

ACTA CLASSICA UNIV. SCIENT. DEBRECEN.	LIII.	2017.	pp. 83–107.
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**OTHER PEOPLE’S GODS: ATHEISM, DEMONISATION,
AND INTERPRETATIO FROM STRABO
TO BERNARDINO DE SAHAGÚN**

BY FRANCISCO MARCO SIMÓN

Abstract: This paper aims to compare the different strategies used by the colonizers to conceptualize the gods of the vanquished peoples in the interreligious contacts that took place in Hellenistico-Roman Antiquity and in Mesoamerica, from the negation of the alien’s religious system (a feature of extreme barbarism sometimes described in terms of “atheism”) to the more common demonisation of the foreign divinities in terms of idolatry, to the different levels of assimilating them to one’s own religious cosmology through the diverse mechanisms of *interpretatio*.

Keywords: Mediterranean Antiquity, Mesoamerica, idolatry, atheism, *interpretatio*, interreligious contacts

The arrival of Europeans in the Americas¹ and the events of the following centuries, described by historiography in terms of “discovery”, “meeting”, “clash”, “exchange”, “invasion”, or “invention”, coincided with the blossoming of a Renaissance culture which had rediscovered Classical texts. It was believed at the time that the wisdom of the ancients was the zenith of human knowledge – but the ancients knew nothing of the Americas. Scholars found themselves forced to deal with an explosion in the known species of animals and plants, and a wide variety of cultural practices, and the religious authority had to develop linguistic competencies and knowledge to try to convert a large number of peoples to the Christian faith. Uncategorised information and the peoples that they would get to know forced Europeans to “imagine the other”²

Recent archaeological finds lay the foundation for a comparison between empires like the Roman and Aztec. Both, for instance, used monumental archi-

¹ The most important event since the creation of the world (excluding the incarnation and death of the one who made it), according to López de Gómara (1852, 156); this opinion was shared, for example by Adam Smith in 1776 (Pagden 1982, 10).

² Kupperman 1995, 1-3. On the relationship between the “discovery” of the Americas, the conquest of Granada – with the end of Muslim power in the Iberian Peninsula – and the expulsion of the Jews, all in the same year, 1492, see Lewis 1995.

texture and sculpture programmes to foster a collective social memory in the cultural pluralism that characterised the world systems that they embodied. The recent works in the Templo Mayor in Mexico indicate, for example, that it was a crucial complex for expressing the power of the imperial state. The sculpture programme not only reflected the exploits of their heroic originals, but also those of the Aztec emperors themselves, combining the monumental tradition of Teotihuacán and Tula with the international style of the eastern Nahuas, and featuring the emperors conquering their enemies with the characteristic iconography of Huitzilopochtli, the supreme god whom they represented on earth. Guzmán has emphasised, for example, how the use of *spolia* in the Templo Mayor served to express the subordination of the periphery to the emerging Aztec metropolis,³ which cannot help but recall the representation of defeated peoples in such important Roman spaces as the Fora of Augustus and Trajan.⁴

This paper proposes to explore the principal ways in which the colonisers, both in the ancient Mediterranean and in Mesoamerica, conceptualised other people's gods. One way, rather less common, would underline the absence of religious practices among vanquished peoples, which would then correspond to an absence of gods, that is, with a state of atheism. A second, much more frequently represented attitude in the writings of the European colonisers in New Spain, reduced the indigenous ancestral deities to the status of idols, in a process of 'demonisation', which is very old because it emerged from the exclusivist Judaeo-Christian identity. The third, much more interesting from the perspective of this paper, entailed a negotiation between the religious systems that were in contact, in which the otherness of the alien was adapted to one's own cosmology, through the various processes and levels of *interpretatio* (which could lead to varying degrees of syncretism).

1. Atheism as a mark of radical otherness

It has been said that the writings of Christopher Columbus, in documenting the plurality of extant religious systems, contributed decisively to the appearance of a "new science" – what we call the history of religion.⁵ The description that the admiral made of the first indigenous Americans, the Tainos of the island that would be called Hispaniola, follows the pattern of a "rhetoric of absence"⁶ which summarised the "cultural vacuum" of those indigenous Caribbeans with

³ Guzmán 2016a; 2016b.

⁴ La Rocca – Ungaro – Meneghini 1995.

⁵ Stroumsa 2010; Botta 2013.

⁶ Todorov 1991.

a double nudity: physical nudity or lack of garments, and also an “ontological nudity”⁷ that was embodied by the absence of a religious system per se. Accordingly, the admiral writes that “they will easily become Christian, since it seems to me that *they have no sect*”.⁸ In the same way, the Hieronymite friar Ramón Pané, who from 1493 studied the language, customs, and traditions of the indigenous peoples around the Hispaniolan settlement of La Isabela, and recorded them in his *Relación acerca de las antigüedades de los Indios*, put the following words in Columbus’ mouth: “I have not been able to distinguish idolatry or any other sect”. He followed that by indicating that they had wooden images carved in relief which they called *cemíes*.⁹ In 1553, in the opening of his *Crónica del Perú*, Pedro Cieza de León said that the indigenous people of the Andes had no religion whatsoever “that we understand”, nor did they have places of worship.¹⁰

This absence of gods indicated by a few sources about the indigenous peoples of the Americas also appears in some ancient sources as a feature of extreme barbarism. Although the term *atheos* is not common in Greek authors of the Classical period, and does not seem to have a meaning comparable to the modern one until Plato, its appearance in authors such as Antiphon (1, 21-22), and Aristophanes is moving in that direction.¹¹ A fundamental text, derived from Posidonius of Apameia, is that of Strabo of Amasia, who mentioned the following about the indigenous people of the Iberian Peninsula in his “Geography” (III 4, 16):

“Some say that the Gallaeci are atheist (*ἀθεῖος*); and that the Celtiberians and their northern neighbours worship an unnamed god (*ἀνώνυμῳ τινὶ θεῷ*), dancing all through the night at the doors of their houses during full moons.”

Strabo’s report about the “atheism” of the Gallaeci, a people who lived in the remote northwest of the Iberian Peninsula, is clearly contradicted by the large number of theonyms that appear in the epigraphy of the area during the Roman period. The point of interest, however, is how this passage by the geographer from Amasia seems to express a Hellenic mentality according to which religion par excellence is that of one’s own people or of assimilable ones, while the religions of those who present an extreme degree of barbarism, whom it is

⁷ Botta 2013, 161.

⁸ Colón 1992, 111.

⁹ Botta 2013, 166.

¹⁰ Cieza de León 1984.

¹¹ See Calderón Dorda 2013, 298; Ramón Palerm – Sopeña Genzor – Vicente Sánchez, forthcoming.

not possible to assimilate because of their substantial difference, are grouped under the term of “atheism”.¹²

Of interest here is Herodotus’ explanation of the progressive formation of Greek religion (II 52 ff.). Having heard through the priests of Dodona, the famous oracle in Epirus, that the Pelasgians (the inhabitants of Hellas before the Greeks) worshipped their gods but gave them no name, the Halicarnassian says: They call them ‘gods’ collectively. They learnt their names later, from Egypt, and the first poets, Homer and Hesiod, helped to give a genealogical order to those gods whom they were at that time able to distinguish their names...

