

The years of our brief lives speak to our days, & the centuries speak to our years. I like to think of Centennials as opportunities to let the centuries leap over our years & speak directly to our days, to this day when there was morning & there will be night. This Thinksheet ruminates hereon.

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We "did" 1776, the second centennial of the Declaration of Independence.

We missed 1979, the 19th centennial of Vesuvius' burial of six towns, Pompeii being the best known. I couldn't convince the N.Y.TIMES to observe it; in vain did I exhaust all eight of my arguments.

We won't miss the double-header 1992, the 5th centennial of the Amerinds' discovery of Columbus & the 3rd of voodoo's discovery of New England. I'm concerned about both, concerned that the recollective part of the celebrations be full & fair, without omissions or distortions caused by historical ignorance and/or religious, racial, nationalistic, or ideological prejudice. (I was about to write a letter on this to Dave Pomeroy, the National Council of Churches' television head, & decided to do him this Thinksheet instead--though I'll not be surprised if he says "Willis! I'm ahead of you on planning for both centennials!")....Let's take the two in historical order:

COLUMBUS' diaries ought to be given more attention than they've had in secular education in America. The modern secular mind finds it easy to "understand" Columbus' motives as (1) Wanderlust, eagerness to explore & discover, (2) fame, (3) wealth, & (4) bringing glory & wealth to his sponsors &, indirectly, to his native land. Not so easy is it for the secular mind to grasp what the diaries say his primary motive was: evangelism, missions to the pagans. But was that really his primary motive? Leave that one to the psychobiographers. For the centennial, it's enough to emphasize what the man himself thought he was about, thought he was doing, thought he was intending. Everybody knows he belongs in the history of "discovery." Let's see that he gets more solid billing in missiological history. The Santa Maria, it seems, was more a missionary ship than was the Mayflower.

SALEM VILLAGE was in a turmoil of changes when, June 2 - September 22, a special court appointed by the royal governor condemned & hanged twenty persons for witchcraft. Nothing really unusual, in the King's eyes & the eyes of his Mass. governor: $\frac{1}{2}$ million had been, & far into the next century were to be, executed for same in Britain & Europe (W.W.Sweet, THE STORY OF RELIGION IN AMERICA [H&R/39], p.91). Why so few executions in New England? Because "persistently the Puritan tradition tended to make revelation rational" (S.E.Ahlstron, A RELIGIOUS HISTORY OF THE AMERICAN PEOPLE [Yale/73], p.390, in another connection). Indeed, as mainline churches today sniff at charismatic experience, so the early American Puritans suspected "enthusiasm," irrational ecstatic behavior: if they hadn't been so much like us, there wouldn't have been any witch trials! I'll finish this page with some observations toward an unbiased, fair, constructive 3rd centennial:

(1) Everybody, including the colony's outstanding scientist Cotton Mather, believed in the reality of suprahuman conscious "principalities & powers." In his brilliant PIETY VERSUS MORALISM: THE PASSING OF THE NEW ENGLAND THEOLOGY (H.Holt/32), Jos. Haroutunian, passim, makes the point that the surrendering of this conviction, in later generations, was a factor in the degeneration from piety with its spiritual-ethical-moral riches to superficial moralism, an ally of rising materialism. Said JH way back in 1932, "The optimism and the humanism of the nineteenth century have already lost their rational quality," & we're facing "a post-modern mind" that may well, & needs to, recover the tragic sense of life, "rediscover the truths once signified by the doctrines of divine sovereignty and divine grace, of predestination and election, of depravity and regeneration" (p.xxv)....(2) The year before, the clergy had lost power to the rising merchant class: the king had changed the franchise basis from church membership to property ownership....(3) Almost to a man, the clergy warned court & people against jurisprudential naivete, preaching that the Devil was trying to use the court to persecute the saints (H.S.Smith et al, AMERICAN CHRISTIANITY: AN HISTORICAL INTERPRETATION WITH REPRESENTATIVE DOCUMENTS [Scrib/60], pp.216-9)....(4) Nobody from the "right" section of town was hanged!....(5) Voodoo, through a servant in the parsonage, may have been the exotic-ecstatic match that lit the tragic conflagration, court & noose.