

## **This is My Religion**

**By Alan Bennett Ilagan**

I am writing this on Good Friday – the day Jesus died for our sins. As winter fades to black and spring gushes in amid wind and rain, my thoughts turn to the guilt of the Easter season. Long-buried feelings of shame re-surface, buoying disgrace in their muddy wake. My memories are a curious mixture of Catholic guilt, religious fervor, and childhood innocence, all woven into the slow awakening of being gay.

I remember serving as an altar boy at the Stations of the Cross during Lent. Looking up at each station, hot wax dripping onto my fingers from the candle I had to hold, the priest behind me intoning words of prayer, and a haunting melody playing on an organ, sung by the weak, reedy voices of elderly women ~ this was the collective notion I had of religion. It was atmosphere. It was ritual. It was appearance. And it had little to do with true spirituality.

On the rare evenings when I didn't have to serve mass, I always wanted to sit beneath the third station ~ when Jesus falls for the first time. The scene elicited some deep kinky thrill, where pleasure and pain and guilt were bound beautifully into one chaotic contradictory idea of religious ecstasy. The entire crucifixion display did that for me ~ a half-naked man, tied up and tortured ~ the ultimate S&M fantasy.

Maybe some part of me knew that one day I too would be persecuted and punished for being who I was ~ a precognizant awareness of an affinity with Jesus' suffering. I never imagined that such persecution and punishment would be wrought by the very same church that taught the moral lessons of my childhood, yet that is exactly what is happening today.

The Catholic church in Massachusetts is currently trying to push for the Amendment banning marriage for gay people. They are withdrawing their support, financial and otherwise, for any organizations that show support for gay marriage. Shouldn't the church, in Massachusetts of all places, be focused on more important issues? The downfall of civilization has more to do with pedophile priests than gay

marriage. It is unfathomable to me how an organization that professes to teach about love and acceptance is *actively* trying to oppress a certain group of people. It's one thing to live and let live, quite another to exert a conscious effort towards an ultimate goal of oppression.

Religion is a powerful force, one that often has nothing to do with God. Someone once said that all wars were religious wars, and that seems to hold true. At its core, war is a disagreement in ideology. With those who oppose us, who are different in some way, we go to war. In the end, both sides suffer. Everyone is affected. No matter how far removed it might seem, it touches us ~ as a wrinkle in humanity, a twinge in time, or a sigh in the slumber of history ~ after which we can never be the same.

I was taught that it was *my* sins that weighed down the cross of Christ, making His load heavier and His burden so much harder to bear. Yet I was also told that He did it for me out of love, out of compassion, out of forgiveness. I still believe in that, even if the church itself seems to have forgotten.

My God does not rule on high through relentless guilt and cruel manipulation. My God is neither vengeful nor destructive. People have been judging and condemning me for years. I do not judge. I do not condemn. My God is compassionate and forgiving, overflowing with understanding and kindness. My God celebrates love and commitment, regardless of gender.

You'll have your judgment day and I'll have mine. I'm not worried.