This article explores the entanglements between the emergence of the anthropological conception of religion and the logic of race in the modern/colonial world. This entanglement is also one between traditional religious categories such as Christian, Muslim, and Jew, and modern ethno-racial designations such as white, indigenous, and black that point to a co-implication between race and what we call religion in modernity. Key in this process was the distinction between peoples with religion and groups without religion in the period of the late Middle Ages and early European expansion. Particularly important in this context are not only religious figures and theologians, but also travelers and conquistadors like Christopher Columbus and others.

IN HIS ARTICLE about religion, religions, and the religious, theorist Jonathan Z. Smith points out that “the term ‘religion’ has had a long
history. The better part of what happened prior to the sixteenth century is irrelevant to the contemporary use of the term” (1998: 269). Although in posing it in this way, Smith runs the risk of erasing the importance of the meaning of the concept of religion prior to the sixteenth century, his expression succeeds in placing an adequate emphasis on the context, which, beginning with Immanuel Wallerstein, would be known as the long sixteenth century (1980). In the sixteenth century, not only did the content of the concept of religion expand, but the very terms in which religion was approached and understood in the West changed. And it is these terms that define what we mean by religion and the study and theory of religion in modernity. With this idea, Smith breaks with a more traditional view that traces the basis of the theory of religion only from the Protestant Reformation or the European Enlightenment onward. It is within the historical and conceptual frame that begins in the long sixteenth century, one that brings to light the complete panorama of the first and second phases of modernity, that the reflections in my contribution to this roundtable are situated.

I show that the conceptual coordinates that defined the “fight for the empire” and the forms of social classification of the fourth century and of later centuries prior to the “discovery” and conquest of the Améri cas changed drastically in the sixteenth century. The relationship between religion and empire would be at the center of a dramatic transformation from a system of power based on religious differences to one based on racial differences. It is for this reason that in modernity, the dominant episteme would not only be defined by the tension and mutual collaboration between the idea of religion and the imperial vision of the known world, but, more precisely, through a dynamic relation between empire, religion, and race (see Quijano 1992; Wynter 1995). Ideas about race, religion, and empire functioned as significant axes in the imaginary of the emergent modern/colonial world. It is with respect to these points that I expand upon Smith’s observations.

Smith begins his article by citing the second earliest inventory of the “New World” in English, A Treatise of the Newe Indi a (1553). From that work, he cites the following: “At Columbus first comming thether, the inhabitantes went naked, without shame, religion or knowledge of God” (Smith 1998: 269).1 Smith also cites the Crónica del Perú, in which Pedro de Cieza writes of the indigenous people in the Northern Andes that “they had no religion whatsoever, from what we understood” (1998: 269).2 Smith

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1The text cited appears toward the end of Münster ([1553] 1966: n.p.).
2In the first part of the Crónica del Perú, Pedro de Cieza makes use of multiple forms of referring to “natural Indians,” many of which include references to their idolatrous religion and their cult of
derives various conclusions from these observations, including the idea that “religion” is in these cases not a theological category but rather an anthropological one, and that the concept presupposes universal applicability such that the absence of religion surprises the conquistadors and chroniclers. After discovering the meaning of the term, Smith traces other uses in later writings, granting particular importance to definitions that emerged within the context of the Protestant Reformation and the era of the Enlightenment. I would like to linger for a moment at the time of the “discovery” and conquest, since I believe that it is there that one can elucidate a profound meaning for the term religion in the modern age and its connections with the idea of race and forms of imperial power.

The first consideration that we need to ponder is what it meant to refer to the indigenous peoples as subjects that did not have religion. Christopher Columbus brings up the idea in the very first encounter with the indigenous on October 12, 1492:

Ellos andan todos desnudos como su madre los parió. . . . Y yo creí e creo que aquí vienen de tierra firme a tomarlos por captivos. Ellos deben ser buenos servidores y de buen ingenio, que veo que muy presto dizan todo lo que les dezia. Y creo que ligeramente se harian cristianos, que me pareçio que ninguna secta tenían. (Colón 1986: 63)

[They all go naked as their mothers bore them. . . . I supposed and still suppose that they come from the mainland to capture them for slaves. 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 appeared to me to have no religion.] (Colón 1969: 55–56)

Later, on Tuesday, November 27, 1492, Columbus also writes that it will be easy to convert the Indians to Christianity since “ellos no tienen secta ninguna ni son idolatras” [they don’t have religion nor are they idolaters] (Colón 1986: 110, translation mine). Other observations that appear in Columbus’ travel log include an entry from December 21 of the same year, which indicates that Columbus already counted the Indians as the devil (see Cieza de León [1553] 1984). On this point, see also the discussion by Luis Millones Figueroa about “the devil as an intellectual weapon” in the Crónica del Perú (Millones Figueroa 2001: 145–52). The references to idolatry and the devil mark continuity with prior forms of interpreting non-Christian subjects and cultures. But in the context of the “discovery” and conquest, there existed not only continuities but also ruptures and transformations in the medieval Christian episteme. The forms in which such ideas about religion were articulated will play, as we will see, a crucial role in these transformations.
Christians and subjects of the King, and that the only thing lacking was teaching them the Castilian language and to “mandarles” [command them] “porque todo lo que se les mandare harán sin contradición alguna” [because they will do everything that is asked of them without questioning] (Colón 1986: 141, translation mine).

The passages above indicate that Columbus perceived the indigenous people as a tabula rasa. It was possible to write anything on their consciousness because they were empty, or lacked substance, reflected in the idea that they did not even “have religion.” The idea that the indigenous people of the Américas had no sects translated in general as the notion that they were subjects without religion, as the translation of Columbus’ diaries in English has it. In effect, just as we see in other writings from the period, “sect” is used as synonymous with religion. Stephen Glazier indicates that “the initial commentaries regarding the lack of religion among the Amerindians were echoed in the writings of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries” (1992: 588). Traces of this conception can be found in writings such as the Comentarios reales de los Incas (1609), in which the Inca Garcilaso de la Vega writes that certain indigenous communities “had no inclination toward the adoration of anything—short or tall—neither from interest nor fear, but rather they lived completely (and still live) like beasts. And worse, because the doctrines and teachings of the Inca kings did not reach them” (Garcilaso de la Vega [1609] 1991: 31, translated by George Ciccariello Maher). Columbus’ view of people without religion was not much different from how the Inca Garcilaso de la Vega saw them later, as indigenous people appeared to Columbus as blank and lacking significant subjectivity. The result was that Columbus imagined (in his October 12, 1492, journal entry) that they could be very easily indoctrinated with Christianity and that they would be good slaves (Colón 1969: 55, 1986: 63).

