

The Apocalypse in St. Augustine: Christopher Columbus, Religion, and the New World

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. . . I urged Your Highnesses to spend all the profits of this my enterprise on the conquest of Jerusalem and Your Highnesses laughed and said that it would please them and that even without this profit they had that desire.¹

While common pedagogy ensures that most students know the date of Christopher Columbus's first trans-Atlantic voyage, it often avoids the complex religious reasons that, in part, inspired and funded his epic endeavor. Just why did Columbus (1451-1506) sail the ocean blue in 1492? The traditional response focuses on the economic and political power struggles of late medieval Europe. Why else would this mariner set out on such a dangerous journey if wealth and influence were not the motivating factors for him and his patrons? This essay claims that the "apocalyptic imagination", which dominated late medieval culture, offers a unique perspective on Columbus and what would become the Spanish legacy in the Americas.

The first section of this study examines the origin and development of apocalyptic imagination in antiquity. The second section explores this unique worldview, which first emerged in Iran, within the context of medieval Christianity. This initial research is crucial since the apocalyptic perspective served as the foundation of the religious dynamic that inspired Columbus to seek out a new route to the East. Success in this endeavor, he contended, could then lead to the capture of Jerusalem and the return of the "Holy Land" to Christian control. The third section focuses on the years immediately preceding and following the fall of Muslim Granada in 1492 and the first voyage to the Indies. During this period Columbus, whose religious identity and sense of mission were influenced by ancient prophecies and apocalyptic Franciscan thought², gradually interpreted his role in salvation history as one who was to bring the Gospel to the ends of the earth and hasten the return of Christ as foretold in Scripture. The voyages of Columbus, the Spanish presence in their New World, and the subsequent founding of St. Augustine thus were influenced by economics and politics, but likewise were ultimately rooted in an apocalyptic fervor that came to see the Americas as the center stage of Spanish evangelization, not a distant sanctuary for religious freedom as did the later English Puritans³. The fourth section argues that the apocalyptic legacy of Columbus - be it unknown, contested, damned, praised, ignored or forgotten - includes an undeniable core of universalism⁴; it can speak to the historical experience of St. Augustine and the unrelenting hopes of many of its residents through the ages, regardless of their religious faith, ethnic background, or national origin.

The Genesis and Development of Apocalyptic Thought in Antiquity

When referring to "apocalyptic thought" through the ages, scholars of religion speak in terms of the belief in the imminent ending of world, which will be convulsed in an epic struggle between good and

¹ *The Diario of Christopher Columbus's First Voyage to America 1492-1493. Abstracted by Fray Bartlomé de las Casas. Transcribed and Translated with Notes and Commentary by Oliver Dunn and James E. Kelly, Jr.* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991), 291. I want to thank Peggy Dyess for her aid in gathering the requisite bibliographical resources for this essay. Thanks as well to Agnieszka Johnson and Katherine Wrisley for their editorial assistance.

² The classic work on this theme remains Alain Milhou, *Colón y su mentalidad mesiánica en el ambiente franciscanista español* (Valladolid: 1982). See also José Luis Mora Mérida, "Los franciscanos y Colón: mitos y misión franciscana y su influencia en los descubrimientos indios" in *Congreso de Historia del Descubrimiento: 1492-1556*, vol. 4, (1992), 593-612 and John Leddy Phelan, *The Millennial Kingdom of the Franciscans in the New World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970), 19-23.

³ On apocalyptic thought and the early English settlers in North America, see Reiner Smolinski, "Apocalypticism in Colonial North America" in *Apocalypticism in the Modern Period and the Contemporary Age*, ed. Stephen J. Stein, vol. 3 in *The Encyclopedia of Apocalypticism*, (New York: Continuum, 1999), 36-71. For a comparison between English and Spanish perspectives on the indigenous peoples in the early colonial period, see Djelal Kadir, *Columbus and the Ends of the Earth: Europe's Prophetic Rhetoric as Conquering Ideology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 137-192.

⁴ For a critique of Columbus's universalism from a post-colonial perspective, see Filipe Maia, "De-Colonizing Heaven: A De-colonial reading of Columbus' Colonial Soteriology" in *Apuntes* 31/2 (2011), 44-67. See also Kadir, *Columbus and the Ends of the Earth: Europe's Prophetic Rhetoric as Conquering Ideology*.

evil, and restored again to the faithful elect when the malevolent forces are destroyed.⁵ However, mention of the word “apocalypse” (from the Greek ἀποκάλυψις/apokálypsis; meaning a “lifting of the veil” or “revelation”) in contemporary culture often conjures up cinematic imagery of the cataclysmic destruction of the earth. Just as every story on the silver screen has an end, so too, must the world. Yes, *Apocalypse now* - indeed.⁶ Be they errant asteroids or aliens, volcanic fissures or obscure Mayan deities, someone or something somewhere wants to draw the final curtain on the world in a violent, convulsive manner. Fixation on the year 2000 and once again on 2012, thanks to opportunistic and erroneous interpretations of the Mayan Calendar, underscores a widespread cultural fascination with “revelations” regarding the ultimate fate of humanity. Even if the world survives these apocalyptic forces, humanity often inherits at best, a frightening landscape of fear and want characterized in the widely popular book and movie series, *The Hunger Games*.

