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CHAPTER 3

THE OTHER AS A MIRROR: IMAGINARY AND ALTERITY IN THE IBERO-AMERICAN COLONIZATION (16TH–17TH CENTURIES)

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ABSTRACT

This article analyzes the Ibero-American colonization process in the 16th and 17th centuries from the perspective of the notions of imaginary and alterity, drawing on the theoretical contributions of Adone Agnolin (2007), Tzvetan Todorov (2010), Guillermo Giucci (1992), Laura de Mello e Souza (1986), among others, understanding the encounter between Europeans and indigenous peoples as a profoundly symbolic, cultural, and epistemological phenomenon. It argues that America was not perceived as an empty space, but as a territory inhabited by complex societies that challenged the traditional categories of European thought. In the face of this confrontation, the indigenous people were frequently represented as barbaric, bestial, or monstrous, functioning as an inverted mirror in which Europeans projected their own religious, cultural, and political conflicts, intensified by the context of the Protestant Reformation and the Catholic Counter-Reformation. The actions of the Society of Jesus are examined as a central element of this process, since the missionaries produced catechetical narratives and practices that, while seeking conversion, legitimized the subjugation and domination of native peoples. Through the analysis of Jesuit accounts, letters, and interpretations, especially regarding practices such as cannibalism and war rituals, the study demonstrates that indigenous otherness was constructed from European categories that hierarchized cultures and justified the expansion of Christianity and imperial power. It concludes that colonization must be understood as a process in which identity and otherness mutually constitute each other, revealing both the violence of cultural imposition and the crisis of meaning experienced by Europe itself in the face of the encounter with the other.

Keywords: Otherness; European imaginary; Ibero-American colonization; Society of Jesus; Indigenous peoples.

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INTRODUCTION

The incorporation of American territories into the European horizon, starting in the 16th century, should be understood less as a mere geographical expansion and more as an epistemological event, in which Europeans were compelled to confront forms of humanity that escaped the traditional categories of their historical experience. The encounter with the so-called "New World" did not merely reveal unknown lands and peoples; it produced a profound shift in the way Europe thought about itself, projecting onto the other—the indigenous, pagan, savage—the conflicts, tensions, and expectations that permeated the European cultural universe.

Far from representing an empty or amorphous space, America presented itself as a territory densely inhabited by societies endowed with complex social, ritualistic, and symbolic organization. This fact, however, generated embarrassment rather than recognition. Indigenous alterity, instead of being understood according to its own logic, was framed within an imaginary inherited from the medieval Christian tradition, in which difference tended to be interpreted as absence, deviation, or imperfection. Thus, the other was not perceived in its singularity but reduced to an inverted mirror in which Europeans sought to reaffirm their own civilizational identity.

It is within this horizon that the role of the Society of Jesus is inscribed, whose missionaries assumed the position of privileged mediators between the European world and indigenous societies. Jesuit narratives—letters, reports, sermons, and theatrical representations—not only described cultural practices considered strange, such as cannibalism or war rituals, but also produced meanings about them, integrating them into a symbolic system that justified domination, catechesis, and subjugation. The evangelizing mission, far from constituting an exclusively spiritual enterprise, was directly linked to the political project of the Portuguese Crown and to the broader context of the Catholic Counter-Reformation, in which the expansion of Christianity was intertwined with the affirmation of a universal order.

In this sense, the notion of alterity proves central. As Agnolin suggests, the other is not merely the one who differs, but the one through whom the historical subject defines itself. The indigenous person, often represented as barbaric, bestial, or monstrous, becomes the symbolic place where Europeans deposit what they refuse to recognize in themselves. War, cannibalism, and the supposed absence of religion thus function as signs of a radical difference that, paradoxically, reveals a disturbing proximity: the other appears as an inverted model of the self.