Since the indigenous people were subjects without religion, Columbus did not need to resort to the established parameters of the encounters with idolaters and “false religions” to dictate how he should interact with them. Here, Columbus proposes servitude as something which is part of the very nature or the natives that he encounters. This conception will persist even after it has been conceded that indigenous people had

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3Las Casas, for example, writes in his Historia de las indias: “Convidar y atraer y ganar, por paz y amor y mansedumbre y ejemplos de virtud, a la fe y cultura y obediencia y devoción del verdadero Dios y Redentor del mundo, a los infieles, sin alguna diferencia de cualquier secta o religión que sea y pecados y costumbres corruptos que tengan” [Bring and gain infidels to the faith, culture, obedience, and devotion to the true God and Redeemer of the world through peace, love, humility, and examples of virtue, without allowing sect or religion, or sins and corrupt customs to make a difference] (de las Casas 1927: 94, translation mine).
religion or after they have converted to Christianity. This is why the later recognition of the indigenous as Christians would not lead Columbus to alter the way he saw them. Since the recognition of religiosity was a principal feature in the recognition of peoples as people, the declaration that natives did not have religion opened up the path for the expropriation of the natives’ lands, denied them subjectivity, and declared them servile subjects.

PEOPLE WITHOUT RELIGION AND THE ORIGINS OF RACISM

There is an important precedent for Columbus’ idea about the lack of religion of the inhabitants of what would soon be known as the “New World.” In a key chapter near the end of Guide for the Perplexed, Maimonides provides a metaphor for the relationship between faith and reason that makes reference to the idea of subjects without religion. It is important to bear in mind here that the translation of Guide for the Perplexed into Spanish was the first and most extensive philosophical text to appear in the Spanish language at its time. It is estimated that this translation, by Pedro de Toledo, was completed in 1433 CE (Maimónides 1989). It would be difficult to underestimate the significance and impact of this text. As Moshe Lazar asserts in his introduction to a recent publication of the Toledo translation, the Guide for the Perplexed provoked “a lasting controversy among students of Judaism and Christianity throughout the thirteenth century and afterward. Important echoes of this debate can be found in St. Thomas Aquinas, Alberto Magno . . . and later in Spinoza and Leibniz” (1989: n.p.).

Toward the end of the Guide, Maimonides divides people into three basic groups. First, there are those who follow the commandments and are oriented toward or know the truth. Then, there are those whose beliefs are false—whose point of reference was probably Muslims—and whom Maimonides indicates it is sometimes permissible to kill so that they not lead others astray. Finally, there are subjects who do not follow any law or have no understanding whatsoever. For Maimonides, “the people who are abroad are those that have no religion, neither based on speculation nor received by tradition. Such are the extreme Turks that wander about in the north, the Kushites who live in the south, and those in our country who are like these. I consider these as irrational beings, and not as human beings; they are below mankind, but above monkeys.

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4For an English translation, see Maimónides (2007).
since they have the form and shape of man and a mental faculty above that of the monkey” (Maimónides 2007: 384).

After a study of the forms of argumentation and philosophies that come closest to what we could deem a properly racist mentality, Ivan Hannaford indicates that it is with the metaphors of reason and unreason, in terms of who has and does not have religion for Maimonides, that we see the beginnings of a properly racist logic in the West (1996: 112). With this, Hannaford provides a critical key for understanding the meaning and implications of the idea of having or not having religion in the context of the conquest. To refer to the indigenous as subjects without religion removes them from the category of the human. Religion is universal among humans, but the alleged lack of it among natives is not initially taken to indicate the falseness of this statement, but rather the opposite: that there exist subjects in the world who are not fully human. However, the idea that the Guide for the Perplexed was capable in itself of inaugurating a logic that would be used not only against “the followers of Mohammad and the descendents of Ham” but also against the Jews themselves would seem to not take seriously Christian polemics from the eleventh to thirteenth centuries, some of which predates Maimonides and already questioned the humanity of religious subjects like the Jew and the Muslim. This prehistory of modern racism is important in order to understand the revolutionary and innovative use of the concept of religion by Columbus and other conquistadors and historians of the conquest.

The prehistory of modern racism has been linked to the emergence of Christianity not only because it was the religion of the Roman Empire, but also because of its increasingly global project of expanding the reach of “the true religion,” a project that intensifies and becomes increasingly intolerant beginning as early as the eleventh century (see, among others, Le Goff 1985; Chazan 1997; Iogna-Prat 1998; Tolan 2002; Landes et al. 2003). As the historian Dominique Iogna-Prat demonstrates, it was then we find the emergence of “an encompassing notion of Christianity, which no longer implied merely a spiritual community, but also designated a social and temporal structure” (1998: 12). Iogna-Prat shows that “Christianity (Christianitas) defined by the clergy in the eleventh and twelfth centuries was conceived as a unitary whole with a center, Rome, and with borders that needed to be defended against external

5Although not central to the argument, we should mention here that there are studies that trace Columbus’ probably Jewish roots. If there is any truth to this, it would give more reasons to think that Columbus was aware of these polemics and the forms which some Jews, including Maimonides, developed to refer to other groups (see Amler 1991).
enemies—pagans and infidels—and to be extended to comprise the entire world *(Universitalitas)* (1998: 12, translated by George Ciccariello Maher). Iogna-Prat adds that “the Church was like a mountain destined to gradually fill the entire space of the earth until it was one with the world” (1998: 12, translated by George Ciccariello Maher). From this point onward, it was of the highest importance to affirm the difference with those who did not constitute a part of the Christian view of the world. The Church of the eleventh and twelfth centuries identified with an expansive utopia which would only culminate when *Christianitas* had become *Universitalitas*.

