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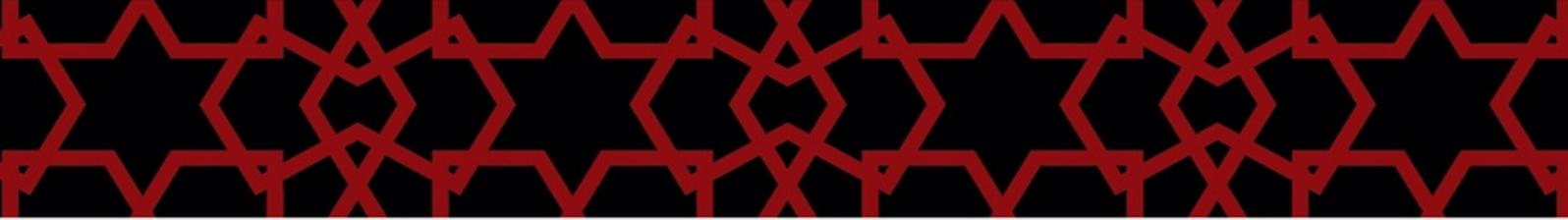


ONE NATION,

UNDER GODS



A NEW AMERICAN HISTORY



PETER MANSEAU

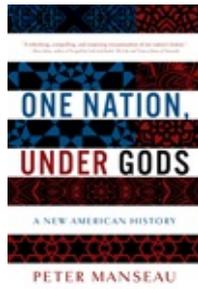
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For my daughters.

*But it does me no injury for my neighbor to say there are twenty gods, or no
god.*

It neither picks my pocket nor breaks my leg.

—Thomas Jefferson

... the forest is unconverted.

—Derek Walcott

INTRODUCTION

Unearthing History

In the dry red soil of Chimayo, New Mexico, there is a hole in the ground that some call holy. They intend no pun, no play on words. The hole is a serious matter; the locals who tend to it would no more joke about their humble opening in the earth than they would a hole in the head, or the heart.

An arm's length in diameter and just deep enough that the temperature seems to drop when you lean in for a closer look, the hole has been here for centuries. The dirt in this valley has been regarded as sacred since before the birth of the Republic of which it is now a part; it has been revered as the physical nature of the spirit world since before the Spanish missionaries arrived with their own notions of embodied divinity; it was holy even before the first Europeans looked on the people of an unmapped continent and declared that they must know nothing of God.

Though it has a long and eclectic spiritual history, the hole sits today in the back corner of a Roman Catholic Church, El Santuario de Chimayo, which is among the most frequently visited religious pilgrimage sites in America. Hundreds of thousands of true believers and curious souls visit every year to line up in a small side chapel strewn with pictures of loved ones lost. They crowd into a closet-sized space around the hole, bend at the knees, dip their hands into the cool of the gap below, and pull up big handfuls of dirt. Some of it ends up in Ziploc bags, some in Tupperware tubs to be taken home on airplanes to every corner of this improbable nation. Much of it ends up in the mouths of the faithful. Visitors to Chimayo believe that eating the dirt brings miracles; as evidence they point to the crutches hanging from the walls.

Some would call this practice folk religion—not the real or legitimate orthopraxy of a Christian church but an indigenous corruption of the sanctioned sacrament of Communion. Others might suggest it is in fact something more complicated: a distinctly American form of religious syncretism, a blending of faith traditions so complete that it is difficult to separate one from the other. Implicit in each of these explanations is a more obvious physical truth. The church at Chimayo was built over a hole in the ground that has history both connected to and independent of the structure around it.

To extend the metaphor: In thinking about religion in American history, we have too often focused only on the church standing above the hole and not on the hole itself, nor on the people lining up to make the soil within a part of their blood, their bones. The United States is a land shaped and informed by internal religious diversity—some

of it obvious, some of it hidden—and yet the history we have all been taught has mostly failed to convey this. We have learned history from the middle rather than the margins, though it is the latter from which so much of our culture has been formed.

We need only look to the point often seen as the beginning to know this is true. It is the story we memorized in school: *In fourteen hundred and ninety-two, Columbus sailed the ocean blue...* and he did so, we all have been taught, on orders and at the expense of Ferdinand and Isabella, the Catholic monarchs of Spain. The largest of his ships was named for the mother of the Christian savior (its full name was *Santa María de la Inmaculada Concepción*, Holy Mary of the Immaculate Conception). In his journal, which begins in the form of a prayer, “In the Name of Our Lord Jesus Christ,” Columbus writes of standards bearing the cross brought onto the lands he was soon to conquer.

