Religion was certainly part of everyday life for early modern Europeans—and in this area of cultural production, too, European expansion had consequences. It is generally accepted that the sixteenth and the eighteenth century differed concerning worldview and the status of institutional religion in society. While the sixteenth century was still quite Christian—the wars of religion had actually reinforced rather than undermined religious vigor—radical Enlightenment attacked religious belief and the role of institutionalized religion in the eighteenth century. Our time of interest—the second half of the seventeenth and the early eighteenth centuries—occupies a transitional place in this development that is still only imperfectly understood. The so-called scientific revolution that took place during this time and is connected to European expansion is certainly one key to understanding this process: it helped to create a distinction between science and theology. This split, however, was not yet established—Europeans still understood God as the origin of nature, and science as a way of understanding nature and thus God. An analysis of religious conceptions helps us to better understand this time of transition, and to assess how European expansion impacted not only religious thought, but how it disrupted established narratives and explanatory models. Religious concepts did not just travel—they were adapted and negotiated.

Africa and especially America needed to be accommodated into a worldview that was shaped by Christian religious ideas, which was not always successful. Increasing contact with these continents thus often ruptured established notions and concepts. It proved impossible simply to supplant existing concepts into this space without adapting them to a certain extent. One example that has received some attention in scholarship was the problem of how to integrate the inhabitants of America into the biblical account of world history. Medieval Christianity had divided the world into three parts, each belonging to one of the sons of Noah: the descendants of Sem lived in Asia, those of Ham in Africa, and those of Japhet in Europe. Unfortunately, Noah only had three sons—and nobody else had survived the Flood.

The discussion about the place of America’s population in the larger biblical narrative was conducted among Iberian savants since the sixteenth century, but it only entered public discourse around 1650. For the next two hundred
years, the issue was publicly debated and new theories and interpretations appeared constantly. The discursive presence of the issue is comparable to the material presence of sugar in the eighteenth century—both were trans-regional phenomena, and both illustrate the impact of the Americas on Europe. While Africa is theoretically present in the case of sugar because it provided the largest part of the labor power, the continent is completely irrelevant to the biblical problem. Africa was part of the old world and did not need to be accommodated in the same manner as the Americas.

This chapter moves beyond these, no doubt significant, larger issues. Again, the idea is to better understand how European expansion impacted Europe by looking at seemingly marginal concepts that did not make great waves in discourse. Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra has suggested that a specific Atlantic use of (religious) typology can be discerned in early modern Europe—a theory that needs to be tested on two fronts. First, the hypothesis has not yet been investigated for Africa but only for the Americas. Including West Africa in the discussion helps us to assess whether we can indeed describe this typology as Atlantic, instead of simply as American. Second, it is not clear at this point whether and how regional background or religious affiliation impacted the use of religious concepts. I investigate these questions by looking into the use of the religious concepts of martyrdom, the devil, and the witch. These very specific investigations reveal how Africa and America exercised a subtle but noticeable impact on early modern religious discourse in France.

Missionaries and Martyrs

Although trade was certainly the driving force for European expansion, it was never its only goal. For the Catholic naval powers, proselytism was another essential element of their overseas endeavors. Missionaries always accompanied colonizers and traders and—if they survived—published reports on their experiences. We have already met most of these reports, since missionary accounts are important primary sources in the study of European expansion.

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