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HIST 611 Interpreting the New World

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Final Essay

### Interpreting New World Religion: Man, Demons, or Madness?

From the very beginning of New World exploration, Europeans struggled to understand native religion; first, if it even existed, and second, if what could be called religion were influenced by human craft, demonic possession, or mere madness. Although some of the authoritative writings of the day could have influenced European explorers to see native religious beliefs similar to historic examples of pagan and idolatrous worship, they rejected the possibility of organized religious practices among the indigenous Americans. To the European mind, the natives were incapable of the agency attributed to diviners and deceivers of the past. Instead, Europeans saw native religious beliefs as derived solely from their lack of civilization and sophistication, perhaps with the intervention of evil spirits. They did not detect any semblance of constructed institutions or human agency in the religious practices of the native Americans. These European interpretations of New World religion contributed to notions of native inferiority and provided justifications for conquest and evangelization.

European explorers setting out for the Americas had access to various writings describing the pagan religions of the past; these undoubtedly influenced some of their interpretations of the New World. Nevertheless, these explorers were unlikely to interpret the practices they encountered after leaving their homes as recognizably religious. A comparison of New World travel accounts and the literary precedents of Herodotus, Isidore of Seville, Marco Polo, and Sir John Mandeville illustrates the distinction. In speaking of the Egyptians, Herodotus recorded in his *Histories* that, “as for divination, they

attribute this ability to some of the gods, but never to a human being.”<sup>1</sup> Herodotus’ examination was descriptive of the Egyptians’ beliefs rather than a scrutiny of what influenced their religious leaders. Although his discussion of divination among the Scythians was longer, he remained true to being descriptive and less explanatory. Diviners among the Scythians, however, could be found guilty as false prophets by a majority of other diviners.<sup>2</sup> In this way, Herodotus described a society where religion had clearly defined institutions in deciding religious disputes.

For other writers of antiquity, the agency of those they examined was central to their religious beliefs. To Isidore of Seville, the teachings of the apostles were absolute and he and anyone else “are permitted to introduce nothing based on our own judgment.” This statement may suggest a lack in agency, but Isidore’s motivation behind this phrase was to reject any teachings or belief systems outside the Church such as heresies, schisms, and deceptions. Those who went astray did so “by their own will.” Isidore was also particularly interested in the motives of false teachers.<sup>3</sup> While trickery and fraud are common explanations, these represent willful actions, much like the agency given to apostates. When speaking of diviners, for instance, Isidore argued that these “are so named, as if the term were ‘filled with god’ (*deo plenus*), for they pretend to be filled with divine inspiration, and with a certain deceitful cunning they forecast what is to come for people.” This willful treachery, however, is coupled with the idea that “there are two kinds of divination: craft and madness.”<sup>4</sup> Madness was always a possibility but, to these writers of antiquity, heresies were usually the result of the craftiness of men and devils.

It was this deceit, of either men or devils, which Marco Polo saw as the foundation of the idolatry he encountered in the east. “In a province called Tangut, whose inhabitants are all idolaters,” Polo encountered death and cremation practices, arguing that “the astrologer makes his divination by

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<sup>1</sup> Herodotus, *The Histories*, trans. Robin Waterfield (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 126.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 257.

<sup>3</sup> Stephen A. Barney, et al., trans., *Etymologies of Isidore of Seville* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 174.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 182.

diabolical art and afterwards declares on what day the corpse must be cremated.”<sup>5</sup> The astrologers and enchanters in the court of the Great Khan also, according to Polo, “know more of diabolic arts and enchantments than any other men. They do what they do by the arts of the Devil; but they make others believe that they do it by great holiness and by the work of God.”<sup>6</sup> As Polo continued his travels, he found astrologers in the province of Manzi, “skilled in their art and in diabolic enchantment, so that many of their predictions prove true and the people repose great faith in them.”<sup>7</sup> Wherever he went, idolatry existed, not by madness or because the people were in some state of nature but because of diabolic influence, both of men and devils. Even as far away as the islands in the oceans to the East, Polo described the idolaters as cannibals, and that “the works of [their] idols are so manifold and of such devilish contrivance that it is not proper to speak of them in our book.”<sup>8</sup> While it is clear that Polo’s account suggests the influence of demons on idolatry, such is rarely found without the agency and craftiness of man.

