



African-American Churches and Christopher Columbus

PETER J. PARIS

Princeton Theological Seminary, Princeton, New Jersey

African-American churches will not be celebrating the quincentennial anniversary of Columbus' first voyage to America because the occasion perpetuates an American myth of origins that repulses all self-respecting African- and Native American peoples. The historical facts¹ surrounding this myth reveal a graphic account of greed, selfishness, human oppression, and natural despoliation jointly authorized by the Spanish crown and the Roman church. Interestingly, Columbus viewed his mission as profoundly theological and himself as the virtual fulfillment of biblical prophecy.² Accordingly, he not only adopted the signature "Christoferens," which means "the Christ-bearer," but his letters and papers are replete with reflections on the theological meaning of his dual mission: the liberation of the Holy Land from the hands of the Turks and the conversion of the world to Christ.³ He believed also that the successful accomplishment of that mission would provide the necessary conditions for the second coming of Christ. Thus, he viewed the territorial expansion of the Spanish empire and its increased acquisitions of gold and riches as a necessary means for the financing of such a holy crusade.

It is important to note, however, that neither Columbus nor his sponsors felt themselves under any moral obligation whatsoever in their dealings with non-Christian peoples. In fact, Columbus not only enslaved the native peoples he encountered in the Americas but, in the wake of the near decimation of the indigenous population, he imported African slaves as substitutes. In those activi-

¹We agree with the historian James Muldoon who rightly argues that criticisms of the consequences of Columbus' voyages should not be undertaken in isolation from the historical facts. See his "The Columbus Quincentennial: Should Christians Celebrate It?" in *America* 12 (October 27, 1990) 300ff.

²See Pauline Moffitt Watts, "Prophecy and Discovery: On the Spiritual Origins of Christopher Columbus's 'Enterprise of the Indies,'" in *The American Historical Review* 90 (1985) 73ff.

³*Ibid.*, 95.

ties he achieved the infamous distinction of becoming the father of American slavery. That alone is sufficient cause for the rejection of the quincentennial celebrations by both African- and Native American peoples.

This writer agrees with the sentiments of Professor Jack Weatherford: "He [Columbus] represents the worst of his era. We should honor those who rise above their times."⁴ Accordingly, we contend that African and Native Americans "rose above their times" in maintaining their humanity by constructing the means of survival under the severest conditions of oppression and annihilation. That accomplishment alone merits celebration. But unfortunately, only the survivors

of that catastrophe have the will and the courage to oppose the “myth of origin” by refusing to participate in the ritual practices of its devotees.

As a matter of fact African-American churches see in the Columbus quincentenary year a dilemma similar to that which their foreparents met when they pondered the meaning of Christian conversion for themselves. The present dilemma arises when African and Native Americans ask themselves how they can be American while refusing to affirm the nation’s myth of origin. Similarly, the earlier dilemma arose when prospective slave converts to Christianity asked themselves how they could be Christian while rejecting slaveholding Christianity. The answer to the latter question lay in the fundamental difference between slave Christianity and slaveholding Christianity: contrary theological interpretations of the biblical doctrine of humanity.

Slaveholding Christians viewed many alien peoples and especially Africans and “first nation” peoples in America as subhuman; consequently, they felt justified in doing with them whatever they wished. In brief they viewed those alien peoples in the same way as they considered their livestock. They thought of neither in moral terms.

As a matter of fact African slaves first encountered the symbols of Christianity emblazoned on the slave galleys that housed the hell they experienced during the middle passage across the Atlantic. In the so-called “New World” that was for them a state of chattel slavery, Africans soon learned that Christian symbolism pervaded the language of their slave traders and owners. In keeping with their own cosmological understandings that all peoples worshiped divinities that reflected their respective styles of life, African slaves came to view Christianity similarly, i.e., as the religion of slave traders and slaveholders. Consequently, during much of their first century in slavery, they had no love for Christianity, trying instead to maintain devotion to their traditional beliefs and practices. Eventually, however, significant elements of the latter were conjoined with their own revised understanding of Christianity; this alone enabled them to give birth to a new religious phenomenon.

