



Christopher Columbus: The Need to Demythologize History

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Historical data uphold the humorous assertion that Columbus was a man who did not know where he was going, did not know where he was when he got there, and did not know where he had been when he returned home. And that was after four trips! Until his death he was convinced that he had visited the east. Entries in his log and diary reveal a man who was terribly brutal, violent, and greedy. Even judging by the standards of his day, Columbus was unusually cruel. Historical data make a strong case for the label of villain rather than hero.

Clearly, the Christopher Columbus story must be demythologized. His mission was not to discover anything; rather, his intent was to conquer, if possible, what he found. The world was not proved to be round by his navigation; learned navigators already believed this. Religious evangelism was not a commitment but a rationalization and support for conquest.

The function of myths in a culture is not to deny or disguise the truth, but rather to provide support, explanation, and meaning for the prevailing value system. Myths serve a very positive and essential function when they affirm people and empower them to service and life in the larger community. Myths are demonic when they are a pretext for the violation of one community at the expense of another. The quincentenary does not correctly recall the discovery of a “new world,” but rather marks the clash of two worlds in which the western world proclaims itself superior and victorious. The myths surrounding Columbus were developed to support a Eurocentric value system and developed at the expense of non-European cultures and peoples.

Differing ethnic, religious, and cultural memories will divide the peoples of what has come to be called the Americas as long as value systems and myths are not examined in the light of a larger global community. Native people detest the memory of Columbus because they were the objects of conquest. African-Americans have slavery indelibly branded in their consciousness as the European solution to the decimated labor force of Native people. Latinos cannot forget the

dispossession of their land by the Anglos. Asians cannot forget the heritage of Euro-American racism and displacement during World War II. Remembering is very painful for many, and it will remain so unless we can move beyond only remembering the past.

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America formally adopted the theme “1992: Remember, Repent, Renew” as a guide for observing the quincentenary. If “Remember” only means focusing on the sins of Columbus and others in the past, we may be tempted to distance ourselves from any responsibility in the present. If memory leads to a more realistic, accurate view of our past so we can enter the present and future with new vision, then remembering is

very helpful. If “Repent” only means feeling guilty when Euro-Americans remember Columbus and the past, then remembering only serves to paralyze. If repentance means turning our lives around and proceeding in a new direction, then repentance leads us to the important level of renewal. “Renewal” is the product of truthful remembrance and authentic repentance.

But how we remember the person of Columbus may not be the most important question. In an article entitled, “Consider the Cargo, Not the Captain,” Steven Charleston, Episcopal Bishop of Alaska and a member of the Choctaw Nation, says that the real challenge is not to determine or remember the truth about Columbus. Rather, he asserts that “the central issue of 1992 is what Columbus brought with him 500 years ago: economic exploitation for the sake of profit and political exploitation for the sake of power.”¹ The church played a very significant supporting role in transporting and maintaining this “cargo.” We in the church must now ask ourselves whether we are willing to venture beyond the past and deal with the old exploitations which are still with us today and which continue to destroy the earth and its people. The homeless, victims of crime, hunger, addiction, violence (domestic as well as military), poverty, ethnic/religious strife, and pollution are all the products of exploitation. These realities are old “cargo” and are still with us.

Columbus: How shall we remember him? The voyages of Columbus served to bring communities face to face in the world, but the result was not a larger community. We best remember him by demythologizing our history, by engaging in dialogue with all our cultural and national neighbors, and by charting a new course away from economic and political exploitation toward global community.

From a Christian perspective we are called by God, not primarily to remember Columbus during the quincentenary, but to remember what God has done in all of history for a broken world that so desperately needs justice, peace, and healing. Above all, we are called to remember the person of Christ who forgives, loves, frees, and transforms human community. It is the person of Christ who empowers us for an evangelical mission of reconciliation, healing, and service. In the final analysis, God promises to transform the cargo and baggage of us all into a new world!

¹Steven Charleston, “Considering the Cargo, Not the Captain,” *Sojourners* 20/8 (1991) 25.

