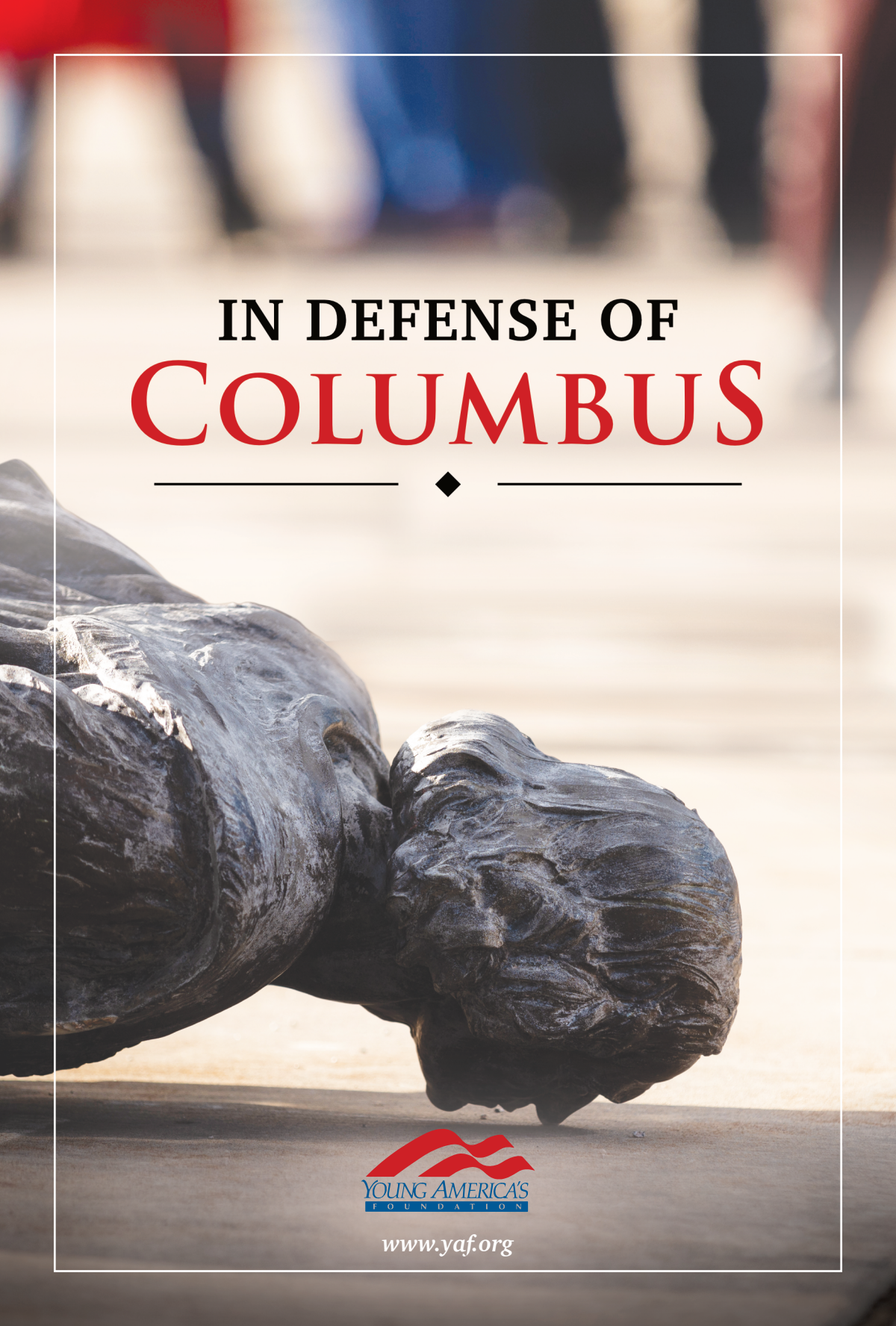
IN DEFENSE OF COLUMBUS



YOUNG AMERICA'S FOUNDATION

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Forward

At a moment when even George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, and Thomas Jefferson are under attack in America, it was inevitable that the unrest and radical criticism would also engulf Christopher Columbus. His case is unique because unlike the others, few people—least of all those who have vilified him and even pulled down his statues—know much about him. They assume that he brought slavery and genocide to the New World. Europeans did commit many sins. But they did not introduce new evils; all of them—including slavery and genocide—already existed among Indigenous peoples, as they did throughout the world.

Dominican missionary Bartolomé de las Casas knew Columbus personally. He earned the name *defensor de los indios* (defender of the Indians) because of his passionate diatribes against exploiters of native peoples in the Americas. Las Casas did not spare Columbus from criticism, but he defended him against those who blamed him for all the disorders and violence that followed the first contacts with Indigenous peoples. The great explorer's missteps, he said, were the result of ignorance and misjudgments about how to proceed: "Truly, I would not dare blame the admiral's intentions for I knew him well and I knew his intentions were good."

The following pages can only claim to be an introduction to a subject that is both rich and fascinating. In fact, one of the greatest tragedies about the politicization of the Age of Discovery is that we are missing a golden opportunity to learn more about both the Europeans who made those first voyages *and* the various people they first encountered on these shores. Two previously separate continents came together in that age—one of the few such large-scale occurrences in the story of the human race. In addition, we have a relatively full documentary record of the period—including some lively diaries, autobiographies, sailing logs, and early histories. These, as any fair reading will show, do not lend themselves to the kinds of simple morality tales that have become the stock in trade of radical critics.

Those critics generally know little or nothing about Columbus or the true story of his enterprise of the Indies. For decades, they have taught students and others who might have an interest in that story little other than a deeply distorted prejudice against Columbus, the Western civilization that he came from and helped to spread, and 21st century America. Instead of studying the history to understand the full truth about these world-altering events, the critics typically dip into history in search of evidence to confirm their pre-existing biases.

As a modest counterweight, this brief treatment—which should be supplemented by serious reading in a variety of sources—examines some of the charges against Columbus and the historical evidence—or lack thereof—for the most radical claims. In general terms, as will quickly become clear, Columbus cannot simply be grouped with the more violent European figures; he simply had a much milder nature. This point inevitably leads to another: Columbus cannot be simply equated with Western culture. If he were, he would have to be given credit for all the impressive achievements of that culture as well as blamed for its failings in the past five hundred years.

If he were, he would have to be given credit for all the impressive achievements of that culture as well as blamed for its failings in the past five hundred years.

The furor over Columbus is really, at the end of the day, a dispute about the dominant world culture today—the West—and the racism, sexism, environmental damage, and ethnocentrism which critics believe are evils unique to our civilization. But are they? Will abandoning our cultural heritage lead to a world that is more open and humane? The pursuit of a welcoming and nurturing society draws deeply from sources in our own tradition. As the culture critic Jacques Barzun forcefully observed from *Begin Here*:

> *The provincialism of the West is a myth. It is the West, and not the East, that has penetrated into all parts of the globe. It is only the West that has studied, translated, and disseminated the thoughts, the histories, and the works of art of other civilizations, living and dead. By now, the formerly shut-in peoples do take an interest in others, but this recent development is in imitation of Western models. By good and bad means. Western ideas have imprinted themselves on the rest of the world, and one result is that cultural exchange and mutual instruction are at last consciously international; this, just at the time when we are told to repudiate our achievements and consign our best thoughts to oblivion. How far this form of moral suicide will spread is unpredictable.*

We have moved very far in the direction of cultural suicide since Barzun wrote those words, and it is becoming increasingly predictable that continuing along that line will not end well—for anyone.

It takes a daring imagination, almost as daring as Columbus' own, to understand the different peoples, European and Indigenous, who lived the earliest history of the post-1492 Americas. But we owe it to them and to ourselves to make the imaginative effort so that as we contemplate our history, we can all understand what has been achieved and remains to be achieved. And how much we owe to the figures that forged the separate continents into the one *world* that we all inhabit today.

Robert Royal
August 20, 2020

Columbus and the World He Found

CHAPTER 1



What kind of man was Columbus, and what kind of people did he find when he made his first landfall in the New World on October 12, 1492? A typical school child in generations past encountering this history for the first time will usually be told that Columbus met with a peaceful people who lived in harmony with one another and respected the animals and plants–in fact all of nature. In contrast to this idyllic portrait, Columbus and his men are most often presented as brutal conquerors who came in search of gold and glory. They are also portrayed as trying to impose their religion and culture on a people with an equally valid—if not superior—culture and religion of their own. The fact that the Indians have mostly disappeared and that Spain (and later the rest of Europe) went on to become wealthy and powerful lends indirect support to this picture. The implicit lesson for the present is that the countries of the Americas are built upon thorough historical injustices.

