

SOME THOUGHTS ON CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS'S *LIBRO DE PROFECIAS* ON THE QUINCENTENARY OF HIS THIRD VOYAGE TO AMERICA

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Returning from his eventful third voyage to America in 1500, Christopher Columbus went to visit his friend, the Carthusian monk Gaspar Gorricio, in Seville before seeking an audience with Ferdinand and Isabella. With the help of Fr. Gaspar Gorricio, the monks of the monastery, and his thirteen year old son, Ferdinand, he composed notebooks to explain his vision of the voyages with the hope of winning approval and financing from the Crown for another voyage. Like so many of the events in his life, the third voyage was a tumultuous experience. Landing in Trinidad (what the indigenous people called Iere, Columbus named Trinidad in honor of the *Holy Trinity*) on July 30, 1498, he proceeded up the Gulf of Paria to the continent of America. Not only was he convinced that he had landed on a continent, but stated that he was sure that it was the paradise mentioned in the Bible. He soon continued his voyage to Hispaniola where he encountered a major rebellion. After his second voyage, he had left his brothers, Bartholomew and Diego, to run the colony. Their ineffective rule had caused a rebellion among the Spanish colonists as well as the native inhabitants of Hispaniola. The Crown had known about the arbitrariness of the rule of the Columbus brothers, and had sent Francisco de Bobadilla to investigate and resolve the matter. The result was that Columbus and his brothers were put in chains and sent back to Spain.

Compiled between 1501 and 1502, the *Libro de Profecias* presented how Columbus understood the significance of the voyages, and why he had undertaken them. While it may be true that this work was written with the objective of persuading the Crown to finance another voyage, it is also a testament to the mind of Columbus as he summed up his own reflections on his experiences since he set foot on lands in the Americas in 1492. What I propose to do in this study is to examine the content of Columbus's vision in the *Libro de Profecias* and then raise some questions about this vision, comparing his vision with that of Las Casas in his *Historia de Indias*. In their edition of the *Libro de Profecias*, Delno C. West and August Kling characterize this work as revealing 'Columbus's sense of millenarian hope and providential mission.'¹ They suggested that such a view of Columbus would raise controversy from those who saw Columbus as the representative of the

¹ The *Libro de Profecias* of Christopher Columbus. Translation and Commentary by DELNO C. WEST and AUGUST KLING, p. 4.

modern, scientific, and adventurous spirit of Europe.² They implied that there was no necessary contradiction between Columbus's apocalyptic vision and his knowledge of navigational science at that time. Indeed, their objective was not to question Columbus's achievements, but to increase our understanding of his motivation by presenting Columbus as a missionary and crusader. The authors felt that the driving force in Columbus's life was a »deep spiritual belief« in the providential nature of his enterprise, a spirituality that was constant from the first voyage to his final voyage.

Several scholars have maintained that the Bible was the ultimate reference work for Columbus. It was the source of all knowledge. Tzvetan Todorov has argued effectively that it was the biblical, medieval framework of Columbus's mind that, on the one hand, served as the inspiration for his obsession to reach India, and, on the other, acted as the source of his paralysis in understanding fully the significance of what he had seen and done on his voyages.³ What Columbus had hoped to persuade the Crown was that his discoveries had fulfilled the prophecy of the bible. In the millennial Christian tradition, the teachings of the Old and New Testament had to be preached to all nations and peoples before the end of the world, the second coming of Christ, and the Last Judgment. Before this signal event in history could take place, all peoples must be offered the opportunity to become Christian. For Columbus, this was the real significance of the discovery of the »fourth part of the world«. Indeed, Columbus gradually came to see his role as a man of destiny: he signed his name as »Christo-ferens (Christ-bearer)«.

But, the Christianization of the indigenous peoples of America was only one part of his prophetic history. He asserted in the *Book of Prophecies* that the bible had prophesied that Christendom would not only defeat Islam, but reconquer and return to Jerusalem, thereby uniting all peoples under Christ in Jerusalem. More significantly for the king of Spain, Columbus said that it would be King Ferdinand who would lead the forces of Christendom in the final successful battle against the forces of anti-Christ in Jerusalem, and would occupy the throne in Jerusalem in the age of restoration of the temple before the Divine Judgment on all nations. The purpose of the third voyage was to find the continent of Paria, where he was likely to find King Solomon's mines as well as the site of the Garden of Eden, and raise the gold to finance Ferdinand's crusade to liberate Jerusalem. In this prophetic vision, Columbus was the new John the Baptist as King Ferdinand was the new David. Columbus did not take the idea of the Spanish king as the new David out of nowhere: A scholar like Arnold of Villanova as well as the Merlin prophecies had predicted that a Spanish king would rule over Jerusalem as a new David.⁴

Columbus begins his *Book of Prophecies* by linking his voyages to the islands with the idea of the return to Jerusalem: »... 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.« For European Christians (as for Jews and Muslims, too),

² See CARLA RAHN PHILLIPS, *The Worlds of Christopher Columbus*, Cambridge, 1992.

³ See TZVETAN TODOROV, *The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other*, NY, 1982.

⁴ *Libro de Profecias*, p. 62.

Jerusalem occupied an important position in their hearts and minds. Not only was it the center where Christianity was founded and the site of much of the events of the bible, but Christians did not forget that this site as well as the first Christian communities of West Asia, North Africa, and Spain had been conquered and occupied by nations that were Islamic. This sense of humiliation nourished the idea of reconquest of Christian lands. From this sentiment sprang the crusades to liberate these lands. The crusade was one of the few themes that could forge any unity among Europeans. Jerusalem was therefore the goal of the reconquest. It was also a symbol of the unity of Christendom, the heavenly city that would lead all the peoples of the world. For Columbus, the continent of Paria and the islands of the Indies and Jerusalem were the two most significant poles in the map of his imagination. The first contained the Garden of Eden, the site of the paradise of creation and also the first sin; the second was the city of God and the hope of salvation. Columbus described the significance of Jerusalem in this way: »In a historical sense, it is the earthly city to which pilgrims travel. Allegorically, it indicates the Church in the world. Tropologically, Jerusalem is the soul of every believer. Anagogically, the word means the Heavenly Jerusalem, the celestial fatherland and kingdom.«⁵

He included a letter he had written to the King and Queen proposing to restore Jerusalem to the »Holy Church Militant«. For forty years he had tried to understand the world's secrets, he said. He conversed with clergy and laity, »Latins and Greeks, Jews and Moslems, and many others of different religions« and prayed to God for inspiration. He learned the sciences of navigation and cartography. It was God who opened his mind to the idea of sailing to the Indies. Despite facing ridicule from every quarter, the »Holy Spirit ... encouraged me with a radiance of marvelous illumination from his sacred Holy Scriptures, by a most clear and powerful testimony from the forty-four books of the Old Testament, from the four Gospels, from the twenty-three Epistles of the blessed Apostles—urging me to press forward ... Now I lay aside all of my lifetime experience as a navigator, and my discussions with many people of many lands and cultures ... I hold only to the sacred Holy Scriptures and to the interpretations of prophecy of certain devout persons.« He felt that the Lord was hastening the great events of history and that the end of history was near. Consequently, the Gospel had to be preached urgently to many lands. He cited Psalm 21:

All the ends of the earth shall remember, and shall be converted to the Lord: And all the kindreds of the Gentiles shall adore in his sight. For the kingdom is the Lord's; and he shall have dominion over the nations.

Christ is the God of all:

Hear us, O God our Savior, who

art the hope of all the ends of the earth, and in the sea afar off.

But this universal Lord is not the divine principle in all religions. For Columbus, the God of the Bible is the only true God. The God of all other peoples is false and must be destroyed. Although Islam shared in the legacy of the bible, yet, for Columbus, they are

⁵ Ibid., p. 101.

heathens who have defiled the temple of Jerusalem. »All the gods of the Gentiles are devils.« But, they should come to the God of the bible who created the universe.

