

# Life at the End of an Empire with St Augustine

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*It isn’t often that a generation lives through a systemic breakdown crisis. While many shallower minds are quick to lay blame to the cause of their troubles on a convenient scapegoat (1), the fact is that these sorts of systemic collapses take time and the root causes are to be found in something both more universal and more subjective.*

Many generations of bad ideas must be embraced without self-criticism or correction before a foolish society unwilling to break from popular delusions faces the consequence of their folly. Machiavelli once noted in his Discourses on Livy (investigating the causes of the decay and collapse of Rome published in 1517 AD) that unless a wayward republic returns to its founding principles, it isn’t long for this world.

Such was the world of the late 4th century when a young Manichean teacher of Rhetoric hailing from North Africa had decided to convert to the new religion of Christianity in 386 AD under the influence of a powerful church leader named St Ambrose (340-397 AD). Augustine didn’t have much love for Christianity itself when he found himself first attending the lectures of Ambrose in Milan and found the religion to be a rather overbearing doctrine relying too much on blind faith and too little on reason.

Ambrose threw the young man’s presumptions out the window, and although he first found himself fascinated by the bishop’s use of rhetoric to persuade his audience, he increasingly found himself actually listening to the substance of the man’s words, soon realizing that for the first time, here was a Christian not preaching AT him, but actually using reason to explain why it were better to be good and virtuous than to hold onto the hedonistic ethos in Rome’s still Pagan-dominated cultural milieu.

Like Augustine, Ambrose had mastered the classics including the works of Plato and especially the writings of Cicero whose death ushered in the collapse of the republic into full blown empire four centuries earlier. These studies gave both men a powerful edge lacking in those Christians who chose to defend their position from a literalist reading of the text of their canonized works, transcending matters of dogma and activating powers of universal reason behind the surface appearance of church doctrine.

Speaking in his Confessions, Augustine writes:

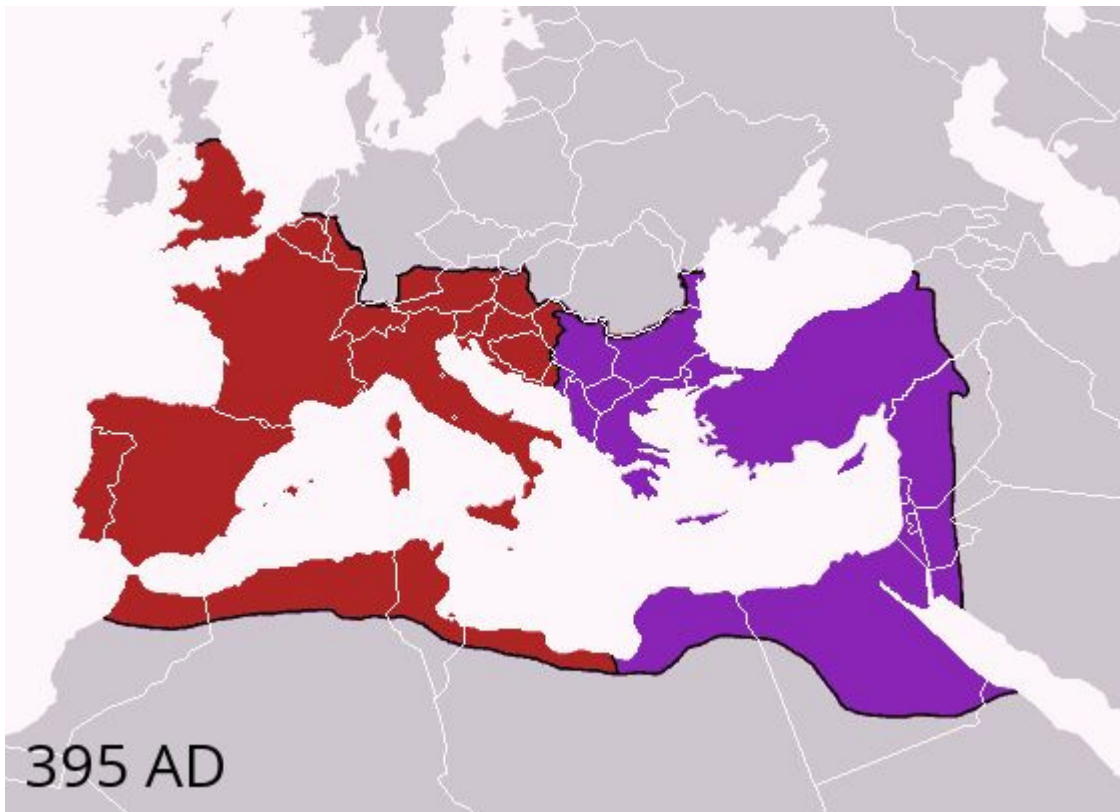
“And to Milan I came, to Ambrose the bishop, famed through the whole world as one of the best of men, thy devoted servant... To him I was led by thee without my knowledge, that by him I might be led to thee in full knowledge. That man of God received me as a father would, and welcomed my coming as a good bishop should. And I began to love him, of course, not at the first as a teacher of the truth, for I had entirely despaired of finding that in thy Church—but as a friendly man. And I studiously listened to him—though not with the right motive—as he preached to the people. I was trying to discover whether his eloquence came up to his reputation, and whether it flowed fuller or thinner than others said it did. And thus I hung on his words intently, but, as to his subject matter, I was only a careless and contemptuous listener. I was delighted with the charm of his speech, which was more erudite, though less cheerful and soothing, than Faustus’ style. As for subject matter, however, there could be no comparison, for the latter was wandering around in Manichean deceptions, while the former was teaching salvation most soundly. But “salvation is far from the wicked,” such as I was then when I stood before him. Yet I was drawing nearer, gradually and unconsciously.”

