

## Let's Play 'CLUE': Columbus Did It, with Racism, in the Americas

*NCC calls for repentance from European 'sins'*

By Wendi Richardson

On the eve of the 500th anniversary of Christopher Columbus' voyage across the Atlantic, plans to commemorate the event are in the works. The affair promises to be a worldwide extravaganza, with some 30 different nations planning to take part. From Spain to the Caribbean to the United States, the year 1992 will be a celebration of the "discovery" of America. The National Council of Churches (NCC), however, will not be joining the festivities. In fact, according to a statement adopted by the NCC Governing Board, "a celebration is not an appropriate observance." The resolution, entitled "A Faithful Response to the 500th Anniversary of the Arrival of Christopher Columbus," declares 1992 instead to be a year of "reflection and repentance."

Why so somber? Asserting that Columbus' discovery was actually an "invasion" and an "historical tragedy," the resolution holds Columbus and his successors responsible for such atrocities as slavery, "ecocide," legalized occupation, exploitation, rape, theft, and racism. The statement implies that the experiences of the indigenous peoples of the Caribbean, Central and South America, Mexico, Puerto Rico, Hawaii, and the Philippines have been nothing but disaster since Europeans set foot in the Western Hemisphere. Furthermore, the "African Diaspora" were torn from their homeland by institutional slavery. Even Asians suffered, as they were lured to America by "false promises of economic prosperity" which actually resulted in "labor camps, discrimination and today's victimization of the descendants facing anti-Asian racism." Finally, the descendants of Columbus and his fellow "conquerors" have suffered with the legacy of perpetual "paternalism and racism" that is allegedly at the root of American culture as we know it.

It is true that during the course of the European settlement the indigenous people endured many brutal injustices. But the NCC statement blatantly distorts history by overlooking the

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*Los Indios acometen à los Religiosos y otros y ponen fuego à la casa ó atavazana.*

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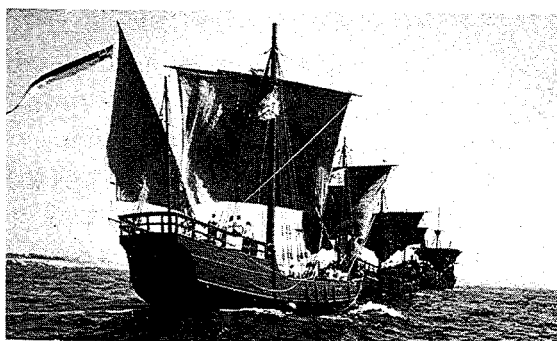
***This 17th-Century illustration of Indians murdering mission priests has much in common with the NCC resolution: both present highly selective views of American colonization***

*With Glasnost Under Fire, What's in Store for the Soviet Church? IRD Executive Director Kent Hill Reports on Recent Visit to Moscow -- page 4*

## **Columbus**, from page 1

ways in which these "oppressed" peoples oppressed each other. In fact, their "spirituality" is exotically admired. Native American spirituality was not entirely the warm, earth-loving faith admired by the NCC; instead, it was often a religion of fear and rigid social control. Some of the very first natives Columbus encountered in the Caribbean were cannibals. North American Indians ritually tortured and slaughtered

***These replicas of the ships Columbus led will tour the United States in 1991. Will there be a church-led protest in every port?***



Spain 92 Foundation

tribal enemies. The Aztecs of Mexico and Central America practiced human sacrifice. Slavery was practiced by the Indians long before Europeans set foot in North America. Are these the cultures and religions the NCC feels should have been protected from any Western influence?

More disturbing than abundant historical blind spots, however, is the dismissal of the mission of the European Church. The NCC statement accuses the Church of having "accompanied and legitimized this conquest and exploitation." The Church and its missionaries, whose purpose it was to evangelize and spread the news of the gospel, are indicted for "crimes" against the spirituality of the indigenous people, including "destroying native religious beliefs while forcing conversion to European forms of Christianity" and demanding "submission from the newly converted that facilitated their total conquest and exploitation." The implications of these statements are perplexing. Are we to understand that, because European missionaries attempted to convert these indigenous peoples from their native religious practices, they were wrong? Surely the European missionaries were at times culturally insensitive, but the NCC seems to be saying that Native Americans, Central and South Americans, and Caribbean natives would all be better

off today having never heard the gospel of Christ.

