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I

The Limits of Idolatry

Downtown is packed. There are thousands of chairs aligned all over the city, and the population has doubled again this year. As the *nazarenos* process, the spectators eat their sandwiches and enjoy the parade. Suddenly, silence takes over the street as the first image shows up far, far away. The marching bands stop playing, and the sandwiches find their way back into the plastic bags as we all make an effort to see over everybody's heads. A white shadow approaches and, as it comes closer, the spectators become practitioners, a category that includes everybody, if only this week. The sepulchral silence is suddenly broken as a loud applause fills the air.

“Está andando, está andando!”¹—somebody screams as he follows the wave in the tunic of the image as it is rocked right in front of us. And *el Cautivo* passes by, in his white robe, followed by an estimated 5,000 people who rely on this image to heal a relative, get out of bankruptcy, or even pass final exams, since nothing is too difficult for this image of Christ which is said to be the most miraculous one in the Holy week in Málaga.² Not the ones in front or behind, not the ones still to come in the following days (it is only Monday of Holy Week), but this very one, this image

1 “He is walking, he is walking.”

2 The image of the Cautivo is one of the most famous in the Holy Week in Málaga, Spain. It presents the image of Christ standing and with his hand tied up as he has been *captured*. He is wearing a crisp white robe that, moved by the rocking of the throne and the breeze from the Mediterranean Sea, makes him look like he is actually walking himself. He is surrounded by 800 *nazarenos* and carried by 240 men who, joined by the thousands of spontaneous petitioners and the throne of María Santísima de la Trinidad, make for an eight-hour walk around the main streets of the city.

that seems to walk over the crowd. And, what to say about the images of the Virgin, processed all over the city followed by people screaming": "¡Guapa!"?

These scenes are repeated year after year in southern Spain where, for a week, the general public establishes a relationship with these figures that only a small percentage maintains during the rest of the year. The images become real. They are cared for, dressed, and adorned with special devotion. They walk the streets; they become the object of our prayers and songs, of our devotion, our affection and the source of our rivalries, since the member of the other *cofradías* will always say that their images are the best looking this year. And, in the view of this spectacle that forms part of some of my dearest memories, I wonder: am I an idolater? Is this paganism happening in the core of the very Catholic Spain? What would Erasmus, Luther, or Calvin say if they saw this? How would Spaniards have reacted if, instead of the Virgen del Rocío it had been Pachamama on that throne; that is, if the Incas were celebrating like this? Would they have been punished for idolatry? And if so, why are we not?

The goal of this chapter is to offer a corpus of the most necessary definitions when dealing with idolatry in the context of the cultural encounter between the Spaniards and the indigenous peoples of the Americas in the sixteenth–seventeenth centuries, and I aim to answer a number of simple but underexplored questions: What is heresy? What is its use in the period around the “discovery” of America?³ How is this concept transformed because of the “discovery”? What is the relationship between heresy and idolatry? What is the significance of the concept of “idolatry” in Europe in the period around the “discovery”? How was it used and to whom did it refer? To anticipate my conclusion, I argue that idolatry does not have a single meaning and, though I make an effort to offer my own definition in relation to the context of colonial Mexico in the moment of the first encounter with the Spanish invaders, I really want to emphasize the polyvalent nature of the concept, a feature that makes it possible to be used and redefined constantly, in very different instances and contexts. It is a malleable concept and so are its applications, making it a very interesting point of reference that crosses the main debates of the period. Therefore, in my opinion, recovering this concept not only speaks about some crucial behavior that was taking place in a particular space and time, but it is also embedded in the process of colonization itself. It refers both to the nature of the “Indians” and to that of their colonizers, to the Catholic understanding of the nature of God himself and his worst enemy, and reaches very deeply into the fundamental mechanisms of hegemony and coloniality.⁴

3 I prefer to use discovery in quotes since those territories had already been populated for years. The event of 1492 only incorporates them to the Western world, but it is not a discovery in the pure sense of the word.

4 From now on and throughout the whole book, when I mention God free of qualifiers, it will have to be understood that I am using this term from the Catholic, Christian perspective.

TRUE VERSUS FALSE RELIGION

Christianity has tried to define what is true versus false religion, what is accepted or not and, therefore, who belongs and who doesn't, setting the boundaries for what is considered the norm in a particular context, while encoding beliefs and behavior in everyday life. Following this tradition, Pedro Ciruelo (1470–1548)—professor of theology, author of *A Treatise Reproving all Superstitions and Forms of Witchcraft* (1538), and teacher to King Phillip II of Spain—when discussing the meaning of false doctrine wrote that “what superstitions teach is false and deceitful and it is not the teaching of God, who abhors superstitions: rather, it is the devil, the father of lies (as Christ said), who takes delight in vain superstitions” (1977: 90–91). But this idea was completed by including a component of inclusiveness/exclusiveness that makes the doctrine the perfect instrument to appeal to the *right* people: “That witchcraft and superstition deserve heavy punishment both from the prelates and by civil judges, as well as expulsion from the lands of Christian peoples as very evil and poisonous things which are known to be extremely prejudicial to the honor of God and very dangerous and hazardous for Christian souls, will be seen as a certainty. In the end, they draw down the anger of God upon the nations, cities and villages where they are tolerated” (77).

This way the root of his concept of true religion is presented at the same time that he demonizes any ritual not sanctioned by the Catholic Church, establishing who, in his point of view, is in or out, who belongs to it and who does not. But as Christianity expanded and it came in contact with other peoples and other forms of worshipping, it became impossible to keep realities so neatly divided into what was true or false doctrine, and acceptable levels of syncretism seemed a much more difficult goal to attain.⁵ Christian religion and its practice thus resulted in an ever-changing reality, playing differently in diverse circumstances and constantly defining and rearticulating the reality that it was trying to label. This process of encountering the *other* normally results in the coexistence of a multilayered religiosity that combines orthodox Christian beliefs together with pre-Christian rituals; that is, with other behaviors and beliefs that the Christian dogma would end up labeling as “superstition,” “heresy,” “idolatry,” and so on. This dichotomy—which can be seen as an expected differentiation between an “official religion,” defended by the Christian authorities, and a “popular religion” that collects the excess—the native rituals not contemplated by the Christian norm, has not always coexisted in peace but rather has resulted in animosity and persecution.⁶

5 I understand “syncretism” as the process by which different practices are combined into one religion. It can take the form of fusion or, in more extreme cases, of assimilation when elements of one religion are absorbed by another one that becomes dominant. In those cases, it might not be a process of fusion, since one religion may almost eliminate the other; therefore syncretism can develop in different degrees.

6 For an extended study on the meaning of “popular religion,” see Carlos Eire’s (2005) article: “The concept of popular religion” in *Popular Religion in Mexico*.

Heresy and idolatry are two concepts that, throughout history, have determined the life and, more accurately, the death of many individuals in Europe and its colonies. Understood differently in different parts of the world at different times, these two concepts were closely interwoven in the discourses about imperialism and construction of hegemony that were developing in the times around the “discovery” of America, a period when the position relative to these terms could close the distance between life and death.

But what exactly is heresy, according to Catholic dogma? What are the characteristics that make it unique? What is the relationship between heresy, apostasy and idolatry? What was its use in the period around the “discovery” of America? And how was this concept transformed because of the “discovery”? These are some of the questions that I will attempt to answer below.

Etymologically, the term heresy means *choice*; that is, it refers to the possibility of choosing to believe in things other than what a particular faith establishes and, therefore, in the eyes of that established faith, heresy is seen as erroneous in such a way that the believers should try to separate themselves from the heretic and that the church, as a whole, ought to create a distance from all who *choose* differently (Eimeric and Peña 1983: 57). It is important to take into account that we are not talking about a decided abandonment of a particular religion but rather a *deviation* in some aspects of that faith, a choice about what dogmas to believe in and what not within that religion. This is, therefore, the main difference between “apostasy” and “heresy” in that whereby the believer accepts the whole deposit of dogmas as proposed by the church, the heretic accepts only the parts of it that meet his own approval, and the apostate abandons the faith altogether. Ciruelo relates these terms when talking about the ill influence of spells, or *ensalmos*:

Any man or woman who seeks a cure through spells tacitly accepts a return to health with the aid of the devil and thus makes a pact of friendship with the enemy of God and man. This pact is a most serious sin of *idolatry*; it violates the first commandment. It is also apostasy from the virtue of Christian religion sealed at baptism. *Apostasy* calls down the wrath and anger of God upon such an individual and his household. One day he will experience punishment at God’s hand, and that punishment will be an affliction much greater than the one healed by the devil by means of the lips and hands of the enchanter. (208, my emphasis)

Nevertheless, in all cases, for these deviations to take place it is necessary that the heretic be a previous believer; that is, he needs to belong to structured religion such as the Catholic Church before he can distance himself from it; in other words, in this case baptism becomes a necessary requirement for becoming a heretic and also the main ingredient that differentiates heretics from idolaters, as understood

in the New World, since the latter had not been baptized when they worshipped a god other than the Catholic one and, therefore, could not choose to deviate from the doctrine.

This emphasis on choice has been stressed in the Catholic inquisitorial literature for a long time, and Nicholas Eimeric's *Directorium Inquisitorium* (1376) dwells heavily on it. Eimeric (1320–1399) was a Catalan Roman Catholic theologian and inquisitor general of the Inquisition of the Crown of Aragón in the latter half of the fourteenth century. In his best-known work, the *Directorium Inquisitorium*, he placed the heretic between the total sum of truths revealed in the true doctrine and the perverse and erroneous version of it chosen by the sinner (Eimeric and Peña 57). Heresy, thus, is presented as an intellectual error perhaps motivated by pride or exaggerated trust in one's own insight, the illusions of religious purity, the attractiveness of political or ecclesiastical power, or the relationship with material interests and personal status. According to Eimeric, it isolates the person or group that falls in it and weakens the community as well as the church that has to fight it. The *Malleus Maleficarum* (1487), the most famous treatise against heresy and witchcraft and the most widely circulated all over the Catholic world, shares this point of view and defines heresy, in relation to witchcraft, as the infidelity carried out by a person already baptized ("Quienes tratan de inducir a otros a realizar tales maravillas de malvada índole son llamados brujos o brujas. Y como la infidelidad en una persona bautizada se denomina técnicamente herejía, esas personas son lisa y llanamente herejes"⁷ (Kramer and Sprenger 1975: 21), stressing the intellectual aspect of heresy and the importance of free will after baptism in this religious deviation.⁸

7 My translation: Those who try to induce others to perform wonders of an evil nature are called witches. And, since the infidelity of a baptized person is technically called heresy, those people are plainly and simply heretics.

