

The Things We Were, the Things We Do

Although the argument by some geneticists that all of us on planet Earth are descendants of a single ancestor, "Eve," who lived in sub-Saharan Africa some 200,000 years ago has now been falsified, the Bible continues to claim we are all in this together, that "in the beginning" there was no distinction between "them" and "us." But now we live in a post-Babel world where tribes are dispersed and cultures separated. And when they meet the results are mixed. Good things happen, of course—but there is no return to paradise; terrible things happen as well. The cross-cultural encounter between Columbus and the native peoples of the Americas was but one—albeit a very significant one—of a long series of such inevitable and ambiguous meetings in human history.

One of the things that contributed to the tragic dimensions of the particular meeting whose quincentary is recognized by this issue of *Word & World* was the failure by both parties to recognize the other side as "us." The Europeans, who knew about loving the neighbor and being created in the image of God, nevertheless killed and exploited the "Indians," in part at least because of a lack of sufficient imagination to recognize these different people as human. Since they were not seen as "us," they could be treated as "it." On the other side, at least some of the native people also failed to see the Europeans as "us"; instead the new arrivals were regarded as gods, beings of a different sort. While this in no way excuses the European behavior, it is one of the reasons, as several historians have pointed out, that the intruders were able to "get away with it" as easily as they sometimes did. Recognizing the other as "us" is an essential prerequisite to overcoming the designation of the other as "it" (or as "god"). It's a lesson that is still true—and still unlearned. Unfortunately, some European-Americans (and some of their systems) still exploit and dehumanize native peoples. But, curiously, we also find today a reversal of the sixteenth-century roles: in some circles it is now the Europeans who are seen as demonic (subhuman) while the natives are regarded as angelic (superhuman). The "demons" are the source of all evil; the "angels" have no negative impact on the planet and no responsibility for the human condition. The caricature is rarely so bluntly stated, of course, but it is surely out there in one form or another, and it has been recognized as destructive by both European and Native Americans. It is another way of failing to recognize ourselves in both the faults and the virtues of the other, of failing to accept in ourselves both the destructive realities and creative possibilities of being human. Only such candid recognition will enable us honestly and realistically to tackle the personal and structural barriers that prevent our full acceptance of one another.

Twenty years ago, Edwina Weston, a 15-year old from the Pine Ridge reservation in South Dakota, wrote:

The little girl sees the future,
the things that will come,
The things we were,
and the things we do,
The things we talk about and,
the things we eat.
She will some day help her people
in other ways.
She will be happy for the things
that will come.
(*Photographs and Poems by Sioux Children* [Rapid City: Tipi Shop, 1971] 49)

In this poem, hope for the future comes from a candid "seeing" of both past and present—the "things we were" and "things we do." Edwina Weston's prescription is valid for all of us, whether Native Americans or descendants of other immigrants: genuine hope will only grow from candor. Perhaps we can learn to look with her childlike openness and then (nevertheless?) share her optimism.

What happened with the arrival of Christopher Columbus depends on your point of view. This issue of the journal begins with three such personal perspectives. Appropriately, we begin with a Native American voice: Episcopal Bishop *Steven Charleston* boldly identifies what he sees to be several cancerous flaws of western culture, but then holds out the possibility of combining western and native strengths to create something truly new.

Peter J. Paris calls for an end to America's standard origin myth, which he sees as inherently racist. Paris finds hope in an alternative vision—developed, he believes, among African-American slaves—of a Christianity which celebrates the kinship of all peoples.

Moved by a comparison between the Japanese imperialism of his own experience and the colonial imperialism of Christian missions, *Wi Jo Kang* calls for a rejection of the spirit of Columbus, preferring instead a simple biblical view of mission, the acceptance of which will call the churches to repentance and renewal.

Ronald E. Osborn presents a transition to the articles which follow, suggesting different ways to read what actually happened in and since 1492; he takes into consideration the experiences of groups not generally included in the standard American history.

After reflecting on both Catholic and Protestant missionary activity in Latin America, *Raymond S. Rosales* turns to practical suggestions for Hispanic ministry in North America.

Father *Stafford Poole* provides an enlightening and helpful analysis of Catholic missionary efforts in Ibero-America, noting how the Castilian background and the native situation interacted to produce a unique religious development.

Pamela Kirk looks more closely at one piece of that Catholic history , offering a theological analysis of *El Divino Narciso,* a sacramental drama by the seventeenth-century Mexican nun Sor Juana. Sor Juana's sensitivity to cultural diversity and her positive evaluation of the work of God among all peoples are suggested as qualities worthy of emulation by the contemporary church.

After considering Luther's contributions to the modern era, *Todd W. Nichol*

offers a daring proposal for American Lutherans—to embrace modernity rather than to reject it, and to match its free-wheeling openness with the audacious openness of the gospel.

Roy A. Harrisville's helpful review of the history of biblical interpretation in America, asking to what degree it is dependent upon European sources, will enable those who care about the Bible to understand more fully the continuum in which they work—which might just be a freeing knowledge.

The Resources section opens with comments by *Kathleen M. Fleury* on joint resolutions of the Montana Legislature and the United States Congress regarding the observance of Columbus Day. Fleury presents these as examples of attempts to show mutual respect between Indian and non-Indian cultures.

The section continues with a Face to Face encounter between *Madelyn Herman Busse* and *Fred Wentz* on the wisdom of an ordained diaconate in American Lutheranism—a discussion which will have meaning in other denominations as well. In Texts in Context, *James H. Burtness* encourages us to preach on the book of Revelation during the coming Easter season and to allow our presentations to be as pictorial and as imaginative as Revelation itself.

F.J.G.