

# Interpretation

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# Interpreta

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# Prescott's Conquests: Anthropophagy, Auto-da-Fe and Eternal Return

COLIN D. PEARCE  
*Humber College*

"It was my hint to speak . . . of Cannibals that each (other) eat,  
The Anthropophagai, and men whose heads  
(Do grow) beneath their shoulders. These things to hear  
Would Desdemona seriously incline . . ."

*Othello*, Act I, scene iii

"Through the shadow of the globe we sweep into the younger day:  
Better fifty years of Europe than a cycle of Cathay."

Tennyson

"Human sacrifice! . . . his soul departed back, back into the blood-sacrificial pre-  
world, and the sun-mystery, and the moon-power . . . away from his own white  
world, his own white conscious day."

D.H. Lawrence

## INTRODUCTION

It seems altogether appropriate in the light of the the half-millennial anniversary of Christopher Columbus's arrival in the New World just a few years ago, and of the recent sesquicentennial of the publication of his great histories, to turn to the foremost English-speaking student of the Spanish conquests in the Americas—William Prescott.<sup>1</sup> The five-hundredth anniversary of Columbus's landing has called forth some adverse comments both on the European impact on the original peoples of the Americas and on the treatment this episode has received at the hands of Western historians. Prescott's treatment may not satisfy the most militant of those clamoring for politically correct history. In the final analysis he accepts the superiority of Western civilization over all others, and he argues that for all its faults and crimes, the European or Spanish takeover of the New World was justified in the light of the Aztec, and to a lesser extent, Inca practices of human sacrifice and cannibalism. But when we turn to Prescott we are relieved to find no simple paean to the Europeans and their intellectual and cultural superiority over the conquered. Rather we find a sympathetic

and exhaustive discussion of the life and society of the Aztecs and Incas on the one hand, and an even-handed and sometimes radically critical discussion of the mentality and conduct of the Spanish conquerors on the other. Thus his histories should leave both the politically correct enthusiasts and the simple encomiasts of the Western way of life equally dissatisfied.

An additional reason why Prescott's histories are refreshing at this time is the concern they exhibit with "culture," with the "sacred," and with the "contributions" made by "unique" peoples. Prescott enables us to better understand in what the particular culture and "values" of the Aztec and Inca societies consisted. He carefully sifts and weighs the available evidence in order to arrive at the most detached picture of these civilizations as is humanly possible. Thus Prescott assists his readers to improve their historical understanding of the initial encounter between the Old and New worlds. They will be reminded of how the Aztecs and Incas appeared to the particular type of Europeans that went to the New World in the first instance, and they will also be reminded of how this type of Europeans appeared to the Aztecs and Incas as they first arrived on their shores.

But perhaps more immediately important is the consideration that the study of Prescott allows an insight into another "culture" which is neither Spanish nor "indigenous." Here I mean the "culture" of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Anglo-American Protestant liberalism. Prescott provides an instance of this culture or outlook that perhaps can be corrective of the view held by some that the "WASP" mind or the WASP historian is incapable of appreciating the merits and accomplishments of other nations and other cultures. The example of Prescott may serve to overcome the stereotypical image of the Victorian progressivist liberal as a dogmatic booster of all things to do with the modern West and with no interests or sympathies beyond these bounds. By providing an instance of such a type being genuinely open to the virtues and accomplishments of "semi-barbarous" peoples, while at the same time being all too aware of the potential or possible barbarism of the civilized West, Prescott serves to dissolve the stereotype of the Anglo-American liberal as "Eurocentric."

We may add that in light of the contemporary uncertainty among social scientists with respect to the constructing of social models or defining the laws of social progress, studying Prescott's classic historical work on the Aztecs and Incas is a reminder of what "social science" or "comparative politics" can be. Lack of a "context" or scheme within which to handle historical details is not his problem. What distinguishes Prescott from more recent scholarship and gives his work a theoretical coherence which this latter lacks is the fact of his being guided by a philosophy of history, or more broadly stated, by an overarching conception of civilization's relation to barbarism. But it must be stipulated at the outset that Prescott's adherence to a "grand scheme" or model of historical development does not lead him to slight or slant the details. He does not try dogmatically to force the facts of Aztec and Inca society onto a Procrus-

tean bed of preconceived categories. To make a long story short, for Prescott the details point the way to his philosophy of history, while his philosophy of history points the way to the details. I would suggest that the fact that Prescott held to such a basic outlook explains why his work stands the test of time, and why the more modern scholars working with a century's worth of subsequent research have been unable to add anything fundamental to his analysis.<sup>2</sup>

#### LIBERAL CIVILIZATION: THE HOBBSIAN BACKGROUND

It is my contention that Prescott's conception of civilization is that of modern liberalism and as such is fundamentally "Hobbesian" in nature. It is perhaps a truism to say that all modern liberalism is ultimately Hobbesian in character. Why refer to Hobbes in particular when discussing Prescott, as there are many other writers somewhat or even much closer to Prescott's time, say Locke, Montesquieu, Hume, Smith, or the Mills, who could serve as a more direct comparison? The answer here is that the Hobbesian interpretation of the relationship between barbarism and civilization shines through very clearly in Prescott's works in a way that is not perhaps so noticeable in other great figures in the liberal tradition. This in turn is explained by the fact that Prescott, although he is writing in the nineteenth century, is writing about societies which were very close in many respects to the medieval-feudal-theocratic regimes against which Hobbes wrote.

For Hobbes, civilization, which is ultimately "completed" by the flourishing of philosophy and the arts and sciences, requires above all the possibility of leisure. "Leisure is the mother of Philosophy; and *Commonwealth*, the mother of Peace, and Leasure."<sup>3</sup> But leisure, while certainly meaning the cultivation of the mind, also involves the production of new opinions about things. This ultimately leads to turmoil as men begin to contend for their versions of right and wrong. In the earlier stages of civilization there was the direct force of the conqueror, or the immediate authority of the father. But at a later date it is claims to knowledge that back up rule. Priests, philosophers, scientists and lawyers all claim they should rule because they are "in the know." In the ancient kingdoms the poets and prophets backed up the royal rulers to such an extent that it was standard to see the monarch as a divinity on earth. In this way the credulous subjects were kept in peaceful subjugation to established authority. The catch in this arrangement was that the real power behind the throne tended to be the priestly caste, which through its claims to wisdom in such mysteries as astrology, sacrifices, holy books, prophecy and so on, beguiled the minds of both rulers and ruled alike and thus conferred the real political authority on them. As we shall see, this was fundamentally Prescott's assessment of the situation in pre-Columbian America.