Less well known are the men who sailed with Columbus who did not call this symbol their own. No less than America would be, Europe at the time was a place endlessly conflicted over its multireligious past. Having shaped so much of Iberian culture, practitioners of Judaism and Islam provided Spain’s Catholics with a daily reminder that their world was not made by the church alone. Whether this reminder was mere embarrassment or existential threat, it was reason enough to force them out. Columbus devotes the first words of his diary to praising Spain for evicting its religious minorities in the same year he began his voyage, and yet his own adventure could not have been accomplished without men drawn from the very peoples he was so pleased to see driven from their homes. It was precisely their connections to exiled faiths that led several of his crewmen to join a mission that was less likely to end in riches than a watery grave.

Even less well known are the spiritual practices of the Taino Indians who paddled their boats out to greet the newly arrived ships. Columbus declared that the people he encountered could easily be converted to the faith of Christendom because they obviously had none of their own. In fact, they merely had no faith he recognized, and so he was as blind to it as history books have often been.

The dominance of the Christian narrative of Columbus over the more complicated quilt of beliefs present at the earliest encounter between the places called the Old World and the New illustrates a neglected aspect of the American story. At every major turning point in the nation’s narrative of encounter and expansion, an alternate spiritual history can be told. From a distance it is easy to see only the Christian elements of much of American history. The church stands above—as unavoidable as any twice-told tale—obscuring the more beguiling story within.

For another example, look no further than the well-known drama of the separatist Christians who left England to practice what they considered a purified version of the Protestant faith. Their establishment of a theocracy in New England intended as a “city upon a hill” usually serves as the Exodus story within the scripture of American history: England as Egypt; the ocean as desert; Massachusetts as the promised land. Mostly forgotten is that within a single generation, heterodoxy rather than uniformity of spiritual purpose became the rule. Banishments from the heavenly cities established in Plymouth and Massachusetts Bay began almost as soon as the passengers of the *Mayflower* and the *Arabella* came ashore. As for those not forced into exile to brave the supposedly godless wilderness, colonists in both New England and Virginia made

desperate attempts to maintain religious order by imposing harsh punishments on anyone who posed a threat to divinely ordained authority. Death sentences were threatened for the first offense of church robbing, as well as for the third offense of blasphemy. Though history is quick to identify this entire era as “Puritan,” the more persuasive ideologies of the time may have been antipathy or indifference to the religious baggage that had come with muskets across the sea. The American experiment was frequently shaped by a rejection of old ways and openness to the new. In religious terms, this rejection created over time a nation unique in its ability to absorb and be built by those of different beliefs; people who believed there were many gods, or none at all.

To be sure, the American talent for the absorption of faiths and cultures has rarely resulted in the kind of peaceful pluralism most hope for today. The story of how a global array of beliefs came to occupy the same ocean-locked piece of land is more often one of violence than of toleration. There can be no clearer illustration of this than what occurred during the three centuries of slavery, which gave the nation its most enduring spiritual wounds. Twenty percent of the U.S. population was enslaved at the Republic’s inception, and few were Christians when they arrived. Most were born of religious histories as rich and complex as Christendom—followers of Islam, Yoruba, and a dozen other lesser-known faiths. During this era, there was a forced transplantation of African beliefs and practices into the growing body of American religion. Yet the loss of such ancient traditions is often overlooked in the discussion of what was wrought by that painful period in our history. So too is the question of whether these traditions were truly lost at all: Much as the “secret Jews” Christianized by the Spanish Inquisition came to influence Catholicism in the Old World, the newly converted men and women held in bondage dramatically changed the faith into which they were forced. Beliefs driven underground have a way of maintaining their power; they rise again in myriad guises, known to the faithful even when the faith is called by different names.

The story of so many minority religious traditions living in the shadow of a single dominant creed may seem an epic only of repression and subjugation. However, it is in that tension—between the marginal and the mainstream—that the nation so many faiths have come to call home has forged its commitment, clear on paper if not always in practice, to become a place where, paradoxically, belief matters both very much and not at all, because we have the right to believe as we please.

As Walt Whitman famously wrote, “The United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem.” Though no corner of America is so tidy as a line of verse, no single life or community is so well-ordered as any metered rhythm, no alliances are so secure that they can be thought an enduring rhyme, his meaning nonetheless rings true when surveying the vast landscape of faiths that together comprise the nation. In the century and a half since Whitman offered that reflection, the American poem has only grown in character and complexity. We might now think of the United States less as a poem than as a massive multigenerational novel. The plot of this novel, and so the plot of this book, is how the repeated collision of conflicting systems of belief, followed frequently by ugly and violent conflict, has somehow arrived, again and again, not merely at peaceful coexistence but at striking moments of inter-influence.

These moments come along unexpectedly, often imperceptibly, to those involved.

Some can be recognized only at a distance of centuries. Considering them now, we might view them as reminders that the process by which many peoples become one, *E pluribus unum*, is not merely the gathering of populations or regions within one border. It is the many living among and learning from each other. It is every strident orthodoxy making room for strange ways and exotic creeds. It is the recognition that, to paraphrase Thomas Jefferson, those who believe in one God, those who believe in twenty gods, and those who believe in no God, are bound together by something more significant than their own individual beliefs.



