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Travel and Ethnology in the Renaissance

This book offers a wide-ranging and ambitious analysis of how European travellers in India developed their perceptions of ethnic, political and religious diversity over three hundred years. It discusses the growth of novel historical and philosophical concerns, from the early and rare examples of medieval travellers such as Marco Polo, through to the more sophisticated narratives of seventeenth-century observers – religious writers such as Jesuit missionaries, or independent antiquarians such as Pietro della Valle.

The book's approach combines the detailed contextual analysis of individual narratives with an original long-term interpretation of the role of cross-cultural encounters in the European Renaissance. The author thus proposes a method of analysis which involves both the European background to travel literature and the specific Asian contexts of cultural encounter. An extremely wide range of European sources is discussed, including the often neglected but extremely important Iberian and Italian accounts of India. However, the book also discusses a number of non-European sources, Muslim and Hindu, thereby challenging simplistic interpretations of western 'orientalism'. In sum the book offers the extended and systematic treatment which the growing field of 'cultural encounters' has so far been missing.

JOAN-PAU RUBIÉS is Lecturer in International History, London School of Economics and Political Science. He has written extensively on the history of travel writing, and the political culture of early modern Spain.

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Travel and Ethnology in the Renaissance

South India through European Eyes, 1250–1625

JOAN-PAU RUBIÉS

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This book is dedicated to the memory of my brother Joaquim Rubiés i Mirabet (1968–1992), his courage and his youth.

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vous verrez à vos pieds, non plus la fameuse cité de Vijayanagar, célébrée dans la tradition et la légende, la capitale de souverains dont l'autorité s'étendait sur la moitié de l'Hindoustan, et dont l'amitié était recherchée par les plus puissants princes de l'Asie, mais mutilée par le sabre musulman et défigurée par la main du temps, l'ombre et le tombeau de sa gloire passée.

Edouard de Warren, *L'Inde anglaise* (1845)

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Preface

Southern India, especially the Malabar coast and the kingdom of Vijayanagara, received many European visitors during the transition from the Middle Ages to modern times. Their travel narratives and chronicles provide a unique insight into the encounter between Europeans and a non-Christian, non-Muslim civilization, which they neither wished to ignore nor were able to dominate. In effect, this is less a book about southern India and its visitors than a book about the European Renaissance from a new perspective, emphasizing the growth of an analytical discourse about human diversity. The choice of Vijayanagara as a case-study is designed to help develop a carefully contextualized argument about the evolution of European travel literature and its intellectual content, which not only seeks to identify changes, but also aims to explain their logic. This book contends that the logic of this cultural change was driven by interactions (and often misunderstandings) with other cultures, rather than by a mere projection of European aims and ideologies. In other words, contacts with non-Europeans were intrinsically important, rather than just rhetorically important, for the development of European culture. The powerful cultural transformation of the Latin Christian world from the thirteenth to the seventeenth centuries was therefore not simply the origin of a new western way of looking and dominating: it was also a genuine, if often twisted, response to the challenge of cultural differences experienced abroad and re-evaluated in Europe.

This book therefore combines an empirical case-study, based on a systematic analysis of original sources, with an argument about the implications of this case-study for a general interpretation of the Renaissance, here broadly understood as a long-term process marked by the development of historical and naturalistic ways of thinking. The writing of this study has been constantly guided by a concern with understanding perception as a historical problem, raising questions

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about how realities are perceived, how 'ways of seeing' change, and which mechanisms make translation and understanding across different cultural traditions possible.

Although it is widely recognized that the cultural changes of the Renaissance must have contributed to the rise of the empirical sciences in the following centuries, there are important aspects of this contribution (especially those relating to moral and political concerns) that remain unclear. In part this is because significant genres, such as travel literature, have not been discussed in the context of an intellectual history which has been too often exclusively concerned with the more elitist genres of the humanist and scholastic traditions. Thus some of the roots of early modern 'natural and human history' have been taken for granted. Travel literature not only created an empirical ground which, by its sheer massive presence, imposed itself in the thinking of seventeenth-century theologians and philosophers: it also prompted debates about methods of exposition, induction and comparison.[1] It was an impact which cannot be understood simply by focusing on a single dramatic moment like the (actually rather muted) immediate aftermath of the discoveries of Vasco da Gama and Columbus, because the standing of travellers' accounts within the authoritative discourses of the Renaissance, and in fact their very contents, evolved in response to European intellectual concerns.[2] It is equally important to correct the still current assumption that the full intellectual impact of the discoveries only took place within the Enlightenment or its immediate antecedents, which completely neglects the Renaissance.[3]

This study has been written as an exploration of the ways in which the

[1] I have sketched this argument in two connected articles: J. P. Rubiés, 'New worlds and Renaissance ethnology', *History and Anthropology*, 6 (1993): 157–97, and 'Instructions for travellers: teaching the eye to see', in J. Stagl and C. Pinney (eds.) *From Travel literature to ethnography*. Special issue of *History and Anthropology*, 9 (1996): 139–90.