8 This same emphasis on infidelity is present in the *Treatise on Superstition and Witchcraft*, the manual compiled by the Spanish friar Martín de Castañega in 1529 and in which the relationship between Catholic idolatry (or more accurately, infidelity to the Christian God and demonic cult) is firmly established. Castañega explains that the basis for this diabolic practice is the inversion of the rituals associated with the Catholic religion and so, instead of "sacraments," he talks about "excrements" for the heretics and conceives of a religion that, taking the Catholic practices, turns everything upside down. Castañega defines this church as follows: "La yglesia diabólica es generalmente toda la infidelidad que está fuera de la yglesia católica, la qual no es propiamente una porque no creen ni adoran un dios verdadero, ni confiesan una fe católica y verdadera, ni reciben ni tienen sacramento que aproveche y valga" (Martín de Castañega 1946: ch. 2). (The diabolic church is generally every infidelity that is found outside the Catholic Church, and it is not really a church because they do not believe in one true god, neither do they profess the Catholic faith nor receive or have any sacrament that is worthy. My translation.) Of course, Martín de Castañega gives this definition in a context that is specifically dealing with the heretics that people were concerned about in the Spain of the time and, therefore, with no intention of referring to the situation taking place in the New World, but, if we consider that he is writing at the same time that Hernán Cortés is incorporating a vast number of Amerindians into the Western imaginary, this definition could be looked upon differently. For one, that idea of the diabolic church could also be used to refer to the practices of the Indians, since they were outside of the Catholic Church as well; they did

But this is not necessarily true in all cases, and in other contexts heresy is devoid of that emphasis on free choice and becomes, instead, the result of ignorance of the true creed, erroneous judgment, or imperfect apprehension and understanding of dogmas, leaving pride to one side to simply becoming the victim of a misinterpretation and not an agent of deviation or religious disagreement. A situation like this is what can be said to have occurred in the Spanish colonies in America where, once baptized, the Indians developed a mixture of their native rituals and the newly learned ceremonies of the Catholic cult, resulting in a syncretic combination that was considered, by the Spaniards, heretical. But, whereas in these cases preaching and deeper understanding of the doctrine could potentially alter and eventually eliminate the mixture, in the case of heresy by pride, obstinate denial or rejection of some aspects of the creed seem to be much more difficult to eradicate and can even turn into the seeds of schism.

Because of its main characteristic—that is, introducing doubt within the dogmas of an established church—heresy has frequently been punished with the total expulsion of the subject from that religion; that is, with permanent Catholic excommunication and, in most cases, the confiscation of his possessions.

But there was a time when even dreaming about things contrary to the Catholic religion was enough to be considered an infidel, since it was believed that it was the Devil himself who put these thoughts in the minds of the already confused practitioner. Therefore, whoever thought of things such as witches flying was just as guilty as if they had committed a heresy themselves and was as heretical as the flying witches they had imagined. This text, then, provided no defense for those accused of imagining heresies since who can prove what one does or does not think about? But, at the same time, this text reduced all the witches' universe, so in vogue at the time (*Sabbaths*, night flights, metamorphosis, etc.) to mere illusions, imaginations engineered by the Devil with no existence beyond the heretic's mind.

This attitude of fear and persecution was helped along by Pope John XXII, who, fearing himself victim of *maleficia*, decided to give the inquisitors in Toulouse and Carcassonne an incentive to fight diabolic acts and worked on a number of letters and decrees (in 1323, 1326, 1327, and 1331) in which he pushed for the prosecution of these crimes against the Catholic doctrine. Undoubtedly, one of the main measures that were attributed to this pope was contained in the bull published in 1318 in which he allowed, for the first time, the trial of dead heretics who, from

not believe in one god only (leaving aside the question about whether any of the gods they worshipped was true or not in the eyes of the Spaniards); and they had no sacraments at all. In that sense, and according to Martín de Castañega's definition, the practices of the Indians had to be considered diabolical, and they themselves would constitute the Church of the Devil, even when the cosmovisions of the different groups did not include the Devil or were even developed in ways similar to Catholicism.

then on, would be tried in effigy and submitted to the same treatment as their living equivalents.

But if that were not enough, in 1326, Pope John XXII published his bull entitled *Super Illius Specula*, a document in which he asserts the reality of diabolic acts, making them change from the status of mere illusions, imagined or dreamed, as they had been taken since the *Canon Episcopi*, to become a pagan reality, something whose existence no one could deny since it had affected the pope himself (Robbins 1991: 345–46).⁹ Needless to say, all these facts put together in a very short span of years started an avalanche of trials against heresy in general, and witchcraft in particular, a type of heresy considered so abominable that it seemed to justify the machinery that had been created to fight it.¹⁰

But Pope John XXII was not the only one who took interest in the fight against heresy. The attempts to fight it extended long after this initiative and, in the latter part of the fifteenth century, Pope Innocent VIII published his *Summis desiderantes affectibus* in which he specifically addressed the matter. In this bull he ratified the undoubted existence of witches and *Sabbaths* and, therefore, recognized the need to intensify the persecution. To better develop this important task, Innocent VIII gave more jurisdictions to the inquisitors. As a result of this petition formulated in 1484, the inquisitors Heinrich Kramer and Jacobus Sprenger answered three years later with their *Malleus Maleficarum*, or *Hammer of the Witches*.

This work was very popular during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, just the period that we are looking at, the period around the imperial moment, just following the “discovery” of America. This inquisitorial handbook, supremely misogynist, follows the path started by Eimeric’s work and opposes the *Canon Episcopi* in the affirmation of the reality of heresy and witchcraft, especially as performed by women. It even goes on to say that since several popes had established the existence of witches, it would be heretical *not* to believe in it, because the negation of a reality asserted by the maximum authority of the church becomes heresy in itself. The *Malleus* shows the first authorized uses of torture in the fight against idolatry, since it considers it “the first of all superstitions” (Kramer and Sprenger 1975: 39) and one that needs to be fought as harshly as possible. It is not surprising that in this atmosphere of obsession with the worst maleficia, Pope Innocent VIII appointed

9 In 1320, Matteo and Galeazzo Visconti were accused in a trial of having conspired to kill Pope John XXII. They had made a silver statuette reproducing the features of the pope and bearing his name. Later, they exposed the statue to the elements for seventy-two nights. It was considered a proof of witchcraft, and that same year the pope issued the second of his bulls directing prelates to deal with the problems of heresy and witchcraft (Freedberg 1989: 266).

10 I dealt with this topic in my book entitled *Magia, hechicería y brujería: Entre La Celestina y Cervantes* (2011). It is an interdisciplinary study of witchcraft and sorcery in Early Modern Spain, drawing on Inquisition manuals and socioeconomic studies as well as literary texts.

Tomás de Torquemada to be Grand Inquisitor of Spain, precisely the same year that the famous manual was published.

From then on, every important inquisitorial manual was based on the same two premises: First, witchcraft existed and was a reality which nobody could deny any more; and second, it was based on idolatry; that is, on the worship of a god other than the Catholic one, in this case, the Devil himself, with whom the witches established an explicit pact, denying God the required obedience. In this line we can find the *Reprobación de las supersticiones y hechicerías* (1529), by Pedro Ciruelo; *Tratado muy sutil y bien fundado de las supersticiones y hechizarias y vanos conjuros* (1538) by Martín de Castañega; and the *Disquisitionum Magicarum Libri Sex* (1599), by Martín del Río, particularly his second book.

But all these texts introduce one more term that needs to be clarified in relation to the ones we have already talked about: superstition. In his *Summa Theologica* (1265–1274), St. Thomas Aquinas refers to it as: the vice of over-doing religion either by superstition or giving God honor in unfitting ways, extending honor to other creatures, worshipping them (idolatry) or looking to them for knowledge (divination and fortune-telling) or guidance (magical practices) (Question 92. I, 409–10). Therefore, superstition sins by excess; that is, it constitutes worship to an improper god or to the right God in improper ways, according to the Catholic Church. From this point of view, there are four species of superstitions of which idolatry, the worship of idols, is only one. It is accompanied by improper ways of worship of the true God such as divination and vain observances, which include magic, witchcraft, and all the occult arts.¹¹ All of these behaviors are heretical and superstitious and have been fiercely fought throughout the history of Catholicism.

As we have already seen, idolatry is a superstitious act and, therefore, a form of heresy, but let us become a little more familiar with the full meaning of this concept. The reason why I choose to concentrate on this term rather than any other (such as “superstition” or “heresy”) is because, although they are very closely related, idolatry, rather than any other manifestations of religious deviation, was the central focus in the eyes of the doctrinal colonizers. This is the way the Spaniards decided to refer to the native religion which, because it worshipped idols not known by the Catholic conquerors, was considered idolatry. Also, this label was used to define the Indians in opposition to the newly arrived who chose to call themselves Christians, as is reflected in their accounts at almost all times.

11 Some of the most famous superstitions include astrology, the use of amulets, chiromancy, necromancy, spiritism; oneiromancy, omens or prognostics of future events; the use of lucky and unlucky days, numbers, persons, things, actions; the evil eye, spells, incantations, ordeals, and so on.

IDOLATROUS “NEW” WORLD

The word “idolatry” is formed from two Greek words: *eidōlon*, “image” and *latreia*, “adoration;” so, from a purely etymological point of view, “idolatry” means “adoration of images” (Eliade Vol. 7, 72–81). In the same line, the *Diccionario de autoridades* (1964) describes idolatry as “the worship or cult that the Gentiles give to creatures or statues of false idols” (my translation), understanding Gentiles to mean “non-Jew” and, eventually, all pagans. Idolatry, therefore, as described above, is the worship of a creature instead of God, but it also implies in some cases the adoration of idols made by man, who is himself a creature, so it puts the creation of man above that of God Himself, as it is emphasized by Isaiah 44:9–18.

It seems fitting that in order to fully understand the way the concept of idolatry was used by Spaniards in the context I am interested in—that is, in colonial Mexico—it is necessary to go back to the main source, the Bible, from which the concept was taken before it evolved in the aforementioned context.

There are several places where idolatry takes center stage in the Bible. The passage that first comes to mind is the adoration of the golden calf (*Exodus* 32), where the Israelites worship a calf made of gold while in the desert after fleeing from Egypt. On this occasion, God orders the killing of many among them, the same punishment that he imposes when the Israelites succumb to idolatry again, lured by the women of Mō’ab (*Numbers* 25:1–5).

On no few occasions, the Bible incites the reader to fight idolatry. Its formal condemnation is found in *Exodus* 20:3–5:

You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow to them or worship them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me.

To this reference we can add *Deuteronomy* 4:15–19,¹² *Wisdom of Solomon* 14:27–31,¹³

¹² “Since you saw no form when the Lord spoke to you at Hō’reb out of the fire, take care and watch yourselves closely, so that you do not act corruptly by making an idol for yourselves, in the form of any figure—the likeness of male or female, the likeness of any animal that is on earth, the likeness of any winged bird that flies in the air, the likeness of anything that creeps on the ground, the likeness of any fish that is in the water under the earth. And when you look up to heavens and see the sun, the moon and the stars, all the host of heaven, do not be led astray and bow down to them and serve them, things that the Lord your God has allotted to all the peoples everywhere under heaven.”

