
Understanding Columbus and His Legacy

By Humberto M. Rasi

Certain events have forever altered the course of human history. Among these were the voyages of Christopher Columbus, which marked the beginning of regular contacts between Europe and the continent that was later to be named—quite unjustly—America.

The 500th anniversary of these voyages offers Seventh-day Adventist teachers a unique opportunity to involve students in a fresh study of Columbus from a Christian perspective—to evaluate his motives, his legacy, and the relationship between God's sovereignty and human actions. This article will summarize recent studies on this fascinating topic, explore the religious dimension of Columbus' personality, and offer some suggestions for class projects and discussions.

It is possible that other mariners had visited the New World before Columbus and his crew set anchor off a small island in the Bahamas. However, his voyages captivated the European imagination like nothing before and initiated a series of transatlantic exchanges that eventually affected the entire planet.

Columbus publicized his discoveries broadly, stimulating others to follow the sea lanes he had pioneered. In addition to introducing many kinds of animals and

plants to the New World, he also returned to Europe with shiploads of America's natural wealth. Fortunately, the admiral was backed by a young kingdom, one that was ready to carry out vigorous exploration and colonization of the newly discovered territory.

In addition, the timing was right. Intrigued by Marco Polo's Asian travels, tempted by the Portuguese explorations of Africa's coast, and blocked by the Turks from using overland trade routes, Europe

was ready to expand its economic frontiers westward.

The key factor in this global shift was an obscure seaman who for seven years had been trying to obtain financial backing to open commercial contacts with the Orient by sailing toward the uncharted West. By the time Queen Isabella of Castile and King Ferdinand of Aragon finally agreed to sponsor his journey, Columbus was a 41-year-old widower with two sons and debts to pay. But his life was about to take a dramatic turn.

Mixed Motives

Interwoven in Columbus' complex personality were three motives that propelled him to undertake four voyages between 1492 and 1504, which led to an ever-expanding coastline. Although these explorations did not confirm his projections of reaching Japan (Cipango), China (Cathay), or India—he had underestimated the distance—they did open a vast continent full of potential for Europe.

The first dimension of his personality is the best known—**Columbus the brilliant seaman and inquisitive explorer.** Based on his readings and extensive travels—from the island of Chios in the Aegean Sea to Iceland and African Guinea—the admiral conceived a plan

that would allow his ships to sail in both directions across the Atlantic, pushed by trade winds and westerlies he had carefully plotted. As he explored the coastlines of an emerging continent, Columbus recorded with fascinating detail the vegetation, the fauna, the crafts, the natives, and their customs.¹

The second dimension has become the focus of recent revisionist attacks—**Columbus the ambitious and exploitative entrepreneur.**² There is no doubt that in his dealings with the monarchs of Castile and Aragon, the astute mariner-merchant obtained important concessions for himself and his descendants in the event that his plan succeeded. He was assured nobility rank, the title of admiral, viceroy, and governor of the territories he conquered for the crown, as well as one-tenth of the enterprise earnings. Moreover, his travel diaries reveal a fixation with gold objects, gold prospects, and the commercial value of the products he observed. In addition, during the second voyage he allowed his associates to impose forced labor on the Hispaniola natives. This cruel treatment, already known in Europe, later brought misery and death, first to the native Indians and later to millions of African slaves.

The third dimension of this explorer is the least known—**Columbus, Bible student and Christian visionary.** In spite of evidences of the admiral's spirituality in his writings, many historians have either minimized or ignored this intriguing facet of his personality. Through personal study of the Scriptures and of several commentators, Columbus came to see his voyages as part of God's providential leading in history, as well as in his own life. "The Enterprise of the Indies," as he called his voyage, had for him a double purpose: Spreading the gospel among the unreached people and obtaining the funds necessary to free Jerusalem from the infidels, thus ushering in Christ's second coming.³

Even in his name, Columbus saw a

hint of the special role God had assigned to him. In fact, *Christoferens* (the Greek root of his given name) means "Christ bearer," and around 1498 the admiral began to incorporate this meaning into his enigmatic signature.