Applying this analytical perspective to Strabo’s text, it becomes apparent that the Anatolian takes recourse to the unnamed god of the Celtiberians and their northern neighbours to highlight the barbarism of these peoples: like those of Herodotus’ Pelasgians, their *nomoi* were less developed, since they had not achieved the level of development necessary to apply names to their gods (something which, is the implicit conclusion, was possible thanks to the arrival of Rome, bearer of a superior civilisation). Following this perspective, the atheism of the Gallaeci should be understood at face value as a Strabonian device to underscore the highly primitive state of the barbarians who lived further from the Mediterranean coasts, in line with the Hellenic vision of *ektopismós*, according to which the degree of barbarity increased with increasing distance from the Mediterranean, the centre of civilisation.¹³

A similar situation to that of the Gallaeci of the far north-western Iberian Peninsula, who Strabo claimed lacked personal gods, was attributed to the Thracians, encountered very early by the Greeks through their contacts with the Ionians of Euboea. The key text describing them as atheists is by Theophrastus (*De pietate*, in Porphyry, *De abstinentia*, II 8).¹⁴

A much more recent example of the application of the term “atheism” to others’ worship is offered by the emperor Julian, who, in his Neoplatonic apology in defence of the integrity of Classical culture, described the Christians in terms of *anómia* and atheism.¹⁵ The Christians had relapsed into atheism, as if it were an illness (νόσημα) (*Ep.* 22 (84), 429d; 430b; *Misop.* 364b). Of course, in this case the claim is one that denigrates the “Gallileans”, as he calls them. He uses the term to allude to the lack of Christian piety because they did not

¹² Bemejo Barrera 1994; Marco Simón 2010.

¹³ Marco Simón 2010. See also Gómez Espelosín – Cruz Andreotti – García Quintela 2007.

¹⁴ From these texts, authors such as Usener (1948, 279), argued for the existence of a very primitive religious state among the various European peoples in which worship was not given to personal gods, but rather, to *Sondergötter*, or gods dedicated to a particular activity, similar to those documented among contemporary Lithuanian peoples.

¹⁵ On the accusations of atheism made against Christians: Walsh 1991; Beatrice 2014.

venerate the gods, and he expresses it in terms of illness, something which some authors would repeat when they came to conceptualise the indigenous religious practices in Mesoamerica, as will be explored later in this paper.

In reality, the example of Julian reflects the re-semanticisation that the term “atheism” underwent. From the traditional meaning referring to the philosophical atheism of Classical and Hellenistic Greece, it became a weapon¹⁶ in Imperial Rome used to designate the practitioners of other religious systems, regardless of whether they venerated gods or not. In this sense, after a detailed evaluation of the sources, “The conclusion seems inevitable that the violent “othering” as atheists of those who hold different religious views was overwhelmingly a Judeo-Christian creation, which was then projected back on the polytheists”.¹⁷ This context explains the references to atheism made both by Strabo and by the above-mentioned sources from European colonisers.

2. Demonisation and idolatrous worship

The Second Audiencia of New Spain commissioned the Franciscan, Andrés de Olmos, to produce the “first systematic study of indigenous customs” to fulfil Carlos V’s request for information in 1533, and his investigation would provide the doctrinal reference-point for the demonization of indigenous gods. As Baudot indicated, the demon imagined by Olmos is a “Devil conceived by colonial politics”.¹⁸ The devil assumed a pre-Hispanic appearance, and the novelty of the Americas contributed to the development of a theory of idolatry.¹⁹ Idolatry was consistently related to the indigenous people’s blindness, as well as with the fear that they felt for the devil. This demonization of the indigenous gods constituted a key element in the *Doctrina Christiana*, the catechism devised to

¹⁶ The martyrdom of Polycarp of Smyrna (between 155 and 167) is a good example. Accused of atheism, he redirected the same accusation back against the polytheists, which precipitated his end, according to the martyrdom narratives.

¹⁷ Whitmarsh 2016, 240. Oldest Christian example may already appear in Paul’s Second Letter to the Ephesians (2.12), which attacks the atheists in the cosmos. Clement of Alexandria would attack the atheism of the polytheists. Before him, however, Justin Martyr reimagined Socrates himself, famously accused of atheism and impiety, as a Christian martyr – and, around 150, when faced with accusations of atheism by the followers of the traditional religion, claimed that, in effect, Christians were atheists: *And we confess that we are atheists ... at least as far as these kinds of imagined gods are concerned. But not with respect to the truest god, the father of justice and self-control and the other virtues, who is free of all impurity* (Just., *Apol.* 1 5-6). This new use of the term “atheist” to denigrate others’ religion would thus replace the more general concept of false *superstitio* when it was used. See also Palmer 1983.

¹⁸ Baudot 1972.

¹⁹ Botta 2013; 11 ff.; López Meraz 2016, 200-201.

initiate the native peoples into Catholicism as it was promoted by Juan de Zumárraga, the first bishop of Mexico.²⁰

Francisco López de Gómara, in his *Historia General de las Indias y vida de Hernán Cortés* (the first edition of which was produced in Zaragoza in 1552), also stated about the religion of the island of Hispaniola: “The most important god for the people of this island is the devil, which they paint all over the place however he appears to them, and he appears to them often, and even speaks to them.”²¹ Fray Bernardino de Sahagún, in his *Coloquios*, would likewise define false gods as demons, indicating that the indigenous peoples practised idolatry because they had been tricked by the Devil. In his *Apéndice a la Postilla* of 1574, he narrates the fall of the angels and their transformation into demons, even naming a Nahua god as the equivalent to the very same devil:²²

Lucifer and his companions, who had been angels, fell; they were defeated; they were banished. Some of them clung to the highest heavens and became demons of darkness, evil spirits full of rage, who abhorred men (...) And Lucifer enslaved our first father and first mother and all of us, their children. And he frightened you, so that you would call him, you would name him Titlacuahua (129-130).

In the prologue to the third book of his “*Historia general de las cosas de Nueva España*”, which he dedicates to the origin of the gods, Sahagún named the godly Augustine of Hippo as his authority, who dedicated the sixth book of his *City of God* to narrating the fantastical theology of the gentiles’ false gods in order to “(...) help them understand that those beings are not gods, nor could they provide anything that may be beneficial to a rational creature. For that purpose, this Third Book will narrate the fables and fictions that these natives weave around their gods, because understanding the vanities that they through faith held about their deceitful gods, they will come more easily through the doctrine of the Gospels to know the true God, and to know that those that they took to be gods were not gods, but lying and devious devils.” Sahagún then enumerates a long list of deities, which will be explored later, adding the tag line that she is not a goddess and he is not a god.

