

There they all are, just as they were in the dingy engravings of our schoolbooks. The welcoming aborigines clad mainly in innocence. The handful of Spaniards with swords, their heads scrunched into pointy helmets. The Great Discoverer himself, roasting in dark doublet and hose, usually on his knees in the sand, head raised to heaven. And beside them the shape of a great cross which, in perspective, looms higher than the distant masts of the three delicate little ships offshore.

For Americans it was a familiar enough image, long before all the heavy buildup to the 500th anniversary set in. Columbus, we knew, never put foot or keel on the continent of North America. He claimed what he called "the Indies" not for any collection of future Protestants from Northern Europe but for Catholic Spain in the 15th century. But we were happy to see the man as a hero and the moment on the beach in 1492 as the start of something that eventually produced the best hope yet for liberty and self-government.

The landing led to much else, of course. A recent cartoon, for instance, shows passengers on an antique vessel admiring a vast and rolling landscape. "I came here seeking religious freedom," one says, "but now I think maybe I'll go into real estate." Just lately the landing has also stirred liberal doses of quincennial surprise and outrage both at Columbus (he as, it appears, a boastful slave trader with little concern for the environment) and at the cruel exploitation following his arrival, as Spanish adventurers claimed the land and enslaved of its people.

Even in the long context of history, some shock is in order. If we are surprised, though, it may be because, apart from a Borgias orgy or two, we tend to think of the period that launched Columbus to the New World as a golden age. Bold thrusts across uncharted seas. Forays back in time to revive the lost learning of Rome and Greece. And that sunburst of artistic genius never since equaled. In "Everything You Always Wanted To Know About Sex (But Were Afraid To Ask)," Woody Allen urges a girl to hurry up and make love because "before you know it, the Renaissance will be here and we'll all be painting."

Showtime for humanism; in short, the end of the Middle Ages and the dawn of Western science; the dazzling moment when modern man was born.

Modern man was a long way off, though, and human nature, then as now, was notoriously unreliable. Despite all the splendid expenditure of intellectual energy and egg tempera, Western Europe from 1450 to 1506, roughly Columbus' lifetime, was a time breathtakingly different from ours. Among other things, and this we tend to forget, it was a time when men believed so deeply that the body is but a sleeve of flesh containing an immortal soul, that in good faith they could see other men tortured to save their souls. It was a time so precarious that any rise in population was taken as a sign of prosperity. It was also a time much given to terror, war, pestilence, famine, slavery and religious persecution, most emphatically not one to encourage gentleness or ecological concern.

During Columbus' lifetime, his eventual sponsors, Ferdinand and Isabella, united the kingdoms of Aragon (his) and Castile (hers), and with startling religious and secular ferocity turned Spain, with a population of under ten million, into a nation. The great event of the year 1492 was not Columbus' sailing but their victory in Granada, bringing back to Spain the last portion of Spanish soil in Moorish hands. That same year the Spanish Inquisition issued an ultimatum to all Spanish Jews: convert to Christianity or quit the country in four months. A major exodus to North Africa occurred in August 1492, the very month when the Nina, the Pinta and the Santa Maria hoisted sail and headed west into the stream of history.

The long boot of Italy, where the Renaissance was born, consisted of five principal parts: the kingdom of Naples, the republic of Florence (richly dominated by the Medicis), the dukedom of Milan, the Papal States, which waxed and waned according to churchly ambition, and Venice. Only Venice was a great power, a sprawling city-state that stretched for miles westward and north from the Adriatic. The parts of Italy were constantly fighting with one another, and later being fought over by Spain and France in combinations and alliances that shifted, sometimes from month to month, making carnage fairly constant. "And all this time," Swiss historian Jacob Burckhardt wrote of the end of the 15th century and after,

"the monarchs of the West year by year became more and more accustomed to a colossal political card game in which the stakes were this or that province of Italy."

