

April 26, 2017

To: The Colorado House Bill Hearing Committee,

Thank you for hearing my testimony today. My name is Dr. Roger K. Green. I am a professor in the Department of English at Metropolitan State University in Denver and currently working on a second doctorate in Religious Studies and Theology at The University of Denver. I am here to support HB17-1327.

My work as a professor gives me first-hand witness to the ongoing struggles the Native American (and other minority) students face as a result of ongoing and historical domination. I especially see disproportionate inequity and socio-cultural advantages that my students of European descent often have. My scholarly work has given me insight into the cultural constructions of the national myth around the figure of Columbus.

Between 1828 and 1942, the most popular American account of Columbus was Washington Irving's fanciful book, *A History of the Life and Voyages of Christopher Columbus*. Many of the myths that still surround Columbus, such as his dis-proving a "flat earth mentality,"¹ come from Irving. Irving's project was to construct an American National identity in a similar way the Brothers Grimm sought establish a German identity. But as we increasingly need to be aware in an age of "post truth" and "fake news," folklore is not history.

Part of the Italian American community has sought to identify with the Columbus myth in order to gain access to an America that discriminated against Italian immigrants well into the 20th century. But even outspoken and articulate members of the community, such as Bobby Dorigo Jones in his "Open Letter to Italian Americans on Columbus Day" last October write:

Replacing Columbus Day to welcome those who have fought and who currently fight oppression is one tiny way that Italian Americans can stand with Native Americans, Latin Americans, African Americans, and so many others, to lift up the struggle of the oppressed. Replacing Columbus Day is a way to assert the dignity of all people, especially those who have been historically marginalized. It's a tiny, if only symbolic way to show that we value the humanity of our neighbor above any cultural anachronism, political football, or our own insecurity. It's just the right thing to do.²

Academic documentation of Columbus's abuses of Indigenous Caribbean and intentions in his so-called voyage of discovery have been well-documented, at least since C.L.R. James's history of Haiti in the 1930s. But the instantiation of Columbus Day has little to do with Columbus and more to do with attempts, like Irving, to narrate a national narrative establishing "heritage." That heritage, unfortunately, is one of white European supremacy. Nevertheless, sometimes supporters of keeping Columbus point to scholars such as retired Anthropologist Carol Delaney.

In a 2014 interview with the Knights of Columbus, Delaney says she doesn't believe he was responsible for the countless atrocities against indigenous people, yet the thrust of her books argument is that Columbus was voyaging to find gold to fund a Crusade against Muslims:

¹ Darin Haton, Washington Irving's Columbus and the Flat Earth, December 2, 2014
<http://dhaton.haverford.edu/blog/2014/12/02/washington-irvings-columbus-and-the-flat-earth/>

² Bobby Dorigo Jones, "Open Letter to Italian Americans on Columbus Day," October 10, 2016
<https://medium.com/case-in-pointe/an-open-letter-to-italian-americans-on-columbus-day-af565b510c16>

Everybody knows that Columbus was trying to find gold, but they don't know what the gold was for: to fund a crusade to take Jerusalem back from the Muslims before the end of the world. A lot of people at the time thought that the apocalypse was coming because of all the signs: the plague, famine, earthquakes and so forth. And it was believed that before the end, Jerusalem had to be back in Christian hands so that Christ could return in judgment. Columbus actually calculated how many years were left before the end of the world. He seemed to think of his whole voyage as a mission, which was part of this apocalyptic scenario.³

Apocalyptic religious views have spread in America since the time of the Monroe Doctrine and the myth of Manifest Destiny – from the Millerites and first Mormons in the 1840s to Waco in the 1990s and Christian attempts to regain Jerusalem for the so-called battle of Armageddon today. Pope Francis in 2015 said, “I humbly ask forgiveness, not only for the offenses of the church herself, but also for crimes committed against the native peoples during the so-called conquest of America.”⁴

If anything, Delaney's scholarship supports the fact that Columbus saw his Christian mission as an imperial and forcefully evangelical one. In a letter to Ferdinand and Isabella's treasurer published in Rome, April 1493, Columbus said:

To the first of these islands, which is called by the Indians Guanahani, I gave the name of the blessed Saviour (San Salvador), relying upon whose protection I had reached this as well as the other islands to each of these I also gave a name, ordering that one should be called Santa Maria de la Concepcion, another Fernandina, the third Isabella, the fourth Juana, and so with all the rest respectively. As soon as we arrived at that, which as I have said was named Juana, I proceeded along its coast a short distance westward, and found it to be so large and apparently without termination, that I could not supposed it to be an island, but the continental province of Cathay. Seeing, however, no towns or populous places on the sea coast, but only a few detached houses and cottages, with whose inhabitants I was unable to communicate, because they fled as soon as they saw us, I went further on, thinking that in my progress I should certainly find some city or village.⁵

He then says, “In the mean time I had learned from some Indians whom I had seized, that that country was certainly an island.” The friendliness that some people speak of Columbus toward natives had to do with his intention of making them Christian subjects to a European monarchy:

Thus they bartered, like idiots, cotton and gold for fragments of bows, glasses, bottles, and jars; which I forbid as being unjust, and myself gave them many beautiful and acceptable articles

³ Alton Pelowski, “Why Columbus Sailed,” kofc.org, May 24, 2014
http://www.kofc.org/en/columbia/detail/2012_06_columbus_interview.html

⁴ Pope Francis, “Pope apologizes for church's indigenous offenses
Southern California Public Radio,” July 9, 2015. <http://www.scpr.org/news/2015/07/09/53009/pope-apologizes-for-church-s-indigenous-offenses-c/>

⁵ *Epistola Christofori Colom . . . de insulis Indie supra Gangem.*, A Letter addressed to the noble Lord Raphael Sanchez, Treasurer to their most invincible Majesties, Ferdinand and Isabella, King and Queen of Spain, by Christopher Columbus, March 14, 1493. Published in Rome, April 1493.
<https://www.gilderlehrman.org/sites/default/files/inline-pdfs/Columbus%20Letter%20Complete.doc.pdf>

which I had brought with me, taking nothing from them in return; I did this in order that I might the more easily conciliate them, that they might be led to become Christians, and be inclined to entertain a regard for the King and Queen, our Princes and all Spaniards

[. . .]

On my arrival at that sea, I had taken some Indians by force from the first island that I came to, in order that they might learn our language, and communicate to us what they knew respecting the country; which plan succeeded excellently, and was a great advantage to us, for in a short time, either by gestures and signs, or by words, we were enabled to understand each other. These men are still travelling with me, and although they have been with us now a long time, they continue to entertain the idea that I have descended from heaven; and on our arrival at any new place they published this, crying out immediately with a loud voice to the other Indians, "Come, come and look upon beings of a celestial race"⁶

Very quickly, Columbus unveils his motives

But supposing their feelings should become changed, and they should wish to injure those who have remained in the fortress, they could not do so, for they have no arms, they go naked, and are moreover too cowardly; so that those who hold the said fortress, can easily keep the whole island in check, without any pressing danger to themselves, provided they do not transgress the directions and regulations which I have given them.

Columbus stresses multiple times that the Indians have no weapons and they would be easy to conquer if necessary. When he returned in 1594 he took many by force into slavery in Europe. Although scholars like Delaney are correct to say Columbus did not initiate all slavery, he did initiate it the trade in the Caribbean, and Catholics today acknowledge that fact.⁷

Delaney's work on Columbus's Christianity actually supports the work of Lenape scholar, Steven T. Newcomb of the Indigenous Law Institute, on the Doctrine of Discovery and the Papal bulls that dehumanized natives.⁸ The language of those bulls was imbricated in U.S. law during the time Washington Irving was writing his Columbus book and James Fennimore Cooper had published *The Last of the Mohicans*, spewing ongoing rhetoric that all indigenous people have died out.

When we think about the ways Indigenous Americans suffer in ways distinctive to other minorities who have certainly suffered in their struggles for civic recognition, we need to think of those people on Guanahani who ran from Columbus at first sight and taken by force to initiate communication. As James Q. Whitman, a Foreign Law professor at Yale's Law School writes in his recent book: In 1928, Adolf Hitler gave a speech admiring, "the way Americans 'gunned down the millions of Redskins to a few hundred thousand, and now, keep the modest remnant under observation in a cage.' And during the years

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Bill Bigelow, "Columbus Day or Indigenous People's Day," Global Catholic Climate Movement. <https://catholicclimatemovement.global/columbus-day-or-indigenous-peoples-day/>

⁸ Steven T. Newcomb. *Pagans in the Promised Land: Decoding the Doctrine of Discovery*, Colorado: Fulcrum Publishing, 2008.

of genocide in the 1940s Nazi leaders made repeated reference to the American conquest of the West when speaking of their murderous conquests to their east.”⁹

We know that both Italy and the Catholic Church backed Hitler in WWII in their efforts to remove or destroy non-Christians and non-white ethnicities. We should be as appalled at the celebration of Columbus Day as we would be appalled at a Mussolini Day. Just as Catholics have had to divest in a version of Christianity that confused the spread of Christian love and the grasping of land, wealth and empire, all Americans need to divest in our national myths that support the same.

I close with these words from Pope Francis’s address to participants in the 3rd World Meeting of Popular Movements last November: “Dear brothers and sisters: all walls collapse. All of them. Let us not be deceived. As you have said, “we should continue working to build bridges between peoples, bridges which enable us to break down the walls of exclusion and exploitation” (*Final Document of the II World Meeting of Popular Movements*, 11 July 2015, Cruz de la Sierra, Bolivia). Let us confront terror with love.”¹⁰

Thanks very much for your attention.

Dr. Roger K. Green

⁹ James Q. Whitman, *Hitler’s American Model: The United States and the Making of Nazi Race Law*, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2017: 11.

¹⁰ Pope Francis, “Address to Participants in the 3rd World Meeting of Popular Movements” November 5, 2016, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2016/november/documents/papa-francesco_20161105_movimenti-popolari.html