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**No Abstract**

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## Bernardino de Sahagún, Jose de Acosta and the Sixteenth-Century Theology of Sacrifice in New Spain

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The long sixteenth century was the beginning of an era that was fraught with both inter- and intra-religious tensions. Early reports of the New World, teeming with life, people and wealth, were laden with discussions of practices that were foreign to European religious ideas. Coupled with the intra-religious tensions that yielded the era of reformations, sixteenth-century Christianity was experiencing tremendous challenges. Among the first to chronicle these religious differences and to propose methods for dealing with the diversity of practice and belief found in the New World were Bernardino de Sahagún and Jose de Acosta. These missionaries produced seminal texts that are the roots of a pattern of comparison that persists in the study of religion today, firmly grounded in categorizing, establishing, maintaining difference, and identifying similarity while striving to contribute to the spread of the Christian empire. The emergence of the comparative study of religion is connected to the expansion of Europeans and specifically European Christians into a world without Christianity.

Walter Mignolo has argued that the foundations of the world today can be located in the late fifteenth-century with the discovery of the New World: "the emergence of modernity/coloniality [is] the emergence of a world order under whose principles we are still living."<sup>2</sup> Frequently, scholars locate the historical roots of the comparative study of religion in nineteenth-century authors such as Edward Burnett Tylor or Max Müller.<sup>3</sup> However, in this article I want to locate them in Mignolo's understanding of the geopolitics of knowledge. As he states, the modern world "can be described in conjunction with the emergence of the Atlantic commercial circuit and ... such a conceptualization is linked to the making of colonial difference(s)."<sup>4</sup> While the comparative study of religion is thought to be a product of the Enlightenment, I will argue that its roots can be found in the early-modern period of missionary contact between the New World and the Old World, specifically the Iberian empire, and the texts produced during the Spanish conquest of the Americas. These missionary texts have made a significant contribution to the development of the study of religion though that contribution has been neglected and misrecognized.<sup>5</sup>

The comparative study of religion begins with the emergence of the Iberian period of expansion and colonialism rather than with the Enlightenment with its focus on Northern European colonial practices. Iberian colonialism, only recently receiving the attention of postcolonial theorists and historians has been neglected in the study of the hows and whys of the exercise of colonial power.<sup>6</sup> Outside the Enlightenment time frame for the "beginning" of modernity and located out of the southern reaches of Europe, Iberian colonialism has been effectively erased from many discussions

of colonialism and post colonialism in much the same way that philosophy from the world of Latin America has been disregarded or ignored.<sup>7</sup> Due particularly to the reports of excessive Spanish brutality known the Black Legend, Protestant northern Europeans largely discounted Spanish missionary accounts of Amerindian contact, or used them as further evidence of the cruelty (and by implication, illegitimacy) of the Spanish colonial endeavor. Moreover, the texts of sixteenth-century missionaries and chroniclers have been used in the development of the comparative study of religion with little regard for the social, political and economic context that influenced their creation.<sup>8</sup>

Two of the best known sixteenth-century missionaries, Bernardino de Sahagún and Jose de Acosta, created works central to our understanding of colonial missionaries and indigenous religious practices at the time of the Spanish conquest in what is now Mexico. Their works have influenced generations of scholarship and each has been honored for his contribution to the anthropological understanding of Indoamerica. Each missionary wrote extensively for other missionaries; Acosta wrote also for a broader European audience. Their representations of indigenous religion and religious practices have informed the study of indigenous religion in Central and South America since those works were first published. This paper will explore Sahagún's and Acosta's texts in a more specific way. I will examine how each missionary used the idea of sacrifice to create a comparison between Christianity and the religious practices of the native peoples of the New World, particularly the Mexica. My question is part of a larger project on the use of the category of "sacrifice" as a way of determining what constitutes a religious practice or taxonomical category in the field of religious studies. Religious practices, such as offerings to particular saints, feasts on important holidays, and sacrifice, in the form of penance or the mass, shaped the way that missionaries, particularly those under consideration in this paper, identified religious life. Sahagun and Acosta were central to the early-modern origins of what would eventually become the comparative study of religion, and provide considerable insight into the way in which sacrifice functioned as a category in both early-modern Catholicism and as a theological method. The particular practices of religious offerings in the forms of candles, flowers, and celebratory feasts garnered the most attention from early-modern chroniclers. These religious behaviors were most like those practiced in Europe in honor of the liturgical year and significant saint holidays. Sacrifice, in the form of penance and the ritual of the mass, provided the model missionaries used to identify ways non-Christians were expressing religion.