[2] The classic formulation of the problem of impact, with reference to America, is J. H. Elliott, *The old world and the new, 1492–1650* (Cambridge, 1970). A more nuanced view is developed in a number of articles in Kupperman (ed.) *America in European consciousness 1493–1750* (Chapel Hill and London, 1995), including the further remarks of John Elliott (pp. 391–408). D. F. Lach, *Asia in the making of Europe*, 3 vols. (Chicago, 1965–93) offers a very detailed view of the impact of Asia, although he is more concerned with the reconstruction of actual images of Asia and a judgement of their empirical validity than with analysing intellectual processes.

[3] Such is the case of the classic study of Paul Hazard, *La crise de la conscience européenne, 1680–1715* (first published Paris, 1935), who begins his analysis in the late seventeenth century. This problem is more acutely felt in the influential work of Edward Said, *Orientalism* (Harmondsworth, 1978), whose references to the literature before the late eighteenth century fail to constitute a proper reconstruction of a European tradition of thought about the Orient.

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rigorous study of travel literature can illuminate these questions. It is therefore an essay about origins, events, contexts and consequences, concerned with long-term cultural changes, attentive both to the medieval background of the Renaissance and to the way the Renaissance created the conditions for the Enlightenment. It has been one of my aims to compare writers from different social backgrounds. I have also sought not to limit the analysis to travellers from a single country, which could perpetuate the false image of a series of self-enclosed national literary cultures especially inadequate for a genre whose development was crucially conditioned by its pan-European aspects (the fact that the intellectual impact of travel literature in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was logically centred on England and France should not of course obscure the fact that Italian and Iberian nations contributed decisively to the early production and growth of the new narrative forms).[4] I shall not, however, seek to include a description of all the images of India produced in the sixteenth century, nor a list of all the orientalist literature of this period – a task which was accomplished by Donald F. Lach in his monumental *Asia in the making of Europe*,[5] or, in a more limited way, by the works of Boies Penrose and Geneviève Bouchon.[6] Neither am I writing a history of early modern ethnology, the kind of work begun by Margaret Hodgen, Giuliano Gliozzi or Anthony Pagden, by focusing primarily on the European debates.[7] The focus of this study is rather the way travel literature, understood as a set of related genres of undeniable importance in a defining period of early European colonial expansion, informed ethnological, moral and political thought, contributing in ways still poorly understood to the transition from the theological emphasis of medieval culture to the historical and philosophical concerns of the seventeenth century. It will be my argument that the full dimension of Renaissance anthropology (in its primary form

[4] A Franco-centric bias dominates much of the best literature, from Geoffrey Atkinson's classic, *Les nouveaux horizons de la Renaissance française* (Geneva, 1936), to Friedrich Wolfzettel's recent *Le discours du voyageur* (Paris, 1996). The case of British scholarship is not entirely different: Kate Teltscher's *India inscribed: European and British writing on India 1600–1800* (New Delhi, 1995), despite its title devotes a very limited space to non-British sources and contexts.

[5] Lach, *Asia*. The admirably researched first two volumes (in five books) covering the sixteenth century have recently been followed by a third volume (in four further books) covering the seventeenth century, written together with E. J. Van Kley.

[6] See, respectively B. Penrose, *Travel and discovery in the Renaissance, 1420–1620* (Cambridge, Mass., 1952) and G. Bouchon, 'L'Inde dans l'Europe de la Renaissance', in C. Weinberger-Thomas (ed.) *L'Inde et l'imaginaire* (Paris, 1988), pp. 69–90.

[7] See, respectively, M. Hodgen, *Early anthropology in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries* (Philadelphia, 1964), G. Gliozzi, *Adamo et il nuovo mondo. La nascita dell'antropologia come ideologia coloniale* (Florence, 1977) and A. Pagden, *The fall of natural man. The American Indian and the origins of comparative ethnology* (2nd edn, Cambridge, 1986).