In fact the slaves’ revision of Christianity constituted a concealed reformation that gradually became ubiquitous among the slaves. Its fundamental principles were the parenthood of God and the kinship of all peoples: a doctrine of God that implied the equality of all humanity. This family construct depicted God as creating all peoples equal in worth and deserving of freedom. This understanding

⁴“Columbus, Stay Home! A Bitter Debate over His 500th Anniversary,” *Newsweek* (June 24, 1991) 55.

constituted a paradigm which they believed was clearly supported by such major biblical events as the Exodus, the teaching of the prophets, and the life and mission of Jesus of Nazareth. Secret devotion and reflection on these and related themes enabled the slaves to construct a theology in music and song that was sufficiently camouflaged so as to conceal the ways in which it constituted an alternative message to that of the slaveholders’ religion. That is to say, this new theology’s vehicle of transmission was that of song, the content of which comprised the substance of the reformation. Thus, the so-called “spirituals” were often in the form of a *double entendre*, i.e., conveying one meaning to the ears of slaveholders and another to those of the slaves. For example, the latter viewed the song,

When Israel was
In Egypt's land,
Let my people go.
Oppressed so hard,
She could not stand,
Let my people go.

Go down Moses,
'Way down in Egypt's land,
Tell ole Pharaoh,
To let my people go.

not as a meditation on the bondage and deliverance of the ancient Israelites, but rather a contemporary dirge about their own situation, wherein the term "Israel" represented the slaves; "Egypt" symbolized the region of slavery; "Moses" designated all slave leaders (male and female); "Pharaoh" signified their slaveholders. Similarly, many of the thousands of "spirituals" maintained and promulgated an alternative gospel, and all constituted a source of transcendence over their pain and suffering by depicting God as friend of slaves rather than their cosmic foe.

In this theological reformation we encounter two opposing spiritualities, each implying conflicting moral dispositions toward the other. Unlike slaveholding Christianity, the religion of the slaves was based on a doctrine of humanity that was inclusive of all peoples. That is to say, it was non-racist. As such, African-American Christianity represents a movement in the history of western Christianity. No other Christian association among western peoples can lay claim to such origins, even though some have notable histories of opposing slavery. Yet, it would be erroneous to think that their opposition to slavery implied a fundamental belief in the equality of all humanity. The eventual institutionalization of such a belief constitutes the unique contribution of African-American Christianity to the western world.

Recognition of this and related facts during the Columbus quincentenary could begin a unique process rarely seen in the history of the world: the process of freeing a nation's myth of origin from the moral defilement of racism. In large part, this is obliquely signalled in the call of the National Council of Churches and others for a time of national repentance during 1992 instead of the massive celebratory extravaganzas and countless ritual practices aimed at the perpetuation of the myth.

From the perspective of African Americans the argument that the whole of modernity issues from Columbus' voyage is false. Hence, we reject Muldoon's

conclusion: "To reject Columbus is in effect to reject the modern world."⁵ To imply that the inheritance of modernity is intrinsically tied up with Columbus is not only an unjustifiable arrogance but logically incorrect. Such arguments, however, abound among those inclined toward seeing the entire modern world derived from the rule and conquest of Europeans. Even though such a perspective may continue to inform the minds and psyches of the so-called "true believers," it is destined to have little persuasive appeal to African- and Native American peoples.