Not only were pagan and idolatrous religions attributed to human craft in the furthest of regions, even Islam was believed to be the result of human agency. Of Muhammad, the author of *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville* explains that he “had epilepsy, and often fell through the violence of that illness.” The author further explains that Muhammad deceived his wife and “made her believe that each time he fell the angel Gabriel appeared and spoke to him, and that he fell down because of the dazzling brightness of the angel.”<sup>9</sup> Even if Europeans reading this account believed that Muhammad was not having epileptic seizures, but was deceived by a devil, he still acted on his own accord in fashioning his religion. Having read the travel accounts of Marco Polo and Sir John Mandeville, we can begin to

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<sup>5</sup> *The Travels of Marco Polo*, trans. Ronald Latham (New York: Penguin Books, 1958), 85-86.

<sup>6</sup> *The Travels of Marco Polo*, trans. Ronald Latham (New York: Penguin Books, 1958), 110.

<sup>7</sup> *The Travels of Marco Polo*, trans. Ronald Latham (New York: Penguin Books, 1958), 224.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 247.

<sup>9</sup> *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville*, trans. C.W.R.D. Moseley (New York: Penguin Books, 1983), 109.

presume what the European explorers of the New World might have expected in terms of native religious practice.

Despite all these stories in antiquity of idolatry and deceptive religion, upon his arrival to the New World, Columbus perceived no religion among the natives whatsoever. "I believe that they would become Christians very easily," he wrote, "for it seemed to me that they had no religion."<sup>10</sup> A month later, Columbus recorded of another people that they "are of the same quality and customs as the others encountered; they are without any religion that I know of, for up to the present I have not seen those whom I have with me do any praying."<sup>11</sup> Again, a few days later, Columbus recorded this absence of religion, adding also, "nor are they idolaters. They are very gentle and do not know what evil is; nor do they kill others, nor steal; ... they are credulous and aware that there is a God in heaven and convince[d], that we come from the heavens; and they say very quickly any prayer that we tell them to say, and they make the sign of the cross."<sup>12</sup> It is significant that Columbus believed not only in an absence of religion but, of idolatry, because he firmly believed these were the islands east of "the big cities belonging to the Grand Khan, which doubtless will be discovered."<sup>13</sup> It is difficult to ascertain why Columbus saw no religion, when those who preceded him in traveling to the East had clearly distinguished between Christianity and the pagan religions of natives they encountered. Perhaps Columbus was motivated by the desire to see the natives easily converted to Christianity without the hindrance of "false" teachings. Again, later in his diary he recorded that Christianizing the natives "will be done easily, since they have no false religion nor are they idolaters."<sup>14</sup> In the end, it seems that Columbus' failure to see religion was a result of his inability to see natives as anything but inferior.

According to Margarita Zamora, "while the Indians' humanness per se is never doubted, they are judged

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<sup>10</sup> Christopher Columbus, *The Diario of Christopher Columbus' First Voyage to America, 1492-1493*, trans. Oliver Dunn & James E. Kelley, Jr. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1989), 69.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 127.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 143.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 145.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 183-185.

an inferior class of human being, pusillanimous, martially inept, and lacking in discrimination.”<sup>15</sup> This belief that the natives lacked discrimination certainly manifested itself in Columbus’ views with respect to their religion.

Columbus was not alone in his belief that natives had no religion. In 1503, Amerigo Vespucci also wrote of the natives in the New World that “they have no laws and no religious beliefs, but live according to the dictates of nature alone.”<sup>16</sup> As Matthew Restall explains, “a century later there were still native groups being described as without any religion at all; for example, this was how Herrera characterized the Chichimecs.”<sup>17</sup> This view of New World natives as irreligious could not persist forever, however, especially as explorers increasingly recorded the customs of different natives they encountered and as conversion to Christianity became a primary concern.