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of cosmographical literature) cannot be understood merely by studying the intellectual constructions of jurists and theologians concerned with defining the nature of man and of human political society. Writers increasingly appealed to the experience of the traveller as a source of authority for the truthfulness of particular observations concerning human diversity. And yet the traveller's experience was complex and his authority questionable. It is therefore very important to understand properly what was actually involved in the process of observing and describing a non-European society.

This is necessarily a story of European attitudes by a European historian, rather than a reconstruction of the historical realities of South India. However, both the changing context of European activities overseas and the specificity of India in the evolution of European representations of non-Europeans are central to my argument. As an idolatrous civilization with a recognizable ancient tradition, sixteenth-century India stood uniquely between the urban civilizations of the New World, unexpectedly found and quickly conquered by the Spanish, and the enormous intellectual challenge presented by the prosperous civilization of the Chinese, which would generate its own separate debate in Europe. The changing and multifarious views of Europeans in India are best understood not simply in isolation as a self-generated discourse, but rather in relation to native views and by comparison with alternative gazes. For this reason, throughout this work some attention is devoted to Islamic as well as European discourses on India. As far as my linguistic skills have permitted, I have sought to provide updated discussions of issues relating to Indian and Indo-Portuguese history which form a necessary background to many of the observations of the travellers.[8] Some of these issues require substantial comparative analysis, in particular the nature of the state in South India, which has emerged as crucial to any judgement on the empirical origins of the European idea of oriental despotism. Key themes such as idolatry, law or kingship, recurrent in many of the descriptions, are here discussed from a comparative perspective so as to interpret the analogies used by travellers and address the issue of cultural translation and mistranslation. Above all, the guiding principle of this study is to discuss the relationship between Europeans and Indians not as one between an observer and its

[8] The fact that the history of Vijayanagara is still to a great extent a puzzle, and that something as basic as establishing a chronology is still a matter of scholarly debate, presents considerable difficulty. The recent monograph by Burton Stein, *Vijayanagara* (Cambridge, 1989) skirted many of these issues rather than solving them. Without claiming any expertise in South Indian languages, I have attempted to use European documents and English-language scholarship in order to provide a context that is as detailed as possible.

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passive object, but rather as one of genuine interaction, with special care not to simplify the historical context for the sake of rhetorical analysis.

It is also my hope that this work will be a contribution to the methodology of cultural history, understood as something wider than a history of ideas and more focused than a history of mentalities. The study of cultural encounters has emerged in recent years as a privileged field for re-thinking fundamental questions about problems of perception, identity and change. Throughout my analysis of travel accounts I have attempted to define clearly and to be faithful to three different dimensions of the process of knowledge: the tradition in which the authors of descriptions had been educated, including of course the rhetorical models and the information that each of them could be expected to know; the social strategies and political interests in which they participated, considering in particular the context of production of each text (beyond a mere sociological generalization, such as 'Marco Polo was a merchant', or 'Alessandro Valignano was a missionary'); and, finally, the experience of otherness in which the narrator may have been involved. Here I have tried to avoid the (now current) assumption that travellers only see those images they already carry, as a prejudice, from their own country.[9]

Two general ideas have emerged from the combination of these perspectives: that the history of culture can be treated as a history of language-games (to borrow a useful expression), and that travel literature is a possible form of cultural translation. I understand a 'language-game' as a set of rules and assumptions, often unconscious to the agents who use them, organized so as to meet the demands of a social context of communication. A 'language-game', therefore, encompasses any cultural activity based on the interaction of subjective agents who create and exchange mental representations in order to meet various purposes. Needless to say, there are many different kinds of conventional signs

[9] Edward Said's influential book, *Orientalism*, has contributed to increased awareness of the political implications of much of what has been produced in the West as 'empirical science on the Orient'. However, Said clearly overemphasizes his case when he rules out one of the fundamental dimensions of the process of 'knowing the other'; in his own words: 'the value, efficacy, strength, apparent veracity, of a written statement about the Orient therefore relies very little, and cannot instrumentally depend, on the Orient as such. On the contrary, the written statement is a presence to the reader by virtue of having excluded, displaced, made supererogatory any such *real thing* as "the Orient"' (Said, *Orientalism*, p. 21). If this were true, I do not think that most of the literature which I have studied would have even been possible. A conclusion similar to mine was reached by Karen Kupperman, *Settling with the Indians. The meeting of English and Indian cultures in America, 1580–1640* (Totowa, N.J., 1980), concerning early English descriptions of the Algonquian Indians of Virginia and New England.