There were most certainly injustices in the early contacts between Europeans and Indians, but anyone who begins to investigate this New World picture more carefully quickly comes upon some further questions that raise doubts about the current educational orthodoxy. Columbus, for all the changes he introduced into both the Old and New Worlds, is not a very strong candidate for a Eurocentric cultural villain. There is simply too much humanity in him, which, as we shall see, appeared in a variety of ways. Nor can the Indians, even the relatively less-developed tribes of the Caribbean, be offered to modern children as role models. Only widespread ignorance of Indian histories allows the generous impulse toward righting historical wrongs to eclipse some disturbing cultural facts. Virtually no Indian culture that existed in 1492 could be recreated today without constituting grave violations of accepted standards of human rights and international law.

For example, at first glance, the Taíno Indians (the Arawak-speaking tribes that Columbus first encountered) seem to have led an almost paradisaical existence. Within a month of first landfall, Columbus himself writes of them to King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella:

> *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.*

Columbus clearly had little evidence for these assertions since he says repeatedly that he and his men understood little of the native language. But the way he fills in the gaps of his knowledge is instructive: he relies on a very old European tradition of believing that pagans who do not show visible signs of idolatry are living in an unspoiled, natural state. Ironically, that European myth also lies behind much of the current uninformed idealization of native cultures.

That generous mythology could not withstand much exposure to reality, then or now. By the end of his third voyage to the New World, Columbus would write back to Spain complaining of the criticisms of his governorship in a very different spirit:

> *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.*

Warlike? Beliefs? What happened to the gentle people imbued with an almost Rousseauan before-the-fact natural religion? Columbus had found, as would European explorers throughout the Americas, that Indians were real flesh-and-blood human beings with all the political, military, religious, and cultural contradictions that everywhere constitute the human condition.

The Spaniards introduced some fresh turmoil into Caribbean societies, but they created no new evils and even stamped out some old unsavory practices. Slavery, conquest, torture and mutilation of captives, the abduction and subjugation of women, cannibalism, and a variety of other social ills existed in indigenous societies long before Columbus. In fact, one of the reasons that the Taínos appear to have been so happy to see Columbus was that they soon realized that the Spaniards might provide them with some protection against the fierce and cannibalistic Carib Indians—their principal rivals—in truth the Spaniards were soon drawn into pre-existing Caribbean disputes.

In the current revisionist atmosphere, many people have tried to deny that repellent customs like cannibalism, existed among the Caribs. These people argue that Columbus was just looking for an excuse by which to enslave indigenous peoples on false charges of violating natural law. Yet the evidence for some pretty nasty behavior among the Caribs is difficult to explain away. On the second voyage, Columbus and his medical expert, a Dr. Diego Ãlvarez Chanca, came upon human bones in villages and other indications of human sacrifice and cannibalism. The Caribs also routinely raided neighboring Arawak tribes for concubines. In fact, Columbus freed some of the women on the island now known as Guadeloupe and returned them to their villages during the second voyage. There were so many of these captive



Arawak women in Carib villages that all the women seem to have spoken Arawak (Carib and Taíno women alike), while Carib was a tongue reserved for the men. Columbus and Chanca also met up with captive boys who had apparently been gelded in order to fatten them up for eating. One of the best recent studies of Columbus has concluded, "To deny that cannibalism existed, one needs to assume that a wide range of European commentators simply made up the stories, an interpretation that defies reason, logic, and the available evidence."

Slavery, conquest, torture and mutilation of captives, the abduction and subjugation of women, cannibalism, and a variety of other social ills existed in indigenous societies long before Columbus.

Such factors have to be taken into account when reading that Columbus simply invented nasty stories to justify his ambitions. One of the principal intellectual defenses of other cultures in recent years has been to encourage us to respect and seek to understand "the other." But to pay the other compliments rather than seriously seeking the facts about his culture and behavior is merely a way of acting so as to think well of oneself: I am not like these Eurocentrists who find other cultures lower than my own. In fact, a serious search for the other will also help us realize that the Spaniards and other European explorers–in spite of all their misdeeds–were placed in some very difficult situations. Certainly, almost all the complaints about Columbus stem more from these circumstances and his uncertainty about how to handle them than from any willful maliciousness.

Even the gentle Taínos were not as benign as Columbus and a long line of later historians have thought. The Taínos, Columbus' belief notwithstanding, had a highly developed religious system and cosmology. Part of that religion involved a ritual ball game, similar to the game played in many parts of Mexico and Central America. In all of these regions, the opposing teams essentially represented the cosmic struggle between good and evil. And when the game was over and one team had emerged victorious, the religious festival may have concluded with the sacrifice of one or more human victims, though scholars disagree about this. One conquistador estimated that on Hispaniola alone 20,000 victims perished in one year. This figure may be a gross exaggeration, but it is further evidence of the kind of circumstances in which the early Spanish explorers found themselves.

To be clear here: the fact that Spaniards and other European explorers came to the New World and discovered abhorrent practices among indigenous peoples does not justify their own oppression and horrors. But neither is the picture as clearly black and white as some activists would have us believe. The earliest contacts between indigenous peoples and Europeans show seeds of attitudes that would develop into good relations as well as the now familiar and overemphasized atrocities that are assumed to have been the sole European response to native peoples.



While Columbus early kidnapped some Indians to serve as interpreters (a rough method of establishing contact) his treatment of the interpreters was not uniformly high-handed. The six Taínos he presented at the Spanish court were well-treated. When they were later baptized, the King, Queen, and *Infante* themselves served as godparents–an indication that something more than mere exploitation and religious oppression was on the minds of the Spanish monarchs in the earliest contacts. Back in the Caribbean on his second voyage, Columbus immediately set one of the interpreters free. Columbus hoped that the good treatment he had shown them and their experience in Spain would lead the interpreters to speak well of the Europeans when they returned to their villages. In this, he was not entirely mistaken: the early exploration records confirm that several Indian leaders, or *caciques,* wanted to visit Spain in order to see its achievements.

Columbus also sought to prevent large injustices from occurring in trade with the natives. One of his earliest comments on the bartering that quickly sprung up was that "they give everything for a trifle." Indians would exchange large skeins of cotton for the brightly colored beads, hawksbells, and other trinkets that the Spaniards had brought with them. Columbus forbade this unequal exchange, believing that it was unjust. The regulation was enforceable on the first voyage, when he had to govern a relatively small number of men. By the second voyage, however, 1,700 Spaniards would accompany him, and his early concern for fair relations with the indigenous population would be quickly overtaken by events beyond his control.

Columbus was a skillful sailor, but a disastrous governor. Many of the bad situations he fell into and his harsh measures to extricate himself stemmed more from his lack of decisiveness than from a will to dominate. By his third voyage, the Spaniards had become so unruly that he had to force them to work at the essential tasks that needed to be done. Additionally, some of the adventurers who had come over to the New World were so violence-prone that Columbus had to arrest and execute them. He wrote back to the King and Queen in Spain begging them to be careful in their choices of colonists; he preferred experienced farmers and skilled craftsmen to the adventurers who more usually arrived. When Francisco de Bobadilla was charged by the Spanish monarchs with going to oversee the situation on Hispaniola during that third voyage, he arrived and found several Spaniards hanging from gallows and more waiting to be hung after sentences from Columbus. In the chaos that followed Bobadilla's arrival he was forced to put Columbus in chains and send him back to Spain.

The strangeness of the indigenous peoples and the lawlessness of the Spaniards placed the admiral in a particularly difficult situation. Remember that Columbus was dealing with unprecedented circumstances. Furthermore, he was a sailor and explorer, not a modern anthropologist or ethnologist. Though Columbus is often said to have only crudely appreciated the indigenous peoples, the most exhaustive recent study of the Taínos observes in appreciation that in his *Log* Columbus "recognized the distinction between Western and Classic Taínos that is made in this volume." Not bad for a ship's captain who was supposed to have an eye only for gold. His writings about the New World reflect a sense of wonder and awe matched by no other civilization's explorations up to his time.



