

Columbus: A Legacy of Violence

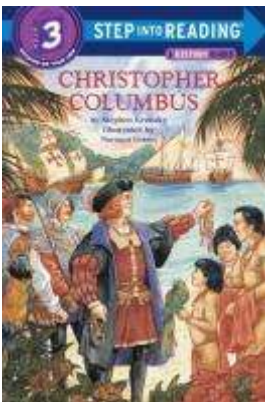
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A Personal Reflection

If you are looking for a scholarly treatise on Christopher Columbus and his impact on the world, I suggest you check out the writings of Howard Zinn or James W. Loewen or Ward Churchill or any number of other good and thoughtful authors. Type in Christopher Columbus on a computer search engine, and you will find a wealth of information, much of it accurate. I set out to prepare a scholarly work to share on Columbus and his legacy, something in which every assertion is backed with citations from primary or secondary sources. After working on it for a few days, I took my Pipe and sat smoking by the Sacred Fire out under the stars and with the Moon watching. The next day, I scrapped what I'd put together and began again. So, this is not a scholarly work; what I have to share concerning Columbus and his legacy is personal.



In August 1992, my daughter came home from her first day in kindergarten. Running from the bus to the house, she said, "Daddy, Daddy, we went to the library today, and I got a book. It's about Indians, Daddy. Can you read it to me?"



On the cover of the book, there was indeed a picture of Indians, together with Spanish conquistadors. It was a children's book about Christopher Columbus. As I thumbed through the pages, I saw that the book depicted Columbus as a kindly soul who helped everyone, Europeans and Indians alike, with his "discovery" of the Americas. As I stood there, feeling like I'd been hit in the head with a brick, a ridiculous image came into my mind. I pictured a little Jewish girl coming home from her first day of school, proudly carrying a book written in praise of Adolph Hitler, saying, "Read it to me, Daddy. It's about Jews." After drawing a deep breath and slowly letting it out, I sat down on the floor with my daughter.

Her older brother and younger brother sat with us too, as I remember. Their mother went on with what she had been doing before, but listened as well. What I said to them that day was something like this:

A long way to the south there is a sea called the Caribbean. There used to be millions of people living on the islands there, people called the Taino. There were other peoples too, but the Taino were probably the biggest tribe.



There are still Taino people today but not nearly so many as there once were. They had a good life there, in the old days. No one had less than they needed. No one had more than they needed. They had good houses, and on their farms they raised corn, beans and squash and really hot

peppers. But, their main crop was what they called batatas. It's what we call sweet potatoes. They also ate fish and shellfish, and they had big canoes with which to travel around on the sea.

Then one year, on October 12, the whole world changed. From one of the easternmost islands in the Caribbean, the Taino saw ships approaching, big sailing ships such as they had never seen before.

Strange men came on shore from the ships. These men wore odd clothing, far too many clothes for the warm weather, and they also wore metal armor. They carried long knives, swords, spears and guns and led vicious dogs on leashes. They had beards on their faces. And, these men stank, because they never took baths, and almost never changed their clothes. And strangest of all, they had no women or children with them. In spite of all that, these strangers seemed to be human beings, and the Taino people welcomed them warmly, bringing them many gifts.



One of the strangers stepped forward, planted a flag in the sand of the beach, and said something in a language none of them could understand. This was Christopher Columbus, and he was claiming the Taino country for the King and Queen of Spain and for the Church.

On the day before Christmas, that same year, Christopher Columbus must have been drunk, because he wrecked his best ship, the Santa Maria, on the coast of a big island called Bohio or Quisqueya according to some. Millions of Taino people lived just on this one island. Now, Columbus thought he would lose all he had on his ship, but the people from the nearest city salvaged everything, and put it all safely in one of their big houses.



