

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

Acknowledgments: I am deeply indebted to the John Carter Brown Library at Brown University not only for providing me with a National Endowment for the Humanities fellowship to conduct this research, but also for its unparalleled resources and helpful staff, and for creating one of the most stimulating research environments that I have encountered. As I struggled to keep afloat in the tumultuous sea of Columbus scholarship, it was with great relief to find scholars who had been there before and who threw a lifeline by generously sharing their knowledge and perspectives. Thank you Pauline Moffitt Watts, Carla and William Phillips, and Nicolas Wey-Gomez.

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.

0010-4175/06/260–292 \$9.50 # 2006 Society for Comparative Study of Society and History

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 long-standing 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 Indias* 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).

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 Asunción (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.

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.

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 prologue¹⁰ 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.

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).

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 Joachim 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. Joachim 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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