¹³ “For the worship of infamous idols is the reason and source and extremity of all evil. For they either go mad with enjoyment, or prophesy lies, or live lawlessly or lightly forswear themselves. For as their trust is in soulless idols, they expect no harm when they have sworn falsely. But on both counts shall justice overtake them: because they thought ill of God and devoted themselves to idols, and because they deliberately swore false oaths, despising piety. For not the might of those that are sworn by but the retribution of sinners ever follows upon the transgression of the wicked.” This book, the *Wisdom of Solomon* is part

and *I Corinthians* 10:19–22 where, for the first time, a connection is established between idolatry and the worship of demons.¹⁴

Saint Thomas of Aquinas does not share this demonic concept that, by the fifteenth century, was fully accepted.¹⁵ Actually, the fight against idolatry had been the focus of many efforts born from the Council of Trent as we saw from the interventions of Pope Innocent VIII. So, if for Kramer and Sprenger idolatry was the first of all superstitions, for the Spaniard Pedro Ciruelo¹⁶ idolatry was a vice, a sin, and an error by which “man denies Him [God] the obedience He requires and gives to Satan the honor due to Him” (76).

In dealing with the Spanish colonies, we can clearly appreciate two opposing movements. On the one hand, we can recognize those who, based on the Old Testament, think that idolatry is a sin that needs to be fought and, therefore, becomes one of the main reasons why preaching by Spaniards and tremendous efforts in pursuing the evangelization of the Indians are required.¹⁷ On the other hand, there are those

of the standard Catholic *Bible*, but it is generally included in the *Apocrypha* in the English Protestant Bible (King James Version).

14 “What do I imply then? That food sacrificed to idols is anything, or that an idol is anything? No, I imply that what pagans sacrifice, they sacrifice to demons and not to God. I do not want you to be partners with demons. You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons. You cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons. Or are we provoking the Lord to jealousy? Are we stronger than he?”

15 He understands it as the practice of “offering divine worship to idols . . . In itself, idolatry is the most serious of sins since it sets up another god in the world, diminishing God’s primacy” but leaves out the diabolic component that other thinkers, like Acosta, would see as an essential part of this behavior (St. Thomas Aquinas 1989, Question 94.1, 410).

16 The complete title is *A treatise reproving all superstitions and forms of witchcraft: very necessary and useful for all good Christians zealous for their salvation*.

17 Ginés de Sepúlveda (1494–1573) participated in this idea, defending what he thought was the legitimate right of the Spanish empire to conquer, or colonize and evangelize, the so-called New World. In doing this, he opposed Bartolomé de Las Casas in the famous Valladolid Controversy developed in 1550 and concerned with the justification of the Spanish conquest of the Indies during the reign of Charles V. Sepúlveda sustained the position of the colonists, claiming that the Indians were “natural slaves” as defined by Aristotle in Book I of *Politics*. Aristotle starts by comparing the barbarian and the slave in terms of their nature and then observes that “barbarians have no class of natural rulers.” Finally, he defines the slave as follows: “One who is a human being belonging by nature not to himself but to another is by nature a slave, and a person is a human being belonging to another if being a man he is an article of property, and an article of property is an instrumental for action separable from its owner . . . For he is by nature a slave who is capable of belonging to another (and that is why he does so belong), and who participates in reason so far as to apprehend it but not to possess it; for the animals other than man are subservient not to reason, by apprehending it, but to feelings. And also the usefulness of slaves diverges little from that of animals; bodily service for the necessity of life is forthcoming from both, from slaves and from domestic animals alike. The intention of nature is therefore to make the bodies also of freemen and of slaves different—the latter strong for necessary service, the former erect and unserviceable for such occupations, but serviceable for a life of citizenship” (Aristotle 1932: 19, 23). Therefore, he portrays the slave as an inferior human being whose only asset is his physical might and who needs to be ruled by others. For his part, Sepúlveda, in his *Tratado sobre las justas causas de la guerra*, stated that “con perfecto derecho los españoles imperan sobre estos bárbaros del Nuevo Mundo é islas adyacentes, los cuales en

who, following Saint Thomas, think that idolatry is not a sin but merely misguided practices that do not justify the presence of Spaniards in America.

Among the latter, Vitoria stands out in considering that the idolatry among the Indians was not a sin but rather a calamity, and concludes that neither the pope, nor his Christian representatives on earth (in this case, the king of Spain) had the right to use violence to fight the behaviors of those who were not their subjects, though he did not go as far as to propose that the Spaniards leave the New World altogether.

Bartolomé de Las Casas, the famous Dominican friar and later bishop of Chiapas, insists on this point and suggests that idolatry is a natural occurrence. According to his opinion, all men have a natural thirst for finding a superior being, a primary reason for everything, and he believes that when this natural desire is not well guided, the Devil sometimes takes advantage of the situation and pushes people to worship false idols. Therefore, in his opinion, idolatry is nothing more than a badly oriented desire to know God and, because of this, is both natural and universal: “La idolatría, supuesta corrupción de la naturaleza humana, sin tener guía de doctrina o de gracia de Dios, es natural, porque aquello que todas las gentes o la mayor parte dellas sin ser enseñadas, usan y hacen y acostumbran, aquello parece y es natural” (Las Casas 1967: 381).¹⁸

He bases this idea on the episode in the Garden of Eden, and he considers that once man betrayed God, there was a breakage in the direct communication with the divine. From that point on, revelation could only occur via learning from man to man; that is, only when man reaches a particular degree of learning through the teaching of other men can he connect with God, but the natural drive has to be there first. In this sense, Las Casas establishes a link between the degree of idolatry in a particular group of people and its degree of civilization, implying that native Indians are living in a more primitive state than the Spaniards who found them and that, necessarily, civilization brings Christianity with it.

Francisco de Ávila, priest in the Peruvian province of Huarochirí and one of the most active instigators of the auto-da-fé in Lima (1609), basically agrees with this approach, though he introduces some essential variations. He starts by establishing a difference between Andean peoples and Incas, and, if he admitted that the former

prudencia, ingenia, virtud y humanidad son tan inferiores á los españoles como los niños á los adultos y las mujeres á los varones, habiendo entre ellos tanta diferencia como la que va de gentes fieras y crueles á gentes clementísimas, de los prodigiosamente intemperantes á los continentales y templados, y estoy por decir que monos á hombres.” (Sepúlveda 1941: 101) (To paraphrase, he says that the natives are “as children to parents, as women are to men, as cruel people are from mild people and as monkeys to men”).

¹⁸ My translation: Idolatry, supposed corruption of human nature without guide for the doctrine or the grace of God, is natural because that which all or most people do without having being taught seems and is natural.

only sinned out of ignorance and therefore should not be treated as harshly, he did not reserve the same privileges for the latter. He articulates it as follows:

Que todos quantos avia desde el mismo Inga, hasta el Mitazo, estaban en la red, i lazo del menio; Y todos dexado a su criador, veneraban, i adoraban lo que no debian, los Ingas al Sol, como si fuera su criador, i para sujetar las pueblos, i gentes primero hazian saber a todos, que debian adorar al Sol porque esse (dezian) nuestro padre, i criador de los Ingas.

Y la demas gente vulgar, que no adoraba? Adoraba al Sol, Luna i Estrellas: Y aunque adorar a estos es gran pecado, no estan culpables, *Sed in his minor est querela. Sap. 13:6.*¹⁹

In this passage, while admitting the idolatry of the Andeans and their worship of Sun, Moon, and Stars, Ávila is willing to recognize their innocence because they were misguided and trapped by the Devil while trying to look for God, but in the case of the Incas he is not as forgiving. He believes that they venerated the Sun, not because they did not know better but because they chose to worship it instead of God and, to make things worse, they imposed this cult over other peoples who had been conquered by them. So, not only did they sin but forced other people to follow their idolatrous ways in the name of colonization. Idolatry, thus, did not only conquer the souls of the colonized, but also their physical territory. So, according to Ávila, the Incas, as rulers of the Andes, worshipped the Sun not as a mistake due to ignorance or due to a lesser degree of civilization, as Las Casas would have argued, but they used this practice being fully aware of its implications, in order to manipulate religion for a political purpose, that of expanding their empire.

Therefore, in establishing a connection between idolatry and territoriality, Las Casas adopts an interesting approach. If, as we have seen, Ávila thinks that, in the case of the Incas, expansionist ambition leads to the spread of idolatry, the Chiapas bishop adds a twist and states that idolatry goes hand in hand with isolation of human groups and linguistic diversity. In his opinion, thus, and since the Garden of Eden, the word of God can only be passed directly from man to man, but the

¹⁹ This passage is taken from a sermon by Ávila, written for the vigil of the Epiphany (Lima, 1646–48). (Monten and Collier 1999: 98–99 in the Spanish version and page 91 in English).

The biblical sentence it refers to is the following: “But yet, for these the blame is less; For they indeed have gone astray perhaps, though they seek God and wish to find him”

My translation: All, from Inca to Mitazo, were ensnared in the traps of the Devil. All had forsaken their creator. The Incas venerated and worshipped that which they shouldn't have (the Sun), as if it were their creator. And, in order to subjugate the villages and the people, first they made them realize that they should worship the Sun because they said it was their father, the creator of the Incas.

And the various other people, what did they worship? They worshipped the Sun, Moon, and Stars. Still, although the worship of these was a great sin, they weren't as guilty—*Sed in his minor est querela* [*Wisdom of Solomon* 13:6].

fragmentation of groups and the distance between them makes this task very difficult. This is the reason why, according to Las Casas, the native peoples of the colonies have not been in contact with the Christian doctrine. Also, the division of languages after the episode in Babel makes this transmission that much more difficult, allowing idolatry to rule over the Americas (Las Casas 1967: 383).

In relation to this, Cristóbal de Molina, a Spanish friar who wrote a chronicle (*Fábulas y mitos de los Incas; Fables and Myths of the Incas*) around 1573, believes that there is a relationship between idolatry and writing, asserting that if the Incas had been peoples of writing, they would not have fallen in the deep abyss of idolatrous thinking: “Causóse todo esto demás de la principal causa que hera no conocer a Dios y darse a los vicios y ydolatrías, no ser jentes que usavan de escritura, porque si la usaran no tuvieran tan ciegos y torpes y desatinados errores y fábulas, no obstante que usaban de una cuenta muy subtil de unas ebras de lana de dos nudos, y puesta lana de colores en los nudos, los quales llaman *quipos*” (Molina 1989: 57–58).²⁰ Following this thought, it should not be surprising that *quipus* were ordered to be destroyed as soon as possible, since they were believed to be receptacles of superstition in general, and idolatry in particular.²¹ Of course, this action did not take into account that, together with what Spaniards thought superstitious, they were also destroying infinitely valuable information about the Incas’ way of life and, ironically, also testimonies of their progressive acceptance of Christian doctrine, since some of the *quipus* contained information in this regard.