The commonly held cultural perspective on the end presupposes a beginning, a point where time begins and history commences. This linear view is relatively recent. Ancient Sumerian, Egyptian, and Vedic cultures viewed time as cyclical, and their myths spoke of continual birth, cosmic warfare, destruction, and rebirth.⁷ Both the past and the future fused into the eternal now. For their part, both the Greeks and the Romans concerned themselves more with the past than the future. The mythic beginnings of both peoples were crucial to their identities and grounded in the stories of such heroes such as Odysseus in Homer’s *Odyssey* and Aeneas in Vergil’s *Aeneid*. The dramatic and violent end of the cosmos with a concomitant messiah figure, universal resurrection and final judgment, as envisioned in Jewish and Christian eschatological literature such as the *Book of Daniel* and the *Book of Revelation*, is absent in Greek and Roman antiquity.⁸

While many Christian denominations readily ascribe to an apocalyptic worldview, few know that this perspective originated in what is modern day Iran and predates Judaism and Christianity.⁹ As early as 1500 BCE a religious reformer by the name of Zoroaster proclaimed a startling message that attracted followers throughout Persia. Known later as Zoroastrians, they produced the *Avesta*, which is a sacred collection of teachings and hymns. Instead of a pantheon of gods, they claimed there was only one god, Ahura Mazda, who was the creator and guardian of the world. Although an evil force existed, Ahura Mazda would triumph and usher in an eternity of cosmic harmony in the final *Frasho-kereti* (making wonderful).¹⁰

Indeed, the Zoroastrians distinguished between eternity and temporality.¹¹ The creation of time in series of millennia provided the place and space in which the forces of good and evil could struggle for supremacy; however, in contradistinction to Egyptian, Sumerian, and Vedic cultures, time would come to a definitive end. How would believers recognize the end was near? Those keen to the sign of the times will know that the final millennial savior (Saoshyant) is coming when evil runs rampant, vows are

⁵ Brett E. Whalen, *Dominion of God: Christendom and the Apocalypse in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 237, n. 2.

⁶ On apocalyptic themes in cinema, see Conrad E. Ostwalt, Jr., “Hollywood and Armageddon: Apocalyptic Theme in Recent Cinematic Presentation” in Joel W. Martin and Conrad E. Ostwalt, Jr., *Screening the Sacred: Religion, Myth, and Ideology in Popular American Film* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1995), 55-63 and *ibid.*, “Armageddon at the Millennial Dawn” in *Religion and Film*, vol. 4/1 (2000) at <http://www.unomaha.edu/jrf/armagedd.htm>. (Accessed 03.03.2012). The identification of Hollywood and apocalyptic themes continues, see “The Big Reveal: Why Does the Bible End That Way?” in *The New Yorker* where Adam Gopnik reviews Elaine Pagels’s *Revelations: Visions, Prophecy, and Politics in the Book of Revelation* (New York: Viking, 2012) at http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/books/2012/03/05/120305scrbo_books_gopnik. (Accessed 03.06.2012). I would like to thank Catherine Scine for this reference.

⁷ Norman Cohn, *Cosmos, Chaos and the World to Come: The Ancient Roots of Apocalyptic Faith* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 3-76.

⁸ Hubert Cancik, “The End of the World, of History, and of the Individual in Greek and Roman Antiquity” in *The Encyclopedia of Apocalypticism*, vol. 1 *The Origins of Apocalypticism in Judaism and Christianity*, ed. John J. Collins (New York: Continuum, 1999), 86-87.

⁹ Cohn, *Cosmos, Chaos and the World to Come*, 77-104 and Anders Hutlård, “Persian Apocalypticism” in *The Origins of Apocalypticism in Judaism and Christianity*, 39-83. It is important to note that Zoroastrianism remains a living religion, see Mary Boyce, *Zoroastrians: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices* (New York: Routledge, 2001)

¹⁰ *Zoroastrianism: Textual Sources for the Study of Religion*, ed. and trans. Mary Boyce (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), 21, 35, and 53.

¹¹ Cohn, *Cosmos, Chaos and the World to Come*, 82.

broken, families are torn apart by hatred, traditional religion is replaced by foreign practices, weather patterns are disrupted, crops fail, and animals and humans alike will take on a distorted appearance. Only then will the savior arrive to crush the demonic forces of evil in a final battle, raise the dead, grant immortality to the righteous, and renew the world as an everlasting paradise.¹²

Christian readers in particular will undoubtedly recognize similar themes throughout the New Testament and in selected texts from the Jewish scriptures. Proving that one religion definitively influenced another can be a tenuous task, but Zoroastrianism clearly played a role in the nascent development of Jewish and Christian apocalypticism.¹³ Jewish and early Christian literature (3rd century BCE to 2nd century CE), often popular but not always canonical, is replete with images and themes reminiscent of Zoroastrianism.¹⁴ The *Second Letter to Timothy* (3:1-5) attributed to Paul, a Jew from Tarsus, sounds strikingly familiar:

*You must understand this, that in the last days, distressing times will come. For people will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, inhuman, implacable slanderers, profligates, brutes, haters of good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God...*¹⁵

In Chapter 13 of *Gospel of Mark*, in a section scholars refer to as the “Little Apocalypse”, Jesus of Nazareth speaks of the tribulations that will befall humanity until the messianic “Son of Man” from chapter 7 from the *Book of Daniel* will gather the elect together for the final judgment.¹⁶ Various other New Testament authors appeal to the apocalyptic motif, but no one with the intensity of John of Patmos, whose aptly titled *Book of Revelation*, or simply, the *Apocalypse*, announces a harrowing series of cataclysmic political, economic, and environmental events culminating in the return of Christ, the subjugation of satanic forces, and the establishment of a New Jerusalem on earth for the righteous. The centrality of Jerusalem to narratives of the end may have waxed and waned in the coming centuries, but it was a central tenet of Columbus’s worldview, and the city has never ceased to be a rich source of inspiration and conflict¹⁷ due to the hope it offers to the faithful. Ultimately the *Book of Revelation* (21:1-5) offers a variation of the Zoroastrian “making wonderful” as John of Patmos exclaims:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his people, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe away every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.’ And the one who was seated on the throne said, ‘See, I am making all things new.’