Therefore, this study proposes to analyze the representations of medieval Iberian culture projected onto Latin America, paying attention to the ways in which the European imaginary—marked by medieval legacies and modern religious conflicts—structured the interpretation of the indigenous world. By investigating Jesuit narratives and colonial discourse, we seek to understand how the experience of conquest produced not only the subjugation of the other but also a profound crisis of meaning within

European culture itself. To think about colonization, therefore, is to think about a process in which identity and alterity are mutually constituted, in a continuous game of projections, refusals, and symbolic negotiations that indelibly marked the formation of the Ibero-American world.

DEVELOPMENT

It is not new to speak of Portuguese who permeated the American territory and somehow used it as an apparatus or exploitation colonies, as Ferreira[2],demonstrates in his study. It is also well known that there is a need to broaden this knowledge regarding the actions of both sides—Portuguese and natives—who were already organized with a unique and subsistent structure that distinguished them from each other. However, despite these important and relevant facts, this is not what the present study seeks to answer. Although it deals with the initial elements of this encounter, it focuses on analyzing the meeting between these civilizations, which, despite being disparate, greatly influenced, identified with, and inculcated aspects into each other's society. From this perspective, we identify thoughts and customs as forms of cultural imposition, thus guiding the analysis toward these disparities in the context of the other, centered on the imaginary and alterity between natives and Portuguese. Regarding Portuguese religious matters, we emphasize the Jesuits as protagonists in this process versus the ritualistic organization of the "natives."

What matters, therefore, is to identify as a purpose the fact that "the self defines itself through the other, of which it is intimately the vehicle," and consequently, the other appears as a model of the self. In this indication, Agnolin points out how complex the notion of alterity is: when we think of the other from the perspective of the self, we are thinking about conflicts that permeate our own reality and that, unconsciously, we attribute to the other—the conflicts we experience within ourselves.

As properties of the Portuguese Crown, to a greater or lesser degree, all social groups inhabiting the Colony were exposed to the expansion of this way of being. This task specifically fell to the missionaries of the Society of Jesus, disseminators of Portuguese identity in Brazilian lands.

The encounter between Europeans—especially the Portuguese—and the natives brought a range of conflicts and representations about the imaginary (what was imagined to be found) and alterity (how the other was perceived), in a non-acceptance of difference, where, through its representation, conflicts experienced by Europeans were attributed to the other, leading to the death of many indigenous people who did not remain passive under domination but fought and, through their ritualistic representations, such as cannibalism, reaffirmed a "culture" common among them, including in the case of the Tupinambá, which is one of the objects of analysis by the authors discussed.

[2] In addition to defending the territory, the colonization of Brazil had another purpose: to transform the Colony into a profitable enterprise for Portugal. (Ferreira, Olavo L., História do Brasil, 2nd ed. São Paulo: Ática, p. 25).

Thinking about Iberian colonization in American territories means emphasizing its importance as a cultural fusion inherent to this territory, for we are not listing an empty, shapeless land, but a defined culture that already presented diverse forms among the existing tribes—what we call cultural diversities. At the moment of "introduction"—of Europeans—into this colonial coexistence, we observe various representations of power and religion that differed in practices but were assiduously present in both contexts. This cultural diversity and differentiation brought the idea of submission and dependence of the native, according to Giucci: "Implicitly, the native is integrated as a subject under the dominion of the Lusitanian crown, entering into a relationship of inequality and dependence relative to the direct emissary of this distant power." (Giucci, 1992: 47).

Estrangement was inevitable for all parties involved in this process, as each, with its own artifices and conduct, sought to demonstrate—or attempted to demonstrate—the superiority or vitality of its religious beliefs. It is important to note that both sides (natives and Europeans) tried in every way to circumvent the imposition of the other's "religion"[3], since the imposition as a form of superiority of the European colonizers' religion is identified throughout various bibliographic accounts. According to Souza, the vision of the colonizers (Portuguese) was characterized by: "…the idea that the discovery of Brazil was a divine action; that among the peoples, God had chosen the Portuguese; that once they became masters of the new colony, they had the duty to produce material wealth—by exploiting nature—and spiritual wealth—by rescuing souls for the divine patrimony." (Souza, 1986: 35).

