

A Realistic Historical Perspective on Christopher Columbus

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It is unfortunate that Christopher Columbus has emerged as a political football in our day. Once hailed as one of the greatest men of all time, he is now a victim of what one could best term historical libel. While it is appropriate to study all historical figures without turning them into mythical figures who could do no wrong, it is equally inappropriate to attribute misdeeds and atrocities to them that are, in the case of Columbus, at best inaccurate, and at worse out and out fabrications.

First of all, there exist fundamental misunderstandings about who Columbus was, and what he was trying to accomplish.

He did not set out to discover America. Neither he nor anyone in Europe even knew of its existence. He wanted to reach Asia, especially China, and convert the people of that land to Columbus' Christian faith. To Columbus this was a realistic goal, considering that in the 13th century, the Mongol rulers of China had invited the family of Marco Polo (Italians) to send Christian missionaries to their country. Of course, Columbus had to sell the trip to the king and queen of Spain in order to get them to put up the money.

Columbus, like all educated persons of his day in Europe, knew the world was round. Columbus' mistake was that the globe was much larger than he had calculated --- calculations based largely upon the writings of Marco Polo. So, when he arrived in the Caribbean on October 12, 1492, he assumed he had reached the outskirts of Asia --- the Indies. That is why he referred to the indigenous peoples he met as "Indians."

Considering that he was desirous of taking the Christian gospel to Asia, it is absurd to argue that he wanted to kill the people of Asia, or mistreat them in any way.

Among the falsehoods leveled at Columbus were that he used the Indians for dog food. This is based on later conflicts he had with the indigenous peoples when he used dogs in battles. They very well may have bitten a few natives, but to say that he used the natives for dog

food is preposterous. In every battle between Columbus' men and natives he had native allies.

He also had no intention of spreading deadly diseases such as smallpox to the indigenous peoples. Again, he was wanting them to become fellow Christians, not kill them.

While some of the later Spanish explorers can rightly be accused of maltreatment of the Indians, the Spanish Catholic priest who was a champion of better treatment of the native peoples, Bartolome de Las Casas, did not consider Columbus one of those who deserved condemnation for this mistreatment by other. In his *Historia de las Indias*, Las Casas wrote, "He [Columbus] was a gentle man of great force and spirit" (De Seno). Columbus urged fellow Spaniards to remain at peace with the Indians. He pleaded with his men to "strive ... by their soft and honest speech" to gain the good will of the Indians, "keeping their friendship and love." Hardly the words of a monster! (Delaney 109).

Columbus is also blamed for introducing slavery into the western hemisphere. That is not true. Slavery already existed in the western hemisphere.

Others make irrelevant comments about Columbus, such as, "He really did not discover America," with some adding that the Indians were there first, and besides, it is likely that other Europeans, such as the Vikings, had already come to the western hemisphere. But Columbus never claimed to have discovered America.

Others blame him for all atrocities that took place in the years after his death. But if we are going to do that, then he should be credited with accomplishments after his death, as well, such as the abolition of human sacrifice and cannibalism in the Aztec Empire.

But what he did accomplish was that he ended the disconnected histories of the world. Because of Columbus, Christianity was brought to what is now North and South America, which largely replaced those religions that caused thousands of human sacrifices. No one can seriously argue that life for the descendants of those indigenous peoples Columbus encountered at the end of the 15th century are worse off today than had he never waded ashore on October 12, 1491. In Europe, life was also improved greatly by the introduction of new foods.

If one were to make a "short list" of the persons in history who had done the most to improve the lives of more human beings, a name that would have to be on that list would be that of Christopher Columbus.

Suggested Further Reading:

Byas, Steve. *History's Greatest Libels*. Indianapolis: Dog Ear Publishing, 2015.

Delaney, Carol. *Columbus and the Quest for a New Jerusalem*. New York: The Free Press: 2011.

De Seno, Tommy. "The Truth About Columbus,"
www.foxnews.com/opinion/2010/2011/tommy-seno-columbus-day-franciscobadilla-native-americans/

Grant, George. *The Last Crusader*. Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Books, 1992

Morrison, Samuel Eliot. *Christopher Columbus, Mariner*. Boston: Mentor Books, 1942.

Questions for Discussion:

1. What are some of the principal accusations often made against Columbus?

What was the main goal of Columbus?

What was a major accomplishment of Columbus?

What was a reason that Columbus mistakenly thought he had reached the outskirts of Asia?

5. What Spanish priest was known as a champion of better treatment of the indigenous peoples?

Deeper Thinking:

1. What are some ways to judge the accuracy of books about history?