More and more, and for a long period of time, idolatry became the face by which America was recognized and a synonym of the innate inability of the Indians. A sample of this can be found almost a century later in some of Calderón de la Barca’s plays that deal with the Indies and the issues around evangelization. In *La aurora en Copacabana*, America appears as the landscape of idolatry par excellence though, in the end, it is also the place where change is possible and there is a successful shift

20 All this is caused, in addition to the main cause which is not knowing God and abandoning themselves to vices and idolatries, by not being peoples of writing, because if they had used it, they would not have had blind, awkward, and foolish errors and fables, although they used a subtle system of woolen threads with two knots and with colored wool in the knots, which are called *quipos* (my translation).

21 The third Council of Lima, which took place in 1582–83, decreed the destruction of *quipus* because of their supposed relationship with idolatry. (Lisi 1990: 191)

“Capítulo 37: Y como entre los indios, ignorantes de las letras, había en vez de libros ciertos signos de diferentes cuerdas que ellos llaman *quipos* y de éstos surgen no pocos testimonios de antigua superstición en los que guardan el secreto de sus ritos, ceremonias y leyes inicuas, procure los obispos destruir por completo todos estos instrumentos perniciosos.”

And since among the Indians, ignorant in terms of writing, there were, instead of books, certain signs of different threads that they call quipos and from them no few testimonies of superstition originate where they keep the secrecy of their rites, ceremonies and iniquitous laws, bishops should try to completely destroy all those destructive instruments”

toward Catholicism (Calderón de la Barca 1994: 128). It is important to remember that the character of “Idolatry” is portrayed dressed like an Indian: in black and covered with stars which represent its object of worship. In the same line, in *Mística y real Babilonia*, also by Calderón, Idolatry shows up on stage dressed as in the previous play: in black, covered with stars, and also like an Indian, with multiple feathers (Calderón de la Barca 1979: 113). America then, becomes associated with idolatry.

But, going back to the sixteenth century, the most definitive shift in the evolution of the concept of idolatry takes place at the end of the decade of the 1560s and the beginning of the 1570s, coinciding with the rebellion of the *taquiungos*. This movement, whose name literally means “dancing sickness” or the “disease of the dance,” constituted one of the first attempts of organized Native American resistance. It preached the total rejection of Spanish religion and customs and, instead, it proposed their return to the teaching of their predecessors, to the worship of the Sun, their *huacas* (sacred entities or places) and their *mallquis* (the mummified remains of their ancestors). The leaders of the Taki Onqoy, the most important being Tupac Amaru, claimed that they were messengers from the native gods and preached that a pan-Andean alliance of native gods and peoples would come together to destroy the Christians.

This movement was met by the brutal repression of the *visitador* Cristóbal de Albornoz and the viceroy Toledo, who decided to exterminate this possible focus of distress before it really became a threat, and Tupac Amaru was publicly beheaded in 1572.²² However, what is most relevant in terms of the evolution of the concept of idolatry is that this event, the repression of the Taki Onqoy, marks the final moment in the progression that we saw above. Idolatry, once considered some misguided practices with no evil intentions, now definitely becomes a major sin, one that puts at risk the supremacy of the Spanish empire and that has to be fiercely fought.

This final shift that insists on the diabolic nature of idolatry finds in José de Acosta (1540–1600) its main supporter. Acosta was a Jesuit missionary and theologian who spent most of his life in Peru.²³ He was elected provincial in 1576. Aside from his publication of the proceedings of the provincial councils of 1567 and 1583, Acosta is best known as the writer of *De Natura Novi Orbis* (1596), *De promulgation Evangelii apud Barbaros* (1588), *De Procuranda Indorum salute* (1588)

22. See Duviols (1977); and Albornoz's *Instrucción para descubrir todas las Guacas del Piru y sus camayos y baziendas*, found in Cristóbal de Molina (1989). In that text, and in reference to this movement of Taki Onqoy, Albornoz attributes the discovery to himself (192–93). See also Guamán Poma's reflection and warnings in relation to the Taki Onqoy phenomenon (1956: 66).

23. The Jesuits arrived to the New World some thirty years after the other orders. They sought areas abandoned or unclaimed by the previous missionaries. They expanded rapidly and, by the end of the XVI century until their expulsion in 1767, had between 450 and 520 members in Peru. They proved to be extremely resourceful and successful at learning the language, teaching in the vernacular, trading goods, and demonstrating a nonviolent European presence, proving that the only alternative to slavery was evangelization mission and integration through church and school (Lynch 2012: 48).

and, above all, the *Historia natural y moral de las Indias* (Seville 1590), where he provided a detailed description of the geography and culture of the “newly-discovered” territories of the Indies. In that work he assures his readers that the main causes from which idolatry originates are the arrogance of the Devil and the mortal hate that he has toward men (Acosta 1894: 3–4):

Que la causa de la idolatría ha sido la soberbia y envidia del demonio. Es la soberbia del demonio tan grande y tan porfiada, que siempre apetece y procura ser tenido y honrado por Dios: y en todo cuanto puede hurtar y apropiarse á sí lo que solo al altísimo Dios es debido, no cesa de hacerlo en las ciegas naciones del mundo, á quien no ha esclarecido aun la luz y resplandor del santo Evangelio.²⁴

For Acosta, therefore, idolatry was neither natural nor innocent, but diabolic and manipulative. Described as such, the definition now serves a double purpose. On the one hand, it continues the atmosphere of fear that developed in Europe during the witch-hunt period. On the other hand, defining all these peoples from “the blind nations of the world” as idolaters allows Acosta and his followers to formulate a concept of opposition. It integrates the unknown into a known system, that of the opposition between good and evil, while unifying the *other* in a group against which Spaniards can fight.

But at the same time, and perhaps this came as surprising collateral damage, the fact that Spaniards insisted on the association of the Indians with the Devil backfired on them. This insistence on the Indians’ diabolic way of life gave them the possibility of using this very strong alliance for their own cause and, for the first time, if Spaniards adopted the flag of Christianity, they handed Indians the flag of the Devil. Therefore, that which had been different, exotic, or strange in the first encounters is now armed with a diabolic force that the Indians did not even know could be used for their own advantage. In this way Spaniards created their own struggle and an enemy to reproduce the ones that they were used to combating, and the ones that they were comfortable with, the ones that belonged to their self-centered way of looking at what was happening in the Spanish colonies.

This idea is based on the practice of *othering* and allows us to see the colonized subject as the radically different, conceived not only as inferior but also as savage, barbarian, and evil. Therefore, it becomes the “demonic other” reproducing models that had already been used in Spain to fight the Moors and the Jews and that made

²⁴ My translation: The cause of idolatry has been the arrogance and envy of the Devil. The arrogance of the Devil is so great and so stubborn that he always wants and tries to be honored as God, whenever he can steal and take for himself that which is only due to Most High God, he does not stop doing it, especially in the blind nations of the world that have not been illuminated by the light and the splendor of the Gospels.

the conflict with the American idolaters that much more familiar. This idea also assumes that European practices are superior and universal and that everything that does not belong to this scheme of things can be spared, rejected, replaced:

En tiempo de los Ingas, y aun antes que los viera, todos por sus ayillos, y por sus divisiones teniendo sus Idolos, para aver de adorarles, y hazer sus fiestas un mes, y aun dos meses antes que llegase la fiesta de su Idolo mayor se disponian para ella. Y el gran Sacerdote solia dar noticia, y apercibir, que para tal dia lo estuviessen: hiciesen su chicha, y todo lo demas, porque ya llegava, dezia, el dia de nuestro gran Padre. Y Tambien les mandaba, que ayunassen, no comiendo con sal, ni agi, y que los varones, y mugeres se abtuviessen entre si. Y deste manera dezia abeis de ayunar: y sino lo hizieredes assi serà gran pecado, y caereis en enfermedades, y trabajos, se os claran los sembrados, y moriràn vuestros hijos; y diziendo esto los amèndrentavan, y hazian ayunar, sin dormir toda la noche. No os digo la verdad?

Mirà hijos mios, todo esto es engaño del Demonio; porque el Demonio maldito sin cessar esta siempre pensando, y desseando hazerse señor, y que los hombres lo adoren como a Dios, y por esto anda remedando a Dios. No aveis visto un mico, ò mono como, mirando lo que haze la persona, el lo imita? Deste modo el Demonio remeda a Dios, como mono de Dios. Y como los Padres en las Iglesias cantan alabando a Dios; el Demonio haze que a el le canten, adorando los cerros, las nieves y las piedras; y si nuestra madre la Iglesia nos haze ayunar en la Cuaresma, y Vigiliass; el Demonio de la misma suerte haze a los que le siguen ayunar, y los trabaja, y lo mesmo haze en otras muchas cosas, engañando a los que poco saben.²⁵

As we can see from this passage, Ávila not only thinks that the Indians have not reached the degree of civilization that the Spaniards have but also links this fact with their foolishness, with their barbarism, which inevitably has diabolic roots. But not only that: if the Devil is the monkey of God and the Incas are ruled by

²⁵ This passage is taken from a sermon by Ávila, written for the vigil of Nativity (Lima, 1646–48; Montén and Collier 1999: 55), in the Spanish version and page 49 in English. “In the time of the Incas, and even before their time, each allyu [*sic*] and area had idols, so that they might adore them and celebrate their monthly festivals, sometimes preparing for two months in advance for the major ones. The high priest used to announce the day so everyone would prepare chicha and all the rest for the quickly-approaching holiday of our father. He also told them, both men and women, to abstain from salt and ají? (pepper) [*sic*]. In this manner they fasted. If they did not, it would have been a grave sin. And they would have fallen sick, and their crops would have died. Thus he frightened them, and made them stay up all night. Do I not tell you the truth?

Look, my children, all this is a trick of the Devil. The wicked Devil always tries to make himself God, and he wants men to adore him as they do God. Thus he imitates God. Have you not seen a monkey, trying to act like a human? Thus the Devil tries to imitate God: like a monkey of God. And as the priests in temples sing for God, the Devil makes them sing to him adoring mountains, rocks and snow. Just as our mother the Church has us fast during Lent and during Vigils, the devil makes those who follow him fast; he does the same in many things, tricking those who know little.”

him, in what position does this leave them? However, the preacher is careful not to call them monkeys because the negation of human nature would immediately be interpreted as the lack of capacity to reason and, therefore, would have aborted the process of evangelization.