Now Macaulay was another historian of Prescott's time who deployed the fundamentally Hobbesian ideal of civilization in his great studies of English

History.<sup>4</sup> But Macaulay was writing roughly two hundred years after Hobbes wrote and ushered in the "New Political Science." Thus in his overview of seven centuries of English development he is not only referring to the five centuries from the twelfth century up until Hobbes, but also to the two centuries in Britain since Hobbes's initial impact. Hence he alludes to English leadership in "the career of political improvement." In a word, Hobbes's list of desiderata from the *Leviathan* had been more or less filled out by the time of Macaulay's writing, and Macaulay himself, as a great exponent of the "liberal mind," was part of the checklist of the advancement of civilization.

Macaulay then was writing about a highly civilized community that had been formed under the influence of Hobbes and those liberal thinkers who followed after him all the way down to Bentham and the Mills. He is not therefore focusing on the earlier stages of the historical process which Hobbes could virtually "feel." Hobbes himself was at one point in danger of losing his head to religious politics. Hobbes lived very much in the society he sought to overcome. But this is only conditionally so for Macaulay, who wanted "more of the same" in the sense of more of the "progressive" measures which were in progress even as he wrote. Prescott by contrast, in turning to the Aztecs and Incas was going back beyond his own and Macaulay's time to the kind of society that is more recognizable in Hobbes. Prescott is ambiguous as between the Spaniards and the "Americans" but not as between either of these two and the modern, Protestant, liberal West.<sup>5</sup>

#### PRESCOTT'S TRIPARTITE SCHEME OF HISTORY

In discussing the rise of the modern historiographical approach, Prescott refers to Voltaire "as the personage by whom the present laws of historic composition may be said to have been first arranged into a system," to Montesquieu as the philosopher by whom this "system was subsequently so much refined," and to Gibbon as the historian who more than any other writer "exhibits more distinctly the full development of the principles of modern history." Thus we are not surprised to find that like Vico with his Divine-Heroic-Human scheme, like Comte and John Stuart Mill with their Theological-Metaphysical-Positivist divisions, and like Hegel with his "One, Few, and All are free" arrangement, Prescott has a tripartite conception of the Stages of History which he labels Mythology-Theogony-Philosophy.<sup>6</sup>

For Prescott the age of Mythology may be regarded as the period of "the poetic development of the religious principle in a primitive age." "It is the effort of untutored man to explain the mysteries of existence, and the secret agencies by which the operations of nature are conducted." The character of religious mythology will "vary with that of the rude tribes in which it originates" (*Mexico*, p. 36), but it is always the same expression of man's efforts to

understand his place in the universe.<sup>7</sup> It is at “a later and more refined period,” the stage of Theogony, that “we sometimes find these primitive legends combined into a regular system under the hands of the poet.” What was initially only a “rude outline” becomes in the hands of the likes of Hesiod and Homer “forms of ideal beauty, which are the objects of adoration in a credulous age, and the delight of all succeeding ones” (p. 36). What Herodotus means by saying that Hesiod and Homer “created the theogony of the Greeks” is that they “filled up the shadowy outlines of tradition with the bright touches of their own imaginations, until they had clothed them in beauty which kindled the imagination of others.”<sup>8</sup>

The “power of the poet” may be felt even when a society has gone beyond the phase of Theogony and is in “a much riper period.” In Dante and Milton the reader, even today, feels “his own conceptions of the angelic hierarchy quickened by those of the inspired artist, and a new and sensible form, as it were, given to images which had before floated dim and undefined before him” (*Mexico*, pp. 36–37).<sup>9</sup> It seems that even the most enlightened individual, by nature as it were, carries around as part of the furniture of his soul “conceptions of the angelic hierarchy.” Great poetry such as *The Divine Comedy* or *Paradise Lost* brings clarity and definition to these conceptions.

But in the age succeeding that of Theogony, philosophy makes itself felt. It disclaims “alike the legends of the primitive age, and the poetical embellishments of the succeeding one.” At this stage, however, philosophy must “seek to shelter itself from the charge of impiety by giving an allegorical interpretation to the popular mythology, and thus to reconcile the latter with the genuine deductions of science” (*Mexico*, p. 37). It appears that in the Age of Philosophy there can still be “impiety.” Society still has its “rules” backed up by some form of divine authority. But the philosophers of this period treat the traditional-popular mythology in such a way as to make it appear as not antiscientific or antiphilosophic. The Age of Philosophy is not as such “impious” or strictly secular or atheistic. It simply adjusts the religion to the highest knowledge of the day which of necessity is scientific.<sup>10</sup> Religion is no longer at odds with science-philosophy because it has been improved and adapted to it.

But at this point one has to be careful. Although Prescott would be inclined to describe both the medieval and the modern periods as falling within the Age of Philosophy, there is nevertheless a fundamental distinction between the two. The earlier period was one of “accommodation” where philosophy or reason “sheltered itself.” In the later period, however, rationalist thought comes more into the open and has an increasingly direct effect on society. Thus the “Age of Philosophy” should really be divided into two periods. There is a kind of “Fourth Stage” within the “Age of Philosophy” which is the “Age of Hobbes” or the “Age of Enlightenment.”<sup>11</sup> In order to see this more clearly we need to consider Prescott’s interpretation of world political history.

Prescott’s conception of world history issues in the argument that “the more

or less liberal character of the social institutions of a country may be determined by its geographical position.”<sup>12</sup> The “progress of freedom, civil and religious,—of the enjoyment of those rights, which may be called the natural rights of humanity,—has gone from east to west.” In Asia there are “extended despotisms” based on “a solitary master” and his rule over a “nation of slaves.” There the monarch is the state and “the people have no political existence.” There is no constitution properly so called. In such countries there has been “little progress in science,” which is to say in “those pursuits which depend on freedom of inquiry, and are connected with the best interests of humanity.” In this context Prescott singles out Christianity as the key to progress. Christianity is the religion of freedom, and freedom is the *sine qua non* of progress. “The free spirit of Christianity, quicken(s) and elevate(s) the soul by the consciousness of its glorious destiny” and therefore prepares human beings for free self-government. A religion like Mahometanism by contrast, provides a basis for political despotism. Its “doctrine of blind fatality” was designed for “those who had already surrendered their will,—their responsibility,—to an earthly master” (p. 6).