On the close association between Jerusalem and Christianity, Columbus included a long letter that Rabbi Samuel of Fez, Morocco, sent to his teacher, Rabbi Isaac, both of whom were later converted to Christianity.⁶ In the letter Rabbi Samuel declared that Isaiah had prophesied that God would abandon Israel and make the Gentiles his people. Columbus used this as proof to explain why the Jews did not accept Christ as the Messiah and the new law. Instead, Christ's message found a more accepting audience among the Gentiles: »All peoples of all languages are reading the books of the law and of the prophets and the Psalms, and they have already destroyed the idols in which none of them believes as a result of the doctrine of Moses and of Aaron.« Through their belief in Christ, the Gentiles now know Moses and the prophets, and they know God and the new law. Columbus used S. Augustine's *Soliloquies* to support the doctrine that it was Christianity and not the nation of Israel that saw the universality of the God of the bible. He felt certain that the false Gods of the Gentiles would be destroyed in their temples and in their hearts. Columbus distinguishes between the spiritual Israel which is »not made up of only one nation« and the Jewish nation, »deservedly overthrown and dispersed through all the lands«.⁷ This spiritual Israel is distinguished by »knowledge rather than race.« What Columbus was advocating was the right of Christians and Gentiles to Jerusalem in an age »yet to come, when there will be a new heaven and a new earth, which the unrighteous shall not be able to inhabit.«

Continuing his exegesis of S. Augustine's *Harmony of the Gospels*, he affirmed that before the coming of the new heaven and earth, the teachings of Jesus must first be preached to all nations. The gospels had already been preached in Europe, Asia, and Africa; with the discovery of the »fourth part« of the world, it was being spread there. Then the final struggle will take place in Jerusalem when there will be »the abomination of desolation«.

The final battle between Christians and non-Christians that will take place in Jerusalem has as its context the defeat of Islamic hegemony in the Holy Land. The eschatological doctrine of the »last days« and the second coming of Christ is intertwined with the ideal of the crusade to liberate Jerusalem and Christian lands from the Muslims. Using the *Book of Laws and Sects* of Pierre D'Ailly as his guide, he finds confirmation of the prophecy that Muslim rule and civilization would be overthrown soon.⁸ Columbus obviously supported D'Ailly's association of the beast mentioned in the Apocalypse with Islam, that »sect of perdition.«⁹ Columbus recorded with keen interest D'Ailly's prophecy that the

⁶ Ibid., pp. 135–141. Rabbi Samuel of Fez was a Jewish convert to Christianity in the late 11th century at Toledo. The letter was translated into several languages.

⁷ Ibid., pp. 145–149.

⁸ The *Imago Mundi* of Cardinal PIERRE D'AILLY (1350–1420) was one of the principal sources of Columbus's scientific knowledge. Columbus made some 898 comments in his copy of the work. Pierre D'Ailly, chancellor of the university of Paris, was an encyclopedist who borrowed his knowledge from Nicholas d'Oresme (1325–82) and from Roger Bacon (c. 1220–c. 1294).

⁹ Ibid., pp. 157–167.

defeat of Islam will coincide with the coming of Anti-Christ »who will establish an abominable and magical government after Mohammed.« To support his view that that moment was imminent, he borrowed selections from *The Book of Harmony of True Astronomy and Record of History* of Alfonso X, which gave the precursory events before the final defeat of Islam. I will quote at length from this selection because it shows how deeply the hostility to Islam was in the minds of medieval Europeans. Although the expectation of the return of Jesus was an important theme in Christianity as was the significance of Christian Apocalyptic literature before the rise of Islam, it was the conflict with Islam that fueled the frequent militant revivals of millenarism and crusades.¹⁰ Certainly, at the end of the fifteenth century, with the successful culmination of the crusade against the Muslims in Granada, Christian Europe had reason to believe that the tide of their struggle against Islam was beginning to turn, and that their fears that had risen when the Turks had conquered Constantinople in 1453 could be relaxed. Columbus cited the version of history from the scholastic history of Pseudo-Methodius: »... through the sins of its inhabitants, the Promised Land will be possessed by the sons of Ishmael, that is the Saracens, although the land should belong to Christians ... after the tribulation which will be caused by the sons of Ishmael when they rejoice in their victories and boast that they have conquered Farsistan, Romania, Cicilia, as well as Capadocia, Isauria, also Africa or Sicily, and those who dwell nearest Rome and the islands; they will boast and say that it is impossible for the Christians ever to recover these lands from them. Then, suddenly tribulation shall overtake them, and the king of the Greeks or Romans shall spring forth in great fury from the sea of Ethiopia upon the inhabitants of the Promised Land, and the King of the Romans shall press a yoke upon them seven times as great as was their yoke upon the earth ... [After] the indignation and rage of the king of the Romans have been kindled upon those who rejected Christ, there will be peace and great tranquility upon the earth, such as has never yet existed ... [After] that peace, then shall be unlocked the gates of the north ... and the whole earth shall be shattered before them, and by various barbarous cruelties shall be wasted and defiled by them. But after a week ... the Lord will send one of the princes of his host and shall conquer them in a moment of time.«¹¹ Then the redeemed will return to Jerusalem in glory and shall inherit the land forever.

The theme of the triumphant return to Jerusalem occupies an important place in Columbus's imagination. But what is fascinating is how audaciously Christians had appropriated the history, heroes, prophets, and symbols of Jews for themselves. Since he had earlier distinguished between the nation of Jews from spiritual Israel and had asserted that Christians and Gentiles had inherited the legacy of the bible, Columbus did not feel any unease in expressing the joy of the hope of reconquering Jerusalem and using the prophet Joel's description of this joy: »And you, O children of Zion, rejoice and be joyful

¹⁰ See M. REEVES, *The Influence of Prophecy in the Later Middle Ages: A Study in Joachimism*, Oxford, 1969; —, »The Development of Apocalyptic Thought: Medieval Attitudes«, in: *The Apocalypse in English Renaissance Thought and Literature*, ed. by C. PATRIDES, Ithaca, 1984.

¹¹ *Libro de Profecias*, pp. 161–164.

in the Lord your God: because he hath given you a teacher of justice, and he will make the morning and the evening rain to come down to you as in in the beginning. And the floors shall be filled with wheat, and the presses shall overflow with wine and oil ...» But, like Joel who admonished the Philistines, Greeks, the people of Sidon and Tyre, Columbus warned the Muslims that the day of the Last Judgment was near. All nations would assemble in the valley of Josaphat where God will issue his judgment. Then the truth of the universality of the God of the Bible and Christ will be acknowledged and, in this new heaven and earth, »many nations shall come in haste and say: Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord and to the house of the God of Jacob: and he will teach us of his ways and we will walk in his paths. For the law shall go forth out of Zion, and the word of the Lord out of Jerusalem. And he shall judge among many people and rebuke strong nations afar off: and they shall beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into spades. Nation shall not take sword against nation: Neither shall they learn war anymore. And every man shall sit under his vine and under his fig tree, and there shall be none to make them afraid ...«¹² In the spirit of reconciliation, the opportunity for salvation is offered to »the house of Judah and the house of Israel« with the invocation that they should »love ye truth and peace.« Yet, as Columbus described it, this Utopian ideal is always accompanied by the warning that the historical enemies of ancient Israel and Christianity will be punished, and he repeatedly utters a cry to do battle: »And I will destroy the pride of the Philistines. And I will take away his blood out of his mouth and his abomination from between his teeth«. »I will raise up thy sons, O Zion, above thy sons, O Greece.« »The Lord shall strike all nations that have fought against Jerusalem: the flesh of every one shall consume away while they stand upon their feet, and their eyes shall consume away in their holes, and their tongue shall consume away in their mouth ...«

In Columbus's moral economy, all peoples are to be given the opportunity to be converted to the universal truth of Christianity without which there can be no salvation. Those who reject Christianity will not be saved. Columbus then included a poem which he wrote in Italian and entitled »Preparing«:

Preparing for the last days
 Always the saintly men
 Separated themselves from the world,
 And always served Christ,
 Suffering tribulations,
 Sacrificing their own desires
 Of the flesh, and the pride of life.
 Clothed with humility
 To restrain their passions.¹³

It is possible that Columbus was thinking of himself when he wrote this. After all, he and his brothers were taken back to Spain in chains at the end of his third voyage. It

¹² Ibid., p. 201.