Columbus was so impressed that he wrote in the logbook he was keeping for the King and Queen of Spain that these are the best people on earth and the most hospitable. "They truly are Indio," Columbus said, and that was when we first started to be called Indians. But originally the word was "Indio" which means

"With God". He went on to say, "They will make wonderful slaves." Columbus changed the name of Bohio to "Hispaniola". It's where the countries of Haiti and

The Dominican Republic are today. The city, near where he wrecked his ship, he renamed Navidad, since it happened on Christmas Eve. How do you like that? You save someone, and the first thing he does is rename your town and your whole country! Then, he kidnapped some people and went back to Spain.

Columbus found out there was gold on Bohio. Columbus really liked gold. Columbus said, "Gold is most excellent; gold constitutes treasure; and he who has it does all he wants in the world, and can even lift souls up to Paradise." Columbus talked a lot about God and about spreading the "gospel", but Columbus' real god was gold. It was for gold that he lived. Columbus would do anything for gold.

When Columbus returned from Spain with more ships and more men, to the people of Bohio he handed out what looked like little round jingle bells.



Columbus said each person would have to fill a bell with gold in a certain length of time. In exchange for a bell full of gold, a person would receive a medallion to hang around their neck giving them the right to continue living until the next bell of gold was due to be filled. Gold is hard to find. Many people failed to find enough gold. When they didn't find enough gold, their hands and sometimes other body parts were cut off.

On an evening in early September 1992, I answered the telephone to hear a young lady's voice say, "In honor of the 500th anniversary of the discovery of America, Weekly Reader Magazine is sending each family with elementary-age school children in America a free book about Christopher Columbus." Once again, I felt like I had been hit in the head with a brick. In case you are wondering, I *do* know what it feels like to be hit in the head with an actual brick, as that has really happened to me before. I couldn't speak. I gently hung up the phone and leaned against the kitchen counter just trying to breathe and compose myself, as my wife was standing there asking what was wrong. The same young lady called back the next evening. "In honor of the 500th anniversary of the discovery of America, Weekly Reader Magazine is sending each family in America with elementary school-age children a free book about Christopher Columbus. Simply provide us with your current mailing address, and we will send your free book."



"We don't want your book," I said and hung up the phone a second time. The next evening, she called for the third time. "We don't want your book," I said.

"But, it's free," she declared. "There's no cost, at all, to your family."

Taking a deep breath, I answered the best I could, "We are an American Indian family. We know about Columbus. We don't want your book."

"Oh," she said, "Oh...oh...oh..." And, once again, I gently hung up the phone.

Aside from finding gold, Columbus and the Spanish also expected the Taino people to feed them, to carry them around from place to place on the island and to

do all their work. Columbus and the Spanish also took young girls as sex slaves, even those as young as nine or ten years old, and often, when bored, they killed people just for sport. The Taino people no longer had time to raise or catch food for themselves and began dying at an alarming rate, from starvation and from epidemics of diseases for which they had little immunity and no strength to fight off, given their weakened condition.

Within less than a decade, millions of people on Bohio had died, and most of the survivors had fled to the mountains, where there emerged a leader of this Taino revolt, a man named Hatuey. According to a short article by William Loren Katz, in 1502, 100 African people were brought to Bohio as slaves. Many of those first Africans brought to Bohio also fled to the mountains, where they joined with the surviving Taino people.

Hatuey and the others decided that the Taino on Bohio had been reduced in population to the extent that they could never retake the island. However, if they went to Cuba, they might have a chance, if they could persuade the Taino and



other tribes on that island to revolt. So, in 1511, Hatuey and about 400 of his followers went to Cuba where they led a revolt against the Spanish. The revolt had hardly begun before reinforcements arrived from Spain, including Hernán Cortés. Even so, Hatuey and his troops brought Spanish activities to a halt on Cuba for at least three months. Hatuey was finally captured, and on February 2, 1512, he was brought out and tied to stake. Hundreds of

other Taino people were herded to watch the execution as wood was piled around Hatuey's feet and legs.