Significant to the theological aspect of Sahagún's and Acosta's endeavors is the role of the Devil. Fernando Cervantes has thoughtfully and thoroughly explored the role of the Devil in the New World.<sup>9</sup> His work traces the role diabolism played in New World missionary endeavors, particularly in the relations between indigenous peoples and the inquisition. His argument for the failure of missionaries to remove ideas of the Devil from syncretic indigenous religious practices is insightful and highlights the unpredictable ways that religious ideas can be exchanged, co-opted, and hybridized. Cervantes' analysis raises an interesting question—why were any of the sacrifices and ritual practices of indigenous people allowed and in some cases encouraged, as long as they did "not contradict the law of Christ and his Holy Church"?<sup>10</sup> Sahagún and Acosta followed Gregory the Great's and Augustine's advice to missionaries during the early spread of Christianity into the non-Christian wilderness of Northern Europe.<sup>11</sup> This missionary strategy encouraged the continuation and incorporation of religious practices not directly in conflict with Christianity into Christianized communities. What I want to explore is a question of why some Amerindian sacrificial practices were permitted—at least initially—to be part of the newly converted New World populace's religious life.<sup>12</sup>

Sahagún and Acosta represent what Daniel Castro has identified as ecclesiastical imperialism.<sup>13</sup> While not direct agents of Spanish imperialism, they were missionaries working to employ a system of domination that devalued native culture and deposed indigenous religion through the promotion of imperial Roman Catholicism. Sahagún and Acosta were at the center of a collision of two cultures and, while continuing to act in the interests of the Church, each missionary recognized the destruction of indigenous culture. For this reason, Sahagún and Acosta made some effort to record and understand the Indoamerican religions they encountered, though neither their methodology nor findings are congruent with current anthropological ideas of cultural preservation and integrity. In this paper I will explore the ways that Acosta and Sahagún understood sacrifice in the realm of religion, both with respect to their own Roman Catholicism and the indigenous Indoamerican

practices that dominated the mission field. I will argue that sacrifice was both central to the missionary understanding of religion and led Sahagún and Acosta to argue for an accommodationist understanding of native Indoamerican religious practices during the sixteenth century.

In their use of a comparative method to understand indigenous religion, Sahagún and Acosta engaged in two levels of comparison. The first level involved placing indigenous practices against their knowledge of the world of the Greeks and Romans. The ancients, as both missionaries referred to the antique authors, provided two important bases. First, the Greeks and Romans were pagans. They lived before the incarnation of Christ and therefore were outside the reach of salvation through the Roman Catholic Church. However, antique authors, especially Plato and Aristotle, had been used to make significant contributions to Christian theology. Also, antique treatises by authors such as Lactanius, Strabo, and Pliny had contributed to early-modern knowledge of the world, for example about Egypt, the torrid zone (the equator), and the amazing inhabitants of foreign lands (amazons, cephalis).<sup>14</sup> While temporally these thinkers had not been able to find salvation through the Church, God had, through grace, made knowledge of himself available by implanting knowledge of God in the heart of all creatures.

Additionally, a popular theology of the time was based on the "Harrowing of Hell" recounted in the *Gospel of Nicodemus*. While this gospel was not part of the official canon, it had been a strong part of the theological history of both ransom and sacrifice theologies of salvation, most importantly via Augustine. In the *Gospel of Nicodemus*, Christ journeys to hell during the days after crucifixion and prior to resurrection to liberate the Patriarchs and others who lived lives worthy of Christian recognition. This was considered part of his work as redeemer.<sup>15</sup> Church fathers and scholastic theologians argued accordingly that by virtue of grace, human nature was in constant search of God. Those who had lived before Christ might have an imperfect knowledge of God but ultimately had some hope for salvation. Also, the theological trend to appropriate and Christianize any thought deemed useful for the expansion of knowledge of God had been in place through the writings of the earliest Church Fathers in the second and third centuries. Greeks and Romans were revered for their cultural achievements and provided a measure for redeemable pagan life.

The second level of comparison utilized by Sahagún and Acosta was a much more straightforward Christian approach: the use of biblical texts to look for evidence of God's presence in the New World. The use of examples of practices found in the Hebrew Bible in particular provided a method of demonstrating the presence of knowledge of God, however imperfect, in the hearts and minds of Amerindians. Practices and beliefs that could be connected to different events in the Old Testament also provided evidence for the presence of Satan's mimesis. Through the model provided by the Old Testament, Satan was able to both compete with and pervert God's creation by establishing himself as "God" to the Indoamericans. Combined, these two comparative strategies (the Ancients and the Hebrew Bible) provided a cross-temporal method for an early-modern understanding of the work of God in a world without knowledge of Christ.

The category of sacrifice is a contested and challenging arena for scholars of religion.<sup>16</sup> Sahagún and Acosta compared it to antique and biblical accounts, and gave serious attention to human sacrifice in particular. While late medieval culture was theologically concerned with blood and the theological problem of sacrifice in the Eucharist (the transubstantiation of the bread and wine into the blood and body of Christ), fifteenth and sixteenth-century early-modern Europe had no culture of sacrifice.<sup>17</sup> It had been relegated to certain arenas of religious practice and authority, such as penance, pilgrimage, and the Eucharist.<sup>18</sup> What Sahagún and Acosta encountered in the New World was a culture of sacrifice—societal and individual sacrifice, large and small scale—for sacrificial practices were an integral part of Indoamerican practices across the Americas.<sup>19</sup> Sahagún and Acosta saw structural similarities in indigenous sacrifice, because however contested theologies of the Eucharist may have been, within the Catholic understanding of penance and works, sacrifice was necessary to please God. Biblical support for the practice of sacrifice was found in Levitical practices and in the foreshadowing of Abraham's sacrifice of Issac to the death and resurrection of Christ. However, in the New World, particularly in the Aztec world, Sahagún and Acosta encountered the power of actual blood sacrifice. Literally, for the Aztecs, the world was held together by the blood of

sacrifice.<sup>20</sup> Sahagún and Acosta saw mimicry of the sacraments, especially the Eucharist, in the Aztec practice of sacrifice.<sup>21</sup> They recognized sacrifice as essential to religion but also saw the practice in the New World as a grotesque distortion of a theology that had flourished in Europe for centuries.