The struggle against the supposed idolatry of the Indians missed a crucial point. It did not consider the fact that what Spaniards saw as idolatrous was embedded in every single aspect of the Indian way of life. It not only affected the idols that were worshipped but also the way they related to one another, their sexual relationships, the crops they grew, their division of time, and so on. This way of life was not questioned or even questionable, but part of the established order and, because of this, almost impossible to eliminate. Gruzinski goes on to say that

La idolatría aporta no sólo una respuesta a la desgracia biológica y social, a la precariedad de las condiciones de vida sino que, mucho más todavía, inculca una manera de ver y de actuar en contextos tan distintos y complementarios como la ancestralidad, la producción y la reproducción, el cuerpo enfermo, el hogar, el vecindario, los campos, el espacio más lejano del monte adonde va uno a cazar el venado y a recolectar la miel silvestre.²⁶

Idolatry, thus, is not only a way of dealing with the world; it becomes the world for those who live it, a way of knowing what surrounds them but also to know their own selves, a way of preserving the past and looking into the future, a spiritual code as well as the law.

At this point I would describe idolatry, in the context of the first Spanish colonies in the New World, as *those beliefs and practices of the natives that do not conform to those of Catholicism and become, for this reason, the target of the Spanish colonizers. It is that irreducible excess of indigenous culture that persists in spite of imperialistic efforts, the remains of a subjectivity that, once colonized, becomes sinful, erroneous and false.*

Idolatry, taking this approach, is used as part of the huge machinery that Spaniards put together with the intention of developing their plans for imperial expansion. Among the functions it performs, it is used by the colonizers to alienate the *others* and unite them in an artificial category defined by what Spaniards were not. Idolaters in colonial Peru and Mexico are, therefore, those who eat what Spaniards do not, worship what they do not, look different from the colonizers,

26 Gruzinski (1993: 158): "Idolatry not only brought an answer to biological and social unhappiness, to the precariousness of conditions of life but, even more, inculcated a manner of seeing and acting in contexts as distinct and complementary as ancestry, production and reproduction, the sick body, the domestic hearth, the neighborhood, the fields, and the more distant realm of the *monte* where one went to hunt deer and gather wild honey."

speak something that is unintelligible to them, and so forth. But the creation of this heterogeneous group creates an enemy to attack: their diabolic nature which, by the mere virtue of its existence, gives purpose to the hundreds of friars who were sent to the colonies, the innumerable soldiers who accompanied them, and what is more important: the birth of a diluted, nonconcrete, invisible enemy that guarantees and justifies the maintenance of a policy of expansionism in Spain that otherwise might have been impossible to sustain. Also along these lines, the characteristics of the enemy make him one that will never be fought enough, one that the colonizer can never be sure is destroyed, one that can scare populations for indeterminate periods of time, and one that can always be blamed for all kinds of excesses. The fight, therefore, has long moved away from the mere discussion of religious matters and has developed into hegemonic terms: it is embedded in the process of colonization itself and shapes the reality of the dominant group as well as that of the invaded.

But, at the same time that the concept of idolatry was being defined in the “New World,” those who were defining the purest orthodoxy in the colonies, that is, the Spanish, the Christians *par excellence*, were being called “idolaters” back in their own continent, producing an ironic situation that runs parallel in many ways to that in America.

EARLY MODERN EUROPEAN RELIGIOSITY

The origins of what was happening in Western European religiosity during the sixteenth century can be partially explained by the events that took place in the previous two centuries, and of which I offer just a brief overview. In general, during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, dissatisfaction with the church could be found at all levels. The Avignon papacy first (1305–1378) and the Great Schism later (1378–1414) contributed a great deal to a crisis in the religiosity of late medieval Europe and a sense of unrest that discredited the authority of the pope and harmed the reputation of the monastic system. This breakdown opened the doors for the great cultural debates about religious reforms and values that were to take place during the sixteenth century and that resulted in the Protestant and Catholic Reformations.

The Roman Church started to be noticed because of its excessive wealth during the period; the poor resented the wealth of the papacy, and the very rich were jealous of it. But it was the poor moral example that provoked the biggest reaction since the lax discipline in many monasteries and nunneries in Europe had reached almost epidemic proportions. Some of the abuses of the Catholic Church included the sale of indulgences (certificates to forgive sins) and of high-church offices (simony), which contributed to the wealth of the church but also to its bad reputation. The

clergy had become lax, corrupt, and immoral, and the church was in desperate need of a reform (Mullett 1999: ch. 1.).

The Renaissance and the development of humanism brought a fresh air of intellectual freedom that finally stirred both the Catholic and the Protestant Reformations (increasing debates on religious values, personalized interpretations of the Bible, the search for a more personal spirituality, etc.), but also brought a renewed attention to pagan antiquity, a neopaganism that, although it influenced the arts greatly, both in form and in content, was fought from the spiritual point of view in the search for an evangelical purity that had been lost somewhere along the way.

Erasmus of Rotterdam (1466–1536) was a renowned scholar who took upon himself the task of using his learning in the search for the purification of the doctrine while criticizing the vices of the Catholic Church. He despised the laxity the Catholic Church had fallen into because, according to his opinion, it perpetuated ignorance, superstition and obscurantism. He intended to supply the remedy, starting by pointing out what other educated men of his time barely dared articulate. This way, Erasmus delivered a message that was heard all over Europe and that had great influence on many Spanish intellectuals, such as Cervantes himself.²⁷ But it was not Erasmus's mission to establish change, but rather to open this possibility to others that would follow, as well as to increase awareness about the abuses that were taking place within the Catholic Church. Therefore, Erasmus thought of a church within, a personal and accessible religiosity and, in order to achieve this goal, in 1516 he translated and published a German version of the Greek New Testament so that everyone could read the Gospel in their languages, a gesture that was a way of challenging the mediation as understood by the Catholic Church.²⁸

But he grew impatient and angry with the superstitious ways of the Catholics, especially in dealing with the cult of statues, the devotion to the relics of the saints, pilgrimages to visit different Virgins, worship saints, endowment of masses, and so on. He thought that the people cultivated a religion of external acts, of appearances, rather than practicing an introspective and personal devotion; that was his idea of *true* religion, free from the weight of the Middle Ages and from its dependence on visible things: "You should always try to advance from things visible, which are for the most part imperfect or of a neutral status, to things invisible. This precept is so pertinent to the matter that when they either neglect it or do not understand

27 On Erasmus in general, and in his effects in Spain, the classic work is still Bataillon (1966). Also see Eire (1986).

28 Continuing his attacks on Catholic ways of worshipping, Erasmus added the following: "To work miracles is primitive, obsolete, and out of date; to teach the people is a drudgery; to interpret the Scriptures is pedantry; to pray is futile and lazy; to shed tears is weak and depressing; to live in poverty is base; to be excelled is shameful, and scarcely worthy of one who will hardly allow the greatest king to kiss his sacred foot; and finally, to die is unpleasant, to die on the cross a disgrace" (Erasmus 1953: 112).

it, most Christians are merely full of credulous wonder, not devout, and except for using the *name* of Christ are not far removed from the superstition of pagans.”²⁹

In his attacks against superstition, he defines it as “a misplaced faith in the external forms of religion” (Eire 1986: 37) that causes an inadmissible fragmentation of the deity. Therefore, even when Erasmus saw nothing evil or sinful in these practices, he would much rather have seen a shift from a visual religion to an internal one, since for him the dangers implicit in these erroneous ways of worship were far too great. But, although he stressed the importance of the spiritual life over the cult of the material, Erasmus never denied the value of the external religious symbols and he never fought to see them abolished.³⁰ In his opinion, the use of material elements in the cult was then limited to serving as aid for the weak but was not advised. So, if we go back to my first example of the Holy Week in Málaga (Southern Spain), I would dare say that Erasmus would not have considered it evil, heretical, or sinful, but probably, and according to his teachings, it would have been too close for comfort to idolatry, too dangerous, foolish, and totally unnecessary: “As for stone and painted images, I am not so foolish as to demand what stands in the way of worship. The stupid adore such substitutes in place of the saints themselves, who are finally crowded out altogether” (Erasmus 1953: 87). In these lines Erasmus asks his followers to become the monitors of their own worship and, instead of relying on the vigilance of the institutions, such as the church or, even worse, the Inquisition, he suggests that each individual take control of his own practice and be ready to take the consequences, good or bad, derived from it. In this sense he insists on distinguishing between the theory and the practice of religion, that is, in talking about the contrast between the ideal of the Bible and the reality practiced in everyday life, which he sees as infected by the corruption of the Catholic Church:

²⁹ This passage belongs to Erasmus’s description of the fifth rule for Christian living as presented in his *Enchiridion Militis Christiani*, written during the first years of the sixteenth century, where he continues as follows: “Unless this kind of worship is restored to Christ and detached from any consideration of creature comforts or inconveniences, it is actually not Christian at all. It is not much different from the superstition of those who in earlier times used to prime Hercules a tenth of their goods in the hope that they might get rich, or offer a cock to Aesculapius that they might recover from an illness, or slaughter a bull to Neptune that they might have a safe voyage. The names have changed, of course, but the purpose is the same” (Erasmus 1963: 99)

³⁰ In his *Enchiridion*, Erasmus ties his reflection on the use of images with his concern about the corruption of the church and, more important, with its effects in the common folk: “Will they not say, then, “Do you forbid the worship of saints, in worshipping whom you worship God?” As a matter of fact, I do not so much censure those who do these things out of a kind of ingenious superstition as I do those who, with an eye to their own profit, parade certain observances, which may perhaps be tolerable, as if they represented the highest and purest devotion, and for their own gain encourage the ignorance of the common people, of which not even I am entirely critical . . . To do things of this sort, therefore, is not so blameworthy as it is destructive to come to a halt with them, and to lean upon them” (Erasmus 1963: 100).

If wisdom should come to Popes, what comforts it would deprive them of! Did I say wisdom? Even that grain of sense which Christ speaks of would do it. It would deprive them of all wealth, honor, and possession; all the triumphal progresses, offices, dispensations, tributes, and indulgences; the many horses, mules and retainers; in short, it would deprive them of all their pleasures. These few words comprehend a multitude of worldly goods. In their place wisdom would bring vigils, fasts, tears, prayers, sermons, studies, sighs, and a thousand similar trials. And think the hardship on all those copyists and notaries, all those advocates, promoters, secretaries, muleteers, grooms, bankers, and pimps—I was about to add a softer but, perhaps, a naughtier name. In short, all those who bring shame—I mean fame—to the Roman See would have to beg for their bread. This would be terribly inhuman, and, even worse, those very princes of the church and true lights of the world would be reduced to a staff and a wallet. (Erasmus 1953: 111)

Nevertheless, for Erasmus, the unity of the church was a fundamental characteristic and, in this sense and in many others, he disagreed with Martin Luther.

