

## "COLUMBUS" AS PERSONAL SYMBOL OF "THE WEST"

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Today is the **semimillennium** of the first well-documented arrival of human beings in the Western Hemisphere. Earlier, some had come from the **west** (ca.14 milleniums ago, from Sinic regions) & some from the **east** (ca.400 BC/BCE, Semites-Canaanites-Carthaginians, landing in N.Carolina; & ca.1,000 AD/CE, Vikings). But none of these "discovered" our hemisphere. They "found" it, of course; but discovery implies reporting, & none of them reported, ie got the word to the folks back home. ("To discover America" is RHD2's first illustration under the entry "discover.")

Columbus' first landfall, remembered (celebrated/execrated) today, seems to me to be, except for the Incarnation, history's most portentous event--the event foreshadowing the gluing of the two hemispheres into a sphere, "the global village." It was 500 years ago this very day, & thinking about right now as I write is having a mind-expanding, time-stretching, awe-inspiring, religious effect. In this mood I must record these impressions:

1 Counterdemonstrators against today's Columbus Day parades are right in reminding us all of the downside while we're celebrating the upside. In historiography, the critical principle is needed to balance (by "the hermeneutics of suspicion") the selective principle. Columbus represented the best & the worst of his native culture: I've represented this **ambiguity** in the way I've typed this Think-sheet's first word.

2 It's stupid to say, as is widely being said now, "Columbus didn't discover America, it was already here." It's stupid because it abuses language, a sin for which truth sooner or later punishes us.

How about "Columbus encountered..."? That's the current PC word, but it fails. In §1 (above), just look at all the others who did that before Columbus! "Encounter" doesn't touch the uniqueness of Columbus here, viz his getting the news to the folks back home. Well, how about the liberationist word "invaded"? Wrong again. How can the invited (ie, welcomed, as Columbus everywhere was) be said to have invaded (ie, imposed themselves on a resisting populace)?

I'm sympathetic with many of the political-cultural points the antiColumbus forces are trying to make, but not with a dishonest treatment of "discover." If the Amerinds had sailed to Europe & then gotten back home with the news, would they not have "discovered" Europe? "Discover" means precisely the **loop** of find/return.

3 "The Age of Discovery" applies only to Europe: global discovery was **Eurocentric**, as is the resulting global civilization (eg, the politics, & increasingly the economics, of China; & both, of India). Global institutions such as the UN & its NGOs, the two international banks, & the world's stock-&-bond markets, are cultural-ly Eurocentric. (Note "culturally," ie originating in the European [including the British & American] mind. I'm not saying that Europe is the center of economic or political power, or that nonEuropean cultures are not flourishing--though the phrase "the Americanization of cities" is more & more a reality.) For good & ill, Europe-born ways of government & of raising/producing/earning/spending dominate the earth. It's pointless to rage against that fact.

But many are raging against it under various banners--ethnic, national, countercultural, multicultural, romantic-naturalistic. As M.L.King Jr is a good-guy personal symbol, Columbus is for these ragers a bad-guy personal symbol. Personally, Columbus turned wary & even nasty toward the Amerinds only after they massacred his first settlement, La Navidad (Jesus' birth, the birth of European settlement in what for Europe was the New World). (The settlers disobeyed him & were hard on the Indians, who reacted with genocide [which literally means, killing them all deliberately].)....Same thing happened 182 years later. When King Philip tried to genocide the Mass.-Conn.-R.I. Europeans, the latter naturally turned from friendly to wary & hostile. King Philip's main contention was that the aliens were too successful, not that they were actively abusing the Amerinds.

