

# Heretics and Heroes: How Renaissance Artists and Reformation Priests Created Our World (Hinges of History, 6)

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From the inimitable bestselling author Thomas Cahill, another popular history-this one focusing on how the innovations of the Renaissance and the Reformation changed the Western world. A truly revolutionary book.

In Volume VI of his acclaimed Hinges of History series, Thomas Cahill guides us through the thrilling period of the Renaissance and the Reformation (the late fourteenth to the early seventeenth century), so full of innovation and cultural change that the Western world would not experience its like again until the twentieth century. Beginning with the continent-wide disaster of the Black Death, Cahill traces the many developments in European thought and experience that served both the new humanism of the Renaissance and the seemingly abrupt religious alterations of the increasingly radical Reformation. This is an age of the most sublime artistic and scientific adventure, but also of newly powerful princes and armies and of newly found courage, as many thousands refuse to bow their heads to the religious pieties of the past. It is an era of just-discovered continents and previously unknown peoples. More than anything, it is a time of individuality in which a whole culture must achieve a new balance if the West is to continue.

THOMAS CAHILL's appealing approach to distant history has won the attention of millions of readers in North America and beyond. Cahill is the author of five previous volumes in the Hinges of History series: How the Irish Saved Civilization, The Gifts of the Jews, Desire of the Everlasting Hills, Sailing the Wine-Dark Sea, and Mysteries of the Middle Ages. They have been bestsellers not only in the United States but also in countries ranging from Italy to Brazil. His most recent book is A Saint on Death Row. Chapter I

## NEW WORLDS FOR OLD Innovation on Sea and Land

Winter completes an age  
With its thorough levelling;  
Heaven's tourbillions of rage  
Abolish the watchman's tower  
And delete the cedar grove.  
As winter completes an age,  
The eyes huddle like cattle, doubt  
Seeps into the pores and power  
Ebbs from the heavy signet ring;  
The prophet's lantern is out  
And gone the boundary stone,  
Cold the heart and cold the stove,  
Ice condenses on the bone:  
Winter completes an age.

Thus the perspicacious W. H. Auden in For the Time Being. Like seasons, ages are seldom so precise as to end abruptly, while allowing another age to commence. Few events of European history have been as final as the Black Death in bringing to an end one age (which we might call the Innocently Playful Medieval) and bringing into view another (which we might call the Colder Late Medieval-Early Renaissance). But even at this interstice, old

forms and old mental states hang on, while new forms and new mental states peek uncertainly into view. Locality often determines how boldly or timidly the new will come to supplant the old; and localities can find their integrity, even their ancient right to existence, open to question. ("This village has always been crown territory." "But which crown, England's or France's?" "Which religion, Christian or Muslim?" "Oh, and where, pray, is the boundary stone, the definitive separation between Us and Them?")

At such a crossroads, it is difficult if not impossible to see much farther than one's nose: the watchman's tower is down and the prophet's lantern out. Those who occupy traditional seats of power—those who use signet rings—may begin to find their perches less stable and secure, more open to question. The ordinary bloke, the commoner attempting to make his way in the world, is all too likely to experience a new if vague sense of unease, of doubt seeping into his pores like unhealthy air. It is not a time of dancing and embracing but of stepping back and taking stock. Yet life goes on: men travel and make deals, as they have always done; monarchs make decisions, as they have always done, with far-reaching and often unpredictable consequences.

#### 1492: COLUMBUS DISCOVERS AMERICA

One such man was Christopher Columbus, born of undistinguished forebears near Genoa, long a shadowy petitioner at various European courts, now arrived at Cordoba to the new headquarters of Spanish royalty, the Alcázar, former stronghold of Muhammad XII, whom Spaniards called Boabdil; and two such monarchs were their Catholic Majesties Ferdinand and Isabella of Spain. The year was a fateful one, 1492. To it, historians, looking backwards, have assigned the final expiration of the Middle Ages and the (as yet unheralded) birth of a new age.

Many Americans will recall having suffered through a school pageant or two meant to dramatize the monumental encounter between the Genoese ship captain and the Spanish royal couple. And since such dramatizations invariably contain almost as much misinformation as they do historical fact, it is worth revisiting the great moment with a colder eye.

The ship captain was probably born in 1451 at or very near Genoa, the son of a weaver who also sold cheeses on the streets of Genoa, then of Savona, his son helping out at both locations ("Parmigiano! Mozzarella! Gorgonzola!!"). The boy would have been called Christoffa Corombo in his native Ligurian, later Cristóbal Colón by Spaniards. Since documents of any importance were written in Latin, his Latinized name, Christophorus Columbus, which appears in his own hand as well as in other records of the period, was easily Englished as Christopher Columbus. Though there have been numerous attempts to render Columbus as Jewish, or even Muslim, and to trace his origins to a European country other than Italy, there is no evidence to support such theories, but there is good evidence to support his birth as an Italian Catholic.