The project of eleventh- and twelfth-century Christendom gives new spirit and significance to the Christian apologies and polemics that had been appearing since the fourth century. Iogna-Prat studies in detail the work of Peter the Venerable, who acted as leader of Cluny Abbey between 1122 and 1156, and who commissioned the first translation of the Koran into Latin. He also appears to be the first Western author to use the term Talmud, employing it in a polemical treatise *(Iogna-Prat 1998: 13–14)*. According to Iogna-Prat, Peter the Venerable raised to a new level the attempts of clerics in prior centuries to formalize and systematize the idea of the world derived from the separation between clerics and laity (1998: 107). For him, the Church was a holistic system with a global vocation, and within this view, “the struggle against the various avatars of the Antichrist—heretics, Jews, and Saracens—was a subject of great importance” (Iogna-Prat 1998: 108, translated by George Ciccariello Maher).

Peter the Venerable’s strategy consisted of “fixing [the Church’s] enemies in time and space” (Iogna-Prat 1998: 317, translated by George Ciccariello Maher). This was very clear in his perception of Jews, who for him had no history beyond their biblical past (Iogna-Prat 1998: 318). In contradistinction to Christian universalism, the Jewish religion of exile did not offer any future for the people: Peter “conceived of the nomadic children of Cain, exiled after the destruction of the Temple of Jerusalem, as outside time, waiting indefinitely for their eternal condemnation” (Iogna-Prat 1998: 318, translated by George Ciccariello Maher). From this perspective, the Jews were a people without a center, without direction, and even lacking a present: the Jews had missed the train of history, and had not participated in the great Christian event. In this way, Peter derived the idea that the Jews were tied to a past that only allowed them to reclaim as their own the kingdoms of David and Solomon. With the exception of serving as slaves, Peter also denied them a position within the eschatological Christian economy (Iogna-Prat 1998: 320).

Peter the Venerable’s idea of Christendom as a global design leads him to pose a racial turn in Christian polemics. After analyzing what he
considered to be the “bestial” legends of the Talmud, Peter came to ask himself if Jews were truly human beings (Iogna-Prat 1998: 320–323). Peter was not the first to generate these sorts of ideas, and the Christians were certainly not the only ones to invest intellectual energy into polemics of this type (see Rankin 1956; Golb 1997). The Spanish Jew Judah Halevi—a contemporary of Peter the Venerable—formulated the notion of a natural difference between those born Jewish and those who converted to Judaism (Iogna-Prat 1998: 321). Halevi makes use of a history that argues that God chose twelve individuals that originated from the purified sperm of Adam, and that he placed them in Palestine. Halevi conceived of Palestine as the center of the earth and as a place that was especially imbued with divine presence. The Jews who descended from these twelve individuals, in this view, were “naturally” different from those who had converted to Judaism. For both Peter and Halevi, the earth has a center (Rome or Palestine), and it is in relation to that center and those native to it that the rest of the world and its inhabitants would be defined. We see in these proposals, then, an intra-Western struggle over who occupies the epistemic axis of the world. The principal formal difference between Peter and Halevi resides in the fact that while the account of the former feeds an expansionistic view of global ambition, the second attempts to secure a special place for a particular group. This is to say, while both contain the seed of racism, the first view is fundamentally expansionist and the second is protectionist. Of the two, it is the first that will find a place and become central in the racial global designs that characterize European modernity after the conquest of the Américas.

The expansionist view of a holistic and systemic Christendom that we see in the eleventh and twelfth centuries cannot be properly understood without reference to the first two Crusades (the first from 1095 to 1099, the second from 1146 to 1149) and the struggle against imperial Muslim power. John Tolan comments that, prior to the First Crusade, there was little interest in Northern Europe about the Arabs or “Saracens,” or about what would after the sixth and seventh centuries come to be known as Islam (2002: 69). At that time, Islam was referred to as idolatrous or as a heretical version of Christianity. In Spain, under the control of the “Saracens” from 711, the polemics against the latter had a stronger character. The Christian inhabitants of the peninsula imported polemic traditions from the East, where Christians had already encountered and been

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6It is relevant to mention here that according to Arnaldo Momigliano, during the first years of Christianity, the Jews had a key advantage over the Christians in their confrontations with the pagans, since they seemed to be more open than Christians about the possibility that people from different nations obtained salvation without having to convert or hear about Judaism (Momigliano 1987: 134).
subjected to Muslim power. There, Islam was characterized as the religion of the Antichrist, as heresy, or as a form of power that served as a temporary punishment for Christian sins (Tolan 2002: 40–41). Such conceptions would find a place in Spain, and from there would be exported to the rest of Europe, where they would then be taken up anew in the context of the Crusades. The great majority of the chroniclers of the Crusades described the Muslims against whom they were fighting as “pagans,” and interpreted victories against them as a part of the process that would eradicate paganism and, for some, would lead to the second coming of Christ (Tolan 2002: 109). The logic of writers like Tudebus was that Christianity had been in a struggle from the beginning against paganism, and that the hour was approaching when Christ would vanquish the pagan idols. Others saw the death of “Saracens” as revenge for having taken Jerusalem (Tolan 2002: 116–117). Such medieval chroniclers made little effort to understand Muslims, and assimilated the latter into the idea of paganism. The identification between the two was such that Christians came to use “Saracen” and “Moor” to refer to the pagans of antiquity, thereby proclaiming a conceptual association that would prove fruitful for the Christian world order in the period of the conquest (Tolan 2002: 137). The encounter with Muslims is completely inscribed, for Christians, within an almost ancient battle against paganism, and victory over the Muslims is perhaps as significant for Christians as the victory over the pagans by the Roman Empire, which served as the context for Constantine’s conversion to Christianity.

In the twelfth century, Christian conceptions of the “Saracens” were more than anything else defensive reactions against the power and prestige of the Arab–Muslim Empire. The universalist idea of the Church—in gestation since the eleventh century—ran up against obvious difficulties with a considerable part of the known world under Muslim authority. In the twelfth century, the Christians put a great deal of effort into preventing other Christians from converting to the Muslim faith, often employing distorted accounts of the life of Mohammad toward this goal. These same accounts served to inspire a sense of urgency with respect to the reconquest of Jerusalem. In preventing conversions to Islam, moreover, Christian thinkers of the period hoped to win “Saracens” over to Christianity. In contrast to the struggle against heretics and pagans, Church authorities were not sufficient for this task. Although this tendency did not spread far, Christians began to allude to rational arguments that would prove the falseness of Islam and the truth of Christianity. In this context, some Christian intellectuals began to read the writings of Jews and “Saracens” in order to refute them with their own sources, and Peter the Venerable was one of the pioneers of this enterprise.
Christians assumed naturally that reason was common to both themselves and the Muslims, and that rational argumentation would help the latter to realize their error. However, as Tolan points out, thirteenth-century Christian missionaries increasingly found that Muslims were not impressed with their arguments, which led them to conclude that they were irrational (2002: 251).