David Carrasco has persuasively argued that sacrifice and blood were essential to the social and spiritual life of the Aztec world. For the Aztecs, human sacrifice and practices of auto-sacrifice were ritual strategies to feed the gods, and those blood sacrifices were also central to religious performances used by the Aztecs to secure the continuation of the cosmos and maintain their place within that cosmology. He claims that sacrifice was central to the construction of social, civic, and religious order and authority. This was seen particularly in Aztec cities; "performance spaces" that established relationships between the center (the city) and the periphery (those outside the city whose lives both support and are supported by the city). While practices of sacrifice through tribute had economic implications, as wealth moved from periphery to center, that was not its principal motivation.<sup>22</sup> Rather, as Carrasco shows, through the performance of sacrifices in the city, sacrifice had a sacred function in the maintenance of the Aztec world order.<sup>23</sup>

For sixteenth-century missionaries, conquistadors, and theologians, the question of how to relate New Spain and its sacrificial practices to the "known world" was a challenge. There were two dominant hypotheses, one humanistic and branching from an Augustinian understanding of the world as a place where God left traces of himself in nature and could therefore be known, at least nascently, by all living things. This was a common solution to the problem of how to understand the relationship between the pre- and post-Christ worlds and to reconcile the Christian use of classical texts with their pagan origin. It had been successfully employed by Church fathers and theologians who wanted to use pagan sources such as Plato and Aristotle as the basis of Christian theology. The second hypothesis was expressed clearly in the sixteenth century debate between the leading Spanish jurists Bartolomé Las Casas and Juan Gines Sepulveda about the nature of indigenous New World inhabitants. In that debate, Sepulveda argued that the natives were not rational, meaning that those natives were equivalent to beasts of burden and did not possess a soul—for all intents and purposes, were not human.<sup>24</sup> Las Casas maintained the equality of Amerindians with Europeans based on their accomplishments in the creation of culture (literature, poetry, architecture, art) and in the eyes of God.<sup>25</sup> He therefore advocated the conversion of Amerindians and their incorporation into the Spanish Empire as Christians rather than as slaves.

These two strands of thought about New World inhabitants—either deceived by the Devil and hidden from Christianity or destined to be natural slaves rather than Christian subjects—dominated the sixteenth-century debate about the task of missionizing, the methods employed by missionaries and encomenderos, and the possibility of success of conversion.<sup>26</sup> While Las Casas "won" the debate with Sepulveda, missionary practices in New Spain itself were little changed by the winds of Old World theological debates. Sahagún and Acosta represent an attempt to employ Las Casas' juridical arguments in the context of their missionary work, but they were fighting against the current of disease, slavery, and the European lust for profit.

Bernardino de Sahagún compared the inhabitants of New Spain to the ancients in broad strokes, contrasted with Acosta's more methodical approach. Many early missionaries in the New World thought that Amerindians had much in common with the people of the ancient world. Arguing that New Spain had been inhabited by Amerindians since at least 500 years before Christ, Sahagún suggested that Mexican cities like Tenochtitlan were similar to ancient cities like Troy, Rome, and Venice. He found the original inhabitants of New World to have been perfect philosophers, astrologers and skilled craftspersons, just like their ancient counterparts. In other words, he believed that they were every bit as human and civilized.

Sahagún wrote that Amerindians must be treated as "our brothers, stemming from the stock of Adam"—the root that all humans shared, pagan and Christian alike.<sup>27</sup> He continued: "we are obliged to love them even as we love ourselves."<sup>28</sup> He demonstrated the argument for Christian love by collecting materials that confirmed natives were capable of learning "liberal arts and sacred theology." He advocated that missionaries speak indigenous languages so that they could correct and manage

religious beliefs and practices: "Preachers well versed in the language and the ancient customs which they had, as well as in the Holy Writ, should do this."<sup>29</sup> Sahagún understood the purpose and success of the missionary effort in New Spain as a kind of divine compensation for the Church's losses in England, Germany, France, Asia, and the Holy Land.<sup>30</sup> He saw his work on Mexican language as contributing to Christian knowledge of the world just as "Virgil, Cicero and other authors [who] wrote in the Latin language" had left an image of their pagan, pre-Christian world for the betterment of the Christian world.<sup>31</sup>

Sahagún assumed what Las Casas had argued: that indigenous inhabitants of the New World were rational, ensouled persons who needed to be brought to knowledge of Christianity and converted into Christians and Spaniards. Sahagún believed that the Devil had helped prepare the way for missionary efforts. Sahagún paraphrased Augustine on the issue of knowledge of Mexican practices and religion:

the empty fictions and falsehoods which the gentiles held regarding their false Gods being known could easily make them understand that those were not Gods nor could [erroneous beliefs and practices] provide anything that would be beneficial to a rational being.<sup>32</sup>