These considerations cause Prescott to view Europe as virtually another world when compared to Asia. In Europe man “is a free agent; he thinks, speaks, acts for himself . . . and explores fearlessly the secrets of time and nature.” But even in the most advanced parts of the Old World man is still not truly free. He is still in a transitional stage. He lives under constitutional monarchy, which although a political product of his “freedom of speculation and action,” is not yet the final stage of humanity’s destiny. The culminating stage is distinguished above all by popular freedom and republicanism. The peoples of the Old World will have to undergo more training and experience in self-government before they can qualify for entry into this ultimate political order. Opinion in Europe needs time to catch up to the principles of republican freedom, the “true soil” for which is in the Western Hemisphere.

For Prescott it is the New World which has been marked out by history as the scene for the full flowering of human freedom. “The atmosphere here seems as fatal to the arbitrary institutions of the Old World, as that [of the Old World] has been to the democratic forms of our own.” In explaining why this should be so Prescott points in the direction of the Puritan heritage. The Puritans found an environment within which there was no “trace of civilized man, or of his conscious contrivances.”<sup>13</sup> Under these circumstances they were in a position to “reduce to practice” the “beautiful theories of the European philosopher,—who had risen to full freedom of speculation.” They could “verify the value” of ideas “which had been derided as visionary, or denounced as dangerous in their own land.” (“Review of Bancroft,” p. 79). For Prescott then, the West, and especially America, is a kind of “peak” in history. The rise of Protestant liberal civilization denotes the final stage of human history, which is to say the age of equal and rational freedom.

Unlike some of the early modern philosophers who saw in Christianity the enemy of freedom and successful politics, Prescott, in the spirit of Locke perhaps, describes true Christianity, which for him is obviously of the Protestant kind, as almost a prerequisite for successful politics. Prescott gives the Reformation a rationalist interpretation. What he means by associating the Reformation with reason and freedom is that this movement's break with the Roman Church and its intellectual tradition, through the return to Scripture, succeeded in breaking the grip of Catholicism, which is to say of the mindset which distinguished the Inquisition and the Conquistadores, on the European mind. Once this grip was broken the new reason and the new liberty could flower forth in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. But here Prescott is close to nineteenth-century philosophy in general, which put a lot of emphasis on the Reformation as the key event in the advance of human freedom. Writing after about two hundred years of liberalism's working on Christianity, Prescott interprets the Reformation as a "breakthrough" for the kind of society in which we now live. "The glorious Reformation gave an electric shock to the intellect, long benumbed under the influence of a tyrannical priesthood. It taught men to distrust authority, to trace effects back to their causes, to search for themselves, and to take no guide but the reason which God had given them. It taught them to claim the right of free inquiry, as their inalienable birthright, and with free inquiry, freedom of action" ("Review of Bancroft," p. 77).<sup>14</sup>

Now in the particular case of the Puritans in America who were so important for Prescott as a New Englander, he knows he must address the fact that they were not liberals and were inclined to persecute those of other persuasions just as vigorously as did the old authorities back in Europe.<sup>15</sup> Prescott's apologetics here end up being an "end justifies the means" argument. As it turns out the "zeal requisite for great revolutions in church and state, is rarely attended by charity for difference of opinion." The Puritans themselves were not exemplars of liberal politics but somehow they served the historical purpose of broadening this practice. They were instruments of the "cunning of History." The first settlers may indeed have been "intolerant in practice," but for all that they did bring with them "the living principle of freedom, which would survive, when their generation had passed away." It was impossible for them to avoid serving this purpose because their coming to America was in itself "an assertion of that principle." "They came for conscience's sake; to worship God in their own way. Freedom of political institutions they at once avowed" ("Review of Bancroft," p. 79).<sup>16</sup>

Prescott, then, subscribes to a kind of version of the "Weber thesis." Liberalism's advance and great success in the New World is fundamentally attributable to North American Protestant foundations laid at the very beginnings. But if Protestantism is the foundation of the final stage of world history consummated as America, what was the foundation of the earlier stage of American history before the West made its presence felt? Let us turn to Prescott's Incas.

## THE INCAS: DESPOTISM, THEOCRACY AND PRIESTCRAFT

Prescott insists that we must be careful to approach the Peruvian institutions “from a different point of view from that in which we study those of other nations.” In the case of Peru, “the laws emanated from the sovereign and that sovereign held a divine commission, and was possessed of a divine nature. To violate the law was not only to insult the majesty of the throne, but it was sacrilege.” In the Inca community, then, religion was politics and politics was religion. There was no separate sphere of law and legislation concerned solely with the community’s “practical” or “concrete” interests. All laws were a reflection of divine or cosmic order. The community was not really a realm separate from the rest of this order but a part and an expression of it. The Incas “claimed a divine original for the founders of their empire, [their] laws rested on a divine sanction, and [their] domestic institutions and foreign wars were alike directed to preserve and propagate their faith.” In short, “Religion was the basis of their polity, the very condition as it were, of their social existence. The government of the Incas in its essential principles was a theocracy” (*Peru*, p. 776).<sup>17</sup>

Prescott dismisses the Inca theology or “the traditionary legends by which they affected to unfold the mysteries of the universe” as “mean and puerile.” “Scarce one of their traditions . . . is worthy of note or throws much light on their own antiquities or the primitive history of man.” For Prescott one infallible standard of advancement in civilization is the comprehensiveness of a society’s knowledge of the details of its own past or the sophistication of its “anthropology.” Hence he uses the phrase “semi-civilized” when referring to the Incas’ “historiography” as it might be called. Prescott sums up the Peruvian system of law by saying that the “simplicity and severity of the Peruvian code may be thought to infer a state of society but little advanced.” By this he means that Inca Peru “had few of those complex interests and relations that grow up in a civilized community.” The Incas’ lack of advancement is seen in their not having “proceeded far enough in the science of legislation to economize human suffering by proportioning penalties to crime” (*Peru*, pp. 754–55). Even so, the Inca regime was at bottom a “mild despotism,” the institutions of which were “as artificial as those of ancient Sparta.” And indeed, these institutions, “though in a different way, [were] quite as repugnant to the essential principles of our nature” as their Spartan counterparts.<sup>18</sup>

