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steppin' out



editorial

Freedom of religion?

Native Americans must obtain a permit to get religious items that only the U.S. government is legally allowed to possess

by Renée LaChance

Some days it is just too painful to read the mainstream press. Earlier this month *The Oregonian* left me sobbing and depressed for the rest of my day. Granted, tears rest close to the surface of my emotions these days, but I can usually steel myself against the news. But not this day.

This day, Jonathan Nicholas printed a letter in his column that he received from a white supremacist who referred to Nicholas as "Nicholastein." This day Roberta Ulrich reported the suicide of Nathan Jim Jr., who fought for five years for the right to use and obtain eagle feathers to practice his religion and who finally conceded his battle with the U.S. government by taking his own life. And this day there were multiple stories about the battles over affirmative action and the rights of immigrants on both the federal and state level.

Racism has been institutionalized in our society for centuries. For me, these articles spotlighted how the dominance of the right wing in our government has elevated racism to the level of a religion. To not revere racism is fast becoming a sacrilege.

Yet not all religion is held so sacred.

The religion of Native Americans is still being held captive by the U.S. government. The story of Nathan Jim Jr. illustrates that. Jim, a member of the Yakima tribe, pleaded guilty in 1993 to possession of a bald eagle and parts of a golden eagle. Feathers and claws are some of the eagle parts used by tribal elders in funerals and religious ceremonies. Eagles are protected by both the Endangered Species Act and the Eagle Protection Act. It was thought that the 1994 Religious Freedom Restoration Act would solve this dilemma, by allowing Native Americans access to eagles and other protected birds of prey for religious purposes. Apparently not.

U.S. District Judge James Redden ruled that the U.S. government met the act's requirement by having a permit system of distributing feathers and parts from accidentally killed eagles obtained by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Department. This applies to any bird of prey, including owls and hawks.

This may all sound reasonable to those of us who are not Native American. After all, the Endangered Species Act is a good thing, right? Yes, it is a good thing, when it is not used to hinder religious freedom.

Imagine if the government required Christians to get a permit to obtain communion wafers and wine, which they could only get from the government. Or if it required Jewish people to have a permit to get candles for a menorah. It's unthinkable, isn't it? Yet here we are, living under a government that requires Native Americans to obtain a permit to get religious items that only it is allowed to possess.

(Not to mention the fact that Europeans stole this continent from the indigenous people in the first place. I just had to remind you all of that.)

Because of Judge Redden's ruling, Nathan Jim was facing more prison time for his 1993 conviction, and, rather than go to jail or continue to appeal for justice, he shot himself to death in his home on the Warm Springs Reservation.

The final injustice for the Jim family was that there were no eagle feathers available for Nathan's burial ceremony, held on the Warm Springs Reservation. Other tribal members brought their personal feathers to honor Nathan.

Ironically, the U.S. attorney who prosecuted Jim obtained an emergency packet of feathers from the U.S. government but arrived too late for the ceremony.

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