The diabolical analogy with the indigenous gods is also present in Fernández de Oviedo,²³ Fray Toribio de Benavente (Motolinía)²⁴ and Fray

²⁰ Córdoba 1970, 57-61.

²¹ López de Gómara (1979), ch. CCVII, p. 45.

²² Zinni 2014, 98.

²³ Fernández de Oviedo 1959, 112. In fact, one of the examples he uses in his ethnographic comparison is that of the stone serpent that the Inca Atahualpa kept in his house along with As-

Diego Durán,²⁵ and even managed to penetrate German folklore in the first half of the eighteenth century, in the figure of “Vitziliputzli” (who undoubtedly refers to the god Huitzilopochtli), who was one of the devils in Dr Faustus’ puppet play on which Goethe based his text. The pattern for this demonic image of the Aztec deity²⁶ was sketched by earlier authors, and by Antonio de Herrera in his monumental *Descripción de las Indias Occidentales* published in 1601.²⁷ This diabolical image of the Aztec god reappears later in the engravings of De Bry, Benzoni, Jacob van Moeurs, Bernard Picart and Allain Manesson Mallet.²⁸ By the beginning of the eighteenth century, Huitzilopochtli was less an Aztec god than a reflection of European ideas about distant and alien gods; “a construct of the mind”, to use Elliot’s expression.²⁹

The demonization of the indigenous gods by the colonisers was facilitated by Mesoamerican concepts, in which the gods represented both benevolence and malevolence, creation and destruction. This is where the Nahua term *teotl*

clepius’: both derived from the serpent in Genesis, and it was the Devil who would have been responsible for introducing these idolatries (Lupher 249).

²⁴ Motolinía 1985, 126 ff., 252-253; Motolinía 1971, 34 ff.; Botta 2008a and 2008b, 53-92.

²⁵ Botta 2004, 58-68.

²⁶ On the concepts of *teotl* (divine power, halfway between *mana*, an anonymous force, and the personalised divinity characteristic of western antiquity) and *ixiptla* (“the skin, bark, wrapping” of *teotl*, its image or substitute, the man-god) see López Austin 1973. As is attested in the case of Huitzilopochtli, the image (*teixiptla*) of the deity to convey the physical nature of the *teotl* can be diverse, to judge by the indigenous graphic and textual sources: “He could be activated in the person of a human deity impersonator who wore the costume and carried the accoutrements of the god, and a more static version of his *teixiptla* could be formed of *tzoalli* dough modelled on an armature of mesquite (...) A third manifestation was his sacred bundle, which seems to have been less an image of the god than a container of the power of the cult (...) In addition to these manifestations of the god, however, there was also a relatively permanent *teixiptla* of Huitzilopochtli that commanded his temple as the prime image of the cult” (Boone 1989, 40-41). The sacred bundles are crucially important in Mesoamerican religious systems as receptacles of the secret and invisible divine energy (Stenzel 1970).

²⁷ The very interesting front cover represents the principle gods in six windows that flank the title of the work on both sides. Clockwise from top to bottom, they are: Huitzilopochtli, the greatest of the gods of Mexico and the only one mentioned by name; the gods of wind and wine; and, after images of a typical temple and the Aztec monarch, the gods of thunder, water and the dead (Boone 1989, 68-70 and 72, fig. 31).

²⁸ Boone 1989, 79-83. In the frontispiece of the *America pars quarta* of Benzoni’s history of the West Indies, published in Frankfurt in 1599, the deity appears with markedly diabolical features, but interestingly, he has no head, and his monstrous face is depicted on his chest. This image, like the Ewainpanoma of Guiana described by Walter Raleigh, would have its prototype in the *Blemmyae*, a headless population with their faces on their chests that lived in Libya, according to Pliny the Elder (Alexander 1976, 153; Boone 1989, 77). For the diabolical imitations of Incan cults, the work of Father José de Acosta (1589-1590) is essential (Gliozzi 1971, 49-54).

²⁹ Elliott 1970, 28; Boone 1989, 83.

gets its ambivalence, the common translation of which – “god” – can mislead.³⁰ In this respect, it is difficult to accuse Sahagún of inconsistency when he compares Texcalipoca³¹ with both Jupiter and Lucifer, because if the indigenous god appears on one hand as the majestic and protean lord of war, who knows all things and forgives all things, on the other he presents the face of a malign and destructive sorcerer, rain-hoarder, seducer and malicious trickster; and the same ambivalence is shown by goddesses such as Tlalecuhtli (the earth goddess), Ilamateucli and Tlazeotl: all those divine characters demonstrate an ambivalence that reflects the notion itself of chaos or destruction as the origin of the cosmos and of life.³²

The demonization of the indigenous gods (“devils” or “false gods”) by the Franciscans initially, and later the religious authorities in general, reflects the mediaeval opposition between the *populus Romanus* (composed of those who belonged to the Holy Mother Church) and the *populi extranei* (originally the Greeks, Tartars, Moors, and Jews).³³ This demonization, however, merely rekindled the demonization of the gods of ancient Graeco-Roman polytheism and their association with magical activities, which was undertaken by Christian authors from Justin Martyr in his *First Apology*, written around 150 (Apol. 1, 57). According to him, the Graeco-Roman gods were in reality malign demons who had been mistaken for gods and named as such (Jupiter, Apollo, Venus, etc.), until being condemned by Reason, incarnated in Christ. Justin’s position, reiterated in authors like Tertullian, Minucius Felix, Clement of Alexandria, Origen of Alexandria,³⁴ Augustine of Hippo, Jerome, and others, was the dominant one around 1500.³⁵ This, however, was an earlier strategy, which had al-

³⁰ The Jesuits encountered a similar difficulty when they came to translate the term “God” in the different areas in which they were evangelising (China, Japan, South India, Brazil, and Paraguay). The potential choice of an equivalent indigenous term, such as the Chinese *Tien* (literally “Sky”) posed the risk that the Chinese might think that the new religion was a version of their own; alternatively, they could choose not to translate the term *Deus* in order to avoid misunderstanding, but at the expense of intelligibility (Burke 2005, 5).

³¹ Tezcatlipoca was recipient of eight of the nine prayers to the gods with which the rhetorical sentences (*Huehuetlatolli*, “words of the ancients”) contained at the beginning of book 6, composed around 1547, began; these sentences are of extraordinary importance for what they contain about the pre-Hispanic past. The last prayer is directed to the god Tlaloc (Sullivan 1974, 100).

³² Cervantes 1994, 40–41. Fray Toribio de Motolinía likewise explained that the term *teun-anacatl*, which refers to the hallucinogenic mushroom consumed at the pre-sacrificial banquet, meant in Spanish “the flesh of god”, or “the devil that they worship” (Cervantes 1994, 25).

³³ Laird 2016, 171.

³⁴ Clem., *Strom.* IV 6–7; Orig., *Hom. In Num.* X 2.