Other Italian cities, nominally republics, had given themselves into the hands of despots, benevolent and otherwise, to insure a defense against roving bands of soldiers, and to maintain some kind of order within their gates. Venice alone remained a real republic, run by an austere and farsighted oligarchy, with overseas possessions like the island of Cyprus. The city served as a trading center for the Mediterranean world, as far as the Black Sea, and her fleet was a bulwark against the encroaching Ottoman Turks. Venice was renowned for her courtesans. She had a retirement fund and a pension system for domestic servants. She created the world's most skilled diplomatic corps. Her espionage service, like that of Israel today, was the envy of the world. "It can find out what the fish are doing and also about the fleet which Spain is preparing in her ports," one sultan wrote an agent in Seville.

In 1453, when Columbus was not yet 2 years old, the armies of the Ottoman sultan, Muhammad II, sent a shudder through Venice and all Christendom by taking Constantinople, center of the Eastern Orthodox Church and Byzantine Empire. In those days, if a city resisted, it was official policy, often not followed, to kill the men and sell the women and children into slavery. They killed Emperor Constantine in battle and converted the basilica of Santa Sophia into a mosque. Two years later they took Athens and converted the Acropolis into a mosque. The threat from Islam did not end until 1683, outside the gates of Vienna.

Like the city-states of Italy, the courts of 15th-century Europe, famous for splendor and squalor, were more medieval than modern. Think of nobles and ladies arrayed in gorgeous, particolored costumes that trailed in the mud, or swept among the rushes on the floor of the great hall where bones and leavings were gnawed by dogs. Baths were rare by modern standards, perfume prevalent. You brought your own knife to table, used it to cut off what you would eat, which was deposited on a slab of hardtack bread, known as a trencher. Whence the expression "a good trencherman." Basically you ate with your hands. (Even in the 16th century people ate with their hands. The great essayist Michel de Montaigne noted glumly that in his haste at meals he sometimes bit his fingers.)

There were new codes of manners (don't scratch yourself or pick your teeth at table) and how-to books (how to give a joust). Melees--mock war between mounted knights--caused so many injuries that the practice would soon be phased out. War never went out of style, but it was changing with the advent of guns and explosives. Meanwhile, one measure of how wide a road had to be was the length of a knight's lance if he rode with it sideways across the saddle.

Kingdoms were becoming nation-states or absolute monarchies, enlisting or extorting financial help from rich cities and merchants, raising forces to make war on rival countries and also to strengthen the crown by putting down brigandage and local disorders. The cumulative effect of violence on the common people, who suffered most from war, can hardly be imagined. Much of the fighting was done by groups of undisciplined men who fought for hire or for booty. In Italy they were led by condottieri, freelance commanders who also were pretty much a law unto themselves. One of the most feared, Bartolomeo Colleoni, still throws a chill into tourists who run across his grim likeness, a huge equestrian statue by Verrocchio that stands in a piazza in Venice.

If passing troops did not rape and burn and pillage, they lived off the land, stripping it so thoroughly that military commanders understood an army could never retreat along the same path it had advanced over. People huddled together, praying to be passed by, or ran for the nearest walled town. As guns and explosives were perfected, even walled towns were no guarantee of safety. And when the fighting eased off, bands of ex-soldiers roamed the countryside, robbing and killing, sometimes taking possession of whole towns.

Even so, it was a time of trade and pilgrimages to holy sites with saints' relics, and if a careful count could show that some saints must have had two heads and four arms, few of the faithful complained. In peace or war you tried not to travel except in a large group, and it was unwise to talk too openly about what route you planned to take. Even in the city no one went out at night. At dark all doors were locked and double-barred. Tallow candles cost a lot and smelled, so people slept

from dark till dawn. City gates were locked at nightfall. If a tired traveler arrived a minute or so too late, he was out of luck--and in danger--until morning, unless he could find a spot in one of the inns that grew up outside the city walls.

Violence and the threat of violence bred terror. Punishments were terrible, yet people eagerly flocked to see them. Few ages, except our own--and we screen it through the medium of film--had more morbid fascination with torment, killing and death, or more art and action to satisfy it. A patron saint of those who suffered from the Black Death ("Smithsonian," February 1990), which had killed off a third of Europe's population the century before, was the martyred Sebastian, painted again and again and again as a fleshly pincushion shot full of arrows. Skeleton-filled woodcuts were plentiful, variously depicting the Triumph of Death, the Dance of Death or the Art of Dying.

