

history to view the positive side of the Columbus legacy. Several articles do the same, including: Robert Royal, "Columbus as a Dead White Male: the Ideological Underpinnings of the Controversy over 1492." *The world and I* (December, 1991); Dinesh D'Sousa, "The Crimes of Christopher Columbus," *First Things* (November, 1995); Michael Marshall, "Columbus and the Age of Exploration," *The World And I* (November, 1999).



ISSUE 14



Did Christopher Columbus's Voyages Have a Positive Effect on World History?

YES: Robert Royal, from "Columbus and the Beginning of the New World," *First Things: A Monthly Journal of Religion and Public Life* (May 1999)

NO: Gabriel Garcia Marquez, from "For a Country Within Reach of the Children," *Americas* (November/December 1997)

ISSUE SUMMARY

YES: Robert Royal states although there were negatives that emanated from Columbus's New World discoveries, they continue to "remind us of the glorious and ultimately providential destiny on the ongoing global journey that began in the fifteenth century."

NO: Nobel laureate Gabriel Garcia Marquez argues that Columbus's voyages had a negative effect on the Americas, much of which is still felt today.

In October 1998, a *New York Times* article covered a dispute between Hispanic-Americans and Italian-Americans with regard to which ethnic group should play the more important role in the organization of New York's Columbus Day Parade. While both groups had legitimate claims to the Columbus legacy (after all, Columbus was a Genoese Italian, but he did his most important work for the Spanish nation), the dispute must have drawn an ironic response from those who witnessed the revisionist bashing that the "Admiral of the Ocean Sea" had received in recent years.

In the five centuries since "Columbus sailed the ocean blue," his historical reputation and the significance of his accomplishments have undergone a series of metamorphoses. In the distant past, an eclectic collection of Columbus critics would number essayist Michel Montaigne, English writer Samuel Johnson, philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and French historian and philosopher Abbe Guillaume Reynal, some of whom believed that the world would have been better off without the admiral's discoveries.

It has only been in the last two centuries that Columbus's stock has risen in the theater of public opinion and historical significance. There were many reasons for this change including: (1) the United States acting as a model for democratic government in a 19th/20th-century world living under monarchical/autocratic rule; (2) the part played by the U.S. in the Allied victory during World War I, which ended the German, Austrian, Ottoman, and Russian Empires and brought a greater level of democracy to many parts of Europe; (3) the role assumed by the U.S. in saving Europe and the world from the specter of fascist militarism during World War II. All affected the reversal of Columbus's historical fortunes, as many wondered what the world would have become if the U.S. had not been there to provide inspiration and assistance in these times of need. Thus, some of the credit our nation accrued was passed on to Columbus, whose work had made our nation possible. Samuel Eliot Morison's 1940 book, *ADMIRAL OF THE OCEAN SEA*, marked the climax of this laudatory view of Columbus and his accomplishments.

Historians and publishers love anniversaries and the publicity they generate, and, next to a millennial celebration, none may be more significant than a quinentennial one. Thus, on the 500th anniversary of Columbus's first voyage, the requisite number of tomes on Columbus and his accomplishments were made ready for an eager market. But the world of 1992 was different than the world of Morison's "Admiral of the Ocean Sea," and the historical profession had changed along with it.

The end-of-the-millennium generation of historians treated Columbus differently than had their immediate predecessors. Operating from a different world view, Columbus became to many of them a flawed figure responsible for the horrors of the trans-atlantic slave trade, the annihilation of Native American civilizations through cruelty and disease, and the ecological destruction of a continental paradise.

The recently published books about Christopher Columbus opened a national dialogue on the subject. A national Columbus exhibition in Washington, D.C. was received with skepticism by some and quiet reverence by others. While some participated in the national Columbus Day celebration on October 12, 1992, others declared it a day of mourning in honor of those who lost their lives as a result of Columbus's enterprises. A cultural hornet's nest was unleashed, and any who entered into the Columbus fray had to have the thickest of skin.

Fortunately, as is usually the case, time has a soothing effect, and we will have to wait until the year 2092 for the next major Columbus debate. For now, we have the opportunity—with cooler heads and calmer temperaments—to examine the Columbus legacy.

In this Issue, Robert Royal stresses the positive elements that came from Columbus's discoveries. Gabriel Garcia Marquez emphasizes their negative impact on the New World and its peoples.

Columbus and the Beginning of the New World

The world we know began in the fifteenth century. Not the world of course in the sense of human life or human civilizations, which had already existed for millennia, but the world as a concrete reality in which all parts of the globe had come into contact with one another and begun to recognize themselves as part of a single human race—a process still underway. The spherical globe we had known about since the classical world; in the Middle Ages, readers of Dante took it for granted. Yet it was only because of a small expedition by a few men driven by a mishmash of personal ambition, religious motives, and the desire for profit that an old mathematical calculation was turned into a new human fact. Or as a historian sixty years later accurately characterized the discovery of the New World, it was “the greatest event since the creation of the world (excluding the incarnation and death of Him who created it).”

