Columbus's Ultimate Goal: Jerusalem

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INTRODUCTION

The Quincentennial of Columbus's Discovery of the Americas has come and gone. Some people celebrated, others protested. The Discovery has been called either "The greatest event since the creation of the world, save the incarnation and death of Him who created it" (Francisco Lopez de Gomera writing in 1552),[1] or the greatest disaster in world history. Columbus is either a saint (who was actually proposed for canonization), or he is a sinner responsible for genocide. Can one even say that Christopher Columbus *discovered* America when there were already millions of people living in these lands? Did he discover *America* when he thought he had found a new route to Asia?[2] The debates are interminable and the issues have become so politicized that an informed and informative discussion has been all but impossible; one steps warily into the fray. Yet, despite the voluminous literature by and about Columbus, Americans outside the rarefied circle of Columbus scholars still know little about the man and his mission. In this paper I discuss some of the little known religious beliefs that underpinned the "Enterprise of the Indies," for I think they have the potential to change fundamentally our assessment of Columbus and relocate some of the responsibility for the consequences of the encounter.

Many people are unaware that Columbus made not just one voyage but four; others are surprised to learn that he was brought back in chains after the third

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[1] In the text of this paper I will give the original dates, where possible, and then the date and page of the modern translation/edition I am using. Thus, when I quote from Columbus, I will put the original date, then the date of the modern edition and page. The reference information can be found under Columbus. This quotation, from Gomera's *Historia General de las Indias*, is frequently cited. See Jane 1988[1930–1933]: xv; also Keen's translation of Ferdinand Columbus's biography of his father 1992[1959]: xxiii.

[2] For discussions about the notion of "discovery" see Bataillon 1972; Keen 1992; O'Gorman 1961; Sale 1990; Todorov 1985[1984]; Washburn 1962; and Zamora 1993, among others.

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voyage. Even fewer know that his ultimate goal, the purpose behind the enterprise, was Jerusalem! The 26 December 1492 entry in his journal of the first voyage, hereafter referred to as the *Diario*,[3] written in the Caribbean, leaves little doubt. He says he wanted to find enough gold and the almost equally valuable spices "in such quantity that the sovereigns... will undertake and prepare to go conquer the Holy Sepulchre; for *thus I urged* Your Highnesses to spend all the profits of this my enterprise on the conquest of Jerusalem" (*Diario* 1492[1988: 291, my emphasis]).[4] This statement implies that it was not the first time Columbus had mentioned the motivation for his undertaking, nor was it to be the last.[5] Columbus wanted to launch a new Crusade to take back the Holy Land from the infidels (the Muslims). This desire was not merely to reclaim the land of the Bible and the place where Jesus had walked; it was part of the much larger and widespread, apocalyptic scenario in which Columbus and many of his contemporaries believed. That scenario, derived from the biblical book of Revelation, claims that the conversion of all peoples to Christianity and the re-conquest of Jerusalem are necessary preconditions for the "Second Coming" when Christ will return before the "End of Days." Columbus felt strongly the imminence of this event; he also came to feel that he had a providential role to play in the drama. There is considerable evidence from his contemporaries and his own writings, especially in the little known *Libro de las profecías*, or Book of Prophecies, that these were longstanding beliefs of Columbus.

A discussion of Columbus's piety and religious beliefs occupies the first part of this paper; the second part asks why these beliefs are so little known

[3] Columbus's day-to-day log of the first voyage has come to be known simply as the *Diario*, and my quotations are taken Dunn and Kelley's 1989 edition, *The Diario of Christopher Columbus's First Voyage to America 1492–1493* (Dunn and Kelley 1989). They followed the *Diario de Colón*, a line-by-line translation by Dr. Carlos Sanz (Madrid 1962) and may not have known of Robert Fuson's *The Log of Christopher Columbus*, published just before theirs. There are too many translations and editions to cite here; consult those above for more information. The original diary was lost, but Bartolomé de las Casas, who knew Columbus and had a scribe's copy called *Diario de a bordo* (Diary from on board), made an abstract, including extensive verbatim passages. Las Casas titled his abstract *El libro de la primera navegación*, and included it in his *Historia de las Indías* written between 1527 and 1562, but not published until 1875! Except for short excerpts, no English translation has been published of this most important source of the early period of the encounter. Columbus's son Ferdinand also had a copy of the *Diario* and included much of it in his biography of his father written sometime in the early part of the sixteenth century. Mary Campbell rightly argues that this is no mere ship's log but perhaps the first of its kind—a diary that included impressions, reactions, and anthropological descriptions and possibly also drawings and charts (1988: 188).

[4] Ironically, then, the purpose of "the New World was to redeem the Old City" (Cummins 1976, quoted in West 1987: 52).

[5] Phelan claims, "Columbus's idea of delivering the Holy Sepulchre with the gold of the Indies was a hope that he first expressed to Ferdinand and Isabela on the eve of his departure from Palos on August 3, 1492" (1970: 22). But he may have mentioned it even earlier, during the siege of Granada in 1489 when an embassy from the Sultan of Egypt arrived demanding that the Spanish stop fighting Muslims or he would destroy the Holy Sepulchre (see Morison 1942, vol. I: 131).

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among the general public. My analysis suggests that part of the problem lies in the assumptions of conventional historiography and the (mis)understanding of religion among academics. Then I show how his religious worldview, particularly its notions of space and time, affected both his conception of the enterprise and its unfolding. Telling this story about Columbus in *his* cultural context not only changes our assessment of him and the framing of American history, but also provides a perspective from which to interpret the resurgence of apocalyptic thought among certain groups of Christians today. Ultimately, I suggest, this demands a critical examination of the apocalyptic scenario itself, before it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

THE EVIDENCE

That Columbus was a religious man is attested by his son and others who knew him, including Bartolomé de las Casas, the great historian of the Indies and defender of the Indians. Here is what he says of Columbus: "He observed the fasts of the church most faithfully, confessed and made communion often, read the canonical offices like a churchman or member of a religious order, hated blasphemy and profane swearing, was most devoted to Our Lady and to the seraphic father St. Francis; seemed very grateful to God for benefits received from the divine hand. . . . And he was especially affected and devoted to the idea that God should deem him worthy of aiding somewhat in recovering the Holy Sepulchre" (c.1527 [Morison 1942, I: 63]).[6]

The *Diario* is full of evidence that during the voyages, Columbus prayed often and kept canonical hours on board, especially those of Prime, Terce, Vespers, and Compline. At "Vespers all hands were called, a brief service read, the *Salve Regina* sung, and the watch changed" (Morison 1963: 44). He prepared diligently for Sunday mass and believed in the saving grace of pilgrimage (see Flint 1992; Milhou 1983). On several occasions noted in the diary he and the crew made vows to conduct pilgrimages to holy sites if they survived some of the treacherous seas and storms they encountered. His devotion is also illustrated by the names he bestowed, like Adam, on the islands he "discovered," for example, San Salvador (for their salvation), Trinidad (for the Trinity), Santa Maria (for the Virgin Mary), Isla de la Ascunción (for the Assumption). He counted as friends a number of priests and men in religious orders and often stayed at monasteries for weeks and months at a time.

Furthermore, an eyewitness to his return from the second voyage, Andrés Bernáldez (chronicler, priest, and friend of Columbus), notes that when he "arrived in Castile in the month of June 1496, (he was) dressed as an Observatine Friar of the Order of St. Francis and resembling one in appearance, little

[6] This passage is cited and translated by Morison, 1942, I: 63, from a 1927 edition of Las Casas's *Historia de las Indias*, edited by Gonzalo de Reparaz.

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less than in his dress, with the cord of the Order, which he wore for devotion" (quoted in West and Kling 1991: 58). Some scholars believe that he may have joined the Third Order of St. Francis, meaning that he became a Tertiary—a lay monk of the Observant Franciscans.[7] He was buried in these robes. His religiousness is also evident from the way he began to sign his reports and letters during and ever after the first voyage, when he created a mysterious new symbolic signature that ended with: "Xpo-ferens," or Christ bearer.[8] By this time, he had come to believe he was carrying Christianity across the sea as his namesake, St. Christopher, carried Christ across the waters.[9]

We also find ample evidence of Columbus's religious convictions and ideas in his own writings. More than ninety documents written by Columbus have survived. These include not just the abstract of the *Diario*, but also accounts of the third and fourth voyages, legal depositions, a will and testament, numerous letters (to the sovereigns, to one of his sons, and to his relatives and friends including several monks), and over 3,000 marginal notes in his books (West 1992a: 267). New finds still emerge from time to time. But perhaps most important is his little known *Libro de las profecías* (Book of Prophecies), a collection of classical and biblical passages that Columbus believed prophesied both the discovery and its relevance to the approaching apocalypse. Before turning to that document, let me briefly mention some of the other evidence.

Pauline Moffitt Watts, who has written persistently and eloquently about Columbus's religious ideas, has determined that two interconnected themes

[7] Milhou (1983: 42–51) and others believe this may be the reason he did not marry Beatriz de Arana, the mother of his second son, Ferdinand. It is possible that by then he had taken a vow of celibacy for, unlike the crew, there is no indication that Columbus ever had sexual relations with Indian women.

[8] The first instance is a letter written in Hispaniola, dated 4 January 1493 (Varela 2003: 218), a fragment dated 20 February 1493 (Varela 2003: 226), and a letter before departure on the second voyage dated 9 April 1493 (Morison 1963: 199; and Thacher, III: 111). There are many more examples. See Thacher (1903–1904) for photographs of the letters and signature. The full signature was composed of 4 lines:

.S.
S.A.S.
X M J
Xpo-ferens

Numerous scholars have tried to decipher it, and the effort will no doubt continue (e.g., Thacher 1903–1904; Milhou 1983).

