

Goodbye, Columbus!

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First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship)

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Indigenous Peoples Day

I learned about how much Italian-Americans revere Christopher Columbus the year I went off to Yale. The year before I got there, the university had published a scholarly find it had just acquired, the so-called Vinland Map. This was said to be a map of the world produced by Vikings in the fifteenth century. It showed Greenland and off to the west (that is, left of Greenland) was another body of land which was identified on the map as "Vinland." It wasn't as large as North America, in fact it was smaller than Greenland, but if it was authentic, it might support an argument that the map proved the Vikings had "discovered" North America before the voyage of Columbus in 1492. The Smithsonian Institution sponsored a scholarly seminar on the map in 1966?)

New Haven has a large Italian-American community and there was much outrage about this claim. It came to a head my freshman year at Columbus Day, which has a certain poetic karma. We students were advised to stay in the dorms, keeping out of the streets for our own safety. I remember watching the parade from a fourth-story window. There were no incidents of violence or even ugliness as I recall, but certainly tensions ran high. Years later, it turned out that the so-called Vinland Map was a twentieth century forgery.

That would seem to eliminate the competition from the Vikings as the "discoverers" of the continent we live in, but Columbus's reputation has continued to sink in the decades since I was in college. Part of it has to do with this verb "discovered" which is Columbus' central claim to fame. You can't discover something if everybody already knows about it. The fact that Europeans were unaware that there were lands across the Atlantic and that those lands were inhabited by people does not mean that Columbus' contact with them in 1492 was a "discovery" for the indigenous people themselves were aware of their own existence and the existence of the land they inhabited. And that would be the same if the Vikings had gotten there first.

The late 1970s were a time of what was then called Urban Renewal in many cities, and many port cities such as Boston were swept up in making their harbor area more genteel, more habitable. Boston created a city park next to its dock area and named it the Christopher Columbus Waterside Park. I suspect that there was more than a little politics involved in the choice of name, in that the North End of the city, which abutted the new park, was very strongly Italian-American. A sculpture was created and placed in the center of the park.

That sculpture of Columbus is not there today. I went there yesterday on my way home to make sure. Not only is it gone, but there is no plaque indicating it has ever been there. In search of information, I went into the Long Wharf Marriot right there by the park and asked the concierge what had happened to Columbus. She didn't know, but she Googled the question and came up with the answer that I had come up with earlier in the week: there had been persistent vandalism of the Columbus statue and at one point a vandal beheaded him. It was clear that some element of the public was not happy with the statue

in the park, and so a decision was made to give the statue to the Knights of Columbus, who have a lodge nearby.

The Columbus I grew up with was a hero. My hometown in South Carolina is one of the many places named after him that are found throughout the New World. Yet the more we find out about him, the more unheroic he seems. I had been taught as a child to regard Columbus in something like the way Alfred Lord Tennyson describes Ulysses – or Odysseus, if you wish – in the great poem David just read, a person trying to push against his age's restrictions on knowledge, and to grow the sum of human knowledge about distant lands. Both were mariners braving the unknown, risking their lives and the lives of their crew. Theirs was a scientific quest.

But that heroic mask is prettifying Columbus out of any recognition of the historical figure that we know now. He was not the only one of his age to believe that the world was round; most scientific thinkers from ancient times had assumed that. Columbus had made a calculation of how big the globe was, and he wanted to test his idea not to increase the sum of human knowledge but to make a lot of money in establishing trade routes with East Asia and get the gold that the natives were rumored to possess in great quantities.

He signed an agreement with the Castilian court, Ferdinand and Isabella, which would give him not only access to a generous proportion of all the riches he could take but also political dominance over any non-Christian natives he encountered. This was in accordance with a developing doctrine from the Holy See in Rome called the Doctrine of Discovery. One portion of the doctrine divided the portion of the globe being explored between Spain and Portugal; that is why Brazilians today speak Portuguese and the rest of South America speaks Spanish. But the more important, and more horrifying clauses, allowed the European explorers to do just about anything they wanted with the indigenous inhabitants of the continent, including murder and enslavement. And Columbus opened the door for his successor explorers to do just that. After almost half a millennium, the Doctrine of Discovery was formally abrogated by Pope Francis just this year, 2022, with his apologies to the indigenous people around the globe who had been enslaved, and died under it.

Another statue tail: three years ago, I found myself serving the First Church in Boston, like Old Ship a very old church. A statue of John Winthrop, the founder of the church and of the Puritan settlement which became Boston, was posted right outside the entrance to the modernist building in Back Bay. Many people in the church had been ready to get it off the property – it actually belonged to the city. That movement raised for me the question of how we come to terms with the past.

I don't believe that there is one set of moral codes which are unchanging for all time. Rather, I see morality as an evolving thing, like everything else in life. And I think we make a mistake if we uncritically apply the moral standards of today to ages gone by.

