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How Shall We Read the History of Christianity in the Americas?

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The Oklahoma farmers among whom I began to preach during the depression had a clear understanding of American history. God had created this incomparably beautiful and productive continent as a blessing for his children and in providential wisdom had kept it vacant for a Christian people who would come in the wake of the Pilgrims to take possession of it. This the older folk among them had done on a September day in 1893 when, in the last great land race in the nation's history, they had made the Run into the Cherokee Strip and staked their claims to the farms that had been their homes ever since.

"In the early day" they had lived in sod houses until they had broken the raw prairie with their ploughs, put in their first crops, and reaped a harvest. As the years passed, they had managed by hard work to build comfortable homes and schools and churches. When times were hard, cash was scarce, but as a young farmer told me during the Great Depression, "At least we had enough to eat."

A plain and humble people, they celebrated Thanksgiving with heartfelt gratitude. Even at the communion table one or another of the elders commonly gave thanks, not only for the bread and the cup, but also for this great land, its provision for our material needs, and for the freedom to worship God according to the dictates of our own conscience. They sang "Come, Ye Thankful People, Come" with a sense of the hymn's immediate relevance to their lives and with complete understanding of its biblical and agricultural metaphors. With equal sincerity they sang "America the Beautiful" as the prayer of their own hearts and with no questions or qualms about the assumptions of the second stanza that the heritage of the Pilgrims had made for the extension of freedom "across the wilderness."

That gratitude for America and that sincere faith in God's goodness to the

Christian nation they loved welled up also in the hearts of the people in the other churches in our little town—the Methodist Church, small like our own Christian Church, and the large Lutheran Church on the other side of town which served a sizeable ethnic community and still conducted some services in German. A kindly providence had given this land to freedom-loving Anglo-Saxons committed to the Christian faith.

The understanding of United States history which characterized the people of Lahoma was not unique; rather, it had long prevailed in the churches. Thousands of Americans flocked to the World's Columbian Exposition at Chicago a century ago to mark the 400th anniversary of Columbus's fateful voyage to these shores. There the World's Congress of Religions provided a platform for the orators chosen by their denominations to ring out the watchwords of their particular variations on the Christian heritage, to affirm its common core, and to celebrate the nation's place in the scheme of providence. (The World's Parliament of Religions, also convoked there, introduced many Americans for the first time to the great spiritual traditions of other cultures.) The popular faith in the unique role of the United States in the divine plan gave continuity to old Governor John Winthrop's trust that the Puritan colony on Massachusetts Bay was destined to serve as "a city upon a hill." America's vocation was to be "a light to the nations."

In its secular manifestation the belief in the peculiar role of the United States in the divine economy came out as "Manifest Destiny," the political creed which rationalized the nation's territorial expansion and imparted a tone of sublimity to the poet's celebration: "Westward the course of empire takes its way."

Now as we approach the 500th anniversary of Christopher Columbus's landfall in the western hemisphere an uneasy cynicism clouds the prospect. Newspapers and magazines have featured extensive articles posing the question: Did the achievement represent a discovery of a New World—as generations of school children have been taught—or was it an invasion? In religious circles a good deal of breastbeating has gone on and, in the inflated language reserved for convention resolutions, ecclesiastical leaders have confessed our ancestors' sins in falling upon the populations who already lived in this hemisphere (the term genocide customarily appears), despoiling them of their land and culture, demeaning their religion, oppressing their surviving descendants, and ravaging the continents beyond any possibility of restoration to the Edenic state into which the Europeans stumbled.

New ways of reading the history of the Americas have contributed to this current perspective, which would have seemed passing strange to most of our people when this century began. A new generation of historians, some of them from the marginalized peoples, have attacked the traditional ethnocentric pattern in which the descendants of European "discoverers," conquerors, exploiters, and settlers have written the story of this half-millennium in the western hemisphere. Seen from the standpoint of the Native Americans who were here when the rapacious Europeans came the story is quite a different tale. (Even this way of putting it inevitably uses a European category, the term "America" commemorating the Italian cartographer who mapped the eastern coasts of the "new" continents.)

Commentary on the impending quincentenary advances the sentiment that it ought not to be celebrated, that the "discovery" was really a collision of cultures,

with disastrous outcome for the indigenous peoples. Trendy rhetorical handwringing on the part of editors and writers who have done little to correct past injustices is reminiscent of the "radical chic" affected in the 1960s by a few wealthy members of the establishment. We are in danger of making villains of the ancestors whose ill-gotten gains we have not renounced, clinging as we do to the affluence and power pertaining to our lot as compared with that of the peoples they wronged and to whom we so eloquently apologize.

