

**Fanaticism and Avarice:
'That Strange Alliance in the Character of the
Conquerors of the New World'**

by
Tyler Griffith
(Centre for Modern Thought, University of Aberdeen)

Abstract

At least since the eighteenth century, scholars working on the social and political history of the 'New World'—taken in its broadest possible sense—have been fascinated by the perceived paradoxical motives for undertaking the original ventures of colonisation. Two themes reoccurring more or less steadily throughout the past three centuries are those of religious dissemination and economic gain, notions attracting special attention from many contemporary historical studies. Although highly valuable in their own right, these studies tend to neglect any detailed consideration of the development of these themes over the historical timeline, often assuming a relatively static and unchanging notion of what it means to be, for example, 'fanatic' or 'avaricious'. Taking as its starting point Robertson's *History of America* (from which the titular quote originates), this paper will analyse the important notions of 'fanaticism' and 'avarice' in descriptions of the New World mentality and how they developed over the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. To what extent did early-modern Europeans see this 'odd alliance' in New World mentality as incoherent or contradictory? Why was the pairing so inconceivable in the context of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century social mores? To what extent do early-modern stereotypes of the fanatic and avaricious colonist reverberate into the perceived status of 'New World' character today? By contesting static notions of fanaticism and avarice and instead seeing them through a historical perspective, this paper will suggest an unexplored connection—or at least intersection—between the process of identity formation and the social circumstances of its articulation.

Ends