To better link these thoughts, based on power relations between Europeans—colonizers—and natives—colonized—we develop this problematization, addressing their most expressive confrontations, based on assumptions outlined by the European historical-religious panorama, tied to contexts such as the Protestant Reformation and the Catholic Counter-Reformation.

Through this problematization, we seek to identify the religious motivation among the "navigators," driven by the impetus to disseminate Christianity, rescuing souls for the divine patrimony, as Souza notes, which was evident in the encounter with the other. The religious emphasis in the expansionist context is so vivid that Columbus makes several references to the Crusades, which had been abandoned in the Middle Ages, whose main objective was the Reconquest of the Holy Land, highlighting the importance of religion[4], the Reconquest, and its dissemination in the territories encountered: "The

[3] It is important to emphasize that in the period mentioned—the late Middle Ages and the beginning of the Modern Age—religion and power were intertwined, granting the Church, through its representative—the Pope—the highest authority. "The Pope cannot be judged by anyone; the Roman Church has never erred and will never err until the end of time; The Roman Church was founded solely by Christ; only the Pope can depose and appoint bishops; only he can convene ecclesiastical assemblies and authorize Canon Law; only he can review his judgments; only he can use the imperial insignia; he can depose emperors, absolve vassals from their duties of obedience; all princes must kiss his feet." (Southern, 1970, p. 102).

[4] The concept of religion represents a historical product and, as such, is absent in the languages of "primitive" peoples. Even in classical Latin, the term religio (from which comes religere, to bind) only referred to certain behaviors that today we would define as "religious." (Agnolin, 2005, p. 123).

expansion of Christianity is much more important to Columbus than gold… I hope in Our Lord to be able to propagate His holy name and His Gospel throughout the universe" ("Letter to Pope Alexander VI, February 1502"). (Todorov, 1993: 10).

The systematic study of divinity, its essence, existence, and attributes underwent ideological renewals, in light of assumptions inherent to the model of Protestantism disseminated throughout Europe, which brought popular access to letters through biblical translations into vernacular languages.

> "…in addition to the impulse toward letters and sciences, the 16th century presents a general and significant renewal of Theology. Beyond the re-approximation/re-reading—with new philological instruments and new translations, in vernacular—of the Old Testament and the works of the Church Fathers, this renewal of Theology was also realized through the direct study of the works of St. Thomas Aquinas. The Dominicans of the School of Salamanca and the Jesuits of Coimbra were at the forefront of this renewed and important tradition of critical studies. Among the most relevant intellectual figures of this movement, suffice it to mention Francisco de Vitoria, Domingos Soto, Belchior Cano, Pedro da Fonseca, and Francisco Suárez." (Agnolin, 2007: 24).

This theological renewal was incited by the Protestant movement, as mentioned by Agnolin, characterizing a broader sense of the relationship between divinity and humanity, making the human being directly linked to the divine. The approach to letters and translations was a way to bring this ideology closer, allowing the individual to have direct contact with the divine—not only through documentary sources such as the Bible and works written by the Church Fathers but also through a closer relationship between the human and the divine, reducing this space and distance. Undoubtedly, the Lutheran success, compared to the Catholic world, is due to the fact that the Christian is assumed as an individual directly connected to the divine. "But it is important to take into account that, in the philosophical and theological interpretation of biblical texts, Erasmus and Luther were the most emblematic fruits of the profound philological revolution carried out by Italian humanism." (Agnolin, 2007: 26).