If executioners wanted to be especially humane, they strangled a man before hanging or burning him. Such leniency did not always please the crowd. Records show that spectators would sometimes buy a thief who was to be quickly executed and arrange to see him being drawn and quartered instead. Flaying and burial alive, head down, were also used. Cruelty permeated many pastimes. Bear bating, dog fighting and the worrying of badgers were common. In the Low Countries, crowds at fairs enjoyed watching blind men with clubs being penned up in a small enclosure and coerced into trying to beat each other's brains out.

Religion and art, culture and learning, all profoundly intermingled, produced profoundly shocking and contrary effects. Pure, radiant faith and raw repression, philosophy and savage propaganda, incipient science and ingrained superstition. We know best and love most the art and architecture: timeless, stately piety (and geometric glimpses of Tuscan countryside) in the paintings by Piero della Francesca, who died in 1492, Leonardo Da Vinci's "Last Supper" and, as the 1500s dawned, the Michelangelo ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. Painters were more and more visibly enthralled by the visual beauty of the world, and even by ravishing pagan subjects (overlaid, of course, with Christian symbolism), like Sandro Botticelli's "The Birth of Venus."

Whatever a painting's subject, most were painted "for the Greater Glory of God." These days, however, we rarely tend to connect the religious spirit that infuses such paintings with the tormenting faith that helped produce figures like Torquemada, Queen Isabella's state inquisitor, or the auto-da-fe, an institution with which he tortured Spain. But they had a common source. If Christians spilled one another's blood copiously over the form of religion in the 15th century and after, it was partly because they never doubted that the world was a divine creation.

The civil war in the human heart, between the claims of this world and the next, ran right through the Renaissance. Worldliness among merchants and bankers, who gloried in activity and threw off the medieval notion that being rich was a spiritual liability, paid for civic improvements and history's greatest art boom. Worldliness in thought and inquiry led to humanism, which ultimately would threaten both the simple faith that allowed people to bear up under adversity, and the secular power of the Roman church. Worldliness and corruption among the leaders of that church all but destroyed it. (The term "nepotism" is linked to the proclivity that officially celibate popes had for favoring their "nephews"--sometimes bastard sons--for high office.) Throughout, unworldly purity within the church tried to reform it and failed, though thousands of the selfless religious took care of lepers and ran the hospitals, almshouses and orphanages.

Some of the early apostles of purity were gentle, like Saint Francis. Some were savage. In 1494, after the death of Lorenzo the Magnificent and the expulsion of his son Piero, the preacher-priest Savonarola took control of the city of Florence. He expanded the city's constitution to give more people the right to vote, but his main target was worldly excess, not only in the Florentine citizenry but in the papacy. He banned books and challenged the authority of the pope. At his fiery preachment, people gave up swearing for a time, and gaming. At huge public gatherings to expunge lechery and luxury, known as "bonfires of the vanities," they outdid one another in zeal, tossing into the flames rich clothes, perfumes, jewelry, wigs, toiletries, veils, dice, playing cards, musical instruments and paintings of beautiful women. After four years of this, history's most notorious pope, Alexander VI, a Borgia who had his murderous son Cesare made a cardinal at age 17,

accused Savonarola of heresy and had him hanged from, and burned on, a gibbet placed on a special causeway built out into the city's main square.

We think of the Western world's first movable type and the Gutenberg Bible in 1455, and concentrate on the upbeat news of the general spread of learning through printed books--some 20 million volumes in Europe by the time Columbus sailed in 1492. Among those titles, though, was a best-seller called "The Hammer of Witches." Written by a pair of Dominican scholars and made public in 1486, with a little help from a papal bull against the heresy of witchcraft it helped set off two centuries of torturing, hanging, burning and drowning. The book describes how witches consort with the Devil and how they can be identified. It helpfully provided the formula for preparing the magic salve they rubbed on themselves so they could fly: first, feed stolen, consecrated wafers to toads; then burn the toads and mix with powder from the bones of hanged men and the blood of newborn infants.