Christopher Columbus: The Need to Learn from History

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People tended to choose up sides over the observance of Oct. 12, 1992. One side was concerned that some would glorify Columbus, Eurocentrism, medieval Catholicism, and evangelism by force. Others were poised to trash everything European or Catholic, to romanticize a kind of idyllic pre-Columbian North America, and to prepare for a year of penance for the sins of those who lived a half-millennium ago. Each side was intent on being politically correct. The most egregiously unhistorical and slanted account of events was by Kirkpatrick Sale, *The Conquest of Paradise: Christopher Columbus and the Columbian Legacy* (New York: Knopf, 1990), who found that Europe had for “thousands of years before Columbus been depleting and

destroying the lands and waters it depended on.” Thus Columbus’s voyage was transformed into a politically correct piece about ecology in 1992.

Early in the year there was either the possibility of confrontations, or more positively, sensitizing people to current issues. *The New Yorker* produced several long pieces on the subject; *Christian History*, *Word & World*, and *Newsweek* devoted entire issues to the theme; *The Lutheran Witness* and *The Lutheran* had several articles; *Time* and other national press devoted pages to the quincentenary; the ELCA produced a notebook on ways of observing the occasion; Pax Christi USA issued a book; etc. All of this happened during the months preceding October 1992. When the big day arrived, what happened? Not very much. I was in Columbus, Ohio, a week before the event, and I learned that a flower show had been scheduled. New York and Chicago had their parades, but there are parades there regularly. Attuned as I made myself to the results of Columbus Day, my conclusion is that very little happened.

On the other hand, the significant preparation for the day and a scrutiny of history and myth may be what happened. For one, we learned that Columbus was not a heroic figure but one with very mixed motivations. He set into motion some indefensible activities, such as enforced conversions, the deportation of slaves to

Europe, and the indiscriminate slaughter of innocents. The conquistadors who came after him left a trail of bloodshed and shame, sometimes in the name of Christ. We learned that the birth of Christianity in this hemisphere remains a dark blot on the fabric of Christian history. We also learned, contra Kirkpatrick Sales, that the New World was not “paradise,” as he claimed, but that Native Americans lived with a massive scale of human sacrifice as well as ecological practices which approached Europe’s in their short-sightedness. We learned that original sin was not the special preserve of the conquistadors or Europeans.

At the same time, no one came forward to defend the European “discoverers” for their depredations, other than a few who made lame comments about it being a brutal age (with Bartholemew de Las Casas as a bright exception). This period remains a dark blot on Christian history, one for which we feel a sense of collective shame and remorse.

The most positive thing that happened was the hope that we who live in 1992 can move forward to build more solid bridges of understanding between the descendants of both sides in 1492. The best possible way to observe the quincentenary has been the activity it has produced to rectify the wrongs that have been committed in the five hundred years since Columbus. We need not and cannot repent for Columbus. We have enough on our own plate to contend with, including the innocent but harmful activities of our northern European forebears, not only the Spaniards.

But the quincentenary has another interest for me as a historian, and that is the uses to which we put history. Of course Columbus did not “discover” America. Millions of folks who crossed the Bering Straits between 5000 BC and 1492 AD suspected this continent was here all along. But even from a European point of view, it is patently untenable to assume that only one or two individuals—Brendan the Voyager, Leif Erickson, or Columbus—bumped into this land. Surely there were hundreds who ventured to these shores. After all, at least up through the third century AD the Egyptians knew that the earth was round. Now the problem is, why is it necessary for us to create myths (such as the Columbus myth) and live by them? And why do we continue

to permit myths to control our lives, when the truth is somewhere else? In the church we continue to live by myths—"back to the purity of the Bible," "what is earlier is better," "the reformation was about good versus evil, and Luther was good," "medieval means inferior," etc. No, Columbus did not discover America, and there are many more such myths, both civil and religious, which we need to rectify. The only force at hand to lead us into the truth is a study of history, which has fallen on hard times in the U.S.A. today, with no promise of improvement. Just as the observance of Columbus Day 1992 brought to the surface divergent forces which used this observance for their own agendas, so also I use this occasion to bring out my agenda: the more we know of the past the less enslaved we will be to its manipulation in order to justify present practices.