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**Martin, John Jeffries. A Beautiful Ending: The Apocalyptic
Imagination and the Making of the Modern World**

Jonathan Locke Hart

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Martin, John Jeffries.

A Beautiful Ending: The Apocalyptic Imagination and the Making of the Modern World.

New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2022. Pp. viii, 323 + 30 b/w ill. ISBN 978-0-3002-4732-9 (hardcover) US\$35.

Let me begin at the end. That is appropriate for a book about the making of the modern world through the apocalyptic imagination, what John Jeffries Martin calls a “Beautiful Ending.” In the acknowledgments at the end of this beautifully produced book, Martin observes the beginnings of the volume and its genesis, how he found in a diffuse draft of “a history of early modern Europe from the age of Columbus to the French Revolution” a narrative that caught his attention: “the role of apocalyptic in the history of Europe and the Mediterranean from the fifteenth to the seventeenth century” (251). The book emerged unconsciously, he writes: “I hadn’t self-consciously set out to work on this theme” (251). Then Martin found something that intrigued him: “Nonetheless, once this stratum emerged, I found I couldn’t look away” (251). He elaborates on this fascination: “In part, I was fascinated by the hold of the apocalyptic on the imaginations of Jews, Christians, and Muslims in the early modern period” (251). This role of the apocalypse took Martin to a typology of then and now: “Moreover, this story seemed also to speak to the present with our own renewed anxieties about the End of History” (251). That anxious zeitgeist was something Francis Fukuyama explored in *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992). Martin ends where he began, that is at the end of things in the early modern world from the epochal Columbian landfall to the Revolution of 1789 in France: “Above all, as I came to see, the apocalyptic imagination played not an insignificant role in the making of the modern world” (251). Imagining the end makes the future that becomes our present.

Christopher Columbus and Francis Bacon are important for Martin, for the emergence of modernity. The landfall of Columbus changes the view of exploration and knowledge beyond the Pillars of Hercules. Martin says that Bacon saw crossing the Pillars as promising new knowledge of nature and the world, a “shift to modernity itself” (2). The motto *Multi pertransibunt et augebitur scientia* derives “from the Book of Daniel, where the phrase ‘many will pass through and knowledge will be increased’ pointed not to the development of secular knowledge but rather to the End of History and the final sorting of

humanity into heaven and hell” (2). The end is scriptural and not simply in response to a postmodernist credo that history was at an end. From Daniel to Fukuyama, from biblical past through the early modern to the claim that we have gotten beyond the modern, we go.

There would be a divine and not a human end to the world ushering in justice without suffering, the Jews awaiting the Messiah, early Christians believing in the Second Coming, and Muslims longing for the coming of the Mahdi—a messianic figure—and “the Hour”—each promising “a Beautiful Ending” (5). Martin says that each religious tradition overlaps in what he calls “an ‘apocalyptic braid,’” that is, “overlapping and interwoven ideas about the End of History” from the ancient to the modern worlds (5). In the wake of the Crusades, apocalyptic ideas spread more widely and intensified with the printing press and with expanded commerce and exploration, stressing creation to the end of time, eternity being “true historical time” (6), people—like Columbus—believing that they were “actors in a sacred drama” (7). Martin also argues the following: “Apocalypticism also fueled the growth of empire” and “shaped various utopian dreams of community” (7). He also asserts that “political theologies” shaped early modern politics (7) and that faith “played a major role in the making of the modern world,” what he calls a “providential” modernity (9). He sees “apocalyptic imagination” as being a key to the ushering of modernity, which he deems “a providential project” (10). In the early modern age, Christians, Jews, and Muslims “acted with the hope that their actions would accelerate the coming of a Beautiful Ending” (12). As Martin maintains, “Providence was a source of agency” and, therefore, “the apocalyptic imagination and the hope and energies it inspired played a fundamental role in the shaping of the modern world”—the crucial claim of Martin’s book (12).

For Martin, hope moved people to work to fulfill the prophecies enabling “them to realize the Beautiful Ending promised in their scriptures” and “Columbus and thousands of others like him to cross the oceans,” as well as inspiring “the conquest of the Sultan Süleyman and the forging of a global Islamic empire” while encouraging “such Jewish mystics as Isaac Luria to engage in ritual acts of *tiqqun* to repair not only the world but indeed the entire cosmos” (34). Moreover, Martin argues that in the early modern period, the book, like the pulpit, was key in Islam, Christianity, and Judaism in circulating and intensifying “apocalyptic ideas” (55). Martin discusses the callousness and violence behind Columbus in the treatment of the Indigenous peoples (74).

Throughout the age of exploration, “millenarian and other apocalyptic dreams would continue to contribute significantly to the utopian imagination” that encouraged hope for “a better world,” and Martin says that Columbus coming to the “earthly paradise” began “a new way of thinking about the future” (91). According to Martin, Charles V “had crossed through the Pillars of Hercules and created not only a new empire but a new form of empire at that. He had, in short, gone *plus ultra*—farther than any ruler had gone before” (111). In discussing Martin Luther and his funeral, Martin says that before Luther’s death, many saw him as a prophet, relating him to Daniel, John the Baptist, the angel of the Apocalypse but mostly to “the prophet Elijah or Elias” (132). Martin reminds us that Ignatius of Loyola, Servetus, and Calvin were in Paris during the 1530s, which “was still open to a rich range of religious ideals” and views of “the nature of salvation,” passionate differences among them that “would set them on paths of conflict and even violence” (149). In examining the battles for God, Martin begins with Henri II being injured in a joust in the summer of 1559—he died ten days later—and concludes with the observation that religious conflicts “encouraged a variety of apocalyptic and messianic dreams” and that “the dreams of peace [...] often fueled violence” (168).

In examining the spiritual globe, Martin returns to Columbus and his earthly paradise and observes that “this global empire contributed to Campanella’s vision of the end” (186), his *Monarchia di Spagna* representing the hope to hispanicize the world and to Christianize it; here, as in *La città del sole* (*The City of the Sun*, 1602), Jews, Muslims, and others “would be united in the Christian faith, human nature would be perfected, and a golden age would dawn” (186). Concerning cannibalism, Martin begins with Montaigne’s “Des Coches” and discusses Montaigne’s view, a recounting of this New World myth as “a reframing of apocalypticism” (188). Martin says that, unlike Acosta, Montaigne thought it absurd to make “a hierarchy of cultures” and considered barbarism to be “ubiquitous” (205). For Martin, Jews encountered, in Kabbalah, “the mythic power of their faith and could dream of a mystical union with God” (207). Martin discusses, among others, Johann Valentin Andreae, who focused on individual salvation, a utopian vision, a Beautiful Ending, perhaps especially in England (224).

In returning to crossing the Pillars of Hercules, Martin returns to Francis Bacon and his new method and concludes that “individuals and communities sought ways to fulfill their prophetic traditions” to bring into being important

features of modernity, which “is rooted in the Apocalypse” (241). Martin maintains that religion, politics, and science came to be “disentangled from one another” (245). Finally, Martin remakes his central point that “the apocalyptic is a fundamental feature of the modern itself” (250). Martin’s book ends beautifully as it begins, its apocalypse in the eternal now.

JONATHAN LOCKE HART

Shandong University

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