

IS IT EVER RIGHT TO BURN A BOOK?

When we think of Hitler's worldly and cynical efforts to make everyone see things his way by ordering the public burning of dissenting opinion in Nazi Germany, we will doubtless cry "No!" If we think a moment of the long record of censorship and anti-intellectualism in political and, yes, religious institutions, we're likely to feel that no idea is so explosive or so wrong that it shouldn't at least be freely expressed and tested in print; no sincere effort at truth so hateful as to deserve the degradation of being burned!

But on January 6, the Feast of Epiphany, a group of Episcopalians from this diocese will burn publicly--and symbolically--a few sample copies of certain maps and pamphlets which they do not wish to see used in Sunday-school instruction next Lent. This burning is planned to coincide with similar demonstrations throughout the country, all protesting what some of us consider the racist nature of this teaching material published by Friendship Press and endorsed by the National Episcopal Church.

Why burn this material? It aims to direct our children's attention to the missionary efforts in Africa--not in itself a bad idea during Lent, and to be supported by special mite-box offerings. But the Africa presented by this supposedly educational material should be put behind us, we think, on two counts: it is unreal, and it is presented in racist terms.

The material is unreal in content because, in a continent which (like our own cities) we know to be torn by strife and darkened anew by oppression and poverty, it shows us grinning apes and graceful palatrees for our children to cut out and color. Though unfriendly governments have recently and forcibly relieved two Episcopal bishops of their duties for responsibly preaching and working against apartheid and the police state, this material informs neither teachers nor students of such facts about the missionary effort there. Though the drive to self-determination is nowhere in the world more clear and important, the national boundaries shown on this map will be five years old come Lent; nor is there a hint of the efforts at international cooperation between these newly freed peoples.

This Church-school material is racist in tone because, with intolerable complacency, it offers for crayoning a picture of white children playing croquet outside a neat suburban home, next to one of black children working outside thatched huts. It shows a black banker over a caption suggesting patronizingly that in a few years and with better education he may aspire to be comparable to his white counterpart, as if this were precisely all he would wish. The racist economic and political exploitation of black Africans which makes any missionary activity there so important and so challenging is nowhere referred to. Surely it's better that Christian children see no Africa than see this white-washed Africa!

But why burn this material? The combustion planned is more than a practical matter of waste-incineration. For such "teaching" represents precisely the unchallenged racism at the heart of our Church and society. It is neither pabulum for kiddies, to be indulged, nor morally neutral "information," to be tolerated. It is evil propaganda, a clear and

present danger to our Church and our society just now. Such wounds in the Body of Christ must be cauterized to stop infection--not in pious hope only but in righteous anger like that Our Lord endorsed: "Every tree that bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire" (Matt. 7.19). Some of our black brothers have argued that washing by water will not suffice us for the cleansing needed: it is the fire this time. Only a ceremonious burning of our Body's poisons can appropriately symbolize the hope we share for a healthier beginning together.

But finally, why burn it publicly? Each Epiphany we celebrate the occasion on which God, condescending to be born in a stable, was there shown to three travellers from the East. It seems only fitting that this Epiphany some of us show as publicly the symbolic death of some attitudes within our Church unworthy of its Founder. The most apt place for this manifestation is the diocesan center of our Church as an ~~institution~~ and bureaucratic institution (not its heart as a worshipping institution): 808 West State Street, Trenton, New Jersey.

National ESCRU: Your reactions & suggestions will be welcome.

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FIRST DRAFT ONLY

NOT FOR PUBLICATION

This was drafted by me, a lay member of N.J. ESCRU, & Associate Professor of English at Rutgers, after a Steering Committee meeting in Princeton Dec. 7, for possible eventual distribution to chapter members and all parishes in an diocese. I don't think we want to beat Bp. Benzard over the head for this one. I see our aim rather as that of focussing creative attention on the Church's collective guilt by burning sample copies in order that the carefully preserved remainder may be read with fresh eyes. The change we seek by this symbolic act, far from the conversion of printed paper to ashes, is the conversion of people suffering a kind of death to new people.

I'm anxious to clarify all this before the possible witnesses of our act because as an ACLU member, a teacher of Milton's Areopagitica at least once each year, a former teacher of an adult class against censorship (in Michigan), and a professional reporter of the printed truth, I'm kind of sensitive about the ways it can get misinterpreted. The risk is worth it, and I believe with skill we can make our purpose plain enough. Richard E. Chavira, c. 50.