In our own confused way, we continue to pay homage to that achievement. In 1999, NASA will put a satellite into an orbit a little less than a million miles out into space in what is called L-1, the libration point where the gravity of the earth and the sun exactly balance one another. Equipped with a telescopic lens and video camera, it will provide a twenty-four-hour-a-day image of the surface of the earth. Not surprisingly, one of the enthusiasts behind the project is Al Gore, probably the most environmentally agitated public figure alive. But in spite of the damage that Gore and many others believe we humans have inflicted on the planet since our first large steps in exploring it, and despite the laments of multiculturalists about Europe’s rise to world dominance, the new satellite will be called Triana, after Rodrigo de Triana, who first spotted lights on land from the deck of the Pinta during the first voyage of Columbus.

Perhaps the name is only a bow to growing Hispanic influence in the United States; perhaps it hints that we would like to think of ourselves as equally on the verge of another great age of discovery. But whatever our sense of the future, the Columbus discoveries and the European intellectual and religious developments that lay behind them are today at best taken for granted, at worst viewed as the beginning of a sinister Western hegemony over man and nature. The last five centuries, of course, offer the usual human

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spectacle of great glories mixed with grim atrocities. But we cannot evaluate the voyages of discovery properly—much less the fifteenth-century culture from which they sprang—without gratitude for what they achieved or understanding of their human dimensions. In the fifteenth century, the discoveries were rightly regarded as close to a miracle, especially given the way the century had begun.

The early 1400s were marked by profound religious, political, economic, and even environmental turmoil. At one point in the first decade of the century, there were simultaneously three claimants to the papal throne and three to the crown of the Holy Roman Empire. And the large-scale institutional crises were only a small part of the story. Europe was still suffering from the devastation wrought at the height of the Black Death over half a century earlier and in smaller waves thereafter. Overall, something like 40 percent of the population disappeared in the mid-fourteenth century, in some regions even more. Land lay fallow for lack of workers, villages were deserted, poverty spread. As many modern environmentalists have devoutly wished, nature took its vengeance as human population decreased. Wolves multiplied and returned, even appearing in capital cities. Human predators—in the form of brigands—made travel unsafe over wide areas. The consequences of the retreat of civilization spurred Henry V, fabled victor of Agincourt, to offer rewards for the elimination of both types of pests. Though the beauty of landscapes emerged as never before in contemporary painting and literature, it was not a century that indulged itself in easy sentimentality about the goodness of unimproved nature, human or otherwise. On the contrary, natural hardships spurred the fifteenth century to nearly unparalleled achievements.

But if the internal situation were not enough, Europe was also being squeezed by forces from outside. In 1453, the Ottoman Turks finally succeeded in taking Byzantium. Turkish troops had already been fighting as far into the Balkans as Belgrade a few years earlier. Otranto, in the heel of Italy, fell to them in 1480 for a time. We might have expected the Christian powers to lay aside rivalries momentarily and defend themselves from an alien culture and religion. But the main Atlantic nation-states—England, France, and Spain—were still only beginning to take shape. The rest of Western Europe was broken, despite the theoretical claims of the emperor, into a crazy quilt of competing small powers. So no coordinated effort occurred, though Plus II and other popes called for a crusade. Plus even wrote to Sultan Muhammad II, conqueror of Constantinople, inviting him to convert to Christianity. Whether this letter was intended seriously or as a mere pretext for further action, it failed. Neither “European” nor “Christian” interests were sufficiently united to galvanize the effort. The Pope died in 1464 at the eastern Italian port of Ancona waiting for his people to rally behind him.

A crusade to retake the Holy Land was sometimes a mere pipe dream, sometimes a serious proposal during the course of the century. Ferdinand of Spain listened frequently to such plans, but refrained from doing much. (Machiavelli praises him in *The Prince* as one of those rulers who shrewdly take pains to appear good without necessarily being so.) Charles VIII of France invaded Italy in 1494 but also had in mind an attempt to retake

Constantinople and restore the Eastern Christian Empire. Earlier, Henry V, on his way to Agincourt, proclaimed his intentions not only to assume the French throne but to "build again the walls of Jerusalem." Western Europe had a persistent if vague sense of responsibility to defend Christianity from Islamic military threats and a deeper need to recover the parts of Christendom lost to Muslim conquest, even if the good intentions were thwarted by intra-European distractions.

Had Islam continued its advance, much of Europe might have then resembled the cultures we now associate with the Middle East. The Americas might have been largely Muslim countries as opposed to largely Christian ones. Islam was more advanced than Europe in 1492, but in the paradoxical ways of culture, its very superiority contributed to its being surpassed. Muslims do not seem to have taken much interest in Western technical developments in navigation, and even well-placed countries like Morocco were never moved to brave the high seas in search of new lands. European technological innovation and military advance may have been born of necessity, given the superiority of outside cultures and the conflicts and rivalries among European nations.