That sense of wonder sometimes expressed itself in his relations with the natives. Columbus' flagship, the Santa María, went aground in Haiti on Christmas Eve, 1492, during the first voyage. The ship had to be abandoned and Columbus was fortunate that the local native village proved friendly. The local chief, Guadalajarí, scrupulously saved everything that could be saved, then posted guards around the huts where things were stored. Columbus admired the chief for his manners and exceptional cleanliness. The admiration was returned: a few days later Guadalajarí asked if he and his brother could come to Castile with Columbus.

Spaniards and Indians held a feast to celebrate the rescue. Columbus and the chief exchanged gifts. His description of the event in his *Log* is worth quoting at length:

> *He then took off his crown from his own head and placed it upon mine, and I took from around my neck a necklace of good bloodstones–very beautiful beads of fine colors, excellent in every way–and placed them around his neck. I then took off a cloak of fine scarlet cloth that I was wearing that day and clothed the King with it. I also sent for some colored boots, laced with leather thongs, and made him put them on, and I placed upon his finger a large silver ring. I had been told that he had seen a silver ring on one of my sailors and desired it very much. The King was joyful and overwhelmed, and two of these kings who were there with Guadalajarí came to me, each presenting me with a large gold plaque (Sunday, 30 December 1492).*

These early kindnesses are often overlooked in the rush to excuse or blame Columbus for the terrible tragedies that occurred later.

One such tragedy happened in Guadalajarí's village, but never disturbed Columbus' friendship with him. Columbus had to leave almost forty men at La Navidad, the site of his shipwreck, because his remaining two ships could not carry everyone back to Spain. He instructed his men always to remember the kindness and hospitality they had received and the great debt they owed Guadalajarí and his people. Finally, he enjoined them in his absence to avoid anything that might annoy the Indians in any way. The passages in the *Log* seem particularly heartfelt.

All this good feeling, however, was put in jeopardy when Columbus returned the following year. Every Spaniard was dead and the chief blamed a neighboring tribe, claiming he had received a leg wound in a battle to protect the Spaniards from the neighbors. Dr. Chanca removed the dressing and found no wound at all, but Columbus chose to believe his friend rather than hold him responsible for the deaths. No one knows for certain what happened between natives and Spaniards, though it is easily imagined how forty sailors left alone on a strange island may have clashed with indigenous ways. In the battles that would ensue with native tribes, however, Guadalajarí would refuse to join in alliances with other tribes against the Spaniards. In fact, he would fight alongside Columbus and the Spaniards against neighboring *caciques.* Both men would honor their friendship in spite of pressures and events that might have ended it.

However much Columbus may simply have grown tired of the turmoil in later years, these

earliest contacts show that he and the Spaniards began with a degree of respect and even affection toward some native peoples. If they still maintained a sense of superiority that is somewhat understandable given the relatively primitive nature of the island peoples. And if he misidentified some indigenous war parties as part of the Carib tribes, his ignorance cannot be attributed to simple ill will. He had shown a complex appreciation of Caribbean Indians, if not an infallible one.

One of the other charges often brought against Columbus is that in his later voyages he instituted a system of gold tribute and perpetrated genocide. The latter charge is simply false. There is no evidence that he ever attempted the extermination of any Indian people, although like many another military captain of his time, Indian and Spanish, he allowed their enslavement if they were conquered in what he regarded as just military operations. Besides, the Spaniards needed all the manual labor they could find to work the land and it was in their self-interest to preserve alive as many Indians as possible.

The biggest killer of Indians all over the New World was a morally neutral factor: disease. Smallpox, measles, and other European diseases were unknown in the New World, as was African malaria. When these germs arrived along with the Europeans, they found a host population entirely unprotected from their ravages (in a kind of biological compensation, a new and virulent form of syphilis appears to have travelled back to Europe with the Spanish explorers). In some places, entire villages died out; just about everywhere social life was disrupted by diseases, making conquest by small numbers of Spaniards much easier than it would have been otherwise. Trade was so extensive in the Americas that some scholars estimate that within the first century of European contact, a large percentage of Native Americans all over the continents died from imported diseases, 85% of them without ever seeing a white man! While death and destruction of flourishing settlements on this scale were a terrible tragedy, Columbus can hardly be blamed for a problem of which he was completely unaware.

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Such harshness as Columbus showed, outside of military operations, had much to do with a tribute system the Spaniards established. Columbus and his advisers thought, given the abundance of decorative gold among natives, the precious metal must be plentiful on Hispaniola—the island that contains Haiti and the Dominican Republic. Therefore, they imposed what seemed a light tax: a hawks bell's full of gold every two months for each person. As it turned out, gold was relatively scarce and few Taínos could meet the quota. Various captains then imposed harsh punishments for "laziness," though Columbus was little involved in this directly.

Tribute of this sort seems particularly oppressive to us because it comes from outside and



appears to have been imposed on an idyllic people. In fact, the Taínos had three social castes, probably owing to influence from the Aztec mainland, and had long imposed tributes and taxes of their own. Taínos were a kind of ruling tribe whose very religion sanctioned the social order. According to their myths, human beings sprung from two caves on the mountain Cauta. Cacibajagua, the Cave of the Jagua Tree, gave birth to rulers—the Taínos. The cave Amayaúna, "the place [of origin] of those without merit" sent forth the commoners and the Naborias—a destitute lower class of servants bordering on slavery. Thus, at the very founding of the world, the elites were created to lord over and receive tribute from the lower classes. The Spaniards acted as a sort of social replacement for the Taínos in that sense.

The other major tribal group in the Caribbean, the Caribs of the East Antilles, as seen above, were far more warlike and alien in habits. They often conducted raids on Taíno villages, seeking "booty, maize, yucca, pieces of worked metal, weapons, and, mainly captives." The captives generally became female concubines or sacrificial victims in cannibalistic rites. On his second voyage, Columbus came upon a village of such captives, some of whom risked death to swim out to his ship in order to escape the Caribs.

Experience of these tribes and stories of cannibalism told to him by the Taínos led Columbus to declare that enslavement of these sinners against the natural law was justified. In fact, he wrote back to Spain:

> *Since of all the islands those of the cannibals are much the largest and much more fully populated, it is thought here that to take some of the men and women and to send them home to Castile would not be anything but well, for they may one day be led to abandon that inhuman custom that they have of eating men, and there in Castile, learning the language, they will much more readily receive baptism and secure the welfare of their souls.*

Some modern commentators see in passages like these only a rationalization for slavery. A better picture of Columbus and his impact are detailed by looking more closely at the motives he brought to his enterprise of the Indies.

The modern world takes economic and political motives (i.e., money and power) seriously and takes other motives as weak or nonexistent. In fact, Columbus may show the opposite tendency. He certainly did seek gold and privileges for himself and his descendants, but not ruthlessly or even in quite the way that is generally believed. He had an ulterior motive for his whole enterprise, and it is that motive that many modern scholars find literally incredible.

The Dominican Friar Bartolome de las Casas, the most passionate defender of the Indians in the New World, wrote, "Truly I would not dare blame the admiral's intentions, for I knew him well and I know his intentions were good." Las Casas remarks on the "sweetness and benignity" of Columbus' nature, particularly in contrast to the behavior of his brothers in the New World. But Las Casas tasks Columbus with culpable ignorance of the divine law and with a failure to understand how to approach the Indians more sensitively. No one, not even Columbus' contemporary enemies, has ever made much of a case that he was a starkly greedy or violent man, like Cortes or Pizarro.

After his second voyage, Columbus' usual dress in Spain resembled that of an Observatine Franciscan, the order in the Catholic Church most given to poverty and charity after the inspiration of its founder, Saint Francis of Assisi. Recent research has discovered that not only was Columbus a religious man in the sense generally known; he had a millenarian Christian vision from as early as the 1480s about the near future of the world. He took seriously the Gospel mandate to go out and preach the Good News to all nations and believed the end of the world could not come until that had happened. In the writings of Marco Polo, Columbus read that the Great Khan in China had asked for Christian missionaries from the Pope, but the two priests designated had been prevented from carrying out the task. His overall aim in seeking the Indies, then, was not solely to amass wealth for himself and Spain, but to begin that final expansion of the Gospel that would usher in the end time. In fact, he believed that if evangelization took place, the world would end in the 1650s.