## **A World on the Brink of Collapse**

Even though Christianity had been adopted as a state-supported religion in 381 AD, old habits die hard, and just as the Roman elite often simply adapted their pagan rites and rituals into new Christian wineskins, the lessons of Christ were not necessarily high priorities even for many of the Roman converts within the general population who valued personal comfort and stability over the higher message of loving God and loving your fellow man as you love yourself outlined by Christ.

What made this more complicated is that Rome had over-extended itself several times over and had little capability to maintain its international concessions with a capital that had long found itself addicted to ever greater spoils of pillage and slave labor from the subdued peoples of the world. The governing class, military leaders and administrative managers had all glutted themselves in a corrupt system of governance which had grown fat with lethargy and arrogance over the centuries.

Amidst this decay, a growing armada of organized Germanic forces among the Goths, Huns and Visigoths were growing in influence pressing ever harder on Rome’s borders. With the death of Theodosius in 395 AD, any remnant of stabilizing influence in the Roman empire had disappeared, and the disorganized, undisciplined forces of Rome became increasingly incapable of organizing any resistance to the growing assaults of Alaric (leader of the Visigoths). After Theodosius died, Rome was divided into Eastern and Western segments with the west the least manageable.



By 410 AD, the walls of the capital were breached for the first time in history and the first sacking of Rome occurred with a ferocity that none had imagined possible.

From the moment of his conversion to his final breath, Augustine's leadership skills, mastery of the Platonic method and power of rhetoric made him an organic leader within a beleaguered Church. Not only was Rome in an existential crisis on a geopolitical level, but the very church itself had faced an internal rot with splintered heresies breaking away as cults and sub-cults, each declaring themselves the one true heir to Christ's mission.

After the first sacking of Rome in 410 AD, things were looking rather bleak and the desperate population was looking for a scapegoat to absorb their hate.

Were the gods punishing the people for having abandoned them when Rome stopped trying to wipe Christianity off the map and instead chose to embrace it as the official state religion? Augustine found himself doing battle with this trend and the City of God was his defense of Christianity which he began in 412 AD and finished in 426 AD. Its lessons have as much application in diagnosing today's systemic crisis as they did 1600 years ago.