The Burning of Hatuey by the Spaniards at Yara, Cuba, on February 2, 1512. Engraving by Théodore de Bry, 1664.

CHAPTER 1

A Meeting of the Gods

1492–1512

They carved their scriptures from the world around them. With conch shells, mangrove trees, coral rock, true believers in a faith now forgotten made images of the gods who lived in the sky. There were among the people men called *behiques* whose role it was to determine if a branch of wood, a block of stone, or a mound of clay had sufficient power to serve this vital purpose. If satisfied, the behique would then coax a human form or sacred shape from the abode of spirits to the physical realm, inviting ever more deities to serve and protect the 400,000 men, women, and children who knew themselves as the Taino, original inhabitants of the islands that would become stepping-stones to the place now called America.

It pleased the gods to be among them. In gratitude for their creation, these small statues—called *zemies*—were believed to speak to their makers, teaching them to find order in the chaos of life just as they had found form in the formless materials of the earth. The *zemies* told the Taino their history: that people, too, had once been gods. In stories passed from one generation to the next, their Eden was a cave at the center of the island later called Hispaniola, where in bygone days they had lived together with the spirits they now revered.

Like the men in ships they would soon encounter, their myth of origins was one of exile. It was said that long ago the gods had ventured from their cave only under cover of darkness to eat from the limbs of the jobo tree. One night a few of their number found the fruit too sweet to turn from as dawn approached. They kept eating until morning and when the sun shone on their skin they became human, made mortal by their desire.

According to legends recorded later, the *zemies* informed the Taino not only of the beginning but also of the coming end. A tale was told of two chiefs, called *caciques*, who fasted for fifteen days in order to win sufficient favor with the gods that they might learn something of the future. Under the guidance of a behique shaman, the *caciques* inhaled sacred powder ground from the seeds of the jobo tree. Growing as tall as sixty feet, with pale yellow flowers and thorny bark, the jobo, also called cohoba, is a powerful entheogen—from the Greek, meaning something that “creates God within”—and it was at the center of Taino religious practice.

Following a ritual in which one chief blew the powder into the nose of the other, the *caciques* soon had visions in which the *zemies* told them that the world as they

knew it would not last much longer. The prophecy the chiefs reported when their trance had ended was that the time of the Taino living in peace, with only the drama of the jobo ceremony to disrupt their days, soon would pass. A description of the Taino prophecy can be found in the 1511 chronicle of Peter Martyr d'Anghiera, an Italian-born historian of the Spanish explorations of the New World. "Within a few years," the chiefs told their people, "a race of men wearing clothes would land on the island and would overthrow their religious rites and ceremonies, massacre their children, and make them slaves."

For a time, the Taino believed this revelation referred to the torments they suffered at the hands of the Caribs, a rival tribe that made occasional raids from neighboring islands. So feared were these warriors that they had found a place in the bogeyman stories Taino parents told their children. Unlike the Taino, who had spears of crudely sharpened cane used only for hunting, the Caribs carried long-handled, hatchet-like clubs they used, as one account put it, "to trample the head of their enemies," and wielded bows with arrows made lethal by the toxic sap of the manchineel tree, also known as "the death apple." They were the worst demons the Taino could imagine, the only fitting denizens of their visions of apocalypse—at least, until the ships arrived.

The year 1492 was one of endings as well as beginnings. While the Taino mystics took their communion of cohoba powder and beseeched the zemies for a vision of what would come next through the door of the future, another set of doors was closing on the other side of the world.

The gates of the great palace of Alhambra, the "red fortress" of the Moors, were last shut to their makers as the banner of the cross was raised overhead. After centuries of hostility, the Roman Catholic rulers of Spain had successfully forced the final emir of the Islamic Nasrid dynasty from his seat of power in Granada, on the southern coast of the Iberian Peninsula. With the seizure of Alhambra, the five-hundred-year campaign known as the Reconquista, the reversion of Spain from Islamic dominance to Christian control, was complete. That this would have anything to do with a people four thousand miles away, who had yet to hear the names of either Jesus or Muhammad, seems as unlikely as the proverbial flap of a butterfly's wings changing the weather. Yet such is the religious history of the world: As the author of the Gospel of John said, spirits blow where they will; when beliefs are suppressed, the ripples can often be felt to the ends of the earth.

In January of 1492, an ambitious forty-one-year-old weaver's son known to the Spanish as Cristóbal Colón was present as King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella watched Sultan Abu 'abd-Allah Muhammad XII abandon his palace, the crowning achievement of Moorish culture, for exile in Africa. As he departed, the sultan paused to breathe an anguished cry of regret, the infamous "Moor's last sigh," for the loss of Europe's only Muslim kingdom.

