

Samuel Eliot Morison on the Influence of Christopher Columbus in 1493

by Ronald Kirk

On this Columbus Day 2009, let us consider the Prologue of Samuel Eliot Morison's book *Admiral of the Ocean Sea: A Life of Christopher Columbus*.¹ In these few pages, Morison provides some astounding insight regarding Columbus's impact on the outlook and consequent accomplishment of his own times.

First, Morison says that at the end of 1492 the prospect for Western Europe was depressing indeed. Christian civilization seemed to be contracting, while internal hostilities grew. For over a hundred years natural science stagnated and university enrollment shriveled. Institutions decayed, and cynicism, intellectual escapism and worship of a non-existent pagan golden age increased. Islam continued to grow, consuming Christian territory as it advanced. The Turks destroyed the Byzantine Empire, and conquered much of Greece, Albania and Serbia, and nearly took Vienna. Election of the infamous Rodrigo Borgia to the papacy reflected the base condition of the Roman Catholic church. With the essential collapse of the Holy Roman Empire and the moral implosion of the church, Christians had little in the way of human encouragement. The result was a feeling "of profound disillusion, cynical pessimism and black despair."²

In 1493, Morison says the conclusion of the history of the world written in the book known as the *Nuremberg Chronicle*, asserts that the folio tome contains, "the events most worthy of notice from the beginning of the world to the *calamity* of our time" (emphasis added). Morison continues, "Lest any reader feel an unjustified optimism, the Nuremberg chroniclers place 1493 in the Sixth or penultimate Age of the world, and leave six blank pages on which to record events from the date of printing to the Day or Judgment."³

Just as with Savonarola's imprecatory sermons at this time, the Nuremberg Chronicle includes a prophecy of the ending age, referencing God and Magog from the Book of Ezekiel, and a quotation from The Revelation 20:8 that indicates the next and final age will be worse even than their own evil time. Then, "The seventh angel will pour out the seventh vial, and the awful Day of Judgment, painted in the lurid colors of the Vision of Saint John, will conclude the history of a wicked world."⁴ These times were so appallingly bleak to those who lived them, they thought themselves to be living near to the end of the world.

Nonetheless, just as these extremely pessimistic thoughts were readied for publication, news of Christopher Columbus's discovery in the New World came to Lisbon. Apparently, this news soon began to create a profound change in the outlook of Europe, according to Morison:

Strong monarchs are stamping out privy conspiracy and rebellion; the Church, purged and chastened by the Protestant Reformation, puts her house in order; new ideas flare up throughout Italy, France, Germany

and the northern nations; faith in God revives and the human spirit is renewed. The change is complete and astounding. “A new envisagement of the world has begun, and men are no longer sighing after the imaginary golden age that lay in the distant past, but speculating as to the golden age that might possibly lie in the oncoming future” (Sir Charles Oman *On the Writing of History* P: 117).⁵

Bridging the gap between the Medieval past and the future, Christopher Columbus “became the sign and symbol of this new age of hope, glory and accomplishment.”

We see in pre-Columbian Europe a decadence and despair similar to that of our own age. With the present political climate and current, America arguably may soon cease to exist as we have known it. Much of the American church has spent the last several decades awaiting the rapture to remove the church from the dire evil consequences of the times.

Now here is a lesson for contemporary Christianity. Consider Samuel Morison—historian, man of the sea and United States Navy Admiral—who faced with his contemporaries one of the worst threats to western civilization in modern times: Hitler’s Germany and the Axis powers’ determination to conquer the world. Another grim time.

No doubt Morison wrote to encourage his contemporaries with his story of the intrepid, persevering and visionary Columbus. For in his first voyage, Columbus:

the Christ-bearer, would be the humble yet proud instrument of Europe's regeneration...He accomplished with a maximum of faith and a minimum of technique, a bare sufficiency of equipment and a superabundance of stout-heartedness, gave Europe new confidence in herself, more than doubled the area of Christianity, enlarged indefinitely the scope for human thought and speculation, and “led the way to those fields of freedom which, planted with great seed, have now sprung up to the fructification of the world.

In a world of now nearly 7 billion people,⁶ dependence upon the vision and ability of one man would be both naïve and dangerous. Naïve because true and lasting reform depends upon mankind’s general recognition of their Savior Jesus Christ, and His rightful kingdom. In Christ’s kingdom are many individuals saved by grace and entered into covenantal relationships—personal, civil and economic—of any and every kind. It is within this fabric of Christianity, through the benign influence of God’s people governed by the Word of God and His Holy Spirit, that civilization, liberty, justice and prosperity thrive. Dangerous because of the great temptation toward idolatrous dependence upon men. Such dependence always leads to oppression and tyranny, and further evil, not its remedy. For our own good, Christ will countenance no competition.

Rather, Morison's characterization of Columbus should inspire us as individuals to take such leadership as Columbus exemplifies. We ought to rouse ourselves as our parents and grandparents did against the wickedness of men in World War II. We ought to rouse ourselves unto preparation according to God's unique individual giftedness and calling. Thus the many may then *contribute* each his *own* vision and accomplishment, toward the recovery of the free and gracious society that Americans once knew, and even better.

Christ said that we must bear fruit. On this Columbus Day, let us, as he did, allow the Holy Spirit to inspire us to the great things He has determined to accomplish in us (Eph 2:10), to God's glory and the blessings of men.

¹ Samuel Eliot Morison, *Admiral of the Ocean Sea: A Life of Christopher Columbus* (Little, Brown, and Company, 1942), 3-6.

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⁶ Central Intelligence Agency, *The World Fact Book* (<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/xx.html>).