

# Was Christopher Columbus really on a religious crusade?

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WASHINGTON (RNS)—Two recent books argue explorers Christopher Columbus and Vasco da Gama were more like Christian crusaders than greedy mercenaries or curious adventurers. Other historians, however, remain skeptical.

Christopher Columbus, seen here in "The Landing of Columbus" by John Vanderlyn in the Capitol Rotunda, is best known as an explorer, but a new book argues he may have been on a quest to find gold to finance another crusade against Muslim control of Jerusalem.

The books, released prior to Columbus Day, claim the reason the famous navigators sought a direct trade route to India was to undermine Islam.

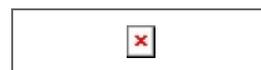
"I think historians have known about this, but they haven't taken it seriously," said Carol Delaney, author of [\*Columbus and the Quest for Jerusalem\*](#). Delaney, a retired anthropologist, is a research scholar at Brown University.

Delaney's book argues Columbus wanted to find gold to finance a new crusade to recapture Jerusalem from the Muslims, believing Jerusalem must be in Christian hands before Jesus' Second Coming.

"People don't usually look at Columbus in the religious context of his time, which was very powerful," said Delaney.

Nigel Cliff, the author of a new book on Columbus' Portuguese contemporary Vasco da Gama, agrees that seeing the explorers through a religious lens is "a change of emphasis." Historians in the 19th century tended to regard Columbus as a heroic figure who embarked on a "disinterested intellectual adventure," whereas those in the 20th century tended to "focus on economics, to the exclusion of much else," he said.

Mere economic advantage wasn't a medieval concept, Cliff asserted.



"Faith is the burning issue that impelled the great Portugal (exploration) campaign for 80 years," said Cliff, a British writer and amateur historian.

Da Gama became the first person to reach India directly from Europe by sailing around Africa in 1498, six years after Columbus discovered the Americas for the king and queen of Spain.

Cliff's book, [\*Holy War\*](#), claims da Gama's arrival in the East marked a turning point from Muslim to Christian ascendancy in global trade against the backdrop of an ongoing "clash of civilizations."

But other historians say the new books' bold claims are backed by poor scholarship. Felipe Fernandez-Armesto, a historian at the University of Notre Dame who has written extensively on Columbus, harshly criticized the books in *The Wall Street Journal*.

In his view, Cliff and Delaney "assume the veracity and authenticity of sources of doubtful authorship and unreliable date" and make the mistake of taking Columbus at his word although he was notoriously disingenuous.

Sanjay Subrahmanyam, a historian at UCLA who has written on da Gama, said religion for da Gama was "significant, but not the sole motive." The explorer was more interested in "personal advancement," as well as ensuring trade routes would be controlled by the Portuguese nobility rather

than the crown.



Fernandez-Armesto called Cliff's theory of a "clash of civilizations" between Christianity and Islam "a figment of contemporary imaginations." Subrahmanyam said it is "sensationalizing history by linking it with contemporary events."

Delaney points to the mysterious "Book of Prophecies," a gathering of mostly biblical pronouncements that seem to lend divine significance to Columbus' voyages. The book supposedly was compiled by Columbus himself.

Fernandez-Armesto also points out the Spanish court that commissioned Columbus' voyages long had been obsessed with the idea of Jerusalem.

However, "there is no evidence that Columbus was particularly religious until ... he turned to God following the failure of his worldly ambitions," he said. Columbus died a disappointed man because he had not found the quantities of gold and the passage to India he had sought.

If nothing else, the debate surrounding the books illustrates Columbus remains a controversial figure, more than 500 years after he sailed the ocean blue.

"Everybody seems to have a vested interest in their version of Columbus," Delaney said.