Chapter 10

Of Adam’s Rib, Cannibalism, and the Construction of Otherness through Natural Law

Toy-Fung Tung

Introduction*

Europe’s confrontation with the New World and its indigenous cannibals was a stark confrontation with the Other seen through Old World conflicts and desires. This essay will examine how the cannibalistic Amerindian Other was construed by Francisco de Vitoria (ca. 1485–1546), a Spanish Thomist, and Jean de Léry (1534–1613), a French Huguenot. Trained in medieval theology and jurisprudence, Vitoria famously addressed the legality of the Spanish conquest of the Americas in two reflections, On the Amerindians American Indians and On the Law of War, which were both publicly delivered in 1539. Unlike Vitoria, who never saw an Amerindian, the poorly educated Léry lived for nearly a year among the Tupinamba of Brazil. Léry’s account of his time in Brazil, History of a Voyage to the Land of Brazil, first published in 1578, was reprinted between 1580 and 1611 in five successive editions with authorial corrections and additions. By

* My thanks to Harvey Brown, Paul J. Cornish, and other participants of the Medieval Natural Law panel at the 2011 International Congress on Medieval Studies, where a version of this chapter was first presented. I also thank Raziel Abelson for his editorial suggestions.


1535, all the Spanish empirical texts that would figure in the moral debate on the Amerindians had been printed, except for Francisco López de Gómara’s Historia general de las Indias (1552).4

But Eurocentric concerns, not facts, directed the inquiry into the Amerindian Other. As we shall see, Vitoria invoked natural law and conceded to the Amerindians personal dominium—that is, mastery over their individual bodies, goods, and actions—while denying to them that same dominium as a people in the context of divine providence.5 Léry’s training as a Calvinist pastor led him to portray the Tupinamba both as individuals partaking of mankind’s common fallen nature and as a people foreclosed from Eucharistic participation in the perfect Christian community. Vitoria and Léry viewed the Amerindians through the lens of contemporary religious disputes, between Catholics and Lutherans, and between Catholics and Calvinists.6 The importance of rejecting Luther’s conciliarism has long been recognized in Vitoria’s thought, while the influence on Léry of Calvin’s Eucharist and other doctrines has been amply demonstrated.7 Although they validated the Amerindians’ individual personhood as sons of Adam, their ‘othering’ of the Amerindians’ communal identity as a people was tied to strategies intended to displace the Christian Other at the pinnacle of Christian progress.

---


5 Under Gaius’s three Roman law categories, Vitoria affirmed the Amerindians’ “dominium super proprios actus et super propria membra,” along with their “dominium rerum.” Amerindians, 242, 251; Urdánoz, 654, 665–666.