This reminds us of something often overlooked in most contemporary historical surveys. The "Eurocentric" forces, of which we now hear so much criticism, were actually something quite different in the fifteenth century. What we today call "Europeans" thought of themselves as part of Christendom, and a Christendom, as we shall see, that desperately needed to return to some of its founding truths. Similarly, they did not regard themselves as the bearers of the highest culture. Ancient Greece and Rome, they knew, had lived at a higher level, which is why the Renaissance felt the need to recover and imitate classical models. The fabled wealth of the distant Orient and the clearly superior civilization of nearby Islam did not allow Christendom to think itself culturally advanced or, more significantly, to turn in on itself, as self-satisfied empires of the time such as China did. Contemporary European maps—the ones all the early mariners consulted in the Age of Discovery—bear witness to their central belief: Jerusalem, not Europe, was the center of the world.

But this very sense of threat and inferiority, combined with the unsettled social diversity of Europe at the time, gave Europeans a rich and dynamic restlessness. Not surprisingly, the rise towards a renewed Europe began in the places least affected by the population implosion and, therefore, more prosperous: what we today call the Low Countries and, above all, Northern Italy. Renaissances, as Erwin Panofsky demonstrated a few decades ago, had been occurring in Europe since the twelfth century. But the one that took place in Northern Italy in the fifteenth century—the one we call the Renaissance—produced multiple and wide-ranging consequences.

Pius II was in many ways emblematic of the mid-century. A cultivated humanist born in Siena in 1405 with the imposing name Aeneas Sylvius Piccolomini, he initially came under the spell of St. Bernardino, who preached a strictly observant reformed Franciscan life (of which more anon). But he shortly became attracted to the exciting life of the Renaissance Italian humanists, which is to say libertinism and literary pursuits. He shifted parties among papal contenders, pursuing his own ambitions for many years, wrote a popular

history (*Historia rerum ubique gestarum*) that gathered together wide-ranging facts and fictions about foreign lands, and even became imperial poet and secretary to the Holy Roman Emperor Frederick III. But compared with the squabbling popes and anti-popes who preceded him and the colorful escapades of the Borgias, Pius had his virtues. He was learned and hard-working, enjoyed nature, sought reform, and could have made a difference in Europe had his office enjoyed the respect it once had and was to have again later. The religious renaissance, however, like the cultural, scientific, and artistic one with which we are more familiar, had to come from other sources.

Renaissance achievements found multiple and overlapping uses in a Europe in ferment. The geometry developed by the Florentine Paolo Toscanelli allowed Fillippo Brunelleschi, over the objections of a commission of Florentine experts, to dare construction of the unsupported dome that crowns the magnificent Florentine Duomo. Just a few decades later, an intellectually curious Genoese mariner corresponded with Toscanelli in preparation for his attempts to convince another panel of experts in Spain that it was possible to sail west to the Indies (no serious thinker at the time, by the way, believed the earth was flat). His figures were wrong; the distance was greater than he claimed. The experts—and perhaps Columbus himself—knew it. But it was an age when for various reasons people had the faith to attempt things beyond what was previously thought possible. It is worth looking closely at some of those reasons.

Much has recently been written, for example, claiming that the Christian dimension of Columbus' personality was merely a cover for greed and ambition. These alleged traits are then read as a metaphor for a hypocritical European expansion under the cover of religion. Hypocrites certainly existed in the fifteenth century, as they do today. But real history—as opposed to anachronistic morality tales—is always more complex than the simple motives we project back onto figures quite different from ourselves. Like the Italian humanists, who are often wrongly portrayed as modern unbelieving intellectuals, Columbus combined his faith with new knowledge and new interests. But that did not make his faith any less real. He wanted that Renaissance ideal, glory: in this case, that of an unprecedented voyage. He drove hard bargains with Ferdinand and Isabella to secure the financial benefits of his discoveries for himself and his descendants. (The Muslim conquests and consequent monopolies over Eastern trade routes made the European search for alternate routes all the more necessary and profitable.) Yet when all the mundane reasons have been listed, the spiritual dimension of the project remains in ways that are quite unexpected.

In the preface to his *Libro de las profecias* (Book of Prophecies), an anthology of prophetic texts that he compiled near the end of his life, Columbus relates to Ferdinand and Isabella how, long before he ever approached them, he had become convinced that the westward voyage was not merely possible but his own personal vocation:

During this time, I searched out and studied all kinds of texts: geographies, histories, chronologies, philosoph[ies], and other subjects. With a hand that could be felt, the Lord opened my mind to the fact that it would be possible to sail from here to the Indies, and He opened my will to desire to

accomplish this project. This was the fire that burned within me when I came to visit your Highnesses.

Of course, the reading alone suggests we are dealing with an unusual kind of sailor, one who, like the humanists of his day, has engaged in sifting and comparing ancient and modern knowledge for new purposes. There is some irony, then, in the fact that he claims that God intended to produce a *milagro ebidentísimo* ("highly visible miracle") in this enterprise by using an uneducated man: "For the execution of the journey to the Indies, I was not aided by intelligence, by mathematics, or by maps. It was simply the fulfillment of what Isaiah had prophesied."

