

# E-Reserves: Cover Sheet

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11. See esp. J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, ed. J. O. Urmson and Marina Sbisa (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975), and J. R. Searle, *Speech Acts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969). In religious studies some adaptations have been made to speech act theory in application to religion. See, e.g., Benjamin Ray, "Performative Utterances in African Ritual," *History of Religions* 13 (1973): 16-35, and Wade Wheelock, "A Taxonomy of the Mantras in the New- and Full-Moon Sacrifice," *History of Religions* 19 (1980): 349-69.
12. Eric D. Hirsch, Jr., *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967), p. 25.
13. For a full discussion of this problem see Hans H. Penner, "The Poverty of Functionalism," *History of Religions* 11 (1971): 91-97.

## Good-bye Columbus: *An Afterword*

In November of 1983 I met in Santa Fe with a number of persons interested in considering what preparations might lead to the appropriate celebration and commemoration of the five hundredth anniversary of the first voyage of Columbus to America. I presented remarks from which the following short essay is excerpted. The remarks are addressed primarily to the study and perceptions of Native American religions within the academic study of religion. Foolishly I had not accounted for the fact that the others present were almost exclusively anthropologists and archaeologists. The response to my remarks was shocking to me, for I learned that only one of twenty or so present was aware of the academic study of religion, and most considered my statement that the study of Native American religions has been ignored, has yet really to begin, to be so grossly in error as to be utterly silly. I had no luck, even by invoking the statistics on the number of departments of religion and scholars in the area, in clarifying my position. Since my effort for the last decade has been to help develop a new field of study within the academic study of religion, it now seems that a crucial issue is whether the academic study of religion stands in any way distinct from anthropology. Historically this has not been a significant issue because, I believe, there has been an agreement within the academic community about the limitations of these fields: it has hinged on the presence or absence of writing. However, in the last decade there has been an increasing movement by anthropologists into the study of literate societies with research interests expressed on many fronts. I fail to see much of a complementary movement by students of religion. This is, of course, the movement I am calling for in every essay in this volume. Obviously any current study of Native American religions must depend heavily on the archaeological,

ethnograph, linguistic, and ethnographic record and much of the theory developed by the anthropology of religion. Nonetheless, the study of Native American religions and the academic study of religion, I believe, may be mutually enriched, and in ways complementary to the various fields of anthropology. This has been a premise underlying the foregoing essays, and to bring the collection full circle, I think it appropriate to conclude with this essay.

In the journal of his 1492 voyage Columbus wrote the following about the religion of the peoples he called "los indios": "They should be good servants and very intelligent, for I have observed that they soon repeat anything that is said to them, and I believe that they would easily be made Christians, for they appear to me to have no religion." And in a letter he wrote shortly after his journal entry, he referred again to the religion of these people. His single sentence on the subject is preceded by his observations on fish and followed by a detailed description of trees. He wrote, "They have no religion and I think that they would be very quickly Christianized, for they have a very ready understanding."

Columbus understood religion as identical with Christianity. Given the world in which he lived, he could scarcely have had any other understanding. For him to have recognized anything that he would call religion would have been as unlikely as it would have been for him to have recognized that he was not charting a course to the eastern shores of Asia.

As a student of religion I find no fault with Columbus holding this view of religion; he scarcely had an alternative, yet I find it profoundly disturbing that the view expressed by Columbus regarding religion stands today almost without alteration. Indeed, we continue, like Columbus, to be more interested in the fish and trees than in people and their religions. In the half-millennium period since Columbus the social sciences and humanities have enjoyed major development. The academic study of religion came to life late within this period. It has grown rapidly, now having thousands of teachers and researchers in North America. The academic study of religion has developed its interests to include religious traditions throughout history and throughout the world in an effort to come to terms with religion as an important dimension of being human. Despite this development the field of study continues to ignore almost wholly

the peoples native to the Americas. The well-established field known as American religion is essentially a study of the history of American Christianity. In large measure it is but a study of American Protestantism, for it has regularly ignored even the centuries of Catholic Christian presence in the American Southwest and in Central America prior to the Anglican settlement at Jamestown. Native Americans have never been included in American religious history except in the terms expressed by Columbus—that is, as prospective souls to enfold within Christianity.