[9] A map by Juan de las Cosa (c. 1500) has a drawing of St. Christopher bearing Christ across the waters, which some believe may actually be a portrait of Columbus. If so, it may be the only known portrait drawn during his lifetime, but see Phillips (1992). She suggests that a painting of Columbus, allegedly by Pedro Berruguete, if proved authentic may be the earliest since it had to have been painted before his death on 6 January 1504. The absence of a portrait, however, has not kept artists from filling the gap with imaginary ones. Too often, they show him as corpulent and with a round face. Yet all accounts describe him as handsome and of dignified bearing, tall with a long face, aquiline nose, and reddish hair turning gray.

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reverberate throughout his writings: (1) conversion of all peoples to the Christian faith, and (2) the re-conquest of Jerusalem (Watts 1985: 92). The first is conventional knowledge, the second is little known beyond Columbus scholars. Columbus mentioned the first of these themes in the prologue[10] that prefaced the *Diario*, which he intended, at journey's end, to present to the "Most Christian and Very Noble and Very Excellent and Very Powerful Princes, King and Queen of Spain." He goes on to mention the events of 1492 leading up to his departure, namely the end of the war with the Moors in Granada and the expulsion of the Jews, events that put his own venture in a religious context.[11] He reminds the King and Queen of how many times the Great Khan (of China) had,

> . . .sent to Rome to ask for men learned in our Holy Faith in order that they might instruct him in it and how the Holy Father had never provided them; and thus so many peoples were lost, falling into idolatry and accepting false and harmful *sectas* [incorrectly translated as religion, see below]; and Your Highnesses, as Catholic Christians and Princes, lovers and promoters of the Holy Christian Faith, and enemies of the false doctrine of Mahomet and of all idolatries and heresies, you thought of sending me, Christóbal Colón to the said regions of India to see the said princes and the peoples and the lands, and the characteristics of the lands and of everything, and *to see how their conversion to our Holy Faith might be undertaken*. And you commanded that I should not go to the East by land, by which way it is customary to go, but by the route to the West, by which route we do not know for certain that anyone previously has passed (*Diario* 1492[1989: 19, my emphasis]).[12]

In case he should encounter the Great Khan or other emperors, kings, or princes, it was deemed appropriate for Columbus to carry letters of greeting from the sovereigns (with space left blank for the addressee)[13] and to take

[10] Like everything else about Columbus, there is debate about the "prologue." Zamora, for example, calls it a letter, and believes it was written sometime *after* the departure and addressed to the Crown as a way to legitimize the voyage (1993: 21–38). The timing seems irrelevant since many authors write a "preface" after a work is completed. To me the prologue seems to confirm, in writing, what had been discussed previously.

[11] His linking of these events can be seen as part of the larger spiritual context in which his voyage is included (see Milhou 1983; Sweet 1986: 373; Zamora 1993: 32). See Menocal (1994: 3–14) for a critical view of the lack of attention paid to the synchronicity of these events by historians.

[12] Columbus had read Marco Polo's book of travels and knew that the Great Khan had requested emissaries from the Pope but had not received them. Kublai Khan also asked Marco's father and uncle that "upon their return they should bring with them, from Jerusalem, some of the Holy Oil from the lamp which is kept burning over the Sepulchre of our Lord Jesus Christ, who he professed to hold in veneration and to consider as the true God" (Komroff, trans. 1930: 8). The "customary" route to China had become perilous for Christians due to its control by Muslims, and especially so after the conquest of Constantinople by the Ottomans in 1453. If Europeans were to reach China and its fabled riches, they would have to find another way. Portuguese explorers began to search for a sea-route around the tip of Africa, but because of the 1479 treaty of Alcáçovas, Spanish explorers could not enter "their" waters. Columbus had already presented his plan to the King of Portugal who rejected it, which is why, in 1485, Columbus left for Spain.

[13] Copies of these letters exist, dated 30 April 1492. See Morison 1942, I: 141; 1963: 30.

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along as an interpreter Luis de Torres, a *converso* who knew Hebrew, Chaldean, and some Arabic. It was highly unlikely that anyone in Spain knew Mongolian or Chinese, but since "it was supposed that Arabic was the mother of all languages" (Morison 1942, vol. I: 187), it was assumed that Arabic would suffice.[14] When they arrived in Cuba, Columbus sent Luis de Torres and Rodrigo de Xerez inland with two Indians, "with instructions as to how they were to inquire about the king of that land and what they should say to him on behalf of the sovereigns of Castile ... [and to] give him their letters and a present, and in order to learn of his circumstances and to obtain his friendship" (*Diario* 2 Nov. 1492[1989: 129]).

Throughout the pages of the *Diario* Columbus speaks of the gentle nature of the natives and how easily they would become Christian if only the sovereigns would send religious persons who would learn their language and instruct them.[15] He writes that at their very first encounter he wants them to be friendly and that he "recognized that they were a people who would be better freed [from error] and converted to our Holy Faith by love than by force" (*Diario* 11 Oct. 1492[1989: 65]). He also marvels at the beauty of the place, yet despite having endured a voyage across the ocean that all believed no one had ever crossed, neither its beauty nor the kindness of the natives induced him to tarry. He pushes onward; he wants to find the mainland and needs to find valuable commodities—spices, aloe, mastic, and, of course, gold.[16] In my first reading of the diary I could not understand why he seemed so driven to find gold; no wonder people have assumed his motives were purely mercenary. But this understanding changes when one realizes that finding the gold was necessary not only to repay the people who had invested in the voyage (and to induce them to finance another), but also, as seen from the diary entry cited above, essential if he was ever to finance another Crusade. Today, we might disapprove of that motive, but at the time it was felt to be a worthwhile and Christian duty.

In a letter dated 4 March 1493, purportedly written at sea to King Ferdinand and Queen Isabela just before he arrived back from the first voyage, Columbus claimed "that in seven years from today I will be able to pay Your Highnesses

[14] Hamdani (1979, n. 39) suggests, instead, that Columbus brought an Arabic speaker to converse with Arab merchants, navigators, or envoys he might encounter in the area of the Indian Ocean and who, thus, might be able to direct him to the Khan. This makes sense given Columbus's reading of Marco Polo, though I can find no mention of such a motive in the Columbus documents. There is tremendous irony, however, in speaking Arabic in the New World when it was being outlawed in the Old (Menocal 1994: 12).

[15] This implies that it was the sovereigns, not Columbus, who decided not to send priests or missionaries on the first voyage.

[16] Spices provided another reason for the Spanish monarchs to back Columbus's voyage. Not only had the overland route been cut off by the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople but, according to Dugard, the Venetians had a stranglehold on what spices came via Egypt, "[T]hanks to an exclusive arrangement between the Arabs and the merchants of Venice who were the sole European outlet for India's pepper and spices" (Dugard 2005: 23).

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for five thousand cavalry and fifty thousand foot soldiers for the war and conquest of Jerusalem, for which purpose this enterprise was undertaken" (*Letter*, 1493 [Zamora 1993: 190–97]).[17] Almost ten years later, he is still dwelling on the theme. A letter written in February 1502, but perhaps never sent, to Pope Alexander VI stated, "This enterprise was undertaken with the purpose of expending what was invested in aiding the holy temple and the holy Church," (*Letter* 1502 [Rusconi 1997: 17]),[18] and he specifies the same number of horsemen and soldiers he hopes to finance.

In still another letter, referred to as *Lettera Rarissima*, written on 7 July 1503 in Hispaniola and addressed to the Sovereigns, Columbus describes the events of the fourth voyage. Toward the end of the letter the theme of the re-conquest of Jerusalem recurs: "Jerusalem and Mount Sion are to be rebuilt by the hand of a Christian; who this is to be God declares by the mouth of His prophet in the fourteenth psalm. Abbot Joachin said that he was to come from Spain."[19]

Finally, on 19 May 1506, the day before he died, Columbus ratified his *Majorat* or will, originally drawn up on 22 February 1498 and appended on 25 August 1505, stipulating that a fund be set up for the purpose of liberating Jerusalem.[20] Such evidence should be more than enough to quell the doubters of the sincerity of his motivations, but there is more.

THE *LIBRO DE LAS PROFECÍAS*

It is in the *Libro de las profecías* where his ideas are most manifest. The *Libro* is not really a book in the conventional sense, but rather a collection of passages culled from the Bible (Genesis to Revelation); numerous ancient authors such as Aristotle, Ptolemy, Seneca; church fathers such as Augustine, Jerome, Chrysostom; and medieval authors including Aquinas, d'Ailly, Joachim of Fiore, and Roger Bacon. It also includes extracts from the Qur'an and the writings of a number of Muslims such as Alfraganus and Averroes.[21] This collection was meant to be used in the composition of a long poem to be presented to the King and Queen. The poem was never completed, but

[17] This letter, which surfaced in 1989, is published in *Libro Copiador de Cristóbal Colón*, (Antonio Rumeau de Armas, ed., [Madrid 1989], vol. 2: 435–43). An English translation is published in Zamora 1993: 190–97). Its provenance was highly unusual and its authenticity is still being debated. It is included, however, in the latest edition of Varela's *Textos y documentos completos*. If authentic, it is an extremely important find and resolves the question of why the first letter announcing the discovery was apparently sent to Luis de Santangel rather than to the Sovereigns. If not from Columbus's pen, whoever wrote the letter must have believed his motivation.

[18] For the Spanish text see Varela 2003: 479–81; also Kadir 1992: 202–3.

[19] See Jane 1988, bk. II: 104. Joachin is more often written "Joachim"; see also Morison 1963: 383. The standard study of Joachim de Fiore is by Marjorie Reeves (1969). For his influence on Columbus, see Watts 1985, Phelan 1970, and Milhou 1983.

[20] An English translation can be found in Thacher (1904, vol. 3, 646–60); see also Sweet (1986: 381), for discussion.