³⁵ Flint 1999. The redefinition of the old pagan gods as demons (with what that implies about the negative re-semanticisation of the ancient Greek notion of *daimon*, since benefactor *daimones* would survive as angels), had the clear objective of persecuting and destroying them, but also of

ready emerged in Judaeo-Christianity in the *Acts of the Apostles* (Acts 19,11-20), and above all in the writings of Paul the Apostle (Ephesians 6,11-16; 1 Corinthians 10,19-21), and before, specifically in the demonology of the Biblical tradition,³⁶ and especially in the *Book of Enoch*, as well as various Gnostic traditions.³⁷

In the prologue to Book 1 of the *Historia general*, Sahagún explains the aim of his project: he wants to get to know pagan practices in order to recognise the signs of idolatry in the converts, similar to the way a doctor needs to know the symptoms of a disease to be able to cure it. This analogy between idolatry and illness, which goes back to Plato, had Augustine as its model (*C. D.*, beginning of Book 2), and the emperor Julian's conceptualisation of the Galileans' system in terms of *nosema* has already been discussed. Fundamentally, the deities venerated by the Mexicans are merely "lots of imaginary gods", as Sahagún indicates about the Tlalocs, whose cult he discredited: "This seems more like a thing for children or the brainless than for men of reason. Your ancestors invented countless other follies and innumerable other gods, and there is not enough paper or time to write them all down."³⁸

One author who separated himself from the earlier, dominant interpretations was Clavigero. His *Historia antigua de México* was published in 1780-81, and although it acknowledged that satanism, human sacrifice, and cannibalism were inherent in the religious practices of the ancient Mexicans, he stated, along the same lines as Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas, that the native people's religion was less superstitious, ridiculous, and indecent than the pagan religions of the Ancient World.³⁹

The demonisation of the indigenous gods can be better understood in the context of the importance Christian beliefs had conferred upon the devil since ancient times as a source of superstitions and witchcraft. That explains why, when confronted with indigenous beliefs and practices, the response of the evangelists was not scepticism about the possibility of diabolical action, but the rapid acceptance of it, reinterpreting the foreign realities into familiar terms: they admitted the power of the indigenous religion, its medicine and magic, but attributed this power to the effectiveness of the Christian devil, not to the gods and indigenous medical practices. The basic objective was not to understand

saving the converted pagans from the terrors that the demons inflicted upon them, so that Christianity came to "cast out fear" (1 John 4, 18) (Flint 1971, 280 and 347).

³⁶ *Libro de la Sabiduría* 12, 13; *Salmos* 96, 5: *Omnes dii gentium demonia*, "all the gods of the gentiles are demons".

³⁷ Flint 1971, 293 ff. See also González García – García Quintela 2005.

³⁸ Olivier 2016, 201.

³⁹ Cervantes 1994, 150-151.

native beliefs *per se*, even when they were trying to understand indigenous religion, but rather, to understand the reality that underlay them – the devil.⁴⁰

The fact that the indigenous peoples themselves internalised the process of demonization of the traditional cults demonstrates how successful it was, and is revealed in some of the letters that their nobles wrote to the Spanish monarchs in the middle of the sixteenth century. The nobility in Yucatán, for example, wrote a letter to Felipe II in 1567, requesting that they send more Franciscan friars, to whom they owe their conversion to the faith of Christ, and who preach to them in their own language.⁴¹ In this letter, they say that because of the diseases of the devil and his minions (or perhaps they are already fed up with our childishness), very few remain.⁴² The traditional religious system was also conceptualised in terms of infantilism and the work of the devil in the *Relación de las cosas de Yucatán*, written by Fray Diego de Landa around 1560.⁴³

3. Versions of *interpretatio*

The term “cultural translation” has been increasingly used in anthropology to illustrate cultural encounters in which each party tries to make sense of the other’s actions,⁴⁴ and it has been convincingly suggested that “the act of understanding is a kind of translation, a form of domesticating the alien, of turning other people’s concepts and practices into their equivalents in our “vocabulary” (in both the literal and the metaphorical sense of the term)”.⁴⁵

Four models have been established to describe interreligious contact and the exchange of cults in the polytheistic systems of the ancient Mediterranean:

⁴⁰ Andrews – Hassig 1984, 20.

⁴¹ A document, datable to 1570, that describes the five town or districts of the Archdiocese of Mexico indicates that only one of the clergy mentioned is ignorant of the Mexican language, which the evangelisers generally knew and in which they preached in all its existing variants (Mexican, Otomí, and Matlatzinca): Zimmermann 1970, Dokument I d, 9-11. Motolinía, in his *Historia de los indios de la Nueva España* indicates that nearly nine million native peoples were baptised in fifteen years. This was the “miracle of conversion” that acted as a compensation for the millions of faithful lost to Luther (on Motolinía: Botta 2008a and 2008b, 53-92).

⁴² Zimmermann 1970, Dokument IVa (bilingual letter in Mayan and Spanish), 33.

⁴³ Garibay 1966. Another letter from 1567 from nobles of the Maní province denounces the use of torture by Fray Diego de Landa (Zimmermann 1970, Dokument IV b, 36-37). Landa’s methods are corroborated by Fray Francisco de Toral, a Franciscan like Landa, who writes to Felipe II that this man and his group want to maintain that *without torment you cannot preach the law of God* (Garibay 1966, XIII).

⁴⁴ Bedelman 1971; Pálsson 1993; Kissel 1999; Rubel – Rosman 2003; Burke – Po-chia Hsia 2007.

⁴⁵ Burke 2005, 4, citing Steiner 1974.

1) The translation or adaptation of the names of the gods that belong to different religious systems; 2) the exchange of religious iconography, accidental or by design, which could lead to misunderstandings or re-semanticisation in the interpretation of motives, although the notion of a common understanding cannot be excluded; 3) individual mobility, especially of religious specialists, and 4) the migration of population clusters through processes of colonisation of greater or lesser magnitude.

The Greek discourse, from Herodotus, groups the elements of what we call “religion” into *nomoi*, that is, traditional norms, which varied across different peoples. In this way, in accordance with an important strand of Greek thinking, all peoples appear to address the same gods: what changes are the actual names of those gods, as well as the rituals.⁴⁶ The gods would thus be similar everywhere, and, consequently, identifiable (which is the basis that makes the process of translation possible), although some peoples only name and worship some of them.

The Romans had a word for this cultural translation: *interpretatio*, that is, the process – in its many variants and modalities – by which others’ gods and religious practices are assimilated and conceptualised in terms of one’s own theonomies and categories. This process constitutes one of the essential characteristics of the processes of interreligious contact between the diverse polytheistic systems of the Ancient World.⁴⁷

Naturally, the contents of the elements that transfer from one religious and cultural system to another do not remain unaltered by the process: it is usual for new functions, perspectives and interpretations to arise through the syncretism of elements with diverse origins, as occurred for example in the case of the Alexandrian Serapis or Mithras in the Roman empire.⁴⁸ All these models also apply to the process of interreligious contact in the Mesoamerican world.