Colón, whom we know as Christopher Columbus, was certainly in a better mood. Islam's loss would be Christendom's gain, and it might be his as well. The Catholic Monarchs, as King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella are often called, were aware of Columbus's ambitions to sail west to reach the East. At a time that can be seen as the beginning of the phenomenon we now call globalization, when control over global trade routes was key to a kingdom's fortunes, Columbus proposed replacing the

dangerous overland route to Asia with a supposedly placid trip across the sea. Six years earlier, the Spanish Crown had turned down his request for financing—as had the Portuguese, the English, the Venetians, and the Genoese. The reasons they had given were that the trip would be prohibitively expensive and that it would be almost guaranteed to fail. Court-appointed experts insisted that Columbus had miscalculated the distance between Europe and the Orient, and thus any trip he might take would far exceed his proposed budget.

At the time, no one among the educated classes doubted that circumnavigation of the earth was possible. It was only later mythmaking (not least of all by the American folk writer Washington Irving) that created the impression of Columbus as a geographic visionary, rare in his possession of the knowledge that the world was round. Yet still the royals ruled Columbus's adventure unworthy of the cost at a time when the kingdom was stretched thin by its ongoing conflict with the Moors.

It was logical, then, that Columbus would look upon the Catholic acquisition of the riches of Alhambra as a first step toward turning the monarchs' no to a yes. That same month—January 1492—he revisited the idea with the king and queen, providing them with information concerning, as he later wrote, “the countries of India and of a Prince, called Great Khan, which in our language signifies King of Kings, how, at many times he and his predecessors had sent to Rome soliciting instructors who might teach him our holy faith, and the holy Father had never granted his request, whereby great numbers of people were lost, believing in idolatry and doctrines of perdition.”

Columbus's report to the Spanish court was full of errors both of history and geography. To begin with, Christian missionaries had been visiting the countries he called “India”—which today, we know, refers mostly to China—since early in the fourteenth century. Yet while Columbus may have had a hazy understanding of the past, his intention here is clear: With the mention of “doctrines of perdition” on the rise in “India,” he hoped to suggest to the Catholic Monarchs that the vast, mysterious East was in danger of falling irredeemably under Muslim influence, a turn of events that would significantly dim the glow of the recent Catholic conquest of Alhambra. Moreover, Columbus's suggestion that the pope himself had long neglected to take this crucial step in the ongoing struggle between Christianity and Islam may have appealed to pious Isabella's spiritual vanity. If the “Great Khan” could be converted through her intervention, then she even more than the Holy Father might be seen as the world's preeminent defender of the faith.

With veiled threat and open flattery, Columbus convinced them. It certainly helped that Ferdinand and Isabella, like the would-be explorer himself, knew next to nothing about the people, governance, or culture of Asia. Very likely when Columbus referred to the “Great Khan” he meant Kublai Khan, the Mongol conqueror who loomed large over the most famous text of early European encounter with the East, *The Book of Marvels* by the late medieval Venetian merchant Marco Polo. A Latin edition of Polo's travelogue was among the prized possessions of Columbus's youth. His copy, in the collection of the Columbine Library of Seville, contains comments in the explorer's own hand that show just how inspiring this book of tall tales and exaggeration was to the man whose own exploits would become part of the mythology of America itself.

That Kublai Khan was long dead and his dynasty finished for more than one hundred years would have been news to Columbus and his patrons, but no matter. The

specter of the Great Khan converting to “doctrines of perdition” and thus becoming predisposed to strike out against Christian kingdoms was enough to alter perception of what might be gained if Columbus was successful in his mission. According to Columbus’s journal, permission was granted to him that very month, though it remained unclear how the funding for an ongoing exploration of uncharted lands and waters might be maintained.

A further step toward Columbus’s voyage occurred later that same year, in the same palace. Following the advice of Tomás de Torquemada, the Dominican priest who was the Grand Inquisitor of the Spanish Inquisition, the Catholic Monarchs signed the Alhambra Decree, the order of expulsion of all Jews from the kingdom. For years, Torquemada had been the scourge of religious minorities in Spain, making particular targets of converts from Judaism and Islam. The Inquisitor’s motivating fear was that though many Jews and Muslims had become Christian in name, they had done so for the entirely practical reason of avoiding persecution, rather than as the result of a genuine conversion to the faith. So-called crypto-Muslims (Moriscos) and crypto-Jews (Marranos) were thought to be everywhere, and Torquemada oversaw a campaign of torture and execution to root them out. While the Inquisition had no official authority over the nonbaptized, the original communities from which Moriscos and Marranos came were seen to be the source of the problem. Hebrew and Arabic religious texts were burned in town squares, and the readers of those texts frequently found themselves following their books into the flames.