Columbus clearly employed considerable intelligence, mathematical skill, and geographical knowledge in planning his route. He also knew from much experience at sea that winds in the Atlantic nearer the equator would carry him west, those to be found more to the north would take him east, back to Europe. And he was alert to other environmental signs. Late in the first voyage he turned south to follow a flock of birds that he rightly assumed were headed towards land. Without this chance or providential fact, he probably would have come ashore somewhere between Virginia and Florida instead of the Caribbean, with doubtless immensely different effects on subsequent world history.

Despite all the knowledge, abstract and practical, that Columbus brought to bear on his task, the religious intuitions he describes may strike us as bordering on delusion, on a par with the equally unexpected mystical speculations of the mathematician Pascal, or Newton's commentaries on the prophecies in the Book of Daniel. But anyone familiar with how prophecies have functioned throughout history knows they often work themselves out in ways their authors never envisioned. In Columbus' case, we may wish to avoid judging too quickly the "hand that could be felt" and other evidence that at times he seems to have heard something like divine locutions. They may have been delusions, intuitions, or something else moving in the depths of human history.

Far from being a later and idealized reinterpretation of his own past, Columbus' remarks are confirmed by a curious source. Recent scholars have discovered notes in Columbus' own hand dated 1481, over a decade before his first voyage, in the back of a copy of Aeneas Sylvius Piccolomini's (the later Pius II) *Historia rerum ubique gestarum*. There Columbus compiles a shorter list of prophecies from various sources which, it now seems perfectly clear, guided his whole life project. . . .

Much of this real history has been obscured for a long time by persons who found it expedient to use Columbus as a symbolic figure. For most older Americans, he was presented as a heroic proto-American, combating the obscurantism of reactionary Spanish Catholics who thought he would sail off the end of the flat earth. (As we have seen, neither Columbus nor his intellectual critics believed in such absurdities.) In that reading, he became a forerunner of American Protestantism, modern science, and capitalist enterprise. It is no great loss that we have discarded that historical illusion.

Columbus also did service as an ethnic hero for Catholics, mostly Irish and Italian, during the large waves of immigration at the end of the nineteenth

and beginning of the twentieth century. There was less harm here, because he was a true hero. Enthusiasm grew so heated that on the four hundredth anniversary of his voyage in 1892 efforts were made to have him canonized. But Leo XIII, fully aware of Columbus' irregular marital situation (for reasons of inheritance he never married the woman he lived with after his wife died), contented himself with praising his human virtues: "For the exploit is in itself the highest and grandest which any age has ever seen accomplished by man; and he who achieved it, for the greatness of mind and heart, can be compared to but few in the history of humanity."

In recent years, of course, Columbus' standing as hero has come under severe assault. He and the culture he represented have been castigated for initiating the modern cultural dominance of Europe and every subsequent world evil: colonialism, slavery, cultural imperialism, environmental damage, and religious bigotry. There is a kernel of truth in these charges, but obviously to equate a single individual or a complex entity like a culture with what are currently judged to be the negative dimensions of the emergence of an interconnected human world is to do great historical injustice to both individuals and ideas.

Europeans, for example, had an ambivalent stance towards the new peoples they encountered. On the one hand, there arose almost instantaneously the beginnings of the "noble savage" myth, which had a varied career in the hands of writers like Thomas More, Montaigne, and Rousseau. On the other hand, actual experience of the new cultures revealed peoples who displayed much savagery and sometimes little nobility.

Columbus himself adhered to one side or the other in this culture war at different times in his life. In one of his first communications with the Spanish monarchs after the discovery, he described the Tainos of the Caribbean in glowing terms:

I see and know that these people have no religion whatever, nor are they idolaters, but rather they are very meek and know no evil. They do not kill or capture others and are without weapons. They are so timid that a hundred of them flee from one of us, even if we are teasing. They are very trusting; they believe there is a God in Heaven, and they firmly believe that we come from Heaven. They learn very quickly any prayer we tell them to say, and they make the sign of the cross. Therefore Your Highnesses must resolve to make them Christians.

As the self-contradictions of this passage suggest, Columbus was under the spell of one current in European mythology that believed such "uncivilized" peoples to be somehow closer to the conditions of the Garden of Eden than those enmeshed in the conflicts of "civilization."

In fact, the Tainos themselves were enmeshed in the tribal raiding, slavery, and cannibalism that existed in the Caribbean long before any European arrived (the word "cannibal" is a corruption of the native term for the fierce Caribs who eventually gave their name to the whole region). Columbus was for a while on surprisingly good terms with his Tainos, who in turn used the Spaniards to their advantage against their enemies. But the distance between the cultures was great, and, with the arrival of less-than-ideal explorers in

subsequent voyages, the situation took a bad turn. Towards the end of his third voyage, Columbus wrote to complain about criticism of his governorship over both natives and Spaniards:

At home they judge me as a governor sent to Sicily or to a city or two under settled government and where the laws can be fully maintained, without fear of all being lost. . . . I ought to be judged as a captain who went from Spain to the Indies to conquer a people, warlike and numerous, and with customs and beliefs very different from ours.