This is a tendency I have come to call retro morality. Retro morality is the way we have of looking at the events of the past through the lens of our present-day concerns. Sort of like, do you remember when there used to be a little warning on rear view mirrors which told the driver that objects in the mirror were closer than they appeared.

When we look at a figure from the past, our view might be distorted by the lens through which we look. We assume, wrongly, that people decades or centuries ago thought pretty much as modern

humans do. It is the task of the historian to get inside the mind of people of ages past and be able to say how those minds differ from our own.

What I am calling retro morality, the imposing of today's moral standards on figures from yesterday, is one of three syndromes that historians sometimes write about. The second is called the Historian's fallacy.

The Historian's fallacy is the mistaken assumption that past actors in history had the same foresight that we have now in hindsight. Military historians know what clues the American Navy had about Japanese capabilities and intentions before the attack on Pearl Harbor.

"The historian David Hackett Fischer, who coined that phrase "historian's fallacy," cited the claim that the United States should have anticipated Japan's surprise attack on Pearl Harbor because of the many warning signs that an attack was in the cards. Fischer argues those signs seem obvious only in hindsight—to the World War II military leaders, many of those signs suggested possible attacks on many positions other than Pearl Harbor."

A related problem is called presentism – interpreting the past by means of present-day attitudes.

One commentator noted,

"Presentism often fosters moral self-righteousness. Employing present-day moral standards to reflect on the Founding Fathers' ownership of slaves, David Hume's racism, or Gandhi's opposition to modernity and technology should not be tainted by our stance of temporal condescension."

In 2002, Prof. Lynn Hunt of UCLA was the President of the American Historical Association, and she gave a presidential address about presentism. She concluded her remarks with these words:

"Presentism admits of no ready solution; it turns out to be very difficult to exit from modernity or our modern Western historical consciousness. But it is possible to remind ourselves of the virtues of maintaining a fruitful tension between present concerns and respect for the past. Both are essential ingredients in good history. The emergence of new concerns in the present invariably reveals aspects of historical experience that have been occluded or forgotten. Respect for the past, with its concomitant humility, curiosity, and even wonder ... enables us to see beyond our present-day concerns backward and forward at the same time. We are all caught up in the ripples of time, and we have no idea of where they are headed."

A couple of years ago I read an engaging book which examines at length the way we deal with the past, Clint Smith's *How The Word Is Passed*. Smith is a poet and a journalist whose writings can often be found in the *Atlantic*. He is Black and a native of New Orleans, and in this book he sets out to visit sites associated with American slavery, not to see the sites themselves but to understand how slavery is explained to the tourists who visit them.

One of the first sites that Clint Smith visits is Thomas Jefferson's Monticello, which was an active plantation in Jefferson's day. The guides there now will freely discuss Jefferson's relationship with his slave and mistress Sally Hemmings. But Jefferson's reputation has definitely slid, either because of his relation with Hemmings or just the fact that he owned slaves.

We can see Jefferson's fall from grace in our own denomination; much of what is now the South East region of the UUA used to be known as the Thomas Jefferson District, not because Jefferson ever set foot in a Unitarian church when he was alive, but because he was friendly with a lot of the Unitarians of his time, he did a very Unitarian thing in cutting up the New Testament to eliminate the element of miracles, and he said in letter that in the future everyone would be Unitarian.

Now regarding the name of the UU region, there is a powerful argument that a geographical division of a denomination committed as ours is to decentering whiteness and embracing diversity should not be called by the name of a slaveholder.

I can feel the force of that argument, and yet I am not sure that it does justice. Jefferson's sin in owning people and dealing with them as property is deeply offensive to our modern values but is no more heinous than those of his neighbors throughout Virginia. And the neighbors never wrote the words "all men are created equal" for the first time in human history; the writing of those words gave impetus not only to our fledgling republic but to the entire idea of human rights.

Yes, certainly the words are hypocritical coming from the pen of Mr. Jefferson; but if he had not written them at the moment he did, the very abolition movement that eventually freed the country from the scourge of slavery would have been delayed if it ever started in the first place. It would be so convenient if we could just split Mr. Jefferson in two, and give the good half credit for founding the Human Rights movement and the University of Virginia and punish the bad one for enslaving people and not freeing them even at his death. Maybe we should have a statue that periodically gets pulled off its pedestal and then put back up.

But we can't divide Jefferson that way. The same person who wrote All Men Are Created Equal kept in slavery not only the woman with whom he had conjugal relations but the children born out of those relations. This is what I mean by retro morality. We are horrified by the system of chattel slavery which prevailed in North America for 244 years, and though there are many twists and turns from the formal end of slavery up until now, we know that there is a direct line between that practice of slavery and the subsequent oppressions of Black and brown people that American life still represents here in the 21st century. We really want to move to undo white supremacy, to make life better for all. Wouldn't it be at least a symbolic gesture to reach back two centuries and give Mr. Jefferson a spanking?