These three motives—discovery, profit, and evangelism—are interwoven in this fragment of Columbus' log for October 16, 1492—four days after his first landing—as he surveyed the Bahamas:

This island is very large and I have decided to go around it because, as I understand it, either on or near it, there lies a gold mine. . . . These people are like those of the other islands, and [they share] the same language and customs, except these seem more civilized, easier to deal with, and more astute. . . . I am not aware of any religion among them, so I think they could easily become Christians, because they are very intelligent. It's amazing how different the fish here are from our own.⁴

An Unusual Document

In November 1500, after returning from his unfortunate third voyage and before sailing again in May of 1502 on his fourth and final crossing, Columbus had time for study and reflection. During this period, he compiled a broad selection of prophetic passages from the Vulgate Bible and several commentators, which in his view connected his providential understanding of history to his voyages. The original manuscript of this compilation, which has come to be known as Columbus' *Libro de las profecias* (*Book of Prophecies*), was kept by the admiral's son Hernando. It was later placed in the Colombina Library at the Cathedral in

Seville, Spain,⁵ where it remained untranslated for almost five centuries.⁶

The first section of the manuscript consists of an exchange of letters between Columbus and Fray Gaspar Gorricio, a Carthusian monk residing in Seville. In his letter, written from Granada (September 13, 1501), the admiral sends the compilation to his friend and asks him to review and expand it.

Gorricio responds from Seville (March 23, 1502), returning the manuscript and adding: “Sir, little have I added and interjected. You will see it in my handwriting; I submit everything to the correction of your spirit and prudent judgment” (Fol. 1, revs.).

After a few quotations that reflect Columbus’ hermeneutics, the manuscript includes an important letter written earlier by the admiral to the king and queen. This epistle allows us to reconstruct Columbus’ self-image:

At a very early age I went to the sea and have continued navigating until today. The art of sailing is favorable for anyone who wants to pursue knowledge of this world’s secrets. I have already been at this business for forty years. I have sailed all the waters which, up to now, have been navigated. . . . I found Our Lord very well-disposed toward this my desire, and he gave me the spirit of intelligence for it (Fol. 4).

The admiral then recounts the way in which God miraculously guided him in planning and executing the voyages to the Indies. Next he urges the monarchs to launch an expedition to rescue Jerusalem from the infidels. The letter reveals Columbus’ mature spirituality as he frankly acknowledges his past mistakes:

I will speak of one [scriptural truth] because it is relevant to me, and every time I meditate on it, I feel rest and contentment. I am the worst of sinners. The pity and mercy of our Lord have completely covered me whenever I have called [on him] for them. I have found the sweetest consolation

in casting away all my anxiety, so as to contemplate his marvelous presence (Fol. 5 revs.).

Columbus had a balanced understanding of the role of the individual within a providential view of history:

No one should be afraid to take on any enterprise in the name of our Savior, if it is right and if the purpose is purely for his holy service. . . . The working out of all things was entrusted by our Lord to each person, [but it happens] in conformity with his sovereign will, even though he gives advice to many (Fols. 5 revs., 6).

The bulk of the manuscript consists of Bible quotations and commentaries organized in three parts, which look to the past, the present, and the future. Most of Columbus’ quotations come from the Psalms, Isaiah, the minor prophets, and the Gospels. They reveal an unusual acquaintance with the Scriptures for a seaman of humble origins and no formal education.

An Assessment

Columbus’ daring enterprise can be

understood as an attempt to escape the extremely poor conditions of his childhood and to establish a noble lineage for his descendants.⁷ It was also stimulated by the creativity of the Italian Renaissance. Columbus was born in 1451, just one year earlier than Leonardo da Vinci and Savonarola, and three years before Amerigo Vespucci. While Columbus was conceiving the idea of reaching the Orient through the West, Michelangelo (1475) and Raphael (1483) were born. A few years later Titian and Palestrina would enter the world.⁸

However, neither his cultural milieu nor his family background can explain Columbus’ steady faith in God, his unusual familiarity with the Bible, his providential view of human history, or his clear “Adventist” hope:

The Holy Scriptures testify in the Old Testament, by the mouth of the prophets, and in the New [Testament], by our Savior Jesus Christ, that this world will come to an end: Matthew, Mark, and Luke have recorded the signs of the end of the age, the prophets had also abundantly foretold it. . . . And I say that the sign which convinces me that our Lord is hastening the end of the world is the preaching of the Gospel recently in so many lands (Fols. 5, 6).

The 500th anniversary of Columbus’ voyages is being exploited to carry forward some questionable political agendas. For Christian teachers and students, the quincentennial offers an opportunity for sober reflection—on the long-range effect of our personal decisions, on our treatment of people who are either different from or weaker than ourselves; and on the frequent contradiction between our professed faith and our daily conduct. ✍

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Samuel Eliot Morison wrote the definitive book on this important facet of Columbus’ personality: *Admiral of the Ocean Sea: A Life of Christopher Columbus*, 2 vols. (Boston, 1942).