Movable type was also used to mass-produce indulgences for remission of the penalties of sin, which a succession of popes sold pretty much like war bonds to finance ambitious projects. This was one of many outrages about to split the Christian world from within, setting off the Reformation and a train of religious wars that devastated much of Europe off and on for more than a hundred years. By 1506, the year Columbus died in Spain, bitter and forgotten, a man named John Tetzel, who had acquired a papal indulgence concession in Germany, was auctioning indulgences at mass meetings to the highest bidder, the very thing that was soon to outrage young Martin Luther.

Advances in the fields of engineering, design and science proceeded by fits and starts. More universities were founded. Arabic numerals began replacing Roman numerals in the pagination of books. Arabic and Greek learning in the fields of geometry, algebra, astronomy, geography and medicine were introduced into study. But people's notions of the Universe and of the human body remained hopelessly inaccurate. Even with the new type, word often didn't get around.

For example, the designs of Leonardo, the man who, more than any other, today symbolizes the artistic genius and omnivorous curiosity of Renaissance humanism. We know now about his practical "inventions": all those marvelous things--drawn with almost machine-shop detail--like chain links, the spinning wheel, the rope ladder, the parachute. But Leonardo kept his designs to himself, except for warlike devices, including some exploding cannonballs that he offered to Lodovico Sforza, the Duke of Milan, to get a job as Sforza's military engineer. The duke did not use them. And the rest of the more than 100 devices that prefigure the modern world of machinery were not discovered for centuries.

Cookstoves had just been invented. Three years before Columbus set out on his third voyage, in 1498, the first drydock was built in England. But machinery was rare in Renaissance Europe, and most of it dated back to the Middle Ages or before. The big piece of machinery that a country person was most likely to see in his lifetime was a water mill, a great, clanking thing whose mysteries were known only to the miller. For centuries millers were hated characters (more even than lawyers today) because farmers suspected they took more than a proper share of the grain brought to the mill for grinding. It was widely thought that returned flour was bulked out with a little fine sand. There were strict punishments. Cheating was hard to prove though, so people went on feeling cheated. The comic cuckolding of the miller in Chaucer's "Canterbury Tales" was the equivalent of a modern anti-lawyer joke.

High school history teachers inspiringly tell us that in the inexorable march of progress, Nicolaus Copernicus, born during Columbus' lifetime, made the world understand that Earth orbited the Sun. (This theory had been explored by Arab astronomers two centuries before, but Western scholars were unaware.) Copernicus' reason was that if the Sun moved around Earth, the eccentric movements of planets and the more distant stars didn't make mathematical sense.

Copernicus was largely right. But his outrageous claim made little impression. If Earth revolved around the Sun, scoffers pointed out, it would have to be spinning pretty fast. Wouldn't birds be left behind? If you dropped a stone from a tower, wouldn't it hit the ground yards away? For more than a century, even learned folk went on believing that the Sun and the planets moved around Earth on powered belts called spheres, which resembled the rings of Saturn and were driven by the outermost sphere, known as the prime mover.

Copernicus could not prove his theory because there was no telescope for accurate study of celestial bodies. Moreover, the church set about making it heresy to say that Earth orbited the Sun. It wasn't until 1610 that Galileo perfected a telescope good enough to see the moons of Jupiter and to observe that Venus had phases like our moon, which meant that it circled the Sun, virtually proving Copernicus right. By then, however, the struggle between science and religion had hardened enough so that Galileo was forced to recant his findings.

Sometimes a great leap forward produced by the revival of ancient science was actively pursued, but with limited results, not because of church disapproval, but because the new humanist scholars had a tendency to regard any scientific observations by the ancients as sacrosanct. Example: the rediscovery of medical writings by Hippocrates, and especially by the great second-century anatomist Galen, which encourage further study and practice.

The church had been against the dismemberment of bodies ever since the Crusades, when dying crusaders sometimes got friends to promise to boil them down or cut them up, the better to transport them home. But after his rediscovery, Galen was recognized as the father of the science of anatomy, and approvals were given, especially to celebrated physicians and painters, to dissect human cadavers.

The work was mostly done in winter and in haste (there being no refrigeration), and performed on the bodies of convicted thieves and murderers who, presumably, had less chance at bodily resurrection than virtuous folk. At such events, the exalted physician did no cutting. He stood on a high pulpit reading from Galen, while below, the poor barber-surgeon did his best to prove that the cadaver matched Galen's description. Pictures of these scenes show crowds of students and plain rubbernecks pressing in around the corpse. Also, sometimes, a small dog waiting for any choice bits that may come his way.