4 A dying patient of Loree's recently said that he read the Bible a half century ago & found it full of horrors & has had nothing to do with it since. Life

is full of horrors, so the fact that the Bible too is should recommend it for realism. But that logic didn't get through to the then-young man, who had other reasons for not wanting to have anything to do with the Bible....Like life, the European "age of Exploration" was full of horrors; but, like the Bible, full also of good stuff. **Utopian** critics may grudgingly admit it was a mixed bag but continue to harp on the horrors. I'm sad, as they are, that the Iberians (Span. & Port.) who discovered-settled Central & S.America were not a gentler folk (such as those who settled R.I. & Penn., or even Mass.-Conn.-N.Ham.-Vt.-Me.). But whom does this utopian rage benefit in addition to those who get some relief from ventilating their resentment? Certainly not the dead Amerinds, or even appreciably the live ones.

5 Anybody bespeaking **mollifying factors** vis-a-vis Hitler would be instantly accused of antisemitism. Each year, as the antiColumbus ideology gains strength, it gets harder to point to mollifying factors vis-a-vis Columbus: you're more & more accused of insensitivity to "justice" & "Native American rights." But history is as much distorted by leaving out the good & the complex-ambiguous as it is by leaving out the bad. (When Ross Perot parrots "It's as simple as that," you know it isn't.) In the name of fairness & the God of truth, let's attack myth/countermyth. Against the countermyth, here are some mollifying, softening factors: (1) Almost no Amerinds were deliberately killed, in comparison with the number who died of unwittingly spread disease....(2) While some Arawaks, such as the Tainos who first met Columbus, were gentle, other were fierce (such as the cannibals who were eating Tainos, who doubtless were relieved to discover that Columbus had no interest in eating them)....(3) Columbus was a visionary, his life dominated by "the vision thing." Full of energy, courage, & persistence, he wasn't always easy on those who stood between him & his goals (to save souls for Christ, to repay his sponsors, to exercise authority, to gain wealth & fame, to bring honor to his folk & his church, to experience the joy of using his skills, to adventure where none had done so before). Activists aren't easy to live with. A sign in an antiColumbus demo yesterday in Boston pictured Columbus & an Amerind standing side by side, with the legend "Which one was the savage?" Etym., the Amerind was; in the secondary meaning (ruthless in pursuing a goal), Columbus was. Too bad, but understandable in such a monomaniac....(4) Columbus bashers myopically merge all the Explorers' horrors into one man, the first man, Columbus Euroman, the personal symbol of "the West" transported to the Western Hemisphere. The personal-symbolic phenomenon of attributing all vice to one man appears also in attributing all virtue to one man (say, M.L.King Jr) & then being shocked to find he wasn't perfect but "only human." In Columbus' case, in the minds of some the attribution has flipped: the master has become the monster. The ethical principle here is this: When you conclude that the distortion is doing more harm than good, speak up for what's being left out....(5) Some Amerinds were guilty of genocide against Westerners (eg, at La Navidad, & in King Philips' mind as he began K.P.'s War), but Columbus was not guilty. Eg, a dead Indian is worthless as a slave, & converts are allies, & gold-searching workers are employees. The fact that most of the Amerinds died (of disease, as had happened in Mass. before the Mayflower) does not make "genocide" an applicable term. To apply it [1] evades the element that the mass death must have been intentional, & [2] weakens the word for its proper use, as against Armenians in 1917 & Jews in 1942-5....(6) The aggressive impulse is elemental in humanity, & the oft-shouted notion that the West has been more aggressive than other peoples is a technological illusion: being more "developed," we're more efficient killers. But even with low death-technology (only a dagger), Amerinds (Mayans, Aztecs, et al) were slaughtering at least 100,000 per annum in "savage" ritual sacrifice (not to mention war slaughter, including instances of genocide) when Columbus landed. "Everybody's doing it" is no excuse, but it's unjust to point to the violence of a few in a world in which the many were violent on both sides of the Atlantic (& in the East). Isolation is unjust, contextuality is fair....(7) No human being could be expected to have all the gifts to do everything Columbus tried to do. He was a prodigious success at pilotry & a prodigious failure at "pilotry" (the literal meaning, in ICor.12.38, of "government," which is a transliteration of the Greek for "pilotry": once his feet got on land, he was a colossal mismanager, his cruelties

