

University decision to rename Columbus Day observance sparks debate

PROVIDENCE, R.I. - In a debate over Brown University's decision to rename the school's weekend observance of Columbus Day, some feel the change should allow further study of Christopher Columbus' role in the New World and others express concern it may show disdain for Christianity and Western culture.

The Brown faculty voted April 7 to call the observance "Fall Weekend." Columbus Day always has been a school holiday and will continue to be one.

Columbus Day has been celebrated in the United States since 1905. It is Oct. 12; the federal holiday falls on the second Monday of October. Other Latin American countries also honor Columbus with a holiday but have different names. In the U.S., not all states and cities recognize the Columbus holiday.

In recent years, activists across the country have protested commemorations of Columbus' arrival in the New World. They claim the explorer's 1492 voyage opening the Western Hemisphere to Catholic evangelization and Spanish colonization also started a long period of abuse.

Nicolas Wey-Gomez, assistant professor of Hispanic studies at Brown, said the university's decision should allow further study on Columbus' role in history and a greater understanding of diversity on campus.

The decision by the faculty was not an effort "to prevent those of us within our community from celebrating Columbus' achievements," he told the Rhode Island Catholic, newspaper of the Providence Diocese.

Wey-Gomez was born in Bogota, Colombia, and has studied Columbus and the Spanish colonization of the Americas. He is the author of "The Tropics of Empire: Why Columbus Sailed South to the Indies."

"I admire (Columbus) in a number of ways. He was a great sailor, navigator and explorer," he said. "Columbus was one of those people who did not think inside the box, and he was somebody who stubbornly questioned the cosmological and geographical premises of his time."

Father Henry Bodah, a Providence diocesan priest who's the chaplain for the Catholic community from Brown and the Rhode Island School of Design, said he hoped the university's decision to rename the holiday wasn't made out of contempt for Western culture or Christianity.

"I hope this is not reverse racism where people are not expressing hatred or contempt for Western culture that was brought here with migrations in the 16th and 17th centuries. Columbus is symbolic for the beginning of European migration and European culture," Father Bodah said.

"Why should we be ashamed of Western culture? I hope that's not what it is. What would have been the reaction today if Aztecs conquered Europeans?" he asked.

Stephen Ciolfi, Rhode Island deputy for the Knights of Columbus, said the Knights identify with Columbus' Catholic faith and his achievements as an explorer. He said Brown did not accomplish anything by renaming the holiday.

"Columbus is seen as a person that brought the Catholic faith to America and when the Knights were named after Columbus, Catholics were considered as foreigners. Columbus was identified with Catholic faith and the discovery of America," Ciolfi said.

Ciolfi, a parishioner at St. Philip Church in Greenville, said Columbus serves the Knights symbolically. "This accomplishes nothing," he said of the university decision, "and (it) doesn't change history. All it does is antagonize people."

"This is idiotic. Columbus is not a hero, but the holiday is more a matter of Italian pride," he added.

Massimo Riva, a professor and chair of Italian studies at Brown, said he was in favor of studying Columbus' role in history.

He also sees the need to study Columbus' voyages more in depth and wonders whether the holiday even has much of an effect on today's society.

He said he asked some of his students about the holiday and "they were not excited about the issue. They didn't even give it a thought," he said.

Chief Sachem-Matthew Thomas of the Narragansett Indian tribe in Charlestown said he understood what the Brown faculty was trying to accomplish, but wasn't sure it was the right decision.

"One thing I want to make clear is yes, there was mistreatment of Indians for centuries, but to hang it on Columbus is unfair. I would like to see the mistreatment end but to hang it on one individual - it's going to take more than that," said Thomas.

Providence Mayor David Cicilline said the university's decision diminishes the accomplishments of an important historical figure for Italian-Americans.

"The decision to simply erase the celebration of an incredibly significant moment in world history and Italian-American culture for the sake of political correctness does just the opposite. As an Italian-American, I take particular offense to this decision," he said in an April 9 statement.