## Augustine's Defense of Christianity

In the City of God, Augustine described how the mob of Rome was quickly turning on the Christians in the following remarks:

*"Rome having been stormed and sacked by the Goths under Alaric their king, the worshipers of false gods, or pagans, as we commonly call them, made an attempt to attribute this calamity to the Christian religion, and began to blaspheme the true God with even more than their wonted bitterness and acerbity. It was this which kindled my zeal for the house of God and prompted me to undertake the defence of the City of God against the charges and misrepresentations of its assailants."*

Within the City of God, Augustine argues that it isn't Christianity that is to blame for the collapse of Rome, but rather Rome itself which had fallen from obedience to Natural Law upon whose adherence the survival of societies absolutely depends. While God allows for a certain degree of flexibility to his wayward children who fall into corruption- patience is not infinite and the disobedience to Natural law devoid of redemption can only be tolerated for so long.

Citing Cicero (106 - 43 BC), Augustine's insight into the true causes of Rome's downfall hinged on the positive conception of a healthy society which is in harmony with the mandate of the ideal City of God. This is a society which has wisely rejected the law of "might makes right" of empire.

In the case of Rome, Augustine makes the point that the seeds of her own destruction were sewn long before the birth of Christ.

Even before the debauched revelries normalized under the oversight of the Roman imperial cults of the Committee of 15 which interpreted the oracular gobbledygook in the [Sibylline Books of Apollo](#), and before the hegemony of the cults of Cybele and Mithras which saw a total collapse of the minds and morals of both Roman plebians and elites alike, and before the age of bloodlust that the coliseum's gore entailed as "popular entertainment", Cicero

perfectly diagnosed Rome's spiritual self-destruction in his Commonwealth.

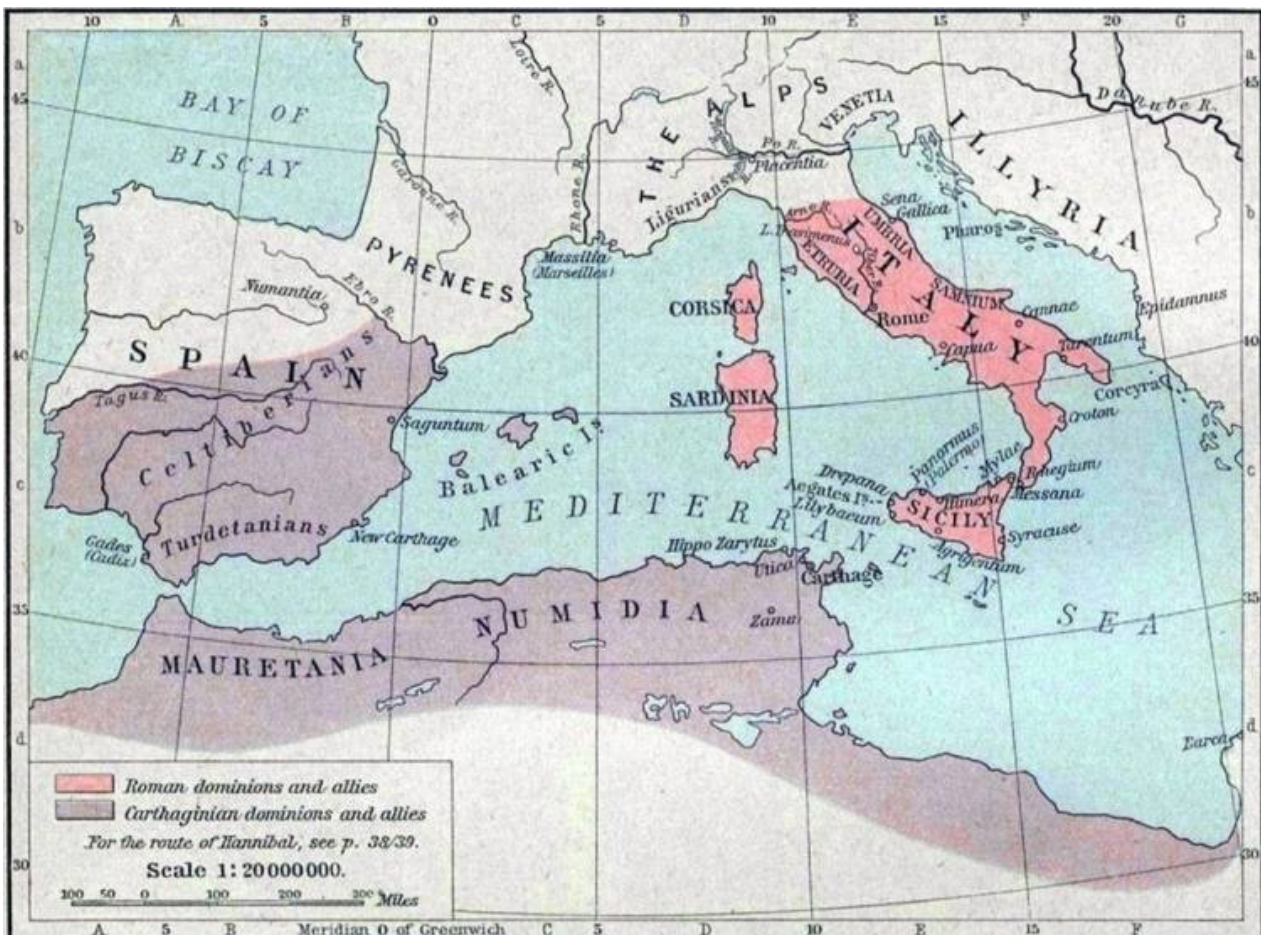
Citing Cicero, Augustine defines a healthy community saying "a community of commonwealth is not an association of units, but an association united by a common sense of right and a community of common interest". Continuing to cite Cicero's 64 BC opus, he writes "the morality has passed away and we are bound to be called to account for the disaster... for we retain the name of a commonwealth, but we have lost the reality long ago, and this was not through any misfortune, but our own misdemeanors".