What are we to do with Christ's Great Commission? Matthew 28 does not say, "Go make disciples of all the nations, except where you might be disturbing traditional religious rituals." We are commanded by Christ to "make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you." Neither did Christ call his apostles to be witnesses in Jerusalem and in Judea and Samaria, but no farther than Europe.

In his recent Encyclical on Missionary Activity, Pope John Paul II cites the "major turning points which have encouraged missionary outreach" throughout history, and calls for the celebration of what he refers to as "the evangelization of the Americas." In contrast, the NCC resolution demands repentance from the Church. Yet the statement is saturated with ambiguity. Who amongst us should be on our knees? Are only those of us accountable whose ancestors can be linked to the European Church, some of whose members at times were exploitive and culturally insensitive? Or is repentance for the past required of the entire present day Church? That would seem to put Hispanic, Native American, and Asian Christians in quite a predicament. Are members of the NCC's "oppressed victim" categories in need of repentance for their involvement in the present-day Christian Church?

And what of those hundreds of thousands of immigrants who flock to the United States each year? If indeed they profit from the opportunity, freedom, and human dignity they find in America, are they to be condemned for falling prey to "false promises"?

In fact, the NCC resolution does not offer any practical solution to the problems it claims to expose. The statement itself is intemperate and unbalanced. Guilt and inflammatory accusations are freely distributed, not just to Christopher Columbus and his successors, nor just to the Church, but to Western civilization. The Columbus Day resolution is merely another radical, political attempt to cast blame for all the ills of the world upon the United States.

Interestingly, it was at the same time the Berlin Wall was coming down and the rejection of communism was underway that the NCC chose to busy itself by once again denouncing Western culture. For it was November 1989 when the Governing Board reviewed the first draft of the Columbus Day resolution.

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# IRD's Mission in a World of Flux

By Carl F.H. Henry

The Institute on Religion and Democracy's primary motive has been to encourage the Church to be what it ought to be in terms of loyalties and activities. It has, among other things, criticized the substitution of a political agenda for the Church's primary spiritual mission. And it has also been very critical of ecclesiastical funding of anti- or pseudo-democratic movements.

From its beginnings in 1981, IRD has had a deep concern for human rights and the relationship between religion and democracy. Of course, not all that is associated with either religion or democracy is legitimate from a Christian standpoint. In our age of rampant ideologies, many words carry multiple meanings, some contradictory. One man's irreligion may become another's religion, and the term democracy has sometimes cloaked totalitarian socialism (e.g., the "people's democracies" of Eastern Europe and China).

IRD has steadfastly affirmed the value of religion to a society. However, religion has become so multiform that one can hardly define it. Marxism and Modernism alike have been regarded as religions. Radical critics dismiss Christianity as a myth. Today, many naturalists regard all religion as a mythical way of relating to a transcendent world beyond rational and historical categories.

The secular humanist identifies as religious whatever values one espouses that integrate one's otherwise discordant selfhood -- whether the harmonizing ideals be devotion to nuclear disarmament, the Red Cross, Red Crescent, or Red Hammer and Sickle. Humanism views religion as having merely a psychologically integrative role. In short, religion is "true" to the extent it gives meaning and purpose to life, but it cannot tell us anything "true" about the external world.

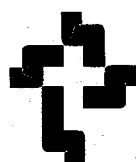
Beyond the matter of defining religion is the issue



*Dr. Carl F.H. Henry is a lecturer-at-large for Prison Fellowship and a member of the IRD board of directors.*

of how governments relate to it. Some nations with state religions sign constitutional international guarantees of religious freedom but compromise those guarantees in practice. IRD resists any trade-off of religious freedom for the false promise of economic justice. It seeks to discourage a privileged political position for any confessional religious body, promotes legal protections for religious minorities, and encourages religious tolerance that enables all to affirm their spiritual convictions openly.

Not all religions even champion religious liberty. The IRD, however, believes that the freedom to



## IRD's First Decade 1981-1991

*IRD invited Dr. Carl F.H. Henry, a renowned evangelical theologian, to reflect on the significance of IRD's work in the last decade*

worship God as instructed by conscience is the foundation of all freedoms, and that a coerced faith demeans both God and humanity. Nor is mere religious tolerance, which may be suspended on the fleeting whims of the state, an adequate substitute for religious freedom. All civic restrictions beyond those required to prevent the abridgement of the rights of others turn out sooner or later to be cover for coercive attempts at forcing some preferred opinions or behaviors upon the human spirit.