[21] For a list of all the works cited, see West and Kling (1991: 23–26).

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the original manuscript has, amazingly, survived, and today it is housed at the Biblioteca Columbina attached to the Cathedral in Seville.

It is believed the *Libro de las profecías* was compiled during the period between Columbus's return from the third voyage in late October 1500 and the beginning of the fourth voyage in May 1502. However a passage referring to being in Jamaica in 1504 may indicate that he took a draft along on the final voyage in order to make additions or corrections suggested by his friend Fray Gaspar Gorricio, a Carthusian monk. Columbus stayed with Gorricio at the monastery of Nuestra Senora Santa Maria de las Cuevas in Seville when not involved in the litigations related to his activities and claims.[22]

This was a very difficult juncture in Columbus's life: the crown had been receiving reports that the colony in Española/Hispaniola was in disarray and, *at Columbus's request*, sent, someone to investigate. The investigator, Francisco de Bobadilla, was shocked by what he found, and when Columbus returned from the countryside he had him arrested and sent him back to Spain in chains.[23] Although Queen Isabela and King Ferdinand absolved him, he saw little chance of recovering his post as Viceroy and Governor of the islands that he had been granted in the Capitulations of Santa Fe on 17 April 1492. It may well be that the monarchs wanted to reduce the privileges they had granted to this foreigner at a time when they had no idea what, if anything, would be found in the colony. Some scholars believe that, given these difficulties, the primary motivation for the *Libro* was to restore himself in the eyes of the monarchs;[24] others, like myself, while not

[22] See *The Book of Privileges* (Nader 1996). It should be noted that not all of the *Libro de las profecías* is written in Columbus's hand. Indeed, four hands have been discerned: his own, his son Ferdinand's, Father Gorricio's, and one other. Nevertheless, it is believed that they are following Columbus's plan; not only was he very busy at the time but it was painful for him to write because his hands were arthritic. Some of Columbus and Gorricio's correspondence about the project survives.

[23] Columbus was, after all, a mariner and not trained to be a colonial administrator. Bad things began to happen as early as 1493 when men were left behind after the *Santa Maria* went aground. They had gone against his explicit orders to do no harm to the Indians, to respect the cacique to whom they owed so much, not to scatter themselves but stay together, and to avoid doing violence against the women; in short to set a good example (see Thacher, I: 632). Instead, their behavior was outrageous: they raped the women and tried to force the natives to work for them. All of them were murdered before Columbus returned on the second voyage. The colonists he brought with him on the second voyage also assumed they could live a life of ease using the natives as servants. In Columbus's words, 'they were a greedy lot.' Las Casas always spoke with respect and admiration of Columbus even as he criticized some of his expedient policies. We should not forget that Las Casas was himself a slaveholder before being converted to their defense several years after hearing a 1511 sermon by Antonio de Montesinos. Columbus never had the opportunity to hear that sermon since by then he had been dead for five years. Yet even as a defender of the Indians, Las Casas cannot be exonerated since he proposed importing slaves from Africa and is, in large part, responsible for that tragedy.

[24] Among those who believe it was self-aggrandizing or a product of senility and paranoia include: Harrisse, Vignaud, Granzotto, Flint, Sale, and Fernández-Armesto.

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denying the ingratiating tone of the cover letter, view the project more as the outcome of a long process of religious conviction and messianic zeal, as well as an attempt to claim his rightful place in history.[25]

I suggest that the *Libro* cannot be understood simply as a response to his immediate troubles, but rather had a long gestation. There is evidence from highlighted passages in his books, some of them dating from before the first voyage, of his interest in apocalyptic and prophetic themes. Over the years Columbus had been marking passages in his books;[26] sometimes drawing a hand with a finger pointing at an important passage, and he often made notes, called *postilles* (early "post-its"), in the margins. Some of the highlighted passages had to do with geographical and nautical information that helped him make his case for the first voyage before committees of court experts, while others had to do with his eschatological beliefs. As I will show, these cannot be separated.

The first sentence of the *Libro* proclaims its purpose: "Here begins the book, or handbook, of sources, statements, opinions and prophecies on the subject of the recovery of God's Holy City and Mount Zion, and on the discovery and evangelization of the islands of the Indies and of all other peoples and nations. To Ferdinand and Elizabeth [Isabela], etcetera, our hispanic rulers" (*Libro* 1500–1502 [West and Kling 1991: 101; cf. Rusconi 1997].) Although it was highly unusual for a layperson to read, let alone interpret and comment on the Bible, Christopher Columbus knew what he was doing (see Avalos 1994 and 1996 for Columbus as biblical exegete). To demonstrate this, and perhaps to forestall criticism, he goes on to describe his methods of biblical interpretation. The first is the four-fold method taken from Aquinas, Gerson, and others in which the commentator must attend to historical, allegorical, tropological, and anagogical interpretation. The second method, known as "prefigurement," Columbus attributes to St. Augustine, Isidore of Seville, and Nicolas of Lyra. In this method a prophecy in the Old Testament is shown to be fulfilled in the New Testament. For example, the story of Abraham and the near sacrifice of Isaac is thought to prefigure God's sacrifice

[25] This must have seemed all the more urgent as the news of Vasco de Gama's voyage to India and Cabot's to the North American continent began to circulate. Cabot, like Columbus, assumed he had reached Asia, but it was Newfoundland. An Englishman by the name of John Day sent Columbus a letter in 1497 informing him of this discovery.

[26] Books extant that Columbus owned are: Pierre d'Ailly's *Imago Mundi* printed between 1480 and 1483, which contains 898 *postilles*; Aeneas Sylvius Piccolomini (Pope Pius II)'s *Historia rerum ubique gestarum* (1477, 861 *postilles*); Marco Polo's *De consuetudanibus et conditionibus orientalium regionum* (1485, 366 *postilles*); the Italian translation of Pliny's *Historia naturalis* (1489, 24 *postilles*); Plutarch's *Las vias de los ilustres Varones* (1491, 437 *postilles*); *Concordantiae Bibliae Cardinalis* (fifteenth century, n.d., no *postilles* but many highlightings of important passages); St. Antoninus of Florence's *Sumula confessionis* (1476); a fifteenth-century palimpsest containing Seneca's *Tragedies*; and Abraham Azcuto's *Almanach perpetuum, cuius radix est annum* (1473).

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of his only begotten son. Both of these methods are still being used today, the latter especially by Christian fundamentalists.[27]

The cover letter that Columbus inserted in the notebook begins: "Most Christian and very exalted princes, the reason which I have for the restitution of the Holy Sepulchre to the Holy Church militant is the following" (*Libro* 1500–1502 [Thacher 1904, vol. III: 660]).[28] It is an urgent letter that warns them the end of the world will take place in 155 years. This date was arrived at by the common practice of using biblical genealogies to calculate the number of years from Creation, to Christ, to the current year. In this instance Columbus cites *Elucidario astronomice concordie cum theological & hystorica veritate* by his most crucial source—Pierre d'Ailly: "From Adam to our Lord Jesus Christ there are 5343 years and 318 days, according to the account of the King Don Alonso [sic; should be Alfonso] ... adding to this 1501 incomplete years [i.e., the year he is writing], makes in all 6845" (*Libro* 1500–1502 [Thacher 1904, vol. III: 662]). The end point is fixed—the duration of the world is only seven millennia based on the notion that the seven days of Creation compute to seven thousand earth years. Columbus cites "St. Augustine who says that the end of this world is to come in the seventh millenary of years from its creation... [so] according to this account, there are only lacking 155 years to complete the 7000, in which year ... the world must end" (op. cit). His calculations about the end of the world seem to date long before this, possibly predating the first voyage by ten years if we can take as evidence one of the 861 *postilles*, written in 1481, in his copy of *Historia rerum ubique gestarum*, by Aeneas Sylvius Piccolomini (Pope Pius II): "*desde el comienc del mundo fasta estra era de 1481, son 5241 años*," (from the beginning of the world to *our year 1481*, there are 5241 years) (*Libro* [West and Kling 1991: 22, my emphasis]).[29] In any case, for Columbus little time remains to fulfill all the prophecies that must be fulfilled before Christ returns, before the end of the world.

The rest of the manuscript is a collection of passages Columbus considered prophetic. A fair number of them focus on islands, for example, "Give ear, ye islands, and hearken, ye people from afar" (Isaiah 51: 5b). The "Discovery of new islands took on enhanced significance as signs that the Second Coming

[27] See Delaney 1998: 137–51; Auerbach 1953; Frei 1974; Harding 2000; Kolve 1996, among others.

[28] Here the quotations are from the English translation by Thacher (1904, vol. 3: 660), because in this case I feel he more closely followed the Spanish. In addition, he correctly translated Columbus's statement that the world would come to an end in 155 rather than 150 years, as in West and Kling (1991: 105).

[29] The *Historia*, published in 1477, was one of Columbus's favorite sources. West and Kling, Watts (1985: 85–86), Flint (1992: 46–48), and others take this entry as evidence of his pre-voyage interest in eschatology. Taviani disputes this and believes Columbus did not read the book until later (1985: 451). Regardless, it was still before the first voyage.

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was close at hand" (Gillis 2004: 43),[30] and thus indicated to Columbus the need to convert all the peoples he has found. He may have thought himself or the discovery to be the sign referenced in the following: "And I will set a sign among them . . . to the islands afar off, to them that have not heard of me and have not seen my glory" (Isaiah 66: 19). Other passages in the *Libro* and in the enclosed letter point to the coming of the Antichrist, the annihilation of the sect of Mohammed, and finally the restoration of Jerusalem.