For Sahagún the emphasis of his work in the *Florentine Codex* was not to persuade Europeans that Amerindians were rational; he started from that assumption. Rather, Sahagún wanted to persuade Amerindians (via Catholic missionaries and indigenous converts) that their practices did not befit rational beings. Sahagún emphasized the rationality of Amerindians and this is where his emphasis on the speaking of indigenous languages was so significant. Important here is that while he argued that the Amerindians practiced a "fictitious theology," it was a theology nonetheless, an important recognition of the reality of the true God. He did not recognize the validity of indigenous religion as such—believing that it was a creation of the Devil—but saw it as mimicking the true religion: Christianity. He wanted to equip missionaries to recognize and sift out diabolical elements from Christian expression.

As Sahagún pointed out, Amerindians were not the first to hold fictitious beliefs:

How foolish our forefathers, the Gentiles, both Greek and Latin, had been in the understanding of created things is very clear from their own writings. [...] And, what is worse, they attributed divinity [to those created things], and they worshiped them, made offerings, *made sacrifices to them* and revered them as Gods.<sup>33</sup> (emphasis mine)

The emphasis here on offerings and sacrifice is central to the way that Sahagún understood the realm of the "religious." Their use was an integral part of religious life, for gentiles (the ancients), the Jews and the Indoamericans. The root of these practices and "foolish beliefs" was the same: original sin and "the cunning ... longstanding hatred of our adversary, Satan."<sup>34</sup> Offerings and sacrifices were practices that should be wrenched away from the Devil and directed toward God.

Sahagún has been called the father of anthropology and ethnography for his prolific writing and preservation of Indoamerican culture.<sup>35</sup> There is no questioning the contribution his work has made to our understanding and ability to reconstruct the Aztec worldview. His work has been mined for and continues to produce important insights into indigenous cultures in what is now Mexico. What also emerges from the *Florentine Codex* are clear statements of Sahagún's conversion techniques and methods, for it is here that Sahagún articulated the power of the Church to appropriate Amerindian practices. He focused on the feasts, offerings and sacrifices—mainstays in the practice of early-modern Christianity:

[In] the villages that enjoy [the feasts, people] ... come as usual because they already had Tonantzin and Tocitzin and Telpotchli, who [on] are the surface are like, or whom they made like, Saint Ann, Saint Mary, and Saint John [...] And it is clear that, in the minds of the common people who come there, it is nothing other than the ancient custom. I now know that it comes from ancient custom. And *it is not my judgment that they should*

*be denied either the coming or the offering, but it is my judgment that they be undeceived of the error from which they suffer, by giving them to understand, on those days they come there, the ancient falsehood.*<sup>36</sup> (emphasis mine)

Sahagún's statement is a good example of his method of comparison as well as the Catholic missionary enterprise's colonial appropriation of indigenous religious life.<sup>37</sup> What this passage also demonstrates is Sahagún's understanding of the coercive power of the Roman Catholic Church. He supplied a model for how the Church authorities could (attempt to) manage, control, and ultimately transform native religious culture and practices into Christian ones. Jamie Lara, in his provocative work on ritual and the liturgical lives of mestizo Christians in sixteenth and seventeenth-century Mexico, argues that indigenous Mexican culture was adaptable and incorporative, creating a hybrid religion that "recycled" parts of nautahl religion.<sup>38</sup>

I suggest that much less of pre-Hispanic religion was destroyed, and much more was recycled, because it was relatively easily Christianized by a change in root metaphors. The world-transforming event had much to do with the wealth of complementary symbols gleaned from the Bible and from teoyoism [indigenous Mexican religion], and with the dynamic qualities of ritual and theatrics in both cultures.<sup>39</sup>

I agree with Lara's analysis of the flexibility and hybridity of mestizo religion, and I want to emphasize that part of that creative endeavor was the result of missionary coercion in their attempts to control the social and religious meanings of festivals and sacrifices. By "giving them to understand" the "ancient falsehood," but not denying or prohibiting them, Sahagún was Christianizing extant religious practices even as native peoples were indigenizing Christianity.

Based on careful observation and comparison of elements of Amerindian religion with Roman Catholicism, Sahagún kept the hard-won indigenous converts in the embrace of the Church and incorporated practices from the pre-contact world within post-contact Christianity. This followed the same assumptions that allowed the Church to incorporate the ancients and use their pre-Christian texts in a Christian world. For Sahagún this was possible only if those practices were not in direct conflict with Christian doctrine and this was in some ways easy to identify because of the nature of those practices—feasts, offerings and sacrifices. Just as the native understanding of human sacrifice and related ceremonies had to be pointed toward the Eucharist and the transubstantiated host (actual blood and body without actual human sacrifice, except for that one time), through careful comparative examination of indigenous practices Sahagún and his missionary brothers moved the Aztec mindset about the practice—the significance of blood for the expression of religious life—without completely eliminating the surrounding practices of feasts and personal offerings. This is the key to the kind of ecclesiastical imperialist practice advocated by Sahagún. As long as the sacrificial offering was directed toward God rather than toward false Gods, the practice was approved, encouraged and Christianized, because it was believed that it was inherently and essentially religious.<sup>40</sup>

