

The Great Discovery

H. H. WALSH

BEFORE the prospect of interplanetary exploration loomed upon the horizon, writers on discovery were inclined to stress the singularity of Columbus' first voyage to America. Today we hesitate before saying that "nothing like it can ever be done again."¹ But even if the unprecedented character of this voyage into the outer space of the medieval world should be matched or overshadowed by a voyage into the outer space of the contemporary world, the dynamic effect of the great discovery of the fifteenth century will still remain written large on the pages of history, and historians will continue to trace its influence in all departments of life: in trade and commerce, in political and social development, and in church reform.

I

The connection between the discovery of America in the fifteenth century and the religious reformations of the sixteenth century may not at first sight appear obvious, and must to a large extent be argued from chronology; yet when it is recalled that it was only twenty-five years after Columbus' first voyage to the West Indies that Martin Luther nailed his ninety-five theses to the church door at Wittenberg, and only twenty-five years later that Paul III issued a bull which led to the assembling of the Council of Trent and thus set in motion a counter-reformation, it does seem highly probable that the former event had some bearing upon the two latter. It is true that there had been many attempts to reform the church before the discovery of America—John Wycliffe and John Huss had both anticipated Luther's defiance of the papacy; the great reforming councils of the fifteenth century were as keen as Trent to strengthen the church to meet the attacks of its critics and enemies—but these earlier reformers and councils failed in their objectives whereas the latter succeeded beyond all expectation. There would seem, therefore, to be some ground for arguing that the sixteenth-century achievement was due to the great stimulus administered to the human psyche by the amazing discovery of a new world.

1. Cf. John Fiske, *The Discovery of America* (Boston and New York, 1892), Vol. I, p. 446: "The first voyage of Columbus is thus a unique event in the history of mankind. Nothing like it was ever done before, and nothing like it can ever be done again." See also A. P. Newton, *The Great Age of Discovery* (London, 1932), p. 4f.; J. B. Brebner, *The Explorers of North America* (London, 1933), p. 3. Brebner does admit the possibility of Columbus' discovery being outranked: "Unless mankind is to embark some day on interplanetary exploration, there can never be a geographical adventure like the discovery and exploration of the Americas."

The stimulation was at first perceived in the form of a shock; and the church's primary reaction was, in conservative quarters at least, a warning against prying into the forbidden secrets of the universe. Explorers were bluntly told that there were better things to do than to waste one's time trying to grasp such complex knowledge as exploration demanded. Sebastian Brant, in his famous satire *Das Narrenschiff*, published two years after Columbus' initial voyage, pours scorn on "man's folly in trying to know so large a subject as the earth when he can hardly know himself." Sardonicly he asks,

Why should we humans seek to be
More than we are in verity?

to which he adds,

Some have explored a foreign land
But not themselves can understand.²

This outburst was a reflection of the spirit that distinguished the medieval from the modern world; the former regarded the life of contemplation or monastic retreat as the ideal, whereas the latter has chosen the life of action directed to the world around it. The choice had already been made by the humanists, of whom Brant was one—though it would appear almost unwillingly, for he still had a nostalgia for the medieval world, even if his very vehemence in denouncing fools seeking a fool's paradise in an unknown world led him to rebuke many of the evils within the churches, since he felt that these had created the restless spirit which indulged in exploration. Because of its author's ambivalence, the *Narrenschiff*, which was supposed to be a defence of the good old days, has been described as "a most effective preparation for the Protestant Reformation."³

Brant had many sympathizers in his last-ditch stand against the new trend. More than a decade after his own lament, a chaplain of the College of Ottery St. Mary in Devonshire, Alexander Barclay, writes in his *Ship of Fools*, in words reminiscent of Brant:

. . . And so this fole castyth
his wyt so wyde
To know eche londe vnder the
fryament
That thereabout in vyne his tyme
is spent. . . .⁴

Even more shocking to conservative theologians than the appearance of the activist spirit was the information that these newly discovered lands were inhabited by weird savage folk, thus giving credence to medieval speculation about an antipodal world peopled by strange human beings who shaded off into "Gorgons, hydras, and chimeras dire."⁵ St. Augustine in the fifth

2. Quoted by F. T. McCann, *English Discovery of America to 1585* (New York, 1952), pp. 73-74.

3. *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 14th ed., Vol. IV, p. 38.