GOLD

Still other passages are about Solomon's mines and the gold of Ophir that was thought by some to abound in the Indies. That this was the gold Columbus was looking for is made clear by his references to Josephus, Nicolas of Lyra, and by his notes in the books by d'Ailly and Pope Pius II, and especially the Bible. For example, "Solomon's ships went to Tarshish with the servants of Hiram; once every three years the ships of Tarshish used to come bringing gold, silver, ivory, peacocks, and apes" (2 Chronicles 9: 21). Since he assumed "three years" was the time it took for the round trip, Columbus "concluded that the Asian land mass must be so vast as to require more than a year's travel between Jerusalem and its eastern edge" (Romm 2001: 29–30).[31] This confirmed his beliefs that Asia extended much farther than hitherto suspected and that the ocean, therefore, was not as wide as was believed.

Columbus had clearly been thinking about Solomon's gold mines prior to the *Libro.* Five years before, his friend Peter Martyr wrote to Cardinal Bernardinus to inform him that Columbus had found mines that "he thinks may be the gold-producing Ophir of Solomon." At that time, Columbus thought they were in Española/Hispaniola (Martyr, 9 Aug. 1495 [Thacher 1904, vol. I: 75]). Later, during the fourth voyage, he thought he had found them near Veragua, along the coast of South America. One can feel the mounting excitement in a letter known as *Lettera Rarissima*, that Columbus wrote to the sovereigns from Jamaica: "Gold is a metal most excellent above all others and of gold treasures are formed, and he who has it makes and accomplishes whatever he wishes in the world and finally uses it to send souls into Paradise" (*Lettera* 3 July 1503 [Thacher 1904, vol. II: 695]).[32]

The search for gold, then, was, at least for Columbus, less a commercial venture than "a spiritual quest," a medium not so much of exchange as

[30] John Gillis, a social/cultural historian and sometime lecturer at Stanford, has written a fascinating study of the history of the meaning of "islands" in western imagination (2004). The western sea, in medieval thought, was presumed to be dotted with islands, and it is probably not coincidental that in "the lower dexter corner" of Columbus's coat of arms are a number of gilded islands. See Thacher (1903, vol. II: 536–40) for illustrations.

[31] Romm (2001) and West (1992b) are crucial reading for this story. See also West and Kling (1991: 223, 247).

[32] See also Jane 1988, vol. II: 104; Morison 1963: 383.

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"a medium of redemption" (Sweet 1986: 383). He goes on to say that just as Solomon used the gold of Ophir to build the temple, "Jerusalem and Mt. Zion, as it is written, must be rebuilt by Christian hands" (op. cit.).[33] The gold and other precious metals filled the coffers of Spain. Paolo Emilio Taviani, the great Italian biographer of Columbus, noted that the crown "in the century following the discovery, received in precious metals alone exactly one million seven hundred and thirty-three thousand maravedis for every maravedi invested in financing Columbus's voyage" (1985: 500)!

Yet gold had much more than monetary meaning; it was no mere metal. According to popular alchemical theories circulating at the time, gold *grows* or matures (Milhou 1983: 125–28; Phillips and Phillips 1992: 219). Metal begins as one substance then, depending on the environment in which it occurs and the forces acting upon it, reaches different stages of perfection and purity, with gold being the purest form.[34] This is not unlike Aristotle's theory of reproductive fluid; that fluid begins as blood and goes through a series of concoctions whereby breast milk and menstrual blood are of impure form while semen is the most fully concocted, active agent capable of being the vehicle for the transmission of the eternal soul.[35] Since gold was thought to "increase and multiply" the wealth of those who had it, perhaps it is behind the custom, in some societies, of throwing gold at weddings to wish the new couple (re)productive success.[36] In any case, the Torrid Zone or belt of the Tropics, formerly thought to be uninhabitable, was the place believed to be the most conducive to maturing and purifying metal into gold—the heat of the sun being the major agent in this process, along with the spin of the earth which caused it to collect.[37] Gold had already been found in Africa and so it was assumed it would be found at the same latitude in "India," where d'Ailly said there were mountains of gold.

THE PROPHETIC ROLE OF THE DISCOVERY

The selections in the *Libro* were meant as evidence pointing to the discovery's essential role in the unfolding of biblical prophecy. That is, it was no mere accident, but an integral part of providential history. Not surprisingly, Columbus began to see his own role as prophesied and divinely inspired, most tellingly in the way he saw himself as the intended of prophecies in Revelation (21: 1) and Isaiah (65: 17; 66: 22): "Of the new heaven and earth which our Lord made, as St. John wrote in the Apocalypse, after he

[33] See Thacher 1904, vol. II: 696.

[34] I am indebted to Nicolas Wey-Gomez for pointing me in this direction.

[35] See Aristotle's *Generation of Animals* for his theory of reproduction.

[36] That, at least, was the case in the Turkish village where I lived for two years conducting anthropological research (Delaney 1991: 140).

[37] Jaime Ferrer, an advisor to the Queen, told Columbus, "gold was found most abundantly near the equator where people had dark skins and where the spin of the earth caused it to collect" (West 1992a: 275, n.79). See also Nicolas Wey-Gomez (n.d.).

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had spoken it by the mouth of Isaiah, He made me the messenger thereof, and showed me where to go" (*Letter* October 1500 [Morison 1942, I: 69]).[38] He had also long been captivated by the prophecy in Seneca's *Medea*, and had highlighted it in his own copy: "An age will come when the Ocean will break his chains, a huge land will lie revealed, Tiphys will discover new worlds, and Thule no longer be ultimate." He cites the original in the *Libro* and then repeats it, emending it by adding a phrase that a *new* sailor, like Tiphys, will discover a new world and the island of Thule will no longer be ultimate.[39] The odd metaphor of an ocean locked by chains provides a glimpse into the symbolic repertoire of Columbus and his contemporaries who thought that he had been given the key.

He tells the sovereigns that God had given him the ability to acquire the skills necessary for maritime exploration—astronomy and astrology, geography, and arithmetic, and map reading[40]—and had also "opened my mind to the fact that it would be possible to sail from here to the Indies, and he opened my will to desire to accomplish the project. This was the fire[41] that burned within me when I came to visit Your Highnesses." Immediately thereafter, however, he claims, "All the sciences which I mentioned above were of no use to me. Quotations from learned opinions were no help." Instead, it was "the Holy Spirit who encouraged me with a radiance of marvelous illumination from his sacred Holy Scriptures" (*Libro* 1500–1502 [West and Kling 1991: 105]). He judiciously added that the faith the Sovereigns had placed in him also encouraged him and made the journey both possible and successful. The *Libro de las profecías*, then, can be seen as his effort to encourage and hasten them in the further project of Jerusalem.

In late fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century Spain there was a widely circulated notion of "a last world emperor" who would fulfill what was known as the *unum ovile et unun pastor* prophecy of John, 10: 16: "And other sheep I have, which are not of this fold: them also I must bring, and they shall hear my voice; and there shall be *one fold, and one shepherd*" (my emphasis). This emperor would fight the Antichrist and reestablish Christian sovereignty over Jerusalem and the Holy Land. As noted, Columbus believed

[38] The letter was written to Dona Juana de Torres, sister of Luis. The full text can be found in a number of places. I have cited from Morison (1963: 289–98), and Thacher (1903, Vol. 2: 423–38). The latter includes the Spanish text.

[39] I have cited Morison's translation (1942: 79) because it is more familiar to Americans than that in either Rusconi (1997: 291) or West and Kling (1991: 227). Columbus said he had been to Thule (Iceland), but the truth of this is debated. Next to Columbus's highlighted passage in *Medea*, Ferdinand added a *postille* saying: "This prophecy was fulfilled by my father . . . the Admiral in the year 1492" (Morison 1942, I: 69). There is a copy in Harvard library.

[40] For the skills necessary and the instruments available at the time, see Morison (1942, vol. I: 240–53).

[41] The word "fire" means more than simply "passion." According to West, it is a "typical medieval symbol for the Holy Spirit as derived from the fire which came down at Pentacost" (1987: 54, n. 6)

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this ruler was to come from Spain; in the *Libro* he included a letter from Genoese Ambassadors to the Spanish Court in 1492: "we did read that Joachim the Abbot of Southern Italy has foretold that he is to come from Spain who is to recover again the fortunes of Zion" (*Libro* 1500–1502; West and Kling 1991: 239]).[42] Sometime between 1569 and 1576, ten pages of the *Libro*, directly following this prophecy, were deliberately cut out, for the historian Ambrosio de Morales who saw the manuscript during that time admonished, "Whoever removed these pages acted badly, for this was the best prophecy in the book."[43]

REACTIONS AND THEIR DISCONTENTS

The *Libro de las profecías* is clearly a work that took a great deal of energy, time, and devotion, and Columbus clearly thought long and cared deeply about it. But if these religious ideas were an intimate part of Columbus's understanding of "the Enterprise of the Indies," why are they not better known among the general public?[44] Why has the *Libro* "remained unstudied and untranslated for nearly 500 years" (West 1992a: 272)? Indeed, when Delno West found a copy at Firestone Library at Princeton in 1984, the pages were still uncut! The lack of attention can be attributed, in part, to the delay in its publication, but, as I shall argue, only in part.

After the death of Columbus's sons in the sixteenth century, the manuscript seems to have moved a number of times, and ultimately it was housed with other Columbus documents in the library of the cathedral in Seville, where it remains (see Rusconi 1997: 10–12 for a brief history of its movements). In the following centuries, the manuscript was known—certainly by those who oversaw the collection—but little was done to publicize it. Finally, early in the nineteenth century, Martin Fernández de Navarrete published a short description of it in his edition of Columbus documents.[45] Washington Irving, author of *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow* and *Rip Van Winkle*, was fascinated by Columbus, and Navarrete granted him access to this material. The result was Irving's 1827 multi-volume *The Life and Voyages of Christopher*

[42] It is immaterial whether the foregoing prophecy actually came from Joachim or from Arnold of Villanova's rendition of him, as Phelan suggests (1970: 136, n. 27; see also Flint 1992: 192); the important point is that many at the time believed it.