The colonisers’ assimilation of indigenous divinities to others from the ancient world, and especially from Graeco-Roman culture, constitutes a general trend from works such as the *Libros de las Décadas del Nuevo Mundo* by Pedro Mártir de Anglería, official chronicler of the Indies between 1520 and his death

⁴⁶ Rudhardt 1992.

⁴⁷ Most recently, Chiai – Häussler – Kunst 2012. The term famously comes from Tacitus referred to the gods Alcis venerated by the tribe of the Naharvali, assimilated to Castor and Pollux by the Romans (*Ger.* 43,4: *Apud Nahanarvalos antiquae religionis lucus ostenditur. praesidet sacerdos muliebri ornatu, sed deos interpretatione Romana Castorem Pollucemque memorant. ea vis numini, nomen Alcis.*)

⁴⁸ Burkert 2000, 2. For the interesting case of the Greek goddess Ino-Leucothea, who became the Roman goddess Mater Matuta, see Prescendi 2011.

in 1526.⁴⁹ This author used an analogy about songs called *areitos* (Década 1, ch. 5): when a cacique's thirty widows were dancing, they looked to the Spaniards like *dryades formosissimas aut nativas fontium nymphas*.⁵⁰ A parallel comparison appears in Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo (10, 54): "Moctezuma took one as the god of war, like the gentiles did Mars; and to another offered honour and sacrifice as the god of waters, like the ancients to Neptune; he worshipped another as god of wind, like the gentiles did Aeolus." Oviedo also compares the gods of Nicaragua to those of the Romans, stating that they imitated the ancient idolaters and pagans who made Ceres the mother of plenty, Mars the god of war, Neptune that of water and Vulcan that of fire (XI 180).⁵¹ Torquemada's *Monarquía indiana* likewise made analogies and comparisons between Aztec society and Greek and Roman cultures, in a trend that would increase in criollo perspectives of the seventeenth century.⁵²

However important the above-mentioned authors are, our main source – as with so many matters to do with Mesoamerican pre-Hispanic religion – is nevertheless Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. He arrived in Mexico only eight years after the conquest and, convinced that true conversion of the indigenous peoples could only be achieved by understanding their cosmovision, undertook an exhaustive study of the mentality and customs of the Aztecs. In 1536 he joined the Colegio de Santa Cruz de Tlatelolco, founded in January of that year, to teach Latin to the sons of indigenous nobles, imbuing them at the same time with passion for the study of ancient Rome. With the help of four of his former students, Antonio Valeriano, Alonso Vegerano, Martín Iacobita and Andrés Leonardo, he imparted information on the nature of Aztec religion using analogies with the Roman religious system, both about the gods and also about the relationship between foundation myths of Tula and Troy, and Cholula and Rome.⁵³

⁴⁹ Mártir de Anglería 1945; Jones 1964.

⁵⁰ Lupher 1993, 384, n. 35, indicating how Las Casas describes a similar scene.

⁵¹ Lupher 2003, 243; Olivier 2016, 193 and n. 13, 207.

⁵² This assimilating vision would culminate, for example, in the triumphal arch raised in 1680 by the Mexican intellectual Carlos Sigüenza y Góngora to celebrate the ceremonial entrance of the viceroy, Conde de Paredes, into Mexico City. Against the backdrop of the traditional Graeco-Roman inspiration of allegorical decorations and emblems which characterised these triumphal arches, Sigüenza y Góngora chose the god Huitzilipochtli and the 11 Aztec emperors to represent the heroic virtues, accompanied by corresponding inscriptions (Boone 1989, 58).

⁵³ Pohl – Lyons 2016, 11-12. Reputedly, during the early years the classes were only in Nahuatl and Latin, and so many of the sons of the young indigenous people progressed so much that they soon learnt to speak as elegantly as Cicero, as the notary and encomendero Jerónimo López reveals in a letter from 1546, in which he warns the king of the dangers that may ensue from allowing the native peoples to study sciences through curricular training that was considered subversive (Lupher 2003, 231).

The *Historia general de las cosas de la Nueva España* is the key encyclopaedic work by Bernardino de Sahagún, who was undoubtedly a true pioneer of anthropology. It was written from information given by indigenous Nahuas, with the help of indigenous students who knew Spanish and Latin in addition to their own language.⁵⁴ The text in Nahuatl and Spanish was supplemented with 1800 hand-painted illustrations, which are crucial for interpreting the written text.⁵⁵ Each book of this *Historia general* was preceded by a prologue in Spanish that introduced and contextualised the ensuing information for the reader, and it is these prologues that contain the personal opinions of the Franciscan.⁵⁶

Sahagún devoted the first book of his *Historia general* to the gods, which provides an idea of the importance he gives them in the traditional cosmovision and culture of the indigenous Mesoamericans. Huitzilopochtli, the principal god whom the Mexicans worshipped and to whom they sacrificed, was another Hercules (1,1).⁵⁷ “Extremely robust, of great strength and highly bellicose, a great destroyer of nations and killer of people”, “after he died, they honoured him like God and offered him slaves, sacrificing them in his presence” (*ibid.*). In other words, like Hercules, Huitzilopochtli was a deified hero (*ἥρως θεός*, to use Pindar’s terms referring to the Greek). As Sahagún explains in his commentaries in Spanish, “This man, whom the Mexicans held in great esteem when he lived because of his strength and vigour in war, they honoured like God after he died, and offered him slaves.” This feature of Huitzilopochtli reappears in other deified heroic figures, like Páinal (1, 2).

What Sahagún does here with Huitzilopochtli is apply Euhemeristic interpretation, according to which those taken for gods were simply deified historical figures, something that Christian authors like Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, Lactantius, and Augustine use against pagans to demonstrate the falsi-

⁵⁴ On the methodological basis of de Sahagún’s investigation, founded upon three specific objectives (to learn about ancient religion, to write texts which could impart a rich vocabulary, and to record the key cultural elements of the Nahuas), see López Austin 1974. The methodology Sahagún used in collecting information in Nahuatl could have been influenced by the one already used by Andrés de Olmos among elders, priests and nobles both in his travels as well as in the Colegio de Sta. Cruz de Tlatelolco (Wilkerson 1974, 72-73).

⁵⁵ This union of writing and imagery only served to perpetuate the character of the indigenous “paintings” (códices), largely destroyed by the colonisers (except for various magnificent examples, such as the *Codex Borgia*). They were painted by specialists called *tlacuilos*, a Nahuatl term which simultaneously means both painter and scribe, combining two activities that European culture considers radically different. The Mexican images were more than mere representations: they were more a path to the divine than a form of expression; they made “visible” the essence of things precisely because they were an extension of that essence (Gruzinski 1992, 16).

⁵⁶ Laird 2016, 170.