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So strong was his commitment to this cause that his wills after 1498, though altered in several ways, did not change one point: he instructed his heirs to set up at the bank of St. George in Genoa a fund to help finance a Crusade to retake the Holy Land. Recapture of Jerusalem was part of the same vision of the end times that Columbus learned from his Franciscan supporters. In his correspondence with King Ferdinand, Columbus frequently urges him to use the wealth from the New World in this holy cause. Ferdinand liked to claim the title King of Jerusalem and several times put the idea of the crusade before his *cortes.* In *The Prince* Machiavelli says Ferdinand was an exemplary modern ruler–exemplary in the Machiavellian mode in that he tried to appear good while doing whatever was necessary to secure order and power. The Florentine thought Ferdinand could afford to put the proposal about the Holy Land before his *cortes* because he knew they would never approve it: he could get all the credit for good intentions without incurring any of the blame for failure to act. Columbus at least put his treasure where his heart lay.

In any case, all of this reveals a side of Columbus that has long been overlooked and remains little known. Toward the end of his life, he compiled a *Book of Prophecies,* mostly passages from the Old Testament and the *Book of Revelations,* that he thought predicted his discovery of new lands ushering in the final ages of the world. This dimension of the real Columbus accords ill with the popular impression of him as a precursor of the modern world. But there is no question that his actions, however much they may include traits of modern scientific and exploratory modes, were undertaken in part out of personal ambition, but more strongly in service of a global religious vision.

While that vision raises large questions of ethical conduct and political prudence, care should be taken not to regard it as mere fanaticism. In the *Book of Prophecies* where he gives evidence



for his mission, Columbus explains: "I believe that the Holy Spirit works among Christians, Jews, and Moslems, and all men of every faith, not merely among the learned, but also among the uneducated." That degree of tolerance and respect late in his life perhaps reflects the "sweetness and benignity" mentioned by Las Casas. For Columbus, the service of "God, gold, and glory" proceeded in that order. A recent study of his religious vision has even argued that his energetic pursuit of gold, viewed in the light of his central purpose to retake the Holy Land, should be understood, at least in part as a "spiritual quest."

Such considerations are perhaps distant from current modes of thinking and hard to take seriously in the alleged "real world" of politics and economics. Yet religious motivations to this day continue to drive people to do things directly contrary to their worldly interests. Iran, for example, would benefit from opening relations with the United States and dropping rhetoric about the Great Satan. Indians might eat more richly if they abandoned beliefs about the sacredness of cows. In both cases, religious reverence outweighs direct practical concerns. Similarly, Columbus might have had an easier life had he been content to exploit the wealth of the Caribbean. But his vision involved the Great Khan who had been left unevangelized, and the discovery of wealth that could bring the Bible prophecies to fruition. Consequently, until disease and death put an end to his explorations, he never flagged in his search for the westward route to Cathay.

Perhaps the central principle in attempting to understand Columbus and the Spaniards is that, in many ways, they were as different from us as the native tribes they encountered. The ardent multiculturalist who wants to simply draw a direct line connecting the various white male figures in Europe's past will find, if he or she really begins to read some history, that many of those figures stand outside our habitual ways of thinking, and the ways of thinking of one another. Columbus may not have been a saint, as some tried to argue at the time of the fourth centenary in 1892, but he was heroically virtuous in a variety of ways. He was a brave and daring explorer. His clashes with Indians and Spaniards probably owed more to the "sweetness" of his character and his indecisiveness when harsh measures were required than to anything else. One scholar correctly recognizes the passive failures: "not only was he unable to keep peace among the Spanish settlers but he also contributed to the decline of the Taínos by failing to protect them." Failing to protect is a failing, but no indication of maliciousness.

Today, the United States would probably not adopt many of his aims or means in entering an unknown land. Yet his behavior was not at all bad–and in some cases was quite admirable–particularly given the problems he faced. Most importantly, some undeniably great element in the human spirit manifested itself in the risks he took for the causes he embraced. And in spite of the atrocities and patches of oppression that were later to become part of the history of the Americas, the very reality of our world, a complex network of all the peoples of the globe, owes a great deal to Columbus' courage and vision. That world has not yet lived up to its ideals or even its potentials. However all of us—red, white, black, and yellow—can feel some sense of gratitude toward the man who showed that all people live in one world, not only in theory or in the abstract, but in actual living fact.

European Culture and 1492

CHAPTER 2

Like Columbus, European culture as a whole has been accused of being directly responsible for every ill that has occurred in the Americas since the first contacts. In fact, since most revisionists or radicals know little about Columbus, the greatest part of their moral passion stems from reaction to real or imagined injustices by Europe that were made possible by the explorer's voyages. This view of history has had little resonance in contemporary Europe, though events to commemorate the quincentenary in Spain were carefully crafted to avoid the more controversial parts of the Spanish colonization of the New World.

In the United States, the critique of Europe touches several traditional chords. Americans have long liked to consider themselves as a purer and better offshoot of the Old World. Longstanding prejudices against Hispanics and Spanish Catholicism have added further plausibility to the most radical criticisms–giving rise to the Black Legend of Spanish atrocities. But when all is said and done, a profound rejection of Western culture lies behind much of the most severe commentary on the quincentenary. For example, Kirkpatrick Sale, a dean of the radical Columbus biographers, confessed in a 1991 letter to the *New York Times* that his book, *The Conquest of Paradise,* "was written to indict not Columbus, the Spanish or the Roman Catholic nations, but the thoroughgoing evils of the culture of Europe as a whole, whose enthusiastic inheritors we Americans have been."

European culture, like any other large-scale civilization, has produced its share of monsters and atrocities, some in its colonization of the Americas. Cortes and Pizarro in Latin America, the Indian massacres and dislocations in what are now the United States, and exploitation of the Indians in Canada are shameful episodes in American history and should be frankly recognized as such, but these elements are not the whole of European culture or American history. A number of the Spanish, English, and French missionaries showed genuine concern and respect for the peoples of the New World. Some figures, like Cortes, present a complex cultural problem once the historical record is more carefully examined. Europe perpetrated some definite evils in the Americas, but it also introduced some definite goods.

Like Columbus, European culture as a whole has been accused of being directly responsible for every ill that has occurred in the Americas since the first contacts.

How can anyone say such a thing? Because of the same Western principles which condemn the behavior of some of the early European explorers. Other civilizations in their conquests did not show anything like the concern for right action that Europe did in theory if not always in fact. As Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. has rightly pointed out:



> *Whatever the particular crimes of Europe, that continent is also the source–the unique source–of those liberating ideas of individual liberty, political democracy, the rule of law, human rights, and cultural freedom that constitute our most precious legacy and to which most of the world today aspires. In fact, it was precisely the contact with the Americas that stimulated Europe to develop further some of the principles we take for granted today as constituting the basic minimum of human rights and proper international conduct.*

Surprisingly, Spain took the lead in these developments. Contrary to the stereotypical picture of the Spaniards as brutal conquistadores aided and abetted by Christian missionaries, the fact is, the Spanish government quickly began passing new laws to try to shape the new situation. Slavery was outlawed by Ferdinand and Isabella as early as 1500, owing to the outcry by theologians and others who believed it an outrage to buy and sell human beings. It takes a serious effort of imagination to understand what a step forward this was in world history. Slavery has existed in most times and in most places throughout human history. Europe under the influence of Christianity probably almost eliminated slavery during the Middle Ages. At the very least, it reduced outright slavery to historically low levels. Extending prohibitions against slavery to the New World was an unusual step for an expanding empire.



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One issue that had to be addressed by Europe in its growth to other parts of the world was who would receive the protection of Christian law. Europe had experience with Jews and Muslims, and thought both of them culpable for their failure to accept the Christian Gospel, hence their second-class status. But what of the peoples of the New World? Who were they? Some Europeans thought they were a lost tribe of Israel. Others, seeing their pyramids and burial mounds and their human sacrifices, thought of the Canaanites who "worshipped on the high places." In any case, the fact that the Indians seemed to have no knowledge of the Sacred Scriptures raised a difficult moral point for the Europeans: how were they to be held responsible to the divine law if they had never heard of it?

Modern critics may see only Eurocentric preoccupations in these questions, but out of such speculations would come principles that now guide international law in the entire world. Some philosophers and theologians in Spain argued that the Indians were what Aristotle in his *Politics* had called "slaves by nature." According to Aristotle, some of the Greeks in his own day were so little rational that they had been properly enslaved by masters who would direct them. Some Spaniards made similar arguments about Indians. Other Spaniards argued that the architecture, government, and art of the New World showed that the Indians, whatever else they might be, were highly rational and could not be slaves by nature.