I consider this situation to be intolerable, yet I do not believe that it can be rectified simply by expanding the current approach of the academic study of religion to include these cultures. It is quite clear that this exclusion of Native Americans from the academic study of religion is symptomatic of much more deeply seated biases that are inseparable from many of the perspectives that have shaped the humanities and social sciences. The exclusion is rooted in the very character of Western intellectual history and is especially clear in the American academic understanding of religion. Thus, rectification will require fundamental revision.

Since the voyages of Columbus are inextricably connected with this matter, perhaps the upcoming celebration of the five hundredth anniversary of his first voyage may serve as a goal toward advancing this process of revision. Let me outline some elements that I believe must be included. America exists for us not because Columbus discovered it, especially not in the style described in Morrison's famous biography: "Never again may mortal men hope to recapture the amazement, the wonder, the delight of those October days in 1492 when the New World gracefully yielded her virginity to the conquering Castilians." Rather, as Edmundo O'Gorman has shown in his book *The Invention of America*, America exists for us as "America" because, after Columbus' death some Europeans began to recognize the incongruity between the observations of Columbus and other travelers and what was known about the world at the time. The beginning of a resolution to this incongruity was the invention of the idea of a "new world." They called it America. American history may be seen as the working out over time of the identity of this idea, expressed through images of the landscape and through actions of peoples within this landscape. I believe that

O'Gorman's work forces us to revise our understanding not only of America and American history, but of historical processes and the writing of history. American history has been made and written in the process of responding to and resolving the incongruities that have existed between our experience in America and the expectations that stem from our images of America.

In this light we may discern the character and history of the encounter with the peoples native to the Americas. It was the recognition and experience of incongruity that gave rise to the invention of America. But in the time of Columbus no such incongruity was recognized between the images and expectations held for "los indios" and the actual peoples encountered. More importantly, no such incongruity has ever been recognized. As Columbus believed that he had found a trade route to Asia, we have persisted in the belief that we know these Indians. The significance of the voyages of Columbus arose only when it was recognized that the observations he made did not correspond to the maps he was using. Yet we have persisted, erroneously I think, in upholding with confidence our belief that the Indians we observe are the ones described in our guides. American history documents this fact. Government policy has always assumed that "we" know what "they" want and need even more than they do, even when they express alternative views. At best it has been a policy of paternalism, but commonly even this parental dimension has been supplanted by one of termination and displacement to meet the exigencies of the advancement of civilization and Christianity. The academic consideration of native peoples has been done primarily by anthropologists whose traditional purview has been those we have termed "primitive peoples"; this means, to unpack the prejudice of the term, peoples whose cultures were disappearing in the face of the more modern, more advanced societies. We have known the peoples native to the Americas variously as "noble savages" and as "dirty dogs." The history of our encounter with them as actual peoples has been almost wholly shaped by the terms of these images, whether it be to attempt to make them farmers on small plots of land like European-American settlers, to make them Christians to save them from their heathen ways, to use them to sell ourselves margarine by projecting images of the purity and healthfulness of a corn-growing Indian maiden, or

to use them as counterimages with which to whip ourselves for polluting the earth.

To put it in terms of the quincentenary, as far as comprehending Native American cultures and especially the religious dimensions of these many complex cultures, I believe that we are still in the boat with Columbus. We have yet to perceive the radical incongruities that exist between what we believe that we know about them and what and who they really are. We, like Columbus before us, inevitably find what we set out to find, see what we want to see. At least in the academic study of religion we, like Columbus before us, express through our actions if not through clear statement that Native Americans have no religion. We remain deaf to their insistence that we have not understood them, that we have not seen them, that our studies radically transform, even violate, them.

To me, a major goal for the Columbian quincentenary should be to begin to recognize and to attempt to come to terms with this fundamental incongruity. In the academic study of religion this would require the initiation of the academic study of Native American religions. This cannot be done in any way that is academically respectable without also rethinking fundamental aspects of the entire field of study.

As a quincentenary goal in the area of Native American studies I would hope that we might first recognize the incongruities that have existed for nearly five hundred years in our envisioning and encountering the peoples native to the Americas, and that this recognition might open a greater sensitivity and respect as well as a revisioning and renewal widely experienced in the academic study of religion and perhaps other academic fields. My highest hope would be that not only would we come to see and hear more fully and more accurately, but that our new vision would initiate a new era in which a fuller human encounter characterized by openness and dignity might take place among all peoples of America. In short, my quincentenary hope would be that after five hundred years we might finally step off the boat.