A young Franciscan friar stepped forward saying that Hatuey must be given a chance to be baptized before being burned to death. The young man briefly told Hatuey of the Christian faith, saying that if he would only submit to baptism he might go to heaven when he died, but if he refused baptism, he would surely go to hell where he would burn in torment forever. "Do Christians go to heaven?" Hatuey asked.

"Good ones do," the friar responded.

"Then send me to hell," Hatuey declared.

Voices of descent began to be heard among the Spanish. In a sermon preached on the island of Bohio In December 1511 Fray Antonio Montesinos risked his life to say

Tell me, by what right do you hold these Indians
in such cruel and horrible servitude?
By what authority did you make unprovoked war
on these people, living in peace and quiet on their land,
and with unheard-of savagery
kill and consume so great a number of them?
Why do you keep them worn out and down-trodden,

without feeding them or tending their illnesses,
so that they die-or rather you kill them-
by reason of the heavy labor you lay upon them,
to get gold every day?

Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas spoke out almost from the very first against the terrorism and genocide perpetrated by Columbus and the Spanish against indigenous peoples. The best descriptions of the horrors come from his writings, and in his last will and testament, he left this prophecy:

I think that God shall have to pour out his fury and anger
on Spain for these damnable, rotten, infamous deeds
done so unjustly, so tyrannically, so barbarously
to those people, against those people.
For the whole of Spain has shared in the blood-soaked riches,
some a little, some a lot, but all shared in goods
that were ill-gotten, wickedly taken with violence and genocide-
and all must pay unless Spain does a mighty penance.

But, the English colonizers and America's founding fathers admired Columbus and his tactics of ruthless domination and exploitation, and the pernicious Doctrine of Christian Discovery, arising from the delusional belief that Christian nations have a God-given right to dominate, exploit and enslave non-Christian nations, a doctrine codified in Papal Bulls Columbus had in hand, is written into law in these United States. Sometimes Indian people in North America will talk about when Columbus first came, and what they are really talking about is the first encounter their tribe had with Europeans or European-Americans, because these were an extension of Columbus, as they always came to dominate, to exploit, to kill. That attitude of domination continues with us to this day in our Indian policies, in our domestic policies, in our foreign policies and not only within our governments but also in our imperialistic multi-national corporations.



In 1999, a company called Aguas del Tunari, a division of the American construction firm Bechtel, bought the water rights in Cochabamba, Bolivia, promising to expand water service. Cost of water service went up about 300%, For people with incomes of about \$40 per month, this was not only intolerable; it was impossible. Suppose a group got together to dig a well, if the water company found out about it, they would cap and lock the well, placing a sign on it saying it was the property of Aguas del Tunari. It was illegal even to collect rain water. In 2000, revolt broke out in Cochabamba. The Bolivian Water War had begun. About three months later, Bechtel pulled out of Bolivia but filed suit against the Bolivian government for \$25 million in damages.

In 2006, Bolivia elected Evo Morales, an Aymara tribal member, as President. The new Bolivian Constitution, ratified in 2009, defines the State as plurinational

and adopts the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples as the law of the land. Suffice it to say, the followers of Columbus who consider domination of indigenous peoples to be their divine right, have little good to say about Bolivia now.

There's a movie about this. It's called *Even the Rain*, a Spanish film made in Bolivia in 2010, directed by Icíar Bollaín. It's about Columbus, Hatuey and the Bolivian Water War. It's about all three. It's a great film. I highly recommend it. If you don't speak Spanish, be sure to get a DVD with subtitles. A key line in the movie is "Not much has changed in 500 years."

So, English colonizers and the American founding fathers admired Columbus. Many Americans continue to admire Columbus, carrying on his policies of conquest and domination. In turn, Adolph Hitler and his National Socialist Party admired the English and the Americans in their treatment of indigenous peoples. According to Lia Mandelbaum, writing for the *Jewish Journal* in an article entitled "Hitler's Inspiration and Guide: The Native American Holocaust" Hitler himself said he learned the concept of concentration camps and the practicality of genocide from his study of English and American history.