With the decree issued in March of 1492, all the Jews in Spain were given six months to leave. Two hundred thousand would ultimately abandon their homes and livelihoods in the only land their families had known for generations. Like the riches of Alhambra, much of the wealth of Jews fleeing Torquemada’s fires fell into royal hands, which in turn financed Columbus’s expedition of commerce and evangelism.

Of those few converted Jews allowed to remain, some of whom were friends and advisors to the Crown, many felt obliged to contribute personally to the voyage. Foremost among these was Luís de Santángel, finance minister to the royal court, who supported Columbus’s case for the necessity of converting the Mongol Empire, and put up a sizable portion of his own fortune—17,000 ducats—as a sign of loyalty to the kingdom and the faith.

It would be too easy to conclude that the voyage of Columbus was the result of simple cause and effect, but chronology does tell a tale. When Columbus first sought Spanish resources for his expedition, none were to be found. After the capture of Muslim and Jewish wealth, the way was suddenly clear. With funds gained from the confiscation of Moorish treasures and the expulsion of Spain’s Jews, Columbus was free to take his journey. Without the two-pronged assault on the religious diversity of the kingdom, it seems unlikely Columbus’s ships would have ever left port.

Yet, like the larger history of the world about to be born, this is not merely an account of the attempted destruction of the weak by the strong. It is, also, a story of resilience.

The Grand Inquisitor Torquemada was not wrong when he assumed that Jews and Muslims were flouting the authority of the church through pro forma baptisms that did little to change their religious practices or beliefs. Throughout Spain, and later in nearly all the lands to which the Spanish would travel, entire communities of nominal

Christians were found to avoid pork, pray in non-Latin tongues, read forbidden books, and generally maintain their spiritual heritage despite the threat of such marvels of medieval technology as the Judas Cradle or the Heretic's Fork. Over time, as one generation of keepers of a hidden faith gave way to the next, Marranos and Moriscos often lost awareness of who their forebears had been, and yet remnants of the old ways of worship survived. In fact, the Grand Inquisitor may have had personal experience of this. Torquemada's grandmother was a baptized Jew, as were others in his extended family. His zeal for hunting Marranos, then, likely arose, at least in part, from a strategy of self-preservation.

The possibility that Columbus himself had Jewish roots has been the subject of heated debate among historians. Those who think it likely roll out the fact that the family name, Colón, had a distinctly Jewish ring to it at the time; likewise, the family business, wool weaving, was one of the few occupations open to Jews in their native Genoa. Others point to the support Columbus received from well-placed baptized Jews in the court of Ferdinand and Isabella, and to the presence of markings that appear to be Hebrew letters on several extant documents written in his hand.

Circumstantial evidence aside, the Jewish Columbus will likely never be more than speculation. Far more certain is the fact that even if Columbus himself was inarguably as Christian as the Catholic Monarchs who finally approved his journey across the sea, the men who helped him get there were less so. The ability of marginal traditions to persevere in the face of persecution was so strong that expeditions conceived and undertaken for the purpose of extending the reach of the church unwittingly facilitated the spread not only of religious orthodoxy but spiritual dissent as well. It was not just a Muslim palace and Jewish ducats that helped Columbus on his way, but a few of the souls the Catholic Monarchs had attempted to rid themselves of earlier that same eventful year.

When they set sail from Spain—on the very day that served as the deadline for Jews to leave—Columbus's small fleet served as unlikely life rafts for a handful of men of Jewish birth who would have preferred to continue their lives as not only Jews but Spaniards. Those who signed on to sail with Columbus included not only criminals given amnesty for the purpose but Marranos and perhaps Moriscos as well. While most were professional sailors with miles of sea behind them, many were marginal men who surely had reasons to take the risk. Boarding the *Niña*, the *Pinta*, and the *Santa Maria* offered a kind of deliverance for these men. They were fleeing a place of religious persecution and sailing for an unknown land that offered freedom in its mystery.

Columbus, too, saw something of an Exodus narrative in his journey. As he writes in his journal, after two months at sea, the crew began to “murmur” just as the Hebrews did against Moses as he led them endlessly through the desert. They had begun to see tantalizing signs of land, but it seemed the winds had died and they might progress no farther. In the sky above, they noted turtle doves and pelicans, birds that rarely wandered far from shore; in the waters below, they saw weeds poking up from the depths, busy with crabs clinging to patches of green oasis in the desert of the empty ocean. But signs of land are a far cry from land itself. If neither gale nor current moved them, the three ships would float aimlessly, with little hope of reaching new

ground or turning back the way they came. Later that day, Columbus writes, when the sea rose and began to move without wind, the crew was astonished—and relieved. The Admiral thought it was a very good sign, because, he remembered, such things often happened to the prophets of scripture. In his estimation, he was not merely a mariner, but a spiritual titan leading the way toward the Promised Land.