Columbus had discovered that the Indians were real flesh-and-blood human beings, with the same mix of good and evil that everywhere constitutes the human condition.

Today, the usual way of characterizing the behavior of the Europeans at this early stage is to fault them for not having the kind of sensitivity to the Other that a modern anthropologist or ethnologist would bring to such situations. Overlooked in this condemnation is the fact that it was precisely out of these tumultuous conflicts that the West began to learn how to understand different cultures as objectively as possible in their own terms. Columbus himself astutely noted differences between the various subgroupings of Tainos as well as their distinctiveness from other tribes. And even when he was driven to harsh action—against both Indians and Spaniards—it was not out of mere desire for power. Bartolome de las Casas, the well-known defender of the Indians, notes the “sweetness and benignity” of the admiral’s character and, even while condemning what actually occurred, remarks, “Truly I would not dare blame the admiral’s intentions, for I knew him well and I know his intentions were good.” Las Casas attributes Columbus’ shortcomings not to malign intent but to ignorance concerning how to handle an unprecedented situation.

This raises the question of larger intentions and the world impact of fifteenth-century European culture. The atrocities committed by Spain, England, Holland, and other European powers as they spread out over the globe in ensuing centuries are clear enough. No one today defends them. Less known, however, are the currents within that culture that have led to the very universal principles by which, in retrospect, we criticize that behavior today. For instance, not only Las Casas, but a weighty array of other religious thinkers began trying to specify what European moral obligations were to the new peoples.

Las Casas, who was the bishop of Chiapas, Mexico, where relations between mostly native populations and the central government remain dicey even today, bent over backwards to understand local practices. He once even described human sacrifices as reflecting an authentic piety and said that “even if cruel [they] were meticulous, delicate, and exquisite,” a view that some of his critics have remarked exhibits a certain coldness towards the victims. Other missionaries learned native languages and recorded native beliefs. The information coming from the New World stimulated Francisco de la Vitoria, a Dominican theologian at the University of Salamanca in Spain, to develop principles of natural law that, in standard histories, are rightly given credit as the origin of modern international law. To read Vitoria on the Indies

is to encounter an atmosphere closer to the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights than to sinister Eurocentrism.

Las Casas and Vitoria influenced Pope Paul III to make a remarkable statement in his 1536 encyclical *Sublimis Deus*:

Indians and all other people who may later be discovered by the Christians are by no means to be deprived of their liberty or the possession of their property, even though they be outside the faith of Jesus Christ. . . . Should the contrary happen it shall be null and of no effect. . . . By virtue of our apostolic authority we declare . . . that the said Indians and other peoples should be converted to the faith of Jesus Christ by preaching the word of God and by the example of good and holy living.

The Spanish crown itself had moral qualms about the conquest. Besides passing various laws trying to eliminate atrocities, it took a step unmatched before or since by any expanding empire: it called a halt to the process while theologians examined the question. In the middle of the sixteenth century, Charles V ordered a theological commission to debate the issue at the monastery of Valladolid. Las Casas defended the Indians. Juan Gines de Sepulveda, the greatest authority on Aristotle at the time, argued that Indians were slaves by nature and thus rightly subject to Spanish conquest. Though the commission never arrived at a clear vote and the Spanish settlers were soon back to their old ways, Las Casas' views were clearly superior and eventually prevailed.

Conquest aside, the question of even peaceful evangelizing remains very much with us. Today, most people, even Christians, believe it somehow improper to evangelize. The injunction to preach the gospel to all nations, so dear to Columbus' heart, seems an embarrassment, not least because of the ways the command has been misused. But some of the earlier missionaries tried a kind of inculturation that recognized what was good in the native practices and tried to build a symbolic bridge between them and the Christian faith. The Franciscans in New Spain and the Jesuits in Canada, for example, tried this approach. Not a few of them found martyrdom.

Many contemporary believers do not think that there was much need to evangelize. This usually arises out of the assumption that native religions are valid in their own way. It will not do, however, given the anthropological evidence, to make facile assumptions that all spiritual practices are on an equal plane. The early explorers who encountered them did not think so, and neither should we. For example, the Mexican novelist Carlos Fuentes, no special friend of Christianity or the Spanish conquest, in the very act of admiring the richness of Aztec culture, characterizes the Aztec gods as "a whole pantheon of fear." Fuentes deplores the way that missionaries often collaborated with unjust appropriation of native land, but on a theological level notes the epochal shift in native cultures thanks to Christian influence: "One can only imagine the astonishment of the hundreds and thousands of Indians who asked for baptism as they came to realize that they were being asked to adore a god who sacrificed himself for men instead of asking men to sacrifice themselves to gods, as the Aztec religion demanded."

This Copernican Revolution in religious thought has changed religious practice around the world since it was first proclaimed in Palestine two millennia ago, yet is all but invisible to modern critics of evangelization. Any of us, transported to the Aztec capital Tenochtitlan or to many other places around the world before the influence of Christianity and Europe, would react the way the conquistadors did—with rage and horror. We might not feel much different about some of the ways that Europeans, imitating Islamic practice, evangelized at times by the sword and perpetrated grave injustices around the world. But it is reductionist in the extreme to regard evangelization simply as imperialism. The usual uncritical way in which we are urged to respect the values of other cultures has only the merest grain of truth buried beneath what is otherwise religious indifferentism.