Galen had used Barbary apes in his experiments, and there were some dramatic anatomical discrepancies. But since Galen could not be wrong, these were usually blamed on the ineptitude of the surgeon. Even Andreas Vesalius, one of the great anatomists of all time, born just eight years after the death of Columbus, deferred to Galen's errors. Yet he finally incurred the wrath of professors at the University of Paris because many of his findings, based on dozens of personal dissections of human bodies, disagreed with Galen's. What physicians could quote from Galen's text was, in a sense, their meal ticket in the profession; they did not want it jeopardized by anything so mere as accuracy.

A great hindrance to medicine was ignorance of physiology. Galen never understood that the heart is a muscle; he thought blood was moved back and forth, like the tide, impelled by some mysterious heavenly spirit. It was not until the 17th century that William Harvey unlocked the secrets of the circulatory system. In Columbus' time and for several hundred years after, doctors thought health and temperament were determined by the mix of the famous four humors (i.e., fluids) of the body: blood, phlegm, choler (yellow bile) and melancholy (black bile). The ideal was balance. Whatever mix you received from the gene pool determined your disposition, then known as your "complexion." A choleric man was likely to be yellow-faced, lean, proud, ambitious, shrewd and quick to anger. A sanguine man, having much blood, was likely to be cheerful and optimistic. Doctors mostly sought to change a patient's body-fluid balance, the old standbys being puking, purging and bleeding.

Clearly the early Renaissance was no time to be sick. Public faith in the medical profession had fallen because doctors had proved so helpless during the plague years, earnestly suggesting such cures as inhaling the smell of billy goats. Besides, even after its worst period of killing, the plague did not go away either, and there was still no cure and almost no prevention. As late as 1484, when the 33-year-old Columbus had just asked for backing from King John II of Portugal and been rebuffed, the plague killed 50,000 people in Milan.

Diagnosis was like blindman's buff. Indiana University professor Ann Carmichael, author of "Plague and the Poor in Renaissance Florence" and doctor of medicine turned medical historian, has been studying computerized medical and death records from 100,000 cases recorded in Florence and Milan circa 1450 and after. She notes that people did not really expect cures. Doctors were simply expected to provide some care and easing of pain.

Except for the bleeding and puking, Carmichael feels, much of the care was good. Doctors kept patients quiet, saw that wounds were cleaned and bandaged, and used effective herbs and salves, many of them left over from the medically underrated Middle Ages. Though Renaissance barber-surgeons were looked down upon by lordly physicians who spouted mock science and took high fees, they could set bones and cut off legs. (To ease the pain, the patient was given things like mandrake root, henbane or opium in wine. As late as the 18th century, however, it sometimes took five people to extract a tooth--four to hold down and one to pull.) Surgery and bone setting were expensive. If you fractured a wrist or dislocated a shoulder and hadn't the means, chances were you'd get an enduring bone infection or be left to heal gradually--more or less crooked and crippled for the rest of your life.

There were no antibiotics. Pus was taken as a sign of healing (whence, until late in the 19th century, the term "laudable pus"). Babies died in the thousands of gastrointestinal diseases. Even today, Carmichael notes, in the Third World, "diarrhea can turn a baby into a prune in less than four days." In the 15th century three out of five children failed to reach age 5; fully half did not make it to age 20.

The plague had taught people some things. As a great maritime power, Venice established the quarantining of sailors off arriving ships, initially for a period of 30 days. To cut down possible sources of contagion when plague threatened, many cities banned the resale of old clothes (which were burned instead). Communal public baths were banned, too.

Florence had a city ordinance forbidding citizens to throw dead cats into the river Arno. But there, as elsewhere, people were regularly buried in city churchyards that leached into nearby streams. In some places garbage was burned or collected to be tossed over the city walls. (In Paris as late as 1512, the pile outside the walls was so high that the king had it removed because he thought invaders might climb up the garbage and scale the city's defenses.) In Italian cities piazzas were kept clean, but in the backstreets, refuse often simply lay around to be churned to a kind of black muck after rains. Farm animals living inside the cities added to the mess, but when cities, with a view to cleanliness, banned their presence inside the walls, things got worse. It turned out that city pigs had been performing a major cleanup service.