Thinking, therefore, about this "New World" requires a careful look at what was forming in the context outlined by Europeans in the paths that permeated their impetus and quest. According to Agnolin, "the fact of having encountered a complex and organized civilization, such as the Aztec and later the Inca, caused discreet embarrassment for the Orient" (Agnolin, 2005, p. 177), referring to the colonies belonging to the Spanish crown. However, a similar factor was evident in the extreme organization that surpassed the imagined context regarding the so-called "Indians[5]" in the Portuguese colonies, for the

[5] Throughout this work, the term "Indian" is used in accordance with the historical documentation analyzed, in which this nomenclature appears recurrently in colonial accounts from the 16th and 17th centuries. Its use does not imply uncritical adherence to a category now recognized as generalizing but preserves the historicity of the sources and highlights the meanings attributed by European agents to the American other. In contemporary historiography, the term "indigenous peoples" is adopted to acknowledge the ethnic and cultural diversity of native populations; thus, when used in this study, "Indian" should be understood as a documentary and analytical category linked to the colonial imaginary.

organization of this society was so relevant that it caused embarrassment to the Portuguese in how to deal with that situation arising from the conquest of the New World. They faced a society extremely organized in its rituals and hierarchical structure, ensuring that even with a leader, power did not concentrate in his hands—that is, without granting superior power to anyone—so that the notion of civility and egalitarian society was maintained, each fulfilling their "role" in this context. "The 'savage' rejects not only personal power but also power itself." (Agnolin, 2005, p. 186).

Friendly relations, at first, began to become conflictual until reaching intolerance; alterity became evident, given the imaginary held about a certain people. Thus, Europeans sought, in Aristotelian terms, to name them as different, making them inferior to themselves—as servants or made to serve. This counterpoint is evident in the issue of cannibalism. According to Agnolin, "If cannibalism constitutes the key element of each successive interpretation of the conquest, we identify that cannibalism, according to Lévi-Strauss, is good to think with," since there was an identity observed by various writers, who sometimes "defended" them and sometimes "accused" them, as in the case of Sepúlveda, who called them sordid dogs, while Las Casas titled them "noble savages."

What matters, therefore, is to identify as a purpose the fact that "the self defines itself through the other, of which it is intimately the vehicle," and consequently, the other appears as a model of the self. In this indication, Agnolin points out how complex the notion of alterity is: when we think of the other from the perspective of the self, we are thinking about conflicts that permeate our own reality and that, unconsciously, we attribute to the other—the conflicts we experience within ourselves.

The same discourse emerges when we analyze the different texts written by Europeans—narratives, Jesuit letters—that bring to the indigenous person the symbol of cannibalism, anthropophagy. From this perspective, the cannibal can therefore also represent "the other too similar to the self, a mirror in which one refuses to contemplate oneself. The monstrosity of the Savage: a desperate effort to establish difference at any cost, that is, to elaborate from oneself a reality different from the other. Therefore, it is commonly stated that estrangement, this alterity, cannot be established without the other, where each group needs the other to define itself, and thus victory is never definitive. This indicates that war does not arise because of alterity but creates alterity, and the enemy is initially always an equal." (Agnolin, 2005, p. 192).

From this perspective, we observe that it is no different in the encounter between Jesuits and colonizers with the "Indians" who inhabited the territory that would become the Portuguese American colonies. This was due to the systematic organization observed in indigenous society, which, according to Florestan Fernandes, states that the formation of war or the triggers for conflicts arise from a "male activity," mainly in Tupinambá society, highlighting that war is provoked by men called "military" and not by women. According to Florestan Fernandes, after the combats between enemy warriors, the

victorious men had as a fundamental role with the prisoners the execution of reception rituals and anthropophagic ceremonies. (Hernandes, 2006, p. 180).

When analyzing such a context, what constituted the structure of Tupinambá indigenous society was characterized by Europeans as acts of inferiority, which, according to the Aristotelian view, would be the factor that justified attributing to the foreign culture a sense of inferiority, to legitimize their actions later intensified by intolerance, as addressed at the beginning of this work. According to Isidore of Seville, while prodigies served to predict, portents to announce, and ostents to manifest, monsters participated in the history of salvation by showing, warning, and signifying the will of the Lord. (Giucci, 1992, p. 78). Author Guilhermo Giucci highlights that the imaginary regarding the distant and unknown was also fueled by travel narratives to the East by Herodotus, Pliny, Saint Isidore, and Marco Polo, in which the elements that compose the "marvelous" are always exalted: prodigal and exuberant nature, leisure, and promise of great wealth. Thus, the entire organization unfolded in the impetus of travelers of the marvelous, who sought to justify the act of colonization, and in this religious version, the marginal escort of the message of Christ and the apostles carried the mission of freeing the hesitant and unbelievers from error.