When the New Jerusalem did not appear and Christ did not return as many expected, Christians raised questions as evidenced in Paul’s *First and Second Letter to the Thessalonians* and began to refocus and reinterpret their beliefs regarding the end. In response to “scoffers” who derided the promise of the Lord’s coming and final judgment, the author of the *Second Letter of Peter* (3:8-9) consoled his fellow believers with these words, *But do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day.* What appears to some to be an inexplicable delay is only a sign of God’s mercy since it allows more people to repent and join the company of the

¹² Hutlård, “Persian Apocalypticism”, 42-60.

¹³ Hutlård, “Persian Apocalypticism”, 80-81 and Cohn, *Cosmos, Chaos and the World to Come*, 220-225.

¹⁴ On this intriguing, albeit little known literature, see *Apocalyptic Literature: A Reader*, ed. Mitchel G. Reddish (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1995).

¹⁵ *The HarperCollins Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version with the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books.* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1993), 2241. Unless noted otherwise, all references to the Bible will come from this edition.

¹⁶ On Mark 13, see Richard A. Horsley, “The Kingdom of God and the Renewal of Israel: Synoptic Gospels, Jesus Movements, and Apocalypticism” in *The Origins of Apocalypticism in Judaism and Christianity*, 326-331. On Jesus and the apocalyptic message, see Bart D. Ehrman, *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet of the New Millennium* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), esp. 125-162.

¹⁷ Annabel Jane Wharton, *Selling Jerusalem: Relics, Replicas, Theme Parks* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2006).

saved. Despite such counsel apocalyptic fever continued to grip segments of the early Christian community, most likely to the chagrin of bishops who may have feared watching people “head for the hills”, only to return sheepishly back to their homes when they realized that they had misread the signs of the times.

The propensity for provoking just such social and religious unrest may be one of the reasons why *Book of Revelation* was almost excluded from the New Testament canon.¹⁸ For his part, Augustine, bishop of Hippo (354-430) and the namesake of the nation’s oldest colonial city, did not reject the *Book of Revelation* but interpreted it in what would become the classical approach to apocalypticism in Western Christianity. In his magisterial *City of God*, Augustine asserted that the return of Christ amid great tribulations, the resurrection and judgment of the dead and renewal of the world are irrefutable facets of Christian doctrine.¹⁹ Nevertheless, he cautioned believers to resist the temptation to calculate the end by equating current historical events with specific passages in *Book of Revelation*. While people should live in a state of continual readiness and long for the end, no one knows the time. Augustine’s reticence in specifying a particular time remained a foundational theological principle of interpretation - at least until the appearance of a monk from an obscure area of Italy on the ecclesial world stage in the 12th century. Joachim of Fiore upended Augustine’s long-standing perspective and set in motion a series of apocalyptic calculations that impacted many, including Christopher Columbus and the Franciscan friars who would evangelize the Americas.

Joachim of Fiore, Spiritual Franciscans, and the Medieval Apocalypse

Born about 1135 in Calabria, a region located in what is popularly referred to as the “toe” of Italy’s “boot”, Joachim was educated to follow the career path of his father.²⁰ He decided to dedicate himself to God, instead of civil administration in the Sicilian court, after a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. He entered the Benedictine Order where he was ordained and appointed abbot of the monastery in Corrazzo. After his community was incorporated into the Cistercian Order, Joachim decided to found his own monastery in a remote area of Calabria called San Giovanni da Fiore. He remained there until his death in 1202. Although far from the political and ecclesial power centers of Europe, royalty and clergy alike sought his spiritual counsel. Richard the Lionhearted spoke with Joachim in 1191.²¹ The crusading English monarch was en route to the Holy Land to recapture Jerusalem, which had fallen under Islamic control in 1187. The king heard from the visionary Calabrian abbot the deeply disturbing revelation that the dreaded Anti-Christ had already been born and the third and that last phase of history was about to begin.

The fact that Joachim’s apocalyptic claims were taken seriously by the most influential political and religious leaders of his day highlights the chasm between contemporary Western culture and the Middle Ages.²² Today the majority marginalizes and ridicules those who make fervent appeals to the *Book of Revelation*, warn of an impending Armageddon, and predict a specific date for the end of the world. At best they are considered “math challenged” because their dates are always wrong or at worst, they are viewed as dangerous fanatics who gleefully await the destruction of humanity. The fiery end of David Koresh and his followers in Waco, Texas, in 1993 remains fixed in the minds of many as an indelible reminder of the consequences of apocalyptic fervor and the “wackos” it produces. In the Middle Ages prince and pauper, pope and priest, men and women, young and old saw the world differently since

¹⁸ On the *Book of Revelation* and the New Testament canon see Elaine Pagels, *Revelations: Visions, Prophecy, and Politics in the Book of Revelation* (New York: Viking, 2012), esp. 103-170. For an overview of how the *Book of Revelation* has been interpreted through the centuries, see Arthur W. Wainwright, *Mysterious Apocalypse: Interpreting the Book of Revelation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993).

¹⁹ Brian E. Daley, “Apocalypticism in Early Christian Theology” in *Apocalypticism in Western History and Culture*, ed. Bernard McGinn, vol. 2 of *The Encyclopedia of Apocalypticism* (New York: Continuum, 1999), 30-33.

²⁰ *Apocalyptic Spirituality: Treatises and Letters of Lactantius, Adso of Montier-En-Der, Joachim of Fiore, The Spiritual Franciscans, Savonarola*, trans. and intro. Bernard McGinn (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1979), 97-112.

²¹ Bernard McGinn, “Apocalypticism and Church Reform 1100-1500” in *The Encyclopedia of Apocalypticism*, vol. 2 *Apocalypticism in Western History and Culture*, 85-86.

²² On Western apocalyptic thought in the Middle Ages, see Whalen, *Dominion of God: Christendom and the Apocalypse in the Middle Ages*.

apocalyptic expectations permeated general society in a manner not even witnessed in the early days of Christianity.