Occasionally the revival of ancient learning was swiftly absorbed, extended and applied to a real problem, changing Man's conception of the world. By far the happiest example, especially for Columbus' quinentennial year, lay in the field of sailing, after Portugal's Henry the Navigator set up a center for sharing knowledge. One notable event was the recovery of "Geography," a treatise written by Claudius Ptolemy in the second century A.D. and lost to Western Europe for hundreds years.

In the 1400s, a European man in the street may possibly have figured the world was flat. But church scholars, as well as other learned men, had long regarded it as a globe. Nevertheless, they thought that its lower half was uninhabitable except for weird creatures, such as giants with a single huge foot. Around the Equator lay a "torrid zone," where the sea was boiling hot. For purposes of spiritual orientation, on most "world maps" of the time, Jerusalem was presented as the center of the world. On others, more realistic in intent, only the Mediterranean, Europe, the Middle East and the top part of the bulge of Africa had any detail. The Indian Ocean was a vague inland sea. The nether regions of the globe were as firmly closed as outer space to the questing imagination.

Ptolemy's "Geography," printed up in book form in the late 1470s, helped change all that because it used information garnered from longtime Islamic experience, as well as from the far-flung records of the Roman Empire and the conquests of Alexander the Great. Ptolemy's maps projected the surface of the globe onto a flat surface, pretty much as we do today, and showed some detail about the East African coast and the Indian Ocean. Perhaps more important, Ptolemy had divided the complete circle of the globe into 360 degree units of longitude, estimating each degree as about 57 miles long at the Equator, considerably less than the 69 miles we now know to be the case.

"Maps," as J.R. Hale puts it, "are diagrams of the possible." To sail anywhere, risking your life, you must at least imagine where you are going. With Ptolemy's "Geography," and others, in hand, Portuguese sailors who had been following the coast of Africa farther and farther south could imagine sailing around the tip of Africa to India and the Spice

Islands, instead of paying Arab middlemen a whopping price for dear items like pepper and cloves. In 1487 Portuguese captain Vasco da Gama did just that, dramatically expanding Europe's vision of the world.

Then came Columbus. Using Ptolemy's distances, in addition to the observations of another scholar, Pierre d'Ailly, who reasoned that between Spain and the Indies there were only 135 degrees of open sea, Columbus cooked his figures to reduce the number of sea or land miles in each degree of longitude. By his reckoning, Japan lay only 2,760 miles from Spain, or roughly a quarter of what it is. Wild for financial backing, he once noted, "The end of Spain and the beginning of India are not far apart ... and it is known that this sea is navigable in a few days' time with favoring wind." History has much derided the Spanish experts who were leary of Columbus' estimates. They were right. But Ferdinand and Isabella were right to back him anyway. By risking the equivalent of \$7,200 and the use of two ships (he had to charter the third) they got title to much of the New World.

Within 30 years, trading ships were shuttling back and forth where, shortly before, hardly a man had dreamed of going. The Western Hemisphere was being explored, the Pacific had been crossed and, with Magellan's voyage of 1519 ("Smithsonian," April 1991), Europeans had made it around the world. All this eventually meant a flood of silver, gold, land and sugarcane profits, as Spain became the most powerful country in Europe, with a far-flung, enduring empire. It also brought an appalling expansion of slavery.

There was little in Columbus' background to make him feel glum about any of the above. He was very much a man of his time in his courage and in his faith that God wanted all this to happen, as well as in his passion for trade and his desire to exploit the physical world. His Europe was a smallish peninsula sticking out from the landmass of Asia, with much seacoast north and south reachable from inland, many harbors for shipping and rivers for waterpower and trade. Europe's way to the gold and spices of the East had been slow and expensive, since it was controlled by the Arab world and lay through the Middle East, until navigators solved the problem. As historian Fernand Braudel notes, 15th-century Europe needed to expand into the New World.

