

[Back](#)**4 page(s) will be printed.**

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THE CLAMOR OVER COLUMBUS

On this hotly debated anniversary, what should Christians think?

The Columbus quincentenary has been the occasion for more controversy than celebration," writes one scholar with massive understatement. From Newsweek to the Smithsonian Institution, from the National Conference of Catholic Bishops to the National Council of Churches, people have loudly debated what Columbus's landing really means.

Was it "the expansion of Christianity into our hemisphere [that] brought to the people of this land the gift of the Christian faith with its power of humanity and salvation, dignity and fraternity, justice and love"? Or was it the beginning of "invaSion, genocide, slavery, 'ecocide' and exploitation"?

The editors asked one distinguished historian and friend of CHRISTIAN HISTORY to venture into the fray and suggest what Christians in 1992 should thin1` of this momentous 500th anniversary.

CHRISTIAN HISTORY cannot not notice the landing of Christopher Columbus in 1492. Anyone writing world history has to regard the event among the four or five most noticeable and notable in recorded history.

CHRISTIAN HISTORY pays special attention to the branch of world history that deals with the story of Christianity. By bringing in Christ, his church, and the culture called Christianity, the

magazine cannot avoid Columbus, 1492, and all that. His enterprise cannot be presented without reference to his faith.

Accusations against Columbus and his enterprise are manifold, and Christians today cannot escape being implicated. Whether and how the accusations are just needs some exploring.

Picture an Islamic America

Imagining away the landings, explorations, conquests, and settlements has become a big part of the quincentenary observance: "If only Spain hadn't come to the Americas, how much better things would be for natives of the Americas" runs the sentiment. Yet consider this:

Early in 1492 the Christian troops of Ferdinand and Isabella ended an era of Islamic domain in Western Europe. Islamdom at the time was in as expansive a mood as was Christendom. Had Islam won a few more military victories--and had it commanded more nagging entrepreneurs like Columbus and his cohorts--the landscapes of the Americas would be vastly different.

Imagine a cityscape in which the minaret, not the church steeple, dominates. Picture a New York that looks like Tehran, a San Francisco that resembles Malaysian cities. Imagine a United States with 1-4 million Christians, instead of 1-4 million Muslims, fighting for attention. In neither script--the actual or imagined--do the people of the hemispheres remain unaware of each other.

Had the voyages of Columbus not been successful, certainly in 1493 or 1494 some other Spaniard would have made the crossing after which permanent contact would have occurred. Or not many decades later, England would have brought ships, troops, plunderers, and adventurers. If not Spain or England, then the Netherlands or France.

This provides a common-sense check when writers suggest that native peoples of the Americas should have been left alone. The explorers and conquerors from Spain may have done nearly everything wrong--sometimes it appears that way--but there is no way the American hemisphere would always have been left alone, free from diseases and swords, unaware of the Bible and the churches of Europe.

Competitive repentance

During this year of observance, narrators tell--some eagerly--a story of almost unrelieved exploitation, dehumanization, death, and murder. Experts in exaggeration seem to be contending to see who can bring the longest and most fierce list of charges against Spain and Europe.

But no one needs to exaggerate a story that includes rivers of blood, oceans of tears. As with the story of the Holocaust in Hitler's Germany, one is tempted to resist telling it, so inadequate are imaginations to reconceive each mother's cry, each slash of the sword, each experience of pain. Yet since most of history is suffering, not to tell the story of sufferers is to dishonor their dying, and to deprive ourselves of a fuller humanity.

So the story gets told with a vengeance, by various tellers.

Native Americans could not forget the story of this hemispheric Holocaust. And in almost every nation in which they remain a presence, from the United States to Brazil, the infliction of misery and the suppression of rights goes on.

Christians have a stake in their story, because Christianity not only did little to mitigate the horrors but also often legitimated them. In the United States Christians stole the land or bought it cheaply. They killed the Indians who were in their way, and those whom they did not kill they put on reservations. The English colonists, if anything, did less well than the Spanish and French in this respect.

Thus Christians are another major group telling the story, and among this group, one finds few defenders of the Columbus venture.

Yet are Columbus-bashing and Europebashing appropriate for Christians?

Ostensibly, the anniversary calls for repentance, and Christians can never get too much of that. But many churches' "Calls to Repentance" are not so much expressions of repentance as they are boasts--"We are more repentant than you" or "We are more sensitive and aware than you."

Repentance, though, is not saying "Look what your ancestors did!" or "Look what our ancestors did!" It is not even saying-"Look what we, their heirs, have done!" At the center of repentance lies the cry, "Alas, what kind of people are we, that we are capable of doing bad things to the environment and the native peoples--and we are doing such things now!"--and to follow that with policy and action.

One listens and watches for such expressions--and action--but often the self-justifying or other-accusing language obscures.

Christian reckonings

Once we get past competitive repentance and actually repent, we see in bolder relief enduring issues illuminated by the Columbus events. This is not the place to resolve them (each has produced shelves full of literature), but let me offer a catalog of Christian reckonings.