It might have some emotional appeal. But I think what it should do is to make us all "woke" not only to the injustices of history but to the ironies, the nuances, the stubborn was that facts have of not fitting our preconceptions of them.

There is another chapter in Clint Smith's book that I want to talk about. He visits a cemetery named Blandford outside Petersburg, Virginia. I had never heard of the place, but a few years after the Civil War, it got chosen as a central repository for the remains of Confederate veterans, and today it has over 30,000 such remains. Clint is in the office of the place when he picks up a brochure and realizes that Blandford Cemetery has been chosen as the site for a rally by the pro-Confederate organization Sons of the Confederacy, and the rally is going to take place in the near future. He makes the decision that he will attend.

This is the only time in the book where Smith encounters people trying to make an active defense of secession and the Confederacy. I thought I knew a lot about far-right fringe groups, but I didn't realize

there were people like this anymore. I grew up in South Carolina, the first state to secede and the location for the first shots of the Civil War, and there was plenty of Lost Cause rhetoric around at that time. It was common in my childhood for my elders to discourse for hours on why the Civil War was not about slavery, but states rights.

But we know now that those opinions were not driven by a study of history. If you go back into real history, you find that each seceding state drew up a declaration of its reasons for seceding, and the preservation of slavery was right at the top of the list. No, the mythical claim that the Civil War was not about slavery was not driven by an assessment of the history but by the events of those days in the late 1950s and early 1960s: the Freedom Rides, the lunch counter sit-ins, the voting rights marches, the “I Have a Dream” speech.

What my elders called the Southern Way of Life, what we now call white supremacy, was under attack, and a retreat to a defense of the Confederacy was the offensive tactic used against it.

But amazingly enough, the rally that Clint Smith attended was not back in the nineteen-sixties, it was in the late twenty-teens. He kept his journalist’s cool and managed to engage with several informants in the course of the afternoon.

All of the Lost Cause advocates that Smith talked to were bringing retro morality to their subject. They were looking at the Civil War through the lens of denial that there were problems of justice between the races today, and they projected that back on America of a century and a half before. They thought the Civil War was neat because they could not relate to the pain, either present or past, of which it was the symbol.

Let me just lift up one interesting aspect of this Clint Smith spent an afternoon at Blandford Cemetery with people who seriously contend that the Civil War was not about slavery. Then Clint looks back into the history books about the battle that started on that land, which is called the Battle of the Crater. That battle, with Robert E. Lee at the head of the Confederate forces, was the first time that the Confederates had faced Union regiments employing Black soldiers, and the southerners were furious. If the Union Army could actually get Black soldiers to fight, all the racist myths the southerners had been telling themselves were lies. They reacted in fury. As Clint Smith described it, it was as if Lincoln was unleashing on the southerners a massive slave revolt. The Confederate forces killed all the Black prisoners that they caught in that battle.

Let’s step back. The problems I have been describing of retro morality or presentism assume that there is some sort of progress in the world of ideas. Ideas are not static, but they go through an evolution over time, and the philosopher Georg Frederick Hegel had a pretty good description of how that worked. It’s all one continuous process, but if you just find a starting point at random, you will see an age where a big idea dominates. People learn about it, they seek to understand it, they try it out on the evidence, try to prove or disprove it. And what may happen is that some people start defending the idea and others start attacking it. Let’s call the original idea the thesis. The idea which develops against the thesis is called the antithesis. The thesis and the antithesis struggle against one another and one of them may win, but what often happens instead is that the thesis and the antithesis find agreement in a new idea which combines elements of the two original ideas. This is called the synthesis. And once the synthesis is established, it can spawn its own opposite, a new antithesis, and that can struggle with the synthesis to create still another synthesis.

I like to envision this process as a stilt walker lurching down the highway of time. You can't tell from where it started where it's going to end up. So that's Hegel's idea of how ideas change and develop. Some of us are not satisfied with this. We want there to be a smooth progression, we don't like the back and forth.

I could wish for a smooth progression too, but here in my eighth decade of life, I find that the jerky path happens more often.

I, for one, am content to let Columbus' statue grace the Knights of Columbus hall. You are entitled to differ with me, and I am not here pleading for the church to take any kind of formal position on what we call this day in October. Columbus' dealings with the indigenous people he encountered amounted to genocide, forced labor and enslavement. A huge portion of the indigenous peoples of the Caribbean died as a result. Moreover, he opened the door to European colonization of the entire two continents and thus is partly responsible for the pressure the colonial and then national governments used against indigenous people, driving them off the lands and trying to exterminate their culture. Though I am from Columbia, South Carolina and lived in the District of Columbia and once went to General Assembly in Columbus, Ohio I would be glad to show him the exit from places of honor in the U.S. Happy Indigenous Peoples Day, Good-bye Columbus!

Amen.