For all our sense of superiority to this now half-millennium-old story, we still face some of the same questions that emerged in the fifteenth century. We still have not found an adequate way to do justice to the claims of both universal principle and particular communities. We have what Vaclav Havel has called a "thin veneer of global civilization" mostly consisting of CNN, Coca Cola, blue jeans, rock music, and perhaps the beginning glimmer of something approaching a global agreement on how we should treat one another and the planet.

But that minimal unity conceals deeper conflicts involving not only resistance to superficiality but the survival of particular communities of meaning. We say, for example, that we have an equal respect for all cultures—until we come up against religious castes and sexism, clitorectomies and deliberate persecution. Then we believe that universal principles may take precedence. But whose universal principles? A Malaysian prime minister has lately instructed us that, contrary to international assumptions, "Western values are Western values: Asian values are universal values." It may take another five hundred years to decide whether that is so, or whether the opposition it assumes between East and West will persist.

All of this may seem a long way from the fifteenth century. But it is not mere historical fantasy to see in that beginning some of the global issues that are now inescapably on the agenda for the new millennium. Christianity and Islam, the two major proselytizing faiths in the world, are still seeking a *modus vivendi*. The global culture initiated by Columbus will always be inescapably European in origin and, probably, in basic shape. We chose long ago not to stay quietly at home and build the otherwise quite wonderful contraptions called cuckoo clocks. That decision brought (and brings) many challenges, but the very struggle should remind us of the glorious and ultimately providential destiny of the ongoing global journey that began in the fifteenth century.

For a Country Within Reach of the Children

Christopher Columbus, with the authorization of a letter from the Spanish monarchs to the emperor of China, had discovered this paradise through a geographical error that changed the course of history. On the eve of his arrival, even before he heard the wings of the first birds in the darkness at sea, Columbus detected the scent of flowers on the wind coming off the land, and it seemed the sweetest thing in the world to him. He wrote in his shipboard diary that they were met on the beach by natives as naked as the day they were born, handsome, gentle, and so innocent they traded all they had for strings of colored beads and tin trinkets. But his heart almost burst from his chest when he discovered that their noserings were made of gold, and their bracelets, necklaces, earrings, and anklets; that they had gold bells to play with, and some sheathed their private parts in gold. Those splendid ornaments, and not their human values, condemned the natives to their roles as protagonists in the second Genesis which began that day. Many of them died not knowing where the invaders had come from. Many of the invaders died not knowing where they were. Five centuries later the descendants of both still do not know who we are.

It was a more discovered world than anyone believed at the time. The Incas had a well-organized, legendary state with ten million inhabitants and monumental cities built on the Andean peaks to touch the sun god. To the amazement of European mathematicians, they had masterful systems of numeration and computation, archives and records for general use, and an unrelenting veneration for public works, whose masterpiece was the garden of the imperial palace with its life-size trees and animals, all of gold and silver. The Aztecs and Mayas molded their historical consciousness into sacred pyramids among active volcanoes, and they had clairvoyant emperors, celebrated astronomers, and skilled artisans who overlooked the industrial uses of the wheel but utilized it in children's toys.

At the juncture of the two great oceans lay a territory of forty thousand square leagues, barely glimpsed by Columbus on his fourth voyage although today it bears his name: Colombia. For some ten thousand years it had been inhabited by scattered communities with different languages, distinct cultures, and their own well-defined identities. They had no notion of the state or of political cohesion but had discovered the political miracle of living as equals despite their differences. They possessed ancient systems of science and

education, and a rich cosmology linked to brilliant metalwork and inspired pottery. In their creative maturity, they had aspired to incorporate art into daily life—perhaps the supreme destiny of the arts—and achieved their goal with remarkable success, in household utensils as well as in the way they lived. For them, gold and precious gems did not have exchange value but cosmological and artistic power, although the Spaniards viewed them with Western eyes: more than enough gold and gems to leave the alchemists idle and pave the streets of heaven with pieces of four. This was the motive and force behind the Conquest and the Colonization, and the real origin of what we are. A century went by before the Spaniards shaped the colonial state with one name, one language, one god, and the same borders and political division into twelve provinces that it has today. Which gave rise, for the first time, to the notion of a centralized, bureaucratic nation, creating out of colonial lethargy the illusion of national unity. Sheer illusion in a society that was an obscurantist model of racial discrimination and larval violence beneath the cloak of the Holy Office. The cruelty of the conquistadors, and the unknown diseases they brought with them, reduced the three or four million Indians encountered by the Spaniards to no more than a million. But the racial mixing known as *mestizaje* had already become a demographic force that could not be contained. The thousands of African slaves brought here against their will for barbaric labor in mines and on plantations contributed a third notable element to the *criollo* crucible, with new rituals of imagination and memory and other, distant gods. But the Laws of the Indies imposed millimetric standards of segregation according to the degree of white blood in each race: several categories of *mestizos*, black slaves, free blacks, varying classifications of *mulattoes*. It became possible to distinguish as many as eighteen different degrees of *mestizos*, and the white Spaniards even set their own children apart, calling them *criollo* whites. *Mestizos* were not permitted to fill certain high positions in government, to hold other public offices, or to enroll in secondary schools and seminaries. Blacks lacked everything, even a soul; they did not have the right to enter heaven or hell, and their blood was deemed impure until distilled by four generations of whites. Because of how difficult it was to determine the intricate demarcation lines between races, and given the very nature of the social dynamic that created *mestizaje*, such laws could not be enforced with too much rigor, yet racial tensions and violence increased. Until just a few years ago the children of unmarried couples were still not admitted to secondary schools in Colombia. Blacks have achieved legal equality but still suffer many forms of discrimination in addition to the ones peculiar to poverty.