The Protestant Reformation began in 1517 when Luther (1483–1546), an Augustinian monk and professor at the University of Wittenberg, published his ninety-five theses on the door of the Wittenberg Castle's Church and collected in one document the general dissatisfaction that had been felt for a long time in many sectors of the Catholic Church. These ideas, helped by the birth of the printing press, made their way throughout Europe very quickly and provoked a major schism for Christendom (Aranguren 1957: ch. 1). Because his teachings cover many issues, I will only concentrate on Luther's words on idolatry, a concept that he understands as follows:

All manner of religion, where people serve God without his Word and command, is simply idolatry, and the more holy and spiritual such a religion seems, the more hurtful and venomous it is; for it leads people away from the faith of Christ, and makes them rely and depend upon their own strength, works, and righteousness. In like manner, all kinds of orders of monks, fasts, prayers, hairy shirts, the austerities of the Capuchins, who in Popedome are held to be the most holy of all, are mere works of the flesh; for the monks hold they are holy, and shall be saved, not through Christ, whom they view as a severe and angry judge, but through the rules of their order. (Luther 1878: CLXXI, 69)

As we can see in the lines above, the concept of idolatry shifts considerably in Luther's imaginary from the one that had been established up to that moment. Therefore, idolatry remains the worship of a creature instead of God, but instead of referring to those beliefs and practices performed by a distant and unknown *other* (as happened

in the context of the conquest of America), now the idolaters are those of us who are corrupted, who sin by excess in the ritual and from whom Protestants want to gain independence. The Catholics, now called the “papists,” are the new idolaters in a time when, ironically, they were evangelizing the Indies and implementing what the Spanish Catholics considered the purest of orthodoxies. But, according to Luther:

The papists took the invocation of saints from the heathen, who divided God into numberless images and idols, and ordained to each its particular office and work. These, the papists, void of all shame and Christianity, imitated, thereby denying God’s almighty power, every man, out of God’s Word, spinning to himself a particular opinion, according to his own fancy; . . . The invocation of saints is a most abominable blindness and heresy; yet the papists will not give it up. The pope’s greatest profit arises from the dead; for the calling on dead saints brings him infinite sums of money and riches, far more than he gets from the living. But thus goes the world; superstition, unbelief, false doctrine, idolatry, obtain more credit and profit than the upright, true, and pure religion. (Luther 1878: CLXXVIII, 73–4)

Therefore, although Luther’s main interest was not the extermination of idolatry or even the organized fight against it, he stated that the pope and his followers were nothing more than worshippers of idols and servants of the Devil,³¹ and in this light, he feels forced to redefine some concepts:

Saint Augustine and others distinguish thus between heretics, schismatics, and bad Christians: A schismatic is one that raises divisions and dissensions, professing the true faith of the Christian church, but not at union with her as to certain ceremonies and customs; an evil Christian is he that agrees with the church both in doctrine of faith and ceremonies, but therewithal leads an evil life, and is of wicked conversation. But a heretic is one that introduces false opinions and doctrines against the articles of the Christian faith, contrary to the true meaning of Holy Scripture, and stubbornly maintains and defends them. The papists do not call me a heretic, but a schismatic; one that prepares discords and strives. But I say, the pope is an arch heretic, for he is an adversary to my blessed Saviour Christ; and so am I to the pope, because he makes new laws and ordinances according to his own will and pleasure, and so directly denies the everlasting priesthood of Christ. (Luther 1878: CCCCXCV, 217)

For Luther, then, the idolatry of the papists is far from being an error, either committed by ignorance or out of carelessness, but a deliberate deviation from the *true*

³¹ “The Pope and his crew are mere worshippers of idols, and servants of the devil, with all their doings and living; . . . The devil has shown him the kingdoms of the world, and made promise to him as he did to Christ. This makes him condemn and scorn our sermons and God’s service, by which we are beggars, and endure much, while for his doctrine he get money and wealth, honour and power, and is so great a monarch, that he can bring emperors under his girdle” (Luther 1878, CCCCXLIX, 201).

religion by which the pope is honored as a god and becomes the idol of a group that trusts in the institution more than in Christ himself, and who seems to have lost the North in their devotion.

But not everything was lost for Luther, who proposes preaching over imposed destruction of images, a process of learning and convincing rather than a frontal attack, a strategy that was vindicated in the Indies right at the same time.³² Therefore, Luther believed that if a person was well grounded in his or her faith, the images could do no harm, but if that was not the case, and the faith was not very well rooted, the presence of images could lead to an idolatrous use of them. So the images themselves were not dangerous, but it was the *use* that they were given that could become idolatrous. In this case they should be destroyed and, in any case, as prevention, Luther stated that the images were unnecessary.³³

32 Luther, The Third Sermon, March 11, 1522, Tuesday after *Invocavit*: "You read in the Law (Exod. 20 [:4]), 'you shall not make yourself a graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth.' There you take your stand; that is your ground. Now let us see! When our adversaries say: The meaning of the first commandment is that we should worship only one God and not any image, even as it is said immediately following, 'You shall not bow down to them or serve them' [Exod. 20:5], and when they say that it is the worship of images which is forbidden and not the making of them, they are shaking our foundation and making it uncertain. And if you reply: The text says, 'You shall not make any images,' then they say: It also says, 'You shall not worship them.' In the face of such uncertainty who would be so bold as to destroy the images? Not I. But let us go further. They say: Did not Noah, Abraham, Jacob build altars? [Gen. 8:20; 12:7; 13:4; 13:18; 33:20]. And who will deny that? We must admit it. Again, did not Moses erect a bronze serpent, as we read in his fourth book (Num. 22 [21:9])? How then can you say that Moses forbade the making of images when he himself made one? It seems to me that such a serpent is an image, too. How shall we answer that? Again, do we not read also that two birds were erected on the mercy seat [Exod. 37:7], the very place where God willed that he should be worshipped? Here we must admit that we may have images and make images, but we must not worship them, and if they are worshipped, they should be put away and destroyed, just as King Hezekiah broke in pieces the bronze serpent erected by Moses [II Kings 18:4]. And who will be so bold as to say, when he is challenged to give an answer: They worship the images. They will say: Are you the man who dares to accuse us of worshipping them? Do not believe that they will acknowledge it. To be sure, it is true, but we cannot make them admit it. Just look how they acted when I condemned works without faith. They said: Do you believe that we have no faith, or that our works are performed without faith? Then I cannot press them any further, but must put my flute back in my pocket; for if they gain a hair's breadth, they make a hundred miles out of it. Therefore it should have been preached that images were nothing and that no service is done to God by erecting them; then they would have fallen of themselves. That is what I did; that is what Paul did in Athens, when he went into their churches and saw all their idols. He did not strike at any of them, but stood in the market place and said, "You men of Athens, you are all idolatrous" [Acts 17:16, 22]. He preached against their idols, but he overthrew none by force. And you rush, create an uproar, break down altars, and overthrow images! Do you really believe you can abolish the altars in this way? No, you will only set them up more firmly. Even if you overthrew the images in this place, do you think you have overthrown those in Nürnberg and the rest of the world? Not at all" (Luther 1999).

33 Luther's Third Sermon, March 11, 1522, Tuesday after *Invocavit*: "But now we must come to the images, and concerning them also it is true that they are unnecessary, and we are free to have them or not, although it would be much better if we did not have them at all. I am not partial to them."

Parallel to events in Germany, a movement began in Switzerland under the leadership of Ulrich (or Huldreich) Zwingli (1484–1531). Zwingli prepared sixty-seven propositions strongly attacking Catholic positions and, basing his arguments on scriptural authority, he claimed that “true religion, or piety, is that which clings to the one and only God” and added that “true piety demands, therefore, that one should hang upon the lips of the Lord and not hear or accept the word of any but the bridegroom . . . So piety is not piety unless you trust with all your heart the Lord who is the spouse of the soul, fix your eyes on Him only, and lend your ear to none but Him” (Zwingli 1981: 92).

In contrast, Zwingli sees *false* religion as the conjunction of two different aspects: on the one hand, the human arrogance in trying to look for God with the skills of the intellect and, therefore, not letting the works of the revelation go through us;³⁴ and, on the other hand, the love for the created above the Creator, that is, Zwingli identifies *idolatry* and false worship as one of the two main aspects of which false religion consists: “It is false religion or piety when trust is put in any other than God. They, then, who trust in any created thing whatsoever are not truly pious. They are impious who embrace the word of man as God’s” (97–98). From these words we can imagine that although Zwingli’s main concern was not the eradication of idolatry, he put a great deal of energy into defining what it is that made idolaters (in his opinion, Catholics) different from him and into offering an alternative that, in the end, never became a new reformed church.

Zwingli was inspired by Martin Luther and followed him in rejecting the authority of the pope in Rome as well as in considering Christ the sole mediator between God and men and also excluding the sacred role that the Virgin Mary has for Catholics. But the two reformers disagreed on several key points of doctrine. Zwingli and Luther met at Marburg in 1529 in a vain attempt to unite the two movements (*Marburg Colloquy*) but, although they agreed in fourteen out of the fifteen issues that they discussed, they could not agree over the meaning of the Lord’s Supper. Both of them rejected the Catholic concept of transubstantiation, but Luther maintained that Christ was physically present in the bread and wine of the Eucharist, while Zwingli understood Christ’s words, “this is my body,” in a symbolic way. He insisted that the celebration of the Lord’s Supper was a remembrance of what happened in Christ’s last supper, not a new sacrifice, but Luther rejected categorically this metaphorical explanation.

34 “It must be admitted that only by God Himself can we be taught what He is. For, according to the view of Paul, I Cor. 2:11, as no one ‘knoweth the things of a man, save the spirit of the man, which is the man himself, even so all are ignorant of the things of God save the Spirit Himself of God.’ We may well call it the rash boldness of a Lucifer or a Prometheus, if any one presumes to know from any other source what God is than from the Spirit Himself of God” (61–62).

Zwingli went even further, and where Luther purged from worship only those Roman Catholic practices that were against the principle of being justified by faith alone, Zwingli ruled out anything lacking explicit biblical sanction, including removing all music from churches. Actually, he saw the whole mass as a form of idolatry and wanted it abolished and replaced by a simple observance of the Lord's Supper.

As for the images, Zwingli also wanted to abolish them and move the altar from the platform to the floor, making it a simple table where he could celebrate a religious service in which the scripture and the sermon would take center stage, and the rest of the elements would disappear. In the same line, Zwingli also advocated the elimination of all holy days except Christmas, Good Friday, Easter, and Pentecost Sunday. Therefore, he radicalizes Luther's position and, in an attempt to see people free from idolatrous and superstitious ways, he does away with many of the elements that were an integral part of the Catholic ritual, identifying Catholicism with false religion, mass with idolatry, and images with superstitious elements.

Finally, John Calvin (1509–1564) sought to define a middle ground between Luther and Zwingli on the issues surrounding communion. In his opinion, Christ was spiritually—not physically—present in the elements of the Eucharist. The core of Calvinism is the Zwinglian insistence on the literal reading of Christian scriptures. Therefore, anything not contained explicitly and literally in these scriptures had to be rejected; and, in the same line, anything that was written in the Bible needed to be followed strictly and exactly. It is the latter point where Calvin went further than Zwingli, since he wanted to reorganize, not only the religious life and beliefs but also the church, the political organization, and society itself so that they would be modeled by the literal reading of the sacred texts.