⁵⁷ An alternative interpretation, that assimilates Huitzilopochtli with Mars, is proposed by authors such as Juan de Torquemada, Gregorio García, and Agustín Vetancourt (Boone 1989, 58).

ty of their gods. Carlos V himself was compared with Hercules because of his conquest of the New World. Sahagún takes his Euhemeristic interpretation to extremes in explaining the goddesses Cihuapipiltin as the canonisation of all the women who had died in their first childbirth. In 1,11, he compares this goddess with the Nymphs, who according to Isidore of Seville were “the goddesses of water, and they derive their name from “clouds” (‘nubes’), since the waters come from the clouds, so that is why they are named as they are.” Perhaps because of this, an image in the *Códice Florentino* (Book 4, folio 28 v) shows Cihuapipiltin travelling on clouds.⁵⁸

Tezcatlipoca is another Jupiter (1,3). This assimilation to the principal god of the Roman pantheon arose because invisibly, he traversed all the bodies of the cosmos, through the sky, earth, and fire. The comparison of Tezcatlipoca with Jupiter was made possible by another feature that they shared: their many conquests and amorous affairs. Tezcatlipoca seduced the wife of Tlaloc, Xochiquetzal, who was compared with Venus, and is described as an Huastec who conquered the daughter of Huemac, king of Tollan, with his phallus.⁵⁹ The process of *interpretatio* consequently culminated in his demonization: *This being (Tezcatlipoca) is the wicked Lucifer, father of all iniquity and deceit, extremely greedy and arrogant, who tricked your forefathers.*

The Franciscan called the goddess Cihuacoatl *snake woman*. She was also called Tonantzin, “our mother” (1,6), and compared to our mother Eve, who was tricked by a serpent. The case of Cihuacoatl is particularly illustrative of the uncertainties of Sahagún’s *interpretatio*, which are, however, perfectly understandable. Chicomecoatl is another goddess Ceres (1,7). The assimilation makes sense because she is the goddess of sustenance, who provided food and drink, the first woman who started to make bread and other delicacies and stews. There is no comparison for goddesses like Temazcalteci, the grandmother of baths, mother of the gods and heart of the earth, goddess of medicines (1,8), Tzapulatena, inventor of curative resin (1,9), or the goddesses called Cihuapipilti, into whom all the women who died in their first childbirth were converted and worshipped as goddesses (1,10). In contrast, Chalchiuhtlicue, goddess of water and sister of the rain gods (Tlalocs), with powers over the water of the sea and rivers, was said to be another Juno (1,11). Along with Chicomecoatl, goddess of sustenance, and Huixtocihuatl, the goddess of salt, she formed a triad that enabled life and the multiplication of the peoples. Another interesting example of *interpretatio* is that of the goddess of carnal matters, Tlazolteotl, who is another Venus (1,12). This goddess was subdivided

⁵⁸ Olivier 2016, 197-198.

⁵⁹ Olivier 2016, 198.

into three names and manifestations, and had the power to provoke lust and carnal sins, but also to pardon them.

Heading another group of gods of lesser status was Xiuhtecuhtli, the god of fire, who naturally is another Vulcan (1.13). Sahagún's indication at the start of chapter 13 that he will hereafter discuss the lesser gods clearly indicates that the twelve preceding chapters of Book 1 concerned the most important gods, six male and six female. As Laird has pointed out, it is difficult not to see in this distribution the influence of Roman classifications of the principal *di consentes* in male and female pairs.⁶⁰ Ennius (*Annales*, fragm. 62) had already enumerated twelve major gods, six male and six female: *Juno Venus Minerva Diana Ceres / Venus Mars / Mercurius Jovis Neptunus Vulcanus / Apollo*, and the same gods appear in Livy (XXII 10, 9) on the subject of a *lectisternium* celebrated in 217 B.C.

Sahagún makes no attempt to assimilate other gods related to flowers (1, 14-22), an element which, unlike the Graeco-Roman world, has a prominent presence in indigenous cosmovision, as will be explored later, nor tries to assimilate other Tlatocs identified with exalted mountains.

If Quetzalcoatl was not an object of *interpretatio* in Book 2, he is in the third chapter of Book 3, where he is described as another Hercules, a great necromancer. This conceptualisation of other people's gods in terms of necromancy is one more noteworthy feature of Sahagún's. Another *interpretatio* of Quetzalcoatl, however, very different and rather later, also deserves remark: on the basis of the writings of Durán, and of Gregorio García about the proselytization of the apostle Thomas in Brazil, Sigüenza y Góngora identified the Aztec deity with that apostle, something that would prove very useful in developing Mexican national consciousness much later on, when it was necessary to uncouple the Christianisation of Mesoamerica from the Spanish colonisation.⁶¹ Fray Toribio de Benevente (Motolinía) also neutralised the indigenous deities related to the sun and the moon by assimilating them to Christ and the Virgin,⁶² in what would be an example, at least implicitly, of over-*interpretatio*.

⁶⁰ Laird 2016.

⁶¹ Boone 1989, 87 ff. In his *Historia de las Indias de Nueva España e Islas de Tierra Firme* of 1581 (1967), Fray Diego Durán emphasises above all the respective migrations as chosen peoples reaching their promised lands, Canaan and the Valley of Mexico, ending by suggesting from a Diffusionist perspective that Topiltzin-Quetzalcoatl, ruler of the Toltecs, had been the apostle Thomas, evangeliser of the Indies (Durán 1985; Horcasitas and Heyden 1971, 23 ff.).

⁶² Chapter 14 of his *Memoriales* is entitled, "On the many and diverse festivals that they had in this land, in which many idolatries were manifested, and how the Sun and Moon, that is Christ, sun of justice, and his most gracious mother, Our Lady, were on our side to destroy them" (Motolinía 1971, 38).

In the *Libro de los dioses y los ritos*, Durán cites among others the Xochimilcas' goddess Cihuacoatl (Snake Woman), sister of Huitzilopochtli, the sacred fire of whose temple was tended day and night by priests (pl. 22), as it was in the case of the Latin Vesta. Of particular interest is the reference to the god of games and wine, Ometochtli, whom Fray Diego Durán compares to the ancient Bacchus, underlining the enormous popularity of his cult (ch. 22). As is clearly shown in chapter 21, Durán's opinion of the organisation and social order that prevailed among the indigenous people is incredibly positive, as it was for Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas.