[43] See Rusconi (1997: 9). Regarding these prophecies, he says, "It makes no sense to enumerate the many hypotheses that have been advanced without documentary support" (n. 49).

[44] No one I have told about this remarkable book, including some scholars of Hispanic and related studies, had ever heard of it and all were very surprised to learn of it. The work of scholars who have written about the *Libro de las profecías* and Columbus's religious, even apocalyptic ideas seems to have reached only a very specialized audience.

[45] See de Navarette's *Colección* (1825). A decade later, Alexander von Humboldt published a five-volume study of Columbus's voyages wherein he "recognized the 'persuasive force' of a 'mystical theology' . . . yet was basically puzzled by this 'strange combination of ideas and sentiments in a superior man" who was not only courageous, of high intelligence but also practical in business (Watts 1985: 79).

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Columbus. By the 1866 edition Irving had perused the manuscript of the *Libro*, and although that was not his focus, he noted: "It is essential to a full comprehension of the character and motives of Columbus, that this visionary project should be borne in recollection. It will be found to have entwined itself in his mind with his enterprise of discovery, and that a holy crusade was to be the consummation of those divine purposes, for which he considered himself selected by Heaven as an agent" (Irving 1866, I: 286). But that same year a very different reaction to the document began to make its appearance. Henry Harrisse, a French-American scholar, wrote in his *Notes on Columbus* the following:

> It must also be stated that the great navigator, after having made for many years a display of his cosmographical erudition, when old and somewhat insane, if we may judge from his *Libro de las profecías* which forcibly reminds every one of Newton's similar condition when he wrote his *Observations upon the Prophecies and Apocalypse*, denied that he ever borrowed any notions from the old authors (1866: 84).
> It is in this deplorable lucubration, which I sincerely hope will never be published in full, that Columbus continually invokes the Bible and the Prophets, claiming to owe all he knew and all he had accomplished to inspiration from on high,—having been chosen by the Almighty to discover the New World before the whole earth came to an end, which momentous event was certainly to take place within the next fifty years (ibid.: 156).

Harrisse must not have read the manuscript carefully, given that Columbus calculates the date for the end to be 155 (not 50) years away. In any case, Harrisse's assessment must have impeded its publication and had a chilling effect on anyone wishing to undertake a study of it. It was not translated from its original mix of Latin and Spanish into any modern language, or published, until 1894. The first English translation was published in 1991, just in time for the Quincentennial![46]

Despite Harrisse's negative assessment, the Quadricentennial (1892–1893) was primarily a celebratory event that focused on the great "Discovery" and Columbus's skill as a mariner rather than his religious beliefs and motivations. It fostered renewed interest and a spate of books appeared that helped to dispel some of the romantic legends about Columbus. Here I will focus on a few representative examples (see Keen 1992[1959] and West 1987 for fuller discussion). Two general reactions to the *Libro*, not specific to any particular nationality, emerged in the late nineteenth century and endured into the twentieth. One, like Harrisse, sees the *Libro* as the product of a weakened mind or

[46] Columbus knew and wrote in Latin and Spanish, rarely in Portuguese or Italian. The first publication (1894) of the *Libro*, however, was an Italian translation included in the *Raccolta di documenti e studi pubblicati della R. Commissione Colombiana*, a collection of Columbus's writings edited by Cesare de Lollis. The English versions are: Brigham (1991), West and Kling (1991), and Rusconi (1997). Most of my citations are taken from West and Kling, except where noted. West's introductory articles provide excellent background to the religious meanings and significance.

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evidence of senility; the other acknowledges the document and Columbus's motives, but then lays them to one side.

Henry Vignaud, like Harrisse a French American, was one of the most important detractors of Columbus during the early twentieth century. He viewed Columbus's belief in divine inspiration as "an order of ideas that permits no critical discussion and one into which we will not enter here; it suffices to have mentioned it" (Watts 1985: 83, n. 20). These types of reactions remind me very much of the way scholars reacted to the publication of Freud's *Moses and Monotheism*, namely that it was an embarrassment (to them), evidence of Freud's advancing age, a veiled statement about his religiousness or his Jewish identity, or about his own Oedipal relationship with his father. I, on the other hand, feel the book is key to understanding Freud's entire corpus (Delaney 1998: 190ff). Similarly with the *Libro de las profecías*—I believe it opens up a dimension of Columbus that clarifies rather than obscures his vision.

A more positive reading at mid-century is that by Harvard historian Samuel Eliot Morison in his superb, classic study, *Admiral of the Ocean Sea* (1942). While he barely mentions the *Libro*, he does comment on Columbus's ultimate goal to liberate Jerusalem. Regarding Columbus's diary entry for 26 December 1492, the day the Santa Maria grounded, Morison says: "There can be no doubt of Columbus's sincerity in this matter. Even in such a crisis of the voyage his thoughts ran to Jerusalem regained" (1942, I: 392). Despite this, and that almost every chapter is headed by a biblical quotation, Morison's interest was in Columbus's skill as mariner not as prophet. Morison was part of the Harvard Columbus Expedition 1939–1940 that used the *Diario* to follow as closely as possible the itinerary of the first voyage.

More recently, Italian scholar Granzotto acknowledges the *Libro* and Columbus's goal of recapturing Jerusalem, but he feels that he was "lost in dreams and drifted farther and farther away from reality . . . because of his advancing age, his infirmity, and his continual disappointments—Columbus's imagination turned more and more into a vehicle for mad ravings. In his mild delirium he came to believe that he had been chosen by God for his exploits" (1985: 246). Another Italian, Taviani, has no problem with Columbus's religiosity or with the idea of the Crusade to retake Jerusalem. He says it was part of the spirit of the age and nothing unusual (1985[1974]: 79, 113). On the other hand, Spanish historian Fernández-Armesto gives short shrift to the religious side of Columbus and envisions him as a "socially ambitious, socially awkward parvenu; the autodidact, intellectually aggressive but easily cowed; the embittered escapee from distressing realities; the adventurer inhibited by fear of failure" (1991: viii) whose overriding goal was to acquire wealth and establish a noble lineage. A more extreme view "branded him as cruel and greedy, and linked him to the process whereby 'the West has ravaged the world for five hundred years, under the flag of a master-slave

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theory which in our finest hour of hypocrisy was called the white man's burden'" (Keen 1992: lii, citing Konig).

While Columbus's contemporaries acknowledged his sincere religiosity and "noticed immediately the eschatological significance Columbus attached to his discoveries" (West 1987: 49), scholars since the Enlightenment seem to have had a hard time dealing with, or accepting, the vision or version of Columbus as a millennialist because it conflicts with both the romantic, heroic image promoted by Washington Irving and that of Morison's scientific mariner.

"None of these scholars took seriously the possibility that Columbus's personal spirituality or the spirituality of his age might also have inspired him to undertake his voyages of discovery" (Watts 1985: 83), and even less that the conquest of Jerusalem was his true goal. But if we are ever to understand the man and his mission from *his own point of view*, we need to attend to this. Beginning at mid-century and increasing with the approach of the Quincentennial and the millennium, a few scholars became interested in Columbus's millennial, apocalyptic views. It began, perhaps, with Phelan's *The Millennial Kingdom of the Franciscans in the New World* (1956, revised in 1970), and continued with Alain Milhou's *Colon y su mentalidad mesianica en el ambiente franciscanista español* (1983), still unavailable in English, and several publications by Pauline Moffitt Watts (1985; 1992; 1993). Others have made significant contributions to this scholarship and I have benefited greatly from their work,[47] but their publications have typically appeared in specialized journals (e.g., *Medievalia et Humanistica*, *The Catholic Historical Review*) and series like *Repetorium Columbianum* that are rarely consulted by the general population.

CRITICAL ISSUES

I now wish to critically address three problems in the various readings and interpretations, including sympathetic ones, of the *Libro de profecías*. The first is the inability of many academics to see religion, especially its apocalyptic forms, as a constitutive element in worldviews that have real impact on people's lives and historical events. The second problem I call "the humanist convention," which assumes that human beings are always and everywhere the same, that culture is epiphenomenal. This view, I suggest, has allowed critics to blame Columbus for the consequences of the "encounter" rather than examining crucial beliefs and assumptions common to his culture—many of which still persist in our own. The third problem follows directly from the second; that is, even those historians most sympathetic to Columbus

[47] For example, Hector Avalos, Kay Brigham, Valerie Flint, Abbas Hamdani, Carla and William Phillips, Roberto Rusconi, Leonard Sweet, and Delno West and August Kling. I have had to leave to one side here a number of scholars writing about Columbus whose interest and focus are not his religiosity or the *Libro*.

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have failed to make palpable his worldview and cultural milieu, that is, to "restore the radical presentness of the medieval past" (Menocal 1994: 18) so we might gain a vivid, even visceral understanding of how it affected his actions. In the following sections I address each of these problems in turn.

(1) Religion

Academics trained when a modernist, progressivist worldview prevailed assumed that reason and science would supercede myth, magic, and religion and make them irrelevant. Indeed, many of them believed that religion would be dead by the end of the twentieth century. They tended to dismiss religion or, in a Marxist or capitalist mode, interpreted it as a cover for more 'real,' practical, economic, and political interests, or, in a psychoanalytic mode, as a mass delusion assuaging the thought of death. Not surprisingly, they have been mystified by the phenomenal growth in religious affiliations and conflicts, in particular by the rise of fundamentalism in the United States and elsewhere.

