Teaching 1492

Eight years ago, inspired by the Columbian Quincentennary, I taught an elective entitled “1492: The Age of Cultural Encounters,” to upperclassmen at the Horace Mann School, in New York City. On the first day of class, to start students thinking about the state of the world in 1492, I distributed the following list:

1. This society had some sort of deity for almost every imaginable ailment.
2. This society assigned supernatural powers to the bodies in the heavens.
3. This society had incredibly limited knowledge of medicine.
4. This society had a commonly practiced organized religion.
5. This society had a limited knowledge of its history.
6. This society’s sacred knowledge was not intelligible to most of its members.
7. This society had few literate members who could read the sacred books.
8. This society was ravaged by plagues.
9. Members of this society tended to live in large communities.
10. This society practiced rituals in order to relieve the precarious nature of

its world.
11. Members of this society believed touch by their leaders could heal them from disease.
12. This society's religion emphasized visions from deities and supernatural possession.
13. This society engaged in ritualized public executions.
14. This society enslaved people.

I then asked my students to tell me which of these statements described fifteenth-century Africa, Asia, Europe, and North and South America. As I had anticipated, the class was quick to assign superstitions, polytheism, and illiteracy to Native American or West African cultures; violence and slavery to Europeans.

The problem—and the opportunity—as I saw it, was my students' inclination to focus on these societies' differences. My job was to get them to understand their similarities. I began by reminding my students that we were studying an era that had yet to experience a scientific revolution or its now familiar patterns of rational thought. The universe was a mystery, and systems of belief emerged to explain it. Human misfortune was a reality that could only be confronted in the circumscribed arena of ritual, and the rules were established by an oral tradition relayed by elders and a small group of clerics. The sacred texts were unintelligible to all but a few. It was not an era of free thought or individualism. Christianity in England was, according to Keith Thomas, a "repository of supernatural power." Miracles, holy shrines, ecclesiastical talismans, amulets, and holy relics were all part of the medieval church; and witchcraft played as vital a part in English cosmology as it did in the religions of Native Americans and West Africans.

As a class, we tried together to find commonalities in other areas of social and cultural life. We looked at specifics: ritualized public executions were as much a part of English civic life as the human sacrifice practiced in Tenochtitlan; human slavery was a vital part of the developing economy of the Iberian countries as it was part of the web of institutionalized life in the Americas and West Africa. And we looked at broader cultural phenomena: for instance, all these societies viewed time as cyclical. To get my high schoolers to appreciate that shared worldview—which differs so much from our own—I asked students the meaning of time in their lives. Most students acknowledged how much their lives are ordered by watches. From an alarm clock waking them up in the morning to serious clock watching as the class period comes to an end, they all recognized how their lives are structured by the clock, by seasons, and years. With our own society's dependence on clock watching in mind, we then contrasted modern notions of time in the premodern world. The Aztecs believed that four "Suns" or world creations preceded their fifth or last Sun, and the world would come to an end at a fixed but unknown time. Similarly, Christians believed in a Judgment Day that would bring time to an end. West Africans, however, did not think that time would come to an end; instead, they believed that they were caretakers for their ancestors, simply recreating their roles,

and caring for the land of their forefathers, just as their children would do for them. As premodern societies, none of them believed in human progress or viewed change as positive.

A great help to me in deepening students' understanding of the fifteenth-century world were slides I had purchased from a memorable exhibit at the National Gallery, *Circa 1492: Art in the Age of Exploration*. Since upper-level students at Horace Mann are usually up to the challenge of reading historical monographs, I assigned readings from several provocative, if challenging, pieces of scholarship: Inga Clendinnen's *Aztecs* (New York: 1991) and her *Ambivalent Conquests: Maya and Spaniard in Yucatan, 1517-1570* (New York: 1987); John Thornton's *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 1400-1680* (New York: 1992, 1998); Felipe Fernández-Armesto's *Columbus* (New York: 1991); William D. and Carla Rahn Phillips's *The Worlds of Christopher Columbus* (New York: 1992); Keith Thomas's *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (New York: 1971). I also gave the students selections from Marvin Lunenfeld's excellent collection of documents, *1492: Discovery, Invasion, Encounter* (Lexington, Mass: 1991). As they did the reading, I asked the students to keep the following questions in mind: How did these societies apprehend and manage their worlds? Why did magic play central roles in all these cultures? In what ways were these societies threatened by change? How did creation myths and rituals sustain these communities? How did these societies conceptualize time and causality? What did they do to give their lives a sense of purpose and direction?

The students responded especially well to Inga Clendinnen's beautifully written *Aztecs*; they were fascinated by her description and analysis of human sacrifice, which made it seem at once wholly terrible and completely comprehensible. They also liked Keith Thomas's demanding book. They especially appreciated his explanation of the way Catholicism incorporated folk religion. Since we still live with superstitions today, this section of his book led to lively discussions.

Teaching "1492: The Age of Cultural Encounters" proved a rewarding experience for me and, I know from their subsequent comments, for the students. At its best, the course gave students an appreciation—in some cases, a profound appreciation—for the limited range of possibilities and the common cultural practices that tied these societies together. I hope it taught them something, too, about the importance of finding common ground with people they encounter in their own lives.

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