In his letters to Charles V of Spain, Hernán Cortés described many of the religious customs and beliefs he encountered in Mexico. These practices included idol worshipping and human sacrifices; though Cortés wrote little to give any suggestion that native religion was the result of willful deceit or any diabolical enchantments. Rather, natives appeared to be lacking in religious leadership, despite the existence of priests.<sup>18</sup> Without any authoritative guidance, Cortés believed, like Columbus, that it would be easy to convert the natives to Christianity. In his first letter, for instance, Cortés argued “that had we interpreters and other people to explain to them the error of their ways and the nature of the True Faith, many of them, and perhaps even all, would soon renounce their false beliefs and come to the true

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<sup>15</sup> Margarita Zamora, *Reading Columbus* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 170.

<sup>16</sup> Amerigo Vespucci, quoted in Frederick A. Ober, *Amerigo Vespucci* (Middlesex: The Echo Library, 2006), 93.

<sup>17</sup> Matthew Restall, *Seven Myths of the Spanish Conquest* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 181 (footnote 12).

<sup>18</sup> In order to understand which influences were believed to have had an effect on the religion of the Other, it is helpful to focus on those writings that dealt with religious leaders, rather than the population as a whole. This is a difficult task, since European explorers were less interested in learning what native priests had to offer.

knowledge of God.”<sup>19</sup> In his second letter, Cortés finally acknowledged the existence of native priests, mentioning only some of their lifestyle habits and how “the sons of the persons of high rank ... enter the priesthood and wear the habit from the age of seven or eight years until they are taken away to be married.”<sup>20</sup>

Furthermore, to Europeans, custom rather than human agency was to blame for native idolatry. After removing their idols, cleansing their sacrificial chapels, and placing Catholic images throughout the temple, Cortés then taught them of the Christian religion. Mutezuma’s reply demonstrates some sense of Cortés’ belief regarding the influences that led to native idolatry. “All of them, especially Mutezuma,” Cortés explained, “replied that they had already told me how they were not natives of this land, and that as it was many years since their forefathers had come here, they well knew that they might have erred somewhat in what they believed, ... and as I had only recently arrived from there, I would better know the things they should believe.”<sup>21</sup> To Cortés, perhaps the natives once had true religion, but it was not deception or diabolic influence necessarily that led them astray. Rather, it was merely the passage of time that saw idolatry emerge. Cortés reiterated his belief that native religions were dictated by custom and habit in his fifth letter when he observed defeated villagers, “telling them to observe how vain and foolish was their belief, for they placed their trust in idols which could not even defend themselves and were so easily overthrown. They replied that they had been brought up in that belief by their fathers, and that they would persist in it until they knew of something better.”<sup>22</sup> This lack of religion and religious zeal was so foreign to Europeans that they interpreted it as either moral or intellectual inferiority. This interpretation justified (or, at least, served as a convenient pretense for) not only native subjugation, but war on the heathen.

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<sup>19</sup> Hernan Cortes, *Letters from Mexico*, Revised Edition, trans. Anthony Pagden (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 36.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 105-107.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 354.

Like Cortés, Juan Ginés De Sepúlveda defended war against the natives as just, not only because they lacked religion but because they had no sense of humanity. De Sepúlveda argued that natives were inferior “in prudence, skill, virtues, and humanity.” He also saw natives as “half-men (*homunculi*), in whom you will barely find the vestiges of humanity, who not only do not possess any learning at all, but are not even literate or in possession of any monument to their history except for some obscure and vague reminiscences of several things put down in various paintings; nor do they have written laws, but barbarian institutions and customs.”<sup>23</sup> Again, without religion or “any learning at all,” natives could be seen as inferior, and conquest was likewise justified.