The key moment cited by both Cicero and Augustine that saw Rome embrace her tragic destiny was located in the events surrounding the Third Punic War of 149-146 BC.

## How Rome Lost the Mandate of Heaven

The third Punic war with Carthage was a moment not unlike the choice which the American elite made to launch into the Vietnam War and the murder of Cicero was not unlike the same decision those same elite made to stay silent and coverup the truth of John Kennedy's murder in 1963. It also saw parallels to the collapse of Athens into empire with the [judicial murder of Socrates in 399 BC and her embrace of wars with the Delian league in the 5th century BC.](#)

It was during this war that Rome's once loyal ally Carthage found herself the target of total destruction as Roman ships landed on the coasts of today's Libya in 149 BC. Rome's General Scipio Aemilianus had one mission to carry out which was immortalized in his words "Carthage delenda est"... Carthage must be destroyed.



The Carthaginians were desperate to avoid another war, and quickly offered to lay down her weapons and engage in terms of surrender. Sadly, their placation fell on deaf ears and the oligarchy managing Rome had decided that her large territories stretching across Africa, the Mediterranean and Southwest Asia had to be consolidated. After two years of war, Carthage's capital was sieged, ending with every last man, woman and child killed or sold into slavery. The oligarchical system of families and cults which had once used Persia as their enforcer of global controls had found a new host on whom to exert their influence, and once-proud Roman republic was set there upon a new and darker destiny.



Augustine writes: *“After the destruction of Carthage and before Christ’s coming, the degradation of traditional morality ceased to be a gradual decline and became a torrential rush.”*

Augustine makes the point that *“if the values of Christ’s teaching had been practised rather than license, Rome would be prospering. But now there is despair and even the true Christians must submit to endure the wickedness of an utterly corrupt state and by that endurance to win themselves a place of glory in that holy and majestic assembly as we call it on the Heavenly Commonwealth whose law is the Will of God”.*

Here it is important to note, that Augustine is not saying that Rome needed to convert to Christianity in order to be saved, for Rome did just that, and it was not saved.