The inhabitants of the as yet unnamed Americas knew they were here; they needed no Columbus or Leif Ericsson or Phoenicians-with-Africans-aboard to "discover" them. But for the Europeans and their descendants the landfall in 1492 was a momentous discovery.

Looking back over these five hundred years from the standpoint of the peoples so cruelly deprived of their lands, their way of life, and their culture, we can find no more appropriate term than tragedy. It denotes the inevitable downfall of a noble hero (or people), a downfall brought about by an inherent defect, even by a weakness implicit in the hero's virtue, when confronted by an inescapable conflict. In a time of emerging nation-states, nascent capitalism, and burgeoning technology in Europe, the Amerindian cultures could not compete with or resist the foreign expansionism exploding upon their shores.

No amount of breastbeating and confession now can bring back the old order. It is as technologically impossible as it would be ethically irresponsible to remove all traces of European influence from the Americas and restore the continents to the pristine condition in which Columbus found them. We cannot turn back the clock five hundred years.

This is not to say that the descendants of the colonists who have prospered so richly at the expense of the indigenous peoples have no ethical obligation to try to right the wrongs of these "centuries of dishonor." It is only to say that romanticizing a way of life now extinct, or weeping in sentiment, even genuine contrition, can in no way undo what has been done or restore the status quo ante. We can read the account of these five centuries with regret, shame, indignation, and a sense of tragedy, but we can exercise no choice over what has happened. We *can* choose a course of greater justice for the future. At the very least, we can read the history of the Americas from the standpoint of the people who, through no choice of their own, were "discovered" by Europe.

It is important moreover that we consider these five centuries in the hemisphere from other ethnic perspectives also. Habituated by our schooling to seeing this history from an Anglo-Saxon point of view, and more recently from that of Native Americans, we need to look at it also from the position of the Norse, the Spanish, the Portuguese, the French, the Swedes, the Dutch, and the Russians (on the Pacific Coast), all of whom also established colonies on these shores, contesting with the British their dreams of empire and of the fabulous wealth of the Indies.

It is especially important for us to look at these five centuries from the standpoint of the Spanish, who appropriated the greater part of the hemisphere, bequeathing their language and culture and institutions, and evangelizing the peoples to the Christian faith far more successfully than did the English-speaking colonists. Exposed for so long to the Black Legend of the conquistadores ruthlessly shedding the blood of the "Indians" in their rapacious search for gold, we have

taken as truth its caricature of those who founded Hispanic civilization in the Americas, setting over against it our myth of the pious Pilgrims coming in quest of freedom to worship God. By such miseducation many Americans have had their eyes closed to the importance of the Hispanic strain which runs throughout their history. A careful reading of this history could deliver us from our blindness toward imperialistic behavior and economic coercion on the part of the United States in dealing with the nations to the south. Even more important, it could open our eyes to the growing presence and contributions of Hispanic peoples in our midst. Ever since Columbus they have played a significant role in the history of this nation.

Until quite recently the dominant version (almost the sole version) of American history, even in the academy, was a WASP account, telling of white Anglo-Saxon Protestants, primarily male, from their point of view. *They* were the significant settlers, the founders of the nation, its leaders and movers and shakers. A few broad-minded and open-eyed historians tinged their accounts with reference to the large-scale immigration from southern and eastern Europe in the late nineteenth century, and virtually all recent writers have acknowledged the increasing diversity of peoples who have come to these shores since the outbreak of World War II. One can find extended accounts of the adventures and contributions to American life of Scots or Irish or Germans or Scandinavians or Italians or Poles. Every well-informed American needs some feel for such perspectives.

Since the civil rights movement Black history has clamored for attention, confronting us with a very different kind of story from that told in the traditional WASP version. None of us should allow ourselves to forget the tragic tales of raids on African villages, the cruel march of kidnapped peoples to the Atlantic ports, the horrors of the holding pens, the ordeal of the middle passage, the slave markets in America, and the lives worn out in unrequited toil. Even more important are the determination of a subject people to maintain their dignity as human beings, their response to the Christian faith and existential insight into its riches, their long struggle for freedom and justice, and their memorable contributions to the common life.

Yet this bitter and heroic story can be told only against the backdrop of the collision of cultures set in motion by the coming of Christopher Columbus to the New World. Black history is an inextricable part of that larger history and can in no way be separated from it. Members of the dominant white community are gradually coming to terms with this fact. And even those African-Americans who cultivate most intensively their sense of a distinct cultural heritage from their ancestors inevitably and properly seek to claim their rightful share of the benefits deriving from "European" technology and from the larger society from which they were so long excluded. All this is part of the history.