But for all this Prescott does not describe the Incas as being simply barbaric. On the contrary, they were highly advanced in certain respects. While the “institutions of Lycurgus were designed for a petty state,” those of Peru, “although originally intended for such” seemed “to have an indefinite power of expansion, and were as well suited to the most flourishing condition of the empire as to its infant fortunes.” “In this remarkable accommodation to change of circum-

stances we see proofs of contrivance that argue no slight advance in civilization" (*Peru*, p. 752).<sup>19</sup> The extent of the Incas' advancement in "public administration" should also not be overlooked in Prescott's view. They had established a board of commissioners in the main city which was "well instructed in the resources of the country, and the character of the inhabitants of the different provinces. . . . A register was kept of all the births and deaths throughout the country, and exact returns of the actual population were made to the government every year. . . . At certain intervals, also, a general survey of the country was made, exhibiting a complete view of the character of the soil, its fertility, the nature of its products, both agricultural and mineral—in short, of all that constituted the physical resources of the empire" (p. 759). The Incas were also distinguished in their "public works" program. They "covered the land" with their great national projects. "The traveller still meets . . . with memorials of the past, remains of temples, palaces, fortresses, terraced mountains, great military roads, aqueducts, and other public works, which, whatever degree of science they may display in their execution, astonish him by their number, the massive character of the materials, and the grandeur of the design" (p. 763). Here we see some of the signs that the Incas had moved well beyond the state of nature as described by Hobbes.<sup>20</sup>

As to economics, the Inca agricultural or property laws arranged for a new division of land every year whereby the "possessions of the tenant were increased or diminished according to the numbers in his family." The operation of such a law in other countries, Prescott says, has "after a time . . . given way to the natural order of events." This "giving way" to nature means that "the usual vicissitudes of fortune have been allowed to take their course, and restore things to their natural inequality." This "natural inequality" results from the "superior intelligence and thrift of some and the prodigality of others." Prescott notes that nature proved too strong even for Sparta itself. "Even the iron law of Lycurgus ceased to operate after a time, and melted away before the spirit of luxury and avarice" (*Peru*, p. 756). Here we see clearly that Prescott understands there to be a natural inequality with respect to the "faculties for the acquiring of property" (to paraphrase from James Madison). It is a sign of a lack of civilization for there to be laws the end of which is to control these faculties or to repress "luxury and avarice" in the name of permanent equality or "virtue."

According to Prescott the Peruvian agrarian law ran contrary to the very first principle of agricultural and therefore social development. In his view "the desire for improving the soil" is "natural to the permanent proprietor," and the Peruvian peasant could not by law be such. Practically speaking, however, the law was neutralized by the Peruvian "love of order and aversion to change." This meant that there was very little real change of land tenancy, so "the tenant for the year was converted into a proprietor for life." This should have made progressive agricultural and economic improvement at least possible. But, as

Prescott explains, this was far from the case because the Peruvian “could not better his condition. His labors were for others, rather than for himself. However industrious, he could not add a rood to his own possessions, nor advance himself one hair’s breadth in the social scale.” Thus the “great and universal motive to honest industry, that of bettering one’s lot, was lost upon him. The great law of human progress was not for him. As he was born, so he was to die.” This situation provides Prescott with the occasion to outline the opposition between “Rousseauian” virtue on the one hand, and civilization or social progress on the other. In Peru “No man could be rich, no man could be poor . . . but all might enjoy, and did enjoy a competence.”

Ambition, avarice, the love of change, the morbid spirit of discontent, those passions which most agitate the minds of men, found no place in the bosom of the Peruvian. The very condition of his being seemed to be at war with change. He moved on in the unbroken circle in which his fathers had moved before him, and in which his children were to follow. (P. 763)

The above statement leaves us in little doubt that Prescott was very alive to the dark side of progressive civilization. Social progress in some sense depends on the agitation and unease of the mind. A civilized people will show signs of “ambition,” “avarice,” “the love of change” and even a “morbid spirit of discontent.” One does not have to reflect long here to be reminded that Prescott was an American and that these traits are often associated with the American character. It was Tocqueville who compared the Americans to “certain remote corners of Europe” which, like Inca Peru, had “remained stationary.” Despite or perhaps because of the ignorance and poverty which distinguished these places, their populations tended to be placid of countenance and light of spirits. But with the “free and enlightened” Americans, Tocqueville saw that “a cloud habitually hung upon their brow.” He found them “serious and almost sad, even in their pleasures.” “The chief reason for this contrast,” he explains, is that the residents of the “remote corners” “do not think of the ills they endure,” while the Americans “are forever brooding over advantages they do not possess” (*Democracy in America*, vol. 2, p. 144). That which Tocqueville saw from the perspective of France, Prescott could see from the perspective of Peru.

Despite these radical differences there is one respect in which there is a curious parallel between Prescott’s Peruvians and their later counterparts, and that is nation building. Like the United States of America, the “great fabric of the Peruvian Empire” arose “by degrees” and in so doing “gave security to all.” Moreover, under “the influence of a common religion, common language, and common government” “numerous independent and even hostile tribes” were “knit together as one nation, animated by a spirit of love for its institutions and devoted loyalty to its sovereign.” But however this might have been, the purposes of the two empires were radically different. The United States was com-

mitted to permanent social change or “social motion,” as some have called the distinguishing feature of Western societies, while the “ultimate aim of [the Inca] institutions was domestic quiet” (*Peru*, pp. 773, 774–75). Inca Peru was a benevolent despotism, a kind of welfare state where all were cared for even as all were required to work. With their love of domestic tranquility and commitment to a warrior foreign policy, the Incas were at the opposite pole from commercial civilization. They had a psychology reminiscent of the Christian Europe of the Middle Ages—piety or religious enthusiasm combined with a warrior spirit—the very worst political psychology from the point of all liberal philosophers and historians.<sup>21</sup> “The life of the Inca was one long crusade against the infidel, to spread wide the worship of the Sun, to reclaim the benighted nations from their brutish superstitions, and impart to them the blessings of a well-regulated government.” This was the Incas’ mission even as it was “the mission of the Christian conqueror who invaded (their) empire” (*Peru*, p. 776). Psychologically speaking, the Incas shared much with the Spaniards, whom Prescott characterizes as above all full of “bigotry.” The inquisitor-conquistadores were ultimately extending their authority over another government of aggression, persecution, bigotry and superstition. In Prescott’s presentation, the encounter between the Spanish and the denizens of the New World reminds of the Crusades. Prescott makes this comparison most explicitly in his treatment of the Aztecs.

#### THE AZTECS: HUMAN SACRIFICE AND PRIESTCRAFT

In summing up the animating core of Aztec civilization Prescott states that “The tutelary deity of the Aztecs was the god of war.” The Aztec soldier sought to martyr himself for this god. Thus “like the early Saracen or the Christian crusader,” the Aztec could be seen “earnestly invoking the holy name of religion in the perpetration of human butchery” (*Mexico*, p. 23). Their war making though, while a trade, was “not elevated to the rank of a science.” The paradoxical implication here is that warlike peoples tend to lack a science of war, while more civilized, which is to say more peace-loving, peoples will possess it.