The latter group found a hearing in high religious circles. By 1537, Pope Paul III would write in his 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 . . . nor should they be in any way enslaved; 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.*

This declaration did not stop abuses or even the slavery it proscribes, but it at least indicates some current within European thought early after the first contacts with the Americas that cast doubt on any easy identification of European culture with simple oppression.

To its credit, Spain took these moral matters seriously. Though slavery had been outlawed as early as 1500, the Spanish emperor knew that the practice continued. In a step unprecedented in history and without any significant sequel, Charles V called a halt to further military action in 1550 until the moral questions could be settled. He asked a commission at Valladolid in Spain to hear arguments from Juan Gines Sepúlveda, the most learned commentator on Aristotle's *Politics* of his time, and Bartolome de las Casas. The debate was inconclusive because the judges never returned complete ballots, but the effects of the debate (including Las Casas' extensive writing) turned the tide. Abuses gradually lessened and slavery of Indians, if not Africans, slowly died out.

Las Casas had been helped by earlier developments in thought by Francisco de Vitoria, a Dominican theologian who had applied the traditional European categories of just war theory to the situation in the New World. Vitoria is often thought of today as one of the founders of modern international law and his work reflects the modern beginnings of human rights theory. In English-speaking countries, it is usually assumed that such thinking began in Britain with figures like John Locke. In fact, Vitoria and a host of his followers at the University of Salamanca (many of whom eventually ended up in the New World) had elaborated sophisticated concepts of rights by the 1530s, about a century and a half before Locke.

To be sure, Vitoria's work did not have the impact on Spanish society that the English theorists had on theirs. The first Spanish governor of Peru, Blasco Nunez Vela, tried to implement the New Laws of 1542, which sharply curtailed abuse toward Indians. Both the laws and the effort were commendable. But colonists with already established vested interests were not about to give them up because of legislation passed back in Spain. The governor was killed for his pains by his own people and the New Laws only sporadically put into effect in the New World. Despite its practical failures, European thought and morals in these matters shows an admirable spirit of fairness that cannot simply be left out of the historical record.

This was no small achievement, especially given some of the indigenous peoples the Spanish encountered. The United States has created a doubly misleading portrait of Indians. On the one hand, surviving Indians are seen as poor and uprooted, the kind of group that only a

brutal exploiter would injure further. On the other hand, pre-Columbian Indians are idolized as sturdy noble savages living close to the land in deep harmony with nature and one another. Neither of these images is of much use in understanding the peoples the early Spanish conquerors came across.

One of the crucial encounters came between the conquistadores and the Aztecs. The conquistadores have had their full share of criticism, much of it well-deserved. But the Aztecs (or Mexicas as they were more properly known) have received praise for their high level of civilization. Indeed, their achievements were remarkable, almost miraculous to Cortes and his men. Bernal Diaz del Castillo, one of the eyewitnesses, reports that when they first came into Tenochtitlàn, the capital of the Aztec Empire, the conquistadores were so astonished by the beauty and order of the city with its causeways and canals coming right up to the palaces and temples that they thought they were dreaming. The sheer size of the city also dazzled them:

> *Some of the soldiers among us who had been in many parts of the world, in Constantinople, and all over Italy and Rome, said that so large a market place and so full of people, and so well regulated and arranged, they had never beheld before.*

Diaz del Castillo laments that as he writes, decades later, much of this has been destroyed by the Spaniards. There was another side to this culture, however, which for all its achievements horrified the Spaniards. Cortes and his men would probably have tried to conquer Mexico anyway, but the widespread practice of human sacrifice shocked even these battle-hardened soldiers.

Contemporary defenders of indigenous peoples often invoke their ideas of harmony with nature as wisdom we would do well to heed today. But Western culture understands harmony with nature in a much different fashion than do other cultures. The Aztecs, for example, thought that the universe had been produced by the blood of the gods. The proper human response to this religious vision was to return the gift in kind, by the sacrifice of human blood. The victims who had their still-beating hearts cut out were pouring out their blood to prevent the universe from getting out of kilter and returning to chaos. The Aztecs believed there had already been four such cycles and that they were living in the age of the Fifth Sun.

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The Aztec temples were surrounded by stone carvings of plumed serpents. The priests who did the sacrificing were not allowed to cut their hair and nails, nor were they allowed to wash the gore off their clothes. Imagine these scenes in some detail to understand why the Spaniards thought that the peoples of ancient Mexico were worshipping demons. To their credit, the Spaniards sought to stop these practices, but the need for human blood was



so deeply embedded in Aztec metaphysics that it is doubtful whether it would have been modified by anything less than force. Some of the twenty thousand Indians who joined the Spaniards in the assault on Tenochtitlan were seeking to break free from the Aztec Empire that had subjugated them, and many were impressed by Spanish insistence that they send no more young men to be sacrificed as tribute.

Human sacrifice of various kinds existed among the Incas in South America, and in North America the Pawnee, Natchez, and Iroquois among others. The theological underpinnings for each people's practice varied widely. Much has been said recently about the religious imperialism that is supposed to have occurred alongside the political conquest. But in light of this situation, it is understandable how some native peoples may have come to accept Christianity of their own free will. As the modern Mexican novelist Carlos Fuentes has observed:

> *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.*

Christianity in both its Catholic and Protestant forms had its own share of religious violence in the 15th and 16th centuries, but it is undeniable that this European creed brought a profound and much needed shift to the spiritual perceptions of a variety of indigenous peoples.

In what is now the United States, the initial contacts were equally complex, but of a different nature. There was no large native indigenous culture comparable to the Aztecs and Incas in U.S. territory. The closest thing to that scale of civilization probably existed among the so-called Mound Builders. Burial mounds and ceremonial mounds can be found all over the Eastern states from Delaware to Ohio, Illinois to Georgia. The great Cahokian mounds across the Mississippi from modern St. Louis were perhaps part of the largest such settlement in the states. For unknown reasons–disease, exhaustion of the land, warfare–that site was abandoned at just about the time Columbus was arriving in the Caribbean before it had any contact with white men.

When the French, English, and Dutch began settling in the Atlantic Coast, they mostly encountered Algonquian or Iroquoian peoples of the Woodland culture. The getting-acquainted that took place here was more gradual and piecemeal than we are usually taught. In most textbooks, the Pilgrims step ashore at Plymouth Rock in 1620, Jamestown is founded in 1608, and it is assumed that European/Indian contacts date from that moment. In fact, owing to early sixteenth century French explorations in Canada and sporadic visits by other European countries, even the first European settlements had a different relationship to the Indians than usually thought.

Captain John Smith found at Jamestown that the Indians were already familiar with French goods and wanted more. The well-known chief Powhattan even tried to get Smith to move the colony to land he controlled in order to monopolize trade. Indians from Peru to the Great



Lakes were great traders and immediately appreciated the value of certain European goods. Horses and rifles aided the Indians in various ways. But it is not appreciated how much of a difference steel knives could make in a culture that used knives for a variety of life-sustaining activities. Woven cloth and blankets were useful, too, as opposed to skins and furs. These early contacts were more of a mutual search for profitable interaction than thought because later clashes have obscured these beginnings.

At Plymouth, another odd conjunction of events made initial contacts run smoother than they might have. The Pilgrims were surprised to find there an Indian, Squanto, who had been captured and sold into slavery in Europe, escaping by way of England years later. Squanto could speak English, understood white customs to a certain extent, and had attached himself to Wampanoag chief Massasoit (Squanto's original village was virtually wiped out by disease in his absence). With him as interpreter, whites and Indians entered into a treaty in 1620, the same year as landfall, that put them on a course of generally peaceful relations until almost fifty years later when King Phillip's War broke out. These achievements, too, are frequently overlooked or downplayed in current histories bent on showing the brutal rapaciousness of Europeans.

In Canada, Europeans showed great respect for natives initially. In his history of the Jesuits in North America, Francis Parkman observes: "Spanish civilization crushed the Indian, English civilization scorned and neglected him, French civilization embraced and cherished him." Though this puts distinctions a little too sharply and certainly fails to appreciate the Spanish Catholic missionaries in Latin America and the English Protestant figures like Roger Williams and John Eliot in New England, Parkman rightly discerns that the French showed particular openness and respect for the Indians during the first contacts.

The Canadian situation was far different from the situation in New England, Virginia, or Mexico. Canada was not so much a settlement as a trading post and the natural Indian talent for trade made relations productive. The French wanted beaver furs and other goods, the Indians firearms, knives, and cloth, and sometimes, unfortunately, distilled spirits.