2. Kirkpatrick Sale’s book *The Conquest of Paradise:*

Christopher Columbus and the Columbus Legacy (New York: Knopf, 1990) is representative of this bitterly revisionistic approach. The U.S. National Council of Churches has also joined other anti-celebration groups with a resolution that cited "invasion, genocide, slavery and ecocide [destruction of nature]" as the outcome of Columbus' voyages. It confesses that the church has, by and large, "accompanied and legitimized this conquest and exploitation" (Quoted in *World*, October 26, 1991, p. 18).

3. For a perceptive analysis of this facet of Columbus' motives, see Pauline Moffitt Watts, "Prophecy and Discovery: On the Spiritual Origins of Christopher Columbus's 'Enterprise of the Indies,'" *American Historical Review* 90:1 (February 1985), 73-102.

4. *Relación del primer viaje de D. Cristóbal Colón* (Buenos Aires: Emecé Editores, 1942), pp. 32-33.

5. Bound in vellum, the original manuscript consists of 84 numbered leaves (14 are missing), with writing on both the front and reverse sides. The manuscript shows four different kinds of handwriting, including Columbus' autograph (Folio 59). The text appears in Latin, Castilian Spanish, the peculiar Castilian Spanish of the admiral shows Portuguese influences, and a short notation in Italian. The Latin title of the manuscript appears incomplete, due to extensive damage to folio 1 "Bo[ok] . . . [a]uthoritative quotations, sayings, pronouncements, and p[ro]phecies" which the Admiral De Christopher Columbus gathered together concerning the recovery of the Holy City of Jerusalem, and concerning the discovery of the Indies, addressed to the Catholic Monarchs."

6. Kay Brigham has published a reproduction of the original manuscript along with her English translation, *Christopher Columbus's Book of Prophecies* (Terrassa, Spain: Libros CLIE, 1991), from which I have quoted. See also her book *Christopher Columbus: His Life and Discovery in the Light of His Prophecies* (Terrassa, Spain: Libros CLIE, 1990). These books can be ordered from T.S.E.L.F., P.O. Box 8337, Fort Lauderdale, FL 33308. Toll-free telephone number: 800-327-7933.

7. This is the central thesis of Felipe Fernández-Armesto's *Columbus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).

8. See Paolo Emilio Taviani, *Columbus: The Great Adventure* (New York: Orion Books, 1991), p. 263.

9. Adapted from Dan Carlinsky, "Christopher Confusion," *Modern Maturity* (February-March 1992), pp. 50-55.

10. Other references that may be useful as background for class study and discussion: "When Worlds Collide: How Columbus' Voyages Transformed Both East and West," Columbus Special Issue, *Newsweek* (Fall/Winter 1991), 84 pp.; Kathleen A. Deagan, "La Isabela, Europe's First Foothold in the New World," *National Geographic* 181:1 (January 1992), pp. 40-53; Paul Gray, "The Trouble With Columbus," *Time* (October 7, 1991), pp. 52-61; Eugene Lyon, "Search for Columbus," *National Geographic* 181:1 (January 1992), pp. 2-39; David Neff, "The Columbus Nobody Knows," *Christianity Today* 35:11 (October 7, 1991), pp. 26-29; Stephan Thernstrom, "Hello, Columbus," *The American School Board Journal* 178:10 (October 1991), pp. 19-23.

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How Much Do You *Really* Know About Columbus?

Mark Your Answers

- | | | |
|---|-------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| 1. His name was Christopher Columbus. | True <input type="checkbox"/> | False <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 2. He was born in Italy. | True <input type="checkbox"/> | False <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 3. He set out to prove the world was round. | True <input type="checkbox"/> | False <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 4. Queen Isabella had to pawn her jewels to fund his expedition. | True <input type="checkbox"/> | False <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 5. Columbus was the first to sight land. | True <input type="checkbox"/> | False <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 6. Columbus discovered America. | True <input type="checkbox"/> | False <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 7. Columbus was the second to reach the New World from the Old. | True <input type="checkbox"/> | False <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 8. He was honored for finding a new world. | True <input type="checkbox"/> | False <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 9. Columbus died broken and penniless. | True <input type="checkbox"/> | False <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 10. His remains have been buried in Valladolid, Seville, Santo Domingo, and Havana. | True <input type="checkbox"/> | False <input type="checkbox"/> |

Check your answers on page 46.