Although we agree with the novelist Mario Vargas Llosa, who says that there is no way to know what America would be like in the 1990s if the dominant cultures were those of the Aztecs and the Incas,⁶ we strongly disagree with his main argument that the conquest of the Indians by the Spanish conquistadores was due to the former's inability to act against authority and express independent judgment and initiative, an argument that leads him to conclude that "they let themselves get killed" because their religion nurtured the people into a state of collective passivity. Unfortunately, he neglects to make any mention of the role disease played in the decimation of the Indian peoples. Smallpox, diphtheria, whooping cough, measles, and other diseases claimed the lives of countless thousands of Europeans and millions of Native Americans. Clearly, the Indians had no immunity against such contagion and their religion was hardly to blame for that fact.⁷

Nevertheless, Llosa appears to be genuinely concerned about the possible integration of traditional Indian cultures with so-called western modernity, even though he fears that the latter may well require the sacrifice of the former. Should that be the case, he says that he would, regrettably, choose modernization over traditional Indian cultures because he believes that the successful fight against hunger and misery favors the former over the latter.⁸ Such an unhappy conclusion follows from his assumption that modernity is intrinsically tied to western culture. On the contrary, we contend that western culture is not a necessary condition for the exercise of modern science and technology. Rather, the two transcend all cultural limitations and, consequently, are potentially available to all cultures.

The Columbus quincentenary raises a moral issue of immense proportion, namely, how America does and should understand the moral nature of its origins. That understanding should be limited neither to the history of Europeans on these shores nor to a one-sided Eurocentric story of courage, discovery, and colonization. Nor should the story be merely that of the European encounter with native peoples, since that is no guarantee against cultural chauvinism. Rather, African- and Native American peoples must be integrally involved with others in constructing the history of America in such away that it can be owned by all American citizens rather than by those of European descent alone.

Admittedly, we do not know much about the genesis of myths, but we do know that they die through willful neglect. Consequently, every effort should be

⁵Muldoon, "Columbus Quincentennial," 303.

⁶Mario Vargas Llosa, "Questions of Conquest: What Columbus Wrought and What He Did Not," *Harpers* (December 1990) 45.

⁷See Geoffrey Cowley, "The Great Disease Migration," *Newsweek* (Columbus Special Issue, Fall/Winter 1991) 54-56.

⁸*Ibid.*, 53.

made during the quincentennial year to prepare the nation for the death of the Columbus myth. In so doing, the nation would be taking the first giant step toward the restoration of the dignity of Native American peoples: a dignity that has been incessantly trampled upon and nearly crushed to death for five centuries. Serious devotion of the nation to such a restoration project would be welcomed enthusiastically by all African and Native Americans because it would signal a constructive resolve to confront the racism that has inhered in the nation's history from its

beginning. Such a massive national project would facilitate considerable in-depth analysis of Native American culture as well as comparative analyses with African-American culture. All of this would contribute toward dismantling a racist myth of origin in favor of a more adequate self-understanding. Such a process cannot be set in motion by extravagant celebrations of Christopher Columbus. These perpetuate the infamous myth and denigrate African and Native Americans. It is time to kill the myth in its present form. Such an act would be commensurate with the spirit of the United Nations' declaration that 1993 be the "Year of the Indigenous People." We agree with Suzan Shown Harjo, national coordinator of the 1992 Alliance (a coalition of native groups), who recently wrote: "It is necessary and well past time for others to amplify our voices and find their own to tell their neighbors and institutions that 500 years of this history is more than enough and must come to an end."⁹

The imperative to banish the nation's myth of origin is one of many implications of the Christian revisionism manifested in the genesis of the African-American Christian tradition. Throughout its history African-American Christianity has enriched the quality of the nation's public discourse by defining the nature of the many and varied moral threats within our social order. All of their advocacy has issued from a deep and abiding belief that God wills equal justice for all human beings and is opposed to every form of social injustice. Commitment to that position has enabled them to exercise a prophetic function on all matters relating to racism. This has included many major struggles, the most prominent being the abolition of slavery and equal citizenship rights for all Americans. Prominent in its unfinished agenda is an urgent call for a moratorium on all further celebratory events concerning Christopher Columbus.

⁹Suzan Shown Harjo, "I Won't Be Celebrating Columbus Day," *Newsweek* (Columbus Special Issue, Fall/Winter 1991) 32.