That Christopher Columbus believed he was on a mission from God is evident in nearly every document he has left us. It was not just a line he sold to Ferdinand and Isabella. Whatever his material ambitions—which were so considerable he believed himself personally entitled to 10 percent of anything he found—his real motivation seems to have been a fervent, and at times fanatical, devotion to his faith. Eventually he came to believe the accidental propaganda of his name. He was the namesake of the third-century Christian saint who, according to legend, had once carried a small but unbelievably heavy boy across a dangerous river. The boy, as this pious folktale explained, was Jesus himself, making an appearance centuries after his death, holding the weight of the world within him. For this reason, the saint was called Christopher, literally, “the bearer of Christ.” Columbus believed the burden of carrying the savior across the waters had now fallen to him.

Neither the Admiral nor the sailors under his command could have known this, but they would not be the first to bring alien religious traditions to the New World.

Though the suggestion was once ridiculed, it is today well known that Norsemen visited North America five hundred years before Columbus set sail. As Geraldine Barnes notes in her history *Viking America*, the fact that Leif Erikson’s longship had arrived long before the *Niña*, the *Pinta*, or the *Santa Maria* was seen throughout the nineteenth century as a challenge to “the image of America as a land unseen, unnamed and otherwise without mortal creator before 1492... imping[ing] on questions of national history and identity.” That great mythmaker Washington Irving, whose best-selling book about Columbus gave him an obvious interest in maintaining the singularity of the Admiral as the discoverer of the Americas, scoffed at Viking tales of encounter with the native tribes of Canada as mere legends. At best, he insisted, Erikson had enjoyed “transient glimpses of the new world... in a little time lost again to mankind.” Another doubter of the day dismissed supposed evidence to the contrary as “the sublime of humbuggery.”

The confidence of the naysayers could not prevent the facts from becoming more widely known. Around the year 1000, Leif Erikson came ashore and established a Viking foothold with an encampment he called Vinland, which today is thought to have been in Newfoundland. *The Saga of the Greenlanders* describes the exploits of the Erikson clan—Leif, Thorvald, and Thorstein, the sons of Erik the Red—as they explored and inhabited Vinland, and eventually ran afoul of its occupants. It is thanks to the volley of arrows that cut Thorvald down, or more precisely to the funeral that followed, that we know something of the religious practices he and his brothers imported. The Eriksons arrived in North America at the precise moment their people were becoming Christianized, converted from their traditional belief in the gods of Scandinavian mythology through contact with the European mainland. And so as Thorvald lay dying, he asked to be brought to a spot where he had imagined building a home. “There shall ye bury me,” he said, “and set up crosses at my head and feet.”

The Vikings, then, were the first Christians in America. And this new faith may not have been the only religion they carried across the sea. The buried man's very name, which means "the power of Thor," suggests they also brought gods they had known far longer than Christ.

The possibility that still another Old World faith arrived before Columbus is suggested by tales of North African Muslims who allegedly stumbled upon the Americas not long after the Eriksons. The eleventh-century geographer Abu Abdallah Muhammad Ibn Muhammad Ibn Abdallah Ibn Idrisi, commonly referred to as Idrisi, alludes to lands on the far side of the Atlantic in a geography and travelogue with a title just barely longer than his name: *The going out of a Curious Man to explore the Regions of the Globe, its Provinces, Islands, Cities and their Dimensions and Situation*, abbreviated variously as "*The Amusement of him who Desires to Traverse the Earth*," "*The Peregrinations of one who longs to Penetrate New Horizons*," and also simply as "Roger's Book," in honor of his patron, Roger II of Sicily. At Roger's direction and on his dime, Idrisi selected "certain intelligent men, who were despatched on travels and were accompanied by draftsmen." When these travelers and mapmakers returned, Idrisi inserted their descriptions into his narrative and reworked his vision of the world accordingly. Though sponsored by a Christian king, Idrisi made clear from the opening words whom he hoped to glorify through his work. "All grace goes back to Allah," he writes, "the essentially great and powerful being." Viewing exploration as a fundamentally Islamic enterprise, he dated his manuscript in relation to the prophetic career of Muhammad, explaining that it was completed in the year "548 of Hijra." A man of a faith perhaps even more fervently missionary than that of his patron, Idrisi thus found it fitting to send Muslim explorers into the unknown ocean he referred to as the "Gloomy Sea," otherwise known as the Atlantic. "No one knows what lies beyond it," he wrote, because of "the great expanse of its waters, the plethora of its horrors, the reach of its beasts, and the frenzy of its winds." However, when his commissioned explorers returned, he was able to note that they had been held captive for a time on an island on the other side of the darkness and fog, where the navigators saw "people with red skin" with "not much hair on their bodies." The women of the island, he further noted, "were extraordinarily beautiful."