¹³ Ibid., p. 225.

cannot be doubted that the *Libro de Profecias* was part of his attempt to rehabilitate himself in the eyes of the Crown. He clearly has himself in mind when he quotes a poem from Seneca's *The Tragedy of Medea* in which Typhis the pilot discovers »new worlds« and in the next passages refers to an eclipse of the moon when he was on the island of Saona off Hispaniola in 1494. This personal intervention in his book was meant perhaps to remind the King of his own role in the unfolding of divine providence.

In the final sections of the book, Columbus returned to earlier themes. He stressed the universal message of Christianity and the fact that it was addressed not only to Jews but to all peoples. This time he used the authority of St. John's Gospel and Nicholas of Lyra's commentary on it. John had defined the Christian mission in this way: »I am the good shepherd: and I know mine, and mine know me ... And other sheep I have that 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.« All the commentators on this emphasized that it meant that the Gospel was to be preached to Jews and Gentiles. Columbus added a note that S. Paul in his Epistles and Acts of the Apostles had been effective in propagating the teaching that Christ came into the world for the conversion and salvation of all nations, not only Jews. Quoting S. Augustine's homily on S. Matthew's Gospel, he gave credit to Paul for his mission to the Gentiles. In the process, he was changed from »a criminal to a pastor, from a wolf to a sheep.«

Columbus then included a poem called »Joy in the birth of Saint John the Baptist«. Not only was the cult of S. John the Baptist popular in Spain at the time of Columbus's voyages, but in his understanding of Providence, Columbus saw himself fulfilling the same function. Just as S. John the Baptist served to prepare the way for Jesus, so Columbus was suggesting to King Ferdinand that he was preparing the way for the Spanish monarch to sit on the throne of Jerusalem. In the latter years, Columbus would sign his name as »Christo-Ferens«, »Christ-Bearer«, which was the traditional description of the role of S. John the Baptist. The poem said:

Joys more than usual cheer me
Today more than other days,
On this birthday of the holy son
Of Elizabeth and Zachariah.
God the Word rejoiced also.¹⁴

In the concluding section, *Prophecies of the Future. The Last Days*, Columbus drew attention to a letter sent to the Spanish king indicating that Joachim of Fiore had foretold that a Spanish king would recover the fortunes of Jerusalem. Then he related the story of how King Solomon assembled a fleet off the shore of the Red Sea which sailed to the gold mines in Ophir. Nicholas of Lyra placed these mines in India. The fleet brought back to Jerusalem some four hundred and twenty talents of gold. The significance of this story was that Columbus was explaining to the king why he had changed the trajectory of his third voyage: he was hoping to find King Solomon's mines in the continent of Paria so that he

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 237.

could finance the final crusade of the king of Spain to liberate the Holy Land. He ended his notes by repeating his constant theme of the mission to Christianize the world. Quoting Isaiah, he wrote: »I will send of them that shall be saved, to the Gentiles into the sea, into Africa and Lydia, them that draw the bow; into Italy and Greece, to the islands afar off, to them that have not heard of me and have not seen my glory«.

Sailing along the coast of the island of Trinidad and the continent of South America in early August, 1498, Columbus was certain that this was the earthly paradise mentioned in the bible and that the Garden of Eden was nearby. The discovery confirmed his view that the enterprise of the Indies was the fulfillment of prophecy. The marginality of prophecy as a method of knowledge in the modern world makes the millennial cast of Columbus's mind seem ridiculous. While we often celebrate the 16th century Renaissance as the beginning of modern Europe, we should not lose sight of the fact that Europe was still fundamentally medieval in its institutions and outlook. The apocalyptic vision of history was closer to the center of European society than its periphery. That Columbus stayed at Franciscan monasteries on several occasions gave him an intimate knowledge of a monastic movement that was long associated with the more mystical and apocalyptic approach to Christianity.¹⁵ His friendship with the monks at the influential monastery of La Rabida was critical in getting his proposal for a voyage to Asia accepted by the Spanish Crown. The *Rule* of S. Francis was approved by Pope Honorius III in 1223 and had as its central principle the commitment to poverty and simplicity as the way of restoring the original spirit of evangelical Christianity. When Francis died, the pope allowed the *Rule* to be relaxed. But, there always remained Franciscan movements which sought to follow the spirit and letter of the original monastic order, and formed the basis of reform movements in Europe.

These spiritual Franciscans were also inspired by the teaching of the South Italian Abbot Joachim of Fiore († 1202), who was the most influential apocalyptic writer of the middle ages. Joachim divided history into three parts: the age of God the Father from Adam to Christ, corresponding to the layman's Church; the age of God the Son from Christ to around 1260 which was the Church of the Priests; and the age of the Holy Spirit, beginning in 1260 and known as the Church of the Friars. This third age was to be the millennial kingdom of the Apocalypse. The light of the Holy Spirit would illuminate mankind in this age, bringing peace and justice. In Joachim's view, the transition from the second to the third and final period would be characterized by the contemplative life of apostolic poverty. The writings of the spiritual Franciscans focused on the coming end of time, the salvation of the whole world, the recapture of Jerusalem, and its rule by an emperor who would combine both temporal and religious functions. The radical Franciscan-Joachimite ideas travelled to Spain on many roads. The works of the late thirteenth century scholar, Peter John Olivi, a student at Paris and later professor at Provence, and Arnold of Villanova, a professor at Montpellier and court physician at Aragon, influenced the Spanish intellectual climate with their emphasis on spiritual renewal

¹⁵ Ibid., pp. 26–28.

and their call for the rule of Christendom by »one pastor and one shepherd.« Also influential among the Spanish was the fourteenth century French Joachimite, Jean de Roquetaillade who predicted the appearance of a new world leader, the conversion of Jews and infidels, a millennium when political power would be exercised from Jerusalem, from where the Franciscan elect would carry the Christian message to the rest of the world.

It was not principally from Joachim of Fiore that Columbus got the idea of the last world emperor who would be Spanish. There was a seventh century text, the pseudo-Methodius, drawn from Jewish messianic sources, which was translated into several vernacular languages. That there were ten editions of this text between 1470 and 1475 testifies to its significance in the intellectual climate of late 15th century Europe. This world emperor would join church and state, bring peace and justice to all the world, and introduce the mission to convert the world under »one shepherd.«

In the 1980s, some scholars studied the influence of millenarist sources on Columbus. Tzvetan Todorov (1982) insisted that greed was not Columbus's true motive for his voyages, but the spread of Christianity.¹⁶ The wealth he had hoped to find was to be used to advance the cause of the universal victory of Christianity. In locating Columbus's religious sensibility within the inflexible medieval system and vision, Todorov argued that this was one of the reasons for his inhumanity to the indigenous people of the Americas. For Todorov, Columbus »discovered America, but not the Americans.« Todorov contrasted the rigid, obsessive medieval mentality of Columbus with the mentality of another conqueror, Hernan Cortes. Cortes, in Todorov's view, possessed a modern mentality in that he was »the first to have a political and even a historical consciousness of his actions.« No less than Columbus, Cortes was destructive to the native peoples because he used his modern consciousness to manipulate, exploit, and colonize. Archaic ideology in the case of Columbus, and modern instrumental rationality in Cortes were causes of human destructiveness. Todorov's analysis was provocative and brilliant, but we must be warned that the dichotomy between the secular and clerical was not as clear in the time of Columbus. During and after the conquest of Mexico, it was Cortes who was most zealous in uprooting Aztec religious practices and had to be restrained by the call to prudence by the missionary, Fray Bartolome de Olmedo.¹⁷

Pauline Moffitt Watts (1985) and Alain Milhou (1983) made a more sustained inquiry into the spiritual motivations of Columbus. Rooting their arguments in the millennial movements of the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, they concluded that Columbus's apocalyptic vision was a major motive for the voyages. They were both indebted to John Leddy Phelan (1956) who, in his pioneering study of the influence of Joachim of Fiore on the Franciscans in the New World and Columbus, saw Columbus as a religious visionary influenced by the European apocalyptic tradition.¹⁸ Pauline Moffitt

¹⁶ See T. TODOROV, *The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other*, English trans., NY, 1984.

