

AN ENLIGHTENING DIALOG

John had been looking forward to this holiday. He and his wife had driven down to the coast and settled in at the hotel they had often stayed in before. After lunch his wife wanted to look at the shops, John thought he would go up to the headland, find a bench and sit and read his book awhile.

He soon reached the headland and was surprised to see, sitting on a bench there, an old bachelor friend he had not seen for a few years now.

"Hello, Brian!" John called out. "Haven't seen you for a while. Mind if I join you?"

"Not at all, not at all," replied Brian. "It's great to see you, John. Yes, it has been a while, hasn't it?. How are you and Mary keeping?"

"Oh, we're both fine, thanks," replied John. "And you – How are you, Brian?"

"I'm very well, thanks," Brian answered. "I took a very early retirement last year and bought a little bungalow here."

"Very nice," said John. "I've just got one more year to do before I retire. Maybe we should think about looking for somewhere here."

"Yes, do," said Brian. "It's a nice little town. I like to come up here and look at the ships passing up the channel. I was just gazing at those two way out there and thinking how terrible Columbus' sailors must have felt."

"Yes," agreed John, "Their food and water running low. They must have dreaded the thought of starving out there in the middle of the ocean with no chance of land for weeks and weeks."

"I wasn't thinking of that," said Brian. "I was thinking how they must have got more and more scared they'd been dropping off the end of the earth into some terrible abyss."

"Oh good grief!" exclaimed John. "Don't tell me you actually *believe* the flat-earth myth!"

"What do you mean *myth*?" said Brian, feeling a little hurt at his friend's response. "I mean, they did think the earth was flat in the Middle Ages, didn't they?"

"No, they most certainly did not," replied John, firmly. "Haven't you read Dante?"

"No, I can't say I have," said Brian, "Why? What has he to do with it?"

"Well," said John, "In the *Inferno*, Dante is led by the Roman poet, Vergil, down through the circles of Hell until they come right to the centre of the earth. Then they have to start *climbing up and up* so that they can emerge again in the antipodes to find Mount Purgatory. It is quite clearly a sphere that he and Vergil travel through in that poem."

"OK, John," said Brian, rather defensively. "So Dante thought the earth was a sphere. But the Church didn't think so, did it? And that's what mattered in the Middle Ages."

"Good grief!" exclaimed John again. "Where do you get these notions from? The early Church Fathers were well aware the earth was spherical, though they were troubled by Old Testament references its being shaped like the Jewish tabernacle. Augustine conceded that the sacred texts were

speaking metaphorically; and that remained the general opinion. Boethius was quite clear that the earth was spherical, as were Origen and Ambrose. Isidore, Bishop of Seville, even attempted to calculate the circumference of the spherical earth. Our own Venerable Bede in his 'Computus' is quite clear the earth is spherical; and so I could go on and on and on. But I'll mention only Thomas Aquinas since, I think you will admit, his work was very influential in the Church."

"Yes, it was and is," agreed Brian, "there's no doubt about that."

"No, indeed there isn't," John continued, "and not only did he describe the earth as spherical; but clearly took it for granted his readers also *knew* it was spherical."

"OK, OK," said Brian; then, clutching at straws, he added: "But what about the Mappa Mundi and those other Medieval maps? Don't they show it as a flat disk?"

"You mean," laughed John, "like our atlases show the earth to be flat and square! Those maps you refer to show in two dimensions what the medievals thought the northern hemisphere was like. None of them had been to the southern hemisphere and, indeed, it was commonly believed that the torrid zone around the equator was too hot for travelers to pass."

Brian just grunted, wondering what to say next.

"Besides," continued John, "there are Medieval pictures actually showing a spherical earth; and you've surely seen kings in medieval paintings or stained glass."

"Yes, of course," answered Brian. "What of it?"

"They hold," replied John, "a sceptre in their right hand. But what is it they hold in their left hand?"

"That orb thing," said Brian. "like a ball with a cross on the top."

"Exactly!" John said. "The *orbis cruciger* – a *sphere* with a cross on the top – a reminder to earthly monarchs that Christ is the true king of the whole earth. It's been used at least since the 5th century AD. I'm afraid, Brian, the simple truth is that the western world, whether Christian or pagan, has accepted the notion of a spherical earth ever since the Greeks came up with it in the 4th century BC."

"OK," said Brian. "You've got me beaten there, I guess. So, if it wasn't the flat earth, what was it the learned men of Salamanca had against Columbus making that journey?"

"The size of the earth," answered John simply.

"The size of the earth?" asked Brian. "What do you mean?"

"Columbus may have been a good sailor," said John, "but he was not good with his calculations. He estimated the earth to be only three quarters as large as it really is. He thought the distance from the coast of Portugal to Japan was only about 5 000 kilometres. In fact it is a good deal more than that."

"And," added Brian, laughing, "America is in the way!"

"Yes," said John, "but neither Columbus nor the Salamancan scholars knew that. Those scholars may not have known the exact size of the earth, but they knew it was much larger than Columbus imagined and that no

contemporary ships could carry enough supplies to last the journey westward from Portugal to Japan. – that's supposing one could sail straight from one to the other, of course."

"And I suppose those scholars were right on that score," said Brian.

"You suppose correctly ," replied John. "If America had not been in the way, Columbus and his crews would have starved to death in mid ocean. What saved them was reaching the Caribbean."

"So," said Brian, "Columbus was right that he could cross the Atlantic Ocean westward, but wrong about reaching Japan that way."

"That's about it," agreed John. "Likewise the Salamancan scholars were right about the size of the earth, but wrong that Columbus would perish on the journey. America came to the rescue!"

They both laughed.

"But," said Brian. "How did the flat earth myth come about, then?"

"That's mainly due to the American author, Washington Irving," answered John. "In 1828 he published 'The Life and Voyages of Christopher Columbus,' – essentially romanticized fiction with the odd bit of truth added."

"Sort of like the Tabloids," interrupted Brian, facetiously.

"Maybe," said John, "At any rate Irving deliberately introduced the flat earth myth as he wished to show the Medieval Church as ignorant and superstitious and did not want facts to spoil his story."

"I see," said Brian, "But there is a Flat Earth Society, isn't there? Some people do believe in a flat earth, don't they?"

"Probably," said John, "though I don't know how many seriously hold that view. The Flat Earth Society was founded only as recently as 1956 when, Samuel Shenton, a Fellow of the Royal Astronomical Society and the Royal Geographic Society, took over the Universal Zetetic Society which itself had been founded by the followers of Samuel Rowbotham who died in 1884."

"Samuel Rowbotham?" queried Brian. "Who was he?"

"A 19th century inventor and religious fundamentalist. He took literally those Old Testament passages that Augustine had taken metaphorically. And the rest, as they say, is recent history."

They both laughed again.

"It seems," said Brian. "I was wrong about the flat earth. I've been seduced by a 19th century myth."

"Sadly," said John, "you are not the only one. But now we've met up again, we must make an effort to keep in touch."

"We must indeed," agreed Brian, "and you and Mary must come to dinner at my bungalow while you're here."

So, dear reader, let us leave John and Brian, the Enlightener and the Enlightened, exchanging addresses and telephone numbers and making their good-byes.