4. Quoted by F. T. McCann, *op. cit.*, p. 79.

5. J. Fiske, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, p. 311.

century had raised a question about the theological position of semi-human creatures, but decided its solution could wait until such creatures were discovered. The responsible church leaders of the middle ages went further than St. Augustine. They held that such speculation itself was wrong and refused to give any credence to the existence of beings, human or semi-human, beyond the reach of Christ's command to "make disciples of all nations".⁶ When Portuguese sailors, returning from voyages down the coast of Africa, first announced the existence of a hitherto unknown race of men and women, many churchmen still disbelieved, but after the discovery of America this was no longer possible, and so the Church was compelled to reinterpret its theology in the light of this new knowledge.

Admission of the existence of an antipodal people was perhaps less of a shock to orthodox churchmen than the admission that the world is spherical in shape. According to medieval conceptions no such flood as that described in the seventh chapter of Genesis could possibly have occurred on a globular earth; in defence, therefore, of the truth of the Scriptures it was necessary to maintain the popular view that the earth was a rectangular plane. Although Ptolemy's spherical theory of the universe was well known among the learned, including many clergymen, yet it was not officially approved by the Church, which was inclined to side with Cosmas Indicopleustes, a monk of Alexandria and a self-proclaimed Christian geographer, who maintained in opposition to Ptolemy that the inhabited lands of the earth are in the centre of the floor of the universe, "surrounded on all sides by a great ocean." It was dangerous to sail for any distance into this limitless sea, even though Cosmas felt inclined to concede that in some far corner beyond the ocean "is the Paradise from which Adam and Eve were expelled".⁷ This was a concession hardly likely to encourage exploration—not at least until it was possible to retain one's sense of direction in the vast ocean lying between Europe and Paradise. When at last by the invention of the compass the ocean became more navigable there was considerable hesitation on the part of mariners to use this new guide lest like Roger Bacon they be condemned as magicians.⁸

All these theological objections to exploration were to the spirit of the time real enough; and those who urged them were in many cases sincerely intent on safeguarding religious faith. When it was finally brought home to these churchmen that their negative attitude could no longer be maintained, there must have intervened an agonizing period of reappraisal such as had often been imposed upon theologians after the break-down of established philosophies or conventional cosmologies. We can only speculate as to the outcome, but it seems not improbable that these religiously concerned people began to search diligently for something to replace the old values and securities of the middle ages. It may well be that these conservative church-

6. Matt. 28:19.

7. Cosmas' work is entitled *Christianike Topographia*; text in PG, 88, 9-476. (Cosmas Indicopleustes means "Cosmas who sailed to India.") Cf. J. Fiske, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, p. 265.

8. Cf. J. Fiske, *op. cit.*, p. 314.

men by their very concern for the abiding realities of the medieval world contributed more to the reform movements of the sixteenth century than those ecclesiastics who enthusiastically welcomed the new science and the discoveries of the explorers with little regard for the church's doctrinal embarrassments.

II

On the other side in this issue were many churchmen, some in very high office, who gladly welcomed the new knowledge that made discovery possible. Nor were they by any means startled by the sudden discovery of the long-rejected antipodal world. In point of fact some of them took the lead in making such discoveries possible. It was a cardinal of the Roman Church, Pierre d'Ailly (1350-1420), the author of a treatise on geography, *Imago Mundi*,⁹ who convinced Columbus that it was possible to sail across the Atlantic on a continuous voyage that would ultimately lead him to the Indies. It was none other than the Grand Master of the Order of Christ, Henry the Navigator, who determined with all the help that science could supply to know what might lie beyond earth's remotest bounds. To this end he appealed to his order "for funds for the worthy purpose of advancing the interests of science, converting the heathen and winning a commercial empire for Portugal."¹⁰

Great credit for contributing to the discovery of America must be given to the prior of a Franciscan monastery, Juan Perez, for his championship of what were generally regarded as the chimerical views of Christopher Columbus. In the quiet retreat of Father Perez' monastery at Palos, Columbus finally gained a genuine hearing for his plan to reach the Indies by sailing westward across the Atlantic. Furthermore, it was the monks at Palos who arranged an all-important gathering of church dignitaries at Granada where Mendoza, the archbishop of Toledo and primate of Spain, was induced to use his powerful influence to persuade Queen Isabella to provide the ships and men for Columbus' projected voyage.¹¹

All this vigorous support by the clergy of apparently chimerical schemes is explained by the fact that Columbus was a man of mystical vision and always presented his project as part of a divine plan for enlarging the bounds of Christendom.¹² When finally through his efforts a new inhabited world was brought into view, the church in Spain by its identification with Columbus' project was spiritually prepared, as it were, to embark upon a great missionary campaign to bring these new people within the Christian fold. It was also inclined to agree with the prevalent Spanish opinion that the discovery was a reward to Spain for its vigorous support of the Christian cause. This general opinion was clearly expressed by one of the most popular poets of the day, Giuliano Dati, who after due thanks "to the illustrious discoverer Columbus," reserved the "greater thanks to the supreme

9. Cf. S. E. Morison, *Admiral of the Ocean Sea* (Boston, 1942), p. 93.

10. Cf. J. Fiske, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, p. 320.

11. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 413.

12. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 416.

God, who is making new realms to be conquered for thee [Spain] and for himself and vouchsafes to thee to be at once strong and pious."¹³

No longer are there any troublesome questions about the improbability of God's leaving a people separated for centuries from the means of salvation; no longer is there fear to penetrate into mysteries beyond human understanding; from pious monarchs down to humble cabin-boys all theological doubts are dispelled by the exhilarating thought that God had been holding in reserve new worlds to conquer for the kingdom that served him best. Both Isabella and Ferdinand were certain that Columbus' discovery was God's reward to them for the capture of Granada, the last Islamic stronghold in Western Europe, as well as for the expulsion of the Jews from Spain and the harsh measures they had taken for the extirpation of heresy. And with this view conquistador and missionary were in hearty agreement as they prepared to exploit and convert the new-found lands and peoples.

III

The exuberant mood which led to the immediate colonization of the barbaric world by Europeans could not be confined to the Iberian peninsula; in a very brief time it spread across Western Europe and fired men's ambitions to perfect a new and better future for all mankind. This in turn led to more daring thinking and a greater freedom of expression than was customary in medieval Europe.

The era that preceded the discovery of America seems to have been very wary of new ideas, and would have resented the suggestion:

There are more things in heaven and earth Horatio,
Than are dreamt of in your philosophy.¹⁴

Roger Bacon's fanciful endeavour to outline a better future led to years of imprisonment, and Petrarch's attempt to enlarge the intellectual horizon of his time gained for him the title of wizard. But with a new world of wonders being proclaimed by such responsible reporters as Peter Martyr of *De Orbe Novo* fame or Richard Eaton in his *Decades*,¹⁵ it became manifestly impossible to prevent men from dreaming dreams and seeing visions of a new and better society than mankind had ever envisaged before. The challenge was first accepted by Sir Thomas More, who in writing *Utopia* started a vogue of imaginary "brave new worlds" that has continued down to our own time. "Utopia" or "no-where place" was suggested to More while reading a little book called *Cosmographie Introductio*, which described the four voyages of Amerigo Vespucci. More selects one of the characters in this book to serve as the spokesman for a new world order. The narrator tells us that "among Utopians all things being common, every man hath abundance of everything . . .," and that he holds "well with Plato . . . that all men should have and enjoy equal positions of wealth and commodities. . . . For where every man, under certain titles and pretences, draineth and plucketh to himself as

13. *Ibid.*, p. 450.

14. Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, Act I, Scene 5.

15. Cf. Peter Martyr, *De Orbe Novo*, etc. (French tr. by Paul Gaffarel, Paris, 1907); R. Eaton, *The Decades of the new world* (ed. Edward Arber, Birmingham, 1885).

much as he can, so that a few divide among themselves all the whole riches, . . . there to the residual is left lack and poverty."¹⁶ As one reader of *Utopia* has exclaimed, this "is almost the voice of Karl Marx. . . . It remains as contemporary as a planned economy and the welfare state."¹⁷

What is even more surprising is that More, a loyal son of the medieval church, should predict the spirit of modern day sectarianism, since in *Utopia* religion is voluntary and "no prayers be used [in church] but such as every man may boldly pronounce without offending any sect."¹⁸ Las Casas, the famous Spanish missionary, also indulged in utopian visions, dreaming "of an ideal colony, peopled by perfect Christians labouring for the conversion of model Indians,"¹⁹ a dream partly realized in the Jesuit colony of Paraguay. A consequence of these dreams was the founding of new religious orders dedicated to foreign missions among far-away peoples; another was the attempt to create in the forests of the new world new Zions based upon the principles of reformed or "purified" churches.