This emphasis on the written word and the literal interpretation of the same brought Calvin to despise the physicality of representations as an improper way of referring to the divine—that is, he believed that the visible could not contain the invisible, or the material in the spiritual—and he joined the attack on images that had been started by Luther and radicalized by Zwingli:

We think it unlawful to make any visible figure as a representation of God, because he hath himself forbidden it, and it cannot be done without detracting, in some measure, from his glory . . . If, then, it be not lawful to make any corporeal representation of God, much less will it be lawful to worship it for God, or to worship God in it. We conclude, therefore that nothing should be painted and engraved but objects visible to our eyes: the Divine Majesty, which is far above the reach of human sight, ought not to be corrupted by unseemly figures. (Calvin 1844: 108)

Therefore, Calvin does not reject the value of art (which he considers gifts of God), not even in its application toward the church, but he does reject the efforts made in trying to represent God, basically because he does not trust human nature. He argues that idols “were forbidden to the Jews because they were prone to superstition” (99), and, from there, he develops a lack of trust for men that makes him try to reduce the dangers that he could encounter as much as possible, including, of course, the use of images in worship because

since the whole world has been seized with such brutal stupidity, as to be desirous of visible representations of the Deity, and thus to fabricate gods of wood, stone, gold, silver and other inanimate and corruptible materials, we ought to hold this as a certain principle, that, whenever any image is made as a representation of God, the Divine glory is corrupted by an impious falsehood. Therefore God, in the law, after having asserted the glory of Deity to belong exclusively to himself, when he intends to show what worship he approves or rejects, immediately adds, “Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness.” In these words he forbids us to attempt a representation of him in any visible figure . . . God compares not idols with each other, as though one were better or worse than another; but he rejects, without a single exception, all statues, pictures, and other figures, in which idolaters imagined that he would be near them. (98)

Therefore, the erection of images of God or, for that matter, any representation of him, is not only idolatrous and superstitious but also goes against the main principle that rules Calvin’s doctrine: having the whole creation glorify God by worship and obedience, since the images would be in direct conflict with Calvin’s reading of the scriptures.

But, along with the corrupt nature of humankind, Calvin found another subject toward which to direct his blame and, just as Erasmus did years earlier, Calvin singles out the Catholic Church and the papists as responsible for the spread of idolatry all over the Christian world:

If the papists have any shame, let them no longer use this subterfuge, that images are the books of the illiterate; which is so clearly refuted by numerous testimonies from Scripture. Yet, though I should concede this point to them it would avail them but little in defense of their idols. What monsters they obtrude in the place of Deity is well known. But what they call the pictures or statues of their saints—what are they but examples of the most abandoned luxury and obscenity? . . . Whom, then, do the papists call illiterate, whose ignorance will suffer them to be taught only by images? Those, truly, whom the Lord acknowledges as his disciples; whom he honours with the revelation of his heavenly philosophy . . . In fact, those who presided over the

churches, resigned to idols the office of teaching, for no other reason but because they were themselves dumb. (103–4)

Calvin nostalgically remembers a time when the Catholic Church had no images and when the delivery of the doctrine was not as corrupt, but since then, he observes a pattern by which any new convert could keep his pagan activities under the disguise of Christian themes, a practice that, we must consider, was probably taking place as he spoke, though not with the permission of the Catholic *conquistadores*.

To give a more rounded idea of how much idolatry and false worship upset Calvin, I would like to give one more example, this time directly related to his own life (or rather, death). In 1564, debilitated by a series of illnesses, Calvin died in Geneva. But he took the time to specify in his will that he wanted to be buried in an unmarked grave *to avoid any possibility of idolatry*, in a last attempt to be consistent with his theology, which humbles man and exalts God above all.

But Erasmus, Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin were not the only ones who realized that Christianity needed reform. Catholics themselves started a movement within, even before the Protestant Reformation as such was on its way, which culminated in the Council of Trent (1545–63), a turning point in the efforts of the Catholic Church to respond to the challenge of the Protestant Reformation and a key part of the Counter-Reformation. Because of the circumstances in which it was born, the council first reacted against Protestantism and then, as a consequence of it, reshaped Catholic doctrine. So it refused any concessions to the Protestants and, in the process, codified Catholic dogma far more than ever before. It opposed Protestantism by reaffirming the existence of seven sacraments, transubstantiation, purgatory, and clerical celibacy, and decrees were issued in favor of relics, indulgences, and the veneration of the Virgin Mary and the saints. Therefore, tradition was contemplated as one of the elements that constitute the Catholic way of life and worship, but, at the same time, the council took steps to eliminate many of the major abuses within the church that had partly incited the Reformation.

PARALLEL PATHS

Even when the two processes that I have presented until now seem so far one from another—that is, the incorporation of America into the European imaginary and the Protestant and Catholic Reformations—it is important to realize that they were not isolated events. Both processes were taking place at roughly the same time, but the coincidences do not stop there. I think it is remarkable that at the very same time that Hernán Cortés and his men were encountering *idolatry* in the New World, in 1521, Germans began to define Catholic symbols and rituals as idolatrous

with nearly identical language.³⁵ But it is not only through chronology that these two key events are related. In fact, they are interwoven, and the two are expressions of the same phenomenon. The concern for idolatry is, at the bottom, a late medieval development and a part of a new system of ethics. Therefore, it was not a concept invented for Europeans to refer to the *other* in the colonies, and though it was applied in this situation, the concept of idolatry was created by Europeans to refer to themselves, to other Europeans who had gone beyond the set boundaries and, thus, the plasticity of the term. It was created to discover the enemy within, either by confession or other methods, and it was only convenient to reshape it in order to describe the *other*, though that was not the primary goal of this concept. I think it is essential to point out these connections and to them I will devote the remainder of this book.

As we have seen, Zwingli was very thorough in presenting the differences between true and false religion as a way of creating a distance between reformed protestants and old-fashioned Catholics, but this distinction can also be found in the chronicles of Bernal Díaz del Castillo, a soldier in Cortés's army who, when confronted with the reality of New Spain, cannot help but marvel at the expressions of false religion that fill the "new" territories: "Llevaronnos a unas casas muy grandes, que eran adoratorios de sus ídolos y estaban muy bien labradas de cal y canto y tenían figurados en unas paredes muchos bultos de serpientes y culebras y otras pinturas de ídolos, y alrededor de uno como altar, lleno de gotas de sangre muy fresca; y a otra parte de los ídolos tenían unas señales como a manera de cruces, pintados de otros bultos de indios; de todo lo cual nos admiramos, como cosa nunca vista ni oída" (Díaz del Castillo 1999: 69).³⁶ In this description, there is an obvious correlation

35 Gruzinski reflects on this point in his *Images at War*, where he recognizes a number of parallels: 'But how could one not note certain chronological coincidences? American idolatry was not unique during the sixteenth century. Indeed, the Mexican iconoclasm reigning from 1525 to about 1540 was contemporaneous with the European one, a movement that condemned the worship of saints and banned their representation. While the Franciscans were launching their first expeditions around the lagoon, Farel, the Reformer, was throwing St. Anthony's statue into the Aleine River in Montbéliard (March 1525), and fomenting raids against altars and images. In the following years idolatry was solemnly 'removed' in the Swiss towns that had been won over to the Reformation. In 1536 King Henry VIII had St. Edmund's two shrines in Suffolk destroyed 'for avoiding the abomination of idolatry.' The same year, 'following the example of the good and the faithful kings of the Old Testament, 'the council of Bern gave the order 'to suppress all idolatries, all images and idols. 'As if there were transoceanic echo, the emperor Charles the Fifth enjoined his Mexican viceroy in 1538 to have the 'cues [sanctuaries] and the idols' temples thrown over and suppressed' and to 'seek out the idols and burn them.' While the Spanish were undertaking the purging the entire continent of its idols, Tudor England was progressively destroying its own images as the Reformation became more radical. Churches were even whitewashed, as the pyramids had been in Mexico' (2001: 63).

36 They took us to very big houses, that were chapels for their idols and where very well carved in lime and had in their walls carved many shapes of snakes and serpents and other paintings of idols, and around one of them, there was an altar, full of drops of fresh blood; and, on the other side of the idols, they had

between the images of the pagan idols and the symbols that Catholics relate to the Devil (like snakes) and, in spite of the true admiration that all that fine work produces in the Spaniards, the viewing of the temples is accompanied by a negative judgment of the Indians. In this case they are presented as civilized enough to build marvelous places of worship, an intellectual capacity that will be necessary in the process of being evangelized; but on the other hand, these places are not consecrated to the *right* divinity, but rather to the symbols of the Devil, including the infamous serpents.

At this point I would like to pause for a moment and introduce a reflection about the so-called Indian idols I have been referring to. I have been using this word (idol) to refer to an image or object that is worshipped as opposed to the worship of God as defined from the Catholic point of view. This is also the way I understand this word to be used in the writings of Bernal Díaz del Castillo and others who witnessed the moment of the first encounter (even when Bernal himself wrote about his experiences years after they happened). Nevertheless, as Gruzinski points out, “Columbus . . . took care to avoid the word ‘idol,’ denying idolatry to instead denounce the fraud of the caciques handling the *cemies*,” which he conceives different than idols and defines as follows:

Unlike idols representing the devil or false gods, the *cemies* were essentially things, endowed or not with a life: “dead things shaped of stone or made of wood,” “a piece of wood that appeared to be a living thing,” objects that recalled memories of the ancestors. They were stones to relieve birthing pains; or whose use brought rain, sun, or the harvests, like those Columbus sent to King Ferdinand of Aragón: or yet similar to those pebbles the islanders kept wrapped up in cotton inside little baskets and that “they feed what they eat.” (Gruzinski 2001:11)

Therefore, the concept of “idol” is not a universal one but rather a quite relative term that characterizes the gaze of the one looking as much as the object described:

Idol and image belonged to the same mold, that of the West. Endowed from the very beginning with a demonic identity, function and form, the “evil and lying,” “dirty and abominable” idol could only exist in the gaze of the one who discovered it, was

some signs like crosses, painted with other shapes like Indians, all of which we admired like something we had never seen or heard of before (my translation).