In the *Apologetica historia sumaria*, written by Las Casas in the middle of the sixteenth century, "an extraordinarily ambitious attempt to embrace the peoples of the New World within a global survey of human civilisation",⁶³ the native peoples surpassed the Greeks and Romans "in no small degree", especially the Romans, presented as licentious barbarians and practitioners of human sacrifices to Iuppiter Latiaris, following the denigratory statements of Lactantius, Augustine of Hippo, and Eusebius of Caesarea.⁶⁴ In the chapters 103 to 127, he compares the gods of Graeco-Roman polytheism with those of the Mesoamerican peoples, affirming the superiority of the latter over the former.⁶⁵

In Book 2 of his *Monarchia indiana*, published in Seville in three volumes in 1615,⁶⁶ although completed before that date, Fray Juan de Torquemada describes Quiltazi⁶⁷ in a similar way as Virgil does Alecto, another snake goddess who is one of the Erinyes, who appears as an infernal agent of Discord in the Aeneid (VII 324-326 and 327-328) when Aeneas and his Trojans are about to reach the promised land of Italy. Like Cihuacoatl, Alecto has many names and can adopt diverse forms. Torquemada's Quiltazli, however, could also be considered an inverted model of the Isis who appears in Apuleius' *Metamorphoses*, who also has many names and a crown adorned with the uraeus.⁶⁸

According to Torquemada, the Aztecs had supreme gods (like Tezcatlipoca), other less important ones, and even those that were taken for gods but were no

⁶³ Elliott 1970, 48.

⁶⁴ Although unpublished until recent times, the manuscript of the work circulated widely and influenced later authors such as the Franciscans Jerónimo Mendieta and Juan de Torquemada and the Augustinian Jerónimo Román (Lupher 2006, 156 ff.).

⁶⁵ Lupher, 2006, 159-160.

⁶⁶ Keen 1971, 181.

⁶⁷ Torquemada describes how the Aztecs left Aztlan, their mythical homeland, to settle at last in the promised land, a lake in which Tenochtitlán would arise. A witch called Quiltazli appeared to two of their chiefs in the form of a magnificent eagle on a prickly pear cactus, and on another occasion revealed her various names to them. Quiltazli is simply the avatar of the Aztec goddess Cihuacoatl, the Snake Woman.

⁶⁸ Laird 2016, 168-169.

more than mere men, in a Euhemerist interpretation which appears in other authors like Sahagún, as previously described. This progression led him not only to proclaim the similarity between the Aztec and Graeco-Roman gods, but actually to identify them with each other, possessing the same names although they sounded different due to the different languages: Tezcatlipoca was Jupiter, Huitzilopochtli Mars, Tlaloc Neptune, and so on.⁶⁹

The foundation of numerous churches and monasteries on the site or in the vicinity of indigenous sanctuaries constitutes another variant of what may be called “archaeological *interpretatio*”. To give only one example, in Cholula – described by Sahagún as the Rome of the Aztecs – a Franciscan monastery was constructed in 1529 on the spot upon which the temple of Quetzalcoatl had been built, along with two churches. One of them was dedicated to Saint Michael, and the other to Saint Gabriel.⁷⁰ An engraving by the Frenchman, Bernard Picart (1673-1733), portrays Quetzalcoatl as the Mexican’s Mercury, undoubtedly because both divinities were patrons of commerce; Mercury, however, was also associated with the archangels Gabriel and Michael, as the winged messenger of the gods. All this seems to suggest a double process of *interpretatio*, by which the selection of Gabriel and Michael occurred through a dialogue between the Franciscans and Cholula’s indigenous nobility, in which Quetzalcoatl was initially assimilated to the Roman Mercury, and went on to be associated with the Christian saints.

At times, it was the indigenous people themselves who assimilated people and artefacts from the colonising culture with their own categories. Some records, for example, describe the friars as poor and villainous creatures (at the heart of which was the colonisers’ suppression of sacrifices, with the devastating effects that entailed for social harmony and cosmic equilibrium), as dead people wrapped in shrouds, and even eventually identified them with *tzitzimime*, demonic stars in Mesoamerican mythology, enemies of the sun who at the end of time would descend to kill and devour the last of humanity.⁷¹

A very interesting author who cannot be discussed in detail here is Carlos de Sigüenza y Góngora, born in Mexico of noble Spanish parents, who, along the same lines as las Casas, José de Acosta⁷², and Dorantes de Carranza in his *Sumaria relación de las cosas de la Nueva España* (1604),⁷³ never lost the oppor-

⁶⁹ Torquemada, prologue to Book 6; Keen 1971, 182. Lorenzo Boturini, a disciple of Vico, would also undertake an *interpretatio* of the Aztec deities via the Graeco-Roman ones in 1746, starting with Tezcatlipoca, another Jupiter (Keen 1971, 230).

⁷⁰ Sahagún 1997, 19; Durán II, 1985, 70-78.

⁷¹ Cervantes 1994, 44-45.

⁷² Botta 2015.

⁷³ Keen 1971, 91.

tunity to compare the achievements of the native Mexican peoples with those of Graeco-Roman antiquity, to the advantage of the former. In his *Parayso occidental*, he included detailed information about the vestal virgins of ancient Mexico, whom he compared with the Roman vestals, including the prayer used by the parents of the young women to present them to the priests of the Aztec convents, a prayer that he knew from the writings of the Cicero of the indigenous language, the noble, Fernando de Alva Ixtilxóchitl.⁷⁴

4. A “rhetoric of negotiation of the sacred”

Sahagún’s work propounds a “new hermeneutical space, conceived as a space of negotiation of meanings and significance, fostered by an imperial need to explain an alien and unstable world (...), which involved new and diverse strategies”.⁷⁵ This occurred in the *Coloquios y Doctrina Christiana. Los diálogos de 1524, dispuestos por Bernardino de Sahagún y sus colaboradores*, written in 1564, which reproduce in dialogue form (following the example of ancient authors such as Plato, Cicero, and Lucian) the first experience of evangelisation undertaken in the New World. In 1564, Sahagún recovered and transcribed the dialogues between The Twelve Franciscan apostles who disembarked in 1524 and the representatives of the Mesoamerican rulers (*tlatoani*), the indigenous priests and wise men (*tlamatinime*). To do this, he relied upon the invaluable help of his trilingual students, the *nahuatlato*s of the legendary Colegio de Santa Cruz de Tlatelolco.

In order to define the space where the dialogue, negotiation and communication between colonisers and colonised take place, Bhabha’s concept of “third space” is attractive.⁷⁶ Here, diverse elements coexist, and hybrid narrative forms (the concept of “middle ground” would be similar)⁷⁷ tend to occur at boundaries (spatial, spiritual, hermeneutic, epistemological).

⁷⁴ Sigüenza 1684, foll. 2-5; Keen 1971, 191. The Dominican, Servando Teresa de Mier, presents a notable example of the defence that Creole made of indigenous culture and religion through assimilating their gods not with the Graeco-Roman ones but with fundamental elements of Christianity: in 1704 he proclaimed from the pulpit that the Virgin of Guadalupe had not appeared to Juan Diego, an indigenous man, in the colonial era, but that she came from an encounter between the Virgin and St Thomas-Quetzalcoatl (see above) and with Incas such as Viracocha. Even the god Huitzilopochtli had been nothing other than the form in which the Aztecs adored the Redeemer, since he had been born of a virgin and one of his names was “Lord of the crown of thorns”; he likewise identified Coatlicue with the Virgin Mary (Keen 1971, 304-305).

