

The Return of the Native

The essential error of the modernist theologians who pushed their agenda at the Amazonian synod is that they have fallen for the myth of the noble savage. But both the noble savage and the urban savage are simplistic generalities: They express a truth and a lie at the same time.

The recent Amazonian synod in Rome revealed what might be called “The Return of the Native” or perhaps “The Return of the Noble Savage.”

The myth of the noble savage has an interesting five-hundred-year-old history. As the new world was discovered and explored, wherever they went, the Europeans discovered indigenous peoples.

Their reactions varied.

The Catholics embarked on courageous missionary endeavors, regarding the native people as pagans in need of the gospel. Most of the Calvinist settlers of New England, on the other hand, did not evangelize the Indians. It was pointless, in their opinion, because the savages could not possibly be members of the elect because they did not have souls. Reports from the early explorers to Africa echoed that opinion. They regarded the tribal Africans to be a somewhat higher form of the chimpanzees and gorillas they had also discovered.

Regarding the indigenous people as a sub species excused the atrocities committed by the colonial powers. Indigenous people were wiped out with massacres, their populations were decimated by diseases transferred from the Europeans against which they had no immunity, they were enslaved, deported, driven from their land, and eliminated if they were deemed to be in the way.

The intellectual response to the atrocities was to go to the other extreme. The myth of the noble savage began to sprout in the fertile soil of anti-religious, enlightenment France. The indigenous people were not savages, but innocent, unspoiled children of Adam and Eve still living in Eden. It was the Europeans who were the true barbarians.

During the late 16th and 17th centuries, the figure of the “good savage” was held up as a reproach to European civilization, then in the throes of the French Wars of Religion and Thirty Years’ War. In his famous essay *Of Cannibals*, Michel de Montaigne – himself a Catholic – reported that the Tupinambá people of Brazil ceremoniously ate the bodies of their dead enemies as a matter of honor. However, he reminded his readers that Europeans behave even more barbarously when they burn each other alive for disagreeing about religion.

In English the phrase “noble savage” first appeared in John Dryden’s 1672 play *The Conquest of Granada*:

*I am as free as nature first made man,
Ere the base laws of servitude began,
When wild in woods the noble savage ran.*

The noble, low born person had been a stock character in drama from classical times. In the 18th century the noble savage joined the Virtuous Milkmaid, the Servant-More-Clever-than-the-Master, and other humbly born, but shrewd or noble characters to highlight natural virtue and expose hypocrisy.

Meanwhile, in the nineteenth century art world, the impressionists romanticized the prostitutes, showgirls, circus artistes, and peasant farm workers. The post impressionist Paul Gauguin took the dream of the noble savage to its logical end by moving from France to Tahiti to live among those he deemed to be innocent children of Eden.

Thus the idea of the noble savage has echoed down to our

present age. In our day it is the eco-warriors who are inclined to fall for the notion of the noble savage. The orthodoxy of the eco-warriors is infused with a sentimental enthusiasm for indigenous people and their culture. As it was with the dawn of the concept of the noble savage, this enthusiasm is always the flip side of a condemnation of modern Western culture.

Today's version of the myth is that we who enjoy the benefits of modern technology and an ordered society are the true barbarians because we are destroying the natural world with our consumerism and greed. The indigenous people show us the way. They are the ones who are living in harmony with *Pachamama* – Mother Earth. In their Edenic innocence they live in a beautiful integration with the natural world.

But of course, this wasn't true in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries nor is it true now. While some tribes were peaceful hunter gatherers, most indigenous peoples followed dark belief systems and horrendous customs.

The human sacrifices of the Mayas and Aztecs contradict any notion of the savages being either simple or admirable. The Jesuit missionaries to North America offer another resounding correction to the myth of the noble savage. St John de Brébeuf and his companions kept detailed records of their lives among the Iroquois and Huron tribes. Their diaries reveal truly horrific conditions among bloodthirsty savages who were locked in superstition, violence, and fear.

The noble savage is always set up in contrast to what, in our day might be called "the urban savage." As Montaigne pointed to the European barbarians in his day, so for us it is the modern urban, supposedly civilized person who is the true savage. Just beneath the veneer of his good manners and ordered life the bloodthirsty savage lurks. Given the right conditions we too would revert to primitive tribalism. This concept was brought to life brilliantly in the film *The Wicker*

Man and William Golding's novel *The Lord of the Flies* – in which a group of English schoolboys, stranded on an island soon turn into bloodthirsty barbarians.

But of course, both ideas – the noble savage and the urban savage – are simplistic generalities, and like all generalities, they express a truth and a lie at the same time. The fact of the matter is both the human in the jungle and the human in the city are pretty much alike, and it is only a traditional Christian anthropology that can make sense of the conundrum.

The error in the concept of the noble savage is excessive optimism. The idea of the noble savage is based in the assumption that human beings are essentially good. The error in the concept of the urban savage is that human beings are essentially bad.

Christian theology affirms that human beings were created good because they were created in the image of God and God cannot make anything bad. The human in the Amazon and the human in Manhattan are both eternal beings who are therefore essentially good. However, both the savage in the jungle and the savage in the city have fallen from that goodness and are, in their natural condition, unredeemed and in bondage to sin and in slavery to darker forces.

As such, both characters are noble and ignoble. Both are sinners. Both could be saints. It is only the Christian faith that establishes this reality and offers the necessary redemption.

The essential error of the modernist theologians who pushed their agenda at the Amazonian synod is that they have fallen for the myth of the noble savage. Infected with the false optimism of universalism combined with a naive sentimentalism, they imagine that we in the developed world are the true savages, while the innocent Amazonian peoples are in no need

of conversion.

Ironically, this attitude is patronizing and racist in itself. They do not grant the indigenous peoples the true dignity of being complex human personalities as understood by Christian theology. Instead the notion of the noble savage encourages their admirers to treat the indigenous people like cultural curiosities – museum exhibits that one should marvel at and admire . . . before moving on.

It is not racist, colonialist, or imperialist to suggest that the indigenous people of Amazonia are sinners who need to be converted, have faith in Jesus Christ, and be baptized.

They need to hear the good news of the gospel, respond with joyful faith, and find redemption and the path to holiness and wholeness. . . . just like their brothers and sisters in Metropolis.

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