Similarly, the Arabic-inscribed maps of the Ottoman cartographer Ahmed Muhiddin Piri showed the northeast coast of South America in relationship to the West coast of Africa as early as 1513. Considered in the context of the work of Idrisi, who elsewhere described China in obsessive detail and argued with confidence that the world was round but not perfectly spherical ("the Earth is," he wrote, "plunged in space like the yoke in a middle of an egg"), such maps provide evidence of an era of Islamic geographic awareness predating Columbus that has nearly been lost to history. Moreover, the collaboration of the Christian King Roger and the Muslim scholar Idrisi, as well as the speed with which later maps crossed between cultures, suggest the porousness of religious boundaries despite the ongoing hostilities between Christendom and the Islamic world.

Perhaps the most developed of the legends of the ancient exploration of the Americas involves Chinese seamen, who unlike Western adventurers would have sailed east toward the New World. Chinese maps created one thousand years before Columbus embarked describe a land known as Fusang, across the Pacific from the

Middle Kingdom. After initial discovery, it was said that Buddhist priests made a journey to Fusang to establish their faith, and “carried with them their books and sacred images and the ritual... and so changed the manners of the inhabitants.” In the eighteenth century, European historians and mapmakers argued over the theory of French sinologist Joseph de Guignes, author of the comprehensive *History of the Huns, Mongols, and Turks*, that Fusang referred to the west coast of the Americas. Advocates of the Fusang-as-America hypothesis pointed to ancient descriptions of long-horned cattle very much like American buffalo, and to the place these same texts referred to as the “Country of Women,” which European intellectuals of the day assumed to be the Amazon. De Guignes, it should be noted, also believed that China itself began as a colony of the ancient Egyptians; such eighteenth-century theories are, in the opinion of Chinese historian Joseph Needham, “youthful indiscretions at which modern sinology is accustomed to blush.”

True or not, the legend of Fusang—like the once-dismissed tale of Norse discovery and the still-speculative accounts of North African adventurers—is a reminder that the land first brought to the attention of southern Europe a little more than five hundred years ago has been a part of the world’s religions much longer than that. Perhaps one thousand years before Columbus, the possibility of America already had religious meanings that had nothing to do with the faith he brought with him. Not only did the land’s original inhabitants have their own notions concerning the spiritual significance of the places they called home; every culture for which the land beyond the waters served as the great unknown had made it a part of its own mythology and aspirations. In response to these, there may have been a constellation of discoveries: the Vikings in the Northeast; navigators from the Pacific in the Southwest; the southern Europeans in the Southeast, all of whom “found” a land that had not been lost, a fruitfully inhabited place more vast and diverse—geographically and spiritually—than any of the great discoverers could have imagined.

These possibilities, however, do nothing to lessen the drama of the only fully known moment of first contact, when the people of Europe met the people of the world they would mistakenly call new, and the gods of each learned they were not alone in the heavens.

Late in the night of October 12, 1492, in the crow’s nest high on the main mast of the *Pinta*, the fastest of Columbus’s ships, it was one of the crew’s Marranos, Rodrigo de Triana, who spotted a reflected light on the horizon, the moon’s glow on beach sand. “Tierra! Tierra!” he called out. *Land!*

The first man to make such a sighting had been promised a substantial bonus, but Columbus, in keeping with his self-identification with Moses—the first to lay eyes on the Land of Canaan—claimed to have seen the light earlier that evening. When the full crews of all three ships began to search the horizon, others began to see the light as well. The first glimpse they had of what would soon be called the “Fourth Part of the World”—a mysterious new land added to the current understanding of the earth as consisting of Europe, Asia, and Africa—resembled only the light of “a wax candle rising and falling.” According to the Admiral’s journal, many doubted this tiny glimmer could be the land they had all but given up hope of reaching. Both Columbus and Triana believed, however, even if only one would be rewarded.

Triana's response to the slight of being denied his bonus, which Columbus claimed for himself, went undocumented. However, stories told about him for centuries have attempted to fill in the gaps. After the journey home, disappointed to return to a country still hostile to his religious ancestry, Triana is said to have drifted to North Africa, where reports began to circulate that the first European to see the New World had begun to follow Islam. As a nineteenth-century account put it, "It is hardly to be wondered at, that one treated so unjustly should abandon his native land and new religion, to seek shelter with the Moors, whom he counted less inclined to take from a poor man his just deserts." Born a Jew, living as a Christian, destined to die as a Muslim, he was a man with a hidden spiritual arc to his life that is mostly missing from tales of Europe's discovery of the continent.

The differences between the three faiths of Rodrigo de Triana would have been incomprehensible to the Taino, a people who had many gods because the world had many needs. They may have found the warring theologies of Spain impoverished in their singularity, despite the obvious wealth of those who brought them.