From this point raised by Giucci, we will discuss the emphasis of Jesuit work reinforced by the context addressed by Agnolin regarding symbolic mediations and indigenous culture: Jesuit interpretation of indigenous practices, which had as its main question how to transform the pagan into a Christian, reducing the different to the same—that is, an attempt to make the different like oneself, as Europeans saw themselves and unconsciously wanted to make them equal, not knowing how to deal with difference or not realizing it. Imagining difference is what allows one to understand oneself; therefore, homogeneity is the total impossibility of constructing meaning.

The role of the Jesuit in this conception of colonization is fundamental to effect the question of alterity, for indeed few had access to writing; therefore, the documents we have are accounts of a European view of the context surrounding the conception of Portuguese colonization. Jesuits in their reports were sometimes opposed to slavery, sometimes acted as a moderating power, and sometimes appropriated slave labor on a large scale. Thus, Agnolin lists the different accounts and views that at certain moments were attributed to them based on their actions.

The shortage of labor in colonial Brazil was evident, and in the 16th century, this function was assigned to the Indians, as they were numerous and became "easy prey" for manipulation. Thus, the hunt for Indians became a great source of wealth in the colonial period. The Jesuits, despite opposing the "hunt" aimed at slavery, served faithfully to the Portuguese crown, which, allied with the Church, overrode political powers, seeking alternative methods of appropriation and conquest of this native

people. The conquest of slave labor thus became the struggle that permeated not only the sphere of the colonate but also that of the Crown, administrators, and missionaries through alliances.

An important account by Jesuit Father Anchieta reveals that they were "people so indomitable and bestial that all their happiness lies in killing and eating human flesh; it is in the theater that this catechetical and combative zeal manifests most prominently." (Agnolin, 2005, p. 107). In this context, we identify the methods used by Jesuits, who, in addition to rhetoric reported by Hansen, also used theater to impress the Indian through representations, where they attempted to indoctrinate them into the specificity of the Church, condemning anthropophagic cannibalism as well as drunkenness, dyeing, dancing, smoking, war, adultery, and polygamy.

To elucidate the process of converting this native to Christianity, we find, according to Agnolin's analysis, different positions among Jesuits, as previously mentioned, and seeing that this process of acculturation of the Indian was marked by intolerance: "concluding that the conversion of the 'sad and vile gentile' could not be achieved through persuasion, Jesuit Father Manuel da Nóbrega points to subjugation as the appropriate path for their Christianization.

> I understand from experience how little could be done in this land for the conversion of the gentile due to their lack of subjection, and they being more like wild beasts than rational people, and being servile people who only submit through fear and subjugation. This submission, according to Nóbrega, would be applied through relentless repression of the (intolerable) customs of the indigenous and the concentration of converts in organized settlements." (Agnolin, 2005, p. 114).

With this statement by Nóbrega and other accounts by priests through letters and narratives, the Society of Jesus legitimizes the harsh work of catechesis in forming a new religiosity, emphasizing the cruelty of the gentile as "cruel inhabitants of the New World." This action and legitimation were only possible through the religious alliance represented in the 16th century by the interdependence between spiritual power (the Pope) and temporal power (the Emperor), where faith and Empire interacted according to the need to expand the Orbis Christianus (Agnolin, 2005, p. 117), that is, a medieval Christian image of the world. It was founded on the belief that the world belongs to God, whose representative on earth is the Catholic Church. As properties of the Portuguese Crown, to a greater or lesser degree, all social groups inhabiting the Colony were exposed to the expansion of this way of being. As we have shown, this task specifically fell to the missionaries of the Society of Jesus, disseminators of Portuguese identity in Brazilian lands.