¹⁷ See R. RICARD, *The Spiritual Conquest of Mexico*, Berkeley, 1966, p. 16; it was originally published in Paris in 1933.

¹⁸ See JOHN LEDDY PHELAN, *The Millennial Kingdom of the Franciscans*, 2nd. ed., Berkeley, 1970, pp. 14–15.

Watts showed the extensive use that Columbus made of Pierre D'Ailly and Roger Bacon in compiling his *Libro de Profecias* and argued for the central importance of the spiritual motivation of Columbus. She felt that, like Columbus, D'Ailly and Bacon were faithful to their medieval mindset in combining the study of history, astronomy, and mathematics to predict the end of the world, the rise and fall of religions, and the coming of Antichrist. She accepted Columbus's description of his role in the apocalyptic drama, that his discovery of the islands near the alleged archipelago of Asia and the conversion of the peoples of this new world to Christianity were part of God's plan for the recovery of Jerusalem and the conversion of all peoples of the world to Christianity before the world came to an end.¹⁹ For her, the liberation of the Holy Land from Muslims was Columbus's »ultimate goal, the purpose of all his travels and discoveries.«

In his study of the apocalyptic tradition of Europe and its influence on Columbus, Alain Milhou made a strong case for the powerful and persistent force of millenarism.²⁰ He argued that the voyages of Columbus were motivated not simply by the desire to reach and tap the riches of Asia by sailing West, but responded to a global vision which »combined the tradition of Atlantic discoveries, the commercial and missionary undertakings to Asia, medieval legends about unknown lands and the messianic and eschatological universalism of the medieval crusade.« The enterprise embraced the expansion of Christianity to the limits of the world, to establish an alliance with the Grand Khan of Cathay and »roll back« the influence of Islam on peoples who did not have an organized religion, and to recover Jerusalem by defeating the Muslims.

To understand the intellectual currents of late fifteenth century Spain, Alain Milhou used the life and works of a contemporary of Columbus, Martin Martinez de Ampiez. A Spanish aristocrat who was a soldier and humanist, Ampiez published in 1496 his version of the *Book of the Antichrist*, followed by several other treatises. What his works revealed above all else was the heightened anxiety of Europe around 1500, caused by the obsessive fear of the Turks. In *The Book of the Antichrist*, Ampiez dramatized a global struggle between Christianity and the Antichrist, assisted by Judaism and Islam, the two »sects of perdition«. The major themes of the book were the anxiety at the prospect of the end of the world, interest in Jerusalem and unknown peoples and lands, the global struggle against Islam, curiosity about the part played by Jews in the history of civilization, respect for Rome and the Pope, and an affinity for the Franciscan tradition and the deep devotion to Mary. Milhou felt that these themes formed a significant part of the cultural climate of the time and supported Columbus's scientific and politico-religious views.

To support his view of Columbus's religiosity, Milhou cited the portrait of Columbus given by Las Casas in his *History of the Indies*. Columbus was accustomed to recite prayers at the canonical hours regularly. Las Casas recalled an incident when Columbus made Chief Ornofay wait until he had completed his prayers. He even wanted to impose

¹⁹ PAULINE MOFFITT WATTS, »Prophecy and Discovery: On the Spiritual Origins of Christopher Columbus's Enterprise of the Indies«, in: *American Historical Review*, 90 (1985) pp. 73–102.

²⁰ See ALAIN MILHOU, *Colon y su Mentalidad Mesianica*, Valladolid, 1983.

a regulation to the effect that colonists first had to go to Confession and receive the Eucharist before receiving the required license to go to the gold mines. As early as 1493, Columbus signed a letter »Christoferens« or Christ-Bearer. From 1493 until his death in 1506 he signed every letter with the following cryptic sigil:

.S.

.S.A.S.

XMY

Milhou offered this interpretation of the symbols. The letters of the bottom line stood for: Christophorus – Maria – Johannes (Baptista); the middle line: Sanctus – Ave – Sanctus; the symbol at the top, again Sanctus. The triple repetition of Sanctus represented the Trinity, a popular devotion around 1500. There developed at that time, too, an interesting iconography – the Virgin Mary crowned by the Trinity, an image that reflected the popular devotion to the Trinity and Mary. What all this meant was that Columbus saw himself as another John the Baptist, preparing the way to bring Christianity to the peoples of the Americas.

In his seminal study, *The Millennial Kingdom of the Franciscan: The Apocalypse in the Age of Discovery*, John Leddy Phelan considered Christopher Columbus to be the first to see »the possibility of converting all the races of the world as an apocalyptic and messianic vision.«²¹ This tendency could be seen more clearly after the third voyage. The identification of the Orinoco river as one of the four rivers of the Garden of Eden, and the inclusion in his will of February 1498 of a clause setting aside a portion of his estate to finance a crusade to liberate Jerusalem were illustrations of his frame of mind. In Columbus's mind, »the discovery of the Indies, the conversion of all the gentiles, and the deliverance of the Holy Sepulcher were considered to be the three climactic events which foreshadow the end of the world.«

But, let me interrupt this discourse to raise a counter-discourse which we will discuss more fully later. How does one square all this evidence of Columbus's spirituality with his insensitivity to the suffering of the American Indians, his obsession with finding gold, and the vanity with which he pursued and demanded recognition?²² It was the same Columbus who sent back to Spain in 1494 some five hundred Indian slaves with the expectation that trade in Indian slaves would compensate for not finding a large quantity of gold; from the first voyage to the last Columbus seemed overcome by a hunger for gold; he demanded and received the 10,000 maravedis that the Crown had promised to the person who first sighted land when the reward should have been given to Rodrigo de Triana; after he fell from grace in 1500, he made countless petitions to have his privileges restored. The answer to this question may be that there is no necessary connection between spirituality and ethics. The history of that time showed the co-existence of religion and slavery as well as the desire for God and gold. Christian Genoa did not have many qualms about selling

²¹ JOHN LEDDY PHELAN, Op. Cit., p. 2, 19; see also DELNO WEST, »Medieval Ideas of Apocalyptic Mission and the Early Franciscans in Mexico«, in: *The Americas* XLV (1989) pp. 293–313.

²² See my book *Columbus and Las Casas: The Conquest and Christianization of America*, Lanham, 1994.

Christian slaves to Muslim Turks despite their fear of the Turks; Portuguese merchants were not disturbed unduly about selling African slaves in Lisbon; and Spanish merchants were engaged in the slave trade of the Guanches of the Canary Islands.

Columbus's religious and millennial mentality was shaped by the prevailing spiritual climate of Europe and Spain. The main lines of this ideology developed in large part out of the European attempt to understand and resolve the experience of their long encounter with Islam and Judaism. Anxiety about the Muslim threat loomed large again at the Turkish conquest of Constantinople in 1453. The Spanish victory in Granada in 1492, the expulsion of Jews from Spain the same year, and the Portuguese successes in Africa offered hope for a successful outcome of the global struggle against Islam. The fears that this crisis produced led to the resurgence of the prophetic tradition.