More important than simply being Christian in name, Augustine makes clear that Rome could have redeemed herself even before Christ was born by following the universal values contained in Christ’s teachings both on the individual level and the broader governmental level.

Augustine’s City of God is in many ways his attempt to do what Plato laid out in his life’s work and especially his Republic (published in 375 BC) and also what Cicero did in his Commonwealth published in 64 BC. In both cases the great philosopher/statesmen laid out their solutions to their nations’ slide into empire. All three noted that whenever societies fall into decadence which empire entails, the love of wisdom is replaced for the love of hedonism and other ephemeral pleasures. Love of the other is replaced with love of the self

and considerations of the wellbeing of the whole community are reduced to the wellbeing of the individual member with power to impose their will onto the masses.

What is needed for a society to break free of the cyclical collapses which such a corrupt society is destined to face? The solution offered by Plato, Cicero and Augustine amounts to simply recognizing that government exists to advance the happiness of a people. This simple concept is much deeper than it appears.

## **True Happiness and the Pursuit of Philosopher Kings**

Augustine writes

*“If Plato says that the wise man is the man who imitates, knows and loves God, and that participation in this God brings man happiness, what need is there to examine the other philosophers? There are none who come nearer to us than the Platonists... Plato defined Sovereign Good as the life in accordance with virtue and he declared that this was possible only for one who had the knowledge of God and who strove to imitate him; this was the sole condition of happiness.”*

As you can see, this idea of happiness is much higher than the lowly notion of happiness among today’s popular philosophers who attempt to define the sentiment within narrow egotistical terms of “satisfying my desire to do what I want to do”. Instead, Plato, Cicero and Augustine raise the concept along with later thinkers like Thomas More and Erasmus, to a standard of spiritual pleasure contained in the pursuit, acquisition and sharing of truth (aka: wisdom).

All things are designed by God to have loves that are premised on their natures. Just as a plant yearns for water, nutritious soil and CO<sub>2</sub> (sorry Greta), and just as a body yearns for food, water, warmth so too does the soul have its own loves towards which it yearns to be made more healthy. The absence of the loves of each thing cause pain, disease and decay for their subjects, and this is the case for the soul whose food is wisdom, without the which no durable happiness were ever attainable.

Here Augustine notes *“in all cases where love is rightly bestowed, that love is itself loved even more. For we are justified in calling a man good not merely because he merely knows what is good but because he loves the Good.”*

Hammering at the lessons of Paul’s [1 Corinthians 13](#) which emphasizes the importance of love’s substance over the mere shadows of behavior Augustine clarifies his position:

*“When a man’s resolve is to love God and to love his neighbor as himself, not according to man’s standards but according to God’s, he is undoubtedly said to be a man of good will, because of this love. This attitude is more commonly called ‘caritas/agape’ in holy scripture; but it appears in the same sacred writing under the appellation ‘Love’. When the apostle is giving instructions about the choice of a man to rule God’s people, he says that such a man should be a lover of the Good... There is indeed a love which is given to what should not be loved and that love is hated in himself by one who loves the love which is given to a proper object of Love. For these can both exist in the same man and it is good for man that what makes for right living should increase in him and what makes for evil should die away until he is made perfectly sound and all his life is changed into good.”*

This idea was expressed nearly a thousand years earlier at the other edge of the world island by none other than Confucius who wrote: "At 15 I set my heart on learning; At 30 I firmly took my stand; At 40 I had no delusions; At 50 I knew the Mandate of Heaven; At 60 my ear was attuned; At 70 I followed my heart's desire without overstepping the boundaries of right."

Even Christ's golden rule was a focal point of Confucian thought as the old sage stated "do not unto others as you would not have them do unto you". The Christian notion of Natural Law as outlined in Augustine's City of God also finds its parallel expression in Chinese thought vis a vis [the concept of Tianming](#) (aka: Mandate of Heaven) whose disobedience by a ruler is sufficient cause for a people to overthrow said ruler in favor of a new government better suited to maintaining the general welfare.

