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Columbus Discovery/Meeting of America in the light of

PEOPLE FLOWS

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At the urging of my Tabernacle Committee, Craigville today, in CCMA annual meeting, adopted, as next year's programs theme, "The 500th Anniversary of Columbus' Discovery/Meeting of America." Our Committee's report concluded, "We are not deterred, but rather encouraged, by the fact that the oncoming event is generating controversy."

Desiring a single word to represent the tension, I came up with **discovery/meeting**, & in #2434 (9Aug90), leaning against the traditional emphasis, I speak of "the 5th centennial of the Amerinds' discovery of Columbus & the 3rd of voodoo's discovery of New England." (The latter refers to the Salem Witch trials, 1692. If there was a cool head on the scene, it was Cotton Mather, New England's supreme scientist, historian, theologian, & preacher of the time--who, however, in the current Salem Witch Museum flier, is pilloried thus: "the fanatically blinded Cotton Mather." So much for touristic fairness.) "I'm concerned about both, concerned that the recollective part of the celebrations be full & fair, without omissions or distortions caused by historical &/or religious, racial, nationalistic or ideological prejudice." Now, about a year after I wrote that, both forms of calamity are upon us & increasing. This Thinksheet provides **a fresh context** for viewing & interpreting 1492.

1 Whose idea was it anyway, this celebrating of "Columbus Day"? The promoters of the 1892 (400th anniversary) Chicago-Columbia Exposition on the grounds adjacent to where the U. of Chicago had just begun. A Baptist preacher with the improbable name of Francis X. Bellamy, disturbed by what he saw as a spiritual & patriotic decline in his beloved country, wrote the Pledge of Allegiance & persuaded Congress & Benj. Harrison to declare Columbus Day a national holiday, with more than 25,000 schools to celebrate it, the celebration to include the Pledge of Allegiance. (So much for those ignorant enough to imagine that American history has practiced a wall of separation between church [esp. clergy] & state.) Pastor Bellamy, then turned jounalist because his church judged his preaching unorthodox, is thus single-handedly responsible for (1) extending the Centennial into an **annual** celebration of which Columbus is the personal symbol, & (2) creating a **daily** public-school patriotic ceremony in the saying of the Pledge of Allegiance to the Flag.

A conclusion the Rev. Bellamy would have appreciated: Anybody badmouthing the 500th Columbus anniversary celebration is against the Flag & a bad American.

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I put it this baldly to indicate at least part of the emotional cost dissenters will have to pay for attacking Columbus, who is (as it were, as you can see by the Bellamy history) carrying an American flag.

How do personal symbols function in a nation's history? Try Washington, Lincoln, King. Then try attacking them (respectively): a slave owner, a wily politician soft on slavery, an adulterer & plagiarist. Irony: Of the three, only King has a distinctive day. I don't mind folks attacking King as a bad (im)moral model of man & student: he deserves it. But for his vision & courage, he deserves also honor & remembrance. Should we be as kind to Columbus, another flawed human being?

2 Yes, we should. I'll repeat the only other Columbus ¶ in #2434: "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 'discov-

ery.' 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."

3 In this time of **double social reversal**, Columbus (& those carved into Mt. Rushmore) is doubly outré: white & male. These are category readings (literally, "pre-judices"), not character readings. The **irony** is blaring: racism & sexism in reversal, stood on their heads. On the current cultural teeter-totter, the Amerinds are heavy & Columbus & the Mayflower are light.

Given this mood among American movers & shakers, few journalists will be untimid enough to speak out against **Columbus-bashing**. Rather, the 5 Nov 90 NW p.79 article is typical: "A New Vision of Paradise Lost: Our ecological mess started with Columbus." The article quotes an Amerind-lifestyle-affirming romantic author, Kirkpatrick Sale: "All the talk about taking Christianity and civilization to the heathen...was just so much ancillary camouflage." More of the same, by NW: "The admiral, says Sale, was the epitome of the corrupt and malignant culture he left behind...." Better for ecology, this seems to say, if Columbus & the Mayflower had been lost at sea.

Notice the forming of the battlelines: Columbus is carrying the American flag, & the ecologically-minded are with "Dances With Wolves" (Kevin Costner's name in the movie) joining the Amerinds (a.k.a. "Native Americans," a doubly ambiguous term: I too am a native, & the pre-Amerinds were more-native-than-thou but were displaced by the new [Amerind] natives, who in turn were displaced by the newer [EurAmerican] immigrants & natives). I'm anticipating this Think-sheet's main burden.

4 A later NW article (24 June 91, pp.54f) riled me into writing a letter to the editor which I correctly assumed would not be published but is so here:

"Your...article on Columbus...rightly points to his complexity and wrongly fails to mention a crucial dimension of that complexity, namely, his self-understanding--as revealed repeatedly in his diary--as one sent by God to benefit the Indians with what he considered the best that he knew, namely, the Christian gospel. [Underlining added here.]

"True enough: outwardly, he was a bold adventurer set upon discovery, wealth, and prestige. That's what he set his mind and his muscles to. But equally true: inwardly, what he set his heart on was evangelizing whatever peoples he would come upon in his explorations.

"That spiritual motive obtained also among the English who settled our Atlantic seaboard. It appears in every one of the royal charters granted the colonies and on the earliest seal of the Massachusetts Bay Colony.

"That motive was central in the lives of many early American clergy and laity, and some of their achievements were spectacular. John Eliot, for example, reduced the Algonquian language to writing, wrote a grammar and a dictionary of Algonquian, translated the whole Bible from [the original] Hebrew and Greek into that language, published the first book in American history (namely, that Bible)--to mention only his linguistic labors on behalf of the Indians.

"But back to Columbus. Why did you fail to mention what he himself considered most important? Perhaps because of ignorance. More probably because for two generations a virulent secularism has been trying to erase spirituality from the American memory.

"Now that spirituality is back, isn't it time to tell the American story more honestly and fully?"

5 Secularly viewed (in the good sense), the primary engine of "history" is **people-flow**: "history" is fundamentally demographic history. The Hapiru(Habiru), Abraham among them, flowed westward into Canaan, a flow continuing from Gn.15 onward throughout the Bible & beyond--indeed, Columbus' Santa Maria & the Pilgrims' Mayflower are part of that flow, the part that met the Sinic flow eastward (the Amerinds of the Americas being the outermost reaches of that flow). A southward flow created Hinduism & its offshoots: a northern flow from the Mediterranean produced Europe. Always God's Spirit has been at work in the always painful & always tragic but usually enriching confrontations, discoveries, meetings, invasions. Cool it, folks: God is not finished with us yet.