Joachim's message appealed to the medieval populace on the theoretical and practical level. He offered them a way of both interpreting and living in a world threatened in the present and consumed by trepidation for the future. While there was much to fear, God would soon intervene in history, and those who will have suffered through the tribulations of the last days will receive the gift of everlasting peace.²³

Joachim's major works are the *Exposition on the Apocalypse*, the *Book of Concordance*, the *Ten-Stringed Psalter*, and the enigmatic *Book of Forms*. By no means an "easy read", these texts are replete with obscure symbolism and steeped in intricate biblical exegesis.²⁴ The origins of his proclamation of an impending crisis and redemption are grounded in a two-fold revelation that occurred on Easter 1183 after a year of struggling with the meaning of the *Book of Revelation*. Not only did he now understand the text at the linguistic level and how it agreed with the *Old Testament* and *New Testament*, he also perceived the truth of the text through a series of visual forms or symbols. Among the best known are the figures of the seven-headed dragon from *Revelation 12:3* and the Trinitarian rings. The first image identified each dragon as a king, past or present. Joachim claimed that the sixth king was Saladin (1138-1193), the Kurdish Muslim who captured Jerusalem in 1187 and stymied Richard the Lionhearted's repeated attempts to recapture the holy city. In his description of this period marked by the devastating defeat of Christian forces, Joachim held out hope:

*After this destruction, which has already in some part begun, the Christians will be victorious. Those who fear the name of the Lord will rejoice when the head of the beast over which the sixth king reigns has been brought almost to extermination and ruin. Then, after a few years, its wound will be healed, and the king who will be in charge of it (whether it be Saladin if he is still alive, or another in his place) will gather a much larger army and incite universal war against God's elect. Many will be crowned with martyrdom in those days. In that time also the seventh head of the dragon will arise, namely, that king who is called Antichrist, and a multitude of false prophets with him.*²⁵

The seventh king, alive but not yet known to the world, was the Anti-Christ Joachim had warned Richard of during his Calabrian sojourn in 1191. The second image depicted the ages of history as interlinked circles from a Trinitarian hermeneutic. The first age or *status* was identified with the Father and the Old Testament, the second *status* with the Son and the New Testament, and the third *status* with the Holy Spirit and a new, spiritual Jerusalem constituted by monks and laity alike. Peering toward this apocalyptic horizon, Joachim claimed two new religious orders of *virī spirituales* (spiritual men) who would be the harbingers of this utopian vision.

Joachim died in 1202, but his critics could not bury his message. Two new religious orders, the Dominicans and Franciscans, emerged within a decade of Joachim's passing. Franciscans were particularly drawn to Joachim's views and other pseudonymous writings attributed to the Calabrian prophet. Referred to as *an alter Christus* (another Christ), Francis of Assisi evoked in the medieval imagination the angel of *Revelation 7:2*, *I saw another angel ascending from the rising of the sun, having the seal of the living God...*The radical evangelical life of Francis, marked by austere poverty, together with the widespread belief that he had received the wounds of Christ in his flesh, convinced numerous brothers that he was the precursor of the final age.²⁶ One friar in 1254, Geraldo of Borgo San Donnino, went so far as to assert in his *Introduction to the Eternal Gospel* that the present world would end in 1260, and the third *status* would begin. In this age of the Holy Spirit, the *Old Testament* and *New Testament* would be supplanted by Joachim's writings and the church would be refashioned in the image of the Franciscans. Needless to say, the ecclesial hierarchy in general did not look favorably on

²³ Joachim of Fiore, *Letter to the Abbot of Valdona in Apocalyptic Spirituality*, 118-119.

²⁴ *Apocalyptic Spirituality*, 97.

²⁵ Joachim of Fiore, *Book of Figures in Apocalyptic Spirituality*, 118-119

²⁶ This theme is treated extensively in Stanislao da Campagnola, *L'Angelo del Sesto Sigillo e l'Alter Christus* (Rome: Antonianum, 1971).

this proposal, or a view of history that replaced established institutional structures with an ill-defined movement of the spirit; Geraldo was condemned to life-long imprisonment.

Other Franciscans such as Bonaventure of Bagnoregio (1217-1274) and Peter John Olivi (1248-1298) nuanced their theological positions but continued to read Joachim's works and refused to step back from the view that Francis of Assisi's entrance onto the stage of world history heralded the beginning of the end.²⁷ Bonaventure referred to him as the "angel of the sixth seal" and spoke of the brothers as *virii spirituales*.²⁸ Olivi, a student of Bonaventure's at the University of Paris, pushed the ecclesial boundaries of tolerance further by identifying the *third status* with the Franciscan Order and criticizing the carnality of the current church. Even more troubling to some, he intimated a link between the Anti-Christ and the Papacy.²⁹

To counter the threat of the Antichrist, whom some brothers believed was realized in Pope John XXII (1244-1334), talk spread in and beyond Franciscan circles in the ensuing years of a *pastor angelicus* (angelic pope) who, together with the Last Emperor mentioned in numerous apocalyptic works, would ensure a millennial period of peace by reforming the church, retaking Jerusalem, vanquishing the Muslims, converting the Tartars (Mongols)³⁰, and defeating the Anti-Christ. John of Rupiscissa (1310-1365) synthesized these Joachmite-Franciscan views with an emphasis on the global-political consequences of the impending apocalypse.³¹ The echo of his voice and others can be heard over a century later in the *Libro del las profecias (The Book of Prophecies)* of Christopher Columbus, when he commented on the biblical texts and ecclesial writers he compiled as early as late November, 1500, in the aftermath of his third voyage across the "Ocean Sea":