Although Augustine never saw the redemption of society in his lifetime, having died in 430 AD amidst a siege held by the Vandals in the former colony of Hippo located in today's Algeria, the infusion of Augustine's Platonic Christian outlook provided the basis for several major renaissances in the centuries after his death.

## A New Hope for Humanity

It was a young Augustinian monk named Patrick who successfully launched a major transformation of Ireland into a Christian nation as outlined in Thomas Cahill's '[How the Irish Saved Civilization](#)' and it was an Irish Augustinian missionary named Saint Columba who finally returned to mainland Europe after several generations of war, decay and famine had reduced the continent to squalor. Starting in 565 AD, St. Columba led the largest Christianizing movement far outside the clutches of the Holy See's control in the form of the Hiberno-Scottish mission which used Scotland as a new springboard for a mass organizing campaign across all Europe.

When St. Columba arrived on the mainland in 590 AD there was very little of substance to be found within the highly fragmented world of Europe.





The entire domain of the former western Roman Empire had been ravaged by territorial warlords fighting for terrain in a similar pattern that was experienced by China during the 480 year dark age that came in the wake of the Han Dynasty's fall in 200 AD.

Just as the rediscovery and application of Confucian principles animated the Tang Dynasty's revival of the Silk Road and unification of the divided land in 680 AD, so too did the rediscovery of Plato via the Augustinian Christian movement then sew the seeds for the re-unification of Europe under the Frankish King Pepin the short and his son Charlemagne who ended the age of Europe's warring states and established the Carolingian Empire. This story is covered extensively by Professor Pierre Beaudry in [Charlemagne's Ecumenical Principle](#).

Charlemagne's Augustinian Revolution in Statecraft- Below featured Charlemagne's empire and its balkanization by his three warring grandchildren via the Partition of Verdun



Among the most celebrated and widely transcribed books in Charlemagne's court were Augustine's City of God and On Christian Education which were read to Charlemagne extensively by the grand strategist Alcuin.

Under Charlemagne, [an age of internal improvements were launched](#) the likes of which had not been seen since the days of Alexander the Great. Besides the canals, roads, schools and new cities, [we also see a mass education of children, social welfare reforms, economic reforms](#) and perhaps most importantly, peace treaties and commercial ties [with the Abbasid Dynasty of Haroun al Rashid, and the northern Jewish empire of Khazaria](#). It was this northern kingdom that served as a key strategic gateway of the Steppes Silk Road between China and Europe.

[This Confucian-Christian-Muslim-Jewish alliance](#) set an example which the oligarchy has been desperate to scrub from humanity's collective memory for 1300 years.

For anyone who thinks that this potential alliance only involved the western branch of Catholic Christianity, and ignored the eastern orthodox Christian movement dominant in the Byzantine eastern Roman Empire of the day, it is worth noting that after Charlemagne had made an important maneuver to avoid war with Byzantium in 801 AD by asking Empress Irene of Athens her hand in marriage.

The fact that Irene accepted the offer at this moment presents the mind of a historian with an incredible sense of the possibilities of a world united by all major civilizations under an ecumenical alliance of cooperation. Could Christianity have re-united under a policy of cooperation with both itself and with the diverse civilizations surrounding her instead of embarking upon a new age of Balkanization within and inter-civilizational wars without? Would the leading factions of the ruling Roman oligarchical families centered in Venice, Rome and Byzantium have been able to subvert such an alliance of the forces of humanity?

Sadly, with the palace coup that overthrew Irene in 802, such potentials were destroyed forever and the world will never have an answer to such questions.

## **From Dante to the League of Cambrai**

Despite the eventual sabotage of the ecumenical alliance of great civilizations after the 10th century, the Augustinian current of Christianity again found its champion in the form of Dante Alighieri who did much to revive St. Augustine's thesis in his [De Monarchia](#) published in 1312 AD. Augustinian Christian leaders around Nicholas of Cusa (1401-1464 AD) organized a unification of the church during the 1438 Council of Florence (again, soon sabotaged with the 1452 destruction of Constantinople) and again Augustinian Christians regrouped and set the stage for the Golden Renaissance.