The generation that won independence lost the first opportunity to eradicate this deplorable legacy. The group of young romantics inspired by the enlightenment of the French Revolution established a well-intentioned modern republic but could not eliminate these vestiges of colonialism. Even they were not free of its evil influence. At the age of thirty-five, Simon Bolívar ordered the execution of eight hundred Spanish prisoners, even those lying wounded in a hospital. Francisco de Paula Santander was twenty-eight when he gave the order to shoot thirty-eight Spaniards, including their commanding officer, who had been captured at the Battle of Boyaca. In an indirect way,

some of the virtuous aims of the republic fostered new social tensions between poor and rich, laborers and artisans, and other marginal groups. The savage civil wars of the nineteenth century were an outgrowth of these inequalities, as were the countless political upheavals that have left a trail of blood throughout our history. Two innate abilities have helped U.S. to elude our calamitous fate, to compensate for the gaps in our cultural and social circumstances and carry on a fumbling search for our identity. One is a talent for creativity, the supreme expression of human intelligence. The other is a fierce commitment to self-improvement. Enhanced by an almost supernatural shrewdness, and as likely to be used for good as for evil, they were a providential resource employed by the Indians against the Spaniards from the very day they landed. To get rid of Columbus they sent him from island to island, always on to the next island, to find a king covered in gold who never existed. They deceived the conquistadors, already beguiled by novels of chivalry, with descriptions of fantastic cities built of pure gold, right there, on the other side of the hill. They led them astray with the tale of a mythical El Dorado who covered his body with gold dust once a year and plunged into his sacred lagoon. Three masterpieces of a national epic, used by the Indians as an instrument of survival. Perhaps another of the pre-Columbian talents that we have inherited is an extraordinary flexibility in adapting without delay to any environment and learning with ease the most dissimilar trades: fakirs in India, camel drivers in the Sahara, English teachers in New York.

On the other hand, a trait that may come from the Spanish side is our congenital status as immigrants with a spirit of adventure that seeks out risks rather than avoiding them. Of the five million or so Colombians who live abroad, the immense majority left to seek their fortune with nothing but their temerity, and today they are everywhere, for good reasons or bad, for better or worse, but never unnoticed. The distinguishing Colombian trait in world folklore is that they never let themselves die of hunger. Even more striking is that the farther away they are from Colombia, the more Colombian they become.

This is true. They have assimilated the customs and languages of others and made them their own but have never been able to shake the ashes of nostalgia from their hearts, and they miss no opportunity to express this with every kind of patriotic ceremony, exalting all that they long for in the distant homeland, even its defects.

In the most unexpected countries you can turn the corner and find a living replica of any spot in Colombia: the square, its dusty trees still hung with paper garlands from the last Friday night party; the little restaurant named for an unforgotten town, with the heartbreaking aromas of Mama's kitchen; the July 20 school next to the August 7 tavern that plays music for crying over the sweetheart who never was.

The paradox is that, like their forebears, these nostalgic conquistadors were born in a country of closed doors. The liberators tried to open them to fresh winds out of England and France—the legal and ethical theories of Bentham, the education of Lancaster, the study of languages, the popularization of arts and sciences—in order to eradicate the vices of a Spain more Catholic than the Pope and still wary after the financial harassment of the Jews and eight

hundred years of Muslim occupation. The nineteenth century radicals, and then the Generation of the Centenary, proposed the same idea with policies of massive immigration aimed at enriching the culture of *mestizaje*, but all of them were frustrated by our almost theological fear of foreign devils. Even today we have no idea how much we depend on the vast world we know nothing about. We are conscious of our ills but have exhausted ourselves struggling against the symptoms while the causes go on forever. An indulgent version of our history, meant to hide more than it clarifies, has been written for us and made official; in its original sins are perpetuated, battles are won that never were fought, and glories we never deserved are sanctified. In short, we indulge ourselves with the delusion that although history may not resemble the Colombia we live in, one day Colombia will resemble her written history.