Although Cortés and De Sepúlveda may have seen war against the natives as justified because they blindly followed customs, even those who wished to defend the natives found it difficult to attribute native religion to agency, even if by willful deceit. Bartolomé de Las Casas recognized, for instance, the existence of native religion but also attributed it to custom and habit rather than the agency of their priests. In his work, “In Defense of Indians,” Las Casas wrote:

Convictions about the gods, the duty of offering sacrifice to them, and the manner and things to be sacrificed are fully agreed on by all the known Indian nations, and these gods are worshipped by those who are reputed to be sacred and holy men (that is, their priests) and their idolatry is established by the decrees of their laws, the sanction of their rulers, and the penalties leveled against transgressors. Finally, since their idols are not worshipped secretly but publicly and religiously in their temples—and this from the earliest centuries—it is clear that the error of these people is probable.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Juan Ginés De Sepúlveda, quoted in David M. Kennedy & Thomas A. Bailey, eds., *The American Spirit, Volume I: To 1877*, 12<sup>th</sup> Ed. (Boston: Wadsworth, 2010), 3.

<sup>24</sup> Bartolomé de las Casas, *In Defense of the Indians*, trans. Stafford Poole, C.M. (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1992), 222.

Las Casas then compared native sacrificial practices to those found in ancient history, also to show such practices as evidence of native religion being in probable error. Punishment of such practices, according to Las Casas, was reserved to God, for even “Plutarch writes that the Romans failed to punish some barbarians who were sacrificing men to the gods, because they knew that it was done from custom and law.”<sup>25</sup> The natives’ acceptance of sacrifice was, therefore, not by consequence of men’s evil designs or trickery. Instead, Las Casas explained how nature and reason led men to sacrifice, or “natural reason, especially if he lacks Christian faith and instruction.”<sup>26</sup> To Las Casas and his contemporaries, natives lacked not only Christian instruction, but any instruction at all. In addition, Las Casas argued that “these entirely guiltless Indians are not to be blamed because they do not come to their senses at the first words of a preacher of the gospel. For they do not understand the preacher. Nor are they bound to abandon at once their ancestral religion, for they do not understand that it is better to do so.”<sup>27</sup> By arguing that natives were in a state similar to nature, having no understanding of preachers, Las Casas and missionaries simply provided further justification to view natives as influenced more by simple, unquestioning custom, than by any craft of their own.

Even those who had not physically visited the New World concluded that native religion resulted by nature rather than human agency. Michel Eyquem de Montaigne, who had never been to the New World but met a cannibal brought back to France in 1562, concluded that “these nations, then, seem to me barbarous in this sense, that they have been fashioned very little by the human mind, and are still very close to their original naturalness. The laws of nature still rule them.”<sup>28</sup> Notably, de Montaigne wrote on natives having “some sort of priests and prophets,” even comparing them later to diviners among the Scythians. Similar to the punishment of false diviners among the Scythians, when a native

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<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 223.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 234.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 241.

<sup>28</sup> Michel de Montaigne, *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, trans. Donald M. Frame (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1958), 153.

prophet “fails to prophesy correctly, and if things turn out otherwise than he has predicted, he is cut into a thousand pieces if they catch him, and condemned as a false prophet.” Although this similarity between New World and Scythian diviners may have yielded further discussion into whether native priests were guided by human craft or madness, de Montaigne said little about their religion beyond that “their whole ethical science contains only these two articles: resoluteness in war and affection for their wives.”<sup>29</sup> Without human intervention, nature could teach the natives little more than such simple principles of religion.