*I said above that much that has been prophesied remains to be fulfilled, and I say that these are the world's great events, and I say that a sign of this is the acceleration of our Lord's activities in this world. I know this from the recent preaching of the gospel in so many lands. The Calabria abbot Joachim said that whoever was to rebuild the temple on Mount Zion would come from Spain. The cardinal Pierre d'Ailly wrote at length about the end of the religion of Mohammed and the coming of the Antichrist in his treatise, De concordia astronomice veritatis et narrationis historice [On the Accord of Astronomical Truth and History].*³²

Columbus reiterated this claim in the *Lettera Rarissima (The Rarest of Letters)* written during his fourth and final voyage to the Americas (1502-1504). As his words indicate, he once again linked his destiny to that of the Spanish royal court and hoped for yet another future opportunity to fulfill prophecy:

*Jerusalem and Mount Sion are to be rebuilt by the hands of the Christians, as God has declared by the mouth of the prophet in the fourteenth Psalm (vv. 7-8). The Abbot Joachim said he who should do this was to come from Spain ... and the emperor of China has, some time since, sent for wise men to instruct him in the faith of Christ. Who will offer himself for this work? Should anyone do so, I pledge myself, in the name of God, to convey him hither, provided the Lord permits me to return to Spain.*³³

²⁷ McGinn, "Apocalypticism and Church Reform 1100-1500", 89-97.

²⁸ *The Sunday Sermons of Saint Bonaventure*, ed. and trans. Timothy J. Johnson, vol. 12 in *Bonaventure Texts in Translation* (Saint Bonaventure: Franciscan Institute Publications, 2008), 31-33.

²⁹ Whalen, *Dominion of God: Christendom and the Apocalypse in the Middle Ages*, 210.

³⁰ Franciscan friars had already reached Mongolia to meet the khan-elect Güyü and witnessed his enthronement in August, 1246. See Peter Jackson, "Franciscans as papal and royal envoys to the Tartars (1245-1255)" in *Cambridge Companion to Francis of Assisi*, ed. Michael J. P. Robson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 224-239.

³¹ *Visions of the End*, ed. Bernard McGinn (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), 230-233. On John of Rupiscissa as the precursor to Christopher Columbus, see Phelan, *The Millennial Kingdom of the Franciscans in the New World*, 18-19.

³² *The Book of Prophecies Edited by Christopher Columbus*, ed. Ruberto Rusconi and trans. Blair Sullivan (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 77. This relatively unknown text is crucial to understanding the apocalyptic fervor that held sway over Columbus and many others in 15th century Europe. See also *The Libro del las profecias of Christopher Columbus*, trans. and comm. by Delno C. West and August Kling (Gainesville: University Presses of Florida, 1991), 105. The most extensive study of the manuscript with the requisite critical apparatus is found in *Cristoforo Colombo, Lettere e Scritti (1495-1506) Libro del las profecias*, ed. Ruberto Rusconi (Roma: Libreria dello stato, 1993).

³³ *Visions of the End*, 285. For the Spanish text, see *Select letters of Christopher Columbus with other original documents relating to this four voyages to the new world*, ed. R.H. Major (Surrey: Ashgate, 2010), 204-205.

Columbus, the (Last) Reconquista, and the Apocalypse in the New World

By the end of the fifteenth century the Franciscans were divided effectively into the “Conventuals” and “Observants.” Conflicting views regarding the vow of poverty and the Franciscan Order’s role in the eschatological end-time scenario fostered a growing fissure among the brothers, and to the identification of the more radical friars known as “spiritual Franciscans”.³⁴ The Observant friars pushed for a reform of the Order and the entire Church, and thus shared many of the views of their “spiritual” predecessors. The most powerful ecclesial figure in Spain, Cardinal Ximenes de Cisneros, belonged to the Observant faction and promoted the reform movement in western Spain and elsewhere.³⁵ He enjoyed, together with his confreres, the favor of the Spanish royalty in the persons of King Ferdinand and Queen Isabel.

While Columbus may have encountered reformed Franciscans earlier, it is clear that he came into their orbit of influence in 1485. When he did, their dedication to an apocalyptic worldview had reached a fever pitch.³⁶ After King John II of Portugal refused to fund his voyage across the mysterious “Ocean Sea”, Columbus and his son Diego arrived at the Observant convent of Santa Maria de La Rábida in 1485. Located in Andalusia and in close proximity to the port of Palos, La Rábida provided a decent library, astronomical observatory, and most importantly, a sympathetic and resourceful community of friars eager to assist Columbus.

While the key to winning the patronage of the united realms of Castile and Aragón certainly cannot be reduced to religious influence and sensibility, the intersection of faith and political perspectives among these Iberian Franciscans, Columbus, and the Spanish Crown played an obvious role.³⁷ Among the friars at La Rábida, Antonio de Marchena was a well-known astrologer-astronomer, whom the royal court held in high regard. He helped secure the first meeting between Queen Isabel and Columbus with a letter addressed to Hernando de Talavera, the queen’s confessor. Another friar and previous royal confessor, John Pérez, became a close confidant of Columbus and interceded later with the monarchs as well; indeed, when Columbus finally received royal patronage, John led the procession on May 3, 1492, to the harbor in Palos where he blessed the departing sailors. When the exploratory-ambassadorial first voyage returned on March 15, 1493, Columbus sought out Pérez at La Rábida and invited him to join the second voyage, which focused more explicitly on colonialization and evangelization.

With the assistance of the friars and a consortium of economic and political patrons, Columbus proposed a voyage across the “Ocean Sea” driven by his burgeoning apocalyptic fervor. Annotations on his favorite scientific textbook, Pierre of d’Ailly’s (1351-1420) *Imago mundi (Image of the World)*, indicate that the subject of the end of the world may have already garnered his attention as early as 1480.³⁸ The *Book of Prophecies*, which Columbus compiled between 1501 and 1505, may contain sections dating back to as early as 1481.³⁹ Four handwritten notes in another one of his favorite textbooks, the *Historia rerum ubique gestarum (History of Facts and Events)* of Pope Pius II (1405-

³⁴ David Burr, *The Spiritual Franciscans: From Protest to Persecution in the Century after Saint Francis* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001).