Just as people can mean different things by "religion," so can they mean different things by "democracy." Regarding democracy, the IRD's stance is positive, but cautious. Without shared religiously-based values, a democracy can deteriorate into chaos, and even anarchy. Yet political self-determination is an option far preferable to political compulsion by tyrants who arbitrarily impose their decrees upon their subjects.

Preferable as it may be, democracy as it is emerging in Eastern Europe will be no millennial alternative to other existing options. Christianity has always emphasized that rulers no less than the ruled are answerable to God for their use and misuse of authority. Democracy stands as a desirable alternative to political totalitarianism because it champions limited government which recognizes that the individual and the family and all society have not only duties to the state, but rights over and against the state that a just government will want to preserve.

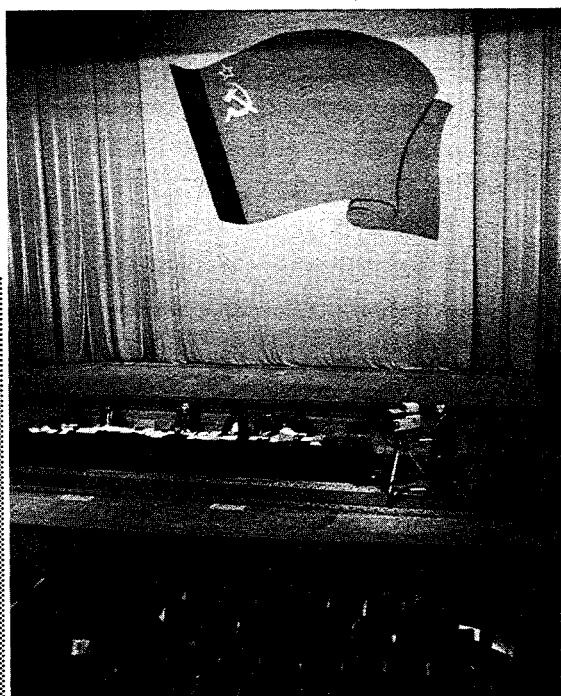
Finally, with regard to the leadership of those

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# 'Don't Let Go of the Reins!'

## *Gorbachev Tightens Grip on Fragmenting Union*

The Baltic republics are not the only source of dissent over the future organization of the Soviet Union. Within the heart of Russia, in the halls of the Russian parliament (headed by Boris Yeltsin), there is a desire for autonomy from the federal state.



### *Religious Liberty Alert*

Between January 19 and 30, IRD Executive Director Kent Hill was in Moscow as part of a five-person delegation from Christian Legal Society, Catholic University Law School, and IRD. The delegation met with lawyers, legislators, educators, religious leaders, and academics to discuss the link between Christian values and law, human rights, democracy, and religious freedom. The following is Hill's report based on these meetings.

**A** Russian emigre recently reminded me of a play written by Pushkin in 1825. The play has Tsar Boris Godunov on his death bed in 1605 giving some astute advice to his son Fyodor, the next tsar. Sometimes let the reins out, sometimes pull them up taut, the tsar told his son, but "don't let go of the reins!"

Indeed, many in the USSR today are convinced that Pushkin's lines are etched in Mikhail Gorbachev's subconscious. They are convinced that *glasnost* is but a temporary respite. The reins of government, never really abandoned, are steadily and surely being tightened once more.

There are reasons for pessimism. First, the economy continues to decline at an alarming

rate. During 11 days in Moscow near the end of January, I walked into many virtually empty stores. This was my sixth visit in 13 years and the situation is much worse now than on any previous trip. People are not starving, but the endless lines required to obtain even the most basic of commodities have multiplied. As members of a small foreign delegation, we were offered meat at most meals, but our drivers and translators reported that their families sometimes ate no meat for two weeks at a stretch.

The well-known Soviet poet Evgeny Yevtushenko complained in verses published in the *New York Times* in February 1990 that "half-measures" are dangerous. Indeed they are. Though Gorbachev has allowed *glasnost*, which permits wide discussion of problems, and though he has constantly talked about *perestroika* (reforming the economy), he has lacked the vision or the power to embark on a radical restructuring of the economy. Gorbachev has discovered that you can't jump across the Grand Canyon in two leaps.