In the same category as utopianism was a tendency on the part of the early explorers and missionaries to idealize the American Indian. It seems fair to say that this Indian of fancy's creation has had an even more revolutionary influence than utopian visions upon western civilization. A mythical Indian first began to take form through Columbus' desire to impress the importance of his discoveries upon the Spanish sovereigns. In trying to do so he described the primitives of Cuba as "very gentle, without knowledge of evil, neither killing nor stealing. . . . In all the world there is not a better people or a better country; they love their neighbours as themselves and they have the sweetest and gentlest way of speaking in the world and always with a smile."²⁰ With even more fervour Las Casas declared: "All these infinite peoples were created by God and most simple of all others, without malice or duplicity, most obedient and faithful to their rulers, whom they serve; the most humble, patient, loving, peaceful and docile people, without contentions or tumults; neither factious nor quarrelsome, without hatred or desire for revenge more than any people in the world."²¹

Reports like these led not only to the writing of fanciful utopias, but also to serious or semi-serious books on political economy. Rousseau's *Le Contrat Social*, the text book of the French Revolution, drew its inspiration from *le bon sauvage*; this is also partly true of Chateaubriand's *Génie du Christianisme* which contributed so much to the romantic movement of the nineteenth century,²² a movement which gave to Christianity the greatest territorial expansion in all its long history.²³

16. More, *Utopia* (Everyman edition), p. 44.

17. Will Durant, *The Story of Civilization: Part VI, The Reformation* (New York, 1957), p. 555.

18. Quoted from Will Durant, *op. cit.*, p. 554.

19. Cf. F. A. MacNutt, *Bartholomew de las Casas* (New York and London, 1909), p. vi.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 19.

21. *Ibid.*

22. Cf. Rousseau, *Contrat Social*, Bk. IV.

23. Cf. K. S. Latourette, *A History of the Expansion of Christianity*, 2nd ed. (New York and London, 1941), Vol. IV, Chap. I.

IV

Such were the contributions of the idealists and dreamers to the thought and culture of modern Europe. But there was also the contribution of entrepreneurs and shopkeepers. Their opportunity came through what has been designated as the "open frontier."²⁴

One of the most significant facts about fifteenth-century Europe was its fortress-like life; on one side were the Turks, on the other the Barbary pirates. Within this beleaguered fortress, comprising an area of about 3,750,000 square miles, life was static, with well-defined classes, and a population of some 100,000,000 people was continually pressing on the means of subsistence.²⁵ Although the old manorial economy had been greatly threatened by the sudden depopulation brought about by the Black Death, yet it was still being buttressed by harsh legislation which forbade artisans from moving about. Then came the miracle; a way of escape from the rigid caste system was opened up by the discovery of a new world. The decline of the manorial system was now greatly hastened by the expanded trade of the Atlantic powers that followed shortly upon the discoveries of the mariners; and this in turn helped the yeomanry and peasants to get out of the hands of their overlords, as they moved steadily into the world of shops and warehouses and began to develop "a passion for bourgeois comfort."²⁶ It was not long before the shopkeepers struck upon the idea of uniting their savings in great corporations for the exploration of new-found lands. The stockholders, however, were not shopkeepers only, but came from the most diverse groups of society. Thus was created a new fraternity in which class barriers began to disappear. In the London company incorporated to develop Virginia there were "besides earls, bishops, knights and gentlemen, plain commoners, merchants, tailors, stationers, shoemakers etc. and two women."²⁷

Lure of profits no doubt played the dominant rôle in creating this unusual fraternity; yet there was also mixed with the profit motive a spirit of service, directed either towards the welfare of the aborigines in the new world, or towards national interests in the old. So sincerely was it believed that a joint-stock company might serve a beneficent purpose that shares in common stock were actually advertised from the pulpits of the churches in England. "Before it was anything else," says one student of the Virginia Company's records, "the Virginia Company was a Christian enterprise."²⁸

24. On the influence of the frontier see F. J. Turner, *Rise of the New West* (New York, 1906), *passim*.

25. Cf. W. P. Webb, *The Great Frontier* (Boston, 1932), p. 142.

26. Charles and Mary Beard, *The Rise of American Civilization* (New York, 1933), p. 20.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 27.

28. A. L. Maycock, *Nicholas Ferrar of Little Gidding* (London, 1938), p. 87, speaking of some of the directors of the Virginia Company, says: "To have neglected the spiritual or pastoral aspect of their work in Virginia would have been a gross and sinful violation of their trust and a grave misuse of their authority. To the truth of this there is ample witness in the Court Books."

Certainly the Massachusetts Bay Company regarded its spiritual purpose as primary, even though the appetite for profits grew with increasing dividends, and Bible and ledger became inextricably commingled in the exploitation of the new world.