Throughout the historical process that permeates the beginning of the 16th century, we see the constant unification and reaffirmation of this alliance between Portugal and the Church, represented by the Society of Jesus, which would remain until 1759, when the Pombaline Reform resulted in the expulsion of the Jesuits from both Brazil and Portugal. However, we attribute to Jesuit priests Antônio

Vieira and José de Anchieta the heroic times of education—or the foundation of Brazilian education—developing an important role in this theme, which we will not delve into, as it is not the objective of our research.

Nevertheless, Spain also undertakes the expansionist process as much as Portugal, and as Catholic kingdoms, they align with the expansionist process of interest to the Church, which would concomitantly benefit from this expansion and universalization of Christian belief. Spain, governed by King Charles I, aligned itself with the fight against the Protestant Reformation in a passive and intellectual manner, even with opponents within the kingdom and neighboring Catholic kingdoms that broke with the Church. He remained as a representative of this alliance, supporting the Council of Trent, which would be the greatest symbol of the Counter-Reformation, and consequently sharing the Society of Jesus, which began its activities in Spain in 1543 and was taken to Spanish America in 1566. The motivational impetus determined both in the notion of the kingdom and in the individuals who composed the kingdom of Portugal is equally identified in the Spanish kingdom and in those who composed it, who relentlessly fought for Catholic expansion and non-acceptance of foreign representations, so well elucidated in the narratives of Sepúlveda and Las Casas. Alterity—the non-acceptance of the other—was evident throughout the Ibero-American territory, emphasizing European superiority in the Aristotelian view, attributing inferiority and servitude to the other.

With this context marked by the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, the precursors in this process of expansion and universalization of Christianity will be identified and listed at the most different levels of representation of the imaginary and alterity present among colonizers, Europeans—including the Portuguese—and Jesuits, who represent the Church in Portuguese American lands.

When analyzing the sources presented throughout the text, we seek to understand how this factor of encounter was established, given that the scenario was marked by visible traces of the Protestant Reformation and the prism of the Catholic Counter-Reformation. The question of the other is marked by European alterity in the sense of attributing to the Indian an Aristotelian view that subjugated them, leaving them in inferior conditions as "made to serve." When we pay attention to these indications, we understand that Europe was experiencing these conceptual crises on different philosophical fronts regarding religion, allowing these conflicts to be attributed to indigenous rituals as pagan, irreligious, bestial, and other adjectives assigned to them.

The anthropophagic case—cannibalism—so often mentioned in the narratives as a symbol of the American Indian, came to intensify this assertion, giving meaning to a superior and imposed colonization of European representations over indigenous ones. Therefore, with these indications listed mainly by Agnolin, Giucci, and other researchers addressed in the texts, we understand the notion of alterity and

imaginary that was established in the reading of these works or Jesuit narratives about the inhabitant of the "New World."

It is interesting to highlight and analyze the religious aspect in this understanding, since the focus of the research developed aims to emphasize Jesuit activity as a representation of the Counter-Reformation in the Ibero-American colonies. From this perspective, we observe that Europeans attributed their religious conflicts to indigenous ritualistic representations of the New World, and thus the non-acceptance of any cultural or religious manifestation—even if not proven as religion—according to the movement that was expanding widely throughout Europe, called the Protestant Reformation. Therefore, the European, in alterity, in relation to the other, made an analysis of himself, of the context he experienced, without being aware of it, attributing this personal conflict to the other, to the indigenous person. This we could understand in the Ibero-American case with greater clarity, since both Portugal and Spain would use, to a greater or lesser degree, the imaginary and alterity, always from a vision of superiority, making others—or the other—appear as inferior, made to serve.