Human sacrifice was the most challenging aspect of the missionary enterprise in the New World. As has been argued by David Carrasco, Jose Klor de Alva, Jamie Lara, and others, it was an essential part of the Aztec worldview.<sup>41</sup> Sahagún gave serious consideration to both its appropriate understanding in Aztec culture and the role of the Church in correcting it. He devoted himself to explaining how the Devil had created what he called a "diabolical" practice, rather than condemning its human agents:

The blame for such cruel blindness perpetrated on these unfortunate [sacrificed] children should not be imputed so much to the parents, who practiced it in shedding many tears and great sorrow in their hearts, as to the most cruel hate of our ancient enemy, Satan, who with most perverse cunning, moved them to such an infernal deed.<sup>42</sup>

Sahagún ended this passage not with a prayer for forgiveness for the parents but with a prayer that God do justice to Satan by taking from him the power to harm. He believed that Satan was to blame for New World practices, especially those that he understood to have had strong connection to and yet significantly distorted the practices of the Roman Catholic Church. In his view they were religious

at their core, holding out a kernel that need only be nurtured and developed to help Christianity flourish in the New World.

Jose de Acosta clarified the close connection between indigenous and Roman Catholic religious practices in his work *Historia Natural Y Moral De Las Indias*.<sup>43</sup> He compared accounts of Mexican and Peruvian culture with Greek, Roman and biblical accounts, looking for the ways that earlier traditions shed light on Amerindians. Like Sahagun, he believed that Amerindians were rational, ensouled creatures worthy of missionary effort. Acosta began with a comparison to the ancients, and asserted "if the republics of the Mexicans and Incas had been described in the times of the Romans and Greeks, their laws and government would be respected."<sup>44</sup> Acosta argued explicitly that Amerindians should maintain the aspects of their culture that did not directly conflict with Christianity. This perspective incorporated Amerindians into European culture, through the inherited tradition of Roman conquest that Spanish colonialism employed. Acosta advocated that indigenous practices should be left in place, especially laws and customs, but claimed Spanish authority in bringing indigenous culture into alignment with Europe as far as possible.

Acosta, like Sahagún, believed that it was God's providence that brought Christian Spain to the pagan New World to reclaim Amerindians from the Devil's insidious hold. Acosta attributed the supposed wrongs of Aztec culture to the work of the Devil, who out of jealousy and rage, had been driven to compete with God and to profane creation.<sup>45</sup> Additionally, Acosta understood the Devil in the New World to be working in the same manner as he had with the ancients: "[T]he Devil's method of deceiving the Indians is the same as that with which he deceived the Greeks and Romans and other ancient unbelievers," through imitation of the sacraments and a profaning of holy ideas and practices.<sup>46</sup> Acosta believed that the Devil had kept the Amerindians for himself until the providential arrival of Christian Spain to lead the indigenous peoples back into Christendom.

Acosta's perspective was scholastic, and as a Jesuit he brought the full measure of his approach and understanding of universal salvation (it is possible for all humans to be saved and nature and grace work together toward that end) to bear on the question of the New World. Following medieval theologian Thomas Aquinas' understanding of the Devil as a created being, Acosta assumed that as with all of God's creatures he was first and foremost a tool of the divine, regardless of his own free will.<sup>47</sup> In other words, like all of creation the Devil's nature led him toward God and salvation even as he defied God. As a result, God could turn the work of the Devil to the benefit of God and creation:

And their very service and subjection to the Devil and his tyrannies, and his heavy yoke, created an excellent opportunity for Divine Wisdom, which takes advantage of bad things to turn them into good, and makes its own good out of other's evil, with which it had nothing to do.<sup>48</sup>

It was precisely because the Devil led Amerindians to mimic the sacraments that conversion was easy. From Acosta's point of view the practice of sacrifice was hugely significant in this: "The chief way in which the enemy of God and men has always demonstrated his cunning has been in the *multitude and variety of offerings and sacrifices* that he has taught the heathen for his worship"<sup>49</sup> (emphasis mine). Acosta maintained that the mimetic practices that the Devil introduced to Amerindian culture, however horrific, facilitated the work of conversion. "[T]he Lord is glorified in everything and that trickster the Devil is tricked in his turn," he wrote.<sup>50</sup> Amerindians were even prepared for the mystery of the Eucharist through Satan's imitation of it in human sacrifice, and so embraced it with "reverence, awe and tears" and piety.<sup>51</sup> Their method of practicing the sacrament of communion brought Indoamerican religion close to Christianity, though the Devil had implanted it in the New World. Acosta saw in it a moment of grace in action—God's use of a diabolical act to facilitate conversion. For Acosta, this justified the conquest as a means for the expansion of Christendom.