It is only historically that we can comprehend the connection between Western imperial conquests and Christianization. Philosophically, these impulses seem contradictory. Yet, the attempts to conquer and Christianize the world represent not only a phenomenon of Columbus's history, but also the world's history. We have been trying to understand it by painting a broad cultural landscape of Europe and Spain. What this discourse on the apocalyptic vision of Columbus does is to show how the spiritual and military conquests of the Other can merge. A look at the relations between resurgent Christian Europe and non-Christians in the thirteenth century would illuminate more clearly the dynamics of evangelization at the end of the fifteenth century as a political and historical force. Major victories by Christian armies in Spain, and the Mongol threat to Eastern Europe created new challenges and opportunities for relations between Christians and Muslims.

It was the noted scholar of canon law, Pope Innocent IV, who developed the legal theory of relations between Christians and non-Christians.²³ In a commentary to the question whether Christians could seize lands occupied by Muslims other than the Holy Land, Innocent IV argued that all men possessed the right to private property and self-government. Therefore, the Christian responsibility for the salvation of all men was not a just cause of war against peoples who were not Christian. Yet, this statement was not as simple as it seemed. Innocent maintained, nevertheless, that the Pope had a spiritual responsibility for all human beings. It was this responsibility that authorized the Pope to send missionaries to preach Christianity to non-Christians and, if obstructed, to call upon Christian armies to invade those lands.²⁴ The significance of this was that, while non-Christians possessed natural rights to lordship and property, Innocent IV was declaring that only the Pope, not the emperor nor the leader of a Christian state, could intervene in the affairs of non-Christians, and then only for a spiritual purpose. But, did Muslim missionaries have a similar right to preach in Christian lands? Innocent answered in the negative because in his judgment they were »in error and we are on the righteous path.« Henry of Segusio, known as Hostiensis, a student of Innocent IV, disagreed with his

²³ See JAMES MULDOON, *Popes, Lawyers, and Infidels: The Church and the non-Christian World, 1250-1550*, Philadelphia, 1979.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

master. For him, Christ's coming had effectively ended the authority and jurisdiction of infidels and their sovereignty and property could legally and justly be transferred to Christians. Hostiensis cautioned, however, that although Christians had the right to universal dominion, intervention in the lands of non-Christians should preferably be by peaceful means by missionaries. Both Innocent IV and Hostiensis agreed that it was the Pope who possessed the right of intervention. These arguments served as the framework for ideas about the relations between Christians and non-Christians within European society and outside. Innocent's defense of the natural rights of all people to self-government and property was in the mainstream of the opinion of canon lawyers.

The successful campaigns of James I of Aragon (1213–1276) in conquering large sections of Muslim Spain made discussions about policy towards Muslims urgent. Writing in the 14th century, Oldratus de Ponte († 1335) sided with Hostiensis in arguing that after the birth of Christ non-Christians did not have the right to sovereignty and property according to natural law. Muslims in Spain were to be treated with tolerance, but he warned that Christians must always be on guard. As long as they posed no threat, non-Christians should not be expelled from Christian lands without reason. Still, Oldratus could not hide his historical bias against Muslims. He said that it was permissible to wage war against the descendants of Ishmael because, as people of the desert, they were by nature uncivilized and needed the heavy hand of Christian armies before they could be pacified and be prepared for Christianization and civilization. Contrary to the beliefs of Oldratus, Christian rulers in Spain found Muslims and Jews valuable members of their societies and ignored papal decrees prohibiting resettlement of conquered lands by Muslims.

The prospect of a bountiful harvest of converts in Lithuania and other indigenous peoples of Northeast Europe following the conversion of Mindowe, king of the Lithuanians, in 1250, caused Innocent IV to send letters to the bishop urging gentle treatment of the new Christians. The Pope's solicitude for the Lithuanians did little to restrain the rapacity of the Christian Teutonic knights and the kingdom of Poland who were intent on conquering and occupying Lithuanian lands. The Teutonic knights also ignored the Pope's appeal to assist the prince of Galicia in his defense against the imminent Mongol threat.

Responding to stories about Mongol interest in Christianity and the growing belief that non-Christians could be converted by rational argument, Innocent IV sent a Franciscan mission to the Mongol ruler. Lawrence of Portugal and John of Piano Carpini went by way of Russia while the Dominicans, Ascelinus and Andrew of Longjumeau, went through the Middle East. In the letter that the Pope sent to the Mongol ruler, the grandson of Genghis Khan, he blamed Guyuk for shattering the peace of the world and urged him to live in peace with his neighbors. In an interesting challenge to the notion that the Pope was responsible for everyone's spiritual welfare, Guyuk admonished the Pope and asked why he considered himself the agent of God.

The urgency of the missionary movement was articulated in the Bull of Pope Gregory IX, *Cum Hora Undecima* (1235), and reissued several times from the thirteenth century to the fifteenth century. Gregory IX urged missionaries to preach Christ's message to all men with the hope of converting non-Christians. The apocalyptic character of the papal

message explained in part the inspiration of the missionary movement: »Since the eleventh hour has come in the day given to mankind ... it is necessary that spiritual men [possessing] purity of life and the gift of intelligence should go forth with John [the Baptist] again to all men and all peoples of every tongue and in every kingdom to prophesy [the end of time].«²⁵

In the middle of the thirteenth century, the idea of armed crusades was giving way to the idea of conversion by peaceful means. There were many like Roger Bacon who doubted that armed crusades were effective. Increasing knowledge of Mongols, Buddhists, and Muslims offered a fertile field for missionary endeavors to convert non-Christians by persuasion. Widespread belief in the millennial prophecies of Joachim of Fiore also contributed to the strength of the missionary movement. According to Joachim, Islam, the seventh head of the beast mentioned in the Apocalypse, would be conquered less by fighting than by preaching. The idea of conversion by argument became an obsession. Even in Valencia where James I had discouraged conversion of conquered Muslims there arose an aggressive conversion movement.

The experience of Majorca in the thirteenth century is also pertinent to our inquiry into movement of Christian conversion. Held by Islam for almost three centuries, Majorca with its mixed population of Muslims, Christians, and Jews, was conquered by James I in 1229. The stage was set for the activity of the famous medieval missionary, Ramon Llull. After his own conversion experience in 1263, he pursued aggressively his project of the conversion of Muslims and Jews by rational persuasion. He went on missions to the Pope and Christian rulers to ask them to found institutions to train missionaries in Arabic and Eastern languages. Shaped by his knowledge of Islam as a living faith, he was influenced by the Catalan Dominican, Ramon de Penyafort, who had suggested that missionaries learn oriental languages. Llull encouraged disputations between different religions. The most famous was in 1263 in Barcelona when there was a debate between the Jewish Rabbi, Moses ben Nahman, and the Dominican friar, Pau Cristia, presided over by King James I. The dream of converting Jews and Muslims was concentrated in Spain and North Africa. Treatises that were significant in later missionary work in America and Asia were written in the late 13th century. It was Penyafort († 1275) who requested from Thomas Aquinas in 1269 a work to help missionaries, and so inspired the masterpiece, the *Summa Contra Gentiles*.

For Llull, conversion of Muslims was extremely important because Islam was the major obstacle to conversion of the world, especially the Mongols. Yet, it was the neo-Platonism of the Muslim philosopher, Al Ghazzali († 1111), and the Jewish Kabbala that influenced his work most. The spirit of Llull's evangelization could be seen at the conclusion of his book, *The Book of the Gentile*. After listening to the presentation of arguments by a Christian, a Jew, and a Muslim, the Gentile left without saying which religion he accepted. Conversion was to be a matter of choice, not force. It was to be based on the serious study of non-Christian peoples and cultures. He appreciated the beauty of the liturgy of Islam

²⁵ Ibid., p. 37.

and the depth of the religious spirit of Muslims. Yet, it was the same Llull who supported in 1291 the policy of an armed crusade. It was probably the fall of Acre in 1291 that prompted him to support armed action to recover the Holy Land. Llull and fellow Franciscan, Roger Bacon (* 1215), were as committed to the idea of the conversion of Muslims by rational argument as the Dominicans under Ramon Penyafort. As Robert I. Burns put it: »Academic Spanish Islam, heir of Averroes and Avempace, wrestled with the sons of Albert, Aquinas, and all the array of thirteenth – century genius.«²⁶

Why did the dream of converting Muslims and Jews fail? Although the schools and philosophical disputations achieved for a brief period the bridging of languages and mentalities of different cultures, at heart the missionaries did not show sympathy for Muslim and Jewish beliefs. The dreams of 13th century missionaries to Muslim lands were based on false assumptions – that the conversion of Muslims was imminent and that Muslim philosophers did not have a high regard for Islamic religious beliefs. It was nevertheless no small achievement that Christians could sit and engage in debate with their historic enemy with the hope of finding common ground following the bloody early crusades.