Our daughter was in fourth grade. One evening, she had her history textbook and several worksheets spread out on the living room floor. I glanced down to see pictures of armored conquistadors and a chapter heading reading "The Explorers". "What do you have there?" I asked. Picking up the book, I quickly read through the chapter. To my wife, I said, "Wow! They outline all the achievements of these men, but they leave out the butchery, the slaughter, the murders, the holocausts they perpetrated." Getting more and more heated, I continued, "Imagine a chapter on Hitler and the Nazis in which they talk about how they invented the interstate freeway system, outline their advances in rocketry, mention how Hitler could paint a decent clown picture but totally leave out the holocaust of Jews and others that they killed. You can't imagine it, because it COULDN'T HAPPEN! Everyone in the country would be up in arms! But Indians don't matter. No one cares about Indians. It's as if we're not even human."

Calmly as you please, our daughter said, "I don't like it either, Dad, but I have to pass the test. May I have my book back, please?"

And my wife said, just as calmly, "I've been saying for years, we can home educate."

So, when, where and how did Columbus Day begin? A 1792 celebration in New York City organized by a group called The Columbian Order was probably the first celebration of Columbus' "discovery" of America. From there, we skip ahead to 1866 when a group of Italian immigrants in New York City organized a celebration. In 1869 a similar celebration by Italian immigrants was held in San

Francisco. In 1892, President Benjamin Harrison issued a proclamation honoring the 400th anniversary of Columbus' landing in the Bahamas. In 1905, Colorado became the first state to make October 12 a holiday honoring Columbus. In subsequent years, several other states followed suit. In 1937, President Franklin D. Roosevelt declared October 12 a federal, legal holiday. In 1971, Congress moved Columbus Day to the second Monday of October.



Since the Knights of Columbus are closely associated with Columbus Day celebrations, marching in their regalia in Columbus Day parades and soliciting funds at store-fronts on Columbus Day weekend, a word about Knights of Columbus history is warranted. The Knights of Columbus was organized in 1882 in New Haven, Connecticut by Father Michael J. McGivney. They took Columbus as their patron, because he was a Roman Catholic and considered the "discoverer" of America. The choice of Columbus as patron was meant to communicate that allegiance to country does not conflict with allegiance to faith. In other words, Catholics can be patriotic Americans too.

I have relatives and close friends who are Catholic. I use to enjoy visiting a Catholic church now and then, especially for a Midnight Mass on Christmas Eve. I enjoyed the ceremony and appreciated how all ones senses were engaged. The last time I went to a Midnight Mass, I was sitting in a pew with my family when the church doors opened and the Knights of Columbus marched up the center



aisle, dressed as conquistadors and carrying the baby Jesus on a sheet. After placing the baby Jesus in the manger, they took their positions behind the altar with swords drawn and raised as the priest prepared the mass. That is the last time I ever attended a service or ceremony in a Catholic church. I just can't risk seeing something like that again.

To Italian Americans I say, Choose a better hero. There are many Italians who are also great human beings. No one can be a great human being *and* a genocide; the two do not go together. Besides, we don't even know for sure that Columbus was Italian! The Catalonians in eastern Spain, the Jewish people and the Portuguese all put forth good evidence for claiming the man. Personally, I don't know why anyone would want him.

To the Knights of Columbus I say, find a worthy patron, and please stop dressing up like conquistadors. This association shows you in a bad light. You are better than that.

Here is my challenge to all Christians, Christian Churches and Christian Denominations: Remove Christopher Columbus from your pantheon of heroes and research the Doctrine of Christian Discovery to see for yourselves what it is,

how it has been and continues to be used. If you agree with the Doctrine of Christian Discovery, may all your curses fall back upon your own heads! On the other hand, should you disagree with this vile and delusional doctrine which has and continues to wreak havoc in the Earth, repudiate the Doctrine of Christian Discovery in word and in deed. Several Christian organizations have already passed resolutions to repudiate the Doctrine of Christian Discovery. These include The World Council of Churches, The Episcopal Church, The United Methodist Church, The Unitarian Universalist Association and The Religious Society of Friends in their New York and Baltimore meetings. The United Church of Christ, The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and several Mennonite organizations are considering a repudiation of the Doctrine of Christian Discovery.

