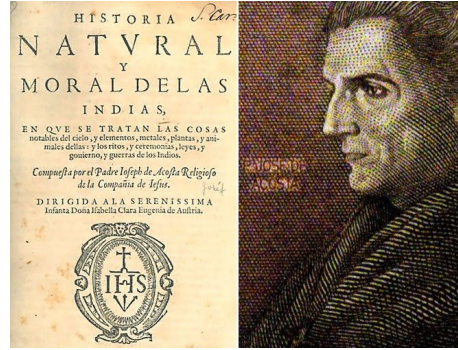


Prompting Observations

- 1) Willie James Jennings (Yale theologian) claims colonial imperialism shaped the theology of 16th c. Jesuit missionary to Peru José de Acosta, and Acosta in turn shaped modern Christian theology.
- 2) Acosta’s colonialism took the form of divorcing intimacy with indigenous peoples from missionary evangelization. Acosta encased theological performance in habits of presumed cognitive mastery and exaggerated judgment of others. Missionaries had nothing to learn from native peoples, only faith propositions and discipline to impose.
- 3) Jennings attributes Acosta’s theological distortions to his epistemic defensiveness upon entering the New World; he set out to shore up traditional Old World understandings against the challenge posed by the New World more than he was willing to learn from America and its peoples.
- 4) Pope Francis, on the other hand, frequently evokes self-decentering, going out of the self, towards the peripheries, as an essential ingredient of openness to reality, receptivity to truth. He associates this self-decentering with the capacity for surprise, for wonder.

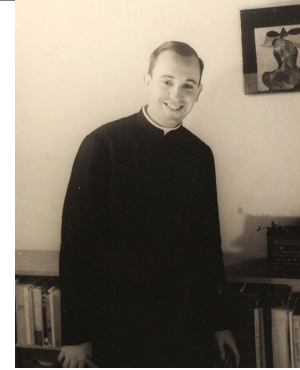
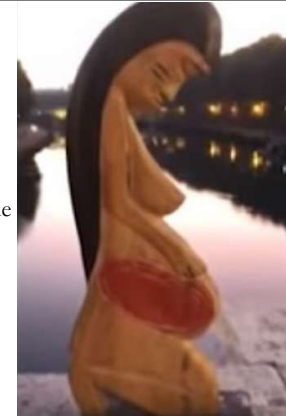
Research Questions

- 1) Does the secondary literature relevant to Acosta, or Acosta’s own written works, implicate a refusal of wonder in his colonialist theological project?
- 2) Does Acosta’s colonialist theology or epistemic defensiveness find echoes in the current church?
- 3) What are the intellectual and spiritual roots of Pope Francis’s notion and practice of wonder?
- 4) How does Francis’s theology compare to Acosta’s and to current theologies marked by similar epistemic defensiveness?



Above: José de Acosta and the title page of his most famous work, *Natural and Moral History of the Indies*

Right: Indigenous statue used in the synod dedication before being pushed into the Tiber by a far right religious and political activist



Above: Young Jorge Bergoglio (Pope Francis) in formation as a Jesuit

Findings

- 1) Jennings’s analysis of Acosta’s failure to reckon with the epistemological challenge posed by the New World; the implicit role of surprise and epistemic vulnerability in Alasdair MacIntyre’s (Notre Dame philosopher) work on acknowledging and overcoming epistemological crises; Walter Mignolo’s (Duke) analysis of Acosta’s epistemic imperialism; and Acosta’s published works support a case that the missionary’s refusal of the cognitive openness of wonder contributed to his creation of a colonialist theology in and for America.
- 2) Acosta’s cognitive closure and anti-indigeneity found an echo at 2019’s Synod of Bishops for the Pan-Amazon Region. During the synod, traditionalist Catholic leaders and activists spread disinformation; denigrated the faith of indigenous Catholics, the pope, and the synod’s participants; trumpeted Europe’s theological primacy; and cheered vandalism of indigenous symbols used to open the synod. More broadly, Acosta’s cognitively closed theology resonates with critics of Francis’s vision of a synodal church, one that listens, learns, and changes.
- 3) Francis’s formation as a Jesuit and his early engagement with Argentine political philosophy stand at the root of his wonder. His engagement with French theologian Gaston Fessard, S.J. and Argentine philosopher Amelia Podetti, especially, created in him an openness to cognitive vulnerability and an expectation that encounter with reality—truth—is always a surprise.

“We must cultivate the soul of a child and of a poet to maintain the capacity for surprise in the face of life.”
 Pope Francis



Conclusion

Like Acosta before them, Pope Francis’s traditionalist critics self-protectively defend the sufficiency and closure of their forms of faith. For Francis, on the other hand, the adequacy of intellect to reality depends on wonder, and wonder decenters the self, one’s prior understandings and expectations. Wonder deals out a death to old ways of seeing, and it raises one up to new visions of a reality that is always greater than human knowing.