The Christian polemics against Jews and “Saracens” that emerged from the context of the development of the expansionist and segregationist vision of the clerics came, as we have seen, to question the rationality and even the very humanity of those with whom they debated. The intensification of the relationship between Cristianitas and Universitalitas, and the use of reason as an instrument of persuasion, led the Christians to believe more and more that heretics, Jews, and “Saracens” were irrational by nature. These polemics, no doubt, presupposed the rationality of their opponents, as one does not enter into debate with someone who lacks the capacity to reason. But the resistance that their opponents showed to “reason” made them appear increasingly as purely carnal or semi-bestial beings (Tolan 2002: 283). The combination of an imperialist and expansionist expression of universalism with conceptions of reason and irrationality would lead to a fatally racist logic. This racism, however, would only be systematized and develop its own foundations in the sixteenth century. The polemics, the practice of which implies a certain concession to the Other, would continue in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, as would the idea that the opponents of Christianity are condemned for supporting a false religion, but a religion nonetheless.

The fruitless character of the Christian polemics generated a new social order, particularly felt by those who had converted to Christianity or who could not show that their lineage was Christian. Christian polemicians and apologists were doubly defrauded: they first realized that many Jews and “Saracens” were not dissuaded of their supposedly false beliefs through “reason,” and secondly, those who converted publicly often continued to practice their “false” religion in private. That is to say, their persuasion had not been effective. This situation represented some clear difficulties for the political order of the Christian kingdoms, particularly where there existed an intense struggle against Muslim power. At a moment in which the Christian kingdoms began to articulate their internal unity on the basis of religion and language, the existence of subjects who concealed where their religious loyalties lay would come to represent a threat to the religious and political order. The result was the creation of an institution that would investigate the intimate lives and genealogies of all those who were suspected of being converts or of having a genealogy.
that was not completely Christian. A blood relation with Moors or Jews would lead to the perpetual suspicion that the subjects in question might have religious affiliations with Judaism or Islam. As a result, the verification of the “limpieza de sangre” [cleanliness of the blood] was perceived as extremely important during that period.

The connection between blood relation and religious adherence established by the Tribunal of the Holy Inquisition represented another step toward the integration of political power with social control. This, however, still did not produce the relationship between religion, race, and empire that would be so fundamental for the modern/colonial world. The Inquisition played a fundamental role in creating the idea of a Europe that was fundamentally Christian and exempted from Muslim and Jewish influence (Mignolo 2002b: 466). The discourse regarding cleanliness of blood makes a firm line of demarcation between Western Europe and the people of the “Oriental” world, and in this sense, it could be said that the Inquisition forced open a path to the orientalist colonial discourse of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The Inquisition established the eastern limit of the modern/colonial global imaginary. But this fixation on genealogy and the “purity of the blood” still did not constitute a proper racist mentality, since the humanity of the subjects in question was taken for granted, and all that was in doubt was their political and religious loyalty. The lack of such cleanliness of blood reveals one as a potential traitor or enemy, but not as a member of another species or as a formal exception from the human. As Maimonides anticipated, the latter perspective is opened up not with regard to religious opponents, but rather with those who are said to have no religion, and this occurs in a more or less systematic form precisely in the context of the “discovery” and conquest of the Américas. This conquest was not simply a continuation of the war for the reconquest of the Spanish peninsula. It created something entirely new.

BACK TO COLUMBUS

The Christian polemics and the discourse and practices surrounding the concept of the “purity of the blood” are, in a manner of speaking, the anteroom to the modern racist discourse and practices that would be initiated with the arrival of Columbus in the Américas. Like many of the Christian apologists and polemicists of the eleventh to fourteenth centuries, Columbus was profoundly inspired by the “universal victory of Christianity” (Todorov 1984: 14–33). In a letter to Pope Alexander VI, Columbus asks him to send priests and missionaries to spread the gospel through the world (Colón 1982: 287). Columbus also planned to help
finance a new crusade to rescue Jerusalem from Muslim hands. But unlike Christian polemicists who put forth a universalist view based on the primacy of the clerical order and justified the Crusades, Columbus was not a cleric but a layman—and moreover, he was a navigator and not a polemicist. Since at least the fourth century, the polemics and the universalist Christian discourses were based on an opposition between true and false religions: the encounter with non-Christians and the formulation of Christianity as the one true religion with an ethos of conversion and proselytism required the polemic. But with Columbus’ description of the natives as beings without religion rather than subjects with false religiosity, we see the initiation of a new regime, one based more on degrees of being than on degrees of truth or falsity. Subjects with the wrong religion are to be refuted, while subjects without religion are “discovered,” indoctrinated, perpetually enslaved, and colonized.

Columbus reclaimed a stable space for the layman “discoverer” within the universalist Christian schema that had been in development since the eleventh century in Europe. After Columbus, the clerical order would move progressively toward an order increasingly defined and demarcated by the relation between colonizer and colonized. This is the form in which the incipient modern state begins to escape definitively from subordination to the Church. The theo-political difference between the lands that were habitable thanks to divine grace and those which were supposed to be uninhabitable in the Christian medieval imaginary would be translated in this context into the colonial and racial difference between humans and subjects who are not entirely human or whose humanity is in question (Wynter 1995). In this conceptual map of the emergent modern Europe, the notion of the idolater is replaced by the Aristotelian concept of the natural slave. As Sylvia Wynter indicates, the religious view of the social, terrestrial, and cosmological order is gradually supplanted by a postreligious vision based in the nonhomogeneity of the human species (Wynter 1995: 36). One of the consequences of this turn is that the dominant discursive genre ceases to be primarily that of the

7Columbus wanted to pay one hundred thousand foot soldiers and ten thousand on horseback to take Jerusalem (see Colón 1982: 287). For an analysis of Jerusalem in Columbus’ thought, see Milhou (1983).