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which can be used in a language-game, not necessarily of a verbal kind, but also images and gestures. Language-games are not static, because through use they are constantly adapted to new situations and transformed. The tradition of a language-game produced by a community over time constitutes a discourse.[10]

A history of language-games thus implies a history of ideas, but is also broader. What makes sense of an agent's subjective experience is not just engagement with an intellectual doctrine, but also a set of purposes. Such a thing as a belief, important as it is in defining a subject's assumptions, should not therefore be taken for granted – human agents have the capacity to entertain beliefs superficially and to revise their beliefs in a context which creates new demands.[11] Most cultural activities are developed through the unconscious use of common language. While sophisticated ideas and models are crucial in a cultural tradition, they rest on a wider ability to use a variety of language-games, and thus to share in a cultural life.

One could of course argue that the formalized discourse of the elite is often more creative than the popular use of a vernacular language, and hence that Aquinas' concept of natural law is more far-reaching than Marco Polo's description of the world. It is, however, the interaction between these two kinds of discourse that I wish to address as the main subject of a cultural history of early ethnology. In fact, the non-reflective use of everyday language can be creative because of the novelty of the context in which linguistic agency takes place. This is how the languages of Christianity and civilization – that is, not just specific theological or political concepts, but rather the whole range of meanings and implications associated with different uses of these concepts – were appropriated by soldiers, merchants and missionaries in their descriptions of non-European peoples, up to the point where major intellectual assump-

[10] I borrow the expression, rather than the theory, from Ludwig Wittgenstein, whose approach was obviously more philosophical. It could be summarized as follows: 'language use is a form of human rule-governed activity, integrated into human transactions and social behaviour, context-dependent and purpose-relative' (*The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, ed. by T. Honderich (Oxford, 1996), p. 461). My understanding of culture as language-games is inspired by this formulation, but is used here more historically and anthropologically. It also extends the concept of language-games to non-verbal cultural activities which carry symbolic meaning and thus require linguistic interpretation.

[11] The concept of language-game does not, however, exclude the concept of belief – beliefs are indeed the key to the 'truth value' attached by a subject to his or her mental representations, and thus crucial in defining what a subject's assumptions are. This is one reason for using 'language-game' rather than language. The point about beliefs is forcefully made by Jay M. Smith in 'No more language games: words, beliefs and the political culture of early modern France', *American Historical Review*, 102 (1997): 1413–40. I do, however, define language-game more broadly than Smith.

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tions concerning the understanding of human societies could be (and needed to be) challenged.

A cultural history written as a history of language-games also implies a precision which is lacking in the concept of mentalities, too often used to generalize collective 'ways of thinking' and to analyse beliefs and behaviour without distinction.[12] In the course of this book, for instance, to speak simply of 'medieval' and 'modern' mentalities would have been inappropriate. Equally wrong is the idea that there is an 'oriental' way of thinking radically opposed to a 'western' way. In fact, even the idea that there exist some 'irrational' beliefs (such as the so-called confusion of fact and fiction some historians have identified in medieval literature on the East) cannot be accepted without criticism: what is rational is what makes sense within the context of a language-game. Rationality may in fact be defined as the human ability to learn and use different language-games, an ability related to the existence of a universal language instinct which allows all children to learn varieties of languages with common linguistic structures.[13]

This understanding of cultural history affects three alternative assumptions about human subjectivity that need to be questioned. The first one

[12] This unease with the way the 'history of mentalities' has often been practised, an unease which has guided my research, is the subject of a book by G. E. R. Lloyd, *Demystifying mentalities* (Cambridge, 1990). From a practitioner's perspective, see also the lucid article by R. Chartier, 'Intellectual history or sociocultural history? The French trajectories', in D. LaCapra and S. L. Kaplan (eds.) *Modern European intellectual history* (Ithaca, 1982). Peter Burke, *Varieties of cultural history* (Cambridge, 1997), chap. 11, has effectively defined the main problems of the history of mentalities under four propositions: the tendency to overestimate intellectual consensus in a past society, the difficulty of explaining change when so much effort is devoted to establishing shared assumptions within a reified cultural system, the tendency to treat belief systems as autonomous (although this criticism is not always applicable) and the tendency to exaggerate binary oppositions between traditional and modern, or even between logical and pre-logical. He also suggests three positive responses – the focus on interests, on categories or schemata, and on metaphors. In fact an understanding of culture as language-games does integrate the analysis of interests with the analysis of language and rhetoric, ranging from the conceptual categories used in everyday situations, with their hidden assumptions, to the different genres of cultural life. It therefore allows the historian to compare different cultures and to analyse long-term changes by defining the mechanisms of translation and transformation within a cultural system.