Acosta identified three forms of sacrifice that the Devil "taught the heathen for worship."<sup>52</sup> These were the sacrifices of insentient things, animals, and men: "But what is most painful about the unhappy lot of these wretched people is that vassalage that they paid to the Devil, sacrificing men to him, who are made in the image of God and are created to enjoy God."<sup>53</sup> Acosta perceived Aztec



human sacrifice as a mimicry of the sacrifice of Christ, and so paved the way for the New World to understand Christianity. Even that most problematic practice could be used by God and the Church for the good of the Amerindians and their gradual incorporation into Christianity and European culture. Interestingly, Acosta did not resort to the theological language of human depravity, original sin, irrationality, or inhumanity when he discussed sacrificial practices. He finished his description of the variety of human and blood sacrifices performed by Amerindians with the conclusion that "an infinite amount of human blood was shed in every way in honor of Satan."<sup>54</sup> Acosta saw human sacrifice as Satan's work, and believed that it could be reformed through grace and nature into salvation for Amerindian people. In this way, he followed Sahagún in believing it was Satan who should bear the blame for human sacrifice, not Amerindians. Acosta saw in the religious life of Amerindians ways the Devil had mimicked the sacraments, Eucharist, confession, penance, baptism, last rites—Acosta saw all present, albeit in a distorted form, in Amerindian religion. Importantly, all these rites, so carefully mimicked by the Devil, facilitated the indoctrination of Amerindians into the rituals, festivals, and sacrificial practices valued by the Roman Catholic Church in the early-modern period.

Another important element in the colonial and imperial efforts of the Roman Catholic Church to reconcile Amerindians with biblical history was to find parallels with the history of the Israelites. Acosta saw many connections between the Aztecs in particular and the history of God's people. When he described the Mexicans' departure from their home, under the leadership of the god Huitzilopotchli, who was a tool of Satan ("the Devil resided in that idol") and founded Tenochtitlan, they followed an important model.<sup>55</sup> As Acosta put it: there was "a resemblance in all this, and in many other things as well, between what is told in the history of the Mexicans and that which Divine Scripture tells of the Israelites."<sup>56</sup> The Mexica, led by Satan (via Huitzilipotchli) journeyed, carrying their God with them, setting up a tabernacle and an ark, and following the laws their God gave them regarding offerings and sacrifices while seeking the promised land. This biblical coincidence was not coincidental at all for Acosta, it was more evidence of the providential moment that had brought Spain to the New World in order to reclaim Amerindians for Christianity, just as the Hebrews, Greeks and Romans had been claimed for Christian history. What is also clear in this example is one of the ways that religion, in the form of offerings and sacrifices—as well as the history of the Amerindians—was colonized and appropriated by the Church. In the minds of missionaries such as Sahagún and Acosta, Amerindians had just been waiting for the Europeans to come and free them from diabolical slavery and to bring them (back?) into Christendom. Through appropriating history and religious practices, Sahagún and Acosta brought Indoamerica into its imperial and Christian embrace.

The sacrifice of children offered another possibility for connecting the Mexica to the biblical narrative. Acosta compared Amerindian child sacrifice with the sacrifice of Isaac but more specifically with the "barbarous nation of the Chanaanites [sic] and Jebusites" from the Book of Wisdom.<sup>57</sup> Jorge Burgaleta has argued that Acosta's strategy in employing this comparison was to challenge Europeans to realize that if both the great empires of antiquity and the Hebrews engaged in child sacrifice and God did not reject them, Europeans were in no position to reject the Amerindians.<sup>58</sup>

Acosta presents *Historia Natural y Moral* as an offering of "information about things both natural and moral in the Indies, to the end that spiritual and Christian values may be planted and grow."<sup>59</sup> In Acosta's mind the Devil had fertilized the soil in such a way that Christianity could not help but take root. He quoted a native who allegedly told him that the reason that Amerindians "accepted the Law of Christ" was that they were: "so weary and unhappy with the things the idol commanded us to do that we had tried to leave them and accept a different law ... we realized that [Christianity] was the true law, and so we received it willingly."<sup>60</sup> All the blood and sacrificial practices extant in the New World made the possibility of conversion all the easier; Acosta argued that Amerindians were ready to replace bloody sacrifices with the sacrifice of the mass in transubstantiation and penance because the weight of their rituals was so onerous and overburdened their conscience. As long as Spaniards governed with justice and respected those laws and practices that did not undermine Christianity, Acosta believed that the New World would fall into Christendom with little difficulty because all the proper religious practices were already in place.<sup>61</sup>

Sahagún and Acosta's methods of accommodating and coercing Amerindians into accord with European and specifically Christian practices used religion to bring the conquest territories into the empire. The role of sacrifice was central to the enterprise of incorporating Amerindians into Christendom because early-modern Christians and missionaries especially understood sacrifice as the primary expression of the presence of religion. Through the ministrations of Sahagún, Acosta, and their missionary brethren directing Amerindian practices to the correct divinity, indigenous religious practices could be brought to profitable use by the Church (and ultimately indigenous labor brought to profitable use by Europeans—but that is another paper). Theologically, each missionary looked for ways that indigenous Amerindian religion connected to, resembled, and differed from Christianity. Both struggled with the expressions of religion that were part of indigenous Amerindian culture, specifically human and blood sacrifice. It was in this category of sacrifice that Sahagún and Acosta found the crux of religion and the basis for their approach to the situation of cultural conflict that was part and parcel of their missionary life. Both were agents of the destruction and partial preservation of indigenous cultures as they struggled to assimilate, accommodate and coerce indigenous Amerindian religion into the Roman Catholic Church.