Problems also arise when religion is treated as a separate and circumscribed domain of life analogous to the supposedly separate domains of economics, politics, and kinship (family), rather than as an encompassing worldview that affects all aspects of social life. As a separate domain it can easily be set to one side. Furthermore, studies of religion have tended to focus on beliefs, practices, sacred texts, rituals, and religious personnel relating to people's private spiritual concerns, rather than analyzing the cosmological orientation and the way it affects the interpretation of historical events. Although Clifford Geertz noted more than a quarter-century ago, "religion tunes human action to an envisaged cosmic order and projects images of cosmic order onto the plane of human experience" (1973: 90), he said that this dynamic relationship was hardly ever investigated, especially, I would add, in the West. There seems to be (or have been) a taboo against critically analyzing the master narrative of Christianity and its entanglements with secular life and institutions.

Another aspect of the modernist view of religion is the widespread acceptance of the idea that there are many religions, and that one can even choose which to *believe* in. For example, Valerie Flint's observation that Columbus *chose* the thought-world he moved in (1992: 195) represents a fundamental misunderstanding of the core of the "imaginative landscape" she tries to establish. Religion is held to be a domain that one can step into or out of at will, that it does not envelope one's life. This was hardly the understanding of religion during the time of Columbus, and it is still not a useful way to understand a wide variety of religious beliefs, practices, and cultures today. Such a view would have kept me from comprehending the lives of the Turkish villagers with whom I lived for several years conducting my anthropological research (Delaney 1991). But I think it also distorts the reality of our contemporary

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society, for despite the "separation of church and state," Christian concepts and institutions continue to exert tremendous power in ostensibly secular domains.

The modern understanding of religion did not fully emerge until the late nineteenth century when scholars began to attach "-ism" to make substantives out of adjectives—Buddhism rather than Buddhist, Hinduism rather than Hindu—thus making a 'religion' by separating out the spiritual elements from a whole way of life or culture that included ethnicity, language, food, dress, and other practices (see Smith 1962; Rawlings 2002).

In reality, however, science, technology, and religion can be and are easily and seamlessly combined. For example, I found Turkish villagers, while mostly illiterate and uneducated, could discuss, understand, make, use, and fix a variety of modern machines and equipment including automobiles, telephones, and television sets; they could talk about international and national politics with more sophistication than most Americans, and they understood the economic networks with which their lives were entangled. They would appear to have a thoroughly modern consciousness. But staying long, getting to know them, and "pushing the envelope," revealed to me how, at a much deeper level, they lived within a completely Islamic cosmology or worldview. That worldview encompassed their lives, it was the context within which they lived, and it provided answers to the perennial questions: who are we, why are we here, where are we going? It also affected the way they dressed, the food they ate, their practices of personal hygiene, the way they moved, and their spatial and temporal orientations (see Delaney 1991). It was inseparable from the rest of their lives, not something they practiced only on Fridays, the Muslim holy day, or by keeping the fast of Ramadan. Though they evinced varying degrees of devoutness, secularism was not an option. They believed their views were self-evident to any thinking person and they could not understand why I could not accept Islam and, in their terms, submit and become Muslim. Islam, to them, is not one religion among others; it is "Religion." It is the one true religion given in the beginning to Abraham, and Muhammad was merely a prophet recalling people to that original faith. They had heard of Christianity, of course, and questioned me about it. But to them it was not a separate, equally valid religion,[48] but rather a distortion of the one true word, the one true faith. Just so did Columbus and his contemporaries view the *sectas* of the Jews and Muslims. His statement about freeing the Indians from *error* shows that religion was not a matter of choice but of right or wrong—there was only one right way. Indeed, they really had no conception of alternatives. The Reformation had not yet begun, and Judaism and Islam

[48] The idea of *separate* plural religions that are equally valid is a very modern, Western, liberal view that is not shared by much of the world, including devout persons of the monotheistic religions.

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were seen not as different religions but as erroneous, heretical sects. Of course, there were people skeptical of specific aspects of this worldview, and some were less devout and fastidious in their practices and customs (cf. Edwards 1988), but secularism, and with it the confinement of religion to its own domain, was not an alternative, and atheism even less so.

When one understands that there was only one "religion," one true way to achieve salvation, one cosmological picture within which one's life and aspirations were made meaningful, it becomes understandable why, if one was compassionate, the conversion of others was an urgent responsibility. This is not to deny that Christianity was also a means for Queen Isabela and King Ferdinand to unify their kingdoms of Castile, Aragon, and Leon into a more centralized state—one motive does not cancel the other.

While the conversion or expulsion of Jews and Muslims was seen as necessary to establish one Christian nation, the methods used in pursuing this goal varied. In some areas there were mass baptisms but without any theological instruction—a situation in which the community could continue *sub rosa* to follow their own practices such as daily prayer and abstaining from pork. Eventually, however, there were demands for conformity in the practices of everyday life—"in your dress and your shoes and your adornment, in eating and at your tables and in cooking meat as they [the Christians] cook it; in your manner of walking, in giving and receiving, and, more than anything, in your speech, forgetting in so far as you can the Arabic tongue" (Rawlings 2002: 17, citing Elliott 1989: 53). This is very close to the way I have described the impact of Islam on Turkish village life (Delaney 1991). "Religion" in both cases meant not simply a set of beliefs, but modes of living. Precisely because such habits are very difficult to change, some in fifteenth-century Spain preferred exile to conversion.

(2) The Humanist Convention

The anthropological critique of this position has been insistent: "[T]he image of a constant human nature independent of time, place, and circumstance, of studies and professions, transient fashions and temporary opinions, may be an illusion, that what man is may be so entangled with where he is, who he is, and what he believes that it is inseparable from them" (Geertz 1973: 35). In other words, there is no backstage where we can go to find the generic human; humans are formed within specific cultures. This does not mean that cultures are totally closed or that there is no overlap; one can learn another culture—that is, indeed, what anthropologists do during fieldwork. But if we are to understand Columbus (or anyone else), we must attempt insofar as is possible to reconstruct the world in which he lived. While some historians writing about Columbus appear to do this, they still, in my reading, project a modern consciousness onto him, leaving the impression that the time and place are merely "transient fashions." They acknowledge that his world was

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different, but the differences are presented primarily as differences of fact rather than feeling and perception and, thus, they fail to give a sense of the way in which the worldview affected both what he was seeing and his interpretation of it. Boas, a founder of American anthropology, is said to be the originator of a view that has become commonplace among anthropologists: "The seeing eye is the organ of tradition," that is, we see what our culture has trained us to see. What, therefore, did Columbus 'see'? How did he perceive the world and how did that image affect his enterprise and its interpretation?

(3) The Geoeschatology of Columbus's World

Columbus lived in a Christian, Catholic world; it enveloped his life and situated it in the widest cosmological sense. Christianity provided both spiritual guidance and orientation in time and space, what Delno West in relation to Columbus termed "geoeschatology."[49] Not only did this worldview provide the terms for the conceptualization of the enterprise, but also for interpreting what he saw, what he found, and its significance. At the same time, he was an experienced sailor and had traveled a great deal. His more scientific knowledge about the *physical* earth and navigation did not conflict with the religious worldview, but rather was easily contained within it. The science-religion conflict is a modern one, born of a conception that they are mutually exclusive.

Contrary to the popular Gershwin song ("They all laughed at Christopher Columbus when he said the world was round"), Columbus and many of his contemporaries knew that the earth was round, not flat (see Russell 1991).[50] The primary issue in the disputes between Columbus and the scientists and theologians who formed the committees to study his plan was not about whether the earth was flat or round, but about its circumference and the width of the Ocean Sea and, thus, whether it was passable (see Figure 1). The committees repeatedly rejected Columbus's plan *not* because it challenged Christian cosmology (it did not) but because they thought his calculations were wrong. According to his calculations Columbus believed that the ocean was much narrower than did the learned scientists and theologians.

[49] Others, in trying to articulate the conjuncture of time and space within a particular religious or philosophically constructed worldview, have coined "chronogeography" (e.g., Bertrand Russell in Woodward 1985: 519); and "geosophy" (Wright 1966: 83). The latter term is picked up and expanded by Gillis (2004).

[50] The erroneous notion that it was Columbus who proved the earth was round is still current in popular culture, and indeed I heard it in 2004 at an academic conference! Russell claims that the "flat earth" theory was a nineteenth-century invention by scholars trying to distance themselves from the "irrationality" of the medieval world. Most of Columbus's contemporaries knew it was a sphere, though, to be sure, some of the *mappaemundi* (world maps), while round, could imply circularity and not necessarily sphericity (see also Andrews 1926). Ironically, during the third voyage Columbus decided it was pear-shaped with Paradise at the tip like a woman's nipple (Columbus, 18 Oct. 1498; see Morison 1963: 286; Jane 1988, vol. II: 30ff; West 1992a: 275).