[13] The emphasis on this universal, biologically inherited learning ability (commonly defined as 'mentalese'), has grown in recent years. For a general exposition see S. Pinker, *The language instinct* (Harmondsworth, 1994). I will, however, stress that the existence of 'mentalese' as a fundamental hypothesis, without which so little in cognitive anthropology makes sense, does not involve accepting the existence of a 'universal people's culture'. All cultures are historical elaborations, so that the same basic linguistic skills can produce enormous differences in practice. A history of perceptions and representations needs to both include the hypothesis of 'mentalese' as part of the logic of cultural change, and the detailed analysis of its various forms and applications – which will actually help determine what mentalese *is not*.

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is a form of crude materialism, according to which people's subjective life – a traveller's capacity to 'see' – was somehow determined by a kind of pre-defined power strategy, or, more simply, the ideology of a social class to which an individual is supposed to have belonged. The variety of interpretations found in travel accounts makes this kind of approach obviously simplistic.

The second assumption is a form of narrow rationalism, according to which travellers simply saw 'what was there to be seen' – unless they were clouded by the prejudices which more empirical or rational observers might easily have avoided. In fact, different interpretations of the same 'reality' can all make sense to different travellers. There is indeed no privileged position from which an interpretation of 'what was there' may be considered unchallengeable, not even the modern historian's.

Finally (and here is where the possibility of cultural translation becomes crucial), I question the idea that, because different interpretations of the same 'realities' were possible, there is no way of talking about rationality. Each interpretation was incommensurable. In particular, travellers would not be able to interpret what an indigenous culture was about, because a traveller's perspective was relative to his own culture. A traveller from the late sixteenth century would equally misjudge a medieval account. Even the modern historian cannot expect to understand properly what a Renaissance traveller saw. Yet an analysis centred on language-games helps understand why this 'radical relativism' is probably incorrect. Of course, different travellers saw different things and, of course, they relied on their own initial assumptions; but what is striking is how the *process of learning languages* (understood, in a broad sense, as language-games) allowed travellers to get involved with foreign cultures or to interpret texts produced in a different context. This ability to learn languages, however universal, was of course affected by the travellers' will to understand better, by the empirical means at their disposal and by their diverse critical skills. The existence of different languages is obvious, but insofar as translation seems to have been a possibility, the problem of relativism is in fact only a problem of degree.[14] Thus the question can be more usefully phrased as *under what*

[14] The case for radical incommensurability seems to be ultimately flawed, despite the spirited defence of Paul Feyerabend, *Farewell to reason* (London, 1987), pp. 265–72, who argues that it is possible to understand foreign concepts without translating them by learning a culture from scratch, as a child does. He also insists that a successful translation changes the translating language, and therefore the possibility of translation is not an argument against incommensurability. However, learning a culture from scratch does not imply that a *foreign* culture is being understood, unless it is somehow related to (i.e. translated into) an *original* culture – a point relevant to any interpretation of travel accounts as evidence for cultural encounters. To learn a different culture 'from

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conditions did travel literature actually become a form of translation? This is one of the key questions which this study seeks to address.

The different chapters of the book explore a number of themes through a chronological progression, following the major narratives of Europeans in South India from the thirteenth to the early seventeenth centuries. The first chapter introduces the case-study and its sources and defines the importance of southern India, and especially Vijayanagara, in the European experience overseas. The second analyses the theme of India in the medieval Latin tradition, with a detailed analysis of Marco Polo's account and its original significance. Carrying the analysis to the fifteenth century, the third chapter studies the impact of Florentine humanism in travel literature, focusing on Poggio Bracciolini's intervention in the narrative of Nicolò Conti.

The fourth chapter then charts the emergence of the traveller as a figure of authority in European culture, using the example of the Italian adventurer Ludovico de Varthema as a model for a first-person narrative, whilst the fifth chapter, focusing on the establishment of the Portuguese in India, discusses their ambiguous attitudes towards Hindus as potential allies in a Christian imperialist project.

