A POCALYPTIC IDEAS HAVE ALWAYS been popular in the United States. We have long conceived of our country as the land of free thought and, for many, a safe haven for millennial prophesying. This attitude began in 1500, when Christopher Columbus wrote: “Of the new heaven and the new earth which the Lord made, and of which St. John wrote in the Apocalypse…, he made me the messenger and he showed me the way.” The back of our dollar bill endorses Columbus’ belief that America is the place where the Apocalypse will happen. The words below the eye and pyramid, novus ordo seclorum (“a new order of the ages”), proclaim America the New Jerusalem.

The notion of an impending apocalypse was very much a part of the ideology of our first colonizers, the Puritans. Among the most radical Protestant reformers, their very name betrays their philosophy of self-perfection as a way of preparing for the impending arrival of heaven on earth. Many Puritans regarded the King of England as the Antichrist mentioned in the Book of Revelation. They detested the English “population,” with its excessive dress habits, drinking, eating, and even its scandalous poetry. They viewed the unknown wilds of the New World to be a better place to live their ideology, which included morally clean, frugal living, along with a heavy dose of Doomsday prophecy.

Throughout U.S. history religious prophets have sought wisdom about what the new order would be like, not only from the Bible but also from the exotic cultures of ancient Egypt, India, and China. Beginning in the 1960s’ age of space exploration, New Agers even looked to alien astronauts for inspiration. Despite the philosophy of self-empowerment they advocated, most New Agers tuned out when it came...
to being self-motivated, active participants in changing the world. They needed to get directions from somebody else. For many, *Hamlet’s Mill*, a thick scholarly tome that appeared in 1969, would point the way to change. It proffered the theory that all great myths have a common origin and that the gods and mythic places that populate them are really stand-ins for celestial phenomena. Following older theories about the division of history into World Ages, the book argued that all major changes in world civilizations were responses to cosmic shifts, specifically the movement of the sun on the first day of spring from one constellation of the zodiac to the next, known as precession of the equinoxes. Remember the Age of Aquarius?

The inclusive nature of *Hamlet’s Mill* exerted a profound grip on fringe theorists. Popular books soon appeared proving that the Egyptians, the Babylonians, the Etruscans, and even the Inca of the New World had tapped into revealed universal wisdom about the ancient past. All were said to have been well aware that the earth wobbled about its shifting axis and that the star-fixed ages of humanity lay at the root of all social change. In the 1970s the Maya would have their turn.

The early 1970s were a time when great advances were being made in the decipherment of Maya script, as well as in the study of ancient Maya astronomy. From texts such as J. Eric Thompson’s *Maya History and Religion* and Michael Coe’s *The Maya*, World Age prophets became aware that the 5125.37-year Long Count, largest of all Maya time cycles, was soon due to turn over. Echoing the theme of the Second Coming of Christ, Frank Waters’ popular book *Mexico Mystique* predicted that the Mexican feathered serpent god Quetzalcoatl would descend from heaven in 2011, bringing about a universal upgrading of human consciousness. He also noted that the celestial precession cycle of 25,627 years
Above, the Maya zodiac in the Paris Codex (pp. 23–24), a pre-contact document dated to the 15th century, consists of 13 constellations. Among those most easily recognizable are rattlesnake, bird, scorpion, and tortoise; they all hang from a serpent sky band. Left, as in the Christian Second Coming, a god descending from heaven appears as a common theme in Mesoamerican art. In this scene from the Vienna Codex, Quetzalcoatl (Kukulcan) comes down from the sky on a cotton rope.

Below, the theory of World Ages is often based on the zodiac. But are zodias universal? A segment of our Greek/Babylonian-derived western zodiac consists of twelve constellations. The course of the vernal equinox sun through the zodiac during human history is marked out. Some believe World Ages are heralded by the equinox sun’s passage through successive zodiacal signs. Remember the Age of Aquarius?

Anthony F. Aveni, The End of Time: The Maya Mystery of 2012 (2009) (left), Akademische Druck-u. Verlag Graz, ADEVA (far right, top and bottom)
is almost exactly divisible by the length of the Long Count, a fact he felt certain could not have gone unnoticed by mathematically obsessed Maya astronomers. No evidence exists to validate Waters’ claim. New Age mystic Jose Argüelles, architect of the 1987 “cosmic convergence” which he viewed as a prelude to the Long Count turnover, had his own version of time’s end. His scenario had evil Tezcatlipoca, the dark antithesis of Quetzalcoatl, descending from heaven, only to morph into his good, light-bearing counterpart.

Where does Maya astronomy fit in? Insistence on the use of the term “galactic” to characterize the domain of the immanent transcendent force has been widespread in the current Maya 2012 literature. For example, Argüelles writes of “galactic sound transmissions [that] will inundate the planetary field”; there is a “galactic code of the seasons,” a “galactic beam,” even a collective “galactic mind.” Maybe we fancy the galactic concept in the vain hope that in its incomprehensible vastness there might be something for us, some hidden meaning. Thus, American author John Major Jenkins invites us to participate “in the galactic process of Maya cosmogenesis.” He predicts that the Maya day of reckoning will be heralded by an alignment of the winter solstice sun (December 21) with the Great Rift (he calls it a cosmic womb) near the center of our Milky Way Galaxy. This is a cosmic lineup that is sure to open the door of opportunity to a “conscious relationship with each other and a creative participation with the Earth process that gives birth to our higher selves.” Jenkins argues that it is all foretold in the Maya calendar and inscriptions, as well as architectural alignments at the ruins of Izapa, a Preclassic Maya outlier. He believes that the Maya set up their Long Count calendar there 2,000 years ago with the 2012 alignment date in mind. The alignment, it turns out, cannot be pinned down to an accuracy more precise than 300 years. Nor is there any evidence the Maya cared much about the Milky Way. Moreover there are no Long Count inscriptions at Izapa.

Hard times beg for change. Much like the ’60s, the first decade of the new millennium has been a stressful one, marked by terrible events and trends too depressing and familiar to enumerate. It is enough to drive even the most rational segment of the citizenry to bizarre, alternative outlooks. This includes a deep desire to recapture an imagined distant past that knew the essence of true wisdom. And so we romance...
the Maya. Still there is nothing new under the sun. As I have argued, all the elements of the logic informing the impending contemporary doomsday scheduled for December 21, 2012, have long been in place. Time’s end is in our American blood.

But the Maya actually might have made some sense of the Christian apocalypse in a metaphoric way. Ethnohistorian Tim Knowlton argues that the Maya did not offer blind acceptance to appease the will of the conqueror by adopting his religious ideology. Their ancient texts did tell of the destruction and re-flowering of the world, a process which, in practice, is allied to the slash-and-burn agriculture commonly practiced in Yucatan. In essence you need to destroy the old soil to make the new more productive. But the more I get to know the ancient Maya, the more I have come to believe that those who seek universal 2012 wisdom in the native texts need to be aware that they may be peering into a mirror that reflects their own Western ideas.

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For Further Reading