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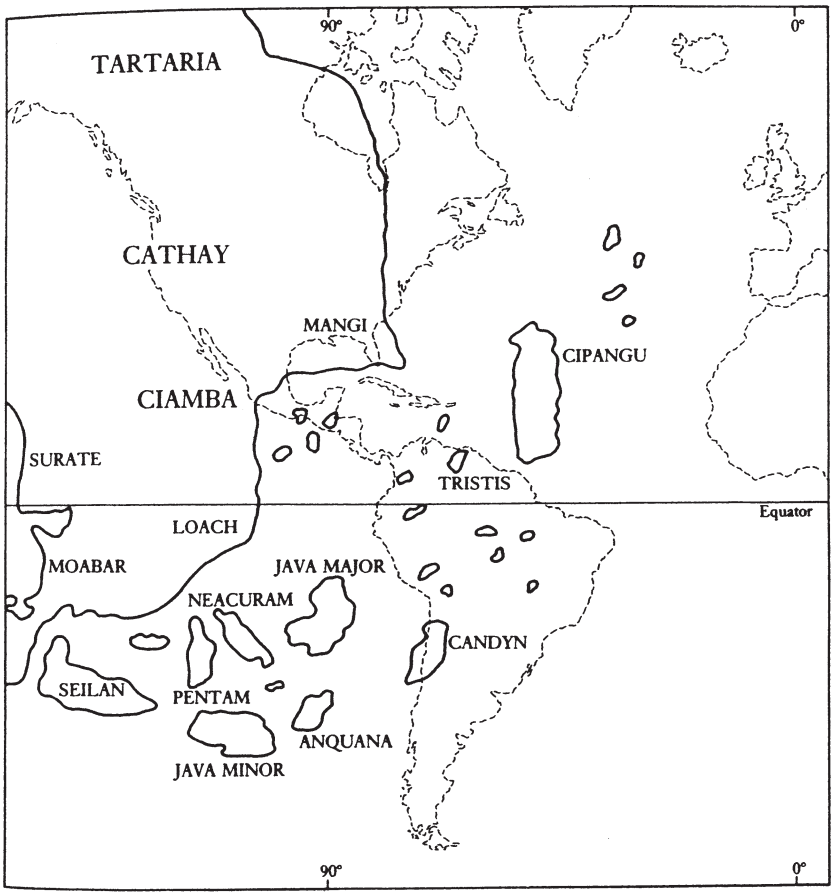


FIGURE 1 What Columbus thought he would find versus what is there. From *Columbus*, by Felipe Fernandez-Armesto (1991). Used with permission of David Higham Associates.

Informing Columbus's views were the theories and methods of Pierre d'Ailly (1350–1420), an influential astronomer/astrologer[51] and important cardinal who, as emissary to the Council of Constance in 1414, helped to heal the Great Schism between rival popes—an internal division often seen as presaging the "end of times." Columbus avidly read d'Ailly's *Imago mundi*, which cited the authoritative opinions of Bacon, Aristotle, Seneca,

[51] D'Ailly believed in a universe in which the celestial influence of the planets and stars affected all phenomena—not just an individual's life but human history. D'Ailly even drew up Christ's horoscope (Smoller 1994: 7)!

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and Pliny that the ocean did not cover as much of the earth's surface as many believed. Rather than a conflict between science and religion, d'Ailly's work shows that, at least for a time, the two were intertwined.

Columbus also drew on the Bible (i.e., to calculate the time ships took to reach the gold mines of Ophir and return to Jerusalem) and the Apocrypha, "where it is written that six-sevenths of the world is dry (therefore inhabitable) and only one-seventh covered by water (2 Esdras 6: 42)" (Watts 1985: 82). All of these implied that Asia was more extensive and the Ocean not so wide as had been thought. From his sailing experience and his study of these and other references, "Columbus estimated that he had only to sail approximately twenty-five hundred miles westward from the Canary Islands in order to reach the Orient" (ibid.). Rather than an insurmountable barrier, Columbus seemed to think of the Ocean Sea as a different kind of highway that would link Europe and Asia (West 1992a: 260).

Although Columbus believed the earth was round, he still lived in a Ptolemaic, geocentric universe; Copernicus's views had not yet been published and Galileo was not yet born. In Columbus's universe, the sun, moon, planets, and stars revolved around the earth, suspended in transparent crystalline spheres, the outermost controlled by the prime mover, a view that made it acceptable to the Church. These words do not, however, convey much of a sense of how people felt. Andrés Bernáldez, a contemporary and friend of Columbus, does it better. It is worth quoting at length a passage from his early sixteenth-century *Historia de los Reyes Católicos*:

> In the name of God almighty. There was a man of Genoa, a dealer in printed books, trading in this land of Andalusia, whom they called Christoval de Colón, a man of very high intellect without much book-learning, very skilful in the art of Cosmography and of the divisions of the world; who perceived, by what he read in Ptolemy, and in other books, and by his own discernment, how and in what wise is formed the world into which we are born and in which we move. This he placed within the sphere of the heavens, so that it touches them upon no side, nor has aught of firmness to rest upon, but is only earth and water globed by heat within the *hollow vault of the sky*.[52]

This was, clearly, a much smaller and cozier universe than the one we are familiar with. There was no notion of an expanding universe, "light years," or the infinity of space and time, let alone "black holes," instead the earth floats in a hollow but *enclosed* vault, surrounded by heat (presumably from the sun), and the spheres that held the planets and stars.

A geocentric worldview did not impede Columbus's nautical calculations since the heavens had been plotted and the movements of the stars were known, yet, according to Morison, "(C)elestial navigation formed no part of the professional pilot's or master's training in Columbus's day, or for long

[52] The *Historia* was not printed until the mid-nineteenth century, but manuscript copies existed. The English translation of the passage is from Young (1893, my emphasis, n.p.).

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after his death" (1942, vol. I: 243). Instead, Columbus depended on what is called "dead reckoning" which involved little more than a compass, compass card, and some way of calculating the speed of the vessel and distance, none of which were very accurate at the time.[53]

However, in plotting how to get from one known place to another he also used portolan charts, which were fairly accurate maps depicting landmasses and coastal outlines, currents and winds, but were hardly useful in uncharted waters. These were his practical maps, used for the craft of navigation. But other maps, known as *mappaemundi* (world maps), furnished the religious significance of geography—they "were meant to illustrate biblical geosophy rather than provide precise locations or directions ... they lack a single point of temporal or spatial perspective that would allow the viewer to differentiate between near and far, or between then and now" (Gillis 2004: 39). They were never intended to be used as practical maps or even to portray an accurate picture of the physical world; instead they were "the cartographic equivalent of narrative medieval pictures" and were even referred to as histories (Woodward 1985: 514). They portrayed significant events in the history of Christianity from Creation to the Last Judgment, along with schematic geographic locations. Woodward, an eminent historian of cartography, had earlier moved away from the modernist progressivist narrative and, perhaps unwittingly, taken a (cultural) anthropological turn—studying these maps not as precursors of modern maps—"repositories of then current geographical knowledge"—but *in their own terms* "as illustrated histories or moralized, didactic displays in a geographical setting" (ibid.: 515), where time and space were represented simultaneously.

The best known of the medieval *mappaemundi* are the T-O maps (Figure 2),[54] which show a world consisting of three continents often symbolized by the three sons of Noah: Japheth = Europe, Shem = Asia, and Ham = Africa). These continents formed the *ecumene* (the inhabited world) and were surrounded by the world ocean (see Andrews 1926: 69; also Campbell 1987; Westrem 2002; Woodward 1987). The T-O maps with the three-part world may be one reason that Columbus was unable to "see" what he had found;

[53] See Laura Ackerman Smoller (1994: 12ff) for ways medieval astrologers understood and plotted the movement of the stars. See Morison (1942, vol. I: 243–53) for the method of "dead reckoning" and other mariner's skills available to and used by Columbus.

[54] "In the seventh century Isidore Bishop of Seville drew a world map that shaped European geographical concepts for nine hundred years. It is simply a "T" inside and "O." The upper half of the circle represented Asia, the lower two quarters Europe and Africa. The crossing of the "T"—the center of the earth—as Jerusalem, the spiritual and historical center of Christian culture. The expansion of geographical knowledge broke down this world concept. How difficult the new concepts were to accept is shown in this Florentine book, published slightly more than three years after Columbus had returned. The Isidorian world map is still present in abstract form, and Bishop Lilio is skeptical about news of discoveries, 'unless anyone believes very extraordinary news that the King of Spain, so they say, is sending ships these days to explore new shores'" (Hough 1980: 33; the embedded quote is of Lilio).

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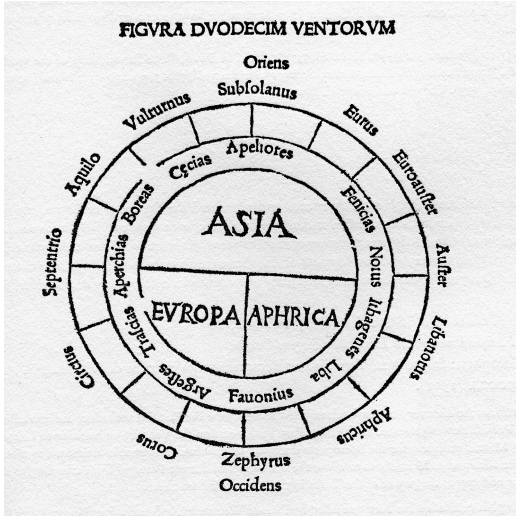


FIGURE 2 Example of a T-O Map. From, *De Origine & laudibus scientiarum*, by Bishop Zachaias Lilio (Florence 1496). Used with permission of The John Carter Brown Library at Brown University.

since there was no place for a four-part world in his imagination, he struggled valiantly to fit the islands of the Caribbean and the north coast of South America into his cultural model. It took quite some time before people in Europe were able to assimilate the notion that there were *four* parts to the world, not just three.

Jerusalem was not always in the center of the *mappaemundi*, but became so from the thirteenth century on, the period relevant for Columbus's worldview (Woodward 1985: 515). Nevertheless, Jerusalem had long been imagined as the (spiritual) center of the world, the *axis mundi*—the world's navel (cf. Flint 1992: 3–41). This was important both because it is the place where so many biblical events took place and because for Columbus and his contemporaries it was the place where prophesied events *will* take place (as it is for today's fundamentalists). But first, it had (has) to be back into Christian hands.

If the medieval maps gave a sense of the spatial configuration of the world, the temporal element was provided by the Christian apocalyptic worldview taken from Revelation. In this view, preceding the end of the world will be plagues and pestilences, earthquakes, and other unusual and horrific natural disasters. The Antichrist, associated with the "Whore of Babylon," will try to dissuade believers from their faith. The faithful must expend efforts to convert the Jews and other unbelievers to Christianity, recapture Jerusalem, and rebuild the Temple before Christ can come again.