It were these same leaders who organized the [1509 League of Cambrai](#) which nearly finished the job begun by Alexander the Great by wiping the central command of the oligarchy from the face of the earth.

Despite its eventual subversion, European philosophers continued to rise into positions of power who looked to Plato, Cicero, and Augustine as the basis of Europe's moral salvation. It should be here noted that a perverse effort to restore Charlemagne's empire in the form of an expansionist program of war and tyranny also grew across the centuries and justified the eventual creation of the European Union in the late 20th Century. This nasty movement should not be confused with the genuine heirs of Charlemagne who saw the basis of their power not on might-make-right, but on the opposing idea of right-makes-might.

Among the most noteworthy of these leaders were France's King Louis XI, England's King Henry VII, Sir Thomas More, Erasmus of Rotterdam, King Henry IV of Navarre, Cardinal Jules Mazarin of France, Finance Minister Jean-Baptiste Colbert and the great scientist/statesman Gottfried Leibniz (1649-1716).

## **Leibniz's Augustinian Vision**

On top of organizing many of the greatest reforms in administration, law and science policy within both Prussia and Russia (serving as Privy Councillor to Peter the Great), Gottfried Leibniz organized [to unify the splintered branches of Christianity around a renewed Augustinian reform](#), and a broader age of reason by looking beyond the limits of the corrupted European courts to... China and Russia.

Corresponding with leading missionaries and advisors to the Kangxi emperor of China, Leibniz created the first major journal on Chinese thought and politics called [Novissima Sinica \(News from China\)](#) in 1696 where he laid [out his grand design](#) writing:

"I consider it a singular plan of the fates that human cultivation and refinement should today be concentrated, as it were, in the two extremes of our continent, in Europe and

in China, which adorns the Orient as Europe does the opposite edge of the Earth. Perhaps Supreme Providence has ordained such an arrangement, so that as the most cultivated and distant peoples stretch out their arms to each other, those in between may gradually be brought to a better way of life. I do not think it an accident that the Russians, whose vast realm connects Europe with China and who hold sway over the deep barbarian lands of the North by the shore of the frozen ocean, should be led to the emulation of our ways through the strenuous efforts of their present ruler [Peter I].”

It is no coincidence that we find in the works of Leibniz and the Augustinian Christian movement, the key to the strategic thinking of [Confucian Platonist Benjamin Franklin](#) who applied the practical and metaphysical insights of Confucius, Christ and Plato into a new system of governance which he defined as a “science of happiness”.

If you have made it this far and don't yet see any of the keys to the salvation of our current society within the context of the rising multipolar alliance and Confucian renaissance which is animating China's New Silk Road, I highly advise reading this essay again.

The author delivered a lecture on this topic which [can be viewed here](#)

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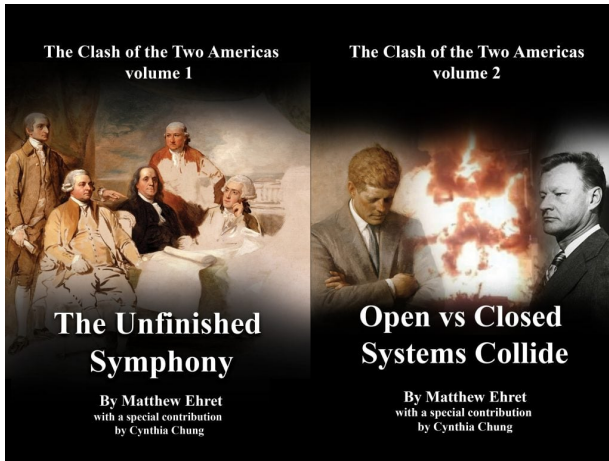
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## Note

(1) be it immigrants, jews, Chinese boogeymen, Russians or right wing domestic terrorists, there are scapegoats catering to everyone

*All images in this article are from TCP*

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