The Aztecs’ “most striking institution and one that had the greatest influence in forming the national character” was human sacrifice (*Mexico*, p. 46).<sup>22</sup> “Surely never were refinement and the extreme of barbarism brought so closely together” as when the Aztecs would make human flesh part of “a banquet teeming with delicious beverages and delicate viands, prepared with art, and attended by both sexes” (p. 48).<sup>23</sup> Prescott says that human sacrifice was possible in Aztec society because “[w]retched superstition” has the power to stifle the “voice of nature.” Indeed, “the most fiendish passions of the human heart have been those kindled in the name of religion” (p. 48). In Mexico the influence of the priesthood “became unbounded,” and it was the priests who “bel-lowed for more” human victims for their rites. “Far from limiting the authority

of the priests to spiritual matters,” the sovereign “often surrendered his opinion to theirs, where they were least competent to give it. . . . The whole nation, from the peasant to the prince, bowed their necks to the worst kind of tyranny, that of blind fanaticism” (p. 50).

But it is of key importance to note that such remarks are not meant to imply that the civilizational process had not well begun amongst the Aztecs. The Mexicans “had many claims to the character of a civilized community” even though they practiced cannibalism.<sup>24</sup> Aztec civilization made provisions for “the rights both of property and persons,” the judiciary was independent of the Monarch (a measure “worthy of an enlightened people”), and Aztec law punished “(o)ffences against private property,” a fact which in itself “argues a considerable progress in civilization” (p. 24). Moreover, as Prescott sees it, the standard for judging the Aztecs should be a comparative one where they are measured against the practices of their conquerors. The Spaniards too managed to combine at one and the same time advancement in civilization and the most barbarous practices. While the Aztecs were cannibals with civilized tendencies, the Spaniards were civilized men with barbaric tendencies. Prescott presents the Spanish Empire in such a way as to make it appear as almost as deficient in civilization and enlightenment as the Aztec. The first Archbishop of Mexico made a “mountain-heap” of Aztec manuscripts and then set them alight. “His greater countryman, Archbishop Ximenes, had celebrated a similar *auto-da-fe* of Arabic manuscripts, in Granada, twenty years before. Never did fanaticism achieve two more signal triumphs, than by the annihilation of so many curious monuments of human ingenuity and learning.” Prescott is careful not to claim “that the records of a semi-civilized people would be likely to contain any new truth or discovery important to human comfort and progress.” But he is in no doubt that the Spaniards were under the obligation to respect the records of the community they had overwhelmed. These records “could scarcely fail to throw some light on the previous history of the nation” and this respect for, or openness to the history of other peoples is a mark of a civilized nation. Prescott therefore holds the Spaniards to a higher standard than the Aztecs in view of their more advanced stage of development. What they should have done as conquerors and what they in fact did do reveals a weakness in their claim that as bearers of civilization their occupation of the empires of the New World was legitimate. While “we contemplate with indignation the cruelties inflicted by the early conquerors,” this “indignation is qualified with contempt, when we see them thus ruthlessly trampling out the spark of knowledge, the common boon and property of all mankind.” “We may well doubt,” Prescott notes, “which has the strongest claims to civilization, the victor, or the vanquished” (*Mexico*, p. 50).

The point then is not the level of Aztec science and wisdom so much as the fanaticism and bigotry of the Europeans. Prescott insists that the enlightened mind should take pleasure in contemplating a nation “in its generous struggle to raise itself from a nation of barbarism, and to take a positive rank in the scale

of civilization" (*Mexico*, p. 54). But the Spaniards were so blinded by fanaticism and bigotry that they had no use for understanding the Aztec's efforts. They sought only to destroy all vestiges of the pre-existing civilization's religious and social system, even though they themselves had allowed "the establishment of the modern Inquisition," an institution "which yearly destroyed its thousands, by a death more painful than the Aztec sacrifices." The Inquisition was in some ways more horrible than the practices of the Aztecs. It "armed brother against brother, and setting its burning seal upon the lip, did more to stay the march of improvement than any other scheme ever devised by human cunning." And while Aztec human sacrifice was nothing degrading to the poor victim, the Inquisition "branded its victims with infamy in this world, and consigned them to everlasting perdition in the next" (*Mexico*, p. 51).<sup>25</sup> Prescott here shows how near a thing it is with him in deciding between the Aztecs and their civilization and the Spaniards and theirs. But the issue of cannibalism forced him to decide for the Spaniards. Ultimately "it was beneficently ordered by Providence that the land should be delivered over to another race, who would rescue it from the brutish superstitions that daily extended wider and wider, with extent of empire. The debasing institutions of the Aztecs furnish the best apology for their conquest." Their conquerors may have "brought along with them the Inquisition" but they are saved from outright execration for this by the fact that the "benign radiance" of their Christianity would one day shine forth once "the fierce flames of fanaticism should be extinguished" (p. 52).<sup>26</sup>

But how is it that the the "cunning of History" could eventually transform the Spanish Inquisition into modern Western "humanitarianism," while the "pious cruelty" of Aztecs and Incas could never so evolve? The answer here is that there was a fundamental "metaphysical" or cosmological difference between the two cultures. The whole nature of the universe and of man's place within it was conceived differently by the Old and New worlds.

#### COSMOS AND TIME IN THE NEW WORLD

Prescott begins his discussion of Aztec cosmology by tracing it to the human situation as such, which the Aztecs shared with all humankind. They "felt the curiosity common to man in almost every stage of civilization," which is "to lift the veil which covers the mysterious past, and the more awful future." But at bottom what will such a lifting of the veil reveal? Ultimately only an infinity of time stretching behind us and the same stretching ahead. We are "between past and future" and our limited vision can see no real distance in either direction. Thus the Aztecs, "like the nations of the Old Continent," sought "relief from the oppressive idea of eternity." But as it turns out, they in their premodern situation sought relief by the same means which Nietzsche, in his postmodern context, suggested modern western man might redeem himself from the burden

of his radically historical consciousness, i.e., by means of the Eternal Return. The Aztecs proceeded to break eternity “up into distinct cycles, or periods of time, each of several thousand years duration. There were four of these cycles, and at the end of each, by the agency of the elements, the human family was swept from the earth, and the sun blotted out from the heavens to be again rekindled.” Prescott sums up the Aztec view very beautifully: “They looked forward confidently to another such catastrophe (as had happened before) to take place like the preceding, at the close of a cycle, when the sun was to be effaced from the heavens, the human race from the earth, and when the darkness of chaos was to settle on the habitable globe” (*Mexico*, pp. 72–73).<sup>27</sup>