Columbus needed to make his trip pay. When it turned out there wasn't much gold where he landed, he naturally turned to the enslavement of the poor people of the Indies. Hadn't Aristotle, a fount of Renaissance learning and the father of scientific classification, decreed that mankind is divided into two classes, the few (and smart) destined to be masters, the many to be properly classified as slaves?

Slavery existed everywhere--including the New World (though no one knew that yet) and Africa. The Turkish sultan's whole army and many of his administrators were his personal slaves. William Phillips, author of the recent study "Slavery from Roman Times," draws on data showing that by 1400, Arab traders working West Africa had brought back four million slaves for the Middle East alone.

The cruelty and expansion of slavery in the New World seems more reprehensible, however, precisely because in 15th-century Europe slavery was relatively rare and getting rarer. This was partly because Christianity taught that manumission of slaves was pleasing to God, partly because peasants were more efficient than slaves in handling European agriculture.

Christians were not allowed to enslave other Christians, but many city families in 15th-century Europe had a domestic slave or two. Mostly young, white and female, they lived with the family and found it relatively easy to marry or work their way to freedom. They were acquired as pagans, usually in Eastern Europe or Circassia, and baptized to save their souls only after they were in service. (As early as the 12th century, the word for "slave" in Italian, German, Spanish, French and English derived from the word "Slav.")

From the start, there was anguished complaint by a few Spaniards about Spanish mistreatment of native people in New Spain--and about slavery. By 1542, with slaves being brought in from Africa, the church and the Spanish government had banned enslavement of "Indians" in the New World, but for some groups in the Caribbean it was too late. They were all but extinct.

It is the fresh awareness of such things (often overlooked in previous, upbeat histories of the period), as well as the new environmental passion, that have led to condemnations of Columbus and what followed him. The European "discovery" of the New World, as one outraged chronicler recently put it, defiled the Garden of Eden, corrupted paradise, and brought little with it but "deforestation, extermination, cruelty, destruction and despoliation."

Such a view may be forgiven, perhaps, as distorted overstatement in a virtuous cause. It is hardly necessary, though, to start a list of hard-won and useful things that eventually resulted from Europeanized thought and action after the Old World arrived in the New: trial by jury, freedom of religion, medicine to cure or prevent almost all manner of plagues, painless dental drills, attempts at universal education, the Bill of Rights and rights for women, the seeds of parliamentary democracy, hope at last for a united United Nations, not to mention the whole rich complexity of Hispanic America today.

The real foolishness of such judgments lies in the utopian delusion that there ever was a paradise here, and a hopelessly skewed perspective that seems to want us to believe that the globe has been going downhill since the Paleolithic period when, granted, few human beings were defiling it. The New World in 1492 ("Smithsonian," November 1991) was sparsely populated and largely underdeveloped. But war and slavery existed. So did slashing and burning for agriculture, and imperial exploitation. And those who ceremonially split a virgin's heart each day to please their deity, or sacrificed babies for rainfall (the more tears, the more rainfall, it was thought) can hardly be seen as denizens of a Garden of Eden, free of violence and greed, wholeheartedly dedicated to benevolence and ecological harmony.

If the biblical story of the Garden of Eden has any application here, in fact, it is only as a figurative reminder that humans are not angels. They seem, instead, creatures doomed by providence or evolution to a prolonged, perhaps endless, struggle with greed, lust, violence and ignorance. Anyone who doubts it has only to glance at the daily papers.

Medieval Europeans knew this, but blamed Man's sinfulness for much that happens in the world, figuring that the issue mostly would be settled between the Devil (in those days he was "as real as a sore tooth") and the Deity. From the Renaissance on, men felt more prideful about mankind. This remarkable creation, cruel and greedy, yet capable of selflessness and heroism, located somewhere between the beasts and the angels in the great chain of being, had one unique and distinguishing skill and virtue--the compulsion and the capacity to learn and experiment--and so might yet prove able to change history for the better.

Since Charles Darwin's "Origin of Species" we've understood that it will be a slow business at best, a matter of trial and error. Little use in blaming this race or that government. In any Garden of Eden drama, Man will always be the serpent—the Adam and Eve as well. James Madison said it all at the Constitutional Convention: "If men were angels no government would be necessary." Columbus, and the land that launched him, simply helped another act begin.