³⁵ These reformed friars would become central to the evangelization efforts in the Americas, see José Sánchez Herrero in “Los movimientos franciscanos radicales y la misión y evangelización franciscana en América” in *Congreso de Historia del Descubrimiento: 1492-1556*, vol. 4, (1992), 565-592

³⁶ West, *The Libro del las profecias of Christopher Columbus*, 27. See also, Juan Gil Fernández, “Los franciscanos y Colón “ in *Archivo Ibero-Americano*, 46/181-182 (1985), 77-110. On the possibility of Columbus being a member of the Franciscan Third Order, see Milhou, *Colón y su mentalidad mesiánica en el ambiente franciscanista español*, 42-45.

³⁷ On the question of patronage, see Felipe Fernández-Armesto, *Columbus* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 45-65; esp. 60-61 with regard to the Franciscans. See also *The Libro del las profecias of Christopher Columbus*, 55-58.

³⁸ Fernández-Armesto, *Columbus*, 41-42 and *The Libro del las profecias of Christopher Columbus*, 16. On Columbus’s reading of Pierre of d’Ailly *Imago mundi* and other influential works, see Pauline M. Watts, “Prophecy and Discovery: On the Spiritual Origins of Christopher Columbus’s ‘Enterprise of the Indies’” in *The American Historical Review*, vol. 90/1 (1985), pp. 73-102. On Pierre of d’Ailly’s works and the difficulty of dating possible notations by Columbus, see Rusconi, *The Book of Prophecies*, 283-288.

³⁹ West, *The Libro del las profecias of Christopher Columbus*, 86-92. This argument is based on notes in Columbus’s copy of the *Historia rerum ubique gestarum* of Pope Pius II, which was published in 1477. Even if the 1481 is disputed, Columbus was reading the *Historia* as early as 1485. See Fernández-Armesto, *Columbus*, 41.

1464), appear to identify the salient points of his nascent proposal. Quoting the prophet Isaiah, the Psalms, Josephus, Augustine and others, Columbus pointed out how these authoritative sources confirmed that God's word needed to be proclaimed to the distant islands, great riches would be obtained there for the sake of Jerusalem, and that the date of Christ's return could be calculated to 155 years in the future.

Working later with the Carthusian monk, Gaspar Gorrico, Columbus completed the *Book of Prophecies* (1500-1505) by appealing to biblical passages and theological sources drawn from a broad range of ancient and medieval authorities. With this compilation, he intended to demonstrate to King Ferdinand and Queen Isabel that the discovery and exploration of the Indies during his three previous ocean passages was an integral part of salvation history. He argued that they were the first steps toward the liberation of Jerusalem, the end of Islamic domination in the Holy Land, and the salvation of the entire human race through the proclamation of the Gospel.⁴⁰ In his *Diario* from the first voyage to the Indies - the same journal in which he petitioned that all his profits be dedicated to the capture of Jerusalem - Columbus also reminded the sovereigns of their commitment to his apocalyptic vision after their victory over the Muslims of Granada in 1492:

*Whereas ... because of the report that I had given to Your Highnesses about the lands of India and a prince who is called "Great Khan" ... how, many times, he and his predecessors had sent to Rome to ask for men learned in our Holy Faith in order that they might instruct them in it and how the Holy Father had never provided them; and thus so many people were lost, falling into idolatry and accepting false and harmful religions and Your Highnesses, as Catholic Christians and Princes, lovers and promoters of the Holy Christian Faith, and enemies of the false doctrines of Mahomet and of all the idolatries and heresies, you thought of sending me, Christóbal Colón, to the said regions of India to see the said princes and peoples of 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 it is customary to go, but by the route to the West, by which route we do know for certain that anyone previously passed.*⁴¹

Columbus's statement, couched in legal language, faithfully represented his own beliefs. They are formulated in a way that would appeal to the Catholic monarchs.⁴² His proposed project resonated well with some factions in the halls of the Spanish court, but the petitionary process lasted seven years before the monarchs granted him approval. Financing the endeavor fell to a consortium of royal and private financiers who, despite the obvious risks and others yet unknown, hoped to profit from a lucrative Asian trade route.⁴³ By January of 1492, funding was secured, and with the conquest of the last Islamic stronghold on the Iberian Peninsula, the sovereigns of Spain looked beyond their newly defined borders toward Asia; this vision included the final *Reconquista*: Jerusalem, the *umbilicus mundi* (center of the earth). The defeat of the Moors (January 2 1492), the expulsion of the Jews (March 31, 1492), the union of Castile and Aragón with Grenada, the dream of an alliance with Prester John, the mythical Christian ruler in the East, and the hope for the conversion of the Great Khan of Cathay⁴⁴ heralded a messianic period of universalism led by Spain and focused on Jerusalem. On April 17, 1492, Columbus received his long sought commission to cross the "Ocean Sea."⁴⁵

Columbus, as well as his royal patrons, were willing partners in the grand apocalyptic narrative written centuries earlier and popularized in Spain and throughout European Christendom in the 15th century. Prophecies like the *Vae mundo* (*Woe to the World*) which originated after the fall of Acre, the last

⁴⁰ Rusconi, *The Book of Prophecies Edited by Christopher Columbus*, 5.

⁴¹ *The Diario of Christopher Columbus's First Voyage to America 1492-1493*, 16-19.

⁴² Fernández-Armesto, *Columbus*, 69.

⁴³ Fernández-Armesto, *Columbus*, 62-63.