There is then something “classical” or reminiscent of the Greeks in Prescott’s presentation of the cyclical nature of the Aztecs’ chronology. It is therefore useful to consider some aspects of classical Greek thought with which Aztec thought may be said to overlap. Although the ancients understood very well the social or civilizational process which moves from family to clan, to monarchy, to republicanism, and the potential of the arts for more or less infinite improvement, and the relation of progress in these arts to the possibility of philosophy or science, at the same time they never lost sight of the possibility of the “end of the world” and the precariousness of the fundamental human situation. Human beings live in the order of nature, and this order necessarily includes such destructive phenomena as floods, famines, plagues, fires and earthquakes. With luck a few stragglers may survive these catastrophes in caves or in mountains and after “tens upon tens of thousands of years” (Plato, *Laws* 667d1), they may again arrive at the threshold of civilization. On the other hand there may be no survivors and the race may become extinct.<sup>28</sup>

Now it is this “cosmocentric” aspect to classical thought which distinguishes it from the “anthropocentric” and historically oriented thought of the Enlightenment and the Romantic periods. While it could be said of Prescott that he knew the classics and was under their literary influence in some ways, he is not inclined to their conception of time or the cosmos. Thus, when he was put in the presence of thought very reminiscent of the ancient alternative, as he inevitably was in the course of his work on the Aztecs and Incas, he was not disposed to adopt their standpoint as a fresh and revealing angle of approach to the modern West. Prescott leaves aside the question of the ultimate inevitability of the human race’s disappearance, or the temporality of human existence, in order to focus on the means and stages of the civilizational process. In this he contrasts with Plato, who was inclined to be very sympathetic to the “ancients” and their fund of wisdom. For Socrates and his companions the sayings or tales from the ancient days, which is to say from days before society’s great progress, and from a time when scientific understanding was much more limited, are very important and provide the key to placing human and social progress in its proper context.<sup>29</sup> Prescott, however, does not expand on the fact that there is a genuine kinship between the Aztecs and Incas and the classical Greek view of

the human situation. We are forced to wonder why. Here we must consider the influence on his thought of the Bible and Christianity.

In the classical view man has a special place in the whole or the cosmic scheme of things of which he constitutes a part. This scheme is in some sense above and beyond him. Thus heaven or the cosmos, or the whole is more important than man. As Aristotle says, "(M)an is not the best thing in the world . . . for there are other things much more divine in their nature even than man, e.g. most conspicuously the bodies of which the heavens are framed" (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1141a 22–23, 1142b 1–2). But the Bible inverts this order of priority. In the biblical description man is placed at the center of the universe and the heavenly bodies, which were of such importance to the Greeks and to the Aztecs and Incas, are demoted. From the point of view of the Bible and God's creation, the sun, the moon and the stars are not divine, have no life, and are not deserving of worship.<sup>30</sup> Life does not even ultimately depend on them. The heavenly bodies are created on the fourth day, even after the seas and vegetation. They exist simply for the sake of man. Man, and not the heavens is the peak of creation.

For Prescott the biblical placement of man at the top is already a given. Despite or because of the fact that Prescott is very clearly a modern rationalist, it might be said that the deepest stratum of his anthropocentrism or humanism comes not so much from modern or Baconian enlightenment philosophy as from revealed religion and the Bible. To the extent then that he approaches the Aztecs and Incas through a biblical lens, albeit modified by modern philosophical thought, he will focus on what their civilization means in terms of the human condition here on earth more than on what pre-Columbian thought itself points to concerning man's situation in the universe as a whole. The humanism or anthropocentrism of Prescott, modern philosophy and the Bible on the one hand, stands opposed to the cosmocentrism of the Aztecs-Incas, Plato-Aristotle and the "pagans" on the other. Thus for Prescott, the Aztecs and Incas and the classical Greeks belong in essentially the same category. Their common cosmocentrism is the product of the "infancy of civilization" as compared to its "prime" or maturity which comes after the biblical revelation. This mature stage of civilization reflects above all the secular conclusions that may be drawn from the Bible's description of man as the highest thing in creation. Unlike the "abstract contemplation, or selfish indulgence, or passive fortitude" that was "variously taught by the various sects of antiquity," and which was evident in the life and culture of the Aztecs and Incas, "Christian doctrine inculcated that the end of being was best answered by a life of active usefulness" (*Biographical and Critical Miscellanies*, p. 77).

Prescott's view of history, then, involves an ascent from the lower to the higher, to the highest. Man has come a long way from the days when he used to look up in pious awe and worship the sun, as did the pre-Columbians. Moreover, for Prescott there is no immediate prospect that humankind could relapse

into such a passive or fatalist attitude again. The modern epoch is in some sense *sui generis* in its attainment of the civilized heights of which human nature is susceptible. Once a certain level has been reached there appears to be a kind of solid floor or foundation that will prevent any fundamental retrogression.<sup>31</sup> Prescott is not concerned to dwell on the insignificance of this process when seen in the light of the eternal order or order of the whole. He does not speak of the inevitable decline of all civilizations back into barbarism.

For Prescott civilization would seem to require a forgetting of the infinity of time or "the oppressive idea of eternity" and a focusing on the here and now. Man's "doing" somehow depends on his not reflecting intensely on the primary or most fundamental questions concerning the universe, time and the human situation. His building of a home for himself in the form of civilized communities depends on his thinking about the things required for this end and not the possibility that all such things pass away. Humankind needs to shut its eyes to such prospects as the possible disappearance and reappearance of the human race over the space of eons. Such a perspective necessarily makes each episode of civilization appear as only one instance, which is no more significant than any other such instance, in a process over which man does not exercise any control. As long as there is a focus on the infinity of time within which man must live, civilization and all its accoutrements must languish. Such "melancholy" reflections, to use Dugald Stewart's phrase, appear incompatible with the "busy-ness" and intensity of the moment, upon which the ascent to the highest civilization necessarily depends.<sup>32</sup> Social progress seems to require a steeling of the will, a stiffening of the spine so to speak, which can only come if the phase of civilization currently ongoing is taken as the only episode that really counts, and therefore with the utmost seriousness.

We get a clearer sense of Prescott's vantage point and the likely reasons for his "refusal" to listen to "the ancient sayings," as did Plato, when we consider his view of the nature of Western science.