But, 13th century missionary activity in its aggressiveness contained the seeds of intolerance that would ripen two hundred years later in America: »Paradoxically, however, its aggressive rationalism and polemical proselytism, like some virus introduced in Christendom's bloodstream, heralded a new age of self-righteous harrassment and discrimination. By the end of the century, Christendom had put on an armor of inquisition and was entering an era of primitive harshness.«²⁷

It is significant that both the orthodox Christianity of the official Church as well as the Apocalyptic Christianity of some movements shared the ideology of crusades and conversion. The assertiveness and militancy of Christianity were striking. The theme of reconquest was pervasive in Spain and Portugal. By the 13th century, Portugal had regained their land and Spain had reconquered all its land except Granada. In the late 15th century, Ferdinand and Isabella were willing to use the idea of a crusade to unify Spain that had been torn by factional conflicts. They did not make any distinction between reconquest and conquest. They had received support for this policy from the Popes. In his Papal Bull, *Pontifex Maximus* (1455), Pope Nicholas V gave his support, encouragement, and authorization to the Portuguese King Dom Henrique: »The Pontiff grants to the king of Portugal and his successors all lands conquered from Cape Bojador to Guinea, and all the southern coast of Africa to its tip. They also receive the right of occupation of all lands, harbors, islands, and seas which they might conquer, and authority to promulgate laws, impose taxes, and build churches and monasteries.« The approval of the right to conquest was explicit. On June 21, 1481, Pope Sixtus IV recognized Spanish sovereignty over the Canary islands. The conquest of the Canary islands offers a luminous precedent to the conquest of America.

²⁶ J.N. HILLGARTH, *Ramon Llull and Llulism in Fourteenth-Century France*, Oxford, 1971; ROBERT I. BURNS, *Muslims, Christians, and Jews in the Crusader Kingdom of Valencia*, Cambridge, 1984, p. 103.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 108.

In 1478 Ferdinand and Isabella sent an expedition to occupy the Grand Canary and subjugate its people, the Guanches.²⁸ The Guanches resisted and it was not until 1483 that the Grand Canary was taken; Palma was conquered in 1492 and Tenerife in 1493. Columbus set out from the Canary islands on all four of his voyages. Indeed, many of the strategies of Spanish colonization were first attempted in the Canary islands. A policy of military conquest was pursued in the northern islands and religious conversion by missionaries in the south. The Guanches of the north were enslaved; there were few conversions in the south. The Spanish conquest had actually started after 1350, but could not be sustained because of civil and dynastic wars. When Ferdinand and Isabella resumed the conquest, they pursued the same policies as their predecessors. Within a generation, two-thirds of Canarians had died, and native Canarian culture was effectively destroyed.

Following Columbus's successful first voyage, Pope Alexander VI granted to Ferdinand and Isabella in 1493 all islands and mainland, discovered or to be discovered west of an imaginary line from pole to pole 100 leagues from the Azores and Cape Verde islands. In 1494 representatives of Spain and Portugal negotiated the Treaty of Tordesillas, defining their respective spheres of influence on a world level. They agreed to draw the line of demarcation 360 leagues west of the Cape Verde islands. What these papal letters and treaty demonstrated was that colonization and domination were important objectives of the projects from the beginning, and were sanctioned by the Church. Writing in 1508, the Italian Fracanzano Montalboddo had already intuited the creation of a new world order integrating the Spanish and Portuguese discoveries. In his *Countries Recently Discovered and the View of the World of the Florentine Amerigo Vespucci*, he divided his work in six parts and included the Portuguese voyages to Guinea, Brazil, and India; the Spanish voyages to the lands and islands they founded; the 'New World' letter of Vespucci about his purported third voyage to Brazil; and letters of Italians in Lisbon about the Portuguese voyages to Asia and present-day Canada. By including the New World letter in the larger context of the voyages to Asia and Canada, Montalboddo was giving a fresh insight into the meaning of European expansion.

Since our focus has been to explain Columbus's apocalyptic vision articulated in his *Libro de Profecias* after his third voyage in 1498, it is appropriate to say a few words about the Portuguese arrival in India in 1498. When Vasco da Gama arrived in Calicut, India, on May 27, 1498, little did he realize that the city and the Malabar region had been a vital center of trade for two thousand years. Malabar merchants had warehouses in Cairo, Alexandria, and Fez. A special relationship developed between its Hindu rulers and Muslim merchants who had contacts with Egypt, Arabia, and the Persian Gulf. At the end of the exploratory first voyage, Da Gama was given permission to trade with Calicut. The second voyage was a grander enterprise. With thirty three ships and 1500 men, Da Gama arrived in the Indian ocean bent on enforcing his claim to supremacy of the seas. The Welsers and other great merchants of Antwerp provided financial backing for the

²⁸ See ANTONIO RUMEU DE ARMAS, *La Política Indigenista de Isabella*, Valladolid, 1969; F. FERNANDEZ-ARMESTO, *The Canary Islands after the Conquest*, Oxford, 1982; E. AZNAR VALLEJO, *La Integración de las Islas Canarias en la Corona de Castilla*, Seville, 1984, pp. 23-87.

enterprise. Without warning, Da Gama intercepted and destroyed any vessel he met. On encountering an unarmed vessel returning from Mecca, he emptied the ship of goods, prevented Muslim passengers from leaving the ship, and then set fire to it.²⁹ Da Gama had hoped that the threat of force would intimidate the native rulers who had befriended him on his first voyage. But, the rulers of Calicut resisted the Portuguese for ninety years. Indeed, Goa was the only place in India that was conquered and colonized by the Portuguese. It was Affonso Albuquerque who constructed the strategic system that would give them mastery of trade in the Indian ocean. Coming out to Asia in 1506, he seized Socotra and demanded tribute from the king of Hormuz, thereby giving the Portuguese control of trade in the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf. They had already used force to establish ports at Mombasa and Mozambique, and points of access to the gold trade in the interior of Africa. With the conquest of Goa, they possessed a suitable base for naval operations. In 1511, Albuquerque conquered Malacca, a major commercial center of East Asia and the link between China and the countries of south and South-West Asia. In Asia, it was also conquest that was giving Europeans dominance over the emerging world order.

The violence of the Columbus and Da Gama voyages to America and Asia stand in marked contrast with the voyages of the Chinese Muslim, Cheng-Ho. Between 1405 and 1433, the Chinese made seven expeditions westward. To illustrate the scale of this operation, the first expedition comprised 63 galleons and more than a hundred auxiliary vessels carrying 868 civil officers, 26,800 soldiers, and 93 commanders. They visited more than thirty countries, from Champa in Vietnam to Mogadishu and Malindi in Africa. After a visit to a Buddhist temple in Sri Lanka on his third voyage, Cheng-Ho had an inscription composed in Chinese, Tamil, and Persian in honor of the local Buddha as thanksgiving for his and his men's safety. Phillip Snow compared the Chinese voyages to Africa with the Portuguese in this way: »... they stormed no cities and conquered no land ... the Chinese were tactful, anxious to avoid disturbing the small coastal states any more than was necessary to achieve their basic ends. Unlike the Portuguese they refrained from plunder. Instead, they coaxed the coastal rulers into trading by presenting them with gifts of coloured silk. They did not burn, as the Portuguese would, with the urge to impose their religious convictions, to lay siege to African souls.«³⁰

Cheng-Ho's encounters with non-Chinese cultures were so different from Columbus and Da Gama that this fact deserves an explanation rather than simply a narration. Could it be that it was the very character of the Christianity that we have been describing and analyzing that was responsible in some measure for the arrogance and cruelty of the European enterprise? Perhaps the comparison between Columbus and Cheng-Ho is too facile and Manichaeian. It would be more useful to look at Columbus's vision and achievements from the perspective and vision of Bartolome de Las Casas (1484–1566).³¹ For their respective admirers, Columbus and Las Casas were the heroes of the European

²⁹ K.M. PANIKAR, *Asia and Western dominance*, London, 1959, p. 35.