When the Taino spotted three great wooden vessels drifting toward their lands, groups of young men swam out to investigate, calling back to those on shore. The words they used were unintelligible to those whose memory would win the day—but of those on board the ships, at least one believed the Taino were singing about them as if they were *zemies* made flesh. Columbus alone thought he could understand the cries of the Taino. He recorded the initial interactions of the Old World and the New in his meticulous journal of the voyage: "Come and see the men who have come from the heavens!" he later claimed to have heard them shout.

Despite his questionable interpretation of the words that greeted him, Columbus would soon also say that as far as he could tell, the Taino were a people without religion—an assessment, we now know, that would be no more true of Rome.

In an era when one's creed was much less a matter of choice than we might assume it is today, being without religion was nearly unheard of; the very possibility was an indication that the world may not be as it seemed. The universe of Columbus's time was divided neatly among Christians, Jews, Muslims, and Mongols. Theologically, the assumption that the Taino had no religion raised for Columbus the question of whether or not such people had souls, which in turn suggested that they may not be human at all.

One can see in Columbus's own writings how this unmoored him. In the years that followed his first encounter with the Taino, his understanding of where he had been, and whom he had met, would change wildly. For a time he believed he had found Paradise itself; he imagined the world at the time not as an almost perfect sphere but rather as a shape closer to a pear, with the vestiges of Eden poking up from the top of the globe like, in his words, a nipple on a breast. Alternately, he wondered if he had found a spot inhabited by the lost tribes of Israel. He would devote his later years to the production of a text, written in collaboration with a cloistered monk, proving through biblical citation that his discoveries had ensured that Jerusalem would be retaken for Christendom, bringing about the second coming of Christ. In his largely forgotten *Book of Prophecies*, Columbus identifies himself as a figure whose arrival is hinted at throughout scripture. "I have already said that for my voyage to the Indies neither intelligence nor mathematics nor world maps were of any use to me," he wrote.

“It was the fulfillment of the prophecy of the Prophet Isaiah.”

All these thoughts had their beginnings as he looked upon the Taino and heard their awestruck shouts as hosannas of welcome, believing they were overjoyed to see a man so grand he must be their savior.

Very likely they believed quite the opposite. If the Taino had feared their neighbors the Caribs as lethal goblins from the underworld, bringers of the end of days, what would they have thought of this new “race of men wearing clothes”? What would the zemies say such men might do to their children and their gods?

On this score, there is no need to speculate. At least some among the Taino looked upon the three ships of Columbus as Christians might have looked upon the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, forms given to the fears of a culture nearing its end.

Peter Martyr d’Anghiera, the Italian-born chronicler of the final days of the Taino, wrote in 1511, “When the Spaniards landed the islanders then referred the prophecy to them, as being the people whose coming was announced. And in this they were not wrong... for under the domination of the Christians, those who resisted have been killed.”

Soon after landing—though not immediately—Columbus realized he was nowhere near the place he called “India” or the prince he called “the Great Khan.” One wonders if the frustration and befuddlement he felt at this revelation could have rivaled the emotions that inspired the fabled “Moor’s last sigh.” That earlier lament had been offered for a kingdom and a fortune lost; Columbus’s grief now was for a kingdom and fortune of his own that never would be. If he had not reached the lands known as the East, there would be no large-scale conversion of the Mongol Empire. The lucrative new trade route with the Orient he had promised his royal patrons was now proved a fiction. Judged by its initial intentions, Columbus’s mission was a failure both spiritually and commercially. The only way to salvage his reputation would be to find some way to wring profit from an otherwise disastrous expedition. After a mostly fruitless search for gold, he chose the only commodities readily available: land and bodies. To claim the former, he planted the same Catholic standards he had seen raised over Alhambra, and established beneath them a fort he named for the birth of Christ, Navidad. To claim the latter, he took five hundred Taino by force and shipped them back to Spain. More than half died on the way—a horrific rate of survival that nonetheless offered better chances than those faced by all who remained, for whom murder, disease, and forced labor were the immediate implications of life under the banner of Christendom.

As it was chronicled by the sixteenth-century Dominican historian Bartolomé de las Casas in his *A Brief Account of the Destruction of the Indies*, the decades that followed Columbus’s arrival rivaled any torment dreamed up by the Inquisition. “The Spaniards first assaulted the innocent Sheep... like most cruel Tygers, Wolves and Lions hunger-starv’d,” las Casas wrote, “studying nothing, for the space of Forty Years, after their first landing, but the Massacre of these Wretches, whom they have so inhumanely and barbarously butchered and harassed with several kinds of Torments never before known or heard... that of Three Millions of Persons, which lived in *Hispaniola* itself, there is at present but the inconsiderable remnant of scarce Three Hundred.” Elsewhere in the Caribbean, las Casas continues, three hundred would have