A common revisionist view of these arrangements is that Europeans made the Indians overhunt their territories and rapidly diminish the number of beavers, upsetting the natural balance in the woodland. This interpretation is slanted for two reasons. First, it neglects the very real motivations Indians naturally had to want better technology when it became available to them. They were not wedded to archaic and laborious traditional tools and artifacts the way some of their modern admirers are. Second, blaming the white man for environmental damage assumes that Indians were in perfect balance with nature previously; they were not. Northeastern Woodland tribes generally exhausted the land around the village in eight to ten years and then moved on. Long before the white man, they often contributed to the decline of species.

In terms of their relations with one another, tribes in Canada could be especially fierce. The Iroquois Confederation was formed when the Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Seneca, and Cayuga–tribes related by language and custom–decided to stop warfare, torture, and

ritual cannibalism among themselves. But they continued all of these practices against the Algonquian and Huron peoples on their borders. The early French explorers were often shocked at the cruelty to captives in particular shown by the Iroquois.

A very good picture of what this behavior meant in practice may be seen in the 1991 film *Black Robe* and based on the novel by Brian Moore. In this work, the beauty of nature and integrity of both French and Indian leaders appears in strong colors. Less savory figures on both sides also emerge. But the brutality of Indian life as it appeared to the French Jesuits, called "Black Robes" by the Indians, is never hidden. When a priest and his Indian guides are captured by an Iroquoian village, the priest has a finger cut off, the son of his guide has his throat slit, is cut up, boiled in a pot, and eaten in front of his father and sister. The sister is destined for rape and sacrifice to a war god by her captors.

This story is typical of much European experience at the time. The Jesuit martyrs of North America, for example, used to be highly regarded for their courage in seeking to convert Indians from ways like these in spite of the ever-present threat of a horrible death. Jean de Brébeuf, a Jesuit missionary to the Huron, for example, was an authentically dedicated man who learned native languages and tended the sick. He attracted many natives to him for these qualities. Yet when he was captured by the Hurons' Iroquois enemies, he was shown no mercy. Boiling water was poured over his head in a parody of baptism. Then red-hot hatchets were strung around his neck and a pitch and resin belt on his waist. His lips were cut off and other pieces of his body were cut off, roasted, and eaten in front of him. Finally, his heart was dug out and eaten, while his blood was drunk.

A typical response to these incidents now is to exonerate natives by blaming the Jesuits for interfering in lands and cultures not their own. Yet it is in large degree owed to the Jesuits and other European missionaries like them that these fierce tribal practices no longer take place regularly anywhere on American soil. The Huron were converted to Christianity and were later wiped out by the Iroquois, perhaps because of their refusal to participate in the tortures and mutilations that were a part of the tribal need to deter potential attackers. Both Jesuits and Huron sacrificed themselves to put an end to some indigenous behavior that no one would tolerate today.

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When thinking about the role of Europe in the Americas, it is right that to recall Europe's sins, which were great and many. Europeans had principles that should have prevented them from their own massacres and tortures, broken promises, and sheer human arrogance toward native peoples. But in the long run, those principles prevailed against some very daunting native conditions.



Perhaps the best perspective on the European interaction with native peoples in the Americas has been provided by the Peruvian novelist Mario Vargas Llosa, who has written of the conscientious missionaries and other European settlers:

> *Father Las Casas was the most active, although not the only one, of those nonconformists who rebelled against abuses inflicted upon the Indians. They fought against their fellow men and against the policies of their own country in the name of the moral principle that to them was higher than any principle of nation or state. This self-determination could not have been possible among the Incas or any of the other pre-Hispanic cultures. In these cultures, as in the other great civilizations of history foreign to the West, the individual could not morally question the social organism of which he was a part, because he existed only as an integral atom of that organism and because for him the dictates of the state could not be separated from morality. The first culture to interrogate and question itself, the first to break up the masses into individual beings who with time gradually gained the right to think and act for themselves, was to become, thanks to that unknown exercise, freedom, the most powerful civilization of our world.*

For all its sins and shortcomings, Western culture can claim this as its central legacy to the Americas and the world.

Modern American Society and 1492

CHAPTER 3

If Columbus the man and the West as a civilization have not entirely indefensible records in the Americas since 1492, why all the fury on the part of some very loud and very influential protesters? True, there were some horrible evils that began early and persisted a long time, but those have been frequently and publicly acknowledged. What do those evils mean to the present? A small part of the protest is intended to remind us of things that should not be forgotten. But the largest portion of the controversy stems from the fact that Columbus and his legacy provide an opportunity for American "progressives," as we saw Hans Koning explaining at the beginning of this essay. What better way to advance claims against contemporary American society–claims of radical environmentalism, feminism, and multiculturalism–than to argue that evil forces have been at work against the good, the true, and the just since the very discovery of America, and even reach down into the deepest roots of Western culture? How can anyone dare to reply to such sweeping charges? Evils on such a scale make claims for present changes seem modest in comparison.



Take, for instance, Russell Means's claims that "Columbus makes Hitler look like a juvenile delinquent." From what we have seen of the indisputable history, Columbus never perpetrated, intentionally or unintentionally, evils of the kind or on the scale of the Nazis. To claim that he personally, and Western culture generally, belong in the same category with one of the most monstrous human beings in history is deeply unfair to Columbus and a cheapening of one of the authentic attempted modern genocides. Russell Means is no fool. He knows that few people will take the trouble to read reliable histories of the early years of the Americas. So he can afford to make large claims without fear of contradiction. At least he has the excuse of seeking redress for serious mistreatment of the native peoples he lobbies for. Others, however, have piggy-backed on Indian grievances as a way to advance radical agendas against the entity they now regard as the bearer of what is most evil in the Western tradition: the United States.



These leaders, too, are not fools. One of the strongest characteristics of American society and culture has historically been a profound optimism and belief in the possibility of social perfection. Americans generally reject the notion that the United States is just one more nation in human history, and often believe subconsciously that we should somehow be able to accommodate–even satisfy–the claims of everyone in our society. The more radical multiculturalists and other utopians play into this perfectionism by implying that the existence of injustices in Western history thoroughly discredits Western ideals. Significantly, these charges are advanced precisely on the basis of those same ideals, ideals often not shared by non-Western peoples prior to their contact with the West.

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But it is part of the deeper human and political wisdom of the West that all orders–indigenous peoples no less than the modern liberal democracies–fall short of perfection. The West has never claimed that it is a flawless society, merely that its ideals are high and open to examination, correction, and amplification. To accept the justice of some criticisms of the European conquest and colonization is not at all the same thing as accepting criticisms of modern American society based on that past. The United States today cannot properly be equated with the worst portions of the colonial European past. Yet the presence of evil mixed with the good at the very origins of America makes some people, who have mistaken notions of history and the nature of human beings, feel that their whole idealized picture of the United States has been discredited.

Even a thoroughgoing liberal like Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. has been forced by the multiculturalists and Afrocentrists to a round defense of the West in general and America in particular, and with good reason. In some intellectual quarters, where the West is assumed to be an evil monolith and all non-Western societies are thought of as repositories of humanity and right order, some simple truths are much needed. What is at stake is not only the righting of historical wrongs, but the radical rejection of a civilization. Jacques Barzun has brilliantly formulated the nature of this rejection:

> *Today the full realization of the Western world's practical concerns would not reconcile and make happy its chief denouncers. It might make the poor and disenfranchised happier, but one may wonder for how long, since those already free from want, tyranny, ignorance, and superstition declare themselves the most oppressed and miserable of men and willingly risk what they have in order to smash the system.*

That is the radical challenge that lurks behind many of the ill-informed concerns about past injustice.



For simple criticism of the conquest is nothing new or, for that matter, old. Europeans themselves at various times since 1492 have objected to European atrocities in the New World. There was never any settled conspiracy among Dead White European Males (DWEMs are a staple of much campus radical activity) to hide their seizure of power and wealth. For example, the British exploited anti-Spanish feeling to condemn the Spanish Conquest, but then went on to atrocities of their own. In Latin America it is often argued that the British were more ruthless in wiping out Indians and more racist in refusing to intermarry with them (something neither the Spanish nor French rejected). The French essayist Montaigne early lamented the destruction of entire native cities and the massacres of large numbers of people; the Prussian philosopher Immanuel Kant deplored European arrogance in its assumption that the American land could simply be taken because the inhabitants were still at a neolithic level; C. S. Lewis argued that the Europeans "became to America what the Huns had been to us" and even dismissed the missionary aspect because "the actual record of Protestantism in this field seems to be 'blank as death.'" Samuel Johnson sided with the theologians at the University of Salamanca against those who thought indiscriminate conquest justified: "I love the University of Salamanca; for when the Spaniards were in doubt as to the lawfulness of their conquering America, the University of Salamanca gave it as their opinion that it was unlawful."