³⁰ See PHILLIP SNOW, *The Star Raft: China's Encounter with Africa*, NY, 1988, pp. 1–36.

³¹ BARTOLOME DE LAS CASAS, *Historia de Las Indias*, 3 vols. edited by AGUSTIN MILLARES CARLO, Mexico city, 1986.

voyages to America after 1492. Las Casas arrived in the Caribbean in 1502 and spent forty-five years defending the native peoples and writing about the encounter between Europeans and Americans. He participated in the conquest of Cuba, was an *encomendero* and a slave holder. He became a priest in 1510, but he gave up his *encomienda* only in 1514. A friend of Columbus, he defended him vigorously against the supporters of Pinzon and, later, Vespucci who tried to steal Columbus's achievement by claiming that it was not Columbus who ›discovered‹ America. Las Casas wrote several works on the Spanish conquest and evangelization, but we will follow his masterpiece, *Historia de Las Indias*, which he commenced in 1522 and finished around the last years of his life.

Las Casas believed in Divine Providence and felt that the importance of Columbus's voyages lay in the opportunity to preach Christianity and to prepare the indigenous people for conversion and salvation. Citing the Apocalypse of St. John, he felt sure that »divine Providence must have naturally disposed these people for indoctrination and divine grace, reserving the time of their calling and conversion ...« In this there was agreement between him and Columbus as both shared a Providential vision. The *Libro de Profecias* of Columbus describes, movingly at times, the contours of this prophetic vision, a theme which is restated constantly in the work. Not so was the *Historia de Las Indias*. From the very prologue, Las Casas called into question why Columbus and the Spaniards did not observe the spirit of their mission: »I was moved to write this book by the great and desperate need all Spain has of truth and enlightenment on all matters relating to this Indian world. What damage, calamities, disruptions, decimations of kingdoms, what millions of souls lost, how many unforgivable sins committed, what blindness and torpor of mind, what harm and evils past and present have been caused ... cannot ever be enumerated, weighed, measured and lamented enough from now until the final and fearful Day of Judgment.«

He began his narrative by describing the life of Columbus and how the enterprise of the Indies took shape. To critics of his time who said that Columbus was a mere artisan, Las Casas responded: »I think Christopher Columbus was the most outstanding sailor in the world, versed like no other in the art of navigation, for which divine Providence chose him to accomplish the most outstanding feat ever accomplished in the world until now.«³² His sense of the achievement of Columbus was sincere: »God gave this man the keys to the awesome seas, he and no other unlocked the darkness, to him and no other is owed for ever and ever all that exists beyond those doors. He showed the way to the discovery of immense territories whose coastline today measures over 12,000 leagues from pole to pole and whose inhabitants form wealthy and illustrious nations of diverse peoples and languages. Their rites and customs differ but they all have in common the traits of simplicity, peacefulness, gentleness, humility, generosity, and, of all the sons of Adam, they are without exception the most patient.« As Las Casas unfolds his story, it became clear that greed and force were the dominant interest of the colonists, not peaceful conversion. Over and over, he says that the colonists sought to spread terror among the

³² I am using the edition and translation of A.M. COLLARD (NY, 1971), p. 17.

native people so that they would see the Christians as strong and powerful. But, did he implicate Columbus in this? It seems obvious that he was drawing a distinction between Columbus and other colonists who were simply unnecessarily cruel like Alonso de Hojeda. Yet, he did not exonerate Columbus for not restraining the arbitrary conduct of Hojeda: »The admiral should have taken pains to bring love and peace and to avoid scandalous incidents ... Truly, I would not dare blame the admiral's intentions, for I knew him well and I know his intentions were good.« There is no denying his sympathy for Columbus, but he mentioned that in 1494 Columbus sent back to Spain 500 Indian slaves, and was »tyrannically offending the Indians.« Las Casas recorded that at that very moment the Crown was planning to undermine Columbus, and added this comment: »That is how God operates and that is why all of us must take care not to offend Him, praying that He enlighten us as to our sins so that we may mend our ways.«

As the Spanish colonial system was put in place to exploit the wealth of the Indies, Las Casas became more forceful in his criticism. He did not spare Columbus whom he saw as being »as blind as those who came after him, and he was so anxious to please the King that he committed irreparable crimes against the Indians.« I will describe at length Las Casas's commentary on the Christian encounter with the native people in order to pose a fundamental question about the human condition. Both Columbus and Las Casas witnessed the encounter intimately, and its destructiveness. Why did Columbus ignore it, choosing to hold firm to his hopeful prophetic vision, maintaining the merciful role for Spain and himself in that vision? Why did Las Casas cry out so loudly against the horrors that were taking place? This is how Las Casas described the encounter around the time that Columbus compiled his *Libro de Profecias*: »[The colonists] grew more conceited every day and fell into greater arrogance, presumption and contempt toward these humble people. They no longer felt like walking any distance. Having neither mules nor horses, they rode the backs of Indians if they were in a hurry; if they had more leisure, they traveled as if by litter, stretched on a hammock carried at a good speed and with relays. In this case they also had Indians carry large leaves to shade them from the sun and others to fan them with goose wings. I saw many an escort follow them loaded like a donkey with mining equipment and food ... Soulless, blind and godless, these Spaniards killed without restraint ... they despised and belittled them, discrediting their humanity and believing them to be nonrational animals.«³³ Las Casas found the cause of this oppression in the fact of greed: »But having found greed as the prime mover — vehement greed, blind, wild and the root of all evils — it became apparent that the original tyrants ... had been numbed by greed.« Continuing, Las Casas wrote: »It was a general rule among Spaniards to be cruel; not just cruel, but extraordinarily cruel so that harsh and bitter treatment would prevent Indians from daring to think of themselves as human beings or having a minute to think at all. So they would cut an Indian's hands and leave them dangling by a shred of skin and they would send him on, saying ›Go now, spread the news to your chiefs.‹ They would test their swords and their manly strength on captured Indians and place bets on the slicing off

³³ Ibid., pp. 79–82.

of heads or the cutting of bodies in half with one blow. They burned or hanged captured chiefs.«³⁴ Or, listen to the story of Queen Anacaona of Xaragua province in Hispaniola. When the Spanish governor announced that he and 300 guest were planning to visit her, she prepared a lavish ceremony to honor her guests, presenting songs and dances as when Columbus was entertained by King Guacanagari during his first trip to the Caribbean. Later, one Sunday afternoon, when Queen Anacaona and 80 chieftains visited the Spanish commander, he lured her followers inside his wood and straw house, prevented them from leaving, set fire to the house, and burnt alive all the men. Queen Anacaona who was kept outside was hanged. There is no doubt that this was genocide. But, is there no other explanation for these killings than murder for pleasure?