Crusade. Medieval Christians--and Columbus was among them--did not conceive of missions as have heirs of nineteenth-century Protestant missions. But medieval Christians were good at crusading, at trying to purge sacred places of infidels and the waste places of savages--all in the interest of extending pure Christian domains. Columbus the adventurer thought that as Spain circled the world, it would pick up the riches of Cathay along the way. It could then stab the Muslim in the back, as it were, from the East, and crusade to restore the Holy Land.

Christians still use the concept of the crusade, at least metaphorically, but they rarely revisit the past to see the assumptions that lie behind a genuine crusade.

Mission. Columbus had missionary interests. His detractors, though, see all Christian endeavor of the sixteenth century as exploitation. Though missionary friars often criticized the conquerors, everyone agrees that Catholics first and Protestants later related poorly to Indians. But many critics are hostile to all missions. The issue is quickened in 1992.

Prophecy. Not until recently, as historians have reread Columbus's *Libro de las Profecias* [Book of Prophecies], have they seen the extent to which Columbus saw his voyage as fulfilling prophecy. He read the Bible and Christian commentators to draw pictures of how the world was to end--and then sketched himself into them. Millennial readings of American history did not begin with Jonathan Edwards in the 1740s or Dwight L. Moody in the 1870s; they inspired the voyages of 1492. How to apply prophecy to current events remains an issue to ponder.

Conquest. Columbus and those who followed him assumed that if they came upon a place, they had a right to determine its destiny. What gave him the right to claim "Asia" (as he thought) for Ferdinand and Isabella, for pope and empire? Imperial ambition has received Christian support in the five centuries since. Debate over it comes up whenever the United States exercises its muscles, as it did recently in the Persian Gulf. The issues posed by Columbus's presumption remain on the Christian conscience.

Stewardship. The newcomers to the continents despoiled them. To get the quickest possible yield from mines and plains, fields and forests, and peoples, they did whatever was necessary. Five centuries later, battles over ozone layers, deforestation, and endangered species, among others, are urgent extensions of issues posed by the explorers of the 1500s. (Revisionists

might remember, however, that many studies show the Indians themselves often ruined their environments and were consequently forced to move on.)

Double-sided history

Most Christians in 1492 saw native Americans as weak and evil while Europeans were right and true, servants of the Good God.

Today, some historians make Europeans all evil and the American natives all good.

Likewise, Columbus used to be overpraised as the perfect pioneer. Now he is often overaccused as the hemisphere's arch-villain.

Yet Columbus and what he did live on in billions of expressions, almost all double-sided. Christian historians, if they stay true to the record, have to show this ambiguity.

In 1992, few simply defend Columbus, his Europe, and their aftermath. But many simply attack him. These attackers might have some biblical homework to do.

God effects things in the world in ironic ways. The very pride, intellect, and virtue that motivated Columbus and his contemporaries also did them in. God inspires men and women and also expects of them responsible action. God visits the world not only with judgment but also with mercy and motivation. That double-sided view of history, if acquired by large numbers of Christians, could be a valid legacy of the Columbus year.

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): Two different versions of 1492: As Spanish Christians came to the Americas, did they decimate native peoples and despoil paradise? Or did they introduce liberating Christianity to savages engaged in human sacrifice?

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By MARTIN E. MARTY

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### **VOICES IN THE CONTROVERSY**

"The greatest event since the creation of the world, excluding the Incarnation and death of Him who created it."

--Francisco Lopez de Gomara (1552)

"What some historians have termed a 'discovery,' in reality was an invasion and colonization with legalized occupation, genocide, economic exploitation, and a deep level of institutional racism and moral decadence."

--National Council of Churches

"[This is] the 500th anniversary of one of the great achievements of human endeavor."

--George Bush

"[Based] on statistical analyses of Indian deaths, [the Spanish conquest was] the greatest demographic catastrophe in recorded history."

--Peter Winn

"The discovery of America, and that of a passage to the East Indies by the Cape of Good Hope, are the two greatest and most important events recorded in the history of mankind."

--Adam Smith (late 1700s)

"Columbus makes Hitler look like a juvenile delinquent!"

--Native American demonstrator

"After 500 years the Columbian legacy has created a civilization that we ought not, in all humble piety and cultural relativism, declare to be no better or worse than that of the Incas. It turned out better. And mankind is the better for it. Infinitely better. Reason enough to honor Columbus and bless 1492."

--Charles Krauthammer

"If Columbus could discover a country that was already occupied, I can go into the parking lot and discover your car--with you in it."

--Comedian Dick Gregory

"The systematic violence, both physical and spiritual, done first to indigenous people and then to black Africans was, indeed, the original sin of the American nations. In other words, the United States of America was conceived in iniquity."

--Jim Wallis

"Should we, then, celebrate Columbus? Certainly. [His voyages' effects?] Of course not, but then neither did many of his contemporaries.... To reject Columbus is in effect to reject the modern world."

--James Muldoon

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[Back](#)