Montaigne, Kant, Lewis, Johnson–Dead White European Males, all who could easily be linked with other distinguished names who opposed at least some dimensions of the American conquest–show that the "European" attitude about the discovery was not at all the evil monolith that the anti-Europe ideologues assume it was. The difference between them and the current radical critics, however, is that they recognized that they could only make their judgments because they belonged to a certain culture that cared about such moral arguments. There is no corresponding moral concern in the conquests by the Roman Empire, the Islamic armies that swarmed across North Africa into Spain, or the Incan and Aztec Empires. Even where slavery followed European expansion, it was a rare sort of person who did not feel morally uneasy about it. In fact, it would be far truer to say that, paradoxically, in the very visiting of evil upon weaker native populations, the Western conscience was pricked and began to extend further its own concepts of who deserved to be protected by the workings of theology, law, and political institutions. That process has continued, though it is far from finished, and contrary to the current critiques, in no place has it gone farther and been more successful than in the United States.

We often hear, for example, about American mistreatment of minorities and frequently believe that we have failed singularly in this respect. Enslavement of Africans in particular bothers us–and rightly so–as a deep stain on our national honor and continuing source of social tensions. Yet for all the problems that racism has caused in this country, we would do well to keep things in a comparative context. Orlando Patterson, an African-American sociologist at Harvard who has produced in his book, *Freedom,* one of the most penetrating analyses of the deep and central role that idea has played in the West throughout its history, has observed:

> *America, while still flawed in its race relations . . . is now the least racist white-majority*

society in the world; has a better record of legal protection of minorities than any other society, white or black; offers more opportunities to a greater number of black persons than any other society, including all of Africa; and has gone through a dramatic change in its attitude toward miscegenation over the past twenty-five years.

While any such flat assertion is arguable, Patterson's judgements stimulate fresh thought. Examining U.S. race questions in an historical and comparative world context gives us a far more realistic picture of the United States today than do the many facile lamentations and moralizations claiming that American racism is pervasive, growing, and an almost unique evil by world standards. As Patterson has discovered in his scholarly labors, the truth is almost the exact opposite. He argues in his book the reason the West came to value freedom so highly was precisely through our experience of slavery.



The same *mutatis mutandis* has been true of our attitudes toward Native Americans. Vastly larger numbers of people described themselves as Native American in the U.S. Census than ever before. The reasons for this are unclear and complex, but one of the strongest factors has to be that modern America pays a fair amount of respect–and provides some very tangible benefits–to persons of Indian heritage. While these changes in attitude will never entirely erase past injustices, they are no small indication of the kinds of dynamics that typically occur within American society, which has historically extended welcome to more and more groups.



In fact, it is a serious question whether in the desire to make amends for past wrongs, we have not begun committing injustices in the opposite direction by paying native American cultures tributes they do not entirely warrant. A hotly contested and emblematic question is the controversy over what to call the various indigenous peoples inhabiting these two continents at the time of Columbus' arrival. Some people object to the term Indians because it represents, they say, Columbus' mistaken Eurocentric view that he was in the indies. "Native American" has emerged as a politically correct term, but invites confusion with all the non-Indian people who are native-born Americans. A further problem is that even "American" is a term based on the name of another early Italian explorer, Amerigo Vespucci, and it is not clear that naming indigenous peoples after an Italian is less Eurocentric than calling them Indian. No entirely satisfactory solution to this problem has yet been discovered.

There are several significant reasons for this. First, the Indians themselves did not think of themselves as forming one group. Rather, they belonged to specific tribes, often at war with one another, that generally showed a marked ethnocentrism *vis-á-vis* tribes around them. It is very common in American-Indian languages for the members of the tribe to have a name like "the real human beings" and for tribes outside to be denoted by epithets like "dog" or "cannibal." Years of struggle with white settlers and their cultures led some Indians (those who did not assimilate to one degree or another) to develop the pan-Indian view most commonly reported by journalists today. But we should be clear this is a relatively modern rather than a traditional arrangement. Tribes before Columbus were too diverse and too bellicose toward one another for anything like a pan-Indian agenda to have emerged earlier.

A second reason for the difficulty in naming the Indian peoples should be put in the clearest possible terms: like Columbus, they did not really know where they were. In the preparations for the quincentenary, the various parties to the celebration were alerted that "discovery" was a Eurocentric term. The peoples of the New World, in this view, already knew who and where they were and certainly did not need to be "discovered" by Europeans. Though true in one way, this is quite false in another. For all their achievements, the peoples of the Americas did not know their position on the globe. In fact, there is no evidence that they knew they were on a globe at all. Columbus did not prove the world was round for Europeans; educated Europeans already knew as much. But the Indian peoples had an entire world opened to them which, for all the sorrow it brought them, also brought benefits including the benefit of being consciously part of the entire human race.

There is no getting around Europe's role as a matrix for these developments. Europe not only carried its own culture to all parts of the globe, it carried Native American elements as well. The change in flora and fauna is instructive here. Europeans brought horses back to the Americas (they were indigenous to America but died out during the last Ice Age), as well as pigs, cows, chickens, wheat, and a variety of other foods. The Americas, however, revolutionized eating around the world with their contributions: potatoes, tomatoes, peanuts, corn, chili peppers, turkeys, and squash. The potato and corn alone gave millions of people in Europe, Africa, and Asia more secure food supplies. Some scholars even think that the carbohydrates these provided enabled Europe's population to grow to support its expansion.



They may even have contributed to the increasing influence of Northern Europe–potatoes and corn could be easily grown there–over the traditionally more powerful Southern Europe. Given the lack of long-distance ocean-going vessels in the Americas, American influence could not have been spread to the world for centuries by any other way.

Europe also spread notions of Native Americans that were not at all disparaging. In fact, some of those images portrayed the Indians as superior to their European counterparts and greatly influenced subsequent thought. Columbus, as we have seen, believed the Taínos to be living an idyllic life undergirded by natural religion before he had much experience of them. Thomas More's *Utopia,* an island in the same Caribbean Columbus explored, shows traits many Europeans found lacking in their own societies. Montaigne and Rousseau created an image of the noble savage for French society that profoundly influenced ideas of reason, society, and citizenship. And in the United States, while films and books earlier in this century often portrayed Indians as mere savage counterparts to cowboys and settlers, our literature has always had a curious fascination with indigenous figures. These earlier idealizations continue to exert influence. That influence, however, may not be entirely wholesome given the practical problems we face.

Many people believe that Indians possess some secret environmental wisdom that we in late-capitalist America would do well to heed today. The evidence for this and the exact nature of this wisdom are not clear. Like most archaic peoples, American Indians generally believed in natural cycles drawn from their observations of the stars, the seasons, and the rhythms of the human body. While these theories seem worth heeding, particularly in the modern industrialized world, they are hardly a new revelation to European culture (there have been similar notions in our thinking since the ancient Greeks) and, if truth be told, only go so far. Nature is only partly cyclical and certainly does not maintain a "natural balance" for very long. "Nature" is responsible for putting an end to the dinosaurs, spontaneous linear changes that have made whole regions uninhabitable, and killer diseases like tuberculosis and AIDS that can wipe out whole populations. Cycles and balance are good rule of thumb for many of mankind's relations to nature, but not all by a long shot.

Contemporary appreciations of Native American wisdom about nature are mostly sentimental. It is true that native healers know things about plants that modern medicine would be wise to investigate. But modern medicine for all its arrogance and frequent crudeness is a definite advance in many areas on traditional practices. Young children still continue to die in high percentage in underdeveloped societies lacking safe drinking water. Some fairly simple water purification from long-known Western principles, a realizable project proposed by the World Bank, would do more for the health of the population in Third World countries than any other improvement.