Las Casas praised Queen Isabella for introducing regulations to ameliorate the conditions for the native people. But, he said that these reforms were not observed in the colonies. The native people continued to be treated like »sticks, stones, cats or dogs.« Colonists continued to send their Indian workers to the mines far from their homes while their wives worked the soil. Husband and wife were together once every eight or ten months. The newly born babies died because their mothers, overworked and famished, had no milk to nurse them: »while I was in Cuba, 7,000 children died in three months. Some mothers even drowned their babies from sheer desperation, while others caused themselves to abort with certain herbs ... In this way husbands died in the mines, wives died at work, and children died from lack of milk.«

The picture that Las Casas presented of the last years of Columbus is a sad one. In truth, the enterprise of the Indies had been taken from him and given to powerful officials who saw the enterprise as mainly a commercial enterprise. The fourth voyage was also a dismal failure and Columbus had to spend a year in Jamaica in relative isolation. When he returned in 1504, he continued his obsession with getting back his honors and titles that were taken from him. Bedridden and paralyzed with gout, Columbus wrote a memorandum which Las Casas recorded with interest: »The Indians of Hispaniola were and are its very wealth, because they are the ones who till the land, provide the bread and other victuals for the Christians, dig the mines for gold, and do all the work which men and beasts do. He says he is aware that six out of seven Indians have died since he left the island because of maltreatment: butchered, beaten, starving and ill-treated, most died in the mountains and streams where they had fled ... He adds that if he did send Indians to Castile who then were sold, it had been for the purpose of instructing them in our Faith, our customs, crafts and trades, after which he intended to reclaim them and return them to their lands so they could instruct others. All these are the admiral's words. His was a crafty ignorance, if indeed it was ignorance and not greed.«³⁵ Columbus died on May 20, 1506. Las Casas said that he died in misery, dispossessed of his status and titles, but he wondered whether this was not part of God's justice: »God's ways are subtle indeed: consider what this *History* has been telling you of the oppression Columbus imposed on Indian kings and nations in

³⁴ Ibid., p. 94.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 141.

Hispaniola and Veragua; whether he actually did it himself or allowed it to be done, it was an absurd and unrighteous thing. It is not too bold to presume that his own anguish and misfortune were sent as divine punishment.«

The distinguished Spanish scholar, Ramon Menendez Pidal, called Las Casas a pathological liar. So, we are left with the Columbus and Las Casas versions of what happened in that fateful encounter. Let me present another story during that early period of the conquest that at least confirms Las Casas's view of the encounter. In 1510, the Dominicans sent missionaries to Hispaniola under the scholar Pedro de Cordoba to take part in the project of Christianization. When they saw the cruelty of the colonists towards the Indians, they decided to address that issue and do something about it. In 1511, Fray Anton de Montesinos gave the sermon at a Mass that attracted all the important officials of Santo Domingo, including Diego Columbus: »I have come here in order to declare it unto you, I the voice of Christ in the desert of this island. Open your hearts and your senses, all of you, for this voice will speak new things harshly, and will be frightening ... This voice says that you are living in deadly sin for the atrocities you tyrannically impose on these innocent people. Tell me, what right have you to enslave them? What authority did you use to make war against them who lived at peace on their territories, killing them cruelly with methods never before heard of? How can you oppress them and not care to feed or cure them, and work them to death to satisfy your greed? ... Aren't they human beings? Have they no rational soul? Aren't you obliged to love them as you love yourselves?«³⁶ The Spanish officials threatened to take action if Fray Montesinos did not recant what he said. The following Sunday, Fray Montesinos declared that he had spoken the truth, said that his Order would refuse to confess anyone who did not mend their ways, and told the officials that they could write to anyone they pleased. Perhaps it is unfair to Columbus to compare him with Las Casas and Montesinos. Most Europeans did not find the oppression inflicted on the native people exceptional or they simply preferred to ignore the issue. The outstanding royal historian, Fernandez de Oviedo, drew attention to the cruelty but did not have a high opinion of the abilities of the Indians. Defenders of Columbus are quick to attack Las Casas because there is a long scholarly tradition that Las Casas was responsible for the Black Legend of Spain. But, they must be reminded that Las Casas was sympathetic to Columbus, and his criticism of him was restrained, unlike, say, that of the Spanish historian, Ramon Iglesia, who did not believe that Columbus was a religious person at all: »The piety that is claimed for him was fabricated, conscious, extroverted, ritualistic ... the religiosity of Columbus is as secondary in his spirit, is as self-interested and dependent upon practical results, as his supposed feeling for nature.«³⁷

The most devastating criticism of Columbus and the conquest, however, remains the issue of the dramatic decline of the native population. Other issues such as evangelization and exploitation are insignificant in the context of this genocide. In Espanola, the

³⁶ Ibid., p. 183; see also *Fray Anton de Montesinos*, Mexico City, 1982.

³⁷ See RAMON IGLESIA, *Columbus, Cortes, and Other Essays*, trans. and ed. by L.B. SIMPSON, Berkeley, 1969, pp. 8–33.

population declined from about 3½ million in 1496 to 125 in 1570.³⁸ In the face of the decline in population, Indians from the Bahamas and other islands were forced to migrate to Espanola between 1511 and 1520. Las Casas's statement that there were no more Indians in the Bahamas in 1542 provides another illustration of the deadly consequences of the conquest of the Caribbean. A similar human catastrophe occurred in Puerto Rico, Jamaica, and Cuba. The destruction of the native peoples of the Caribbean would be the prelude to disasters in Mexico and Peru. On the eve of the conquest of Mexico, the estimated population was 25 million; in 1600 the Indian population had declined to one million. Of an estimated population in Peru of 32 million in 1520, the number dropped to 5 million by 1548. Undeniably, the data from which these figures are based are imprecise, but the scholarship on native American demography has been careful. Few scholars take seriously today the statement of George Bancroft that before Europeans came to the United States the area was »an unproductive waste ... its only inhabitants a few scattered tribes of feeble barbarians, destitute of commerce and political connection.«³⁹

What were the causes of this catastrophe? Must Columbus be held responsible for this? Admittedly, disease was a major cause of the population decline. After the outbreak of the small-pox epidemic in Espanola in December 1518, one third of the native population died in a few weeks. American Indians did not have immunity to old world diseases — small-pox, measles, bubonic plague, whooping cough, typhoid, influenza, and yellow fever. But the decline also occurred in years when there was no epidemic. The European obsession for gold that we could see as early as Columbus's first voyage in 1492 and the establishment of the *encomienda* destroyed the native social structure and the rhythm of their lives. Columbus himself had set the stage for this in 1496 in Espanola by allocating to his military leaders groups of native peoples who were expected to provide labor and tribute. This system of forced labor meant that Indians were sent all over the island to work in the mines. Judge Zuazo, a member of the first Audiencia of Santo Domingo, was convinced that this shifting from their homes to unknown surroundings caused the death of large numbers. Their community life was gradually destroyed. In the *Relacion de Texcoco* (1582), Juan Bautista Pomar reflected on the decline of the population in Mexico in this way: »[The native Mexicans] suffered from an affliction and fatigue of their spirits because they had lost the liberty God had given them; for the Spaniards treat them worse than slaves.«⁴⁰ As we end these reflections on Columbus, the mind once again remains focused on the human tragedy and genocide that overtook the indigenous peoples of America. Again, the question of Columbus's religiosity seems irrelevant: The enterprise of the Indies still seems more a tragedy than an achievement.

³⁸ S.F. COOK and W. BORAH, *Essays in Population History: Mexico and the Caribbean*, Berkeley, Ca., 1971, 376–410.

³⁹ ALFRED W. CROSBY, JR., *The Columbian Voyages, the Columbian Exchange and their Historians*, Washington, D.C., 1987, p.V.

⁴⁰ See T. TODOROV, *The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other*, NY, 1984, p. 135.

Abstract

Returning to Seville from his third voyage to America (1498), Christopher Columbus compiled his *Libro de Profecias* which sought to explain the significance of his achievements in the context of Biblical prophecy, the history of Christianity, and the struggle against Islam in his own time. How did the religious perspective of this work influence Columbus's enterprise for reaching the Indies? This essay examines the millennial sources of the *Libro de Profecias*, the 13th century precedents of the missionary movement, and the spiritual movements of late fifteenth-century Spain as influences on the intellectual formation of Columbus. It discusses how the connection between colonization and Christianization developed in early modern Europe. To the question of how this »spirituality« affected the horrors of the conquest of America, the discourse of Fray Bartolome de Las Casas is analyzed as a counter-narrative.