⁴⁴ The Franciscan friar, John of Montecorvino, had reached Beijing some two centuries earlier (ca. 1292) and was well received by Temür Khan, the grandson of Kublai Khan. Friars remained in China until they were expelled from Beijing in 1369. See: E. Randolph Daniels, "Franciscan Missions" in the *Cambridge Companion to Francis of Assisi*, ed. Michael J. P. Robson 253-254.

⁴⁵ Alain Milhou, "Apocalypticism in Central and South American Colonialism" in *Apocalypticism in the Modern Period and the Contemporary Age*, 3-7 and Milhou, *Colón y su mentalidad mesiánica en el ambiente franciscanista español*, 169-187.

Christian city in the Holy Land in 1291⁴⁶, circulated in the courts of Castile and Aragón. Often attributed to Joachim of Fiore and promoted by Franciscans, these popular accounts of the end spoke of the “Last World Emperor” who would usher in the millennial peace foretold in the Scriptures and reclaim the land of the one Christ for his faithful people.⁴⁷ Indeed, Genovese ambassadors on a visit to Columbus and the royal court in 1493 may have alluded to such prophecies when they called upon the victors of Grenada to retake Jerusalem.⁴⁸ As late as 1502, Columbus linked the prophetic destiny of Spanish monarchs with his own voyages and religious convictions at the outset of the *Book of Prophecies*:

*This is the beginning of the book or collection of auctoritates, sayings, opinions concerning the need to recover the holy city and Mount Zion, and the discovery and conversion of the islands of the Indies and of all the peoples and nations, for Ferdinand and Isabel, our Spanish rulers.*⁴⁹

St. Augustine: A City of Old and New Beginnings

Columbus set sail from the coastal city of Palos on May 3, 1492. When this initial exploratory-ambassadorial first voyage returned on March 15, 1493, Columbus spoke of his sightings not as a “new world” per se, but as previously unknown or rarely seen regions of the “old world”, hence, of course, the “Indies” appellation. In the course of the following crossings, he came to believe that he reached Asia as well as a *terra incognita* (unknown world) that indeed was a *terra nova* (new world) for Europeans. Columbus approached his death on May 20, 1506, clinging to his apocalyptic convictions; he had found another route to Asia, while believing that evangelization must continue in the new world of the Indies, and that Jerusalem should return to Christian control.⁵⁰ At one point when settling his family and financial affairs, he dictated that a deposit be made in the Bank of San Giorgio in Genoa that would finance the final *Reconquista*.⁵¹

One of the ironies of history is that Columbus’s apocalyptic quest to foster the conquest of the ancient city of Jerusalem shifted the geopolitical-spiritual focus of salvation to the Americas as the new promised land of Israel, and site of the New Jerusalem.⁵² Initial efforts to evangelize the Indies after the first voyage of Columbus did not share this later worldview; the first priests and friars were tempted to believe that these lands could be easily brought into the existing realm of western Christendom since the peoples did not appear, according to Columbus’s initial report, to have their own set of religious beliefs that would impede conversion. The inevitable cultural conflicts, which were magnified by language problems, quickly removed any hope of swiftly assimilating the indigenous peoples into the medieval ecclesial structure.⁵³ For example, one cleric, who was a member of the second voyage, spent three years with one family learning the language and teaching the faith. His work culminated in a single baptism on September 21, 1496. Soon the apocalyptic imperative of evangelization in the Caribbean region⁵⁴, which Columbus embraced with increasing fervor during and after each voyage, would be subsumed into the larger colonialization designs of the expansive and increasingly self-confident Spanish empire. The story of St. Augustine’s foundation and the enduring Spanish legacy in La Florida are undeniable elements of this continually evolving historical reality grounded in the apocalyptic beliefs of Christopher Columbus.

⁴⁶ Robert E. Lerner, “Medieval Prophecy and Religious Dissent” in *Past & Present*, n. 72 (1976), 14.

⁴⁷ On apocalyptic prophecies and the rulers of Castile and Aragón, see Milhou, *Colón y su mentalidad mesiánica en el ambiente franciscanista español*, 349-403; esp. 377-380.

⁴⁸ On this possibility, see Rusconi, *The Book of Prophecies Edited by Christopher Columbus*, 31-32.

⁴⁹ *The Book of Prophecies Edited by Christopher Columbus*, 59.

⁵⁰ Felipe Fernández-Armesto, *Columbus and the Conquest of the Impossible* (London: Phoenix Press, 2000), 126-133.

⁵¹ *Christopher Columbus and His Family: The Genoese and Ligurian Documents*, ed. and trans. John Dotson, textual ed. Aldo Agosto (Turnhout: Brepols, 1998), 341-342; English translation: 167.

⁵² Milhou, “Apocalypticism in Central and South American Colonialism”, 7.

⁵³ Roberto Rusconi, “Escatología e conversión al cristianesimo in Cristoforo Colombo e nei primi anni della colonizzazione europea nelle isole delle ‘Indie’”, in *Cristianesimo nella Storia*, 14 (1993), pp. 263-302.

⁵⁴ On the early development of the institutional Catholic Church in the Caribbean, see Johannes Meier, *Die Anfänge der Kirche auf den Karibischen Inseln* (Freiburg: Neue Zeitschrift für Missionwissenschaft, 1991). For the story of the first Franciscan convent, see Mariano Errasti, *El primer convento de América: Historia y forma de vida de los franciscanos en su convento de la ciudad de Santo Domingo 1560-1820* (Arantzazu: Ediciones Franciscanas, 2006).