But perhaps the most mistaken use to which native peoples are put is as ideal models for living together today. Despite all the propaganda to the contrary, it is difficult to see what neolithic tribes or even the high native urban cultures have to say directly to modern industrialized culture that is not already available from portions of our own culture. A few contemporary commentators go so far as to recommend that we simply chuck our entire civilization. Witness



Kirkpatrick Sale:

> *There is only one way to live in America, and there can be only one way, and that is as Americans–the original Americans–for that is what the earth of the Americas demands. We have tried for five centuries to resist that simple truth. We resist it further only at the risk of the imperilment–worse, the likely destruction–of the earth.*

While this apocalyptic scenario may convince only a few people, it does appeal to a widespread and deep dissatisfaction with modern life that seeks relief in some other world.

The easy invocation of "American" ways, here, betrays a pervasive problem with such thought. Native Americans were grouped into hundreds of different social structures, spoke perhaps as many as 2,000 languages, and differed in the success they had in living on the land or with one another. The Maya had a high urban civilization that collapsed, as did the Cahokians on the Mississippi River. Archaeologists are not sure about why these social disasters occurred, but evidence suggests that warfare, political turmoil, epidemics, deforestation, and other environmental damage played a role. Some native peoples hunted whales and seals, others practiced slash-and-burn agriculture. Some sacrificed thousands of human beings to the gods to maintain the order of the universe, or sought to obtain the courage of their enemies through ritual cannibalism. To be sure, there were also many benign native practices. But which of these "Native American ways" are we supposed to return to?

Paradoxically, the recommended return to native ways is a cover for some of the most ethnocentric contemporary distortions. Native America is good, in this view, in so far as it is useful to our present concerns. Anyone who takes the trouble to look will find side by side with the more admirable parts of any given tribe, all the old human evils that we all deplore. We think of the Indians as environmentalists, but that is because we select from their history. We emphasize their ideas of the balance of nature and overlook that, say, the Eastern Woodland culture consisted of tribes that generally exhausted the land around their villages and therefore were forced to relocate every eight to ten years. That native way is not something we wish to encourage, or even recognize, though it was as integral a part of tribal culture as things we may admire.

Furthermore, most native tribes were warrior societies, however benignly they may be portrayed by contemporary advocates. The martial virtues should be honored by every sane society–and kept well in line by moral and political checks. Nowhere in native societies, do we find the kind of sentimental pacifism or inclination toward peace that has become part of the new image of the American Indian. Male and female roles were also strongly separated for the most part between war, hunting, and tribal governance on the one hand, and domestic life on the other. The few indications of female participation in traditionally male preserves have been overemphasized in the recent literature to make Indian societies more politically correct. Given the choice, it would be an unusual modern feminist indeed who would prefer any native society to modern America on feminist grounds. The facile invocation of Native American wisdom in all these cases indicates more dissatisfaction with the present than acquaintance with the past.



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Some of the lessons we might learn from native cultures, if we approach them without ideological filters, run in quite different directions than are often supposed. Most Indian groups showed a high degree of cultural uniformity and no little hostility to outsiders, even outsiders with basically similar cultural forms. Typically, contemporary commentators emphasize the warm, face-to-face social bonds and play down the exclusivity to give a sympathetic portrait of the kind of social order we feel wanting in modern America.

But if we look at real indigenous societies, there are two points we might draw from their history that would serve us well in modern societies. First, individualism (a term Tocqueville invented to describe a new phenomenon he observed in America) and pluralism have their limits. If we feel divorced from one another in our current social arrangements, we will not heal our divisions only by pleading for greater toleration of more and more marginal and fragmented groups, but also by thinking very carefully what common cultural and social values bind us all together. That, after all, is what we profess to find and admire in native societies. Concern for the common good and the common culture have been conspicuously absent from most public discussions of American society in recent decades. Yet the critics of modern America who point to indigenous societies as models rarely mean to suggest that we should imitate them in emphasizing a common, embracing culture.

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Second, we must recognize the dangers that inhere in tribalistic separationism and conflict. America has long prided itself on its tradition of vigorous private association and action. In fact, probably no other people in the world has spontaneously created so many mediating social structures and private organizations. Yet Native American history may remind us that when these groupings are conceived of as defined against other groups, a perpetual culture war, or war outright, may be the result. Even in idealized portraits of native life like Kevin Costner's *Dances with Wolves,* the sharp fact of warfare among Indian tribes (long before and outside of the conflicts with white men) cannot be entirely passed over. We grow apprehensive over the violence in our inner cities today, but, for centuries, raids of one group on another were part of everyday life in most of pre-Columbian America.



These two observations on indigenous ethnocentrism and indigenous tribalism have further relevance to our current situation. The balance between the Many and the One in our nation's ideal of *E pluribus unum* is never settled forever. As the nation changes so must the balance. For several decades now, we have been promoting the many, thinking that more and more diversity could only be a gain. In many ways, it has been, but only where movements like multiculturalism, which seek to break the very container within which the pluralism can flourish, are not allowed to dominate. Perhaps it is time to start thinking more seriously again about the essential function of the *unum.* To say this is not to assert that such a unity already exists or is easily available. The right sort of unity must be forged in each generation by each generation. Just as 1492 presented an opportunity for vastly different human groups to find a new context for living together, so today offers a similar challenge.

As we think through these issues, we should recognize that only in the developed cultures of the West, and in the United States most notably, are such complexities allowed to present a real problem. The most common method of dealing with diverse peoples in the history of the world has been to subject them to a monolithic culture (the Aztecs and early Spanish governments in the Americas, Incas, and English settlers all share this characteristic). The second most common method has been to allow pluralism while exacting tribute. Only the modern West has tried to establish systems that respect difference at the same time as they try to discern common goods and to encourage universal participation in the deliberations of the society.

Many people living in modern Western countries take such values so much for granted that they are outraged that the West has not been even more open than it has been. But far from representing a historically broader view than that of mainstream culture, this dissatisfaction reflects a definite provincialism. Once we step outside our own time and really study other societies, Western and non-Western, throughout the ages, we cannot help but notice what a rarity Western openness is in the human record.

One of the elements we must begin to consider again in sorting through these issues is a subject often thought outside our deliberations on public life—namely religion. Much of the fascination with Native American cultures stems from nostalgia for a society in which the spirit world and this world meet and interpenetrate far more than they do in modern societies, and from a profound revulsion against the materialism and emptiness of modern secularized life. If we could only return to this unity of the sacred and the secular, we feel, our material life and our social interactions would take on a richer, more authentic, more vigorous quality.

To a certain extent this is true. Indian cultures may have had their flaws, but shopping mall culture is too empty even to provide much of a target for criticism. Yet we must be cautious, because as we know well from recent Communist history politicized attempts to provide religion or religion substitutes come at a heavy price. One distinguishing feature of the West has precisely been its attempt over the last millennium and a half to keep church and state, religion and politics, in contact without making them identical with one another. The medieval disputes between pope and king, the Renaissance conflicts between prince and bishop, and the more modern separation of church and state all point to the fact that in



Western religions we do not expect salvation in this world. In that respect, Marxism was a religious heresy. Those who expect native religions to restore us to the Garden of Eden are engaged in a similarly mistaken enterprise.

The effort to restore a sense of the sacred in our views of nature and society without creating a totalitarian politics is a difficult balancing act. For many people, native American religion provides a novel belief system and way of life that they think respond to our condition. Native religions are complex and much of their interpretation is uncertain, but it would be fair to say that most surveys of the subject reveal little that is not already available to us through Western mythology, theology, or mysticism. Whenever we find that Indian religion or spirituality, created by very different peoples in very different circumstances, exactly fit our current concerns, we should be suspicious that those religious beliefs are probably being distorted for contemporary agendas.

Neolithic religion and culture are just too distant, alien, and mixed up with cultural practices most of us could never accept to shed much light on our current predicament. The religious energies of the West are far from exhausted. If we truly want to restore our relationship to nature and to one another, we might do best to turn to the discarded and often ridiculed riches of our own religious and moral tradition for answers. We are already doing so in a covert way, often by finding lost Western values in non-Western peoples, whether those values are there or not. We would be far more intellectually honest, and even far more effective, if we acknowledge the true origins of our self-criticisms and discontents, and attempt openly to live up to those ideals–sacred as well as secular–that we have set for ourselves and that much of the world has subsequently come to admire and emulate, ever since the several continents were set on a course of becoming a single world, one fateful morning in October of 1492.

"None of the people who want to tear down statues of Christopher Columbus know anything about Columbus. They just want to tear stuff down."

— Michael Knowles



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