Even where religion clearly existed, Europeans found it difficult to compare it to examples in antiquity. In his *History of a Voyage to the Land of Brazil*, Jean de Léry began his discussion on “what one might call religion among the savage Americans” by voicing his concern of the Tupinamba: “Not only are they utterly ignorant of the sole and true God; what is more, in contrast to the custom of all the ancient pagans, who had many gods, they neither confess nor worship any gods, either of heaven or of earth.”<sup>30</sup> Again, comparing the natives to ancient pagans, de Léry found little similarity. Earlier in his work, he recorded that any native practices that could be construed as religion were drawn from nature. While de Léry acknowledged that heresy in France could be attributed to deception and trickery, the natives had no such human involvement. He argued, for instance, that “however blind this people may be in attributing more to nature and to the fertility of the earth than we do to the power and the providence of God, it will rise up in judgment against those despoilers who are as abundant over here, among those bearing the title of Christians, as they are scarce over there, among the native inhabitants.”<sup>31</sup> To de Léry, native religion was based on nature rather than human teaching, whether divine or not. Upon recalling an instance when his native companions asked de Léry about the psalm he sang in praise to God, he

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 154.

<sup>30</sup> Jean de Léry, *History of a Voyage to the Land of Brazil*, trans. Janet Whatley (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 134.

<sup>31</sup> Jean de Léry, *History of a Voyage to the Land of Brazil*, trans. Janet Whatley (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 102.

explained their reaction as one of amazement: “how fortunate you are to know so many secrets that are hidden from us poor wretches!” they allegedly exclaimed.<sup>32</sup> It was de Léry’s audience, however, who were surely amazed of his tales of people without religion and guided solely by nature.

De Léry’s account does offer some impression that the Tupinamba’s ancestors may have distorted their religious narrative, yielding one possibility that human agency was to blame for their situation. When he heard of their belief in a flood covering the earth, “which is the closest they come to the Holy Scriptures,” de Léry attributed this to the likelihood “that from father to son they have heard something of the universal flood that occurred in the time of Noah.” Variations in the native account of the flood, which included the natives’ ancestors climbing the trees for safety, were then proposed as a form of deception, or, “in keeping with the habit of men, which is always to corrupt the truth and turn it into falsehood.” De Léry diluted the prospect of human craft, however, by adding, “together with what we have already seen—that, being altogether deprived of writing, it is hard for them to retain things in their purity—they have added this fable.”<sup>33</sup> Indeed, without any sense of writing, de Léry could not see how the natives could maintain any sense of religion.

The idea that language was directly tied to the ability to have religion (and civilization, for that matter) was also commonly held by some Jesuit missionaries. In his letter to Reverend Father Provincial, Father Pierre Biard wrote that, “as the savages have no definite religion, magistracy or government, liberal or mechanical arts, commercial or civil life, they have consequently no words to describe things which they have never seen or even conceived.” Father Biard further indicated that it was likely the natives “will always remain in a perpetual infancy as to language and reason,” thus making conversion even more difficult.<sup>34</sup> The real question is why it was so difficult for a Jesuit missionary to see that the

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<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 149.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 144.

<sup>34</sup> “Lettre du P. Biard. au R. P. Provincial à Paris, Port Royal, Janvier 31, 1612,” in Reuben Gold Thwaites, ed., *The Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents*, Vol. II (Cleveland: The Burrows Brothers Co., 1896), 9-13.

natives actually had religion. When religion was perceived, even in the form of sorcery or idolatry, it was still difficult for Jesuits to see native religion equal to anything the Old World ever encountered. In Paul le Jeune's relation of 1637, for instance, he found evidence of sorcery: "And inasmuch as these persons know only the bad Manitou, that is, the Devil, we call them Sorcerers. Not that the Devil communicates with them as obviously as he does with the Sorcerers and Magicians of Europe; but we have not other name to give them, since they even do some of the acts of genuine sorcerers."<sup>35</sup> Even when some semblance of sorcery existed in the New World, le Jeune was unable to see it as genuine, at least not in comparison to the Old World.