Genoa and Savona, ports on the Italian Riviera north of Corsica, offered adventurous boys many opportunities for seafaring apprenticeships. Columbus claimed to have first ventured

to sea at the age of ten, and there is little reason to doubt him; surely by his late teens he was almost an old salt, and by his early twenties he had already docked as far away as the west coast of Africa, Chios in the Greek Aegean, Bristol on Britain's west coast, Galway at the edge of the Atlantic, and probably Iceland. He also began to act as agent for a consortium of Genoese merchants, who traded far and wide. One of his voyages took him to Lisbon, where a brother, Bartolomeo, worked as a cartographer. In their collaboration we may glimpse the origin of Columbus's great endeavor.

Thanks to the enormous expansion in world trade that had been booming for more than two centuries, Europeans of means had come to take for granted certain substances that did not originate in Europe, especially the spices, opiates, and silks of faraway Asia. No one (who was anyone) could any longer imagine doing without these things. But the fall of Greek Constantinople to the Ottoman Turks in 1453 had created a profound and permanent alteration in international affairs. It was of course still possible to extract the expected goodies from the Far East, but getting them past the Turks required both more cunning and more gold and sometimes more blood than had been previously required, considerably raising the price of the beloved commodities by the time they came to market. (Imagine if Americans could no longer afford chocolate, salt, or cocaine, or if most of the Wal-Mart's closed down.) If Europeans could not dislodge the Turks which they could not what were they to do? At times, it seemed as if all the best practical minds of Europe were engaged in figuring out how to solve the problem. But think as much as they might, no one could come up with a solution. Except Columbus.

What he suggested made little sense. He proposed to sail around the world, heading west into the Ocean Sea (as it was then called) till he hit the Island of Cipangu (Japan, as identified in the writings of Marco Polo) or perhaps, if he was especially lucky, the fabulous coast of Cathay (China) itself. Maps of the period, inaccurate about many things, nonetheless show both the principal island of Japan (misshapen and lacking most of its fellow islands) and the coast of a strangely squeezed China. There are even attempts to sketch in the archipelagos of Malaysia and Indonesia.

The diameter of the spherical Earth had been calculated accurately by the Greek Eratosthenes in the second century BC, and his calculation was still widely known in the time of Columbus. Though no European foresaw what lay in wait for Columbus, since all thought mistakenly that the Ocean Sea, empty of land, was much larger than it was, almost all who could read and had looked into the subject understood that Columbus was seriously underestimating the overall size of the Earth.

Columbus, basing his calculations on inaccurate assumptions, theorized that the east coast of Asia could be reached by a European ship within a few weeks of its leaving port. The actual circumference of the Earth is about 40,000 kilometers, whereas Columbus assumed it to be closer to 25,000 kilometers. Compounding his mistake was his misreading in a Latin translation of a renowned ninth century Persian astronomer, Ahmad ibn Muhammad ibn Kathir al-Farghani, known to the West as Alfraganus. The Persian's correct measurements were given in Arabic miles, which Columbus assumed to be the same as Roman miles. In actuality, Roman miles are about 25 percent shorter than

Arabic ones. Had the Ocean not held the Americas and the vast sea been empty of land between Europe and Asia, Columbus and his crew, heading west, would have perished in the deep and never been heard from again. This had indeed been the fate of several earlier (and well-known) attempts.

Columbus's good luck lay not in his miserably wrongheaded calculations about distance but in his accurate knowledge of the North Atlantic trade winds, which flow in a great clockwise circle. How he came by this information we can't be sure. It may have been the result of his own observations on his previous voyages, only some of which we know about. In any case, it was information not widely understood at the time, even if in our own day it is common knowledge to transatlantic airline passengers. As a result of his awareness of the trade-winds pattern, he was able to keep them at his back, plotting a southerly outgoing course and a northerly homecoming one, both of which enabled him to travel much more quickly than others had been able to do. In this way, Columbus and his crew were saved from contrary winds, becalmings, and death by dehydration on the high seas.

Columbus was a man of high color—reddish hair and ruddy cheeks enclosing a long, handsome face, surmounting a towering, tautly muscular body—and of highly colored personality. People seem either to have been instantly attracted to him or to have taken an instant dislike. He gestured grandly and spoke engagingly and loudly with the confidence of the true aristocrat, which he was not but was determined to become. He always presented himself as a nobleman, alluding vaguely to his familial line and crest, the son certainly not of Italy but of Genoa, la Superba (the Proud One), city of cities, link between Europe and the great globe. Despite his poor resources, he managed to dress well, cutting a fine figure at the European courts he visited. No doubt his admission to the presence of several monarchs in succession was made possible by the convincing show he made. His fair coloring and cool eye (gray or green in different reports) bespoke his northern European genetic origins and assured his welcome by monarchs who were all engaged in marriage games to render their legitimate stock more blond and blue-eyed.