...him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us (Acts 17:24-27, NIV).

In the annals of human history, the growth of the nations, the rise and fall of empires, appear as if dependent on the will and prowess of man; . . . [but] above, behind, and through all the play and counterplay of human interest and power and passions, the agencies of the All-merciful One [are] silently, patiently working out the counsels of His own will (Ellen G. White, Prophets and Kings, pp. 499, 500).

Study and Discussion Items

The personality, motives, and legacy of Columbus' voyages offer a variety of study and discussion opportunities for the library and the classroom.¹⁰ Here are some suggestions:

1. The world from which Columbus sailed. What was life like in Genoa, Portugal, Castile, and Aragon in the 15th century?

2. The first Americans. Describe the culture of the peoples that Columbus and the first Europeans found in the New World—the Taino, the Arawak, the Aztec, the Maya, the Inca, and others.

3. The seasoned navigator. On a world map, trace the areas through which Columbus sailed before his Atlantic crossing, then mark his four transatlantic voyages.

4. The legacy. Study the positive and the negative effects of Columbus' voyages. Who suffered and who benefited from the Atlantic exchanges he initiated, both short- and long-range?

5. Bible student. Review in Columbus' *Book of Prophecies* the Scripture passages he quoted and the religious references he makes in his letter to the monarchs of Aragon and Castile. How would you describe his Christian beliefs?

6. God's sovereignty and human decisions in history. Read the following quotations and explain how they relate to Columbus' voyages and their results:

The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands. . . . From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. God did this so that men would seek

him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us (Acts 17:24-27, NIV).

In the annals of human history, the growth of the nations, the rise and fall of empires, appear as if dependent on the will and prowess of man; . . . [but] above, behind, and through all the play and counterplay of human interest and power and passions, the agencies of the All-merciful One [are] silently, patiently working out the counsels of His own will (Ellen G. White, Prophets and Kings, pp. 499, 500).

7. The evangelization of the New

World. Four main European powers brought Christianity to the New World: Spain, Portugal, France, and Great Britain. Compare the type of societies they established. (See *Christianity Comes to the Americas, 1492-1776*, by Charles H. Lippy, Robert Choquette, and Stafford Poole. Paragon House, 1992.) Discuss the advance of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in North America, Inter-America, and South America. To what extent does the ethnic and religious background of these regions influence the strength and progress of our church?

TRANSATLANTIC EXCHANGE

Columbus' voyages began a revolution in the world's diet and economy by initiating an exchange of plants, animals, and other products in both directions across the Atlantic. Review the list of animals and products given in the center column below. Then, in the left column, write the names of those animals and products that were taken from the New World to the Old. List in the right-hand column those that were taken from the Old World to the New. Check your answers on page 46.

From the New World to the Old World		From the Old World to the New World
	avocado	
	banana	
	beans	
	cattle	
	chicken	
	chocolate	
	corn	
	honeybee	
	horse	
	lettuce	
	manioc (cassava)	
	oats	
	olives	
	peanut	
	pepper	
	pineapple	
	potato	
	pig	
	pumpkin	
	quinine	
	sheep	
	soy	
	sugarcane	
	sunflower	
	tobacco	
	tomato	
	tulip	
	vanilla	
	watermelon	
	wheat	

Answers to quiz on page 8

1. False. Columbus lived for a while in at least three European countries, changing his name in each. At birth he was baptized Cristoforo Colombo, the oldest of six children. In Portugal, where he lived as a young man, he became Cristovao Colom. In Spain, where he spent his most productive years and eventually died, he was known as Cristóbal Colón. The Latinized name Christopher Columbus was bestowed on him by English historians.

2. False. Documentary evidence points to the city-republic of Genoa as the place where he was born in 1451, the son of Domenico Colombo and Susanna Fontanarossa. To be accurate, he was Genoese. Italy came into existence as a nation in the period 1860-1870 through the unification of the various kingdoms and states located in the peninsula.

3. False. Most educated people of his time had realized the world was a sphere, although they disagreed on its dimensions. What Columbus wanted to prove was that it was feasible to reach China, Japan, and India by sailing westward. His critics believed the distance he was planning to cover was too great. Columbus did miscalculate the size of the earth. Fortunately, there were unknown lands in the way.