Le Jeune, like de Léry and others who preceded him, also believed that the natives may have had the origins of true religion, but that now they were lost in a state where only nature furnished their knowledge. In his earlier relation of 1636, le Jeune recognized that "there are some indications that they had formerly some more than natural knowledge of the true God, as may be remarked in some particulars of their fables; and even if they had had only that which Nature can furnish to them, still they ought to have been more reasonable on this subject... For not having been willing to acknowledge God in their habits and actions, they have lost the thought of him and have become worse than beasts in his sight, and as regards the respect they have for him."<sup>36</sup> This last phrase speaks to the heart of the commonly held belief that natives lacked religion; they were not only inferior to all other peoples previously encountered, but were worse than beasts. This argument would nullify any reason for the Jesuits to even be in the New World, though, so in the second part of le Jeune's 1636 relation, the author Father Jean de Brébeuf stepped back from this argument, writing instead, "I do not claim here to put our Savages on a level with the Chinese, Japanese, and other Nations perfectly civilized; but only to

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<sup>35</sup> "Le Jeune's Relation, 1637," in Reuben Gold Thwaites, ed., *The Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents*, Vol. XII (Cleveland: The Burrows Brothers Co., 1898), 7.

<sup>36</sup> "Le Jeune's Relation, 1636," in Reuben Gold Thwaites, ed., *The Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents*, Vol. X (Cleveland: The Burrows Brothers Co., 1897), 125.

put them above the condition of beasts, to which the opinion of some has reduced them, to give them rank among men, and to show that even among them there is some sort of Political and Civil life.”<sup>37</sup>

Note that even Father Brébeuf refused to place native religion in any position equal to that found in other countries. Their elevation above beasts was intended only to legitimize evangelization.<sup>38</sup>

In order to convert the natives to Christianity, many Europeans believed that the natives had, if not an absence of religion, only slight traces of religion. It was believed that God had thus prepared Native Americans for European evangelization. In his *Royal Commentaries of the Incas*, for instance, Garcilaso de la Vega argued that natives had “some glimmerings of natural law, of civilization, and of the respect men owe to one another.” These glimmerings made the natives of Peru “capable of reason and of receiving good doctrine, so that when God, who is the sun of justice, saw fit to send forth the light of His divine rays upon those idolaters, it might find them no longer in their first savagery, but rendered more docile to receive the Catholic faith and the teaching and doctrine of our Holy Mother the Roman Church.”<sup>39</sup> Although de la Vega noticed some similarities between Indian stories and heathen legends of antiquity, religion and reason were only new developments in Indian society, enabling an easier transition to Christianity.

There is no doubt that, in some instances, writings of antiquity were helpful to Europeans in making sense of the New World. Given the likelihood that explorers drew upon authoritative precedence when writing about their discoveries, it is surprising that any discourse on native religion seemed to depart any general narrative. Rather than viewing New World paganism and idolatry similar

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<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 211.

<sup>38</sup> It should also be noted that another Jesuit, Father Gabriel Marest, recognized that some form of idolatry existed among natives, and “that they have some sort of Sacrifices.” Despite this recognition of some form of native religion, he argued “that it will be very difficult to establish Religion among these Peoples.” See “Lettre du Père Gabriel Marest, Missionnaire de la Compagnie de Jésus, au Père de Lamberville, de la même Compagnie, Procureur de la Mission du Canada,” in Reuben Gold Thwaites, ed., *The Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents*, Vol. LXVI (Cleveland: The Burrows Brothers Co., 1900), 109-111.

<sup>39</sup> Garcilaso de la Vega, *Royal Commentaries of the Incas and General History of Peru*, Part One, trans. Harold Livermore (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1966), 40.

to Old World Eastern religions, Europeans were inclined to describe Amerindian religion as either absent or lacking in any sophistication beyond what nature dictated. By denying Native Americans human agency in their religious practices, Europeans more easily justified conquest and evangelization. From Columbus on, the story of the New World remained a blank canvas on which Europeans were the only agents unto themselves. It may further be debated whether man, demons, or madness influenced Europeans in denying indigenous groups human agency in their systems of belief.<sup>40</sup>

"I pledge that this is my own work and that I have not misrepresented anyone else's work as my own."

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<sup>40</sup> Ultimately, this paper suggests the need for further research on European reactions to native religion, revealing perhaps other justifications and rationalizations that ultimately led to ideologies of race and ethnicity that further dehumanized indigenous populations.