

WHO WAS COLUMBUS "FUNDAMENTALLY"?

and a few additional quincenary puzzlers

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REFLECTIONS after viewing the GBH/TV series "Columbus and the Age of Discovery," exec.producer Zvi Dor-Ner, & after studying Columbus-expert Kay Brigham

1 Can we know who Columbus "fundamentally" was? Un/fortunately, no. Even if we had double our data on him, it would be risky, so complex a person was he. So when the exec.producer says he was "fundamentally a merchant," we should be wise enough to know the statement reveals more about its maker than it does about Columbus. I make the case that Columbus was fundamentally a Christian missionary, but don't trust me--or any other case-maker.

The proof of Columbus' complexity: such good (though mutually contradictory) cases can be made for his being fundamentally such different things!

As for "merchant," our commercial civilization can paint this portrait in sharper lines & brighter colors than it can any other portrait: economic determinism is as much the hermeneutic mode in secular America as it was/is the (failed) theory in socialist-communist countries. The mode is used to explain (1) how C. could maintain his drive through nine years of waiting & a naturally & humanly perilous sea-voyage, & also (2) his abuse of the natives (their value being, in the "merchant" view, only economic). As the lustful explain life in terms of lust, the greedy explain history in terms of money (obtaining, maintaining, & expanding it). A sad instance of "It takes one to know one": greed-driven America can "understand" C. as greed-driven, no matter the actual extent to which he was so within his motivational matrix.

2 Should Jews celebrate Pesach-Passover & Columbus or neither? The Bible's conquest of Canaan was hard on the natives (the Canaanites), as Europe's conquest of the western hemisphere was hard on the natives (the Amerinds). Can you think of any exception to the historical fact that one people passing over onto another people is hard on the other people?

In Joshua/Columbus analogizing, how important is the essential difference, viz that--whereas millions of North & South Amerinds exist to cry against the injustice to their ancestors & themselves, the Canaanites have all been buried? (For our purpose here, the rival exodus-occupation scenarios [invasion of Canaan, or uprising of the Canaanite oppressed, or a combination of the two] are unimportant: Pesach-Passover assumes the biblical narrative, including the slaughter of the Canaanites.)

Of course I'm not picking on the Jews. The principle is universal. Because the Mideast Peace Conference begins the end of this month, with (& a good thing, too) no possibility the Palestinians will gain armed sovereignty, the rights of the dispossessed will be as much on the world's mind as was, last week, a woman's right to be free of sexual harrassment in the workplace.

3 As historical symbols for us Americans, what should "Columbus" & "Mayflower" mean? Every people's historical-symbolic words have both abiding & changing content not only in connotata (here, feelings) but also in their denotata ("facts," ideas, & ideals). Said Coleridge, "Words spoken are the skin of living thought."....(1) To be "true," the content of such words must be both inclusive of data (what happened?) & fair to all participants (what were the short- & long-term effects on losers as well as winners?)....(2) To be "real" now, what are the current-&-future action-implications (what's the best use of that past)?....(3) "Columbus" was in government service, "Mayflower" was in radical alienation from government (the Pilgrims having no pressure or even desire to exploit the natives in the interest of "back home"). We should make more of Thanksgiving Day than we do of Columbus Day....(4) We who live in America North (USA & Canada) should give thanks that our territory was dominated by Europe North: Columbus came from Europe South (oh, those violent Mediterraneans!), which came to dominate America South, where democracy has had little chance. Or is this line of thinking ethnist? It's ethnic, but I think not ethnist.

4 How shall we hold those who claim to have "the key to the meaning of Columbus' voyages"?

At arms' length. The quote is from NEWSWEEK's "Columbus Special Issue" (Fall/Winter '91), collaborative with the Smithsonian's current "Seeds of Change" exhibition. Also on p.4 is the odd, though ideologically understandable, claim that the Americas "changed the ethnic composition of Europe." So anxious is the author to make the Amerinds equals of the Europeans that he says "two old worlds were linked and made one"--yeh, in the sense that the eaten lamb has been made "one" with the lion. White patronism toward Native Americans will serve them no better than does white patronism toward African-Americans, Hispanics, or Asians....The question is not equality, but honesty & fairness & wide-angle viewing. That justifies, even demands, that--as I say in this 12 Sept 91 CCT letter--we both celebrate & mourn.

5 Does multiculturalism, with its dogma that all cultures are of equal value, require us to stop saying Old World / New World? I hope not, though NW p.4 implies we should. By almost every cultural criterion, the Americas are overwhelmingly Eurocentric, & North America Anglocentric. Beware of utopians!

Mourn, celebrate Columbus Day

How should we celebrate Columbus Day '91, and next year the half-millennium of Europe's landfall in the Western Hemisphere? What are we to tell our children about how our nation came to be?

No nation's story of its origin is pure. The story always should be honestly told, glory and warts and all, lest the children be deceived into either jingoism or alienation.

Some of our self-victims of utopianism are trying to deceive our children into alienation. Outstanding among them is Hans Konig, who said in The New

York Times last year, "Don't Celebrate 1492 -- Mourn It."

But honest scholarship and honest patriotism ask us to do both: Mourn that the European migration that began with Columbus has been hard on the natives, whom many call "Native Americans." And celebrate that just when the Old World was bursting with the seeds of new ideas, the soil of the New World came available to plant them in.

As for utopians who want us only to weep because our nation didn't get off to a pure start, let them listen to Gorbachev and Yeltsin, who said that it was "utopianism" that afflicted their people from 1917 till now.

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