The problem of the Soviet economy is illustrated by a purchase I made at the Moscow Circus, a piggy bank emblazoned with flags of the U.S. and U.S.S.R. I noticed something rather unique about this piggy bank. There was a slot to put money in, but no way to get it out without smashing the bank to bits. I couldn't help but note the similarity between that bank and the Soviet economy: the average citizen is depressingly aware that he can invest in the economy, but there is little chance that he can get much, if anything, out.

While our delegation was in Moscow we visited the Russian Republic Supreme Soviet (parliament) on three separate occasions. We were there during the stormy three days when all Soviet citizens were expected to exchange all their 50-ruble and 100-ruble notes into 10-ruble notes. Can you imagine what it would be like in the U.S. if the administration issued a decree, without consulting Congress and without

warning, that all American citizens had 72 hours to exchange all \$20 and \$50 bills? And that it could be necessary to prove that one had earned all the money one had and the exchange had to be done at one's place of work or in the bank in which one had an account? The decree allegedly was directed against black market operatives, but at 11 p.m. it was the elderly we saw standing, in lines two blocks long and in the -20°F cold, desperately trying to salvage their meager savings.

In between meetings with the Supreme Soviet committees dealing with human rights and freedom of conscience, we walked up and down the corridors of the huge parliament building. In the midst of this crisis I saw a hastily written sign on one of the doors which indicated that because of a lack of funds the business office was closed for any exchange of money. If the Supreme Soviet had no money for exchange, how much worse must it have been elsewhere in the country?

On the floor of the Supreme Soviet, former religious prisoner and now people's deputy, Father Gleb Yakunin, stood to give the shortest speech of the day. In one sentence he denounced Gorbachev's currency reform as sheer "banditry." Indeed, everywhere we went the resentment against Gorbachev for this, and many other decisions, was high.

**The second cause for concern is the nationalities problem.** From the beginning there has been an irreconcilable conflict brewing between Mr. Gorbachev's announced intention to "democratize" the Soviet Union and the continuation of the U.S.S.R. as an empire made up of captive nations. The three Baltic republics are the clearest manifestations of the problem. Independent countries between the world wars, Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia were forcibly swallowed up by Stalin in the early 1940s. They want to be free, but Gorbachev won't let them go. Blood has already been spilled in the streets of Vilnius, Lithuania, and deputies of the Russian Republic Supreme Soviet told me that they fully expected violence to come to Moscow as well.

What many in the West fail to grasp is that the conflict over the continuation of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics is not just a struggle

between Russian rulers in the Kremlin and the numerous nationalities of the 15 republics. There is a deep split among Russians as well. Many Russians, including many deputies in the Russian Republic Supreme Soviet, support the independence movement in the Baltics and elsewhere. But others, often those in high positions within the military, KGB, and Gorbachev's all-union government seem committed to using force if necessary to hold the U.S.S.R. together. High officials in the Russian Republic Ministry of Justice complained that Gorbachev and other Kremlin union leaders were threatening the progress towards democracy which had been made. On the other hand the chairman of the U.S.S.R. Board of Pardons told us that large pro-democracy demonstrations on Sunday January 20 were provocative and the "first step towards civil war." He then noted that Gorbachev had been very indulgent with the democratic forces, but if necessary they could be dealt with "in one night."

In one of the great ironies of the present crisis,



all of the Soviet republics have declared sovereignty, *including* the Russian Republic. Many with whom we talked believed there could be a civil war, and that it would involve Russians pitted against Russians.

*But as disturbing as the political and economic storm clouds on the horizon are, we found much that was encouraging.* Everywhere our delegation went our message was well received -- that religion could play a vital role in helping to create a healthy society. We argued that human rights were best guaranteed

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Kent Hill, left, talks with the editor of an independent journal initiated by the Ministry of Justice in the Russian Republic.

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when it was understood that human dignity rested not on the will (or whim) of the State, but on the assumption of the transcendent worth of human beings created in the image of God. Further, we argued that a sober understanding of human nature logically leads to an affirmation of concepts such as the separation of powers and guarantees of the rights of minorities against the arbitrary will of a majority. We talked of the American political experiment, the Bill of Rights, the struggle to determine what the separation of church and state entails, and the present moral and political crises of our own society.

