? (1) The European traders who, before 1620, infected the Indians with diseases they had no immunity against (so, your ref. to 1616); (2) Greedy industrialists with their groundwater "plumes of poison"; (3) The ignorant-insensitive white dogma (leading up to Wounded Knee) "There's no good Indian but a dead Indian"; (4) Greedy white land-grabbers; (5) The stone-age natives who suppressed their creative youth, condemning the Amerinds against technological development; (6) Internecine (inter-tribal) warfare among the Amerinds--a curse of all tribal societies (e.g., Afghanistan).