It is important to remember that Bernal Díaz del Castillo began writing his history in 1568, almost fifty years after the events described during the first arrival of the Spaniards, and in response to an alternative history written by Cortés’s chaplain, who had not actually participated in the campaign. This is the reason why he called his book *Historia de la verdadera conquista de Nueva España*, that is, “True History of the Conquest of New Spain.” Also, because of this chronology, it is possible that his descriptions of the Mexican idols and pagan temples had been affected by the debate about idolatry already omnipresent in Europe.

scandalized by it, and destroyed it. It was a creation of the spirit touched by the Western vision of things . . . The idol also designated, as much as it condensed and interpreted, a selective perception of native cultures, an understanding centered on figurative and anthropomorphical representations (statues, paintings) that the Spanish used as one of their keys in their interpretation of the adversary . . . But what did idols become in the eyes of the Spanish? Faked objects, illusion-machines designed to facilitate fraud; but also devils, “evil things we call devils” (which explains why the idols were afraid of the Christian images), or even objects into which a demon had been inserted . . . This demonic “possession” was not only how the conquistadors saw matters: even the most learned clerks confirmed that “the Spanish believed it, and that was as it must have been.” (Gruzinski 2001: 42–43)

In this situation, Díaz del Castillo shows the Spaniards as taking charge of the process of eliminating *idolatry*, presenting the *true* religion, and incorporating the Indians to the Western imaginary all at once: “Los españoles aceptan gustosos el regalo, pero exigen que los indios abandonen sus cultos y abracen el cristianismo. Pese a la fuerte resistencia local, los españoles destruyen los ídolos, construyen un altar con una cruz y una imagen de la Virgen y bautizan a los indios”³⁷ (1999: 174). As we can see, we are witnessing a process of substitution of symbols: the Spaniards take down the snakes and put up the image of the Virgin, while there is no mention of any attempt to educate the Indians. Even more, sometimes the symbols are the same, as happens in the case of the crosses (the Indian replaced by the Catholic), and it is only the meaning attached to it that is in question. But in my view, the meaning of the second cross does not stress the triumph of Christianity over paganism, or the spreading of the evangelization, but rather the change of hegemony. It is, therefore, a campaign based on the visibility of the symbols, not on doctrine, obsessed with erecting large crosses as a sign of the Spanish colonial power in order to show their increasing territories, a gesture that leaves the Christian creed in a secondary position. Religious identity in the Early Modern Americas is constituting itself as a particular confluence of interactions with foreign landscapes, native tribes and complex indigenous civilizations, and new models of community and social interaction (Kirk and Rivett 2014: 6).

Therefore, if idolatry was understood by Las Casas and St. Thomas of Aquinas as excessive devotion—that is, as a misguided thirst to connect with a superior being—there were numerous opinions to the contrary such as the ones voiced by Zwingli, Bernal Díaz, Luther, Calvin, Acosta, and Francisco de Ávila, and so on,

³⁷ Spaniards happily accept the gift, but they demand that the Indians abandon their cults and embrace Christianity. In spite of the strong local resistance, Spaniards destroy idols, build an altar with a cross and an image of the Virgin, and baptize Indians (my translation).

who cannot separate idolatry from its superstitious roots and who link it to the diabolic. In the first group, the deviation in the natural drive to find God is due to a number of factors that include, above all, ignorance, a crucial element that would exonerate Indians from guilt and put it on the one who takes advantage of this ignorance, that is, the Devil. According to Garcilaso, the Andeans (pre-Inca empire) were in this situation: they were idolatrous, but not by choice, a state that can be easily remedied through preaching. This is the same position that Erasmus would adopt in relation to the Catholics, since he thought that their corruption was based on lax, ignorant ways, but never on a servitude to the Devil himself.

The difference with the second group is considerable, since in the latter it would be the corrupted and devilish nature of the Incans themselves that would consciously open a door to the actions of the Devil. Therefore, Acosta, as did the reformers, believed in the diabolic and manipulative nature of the corrupted natives, an element that made the evangelization that much harder and that, in the context of Europe, meant the schism of the church.

In relation to this, Luther saw the pope as the greatest worshipper of idols, since he adored the Virgins and saints, and the reformer attributes this *fragmentation of deity* to his corrupt ways. This same phenomenon takes place in the Indies, where the Andeans, just like the Catholics, have many *idols* that, as the saints or Virgins, are used for specific purposes. For these reasons, Zwingli and Calvin want to abolish and destroy the images, and though, in principle, Bernal Díaz agrees, in his case he differentiates between pagan images and Christian ones. This distinction had no place in the reformers' mindset, since for them the visible could not contain the invisible, and therefore no material could even attempt to represent the divine without corrupting it, but both the natives Indians and the Catholics thought otherwise.

Luther argues that the images are not corrupt in themselves, but their use is, so he insists on the power of preaching rather than that of the destruction of the idols, an idea that is reflected, at roughly the same time, in the thoughts of Las Casas. But Calvin observes that the pagan rituals are sneaking into the Christian universe, disguised as Christian themes that were in reality only occult pagan beliefs, a situation that, as we will see in the following chapters, was also happening in the New World as a product of an impossible synchronism.

As we can see, the dialogue between Protestant Europe and the Indies was well established, and the points of debate were numerous. The matters that were being treated in the two poles were parallel and, though they referred to very different realities, the search for establishing a true religion seemed to have *idolatry* as its core.

At this moment, I would like to step back and take some distance in order to paint a much more general picture. This perspective allows us to see that, indeed,

idolatry and no other religious crime was common to all these groups. It was part of the way Protestants saw Catholics, as it was present in the way Catholics related to the native population of the Americas, but, moreover, it had also been at stake in the relations that governed the interactions between Catholics, on the one side, and Moors and Jews, on the other, while in the context of the Spanish Reconquista that I propose as an antecedent for the transatlantic enterprise. Therefore, taken one by one, we can establish the idolatrous ways that Protestants saw in the Catholic practice, one that they considered too invested in the material, the visible, and not so deeply committed with the spiritual, the invisible.³⁸ At the same time, the Spanish Catholics were charging the Indians with the same crime they were being accused of—idolatry—since the newly arrived saw the different native religiosities as cults to idols, things created, with no regard for a divine being. The final stage of this itinerary takes us to the situation of the Moors and Jews in the soon-to-be Spain, in the process of the Reconquista. They were also accused of idolatry, an accusation that could appear shocking being that neither Moors nor Jews include images in their worship. Nevertheless, to the eyes of the Catholics of the time, they too were named idolaters since their worship was to a god other than the Catholic one (seen as the only true one from the perspective of the dominant group), a god that was not Father, Son, and Holy Ghost but rather an invention, a new god created to their specifications, manufactured to their taste: an idol. “Quien tiene falsa creencia en Dios hace y adora ídolos y por eso los judíos y sarracenos, que no creen que Dios uno es Padre, Hijo y Espíritu Santo sino sólo Dios uno, se hacen un ídolo y dios nuevo, que no es Padre ni Hijo ni Espíritu Santo, y por eso adoran un ídolo al hacerse un dios que no es Padre etc.”³⁹ Therefore, even if somebody argued that the God of the Catholics and the Jews is the same, the lack of the two other *personae* in the latter makes them of a completely different nature.

38 By contrast, from the Catholic point of view, Protestantism is indeed heretical since it proposes a new dogma based on a deviation from the Catholic one. Nevertheless, the Catholic Church nowadays tends not to refer to Protestantism as such. Modern usage favors referring to Protestants as a “separated brethren” rather than “heretics.”

39 This statement belongs to St. Vicent Ferrer’s sermons (1350–1419). He was a Dominican preacher (Orden de Predicadores) from Valencia, Spain, who played a critical role during the events of the late 1300s and early 1400s that led to the forced conversions of thousands of Jews and the massacres of others (Ferrer 2002: 104). Vicent Ferrer became an invaluable source in the party of Benedict XIII (born Pedro Martínez de Luna, one of the Avignon popes who was antipope from 1394 to 1409) who, lacking the support he desperately needed for his papal candidacy, sent the Dominican friar on a campaign to evangelize the Jews of Spain. It is possible that the Avignon pope, Spanish in origin, thought that by converting the Spanish Jews, he would get the support from all the Catholic countries, but it is unlikely that he was so candid on the matter. My translation: Whoever has a false belief in God, makes and worships idols, and that is why Jews and Saracens, who do not believe that one God is Father, Son and Holy Ghost but only God, make an idol and a new god that is not Father, nor Son, nor Holy Ghost, and that is why they worship an idol, in making a god that is not Father, etc.

This same author, Saint Vicent Ferrer, in his defense of the Christians argued that

Las imágenes no son adoradas por los cristianos sino la causa del recuerdo en la representación, y de esto no deben extrañarse los judíos porque todo el templo de Salomón estaba lleno de figuras, esto es, de ángeles y de otras representaciones, como se contiene en Éxodo, 25 . . . Y advierte que Abraham no adoraba tres figuras sino a un solo Dios que es tres personas y así judíos, ¿por qué os admiráis si nosotros creemos que la Trinidad es un solo Dios, puesto que Abraham no lo dijo en plural sino en singular? etc. También de modo parecido los moros dicen que nosotros adoramos las imágenes etc., pero es la ignorancia la que se lo hace decir, pues ellos en sus mezquitas adoran dirigiéndose a la pared y, sin embargo, no adoran la pared sino a Dios. También los judíos, cuando leen la ley de Moisés en la sinagoga y mueven todas las cabezas hacia la escritura, no la adora sino a Dios representado en ella, y por eso dice Moisés según Éxodo, 20: *No adorarás ni venerarás*, y no dijo: “No tendrás,” sino *no adorarás*.⁴⁰ (575)

In this sense, and under this concept of idolatry, it is easy to bring the native Indians within the same category and accusation of idolatry since, no matter whether anybody thought that there was a god or a spirit within a particular *huaca*, for instance, it would have been considered the wrong god (meaning not the Catholic one, from their point of view), and the worship of a false deity would have also been seen as idolatry (in the case that the Spaniards had actually believed that the *huaca* was a representation and not the deity in itself).

As we can see, the attempts at defining idolatry, understanding it, and fighting it occupied a good number of centuries, but the questions could be reopened today, as I tried to point out in my description of the Holy Week in Málaga (Southern Spain). Therefore, the answer about my idolatrous ways (or not) will depend on the approach taken on this superstitious act. As I have tried to show, idolatry does not have a single meaning, but it is a term full of plasticity that refers back to a heterogeneous reality and, this is the aspect that fascinates me, defines the point of view of that who approaches as much as the practices themselves. It defines the observer even more than the observed practices, and in doing that, it places itself in the center of the debate about identity and the struggles between the dominant and the

⁴⁰ My translation: Images are not adored by Christians, but the remembrance in the representation, and this should not be odd to Jews because the Temple of Solomon was full of images, that is, angels and other representations, as it is written in Exodus, 25 . . . And Abraham warns that he did not worship images, but a true God that is three persons and so Jews, why do you marvel if we believe that the Trinity is only one God, since Abraham didn't say it in plural but in singular? etc. The same way, the Moors say that we worship images etc., but it is ignorance that makes them say so because, in their mosques, they worship looking at the wall but they do not worship the wall, but God. Also the Jews, when they read the Law of Moses in the synagogue and they all bow their heads towards the writing, they don't worship it, but God represented in it, and that is why Moses writes in Exodus 20: “You will not adore nor worship,” and he did not say: “You will not have,” but rather you will not worship.

subaltern, the colonizer and the colonized. But some questions remain such as how did Spain react to the first “infidels” they came in contact with: Jews and Moors? How did this experience shape the first contact that Spaniards established with the transatlantic *other*? These are some of the questions that I will be addressing in the next chapter, in which I will take my analysis to the first years in New Spain.

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