Accordingly, there arose in the age of discovery a more dynamic imperialism than mankind had yet witnessed. A famous German economist, Sombart, has tried to explain the dynamic of this new imperialism by reducing it "to the terms of the everlasting struggle among human societies over feeding places on the wide surface of the earth and over the distribution of the world's natural resources."²⁹ The Beards in their justly famous history, *The Rise of American Civilization*, though much impressed by the Sombart thesis, make the reservation that "the story of human migration cannot all be told in the terms of commerce, profits, conquest and exploration."³⁰ Apart from the Roman Catholic missions and the Calvinistic belief in destiny, both of which added new forces to the development of western imperialism, there was the tremendous uplift of the open frontier, ever beckoning adventurous souls forward to the land of Eldorado. Eldorado, however, was a lodestar that attracted far more than mere gold-seekers and those in search of perpetual youth. As already observed, it attracted those concerned with new and better world orders and reformed churches, while even those who stayed at home could not fail to feel the contagion of the optimism of those who were venturing forth with great expectations; this very spirit of optimism and feeling of freedom gave to western civilization a dynamic quality that has only recently begun to wane.³¹

V

In the field of religion this new quality became most evident in missionary enterprises. At the time of the discovery of America, missionary work had about come to an end; Europe with the exception of Lapland had been evangelized and religious orders with missionary motives seemed doomed to extinction. Then came the challenge of the new world, and an amazing response on the part of the medieval church at a time when the papacy was under most corrupt leadership and was soon to be shaken to its depths by the Protestant revolt. The dates speak for themselves. As early as May, 1493, Alexander VI created a department of Indian affairs, at the head of which he placed Juan Rodriguez de Fonseca, the archdeacon of Seville. On September 6 in the same year the papacy issued a bull, *Dudum siquidem omnes*, calling attention to the need for missionary effort to justify the occupation of the new country by Europeans. To superintend missionary work, a Franciscan friar, Bernardo Bayle, was selected by the pope and given the title of Apostolic Vicar for the Indies.³² In 1524 there was organized the Council of the Indies, one of whose most outstanding members was

29. Quoted by C. and M. Beard, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

30. *Ibid.*, p. 8.

31. On the genesis of modern dynamism, cf. W. P. Webb, *op. cit.*, p. 140f.

32. J. Fiske, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, p. 460.

Bartholomew de las Casas; another was the famous chronicler, Peter Martyr, whose writings kept a large reading public in Europe acutely conscious of the larger world in which they now lived.³³

Such a vigorous response to the challenge of America was not made without some preparation. Discoveries in the thirteenth century, and particularly the voyages of the Polos, had given new currency to a "religious utopia of the *Regnum Dei*, . . . an abstract ideal of the mystics of ancient Europe,"³⁴ which had for centuries been part of the folk-lore of medieval Europe. It was this ideal that had imbued men like Raymond Lull with a desire to convert the Asian peoples who were becoming more intimately known to western Europe. Columbus was not unaware of this missionary urge; moreover, he had the conversion of the Indies in mind even while seeking a sponsor for his projected voyage across the Atlantic.

The spiritual Franciscans were from the first world of discovery ready to proceed to the new world, as were also other mendicant orders. Nor was it long before new orders arose, particularly adapted to frontier outpost conditions. In these first days the Roman Catholic Church far outdistanced the Protestant churches, partly because the latter were long delayed through controversy and unsettlement in working out a philosophy of missions, and partly because the challenge of the Reformation forced the Roman Catholic states "to develop the missionary state as an answer to this threat."³⁵

The ecclesiastical demands of the new world became so pressing in the seventeenth century as to compel Pope Gregory XV to create the *Congregatio de propaganda fide* (1622);³⁶ under its auspices colleges were set up in the Americas to train missionaries for work both at home and abroad. This new activity led to much coming and going in church circles; councils were frequently summoned to deal with the transformation in religious institutions, and unusual experiments in religious expression. These transformations and experiments must be given a large place in any study of the religious background of the churches of the Americas, including Canada.

33. A. P. Newton, *op. cit.*, p. 99, says Peter Martyr (1457-1526) "fulfilled a purpose similar to that of the foreign correspondence of a great newspaper today."

34. *History of Religion in the New World*. Studies presented at the Conference on the History of Religion in the New World during Colonial Times (Washington, D.C., 1958), p. 66.

35. *Ibid.*, p. 50.

36. For the origins of the Propaganda Congregation, cf. *Catholic Encyclopedia* (Special Edition, 1913), Vol. XII, p. 456f.