Another way of reading the story is from the Asian-American perspective—no mere tip of the hat to the first invaders thought to have crossed the land (or ice) bridge across the Bering Strait in remote times and through generations of time to have sifted down through North and South America, the ancestors of the "Native Americans." But given the position of these two continents along the Pacific rim (as well as fronting on the Atlantic basin), more and more people from Asia have come to these shores. In colonial times the Manila Galleon sailed annually from the

Philippines to Acapulco, maintaining ties within the farflung Spanish empire. In the nineteenth century large numbers of Chinese came to the United States to build the railroads, and Asians from many locations have formed an increasing presence ever since. These minorities can no longer be ignored; they are taking an ever larger part in American life.

With the increasing shift of economic activity to the Pacific rim and the growing dominance of Japan, Singapore, and other Asian countries in the world financial picture, it might seem that after five hundred years, Columbus is more or less incidental. Surely if he had not happened upon the Caribbean islands, some other navigator, Spanish or Portuguese, would have "discovered" them. Perhaps so. But it was Columbus's discovery, along with his intimations of great wealth to be had in those parts and the general knowledge of the riches of Asia, that gave the impulse to the great age of exploration and world trade by the European powers—and to the "great century" of missionary activity which brought into existence a worldwide Christian community and the accompanying ecumenical consciousness. The involvement of Europe and the Americas with Asia is an essential part of the story of Christianity in the New World.

The ethnically focused variations suggested here as corrective to the traditional WASP-centered narratives represent various facets of “history from the underside,” since the groups mentioned have long constituted minorities of the population in the United States. Throughout the Americas, hispanics clearly outnumber other strains of European lineage, and persons of African descent present an impressive total. Within this country the proportions of the ethnic communities are increasing, as a result both of natural growth and of immigration, so rapidly that the Anglo population of California is on the verge of slipping into the minority column. Telling the story from the standpoint of only one ethnic strain will no longer do.

But an overlooked majority (as is now well known) has begun to insist that its long-neglected story also be told, and a feminist revision of historiography is well under way, in the Americas as well as in other parts of the world. Since conventional history has served to maintain the dominance of those in power (traditionally Anglo-Saxon adult males), a new and more nearly balanced overview is called for. Thus the writing of history asserts in our time and with clearer insight than heretofore that ethical ideal at the heart of the historiographical enterprise—the obligation to search out what actually happened and to tell the story with fairness to all concerned. The historian is also obliged to submit the past to ethical judgments—using standards professed in the age under discussion and also those held among us.

Looking at the enterprise of Christianity in America from a theological perspective, we discern a lofty religious idealism commingled with often shameful behavior. Landing on the island he named San Salvador (Holy Savior), Columbus stood on the beach between an uplifted cross and a banner bearing the coat of arms of the Catholic sovereigns of Spain, and he bore a drawn sword. Thus the man who took pride in his name of Christ-bearer brought to the New World not only the announcement of the gospel, but also the unblushing claims of imperialism advanced by Christian powers, the effort to reduce to serfdom the people he had discovered and implicitly, when that failed, the intention to enslave the inhabitants

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of Africa as the means to achieving his dreams of wealth; he also launched the rapacious exploitation of the land and the people by Europeans and their descendants. (Kirkpatrick Sale calls all this *The Conquest of Paradise* [New York: Knopf, 1990].)

If we dismiss the ugly parts of this picture as merely the refusal of professed Christians to practice sincerely the faith they claim in words, we are dealing with nothing more complicated than hypocrisy. But again and again, even when Christians faithfully pursued their highest ideals, things turned out badly. (Theodore White has said somewhere that history is the story of what happens to good intentions.) No wonder Reinhold Niebuhr wrote of *The Irony of American History* (New York: Scribner, 1952), or that church historian Martin E. Marty entitled the first volume of his history of *Modern American Religion, The Irony of It All* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1986). Theologians in the Augustinian tradition will have little difficulty here in finding evidence of original sin.

Yet as our foremost unbaptized theologian observed in his second inaugural address, “The Almighty has his own purposes,” and one can read in the five centuries of Christian enterprise in the Americas not only ugly paradoxes and outright denials of the faith, but also impressive faithfulness and new possibilities for good—the bringing together here of peoples from many lands, the vision of liberty and justice for all, the possibility of enough to eat and wear for everyone, efforts to realize a world of dignity and decency and delight. Recalling Abraham Lincoln's profound analysis of the divine hand in U.S. history, we may well ask concerning the entire hemisphere: Is it possible to read the developments of these 500 years with an eye to the purpose of God ? If only we can learn to do that, people of biblical faith will find the Columbian quincentenary an occasion to celebrate after all.