But after he had made his impressive presentation, his proposal would be turned over to the scholars of the court, the people who had read all the books Columbus cited and many more, which he had failed to mention. Inevitably, the scholars would return to their monarch with the same conclusion: Columbus was a crackpot, not an investment opportunity. But, as we know only too well from recent dramas in our financial sector, sooner or later someone somewhere will make the investment. In the event, that someone was Isabella la Católica, reigning Queen of Spain.

Before this, Columbus had conducted a long dalliance with King John II of Portugal, whom he nearly succeeded in convincing. He sought out financial power brokers in both Genoa and Venice but came up short. He sent his brother Bartolomeo to Henry VII of England with the astounding proposal. Henry, father to Henry VIII and founder of the Tudor dynasty, whose claim to the throne was quite shaky, said he would think about it. He thought and thought but had nothing more to say (at least not till it was too late). Meanwhile, Columbus found himself at the Spanish court, spending nearly six seemingly sterile years in the attempt to lure the monarchs into financing his scheme.

Ferdinand and Isabella were not naïfs. Hereditary monarchs and crafty sovereigns, they had created Spain by the ploy of their marriage, uniting Ferdinand's Aragon with Isabella's much larger Castile and then pushing the Iberian Peninsula's one remaining Islamic kingdom into the sea. This last they had accomplished only in March 1492 after years of war and had come to occupy the Alcazar but minutes (as it were) before Columbus appeared once more to present his final and most eloquent plea. Political to their fingertips, the Catholic Monarchs allowed not a whisper of disagreement to squeeze between them. Their motto, "Tanto monta, monta tanto," means something like "Each is the same as the other." So don't try any special pleading with one of us.

Columbus's task was therefore a tricky one, but it seems from the scanty evidence that it was the queen, a woman of exquisite composure and silky speech, whose blue eyes and long gold tresses betrayed her high Castilian and Lancastrian origins, who was especially receptive to Columbus's charm. Though the dark, jowly Ferdinand, whose stubbly beard was incapable of a close shave, would one day boast that he was "the principal cause why those islands were discovered," it was Isabella who actually found the way forward for Spain to finance Columbus's expedition. Columbus had already raised about half the needed cash from his Genoese contacts; and Spain, at the end of a long and draining military campaign, was out of cash. So Isabella donated her jewels (or at least some of them), knowing full well that her act of public generosity would necessarily drive all the nobles of Castile (and perhaps even of Aragon and of Ferdinand's other territories) to follow suit in their effort to show themselves at least as generous.

The year 1492 was a busy one for the Catholic Monarchs. Besides their conquest of the Moorish Kingdom of Granada, they had begun to take considerable interest in the religious observances of their subjects. Like Doctor Johnson in the stagecoach, they felt that false doctrines should be checked and that those who dared espouse such doctrines should be punished by the civil power in union with the church of the realm. Venturing a bit further than Johnson might have done, they issued within days of their having situated themselves in the Alhambra the Alhambra Decree, expelling all unconverted Jews from Spain.

As we have already seen in the case of the Black Death, communities of Jews made convenient scapegoats in difficult times. But by this point, Jews had lived among European Christians for the better part of a millennium and a half—often uneasily, sometimes (as in papal Rome) appreciated for their special skills, sometimes targeted for elimination. In general, insofar as Christians thought about them at all, Jews tended to be considered flawed or partial Christians, believers in the Old Testament but not the New, people who inexplicably failed to see that Jesus was the fulfillment of all their prophecies. They were not universally hated, as were the Muslims (called Moors or, more ominously, Saracens), those who had cooked up a new religion—really, a heresy—and stolen the Holy Places from their rightful owners, the Christians. The fast friendship Boccaccio describes between the two Parisian merchants, one Christian, the other Jewish, is a bit harder to imagine occurring between a Christian and a Muslim (at least in a Christian country).

Selectively admired or merely tolerated, Jews were an expected part of the European social scene. The expulsion from Spain, however, was not their first. On several prior occasions, Jews had been ordered to move en masse from a European country. In 1182 the teenage King Philip II Augustus of France, whose treasury was empty, had seized all Jewish property and forgiven all debts owed to Jews, provided only the debtors pay to the king 20 percent of what they owed. (Sixteen years later, Philip, feeling the adverse effects on French commerce of the departure of the Jews, would allow them to return.) In 1290, Edward I banished all Jews from his kingdom of England, a ban that remained in effect into the 1600s. In 1306, King Philip IV the Fair (who was not) expelled the Jews of France once again. Though readmitted in 1315, they were expelled once more in 1322, readmitted in 1359, and re-expelled in 1394. If the Spanish expulsion seems particularly harsh on account of the huge numbers involved and the efficiency with which results were pursued, it only signaled more execrable banishments to come: by the end of the S...

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