## Notes:

1. For correspondence: [ammonll@appstate.edu](mailto:ammonll@appstate.edu). I am deeply indebted to the thoughtful comments from my peer reviewers and editors at JCCH.
2. Walter D. Mignolo, "The Geopolitics of Knowledge and Colonial Difference," in *Coloniality at Large: Latin America and the postcolonial debate*, eds. Enrique Dussel Mabel Morana, and Carlos A. Jauregui (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2008), 229. In order for religious studies to be "de-colonized" the discipline must first recognize the ways it has been used to contribute to colonialism and the exercise of power in the colonial world. The roots of religious studies and its connection to colonialism are found, not in the nineteenth century's schemas of "cultural evolution," but in the nascent steps of the idea of comparison, explored and tested in New Spain by Catholic missionaries.
3. Eric J. Sharpe, *Comparative Religion: A history* (New York: Scribner's, 1975).
4. Mignolo, "Geopolitics of Knowledge," 229. Osvaldo F. Pardo, *The Origins of Mexican Catholicism: Nahua rituals and Christian sacraments in sixteenth-century Mexico, history, languages, and cultures of the Spanish and Portuguese worlds* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004).
5. Laura Ammon, *Work Useful to Religion and the Humanities: A history of the development of the comparative method in religion from Bartolomé Las Casas to Edward Burnett Tylor* (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, forthcoming 2011).
6. See especially Santiago Castro-Gomez, "(Post)Coloniality for Dummies: Latin American perspectives on modernity, coloniality, and the geopolitics of knowledge," in *Coloniality at Large: Latin America and the postcolonial debate*, eds. Mabel Dussel Enrique D. Jáuregui Carlos A. Moraña (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2008), 259-284.
7. Mignolo, "Geopolitics of Knowledge." "[...] the Iberian foundational period of capitalistic expansion and coloniality is erased or relegated to the Middle Ages as the Black Legend, to which the Enlightenment construction of the 'South' of Europe testifies." (229)
8. Reconsideration of these issues can be found discussed in Margaret Rich Greer, Walter Mignolo, and Maureen Quilligan, *Rereading the Black Legend: The discourses of religious and racial difference in the Renaissance Empires* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).
9. Fernando Cervantes, *The Devil in the New World: The impact of diabolism in New Spain* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994).
10. Jose de Acosta, *Historia Natural Y Moral De Las Indias*, eds. Jane E. Mangan, Walter Mignolo, and Frances M Lopez-Morillas, trans. Frances M Lopez-Morillas (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 330-331.
11. Both Gregory the Great and Augustine of Hippo advised missionaries to sanctify pagan holy places for Christian worship, believing that would aid in the conversion process.

12. By the end of the sixteenth century, missionary approaches to indigenous practices changed quite radically from what Sahagún and Acosta had outlined in their work. See Cervantes, *The Devil in the New World*. See also Pardo, *The Origins of Mexican Catholicism*.

13. Daniel Castro, *Another Face of Empire: Bartolome De Las Casas, Indigenous rights, and ecclesiastical imperialism* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2007).

14. Jorge Beer Jean-Marc de Magasich-Airola and Monica Sandor, *America Magica: When Renaissance Europe thought it had conquered paradise* (Anthem Press, 2006). European explorers hoped to find magnificent tribes of women warriors, men with faces in their torsos, cities of gold and splendor, and even possibly the lost tribe of Israel in the New World.

15. See Jeffrey Burton Russell, *Lucifer, the Devil in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1984). "Origen, Cyril of Alexandria, Augustine and Gregory Nazianzenus argued that when Christ descended among the dead he preached to the pagans and converted those who lead good lives according conscience: Gregory the Great's twenty-second homily on the Gospels can be read as accepting this argument, which allowed Plato to be saved as well as Abraham. The doctrine of descent among the dead, widely taught in the early Church, was first formally introduced into creed in 359 (the Creed of Sirmium). It grew in popularity in Spain in the 6th century and in Gaul in the 7th, and the creeds from these areas influenced the Roman baptismal creed, which produced the Apostles creed about the 8th century." (107)

16. David Carrasco, *City of Sacrifice: The Aztec Empire and the role of violence in civilization* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999). "When we try to face up to the accounts of human sacrifice, our assumptions about human nature, social order, and the human imagination are shaken, and the issues of what religion is, does, and means are opened." (2)

17. Caroline Walker Bynum, *Wonderful Blood: Theology and practice in late medieval northern Germany and Beyond* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007).

18. See Miri Rubin, *Corpus Christi: The Eucharist in late medieval culture* (New York, 1991). Rubin and Bynum offer insightful analyses of the role of the Eucharist in late medieval Europe. Many of the controversies and theological trends Rubin and Bynum trace continue to inform the worldview of sixteenth-century thinkers and remained controversial even after the Tridentine reforms.