Chapters 6 and 7 analyse the Portuguese development of an empirical ethnology in the early decades of their colonial trade through an interpretation of the detailed works of Duarte Barbosa and Domingos Paes describing, respectively, the social world of the Malabar coast and the city of Vijayanagara. This analysis seeks to address the problem of the limits of empirical objectivity by distinguishing between descriptions of social customs and the interpretation of non-Christian religion, thus

scratch', then, if ever related to another (original) culture, implies a kind of translation. The very idea that a successful translation changes the translating language suggests that languages are not closed systems of meaning, which makes the argument of incommensurability irrelevant – the interesting problem is understanding when and why people engage in cultural dialogues. Feyerabend explains that the kind of incommensurability he understands is not merely to do with difference of meanings, but occurs only when the conditions of meaningfulness for the descriptive terms of one language (theory, point of view) do not permit the use of the descriptive terms of another language (theory, point of view), as can be seen in a number of historical examples (such as Aristotelian versus Newtonian science). This is also the kind of argument used by Jacques Gernet in *China and the Christian impact* (Cambridge, 1985) to argue that the Jesuits in China made a bad translation of Confucianism into Christianity. The problem here is, of course, whether there was any possible (more abstract) language from which the sharers of different cultures could understand the relative validity of their mutually exclusive original languages. Historical analysis clearly shows that an ability to transcend particular language-games is not only possible but, in fact, is one of the key elements of historical change. This is what translation actually consists of (rather than just equating one list of concepts with another).

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revealing a deep chasm between the secular and religious spheres of discourse in the reports written by European merchants, but also suggesting the possibility of trans-cultural understanding through ritual, rather than doctrinal, analogies. Chapter 8 then discusses the emergence of a historical discourse in sixteenth-century India, which mediated between the indigenous historical memory and European moral and political concerns. The first part focuses on the chronicle of the history of Vijayanagara by Fernão Nunes, analysed in the context of the historiography of expansion in the Hispanic Renaissance and compared with Indian Muslim sources. The second part of the chapter then seeks to clarify the question of orientalism by distinguishing between the historical discourse generated in India and the appropriation and elaboration of this material in Europe, and in particular the emergence of the concept of oriental despotism in the political thought of Giovanni Botero in the late sixteenth century.

Finally, the last two chapters of the book, 9 and 10, explain the reasons behind the simultaneous emergence at the turn of the seventeenth century of an innovative missionary discourse on the gentile religion of India (Hinduism), and of an independent secular analysis, potentially sceptical, of Indian culture. This opposition between Jesuit apologists and lay critics leads towards a conclusion which considers the contribution of travel literature to the origins of the Enlightenment. The development of methodological distinctions between the authority of multiple empirical observations and the writing of an authoritative world history, the often self-defeating need to relate the evidence of religious diversity in an antiquarian perspective based on classical and biblical sources, and the search for a human identity across cultures beyond the growing barriers of orientalist archetypes, are all defined as consequences of the way Renaissance travel literature came to affect, and be affected by, European intellectual concerns.

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Needless to say, this book would not have been possible without the contributions of many scholars. It is in fact the case that the study of travel literature as a world-wide cultural phenomenon has emerged in the last decade as a subject in its own right, and that the subject has been (to

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use an expression) growing under my feet. The vast range of the material that I have considered here and perfectly sensible editorial demands have made it impossible to keep the scholarly apparatus as detailed as I had intended. None the less, I would like to acknowledge that it has only been with the help of many writers who now remain anonymous that I have been able to write this book.

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A note on spelling and vocabulary

For the sake of making this book generally accessible, and given that it is not primarily destined for a specialized orientalist audience, I have accepted the editorial suggestion of simplifying the spellings for the transliteration of Arabic, Persian, Sanskrit and other Indian languages, so that Shāh becomes Shah, etc. At the cost of a small inconsistency I have allowed myself to retain oriental macrons for the names of three important writers: Ibn Battūta and Ibn Khaldūn, widely known in the West, and ʻAbd al-Razzāq, whose travel narrative is especially important for the argument of this book. On the other hand, I have used traditional western forms for Avicenna and Averroes (but not Tamerlane, which I have spelt as Timur).

Throughout this book I have used a few early modern concepts which were important to the ethnological vocabulary of the period, but which either are not used in modern English, or have different meanings. Thus, ‘relation’ is used to mean a descriptive narrative account; ‘civility’ (preceding the concept of ‘civilization’) refers to the traits of rational and orderly behaviour found primarily in sophisticated urban societies; and ‘gentilism’ is the noun relative to the ‘gentiles’, peoples whose religious life lay outside the biblical tradition (‘paganism’ would be a close approximation).

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