8Bernardo de Sahagún has provided a detailed report of one such rare dialogue or colloquium, which were lamentably obscured by the way that the understanding of conquered subjects distorted the efforts of the tlamatinime or Aztec wise men to make them listen and by some Christians to incorporate them within a more universal concept of the human. The colloquium in question occurred between the twelve first Franciscans who arrived in Mexico in 1524 and several tlamatinime who had survived the conquest (see Sahagún 1986).

9For an analysis of the relationship between colonial/racial relations and the humanist revolution that would help to rupture the theo-centric medieval episteme, see Wynter (2003).
religious polemic. In a certain sense, one might say that the first words of what Enrique Dussel refers to as the *ego conquiro* were not “I conquer,” but rather “they have no religion.”\(^{10}\) This is how the clerical order based upon the apology and the polemic against false religions and false faith would come to be challenged, and it is in this challenge that we find one of the most potent bases for racism and for the scientific humanist discourse of modernity. The indigenous people were to be described and commanded, more than simply refuted (see Acosta 2002). The scientific, legal, and anthropological treatise would be the most crucial discursive genre in this context. The anthropological turn in the category of religion—highlighted by Smith—is thus at the root of the anthropological turn in the modern sciences and of the racist conception of the human that has come to distinguish European modernity since more than five hundred years ago.

Much is said of the Copernican revolution, but much less about a Columbian revolution, referring this directly to Columbus and not to the country. The latter consisted in the rupturing of the theological–clerical episteme of the Middle Ages, which was largely based on the one hand on the relation between true religion and heresy or false religion, and on the other on the opposition between the clerics and the laity. Columbus’ voyages led to a disruption in the ways Europeans conceived themselves and the world: lay people gradually obtained more power over clerics, while their status would increasingly be adjudicated to their superior nature rather than to the quality of their beliefs.

The opposition between true and false religions had its roots in the context of the Christian opposition to the pagans in the Roman Empire in the fourth century: it was with this that Christianity was able to become the epistemic center of the Empire. The opposition between clerics and laity sought to tip the balance of power in the Christian world toward the Church. As Sylvia Wynter has argued based on the work of Jacques Le Goff, this opposition gave expression to the more fundamental division between Spirit/Flesh, and the social, geographical, and cosmic orders were defined by such a division (see Le Goff 1985; Wynter 2003: 278–279). In this way, the heavens were conceived of as different in essence from the earth. The earth, in turn, as post-Adamic territory, was thought to be in the center of the universe, and the geography of the earth was also understood in a similar fashion. The inhabitable regions with a moderate climate, which lay on top of the water through the work of divine Grace, were centered in Jerusalem, and the other lands outside

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\(^{10}\)For an analysis of the “I-conquerer,” see Dussel (1992: 50–66).
of divine Grace were considered uninhabitable. The medieval Christian polemics were largely played out within this geographical schema. The Christian politics of the true religion versus the false religions operated within an episteme that sought to take control of the known and habitable world.

In some ways, the medieval world had already entered into crisis before Columbus left for the Indies. Portuguese navigators had already refuted the classical claim that the Antipodes and the lands south of the Equator were uninhabitable. In 1444, Dinis Dias, a Portuguese navigator, arrived at the Senegal River in Cape Verde, Africa. There, fifteen degrees below the Equator, he found tropical vegetation and inhabitants. Beginning in 1482, Columbus had visited Portuguese ports in Africa, and seeing that the supposedly uninhabitable lands were not in fact uninhabitable had a decisive impact on him (see Colón 1982: 167; Taviani 1991: 17–19; Phillips and Phillips 1992: 106; Wynter 1995: 9).12

We should also consider here the fact that while Latin Christianity had already known the existence of black-skinned subjects, the encounter with African blacks in their own habitat that began with the Portuguese explorations posed the need for new forms of anthropological reflection (Fernández-Armesto 1993: 21). The same occurred with the inhabitants of the Canary Islands who, after being confronted with Portuguese explorers, were gradually conquered by the Spanish during the second half of the fifteenth century. However, the encounters with African blacks and the indigenous peoples of the Canary Islands in the fifteenth century, of whom early Christianity had already been aware, did not significantly alter the terms with which Christians classified and understood the communities and peoples that were inside or surrounding their territories. In both cases, the subjects were described according to a classificatory system based on the Christian politics of true versus false religion. It is interesting to compare in this context the expressions used by Columbus to describe the indigenous in the diary of his first voyage to the way in which Peter IV, King of Aragon, referred to the Canaries and their

11For an account of the Portuguese explorations in Africa during the Middle Ages, see Albuquerque (1983) and Chaunu (1972). Bartolomé de las Casas, among others, takes account of the classical theories that justified the idea of the absence of life in the so-called Torrid Zone, and he comments on their significance. Preoccupied with establishing the legitimacy of Christianity in the new context, Las Casas presents Columbus as a divine emissary charged with revealing the falseness of such theories to the world (1927: 40–45).

12Chaunu (1972), Taviani (1991), and Phillips and Phillips (1992), to mention a few, comment on the impact on Columbus of his stay in Portugal and his voyages with Portuguese mariners. For a detailed study of the subject, see Catz (1993).

13For an account of the conquest of the Canary Islands, see Castro Alfin (1983).
inhabitants in 1386: “I know that not long ago some islands were discovered in the ocean—known by the name Canary—in which there exist some populations, and whose unhappy habitants continue to blindly and erroneously practice idolatry, thereby placing them far from the true path” (cited in Caballero Mujica 1992: 108, translated by George Cicariello Maher). While the natives of the Canary Islands were conceived as populations who practiced a false religion, Columbus described natives in the “New World” as beings without religion altogether. One was lacking truth, while the other was lacking what was deemed to be a universal feature of humankind, therefore putting their very humanity in question.