So now, Pope Francis, you seem to be a man with a good heart. You are the one in most direct lineage from those who issued the Papal Bulls which form the basis of the Doctrine of Christian Discovery. We are waiting to see whether you have the courage to do the right thing. Your repudiation of the Doctrine of Christian Discovery and of the Papal Bulls that gave rise to it will be a beginning of healing and rehabilitation. Do the right thing, and perhaps a day will come when the rest of the world will begin to view Christians as something more than thugs, thieves, terrorists and cannibals roaming the Earth, seeking whom they may devour. Do the right thing, and perhaps a day will come when a heaven that includes Christians, even "good Christians" will no longer be imagined as worse than a fiery hell.



In October 2001, I was honored to participate in the Transform Columbus Day activities in Denver, Colorado. Transform Columbus Day was an annual protest of Columbus Day organized by the Denver American Indian Movement and others. I think the last event was in 2012. In 2001, our eldest son and I took part in a Four-Directions March through the streets of Denver, winding up at the state capitol building. We got to meet Glen Morris and Russell Means and lots of other notable people of every imaginable ethnicity. I had no idea there were so many police in Denver or even in the whole state of Colorado, and they were all there, suited up for war, just watching us. I hope they listened and learned something. On Sunday, we had an all-day prayer vigil at the capitol. Somehow, I got roped into being master of ceremonies for that. It was the same day the war started in Afghanistan. I guess we didn't pray hard enough.

In 1990, three states stopped observing Columbus Day, namely Alaska, Hawaii and Nevada. Since then, Arkansas California, Delaware, Florida, Michigan, Minnesota, Oregon, South Dakota, Texas, Vermont, Washington, Wisconsin and Wyoming have discontinued official observance of Columbus Day. That doesn't mean communities within those states can't continue their Columbus Day celebrations. This year in Seattle, Washington, Columbus Day is being replaced with Indigenous Peoples Day.

I take Columbus Day personally, because I take what Columbus did personally: kidnapping and slaving, the cutting off of hands and other body parts, the rape of women and little girls, the indiscriminate butchery of men, women, children and babies, even pregnant women, the wanton ravishment and destruction of the land. I take it all personally, because as a human being I am personally connected to all of it. The Taino and other peoples that Columbus dominated, oppressed, exploited and murdered - they were not just Indians, they were human beings.

I take it personally that, following the example and precedent of Columbus, England and the United States enacted genocidal policies against indigenous peoples of North America and of other continents and have played leading roles in the rape and destruction of lands and oceans. I take it personally that Nazis killed millions of Jews and others in the concentration camps and death camps of Europe. I also take it personally that the United States killed close to a quarter of a million civilians in Nagasaki and Hiroshima, Japan, not to win the war but to test nuclear weapons on human targets. I take it personally that men, women and children were indiscriminately killed in the "Shock and Awe" phase of our war with Iraq, leaving the land poisoned with depleted uranium. I take it personally that innocent people, even children, even babies were blown apart or left homeless in the recent violence in Gaza. I take it personally that my cousin / my little brother



was clubbed with baseball bats, bound with duct tape and stuffed into a septic tank in December of 2012. But, I also take it personally that 18 year-old Michael Brown was publicly executed without trial in the streets of Ferguson, Missouri on August 9, 2014 and that 18 year-old Joseph Jennings, also unarmed, died after being shot 16 times by police outside the Orscheln Farm & Home Center in Ottawa,

Kansas on August 23, 2014. We are all connected, all related. It is all personal.

But, when you grow up with heroes like Columbus, you grow up thinking that domination and exploitation are normative. It's us against them: whites against the savage non-whites, Americans against anyone south of the border, men against women, man against nature / against the land / against the Earth. That's Columbus' legacy - a legacy of violence.