At the Russian Republic Ministry of Justice, I was asked by the chairman of the meeting in what sense America also was in the midst of a moral crisis. I said that, whereas Soviet citizens were in the process of trying to achieve democracy and human rights, Americans were engaged in the difficult task of trying to keep them. I explained that many U.S. Christians consider important culture-shaping elements in our own society (the media, many secular academics) to have lost an appreciation for the link between religious values and societal stability. In fact, some even believe religion to be an entirely private phenomenon which ought to be kept out of the public square. The Russians listening would often nod when they heard this, for this was a perspective they knew only too well from their own recent anti-religious history.

The head of the Russian Bar Association, Aleksei Malaev, was so enthusiastic over what we said that he proposed that four of us

return this summer to speak to audiences outside of Moscow. He was particularly insistent that provincial cities needed to hear the perspective we had to offer.

Our delegation made it clear that we did not come bearing new religious truths from the West. Russian culture, after all, is deeply steeped in a Christian world view. The tragedy of the post-1917 Soviet world, we asserted, was directly tied to an alien ideology which sought to deprive Russian culture of its religious treasures. Agnostics and atheists who listened to this view frequently expressed agreement, for there is a broad consensus that the communist experiment, with its materialism and atheism, has profoundly failed to create a healthy moral society. There can



### **Kent Hill's New Book Chronicles Changes in Glasnost**

*Is there any promise left in glasnost?  
Or is there only peril ahead?*

*Are the gains made in religious  
freedom irreversible?*

In ***Soviet Union on the Brink: An Inside Look at Christianity and Glasnost*** (Multnomah, 1991), IRD Executive Director Kent R. Hill updates and expands his previous writings on the condition of religion in the Soviet Union.

Available in paperback from IRD for \$14.95. IRD members receive a 10 percent discount; if payment accompanies order, IRD pays the postage.

be little doubt that non-believers in the Soviet Union are far more open to consider religious perspectives today than many of their secular counterparts in the West. In this sense, secular U.S. universities are presently a more difficult mission field than their Soviet counterparts.

Particularly revealing were meetings with the faculty of the Theory and History of Religion and Freethinking (formerly "Atheism") at Moscow State University. This group is part of the Department of Philosophy with which I was associated in 1978 when my wife and I lived in Moscow while I did doctoral dissertation research. Though the group of nine faculty members with whom we met still included many Marxists, there was an openness to discussion which even resulted in an invitation for me to return to Moscow next year to teach a course on the History of the Church in the U.S.S.R. or on Christian apologetics.

This is an ebb tide time in Soviet history. Our newspapers are filled with disturbing reports of moves away from *glasnost* and *perestroika*, and the situation may well become considerably worse before it becomes better again. However, most of the gains made by Christians over the past four years remain and may well survive a sharp turn back towards the authoritarianism. I do not believe it likely that communist, anti-religious ideology can make a comeback. The U.S.S.R. Freedom of Conscience Law passed last Fall forbids continued state-funded public instruction in atheism. This is perhaps the most significant and often overlooked clause in the new law. This strikes at the very heart of

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**Notes**


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## **IRD Views Guatemalan Vote First-Hand**

In November, IRD's Alan Wisdom traveled to Guatemala as part of an election observer group. He also talked with Guatemalan church leaders, both Catholic and Protestant.

According to Wisdom, the recent swearing in of Jorge Serrano Elias as the new Guatemalan President is a sign of changing times for two reasons: "First, it was a transfer of power such as Guatemalans have never seen before. A civilian of one party -- the Christian Democrat Vinicio Cerezo -- finished out the full term which he had been elected and handed over the presidential sash to a civilian of another party -- the more conservative Serrano -- who had won a fair, openly-contested vote. The second remarkable fact was Jorge Serrano's religious affiliation. He is the first Protestant ever elected to lead a Latin American nation."

A complete report by Wisdom is available from IRD in *Mainstream*, the quarterly newsletter of Presbyterians for Democracy and Religious Freedom.

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## **Conferences Compete for Student Attendance**

Attendance at two student conferences held simultaneously in late December 1990 may say something about the relative health

of two segments of American Protestantism.

After two decades without a meeting of what had been called the University Christian Movement, 2,100 college students gathered in Louisville, Kentucky for five days of joint worship services, denominational meetings and workshops on topics ranging from feminist spirituality to the social impact of rock 'n' roll, according to Religious News Service.