While the indigenous of the Canaries were cataloged as idolaters and devil-worshippers (see Castro Alfin 1983: 137–138; Fernández Rodríguez 1998: 314), Africans were seen as Moors or Muslims (see Rivera Pagán 1992: 312; Goldenberg 2003: 175). The expansion of the category “Moor” to include Africans was not strange, since moro is etymologically related to the Latin term for negro or black.14 Moor, then, was an ethnic and geopolitical category based on skin pigmentation and religion. It would be Columbus, on his first voyage to what Latin Christianity would come to know as the New World, who would transpose the basis for the identification of subjects to the uninhabitable zones. More than merely subjects with a false religion, he conceived of the inhabitants of such zones as subjects without religion, which indicated an exception with respect to the religious universal on which the opposition between true and false religion was based.15 And if Christians understood religion as a link or bond with the ultimate foundation of the world, then the indigenous appeared not to be linked to anything, which made them fundamentally uncivilized

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14The Latin term from which the Spanish moro is derived is morus, which means black. Morus, in turn, derives from the Latin and Greek maurus or mauros, which was used to refer to the dark-skinned peoples in Northwestern Africa or Mauritania. See Forbes (1993: 67).

15Sebastian Münster’s Treatise of the Newe India ([1553] 1966) suggests that references to the absence of religion in indigenous people could have begun when Columbus stopped in the Canary Islands at the beginning of his trip, but there is no mention of encounters with natives in the Canaries in the diary of the first voyage. It is possible that Münster used the vocabulary that Columbus had applied to the Amerindians to narrate an encounter with the inhabitants of the Canaries. Regardless, it was in the context of the natural, cultural, and geographical description of the Américas in which the rupture with medieval forms of social and political classification would become most obvious. Of course, we must concede, as Fernández-Armesto insists, that “much of what was said about the American Indians had been presaged . . . in the literature on the Canaries” (1993: 21, translated by George Cicariello Maher). Moreover, the ways that the indigenous Americans were seen also had implications for how the native inhabitants of the Canaries were described and interacted with. For a description of the context of the colonization of the Américas, Granada, and the Canary Islands, see Fernández-Armesto (1997).
and indomitable. Subjects without religion were not so much mistaken as they were, from this perspective, ontologically limited.

Upon having judged the indigenous as subjects “without religion,” Columbus had altered the medieval idea regarding the “chain of being” and had made it possible to think of the “condemned” no longer in exclusively Christian and theological terms, but rather in terms that were modern and anthropological. The “condemned” of the modern era not only lacked truth, but also diverged fundamentally from that which was considered to be a human being. Their shortcomings result not so much from their judgment, but from a problem in their very being. The “coloniality of power,” then, is born simultaneously with the “coloniality of being.” In these different ways, Columbus took charge of transgressing the two fundamental vertices of the feudal Christian episteme with a single gesture. While he would continue to look to Rome and Jerusalem as the central axes (axis mundi) of a world defined in terms of the holistic and systemic view of Christianity, his classification of the indigenous as nonreligious subjects already announces the existence of an order that would emphasize anthropology over theology and racial classification over Christian polemics. Columbus’ epistemic feat would give new meaning to the idea that while he himself was not a modern subject, he did play a crucial role in opening the doors of modernity.

RACE, RELIGION, AND EMPIRE

The beginning of an anthropological and scientific schema, which represents part of the transition from the idea of Christianity as the axis of the feudal European world to a new epistemological axis of the globe, also provides a new basis for the study of the dialectic between Christianity and the process of Western secularization, which seems to have the articulation of the global/racial modern European project—or what Walter Mignolo has described as the logic of coloniality—as its fundamental basis (Mignolo 2000, 2011a, 2011b). With his “discoveries,” Columbus may seem to have simply offered Latin Christianity the opportunity to transform itself into the effective center of the world, and thereby to complete the medieval mission and vision of Christianity, but in reality he opened the door to the epistemological and symbolic universe which would lead to a fundamental loss of centrality for

16 Lewis Gordon (2004) makes the link between not having religion and a presumed lack of civilization in a commentary on the justifications for underdevelopment in Hegel.

Christianity and give birth to “modern Man.” This modern Man, rather than simply continuing the project of the Church, would attempt to subordinate the latter, even to the point of declaring the death of God. In a sense, Columbus’ “gift” to Latin Christianity was as much something given as it was—in accordance with its etymology—a “poison.”

The invention of a subject who personifies inferiority in his [or her] very nature, and with respect to whom any action is possible, establishes the beginnings of a radical subversion of the medieval theological world, and in this sense, the modern theo-politics of knowledge carries within it the seeds of its own destruction. Now it is not so much God and religious salvation but the ego conquiro and political and economic salvation which are situated at the center of the new form of knowledge. As Wynter has demonstrated, the conquest gives rise to a hybrid system of religious–secular representation in which homo religiosus begins to be displaced by homo politicus and homo economicus. Modernity, then, introduces ego-politics into the womb of theo-politics, as early modernity bears witness to the gradual marginalization of the theo-politics by the ego-politics of knowledge, in which a new God is born: modern Man. The modern idea that “if God does not exist, then anything is allowed” is preceded in the first stages of modernity by the idea that “given that anything is allowed (with respect to the colonized/racialized subject), then there is no God (and therefore I am God).” Thus, it is genocide, and not only technical and scientific expansion, that opens the doors to deicide, and it is from the conjunction of these various elements that the modern ego cogito/conquiro emerges and is solidified.

The substantiation of this new racial perspective that began with reference to religion would not have had much impact were it not for the ramifications it had after the “discovery,” as this same view was propagated by other conquistadors and historians. Moreover, the idea that the indigenous were like a tabula rasa without subjectivity, and that they were to be viewed as merely another interesting element among the flora and fauna “discovered” in the New World, gave rise to the question of whether or not indigenous people had souls. Aníbal Quijano sheds light onto this question, arguing that although Pope Paul III responded affirmatively in 1537 to the question about whether or not American aborigines had souls or not—that is, whether or not they were fully human—it remains the case that “since then, in intersubjective relations and social practices of power, we find constituted the idea that non-Europeans have...
a biological structure which is not only different from Europeans, but which, above all, pertains to an ‘inferior’ level or type” (Quijano 1992: 169, translated by George Cicciariello Maher). With regard to the indigenous, what was in question was less the truth of their religion than their very humanity, and in this context, one did not so much debate with the Indian herself as one enquired and had debates with other Europeans about the Indian’s humanity. The principal debates of the age were thus between Europeans themselves, and they concerned the existence of natural law or forms of what would later be referred to as human rights with respect to the indigenous. These issues would become clearest in the Valladolid controversy of 1550 (see Dumont 1995).