4. Probably false. This seems to be a pious legend recorded by Bartolomé de las Casas, an early biographer of Columbus. Of course, the queen could have offered to pawn her jewels, if necessary, as a rhetorical way of showing her support. The two million maravedis needed for outfitting the expedition was pieced together with loans from Luis de Santángel, the court's chief financial officer, and other investors, including Columbus himself. The balance was made up by the citizens of the port city of Palos, who were to pay off a royal fine by outfitting two caravels.

5. May be true. Juan Rodríguez Bermejo or Rodrigo de Triana, a seaman on the *Pinta*, was the first to shout, "¡Tierra, tierra!" at 2:00 A.M. on Friday, October 12. However, in his diary for the evening of Thursday, October 11, Columbus indicates that he saw, or thought he saw, a flickering light in the darkness ahead. In any event, the admiral kept for himself the lifetime annuity awarded by the crown to the first voyager to see land.

6. False. Columbus could not have discovered a land that had been populated for centu-

ries. As a Native American remarked, "He didn't discover us; my ancestors knew where we were!" That first meeting of Columbus and his men with the awestruck aborigines on the white sandy beaches of Guanahani could more accurately be described as an encounter between representatives of two portions of humanity, two worlds that would slowly become one. One year after Columbus' death, Martin Waldeseemuller proposed that the new continent be named in honor of Amerigo Vespucci, a friend of the admiral who explored the coast of South America in 1499-1501. Although Waldeseemuller changed his mind later, the name *America* stuck.

7. Probably true. The arguments in favor of Leif Eriksson's sailing south from Greenland along the Atlantic coast to northern Newfoundland around A.D. 1000 are persuasive. However, there was no sustained Norse follow-up. There may have been other crossings of which we have no records. The fact is that Columbus was the first in a long tradition of transatlantic navigation that has continued to our time. Modern racing yachtsmen still follow his course.

8. False. Columbus was honored for having found a new route to the Orient. For years he maintained that he had found and claimed for Spain a group of islands off the east coast of Asia.

9. False. The crown did renege on much of the reward that had been promised the admiral and his descendants. After returning from his fourth voyage (1502-1504), Columbus spent most of his final year and a half trying to recover what he felt was his due. Still, when he died on May 20, 1506, in Valladolid—accompanied by his sons, Diego and Hernando, and a few friends—he was not poor.

10. Probably true. The actual location of Columbus' remains is still a mystery. His body was temporarily buried in Valladolid and transferred in 1509 to Seville. Later in the century, his remains were brought to the city of Santo Domingo, in Hispaniola. In 1795, when Spain ceded to France its portion of Hispaniola, they were said to be taken to Havana. When the United States occupied Cuba in 1898, the Spanish government removed the remains to the Cathedral of Seville. According to several historians, however, what remains of the admiral's ashes are still in the sepulcher at Santo Domingo's cathedral. In October 1992 these remains are being transferred to the new mausoleum and lighthouse that is being constructed across the river from the city of Santo Domingo. ☞

Transatlantic Exchanges

Answers to quiz on page 9

From the New World to the Old World: avocado, beans, chocolate, corn, manioc, peanut, pepper, pineapple, potato, pumpkin, quinine, sunflower, tobacco, tomato, vanilla.

From the Old World to the New World: banana, cattle, chicken, honeybee, horse, lettuce, oats, olives, pig, sheep, soy, sugarcane, tulip, watermelon, wheat.

Continued from page 25

A point effectively linking this book to the adult-degree program is the observation that "People who are contented with their lives are not very hungry" (p. 15). The people most likely to be open to spiritual feeding are experiencing disruption and pain in their lives. And those of us who teach adult learners know that these are the kinds of situations that bring them back to college. Therefore, we need to be alert to their openness to spiritual support.

Religious education for the adult learner draws the past, present, and future into juxtaposition and tension. Learning in this context must be dynamic, creative, and flexible.

Part One of the book discusses people's desire to find meaning in life and death in a way that will contribute to integrity and wholeness. Part Two explores characteristics of the adult learner, human development, and ways of knowing and learning. Part Three sets forth tools, ideas for developing programs, and thoughts about connecting with those outside one's community of faith.

Those who lead adult groups of their own religious persuasion should find the book helpful. Other teachers of adults can, as the author suggests, sort out what is useful and leave the rest behind.—Josephine Benton.

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