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Apocalypticism has always been a strong strand of monotheistic religious traditions. In Christianity, German theologian Kasemann proclaims that the "apocalyptic was the mother of all Christian theology" (quoted in McGinn 1979: 1), though more prominent at some times than at others. In the medieval period it was quite widespread, especially among certain groups such as the Franciscans. This was the group Columbus was most associated with, beginning, perhaps, from the time when he lived with his wife Felipa Perestrella y Moniz on Porto Santo, where his son Diego was born. It is known that a Franciscan friary was nearby (West and Kling 1991: 56). His association with the Franciscans becomes better known from the time he arrived as a widower in Spain in 1485, when it is believed he called at the monastery of La Rabida with young Diego in tow. It seems highly likely that he stayed there for some time and discussed his plans for the voyage, because a resident monk, Fray Antonio de Marchena, arranged for Columbus's first meeting with Queen Isabela. Another monk at La Rabida, Fray Juan Perez, became Columbus's closest friend and personal counselor. In 1491 when Columbus's plan had been rejected, seemingly for the last time, and he planned to try his luck with the King of France, Perez arranged another audience with the Queen who, in turn, asked for one more assessment from the committee. When they rejected it again and Columbus had left the Spanish court determined to present it to the Kings of England or France, Luis de Santangel stepped in and persuaded Ferdinand and Isabela to reconsider. They did so, and quickly dispatched a courier to command that Columbus return to them. Perez also performed the mass on 2 August 1492 just before the departure from Palos. Upon his return from the first voyage Columbus stayed at La Rabida for several weeks, told Perez about the marvelous things he had seen, and tried to convince him join the second voyage to see to the conversion of the Indians (West and Kling 1991: 56–57).

The Franciscans, influenced by the views of the medieval abbot Joachim of Fiore, elaborated the apocalyptic schema by outlining three stages or ages: "The age from Adam to Christ corresponded to God the Father. This was the layman's church. The age from Christ to 1260 corresponded to God the Son. This was the priest's church. Joachim prophesied that a third age of the Holy Ghost would begin in 1260. This was to be the friars' Church" (Phelan 1970: 14). The friars' church would be a period of peace and apostolic poverty in which all people would lead a contemplative life. Some Joachites believed the third age, also known as the Age of the Spirit or, significantly, the Age of Gold, had begun in 1254/5. In any case, Columbus believed he was living in the third age and "the eschatological clock was ticking."

CRITICAL ISSUES REVISITED

We can never know for sure what Columbus was like, what he was thinking, or what motivated him; we cannot get into his mind. But meaning is not

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something hidden inside the mind or brain; it is constructed from the symbolic repertoire available in a culture, and "culture is public because meaning is" (Geertz 1973: 12). Thus, it can be investigated. "[F]rom the fourth century until the middle of the nineteenth the Christian religion was the principal force molding the European and American mind. . . . [that] the Church proved herself, when not the *mater*, at least the *matrix* of Western thought" (White 1942: 45).[55] Christianity provided the dominant symbolic repertoire and the narrative pattern within which the symbols derived their meaning.

Acknowledging the contributions of cultural anthropologists on this issue, the well-known historian, William McNeill, wrote a book called *Mythistory* to show the kinship between myth and history. For the past to become history, he says, "facts have to be put together into a pattern that is understandable. . . [and furthermore] the arrangement of facts to make history involve(d) subjective judgments and intellectual choices" (1986: 4–5); it is the mythical substrate that most often provides the pattern that determines the arrangement. Myth, in this sense, is not about false things, but is the widest cosmological context in which people situate and interpret their lives. As anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski said long ago, "myth is not merely a story told, but a reality lived" (1954: 100). While Malinowski was speaking of the Trobriand Islanders among whom he was living, it is just as applicable to Columbus, and to our own society. Religious myth has social implications; conversely social events are made to speak to religious themes.[56] The Christian myth is not about just the past, but the future.

In his brilliant article "Christian Myth, Christian History," Lynn White who, prior to McNeill coined the term "myth-history," claimed that "Christianity above all other religions has rashly insisted that its myth really happened in time. It was not merely a dramatization of the common denominator of all religious experience; it was likewise a sequence of historic events" (1942: 155). One of the characteristics of living within a Christian worldview, White says, is its bifocal nature—every event has double significance. A Christian lives both in time and eternity and tends to interpret things from this dual perspective of both history and myth. "Myth is defined as the dramatization in temporal terms of things seen from the non-temporal standpoint of eternity" (White 1942: 148). Thus could Columbus imagine his discovery both as an historical feat accomplished in the year 1492 under the auspices of the Catholic monarchs *and*, more importantly, as an eschatological event that had been foretold. Once the event was situated in that context, it was reasonable to assume that certain other prophesied events would surely follow. In short,

[55] With great prescience, he goes on to say that even when not ostensibly religious the secularized versions of Christianity became the "liberal creed of the Enlightenment" (1942: 145).

[56] Western history is rarely taught this way and therefore an important door to understanding remains shut. I remember how suddenly western history began to make much more sense when, as a student at Harvard Divinity School, I took courses in Christian history.

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biblical myth informed what he saw, what he found, and what it meant. If this is the way Columbus was thinking, then what he accomplished was not so much a "discovery" but a revelation—an important step in uncovering God's plan. Perhaps it is not coincidental that Apocalypse means Revelation.

CONCLUDING POINTS

Why should we care about the thoughts and actions of a man who lived over 500 years ago? What, if anything, might it contribute to contemporary society? Situating Columbus and the encounter within a Christian apocalyptic scenario helps to relocate some of the responsibility for the consequences of the encounter. Many of us may find the scenario disturbing, even reprehensible, but we can hardly blame Columbus personally for holding it. Not only were there no viable alternatives available to him, as there are for today's fundamentalists, but he had been dead for more than six years by the time his friend Las Casas changed his views about the Indians.[57] In no way is this meant to excuse the devastation that occurred, but it broadens the terrain of the debate. To criticize and excoriate Columbus as so many have done and continue to do, ignores the cultural context in which he moved and the religious ideas that informed it.

To criticize historians for their lack of attention to this context only goes so far. Even the sympathetic commentators who have presented the religious context have failed to undertake a critical investigation of the religious ideas themselves and their destructive implications. A critical assessment of religion seems to be taboo even among secular historians. Such a critique is beyond the scope of an already long paper, but it is part of my broader project; here I will briefly indicate what I think must be done.

The millennial, apocalyptic scenario that stirred Columbus did not die with him but made the transatlantic crossing with the Puritans who founded the "New Jerusalem" in New England. Through the Puritans these ideas entered into the American mainstream where they have had a powerful grip on American imagination, helping to shape a particular vision of the place of the United States in history and the way Americans understand themselves and their destiny. For many people, the Christian myth still forms the basis for the construction of meaning and for understanding world events. Moreover, the apocalyptic strain in Christianity has been growing stronger. One need only enter a Christian bookstore to become aware of this. At the time of the first Gulf War there was an efflorescence of apocalyptic books portending the end of the world. For example, *The Rise of Babylon: Sign of*

[57] Spanish views about enslaving Indians were changing. Queen Isabela made it clear that her subjects could not be enslaved, a command that Columbus ignored with the excuse that those enslaved had resisted and been captured in war. Nevertheless, the debate between Las Casas and Sepulveda in 1550–1551, long after Columbus's death, showed that many prominent Spaniards condoned slavery.

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the End Times (Dyer 1991) asked on the front cover whether "ours could be the last generation?" Saddam Hussein was portrayed as the Antichrist and his rebuilding of Babylon was taken as a sign that Armageddon was nigh. More recently he was labeled the Evil One and Babylon was literally bombed.[58] The extraordinarily popular *Left Behind* series of Christian apocalyptic novels is clear indication that this way of thinking is alive and well in the United States.[59]

Ever since the turn of the millennium, it is becoming clearer that the Christian apocalyptic scenario is a very popular one not just for interpreting current events, but also for bringing them about. Many see the war in Iraq in this light, yet Jerusalem remains at center stage, the focus of apocalyptic desire. A small but dedicated group of Christian fundamentalists have joined with a similar group of Zionists to blow up the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, currently the site of a Muslim mosque, on which Abraham is thought to have placed his faith, so that the third temple may be built.[60] If such should come to pass, Armageddon will surely follow. We need to be asking: What is the attraction of the apocalyptic scenario? Why do some people want to be part of this cosmological but devastating drama? Do they really want to be present at the "end of days," and if so, why? Or do they assume they will be among the elect, the saved, the "raptured"? What are the social consequences of such exclusionary beliefs? Why is the next world, or heaven, seen as a better goal than making this world a haven for all? With biological, chemical, and nuclear weapons at our disposal we need to explore ways to diffuse the power of the apocalyptic myth before its destructive, self-fulfilling prophecy becomes a reality.

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[58] Biblical language, especially apocalyptic references, have been part of the Bush presidency and his 2004 reelection campaign. For example, Vice President Dick Cheney conjured fears of Armaggedon if President Kerry should be elected (*New York Times*, 19 Oct. 1904).

[59] The series of ten novels, written by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins, have together sold over 60 million copies and have often topped best seller lists.

[60] See *The End of Days: Fundamentalism and the Struggle for the Temple Mount*, by noted Israeli journalist Gershom Gorenberg (2000). Also see, "The Oslo Accords and the Temple Mount: A Case Study of the Movement for the Establishment of the Temple," a paper by Moti Inbari presented at the seventh annual conference of the Center for Millennial Studies, November 2002, and published in 2003 (Hebrew Union College Annual 74: 279–323); "Israel's Y2K Problem" by Jeffrey Goldberg (*New York Times Magazine*, 3 Oct. 1999).

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