Though the existence of the conference was interpreted by some as a resurgence in unified action by youth, attendance fell well short of the 4,000 expected. The conference was the outgrowth of an attempt to build student Christian leadership by the Council for Ecumenical Student Christian Ministry, which was formed in 1987. Sponsors included the United Methodist Church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and several of the historic black churches.

By contrast, Urbana, sponsored by InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, drew more than 18,000 (mostly students) to its 16th triennial mission conference at the University of Illinois. Delegates from 99 countries attended. The denominational breakdown showed the greatest numbers of participants were from independent or interdenominational churches, unspecified Presbyterians, the Evangelical Free Church, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and unspecified Baptists, according to Religious News Service (RNS).

RNS reported that Urbana planners attempted to reflect ethnic diversity in both conference leadership and among attendees. Mission and development agencies

were represented to inform attendees on opportunities to serve.

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## **Unofficial Chinese Churches Still Under Fire**

A report from sources in China indicates that in the last two months the Chinese government has stepped up its efforts against the "underground," Vatican-loyal Catholic Christians. Six bishops, including 84-year-old Fan Xue-yan, who has served more than 20 years in prison since 1949, 26 priests and many lay persons have been arrested in Hebei Province in northern China. This latest wave of arrests had a great impact on the underground seminaries and convents. Thirty seminarians and 50 young nuns have been sent to a political study center. At a recent meeting of government-recognized clergy, an official warned that the government "will prevent and crack down on any illegal criminal activities in the guise of religion."

Unofficial Protestants also have come under attack from Bishop Shen Yifan of Shanghai, who is rumored to be a likely successor to Bishop K.H. Ting, leader of the registered church. In a report issued last August, Shen referred to the unofficial Protestants as "those who steal money, rape women, destroy life and health, spread rumors and destroy social order. Some even foment believers to oppose leadership by the Party and seek to destroy the Three Self Movement.... Self-appointed evangelists worm their way everywhere and form reactionary organizations. Some have formed links with overseas hostile forces and gained their financial support."

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what Marx and Lenin considered to be fundamental -- atheism.

What we are likely to see is a strong reassertion of Soviet nationalism and further economic disorder and confusion. In the midst of this, there may be bloodshed and even civil war. The future is uncertain, but a full return to the past is unlikely. In the meantime, opportunities for Soviet citizens to reconsider the positive role religion can play personally and in society will continue to grow. As Father Yakunin eloquently put it:

"Religion is like salt which protects humanity from decomposition and disintegration. Any attempt to banish it from social life invariably leads to a degradation of society." If ever there was a time in Soviet history when Christians needed to be salt, it is now. God willing, they will be.

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churches associated with historic Christianity, the IRD stands with those church members who expect both *more* and *less*. We expect orthodoxy in the churches to be held firmly -- *more* firmly than it often is. We believe that this orthodoxy will shape the nature and scope of the Church's public witness by emphasizing, wherever possible, peaceful and democratic means of handling conflicts. This will mean far *less* public activity that runs counter to this prudently forged democratic commitment. It will also mean church pronouncements that are far *less* prescriptive than they have become. Christians can and ought to disagree about politics, while the Church ought to set the broad moral and theological framework for the discussion.

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Deemed too extreme by more than half of the members, the statement was returned to committee for revision. Six months later, in May 1990, it again was brought before the Governing Board. At that time, an alternative, more moderate resolution was introduced and rejected with many words but little debate. The initial, more radical resolution was adopted. Only one substantive change is found when comparing the original draft with the adopted resolution. A new line reads: "What represented newness of freedom, hope and opportunity for some was the occasion for oppression, degradation, and genocide for others."

What the NCC fails to realize is that the "newness of freedom, hope, and opportunity" offered by Western culture deserves to be celebrated. Reflecting upon history, we see many injustices have been suffered by many peoples. But these are not exclusively the result of colonization or early forms of capitalism. They are the result of sin. For as we are creatures fallen from the grace of God, so too is our every endeavor. All things consid-

ered, however, Western culture has been a force for justice and opportunity, upholding and defending many values and traditions consistent with the truth of the gospel. And, in fact, the Western values derived from our Christian heritage have proven to be the instrument for undoing some of the worst Western injustices. The NCC ought to give credit where credit is due.

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