The encounter between Europeans—especially the Portuguese—and the natives brought a range of conflicts and representations about the imaginary (what was imagined to be found) and alterity (how the other was perceived), in a non-acceptance of difference, where, through its representation, conflicts experienced by Europeans were attributed to the other, leading to the death of many indigenous people who did not remain passive under domination but fought and, through their ritualistic representations, such as cannibalism, reaffirmed a "culture" common among them, including in the case of the Tupinambá, which is one of the objects of analysis by the authors discussed. In this context, Giucci may seem sympathetic to the conquerors; however, he does not lose sight of the entire violent and bloody process of colonization that unfolded in the Americas, with the shock of alterity and disillusionment being greater than the riches and wonders that had driven them.

Another factor worth noting is that, in the ideology guiding Jesuit missionary practice, this imposition of a transposed meaning (the other) over the proper meaning also occurs within an interpretation of their own (heroic) actions, leading to the understanding that this "theater of images made of heroic gestures of the missionaries comes to condition, in a decisive way, even the placement (meaning) of the other, whether barbarian, innocent, bestial, or naive." With this, we understand that the notion of alterity identified in Jesuit actions did not fully contribute to the fact of "acculturation" or openness to cultural diversities, even because this concept was exercised in a time far removed from the period studied. What was prioritized, therefore, was a culture of superiority and inferiority, of organization or disorganization, of social structure or lack thereof—and this is what frightened the colonizers, as they identified a culture that was already organized in its social structure and maintained

itself, something that was not happening in Europe. “The other appears as the model of the self.” (Agnolin, 2005, p. 182).

CONCLUSION

The analysis of the representations constructed in the encounter between Europeans and indigenous peoples in Ibero-America shows that colonization was not limited to a process of territorial occupation or political imposition but was configured, above all, as a symbolic and cultural phenomenon deeply marked by the notion of alterity. By projecting onto the indigenous peoples images of barbarity, monstrosity, and inferiority, Europeans not only sought to explain the unknown but also attempted to affirm their own identity, anchored in values inherited from the medieval Christian tradition and strained by the religious and intellectual transformations of the 16th century.

In this sense, the European imaginary played a central role in constructing the figure of the “Indian” as a radical other. Practices such as cannibalism, war rituals, and indigenous forms of social organization were interpreted through Aristotelian and theological categories that hierarchized peoples and legitimized domination. Such interpretations, however, reveal less about indigenous societies themselves than about the internal conflicts of Europe, marked by the Protestant Reformation, the Catholic Counter-Reformation, and the need to reaffirm a universal Christian order. Thus, the American other became the symbolic space where fears, tensions, and contradictions of the European world were deposited.

The role of the Society of Jesus was decisive in this process. As privileged mediators between the Crown and native peoples, the Jesuits produced narratives that simultaneously condemned and instrumentalized indigenous alterity. Their reports, letters, and catechetical practices reveal a constant oscillation between defending the indigenous against direct enslavement and legitimizing their subjugation in the name of Christian conversion. Catechesis, far from representing an intercultural dialogue, often operated as a mechanism for reducing difference to sameness, seeking to erase indigenous practices and cosmologies in favor of a universal Christian identity.

Thus, it becomes evident that alterity does not precede conflict but is produced by it. War, religious intolerance, and cultural imposition do not arise as natural responses to difference but as strategies for the symbolic construction of the enemy, necessary for affirming a supposed European superiority. The indigenous person, classified as barbaric or bestial, paradoxically becomes a disturbing mirror in which the European refuses to recognize himself but on which he depends to define his own identity.

It is concluded, therefore, that the representations of medieval Iberian culture projected onto Latin America were fundamental for legitimizing the colonial and missionary project. At the same time, these

representations reveal the limits of European thought in the face of difference, showing that colonization was also a process of crisis and identity redefinition. Thinking about the colonial encounter from the perspective of the imaginary and alterity allows us to understand that the history of conquest is equally the history of the West's difficulties in dealing with the other without reducing, subordinating, or silencing him—a problem that goes beyond the 16th century and remains relevant for understanding colonial legacies in the contemporary world..

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