As opposed to the fourth century, when Christian discourse had been directed toward polemics and defenses of Christianity (apologetics) through which Christians distinguished themselves from the believers of false religions, sixteenth-century discourse developed around polemics about the very humanity of colonized subjects. Likewise, some of the most prominent forms of “apologetics” were focused on the defense of the Indians, rather than on the defense of Christianity itself (see Casas 1967). The general skepticism about the full humanity of the indigenous peoples led Europeans to explain cultural differences on the basis of alleged differences in the degree of humanity. That is to say, cultural difference came to be crossed-over or over-determined by racial and colonial difference (see Mignolo 1999, 2000, 2002a, 2003). This way of understanding cultural production and intersubjective relations would survive the formal elimination of colonialism, and would continue to define relations among people in the modern world up to the present. Racism, then, is from this point of view a central element in the formation of the modern/colonial world.

We only need to add two fundamental points to Quijano’s account. On the one hand, if Indians were finally conceived of as humans, it must be said that they were never able to escape the original idea that their subjectivity represented a tabula rasa. In addition to being considered dispensable subjects, indigenous people were seen as subjects to be indoctrinated and domesticated. What happened to the community of

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20A translation and discussion of the 1553 papal bull Sublimis Deus appears in Hanke (1992: 11–85). Paul III’s logic was that if Indians were men, they were then capable of religious learning, which justified systematic preaching in the Americas, and with this, the strong presence of the Church in the “New World.” This transforms the indigenous into a subject to be indoctrinated, and polemics are accordingly very rare. For a detailed account of evangelization and the imperial/colonial project in the “New World,” see Rivera Pagán (1992).

21In order to understand the significance and depth of the sixteenth-century research into the humanity of the Indian, see De Cesare (1999).
black slaves was different. The perception of the slaves represented something like a combination of the worst practices of the medieval politics of truth and falsehood and the modern racist geo-political perspective that began with colonization and conquest of the Américas. Those people who were kidnapped and sold in Africa and who came to the Américas as slaves were initially considered to be Moors or Muslims, and the Portuguese had already used this to legitimate their enslavement (Rivera Pagán 1992: 312; Forbes 1993). They took advantage of the conflictive history between Christendom and the Muslims and of a perception of the latter as bellicose subjects, which thereby legitimized just war and enslavement. This view of Muslims is clearly visible in Maimonides, for whom it was acceptable to eradicate Moors or “Saracens” if necessary. What I am proposing here is that, in the passage across the Atlantic, in coming from Africa to the Américas, African slaves came to be depositaries for the cruellest treatments of both the Moor in Africa and indigenous people in the Américas. The skepticism with respect to the humanity of the indigenous would be transposed and readapted to the African slave, who would cease to be merely a “Moor” and become instead a “negro.” While the former designated religious and ethnic difference (as a Moor was a Muslim and inhabitant of northwest Africa or Mauritania), “negro” would be converted into a category of racial condemnation. As Wynter points out, “negro and negra” would come to represent the only legitimately enslaveable category within the culturally specific European representational system: a category outside of the limits of the “real ‘we’” (1995: 33).

Thus, we see that the newly fashioned modern “chain of being”—with God/White European Man at one pole and the colonized, condemned, or subaltern at the other—would give rise to a “chain of colonial signification” which would replace the medieval “chain of being” with a colonial/imperial discursive structure, sometimes ambiguous, mutable, and evasive, but always in opposition to the effective decolonization of the modern/colonial world. This “chain of colonial signification” does not appear out of thin air, but nor is it completely determined by a given material structure: it exists in productive relation with those institutions that maintain the “coloniality of power.” In this case, when the Spanish and other conquistadors looked for slaves in Africa to replace or complement the indigenous workforce, both the available old forms of religious differentiation (derived in part from the Portuguese contact with Africa), as well as the new imperial and dehumanizing discursive forms that were crafted in the Américas, intervened in the legitimization of African slavery. This justification, then, no longer needed to be based strictly on religious differences. The “negro” and the “negra” would come to be conceived as inherently slave; slavery was part of the very being of the negra/o and vice-versa.
As a result, the terms “negra” and “negro” would be used not only to refer to black-skinned subjects, but rather against all types of slaves and colonized peoples who threatened the colonial order, including indigenous people themselves, revealing this a slippery and always mutating, but never fully decentralized, chain of colonial signification (Forbes 1993: 75, 79).

From being a subject with a different religion, the Moor or Negro was converted into a subject without subjective experience. Both the absolute lack of subjectivity and the traces of having been subjects with a false religion would explain why it was that African slaves—unlike indigenous peoples—were not considered as subjects to be Christianized or inculcated in the dogmas of the Church. The indigenous were (and still are) subjected to an indoctrination regime without precedent in human history. While Blacks were identified with the violent Moors who could be eradicated through violence, indigenous peoples came to be conceived in the context of the conquest as lost tribes of Israel. Indigenous people were predominantly seen as being more than prepared to learn the gospel, whether because they were a tabula rasa onto which the divine word could be stamped or because it was believed that they had already in one form or another participated in the history of Christian redemption. It was thought that indigenous people, unlike European Jews, who—according to Christians—were stubbornly determined to reject Christ, provided a new territory in which to evangelize, but as indoctrination and no longer as polemic proper. Clearly, the indigenous continued to be enslaved and abused, but in many contexts, they were afforded a certain degree of protection from the juridical and theological order. We know that this protection was more theoretical than practical, and that it became a mechanism of control, but with respect to Blacks, it was not even necessary to justify or disguise violent behavior because they were treated as property.

Antiblack prejudice was not new to the sixteenth century, and some researchers find clear traces of it in the Muslim world, in Judaism, and in Latin Christianity. However, it would be Latin Christianity that would

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22Diego de Durán is among those to express this idea (1967). Durán and Sahagún are suspected to have been Jewish converts, which would provide an interesting hermeneutic key to interpreting and analyzing their positions regarding the religion of indigenous people.