⁷⁵ Zinni 2014, 17. Similarly, Botta 2013.

⁷⁶ Bhabha 1994.

⁷⁷ Thus, for example, Woolf 2011, 28.

Zimmermann has used the concept of “cognitive resistance” to describe the processes by which a false understanding arises because of lexical but not semantic similarities between colonisers and colonised.⁷⁸ This happened in the semantic fields of *teotl* and *God*, as has previously been noted. Another example would be *mictlan*, the subterranean region of the dead, which became Hell in the evangelisers’ texts.⁷⁹ Various authors accordingly adopt a series of strategies tending to substitute a discourse which is exclusive by definition, as doctrine is, with another more inclusive one, choosing words or images from the indigenous lexicon referring, for instance, to native flowers, the jewels of the Mexicas. At the Epiphany, for example, the kings from Arabia brought flowers in the form of a heart, flowers of young corn and roasted corn, and cocoa flowers, like those traditionally offered to Huitzilipochtli.⁸⁰ This is because for the Nahua, the world of flowers reflects the world of origins, in which the gods were created and life on Earth was made possible: a mythical space-time known as *Tamoanchan*, “the place of the flowering tree”, “the place where the flowers stand tall”.⁸¹ Just as Tertullian contributed to creating a “Latin of the Christians”, so Sahagún and his *nahuatlatoles* would alter Christian concepts by integrating them into Nahua culture.

This is “the hybrid tongues in the colonial space”,⁸² a hybrid and above all “Christian” language: if Christ is the “resplendent celestial flower”, and “the gem, the precious feather” (*Psalmodia* 37 and 21), Mary was the “spiritual jade, bracelet, turquoise” (*ibid.* 39).⁸³

It is clear that this process of evangelisation, adopting discursive forms from the other culture, is not new to Christianity, since Augustine of Hippo (*De Doctrina Christiana* 291) had already recommended adapting and learning the figures and tropes of the other to make the conversion more efficient.

Los Doce and Sahagún propose a process of “Nahuatilisation of Christianity”,⁸⁴ and not ‘Hispanisation’. A more “collaborationist” model, as it were, which was captured in a “rhetoric of negotiation of the sacred towards a shared narrative”⁸⁵ and which reflects, inevitably, the uncertainties of the process.⁸⁶

⁷⁸ Zimmermann 2014.

⁷⁹ Zinni 2014, 141-342.

⁸⁰ Zinni 2014, 195-197.

⁸¹ The “flower world” is the highest realm of reality, a place of light, warmth, fire, war, songs, and dances, but also a space-time of destiny for the souls of warriors fallen in combat and women who die in childbirth: it is also *Tonatiuh Ichan*, the “house of the sun” mentioned by Sahagún in his *Historia General* (Burkhardt 1992; López Austin 1994).

⁸² Bahbha 1994, 101.

⁸³ Zinni 2014, 199.

⁸⁴ Dibble 1974; Klor de Alva 1988; Burkhardt 2011.

⁸⁵ Zinni 2014, 181.

Conclusion

The colonisers had to integrate what was new and strange in the Americas into a familiar and understandable context, and throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and beyond, scholars and intellectuals became interested in developing a series of parallels between the civilisations and religions of the Americas and those of the Graeco-Roman Mediterranean.⁸⁷

When they came to making sense of the actions and concepts of others in order to facilitate evangelisation and “to domesticate otherness”, the challenging endeavour of Sahagún and the other authors used the comparison with what they knew about Graeco-Roman Antiquity, employing a triple explanatory path about other people’s gods that this paper has tried to synthesise: that of denying their existence, that of demonising them, and that of attempting to assimilate them. In some way, however, this use of various paradigms in the construction of a discourse on the otherness of the native peoples also made the Spaniards reflect and rethink their opinion and judgement of those realities, in a similar way to that which the Jesuit Joseph François Lafitau later found in his “*Moeurs des sauvages américains comparées aux mœurs des premiers temps*”).⁸⁸

“I have not been content just to know the character of the savages, nor to inform myself of their customs and practices; I have sought the vestiges of the most distant Antiquity in these practices and these customs. I have carefully read the most arcane authors who have discussed the customs, laws and habits of the peoples of whom they had any knowledge. I have compared these customs with one another, and reached the conclusion that, if the ancient authors have enlightened me to support some fortunate conjectures about the savages, the customs of the savages have shed light for me so that I can understand more easily and explain many things that appear in the ancient authors.”⁸⁹

The great contribution of the chroniclers, with Sahagún at the forefront, helped to illuminate the corners of the ternary space formed by the gods of others in Antiquity and the indigenous Mesoamericans, and also by the beliefs

⁸⁶ It is unclear what was Sahagún’s reference, if any existed, to compile the list, for example, of the 37 gods that appear in *Primeros Memoriales*: a pre-Hispanic codex? An indigenous map in which the gods were associated with different locations? If it is not clear what was the basis for Sahagún’s selection, neither is his position regarding the indigenous gods monolithic: he oscillated between recognising parallels with the Graeco-Roman deities, Euhemeristic theory, the presence of the devil, and the footprints of a possible evangelisation prior to the Spanish arrival.

⁸⁷ These contacts did not only involve Europe and the Americas: a Chaldaean (Uniate) Christian priest travelled from Mosul to Hispanic America between 1675 and 1683, leaving a record of his travels in Arabic: see Abelardo Chediac, “Primer viaje de un oriental a la América”, *América Española* 25 (1940), 87-98, Lewis 1995, 70, n. 9.

⁸⁸ Lafitau 1724, I, 3-4.

⁸⁹ Olivier 2016, 205 and 209, n. 43.

of their time. Clearly, these beliefs changed, and those changes also help understand the fluctuations in the writings of these authors. Clement VII had been an enthusiastic collector of Roman and Aztec antiquities, but his imprisonment by Charles V in 1527 upon the sacking of Rome ushered in an era of Counter-Reformation conservatism embodied by Sixtus V, who had the columns of Trajan and Marcus Aurelius topped with statues of Saints Peter and Paul to celebrate the triumph of the true religion over paganism.⁹⁰

The doubt remains about whether these comparisons in themselves brought significant new insight into Graeco-Roman Antiquity and the Americas, as some authors have claimed. Perhaps, as MacCormack has suggested,⁹¹ those comparisons automatically integrated what people were able to learn about the cultures and religions of the Americas, and their own past, with other interests of the period, as we tend to do today.

In any case, as indicated at the beginning of this article, those comparisons entailed a crucial advance in the emergence of concepts of polytheisms, and of a history of religions. They also continue to contribute, through the reading of these fertile texts, to the development by historians of ancient religions of fresh and renewed perspectives on the realities on which they work, which are so often lacking a sufficient context.

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⁹⁰ Pohl – Lyons 2016, 10-11.

⁹¹ MacCormack 1995, 79-80.

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(ISSN 0418 – 453X)