increasing parallel to the frustrations from his ineptness). A little sympathy for him, please: he was overemployed....(8) Amerinds can authentically demonstrate against Columbus, but it's bad faith & hypocrisy for Americans of European descent to do so: Columbus is us; he robbed the bank & we're helping him spend the loot. "Identifying" with "the oppressed" usually is ambiguous behavior....(9) Columbus (the West) is being attacked for feeling/believing he was superior. He overfelt it & overbelieved it, but it was also something he knew. If the Amerinds had discovered Europe, that would have proved they were superior. If they'd met the Europeans in midocean with equivalent force-potential, that would have proved they were equal. But Columbus' discovery of them proved the Europeans superior & the Amerinds inferior. The challenge to Columbus (& many of us since) was, How do you treat inferiors? How the West treated the Amerinds left much to be desired from the idealistic-utopian point of view. But let's not infer, from all humans' being equal face-to-face with God (or in "nature"), that we're all actually equal. Diversity is not just horizontal but also vertical: persons/peoples vary astonishingly on the superior-inferior scale, all things considered. Beginning with the genes & stretching all the way to the grave, life isn't fair ("so," said Sartre, "we must be"). The psychopolitical problem here is that since the Renaissance-Enlightenment, two illusions have been pumped into the cultural bloodstream, viz [1] that human beings are basically good--an attack on original sin, the fall, the need for God-initiated redemption, & [2] that we're all equal--an attack on the divine rights of kings & knights, ie on feudalism, from an ontological & not just a political base. While there are upsides to these reality-defying doctrines, one downside is the proleptic disparagement of undemocratic predemocrats such as Columbus, who gets abused for not believing & living the "liberal" ideology that has, for its two legs, the two Ren.-Enl. illusions....(10) Some sympathy too for Columbus as a world-class failure overwhelmed by disappointments. From the reigning science of the day he surmised that the Orient was reachable by sailing west (because, science correctly said, the world is globular) directly (science was wrong) without too much effort (because, science incorrectly said, the earth is small). Lesson: The "best" scientific opinion sometimes misleads to action on false premises. In this case, a right idea (the earth is round) + a wrong idea (in effect, there's no Western Hemisphere) = disaster. (You couldn't get through to the East till the 20th c. [Panama Canal], & you still can't get through via the St. Lawrence.) It's dismal: He didn't know where he was going (ie, where he'd get to); when he got there, he didn't know where he was; & when he got back to home port he didn't know where he'd been & died without knowing. We must credit him with courage commensurate with his colossal ignorance. And it should give us pause that he was as well-informed, in relevant matters, as anyone on earth....(11) Both Columbus-boosters & Columbus-bashers should temper their temptations to extremism by meditating on the historical law of unintended consequences. On the negative side, the law states that the waves from any big splash in history are going to do some damage on some shores. Columbus clearly intended, as his writings (esp. his diary) copiously show, to be good news to everybody--God, Ferdinand & Isabella, any people he'd meet on his seafaring, & (of course, as Jesus said he should love himself) himself. Lesson: Pray that you'll get through the world having done as little harm as possible. Yes, list Columbus' discredits, but in a parallel column his credits....(12) Don't bash Columbus for using "tainted money" (his royal sponsors having completed, that year [1492], the laying down of their (what we'd now call) "ethnic cleansing" of Spain from Muslims & Jews)! What money's not tainted? It's utopian humbug to imply he should have waited around for less tainted money, when decades of his life had already been spent in futile efforts to raise capital for his voyage west. In the McCarthy paranoid period, I used communist money to subvert the House Unamerican Activities Committee. It was the only money I could get for the purpose. We now see, as I saw then, that that congressional committee was unamerican. And we thank God for its collapse, & that of Joe McCarthy's parallel committee in the Senate. Tainted money is a good to be used to "conquer evil with good" (Ro.12.21)--also to conquer lethargy, apathy, indifference, & ignorance....(13) When the Europeans gave their diseases to the Amerinds, the latter equally unconsciously returned the