19. Carrasco, *City of Sacrifice*.

20. Ibid.

21. This mimicry of the sacraments was part and parcel of an understanding of the Devil as a creature desiring to imitate God in all ways. This jealous Lucifer was quite different from literary appearances of the Devil. For more detail about the role of the Devil in early-modern literature, see Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra, *Puritan Conquistadors: Iberianizing the Atlantic, 1550-1700* (Stanford University Press, 2006).

22. Patrick James Carroll, *Blacks in Colonial Veracruz: Race, ethnicity, and regional development*, 2nd ed. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001).

23. Carrasco, *City of Sacrifice*.

24. Lewis Hanke, *Aristotle and the American Indians: A study in race prejudice in the modern world* (Chicago: H. Regnery, 1959). See also Daniel Castro, *Another Face of Empire*.

25. See Bartolome Las Casas, *The Devatation of the Indies: A brief account*, trans. Herma Briffault (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992); Edmundo O'Gorman, ed., *Apologetica Historia Sumaria* (Mexico: Universidad Nacional Autonoma de Mexico, 1967).

26. On the controversy over mass baptisms, both in the New World and the Old, Fernando Cervantes offers an insight on the optimism inherent in such a practice: "The emphasis was on [mass] conversion, and the policy of mass baptisms without any previous preaching or instruction belied a triumphalist optimism and a somewhat naïve confidence in the power of the sacraments against heresy and error." See Cervantes, *The Devil in the New World*, 12.

27. Bernardino de Sahagun, *Florentine Codex*, trans. Arthur J. O. Anderson, 2nd ed., 15 vols. (Santa Fe, N.M.: School of American Research, 1982).

28. Ibid.
29. Ibid.
30. Ibid.
31. Ibid.
32. Augustine, *City of God* cited in Jaime Lara, *Christian Texts for Aztecs: Art and liturgy in Colonial Mexico* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2008), 231.
33. Sahagun, *Florentine Codex*.
34. Ibid.
35. See Miguel Leon Portilla, *Bernardino De Sahagun, First Anthropologist*, trans. Mauricio J. Mixco (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2002). Also, Walden Browne, *Sahagun and the Transition to Modernity* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2000).
36. Sahagun, *Florentine Codex*.
37. I develop this thesis further in my forthcoming work, *Work Useful to the Humanities*.
38. Lara, *Christian Texts for Aztecs*.
39. Ibid., 262.
40. Those Christian practices also were influenced by indigenous practices, too, as the vibrant culture of Meztizo religion continues to demonstrate. This, however, was not Sahagún's concern. See Serge Gruzinski, *The Conquest of Mexico: The incorporation of Indian societies into the Western World, 16th-18th centuries*, trans. Eileen Corrigan (Cambridge, UK: Blackwell Publishers, 1993).
41. Carrasco, *City of Sacrifice*; Klor de Alva, *The Work of Bernardino De Sahagun: Pioneer ethnographer of sixteenth-century Aztec Mexico*, eds. Jose Jorge Klor de Alva, H. B. Nicholson, and Eloise Quinones Keber (Austin, Tex.: Institute for Mesoamerican Studies, University at Albany, State University of New York; Distributed by University of Texas Press, 1988); Jaime Lara, *City, Temple, Stage: Eschatological architecture and liturgical theatrics in New Spain* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2004).
42. Sahagun, *Florentine Codex*.
43. Acosta, *Historia Natural Y Moral De Las Indias*.
44. Ibid.
45. Acosta wrote for his European audience that one of the benefits of understanding the Amerindian culture is to "[...] serve to make us recognize the Devil's pride and envy and the deceits and tricks he has practiced on those whom he has enslaved; for on the one hand he wants to imitate God and compete with him and his Holy Law and on the other he mixes in an infinite number of vanities and filth, and even cruelties, since it is his role to wreak havoc on everything good and corrupt it." Ibid., 328.
46. Ibid., 329-330.
47. For more detail on Aquinas' understanding of the role of the Devil in creation see Frederick Charles Copleston, *Aquinas* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1975). Also, Russell, *Lucifer, the Devil in the Middle Ages*.
48. Acosta, *Historia Natural Y Moral De Las Indias*, 447.
49. Ibid., 288.
50. Ibid., 306.

51. Ibid., 304.

52. Ibid., 228.

53. Ibid., 291.

54. Ibid., 297.

55. Ibid., 387.

56. Ibid.

57. Ibid. The Book of Wisdom is also known as The Wisdom of Solomon in the Old Testament.

58. Claudio M Burgaleta, *Jose De Acosta, S.J., 1540-1600: His life and thought* (Chicago, Ill.: Jesuit Way, 1999).

59. Acosta, *Historia Natural Y Moral De Las Indias*, 251.

60. Ibid., 298-299.

61. Ibid. "The other aim that can be achieved with knowledge of the laws and customs and polity of the Indians is to help them and rule them by those very laws, for in whatever does not contradict the law of Christ and his Holy Church, they ought to be governed according to their statutes, which are as it were their municipal laws. Through ignorance of these, errors of no little importance have been committed, for those who judge and rule them have not known how to judge and rule their subjects. This, in addition to being an offense and an unreasonable thing done to them, causes great harm, for it makes us Spaniards abhorred as men who are and always have been their enemies in both good and evil." (330-31)