23For Frank Snowden and Lloyd Thompson, there was no antiblack racism in antiquity or in the Roman world (see Snowden 1970, 1983; Thompson 1989). Thompson characterizes negative assertions about blacks as aesthetic judgments based on ethnocentrism. Bernard Lewis discusses antiblack prejudice in the early Muslim world (1990). For David Goldenberg (2003), antiblack prejudice was generated in the context of Islamic expansion into Africa and Asia, and it spread from there to Jews and Christians. Although the origin of antiblack prejudice is in debate, what interests us
raise that prejudice to the level of a principal axis in a form of power that, for the first time in human history, would be thought of as global and begin to unfold globally as well. If, as Quijano and Wallerstein argue, the “New World” became the model for those systems of power operating in the Modern world-system, we need to add to this the idea, partly advanced by Wynter, that antiblack prejudice—which was converted in the context of the transition from theology to a racist anthropology into antiblack racism proper—became a fundamental compass for Modern forms of power (see Quijano and Wallerstein 1992; Gordon 1995; Wynter 1995). As Sylvia Wynter argues, beginning with the relationship with black slaves, there developed the principles/criteria that would dictate the similarity and difference between the indigenous and the Spanish, leading the former to be considered from the mid-sixteenth century onward as subjects who inherit a condition of freedom within the Spanish Empire. Black slaves “embod[ied] the new symbolic construct of Race or of innately determined difference that would enable the Spanish state to legitimate its sovereignty over the lands of the Americas in the postreligious legal terms of West Europe’s now-expanding state system” (Wynter 1995: 11–12). Antiblack racism, then, represents a principal axis in the change from the “royal power” of the Spanish state during the Middle Ages to the coloniality of power which would define European modernity.24

Antiblack racism and the formation of the idea of race established a new logic to characterize the difference between subjects and communities, and readdressed the terms of the polemics and the ancient and medieval forms of differentiation. The idea that Blacks were condemned by their affiliation with Ham took on geo-political and racial significance in the incipient European racial modernity. One should not forget either that the dichotomy between true and false religion was associated with opposition between spirit and flesh: the truth was considered spiritual and those who were living in dishonesty were thought to live by the flesh or to be intrinsically carnal subjects. This logic had already been put into practice in the perception of Jews and Muslims in medieval Europe, but it was naturalized in the context of increasing Black slavery in the

here is the fact that antiblack prejudice already existed prior to the conquest of the Americas. However, what would occur after, first, Portuguese explorations in Africa and, later, the treatment of African slaves in the Américas is part of a different episode in which racism (and no longer mere prejudice) becomes transformed into a vital axis for the colonial power matrix that would in large part define modernity. This is lost in the accounts of Lewis and Goldenberg, who do not take into consideration the particularities of the modern/colonial episteme.

24See, for example, Quijano’s studies on the coloniality of power and compare them to Nieto Soria’s analysis of “royal power” (Nieto Soria 1988; Quijano 1992, 1997, 2000a, 2001).
Américas. Skin color, and not faith, would become the mark of a subject’s merely carnal constitution. The (black) African “Moor,” in contrast to indigenous populations in the Americas and elsewhere, would not end up being defined as a tabula rasa, but rather as a subject which was simultaneously entirely carnal and in defiance of the Christian order. As a result, the black was conceived in the modern/colonial world fundamentally as a subject without subjectivity, but one which was also fundamentally violent and moreover (like the indigenous) feminized. Hence, while antiblack prejudice preceded the conquest of the Americas, it is in the context of the latter that the antiblack racism so dominant in modernity would be forged.

The term “Negro,” then, came gradually, by virtue of the racist turn in the incipient Western modernity, to represent a symbolic category denoting radical dispensability, suspicion, violence, and hate. As a result, “Negro” would become an established way of referring to violent natives and other racialized subjects in the modern/colonial world (see Forbes 1993). The “Negro” became a subject with regard to which countless racist discursive forms and power structures would be created, which would subsequently be mobilized against various other groups during the history of modernity. While the “Moors” or African blacks would be partially “indigenized,” thereby creating a new form of racialization which integrated elements of the feudal and new modern/colonial worlds, other racial subjects would then be blackened or darkened, including the indigenous people themselves. The “black” being became perhaps the most evident mark of condemnation in modernity. As a result, there emerges a global antiblack racism by virtue of which racialization processes would follow forms of “darkening” even when no black subjects were involved or even when members of the dominant group were themselves black. “Negro” would become a symbolic space to be occupied by colonized or racialized subjects with distinct pigmements. This is another reason why antiblack racism would be so central to the Western modern/colonial power structure.

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25I deal more with gender in Maldonado-Torres (2007). This exploration, “discovery,” and colonization involved a very peculiar relation to gender and sexuality. It is important to remember here Columbus’ idea that the earth was not round, but that it was more accurately shaped like a breast. Anne McClintock refers to this as the “porno-tropics” of the “discovery” and conquest (see McClintock 1995). See also Dussel’s formulation of the patriarchal element of the modern ego-conquiro (1992: 64–66).

26For a formulation of this point with relation to contemporary racial relations, see Grosfoguel (2003).

27For an analysis of antiblack racism that elaborates on these themes, see Gordon (1995, 1997).
Returning to Jonathan Smith’s article, as he indicates, Columbus’ assertion about the lack of religion in indigenous people introduces an anthropological meaning to the term. In light of what we have seen here, it is necessary to add that this anthropological meaning is also linked to a very modern method of classifying humans: racial classification. With a single stroke, Columbus took the discourse on religion from the theological realm into a modern philosophical anthropology that distinguishes among different degrees of humanity through identities fixed into what would later be called races. This is why, while it may be possible to trace elements of race thinking to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam or to certain figures who were followers of any of these religions, the most crucial aspects are arguably found in the views of travelers and conquerors who were defying Christian tenets as much as they thought that they were simply continuing the mission of the Church. Their departure from traditional Christian views in their ways of approaching and cataloguing the “New World” simultaneously validated anthropological views of religion (vis-à-vis theological approaches), empirical investigation, and race thinking. Both the secular theory of religion and modern race thinking owe much to Columbus, as well as to the universe of meaning and the colonial chain of signification that followed after his so-called discovery. This points to important intersections between the critical theory of religion and global race and ethnic studies, but pursuing those intersections further lies beyond the already ample scope of this article.

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