In similar fashion, our conformist, repressive education seems designed to force children to adapt to a country that never took them into account, rather than placing the country within their reach and allowing them to transform and enlarge it. The same kind of thoughtlessness inhibits their innate creativity and intuition, thwarts their imaginations and precocious insights, their wisdom of the heart, until children forget what they doubtless knew at birth: that reality does not end where textbooks say it does; that their conception of the world is more attuned to nature than any adult's; that life would be longer and happier if all people could do the work they like and only the work they like.

These intersecting destinies have forged a dense, indecipherable nation where improbability is the only measure of reality. Our banner is excess. Excess in everything: in good and evil, in love and hate, in the jubilation of victory and the bitterness of defeat. We are as passionate when we destroy idols as when we create them.

We are intuitive people, immediate and spontaneous autodidacts, and pitiless workers, but the mere idea of easy money drives us wild. In our hearts we harbor equal amounts of political rancor and historical amnesia. In sports a spectacular win or defeat can cost as many lives as a disastrous plane crash. For the same reason we are a sentimental society where action takes precedence over reflection, impulsiveness over reason, human warmth over prudence. We have an almost irrational love of life but kill one another in our passion to live. The perpetrator of the most terrible crimes is betrayed by his sentimentality. In other words, the most heartless Colombian is betrayed by his heart.

For we are two countries: one on paper and the other in reality. We are precursors of the sciences in America but still take a medieval view of scientists as hermetic wizards, although few things in daily life are not scientific miracles. Justice and impunity cohabit inside each of us in the most arbitrary way; we are fanatical legalists but carry in our souls a sharp-witted lawyer skilled at sidestepping laws without breaking them, or breaking them without being caught. We adore dogs, carpet the world with roses, are overwhelmed by love of country, but we ignore the disappearance of six animal species each hour of the day and night because of criminal depredations in the rain forest, and have ourselves destroyed beyond recall one of the planet's great rivers. We grow indignant at

the nation's negative image abroad but do not dare admit that often the reality is worse. We are capable of the noblest acts and the most despicable ones, of sublime poems and demented murders, of celebratory funerals and deadly debauchery. Not because some of us are good and others evil, but because all of us share in the two extremes. In the worst case—and may God keep us from it—we are all capable of anything.

Perhaps deeper reflection would allow us to determine to what extent our character comes from our still being essentially the same clannish, formalistic, introverted society that we were in colonial times. Perhaps calmer reflection would allow us to discover that our historical violence is the force left over from our eternal war against adversity. Perhaps we are perverted by a system that encourages us to live as if we were rich while forty percent of the population exists in abject poverty, that fosters in us an elusive, instantaneous notion of happiness: we always want a little more of what we already have, more and more of what once seemed impossible, much more of what the law allows, and we obtain it however we can, even if that means breaking the law. Realizing that no government can satisfy these desires, we have become disbelieving, non-participatory, ungovernable, and characterized by a solitary individualism that leads all of us to think we depend only on ourselves. More than enough reason to go on asking ourselves who we are and by which face we wish to be known in the third millennium.



POSTSCRIPT



Did Christopher Columbus's Voyages Have a Positive Effect on World History?

Pouring through the many Columbus-oriented works which were products of the quincentennial anniversary is likely to leave one bewildered and perplexed. One wonders how many writers can take the same information and come to diametrically opposed conclusions concerning Columbus and his place in history. Of course, as is usual in historical matters, one's experiences and the perspective derived from them are important determinants in drawing conclusions from the historical process.

It is worth noting that when the Columbus "iconography" was established in the West, the perspective on civilization was a Eurocentric one, and many of its potentially-negative voices were muted or silent. As Western history became more "inclusionary" and a multi-cultural view of history made its way into the public consciousness, these voices began to be heard. They produced an alternative interpretation of Columbus's voyages and their impact on history for different from their predecessors. What the future will hold for the subject remains to be seen.

One important question germane to the Columbus debate is: To what extent can he be held personally responsible for the transatlantic slave trade, the annihilation of Native American populations, the ecological destruction of the Western Hemisphere, and other evils that were committed long after his death? Any assessment of Columbus's role in world history needs to explore answers to this question.

The post-quincentennial Columbus years have produced a large volume of works on the subject. Some of those on the negative side of the admiral's contributions to world history include Basil Davidson, *The search for Africa: History, Culture, Politics* (Random House, 1994)—that contains a chapter entitled "The Curse of Columbus"—which blames him for the horrors of the transatlantic slave trade. David Stannard, *American Holocaust: Columbus and the Conquest of the New World* (Oxford University Press, 1992) goes so far as to hold Columbus responsible for the genocidal acts committed against Native American populations. Kirkpatrick Sale's *The Conquest of Paradise: Christopher Columbus and the Columbian Legacy* (Penguin Books, 1991) takes a more philosophical approach, but still considers Columbus's legacy to be a negative one, especially as far as the environment is concerned.

Columbus has not been without support. The late Italian historian Paolo Emilio Taviani (1913-2001), in *Columbus: The Great Adventure: His Life, His Times, and His Voyages* (Orion Books, 1991) makes a passionate plea for