The Spanish legacy celebrated in St. Augustine is, paradoxically, tied to an Italian émigré whose own universal longings reach back into the mists of the distant highlands of ancient Iran. The Zoroastrian desire for a “making wonderful”, a time when everyone, everywhere - including the natural world and non-sentient creatures - would realize the Franciscan dream⁵⁵ of a world marked by justice, equality, and peace continues to elude even the most sincere efforts of individuals and nations. At times the apocalyptic imagination has been utilized in frightening ways to advance an oppressive, even violent agenda. The popular and scholarly judgment of Columbus’s “Enterprise of the Indies” in this regard has oscillated between both extremes. Around the four hundredth centennial of his voyage (1892) some considered him worthy of canonization, while the fifth centennial (1992) heard calls for his damnation.⁵⁶ In the Memorial Presbyterian Church in St. Augustine, visitors today can still view a precious incunabulum of Augustine’s *City of God*, published before 1492. The book serves as a cautionary tale to anyone who attempts to construct a perfect city within the vicissitudes of time; nevertheless, the desire for such a city remains undiminished.

The apocalyptic quest of Christopher Columbus (Christ bearing dove) offers crucial insight into how to celebrate the Spanish legacy in the city of St. Augustine. Scholars have frequently dismissed the religious aspect of this mariner’s worldview or held it suspect, but there is no doubt that Columbus looked for divine guidance in his endeavors and contended he received it.⁵⁷ This is to be expected from any medieval *homo viator* (human being as traveler) from Iceland to Italy and beyond, who believed his or her travels were an analogy for the journey from earth to heaven.⁵⁸ People of various creeds around the world still interpret their experience of life in similar terms. What emerges unexpectedly in the writings of Christopher Columbus is the universalistic dimensions of his epistemology.⁵⁹ To the surprise of perhaps many who hold to their particular beliefs as exclusive, he argued that the divine spirit was at work in his religious community and that of others: *I believe that the Holy Spirit operates in Christians, Jews, Moors, and in all others of any religion, not only in the wise, but the ignorant as well.*⁶⁰ He refused to be restrained by the status quo in whatever field of knowledge he studied or by his social and ecclesial status. While he acknowledged God had directed him, he also noted in the *Book of Prophecies* that his own gifts and willingness to learn from others regardless of social status, ethnic origin, and religion were part of a process of discernment and judgment:

*At a very early age I began sailing the sea and have continued until now. This profession creates a curiosity about the secrets of the world. I have been a sailor for forty years, and I have personally sailed to all the known regions. I have had commerce and conversation with knowledgeable people of the clergy and laity, Latins and Greeks, Jews and Moors, and with many others of different religions...During this time I have studied all kinds of texts: cosmology, histories, chronicles, philosophy, and other disciplines. Through these writings, the hand of our Lord opened my mind to the possibility of sailing to the Indies and gave me the will to attempt this voyage.*⁶¹

Over the centuries the city of St. Augustine has remained at the center of the struggle for justice, equality, and peace for many peoples with notable victories and defeats, many of which are too easily

⁵⁵ On this dream, see Timothy J. Johnson “Francis and Creation” in *The Cambridge Companion to Francis of Assisi*, ed. Michael Robson, 143-160.

⁵⁶ Carol Delaney, *Columbus and the Quest for Jerusalem* (New York: Free Press, 2011), xii-xiii.

⁵⁷ Columbus is hardly an exception here as the history of Christianity attests. On the senses and divine revelation, see *The Spiritual Senses: Perceiving God in Western Christianity*, eds. Paul L. Gavriluk and Sarah Coakley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

⁵⁸ This theme is of continual interest to Franciscans, both yesterday and today. See *Pellegrini e forestieri: l’itineranza francescana*, ed. Luigi Padovese (Bologna: EDP, 2004). Bonaventure is the Franciscan master on this theme, see Timothy J. Johnson, “Prologue as Pilgrimage: Bonaventure as Spiritual Cartographer” in *Miscellanea Francescana*, 106-107 (2006-2007), 445-464.

⁵⁹ On this point, Columbus reveals himself to be a student of the Franciscan friar, Roger Bacon (1214-1294) See Timothy J. Johnson, “That They May Love the Faith: Roger Bacon on Culture, Language, and Religion” forthcoming in *From La Florida to La California: Franciscan Evangelization in the Spanish Borderlands* (San Francisco: Academy of American Franciscan History, 2012). Columbus’s annotations in Pierre de d’Ailly’s *Imago mundi* demonstrate that he was familiar with Bacon’s *Opus majus*.

⁶⁰ *The Book of Prophecies Edited by Christopher Columbus*, 71.

⁶¹ *The Book of Prophecies Edited by Christopher Columbus*, 67-68.

forgotten or ignored. The quest for the metaphoric “New Jerusalem” continues unabated. The marvelous Spanish legacy in Florida of diversity, which is offered in the daring, albeit flawed Italian Christopher Columbus, is not restricted to the contemplation and celebration of past achievements and present monuments. The universalism of Columbus, while marked by the limitations of time and place found in any historical period⁶² - including the beginning of the twenty-first century - remains a rich resource to be retrieved today in La Florida. Linguistically ¡Viva Florida! is an imperative; it is a command that is grounded in the past and directed to the present. Like the finest and most optimistic iterations of the apocalyptic imagination through the millennia, this essay claims that this imperative also carries the ardent hope of a future “making wonderful” for everyone, regardless of creed, color, or country.

¡Viva Florida!

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⁶² The obvious limits of Columbus’s universalism are painfully evident in the cruelty he displayed toward the indigenous peoples in the Caribbean in the midst of his later voyages. His behavior baffled Bartolomé de las Casas, who wrote: *It is a strange thing, and I have said this before, that a man whom I have to say had a good nature and meant well, should be so blind in such a clear matter.* For this quote and a concomitant study, see John Hubers, “‘It is a Strange Thing’: The Millennial Blindness of Christopher Columbus” in *Missiology* vol. 37/3 (2009), 333-353.