disfavor: Europe's syphilis plague began with Columbus' return to Spain. Good/evil flowed in both directions over the Atlantic. For an honest, balanced picture of this, see "The Grand Exchange," the obverse side of the 1992 National Geographic map "Spain in the Americas."....(14) Almost all the "Indians" in the Western Hemisphere are mestizos, Amerind-Iberian mixed bloods. In his Columbus Day essay on McNeil-Lehrer tonight, one of them, Rich. Rodriguez, said that "the problem" with mestizos' participation in Columbus-bashing is that "1492 is our birthday." As for "pure" Indians, they are so only because their previous racial-ethnic mixing is prehistoric, ie not remembered--which is true also of all the other "pures" on earth. The Columbus Event (my coinage from Jn. Knox's "the Jesus Event," the splash + the effects) was such a blessing that no mestizo I've asked about it through the years has said s/he'd rather be a pureblood Amerind. Columbus-bashing has only a tiny population-base & would hardly be noticed were it not for "white" promotion....(15) Those who see Columbus as overwhelmingly "a destructive opportunist" should face the uncomfortable (to them) fact that he was also "a heroic visionary" (to use the two phrases of the 7-hour PBS documentary on the quincentenary (rerun on Columbus Day eve). Rightly said the series, don't angelize or demonize him....(16) Always & everywhere, people-flows have been hard on the people who get flowed over. Nothing personal. A historical fact that ought to provide wouldbe Columbus-bashers with some historical-philosophical distance. Am I excusing Columbus? No, I'm categorizing him. To distinguish him within the people-flow-leaders' category, he was less violent than most. That's no comfort to the flowed-over people & their descendants, but it should make Columbus-bashers a bit less virulent, a bit more fair. Irony: I've found that often the struggler for justice for some is in that process a committer of unfairness to others ("truth on the scaffold"). Example of unfairness: In 1991, the National Council of Churches' governing board said the quincentenary should be a time of penitence rather than jubilation, penitence for "genocide, slavery, ecocide, and exploitation." Not celebrate + mourn, just mourn. Ho, hum. No wonder a distinguished reporter said to me, "The NCC is just too boring to bother to report on." Another ripoff: N.D. has changed "Columbus Day" to "Native American Day."

6 Here are, as I see them, the Columbus Day **AGENDAS**:

....**religious**. We accent Columbus' central-centering spiritual motivation, as in his writing his signature in Gk.-Lat. to bring out that "Christo-fer" means a bearer of Christ to others, ie a missionary, an evangelist. The Fall-Winter '91 NEWSWEEK Columbus Special Issue is excellent on this. His was an act of faith that changed the world, & his Faith became the religion of Iberian America. Says a Native American (Oct/91 NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC, 53), "I am a Christian; I am not sorry the missionaries came. But I wish they had known how to let their message change people's lives from the inside, without imposing their culture over our ways." I believe that's the way to go now as we approach 1993, the UN "Year of Indigenous People."

....**antiChristian-propagan**. British poet Swinburne put both in a single phrase, speaking of Spain: "her sins and sons through sinless lands dispersed....made accursed the name of man and thrice accursed the name of God." He despised Christianity (as increasing numbers in America today do), & romanticized the gods the Christian faith displaced (by the "gray" world of Christianity).

This agenda has two thrusts; (1) the attack on Christianity as such (using the Amerinds negatively, as victims of Christianity), & (2) the promotion of naturalistic paganism (using the Amerinds positively, as Old/New-Age models). Amerinds are getting used by retrospective (Golden Age) utopians as prospective guides--a close parallel to the antiChristian goddess religion of radical feminism. I anticipate that future Columbus Days will see more & more attempts to celebrate paganism, many antiChristian forces banding together.

....**secularistic**. The message of these folk is that religion is bad news & the Columbus Event proves it. They fall into easy alliance with the folk of the antiChristian-propagan agenda, though a fragile alliance.

....**esthetic**. Here, appreciation's the thing. Eg, the National Gallery of Art's nonpolitical exhibit, "Art in the Age of Discovery." Or SEEDS OF CHANGE (Smithsonian/91).