Far from looking back, and forming itself slavishly on the past, it is characteristic of the European intellect to be ever on the advance. Old discoveries become the basis of new ones. It passes onward from truth to truth, connecting the whole by a succession of links, as it were, into the great chain of science which is to encircle and bind together the universe. The light of learning is shed over the labors of art. New avenues are opened for the communication both of person and thought. New facilities are devised for subsistence. Personal comforts, of every kind, are inconceivably multiplied, and brought within the reach of the poorest. Secure of these, the thoughts travel into a nobler region than that of the senses; and the appliances of art are made to minister to the demands of an elegant taste, and a higher moral culture. (*Mexico*, p. 77)

For Prescott there is a kind of fundamental harmony or parallelism of intellectual and social progress. This was not so much the case with the premodern

or pre-Enlightenment thinkers. They argued that after society had developed to the point where the emergence of philosopher-scientists was possible, which admittedly would be at a very late stage, the intellectual progress of the few would not be directly linked to the changing conditions of society. Rather, the enlightened few would always be observing the progress (or regress) of civilization from their intellectually advantaged but more or less powerless position. But modern philosophy, at least in some of its permutations, dispensed with this disjunction between "science and society" for the sake of conquering nature and making it serve man's ends.<sup>33</sup> Prescott's historical thought falls within this modern horizon. He sees intellectual and social progress as directly linked and as having a reciprocal effect on one another. And this is all to the great benefit and happiness of mankind.

## CONCLUSION

Prescott suggests that it is natural to the human condition to form conceptions about how the whole is animated or determined. The interpretations of "ultimate reality" will vary widely with the local and indigenous factors at work in every human community. Thus it is that the histories of the various communities in which human beings have gathered over time reveal the erroneous paths along which mankind can wander. We know these paths to be erroneous because in the final analysis only one variation of the option, that of the modern, Christian West, has shown itself capable, through minds such as Prescott's own, of wondering aloud whether when all is said and done, the semi- or uncivilized state might not have been more conducive to mankind's happiness and well-being than the condition which awaits him once "the scale of civilization" has been climbed to its very top rung. In adopting this critical stance towards the history of the expanding West, Prescott implicitly seems to reveal Western civilization's truest advantage. This civilization's proneness to radical self-doubt forced Prescott to the conclusion that the modern, Western conception of man's place in the order of the whole and his relation to nature, which makes this self-doubt possible if not inevitable, is superior to all known alternatives.

Prescott describes the genesis of the Aztecs' belief in millennial cycles which encompass the world's and humanity's repeated destruction and regeneration as being in their desire to gain "relief . . . from the oppressive idea of eternity." It is perhaps fair to suggest that the liberal, progressivist historian's interest and concern with the ways and means of mankind's march to universal, free and rational civilization may have its origin in the same human need. Considering the subsequent fate of his brand of Protestant, progressive liberalism in the century and a half since he wrote, it is interesting to reflect on whether Prescott would revise his assessment of the Aztec and Inca cosmology were he writing his great histories today. Perhaps if he were he would hear in

the “metaphysics” of the pre-Columbians a song that he too should begin to sing, the “Yes and Amen Song” of Nietzsche’s Zarathustra: “Oh, how should I not lust after eternity and the nuptial ring of rings, the ring of recurrence? Never yet have I found the woman from whom I wanted children, unless it be this woman whom I love: for I love you, O eternity. *For I love you O eternity!*”<sup>34</sup>

## NOTES

1. First reactions to Prescott’s study of the conquests came from such distinguished writers and historians as: H. H. Milman, “Prescott’s History of the Conquest of Mexico,” *Quarterly Review* 73(1843): 187–235, and “Prescott’s Conquest of Peru,” *Quarterly Review* 81(1849): 215–48; S. M. Phillips, “Prescott’s *Conquest of Mexico*,” *Edinburgh Review* 81(1845): 228–49; Francois Guizot, “Philip II and His Times: Prescott and Motley,” *Edinburgh Review* 105(1857): 1–45; Theodore Parker, “The Character of Mr. Prescott as an Historian” and “Prescott’s *Conquest of Mexico*,” *Massachusetts Quarterly Review* 2(1849): 215–48, 437–70; Count Adolphe de Circourt, “William Hickling Prescott,” *Bibliothèque Universelle et Revue Suisse* 4(1859): 597–620. The main biography of Prescott was by his lifelong friend and colleague George Ticknor, *Life of William H. Prescott* (New York: Merrill and Baker, 1863). Prescott drew attention at the turn of this century from Rollo Ogden, *William Hickling Prescott* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1904); Harry Thurston Peck, *William Hickling Prescott* (New York: Macmillan, 1905) and John Spencer Bassett, *The Middle Group of American Historians* (New York, Macmillan, 1917). His work began to be revisited as early as the thirties by Philip Means, “A Re-examination of Prescott’s Account of Early Peru,” *New England Quarterly* 4(1931): 645–62, but especially in the fifties by Donald Ringe, “The Artistry of Prescott’s *Conquest of Mexico*,” *New England Quarterly* 26(1953): 454–76; Robert Arthur Humphreys, *William Hickling Prescott; The Man and the Historian* (London: Hispanic and Luso-Brazilian Councils, 1959); and David Levin, *History as Romantic Art: Bancroft, Prescott, Motley, and Parkman* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1959). More recently there has been a biography by C. Harvey Gardiner, *William Hickling Prescott: A Biography* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1969), and a study by Donald C. Darnell, *William Hickling Prescott* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1975).

2. Gary M. Feinman speaks as though nothing fundamental has been discovered about Aztec life even on the sesquicentennial of the publication of Prescott’s great studies: “Scholars are beginning to fully describe and understand the diverse components that comprised the basin of Mexico at the eve of Spanish Conquest” (“New Perspectives on the Aztecs,” *Journal of Historical Geography* 14(1988): 67). In general the specialists in this field cannot make up their minds whether they want an infinite absorption in details or to move in the direction of an overall or comprehensive view. Renato I. Rosaldo, for example, says that although “detailed studies” are singularly important, they must nevertheless “be balanced by periodic attempts at synthesis” (“Afterword,” in George A. Collier et al., eds., *The Inca and Aztec States 1400–1800* [New York: Academic Press, 1982], p. 464). While attempting to give an overview of the state of scholarly studies of the pre-Columbian societies, Elizabeth M. Brumfiel observes that the new trends exemplify to a considerable extent “the entry of Marxist concepts of consciousness and ideology” into the field (“Aztec Religion and Warfare,” *Latin American Research Review* 25[1990]: 257). But for Nigel Davies this development is far from welcome. Davies’ reason for objecting to a Marxist analysis of these societies is that attempts to find a generalized model offer too much of a “temptation to distort the facts” in order to fit them “into some alien analytical scheme.” They presuppose that “the character of a given culture is determined by a limited number of factors that constitute a core, or substratum, of that culture and which are common to certain others.” According to Davies, “the search for an overall model that will serve (to explain) . . . the Aztec phenomenon, is nothing but a passing delusion” (Nigel Davies, *The Aztec Empire* [Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1987], p. 125). But while manifesting great fear that the neo-Marxist approach might force the facts into a preconceived

"model," Davies nevertheless concedes that at some point there is a need for "synthesis" and broad generalizations. He is forced to allow that the whole enterprise is only worth while if it issues in the uncovering of some broader meaning, and what could this be other than some picture of a "core" or "substratum" (to use his words) which is "common" to all human societies, including our own. In the end we are left wondering where it is that all this ethnohistory, historical geography and cultural anthropology would take us. General conclusions of enduring interest seem few and far between.

3. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982), chap. 46, p. 683.

4. Compare *Leviathan*, chap. 13, p. 186, with Lord Macaulay, *Historical Essays* (London: Collins Clear-Type Press, n.d.), pp. 385–86.

5. Prescott arrests our attention as a member of the "historical school" of the early nineteenth century precisely because of his choice of subject matter. It was virtually par for the course for members of this school such as Mackintosh, Macaulay, Hallam, Guizot and others to produce a "History of Europe" or a "History of England" showing Western society's passage through the various stages of civilization to the present. Prescott indeed produced *The History of Ferdinand and Isabella* (1837), but following after William Robertson's *History of America* (1776), he undertook to present to the modern reader the history and society of pre-Columbian America and the saga of its coming under European dominance. He would provide the "full" history of the Western Hemisphere by painting a detailed picture of what existed before the European invasion. He took over this task from his friend Washington Irving. See "Preface," *History of the Conquest of Mexico and History of the Conquest of Peru* (New York: Modern Library, n.d.), Hereinafter cited as either *Mexico* or *Peru*.

6. William Prescott, *Biographical and Critical Miscellanies* (London: George Routledge, 1875), pp. 79, 82, 85.

Mill says that "any general theory or philosophy of politics supposes a previous theory of human progress, and that this is the same thing with a philosophy of history" ("Autobiography," in *The Essential Works of John Stuart Mill*, ed. Max Lerner [New York: Bantam, 1961], p. 99). In his Preface to *Mexico*, Prescott explains that he invested great "labor" and "time" in the "Introduction" and "Appendix" (which he says "properly belongs in the Introduction"), where his discussion of the three stages of civilization appears. These parts of the work he says, were designed to show "the true nature and extent of the civilization of the Mexicans" (*Mexico*, p. 5).

As usual Nietzsche is the odd man out in modern philosophy in his tripartite breakdown of human history. For him, "There is a great ladder of religious cruelty, with many rungs; but three of these are the most important." In the first stage "one sacrificed human beings to one's god." In stage two, which is "the moral epoch of mankind," "one sacrificed to one's god one's own strongest instincts." And in stage three one had to "sacrifice God himself and from cruelty against oneself [to] worship the stone, stupidity, gravity, fate, the nothing" (*Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Walter Kaufmann [New York: Vintage, 1966], #55, p. 67). For Nietzsche history is the story of the transmogrifications of human cruelty, while for Prescott it is the progressive overcoming of the cruelty of stage one, which would be the stage of the Aztecs and Incas, in the direction of the humanitarianism of the modern West.

7. Hobbes had said that despite the common "seed" of religion, local or incidental factors may make for "ceremonies so different, that those which are used by one man, are for the most part ridiculous to another" (*Leviathan*, chap. 12, pp. 172–73).

8. Prescott says that Herodotus's claim that Hesiod and Homer "created the theogony of the Greeks" is "an assertion not to be taken too literally, since it is hardly possible that any man should create a religious system for his nation" (*Mexico*, p. 36). What Prescott intends by this remark is perhaps best explained by Thomas De Quincey. Discussing Plato's plans for the poets in the *Republic*, De Quincey says: "Strange, indeed, that Plato should ascribe to any poets whatever, so prodigious a power as that of having created a national religion, for the religion of paganism was not something independent of the mythology. . . . The fact really was, that the human intellect had been for some time outgrowing its foul religions; clamorously it began to demand some change; but how little it was able to effect that change for itself, is evident from no example more than Plato" (*Leaders in Literature With a Notice of Traditional Errors Affecting Them* [Edinburgh: Adam and Charles Black, 1863], pp. 227–28). It seems that for nineteenth-century writers like Prescott and De

Quincey the broad "forces of History" have a greater explanatory power than the literary genius of one or two great artists.

9. Compare John Stuart Mill: "The intensest feeling of the beauty of a cloud lighted by the setting sun, is no hindrance to my knowing that the cloud is vapour of water, subject to all the laws of vapours in a state of suspension . . ." ("Autobiography," p. 93).

10. This may be said to be the tradition of natural theology which stretched from Socrates (Xenophon, *Memorabilia* 1.4, 5–7; Plato, *Republic* bk 2, *Laws* bk 10, *Gorgias*, end) to Cicero (*De Natura Deorum* 2.4) to Paley (*Natural Theology* [1802]).

11. See Friedrich Nietzsche, *Daybreak: Thoughts on the Prejudices of Morality*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), Aphorism #189, p. 190.

12. William Prescott, "Review of George Bancroft's *History of the United States From the Discovery of the Continent*," *The North American Review* (Jan., 1841), p. 75.

13. See Oliver Wendell Holmes, "The Professor at the Breakfast Table," in Edward Weeks and Emily Flint, eds., *Jubilee: One Hundred Years of the Atlantic* (Boston: Little Brown, 1957), pp. 31–33.

14. "This is the essence of the Reformation: Man is in his very nature destined to be free" (G. W. F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Sibree [New York: Dover, 1956], p. 417. Sir James Mackintosh says that Luther "in his warfare against Rome had struck a blow against all human authority, and unconsciously disclosed to mankind that they were entitled, or rather bound, to form and utter their own opinions, and most of all on the most deeply interesting subjects" (*The Progress of Ethical Philosophy* [Edinburgh: Adam and Charles Black, 1835], p. 308). Lord Brougham says that one cannot understand modern Europe without considering "[T]he effect of the reformed faith, wherever it was established, in emancipating the human mind and causing reason alone to be consulted in all controversial matters" (*Political Philosophy* [London: Charles Knight, 1844], vol. 2, pp. 63–64). Dugald Stewart says that "The renunciation in a great part of Europe, of theological opinions so long consecrated by time . . . could not fail to encourage, on all other subjects, a congenial freedom of inquiry" (*The Progress of Metaphysical, Ethical and Political Philosophy Since the Revival of Letters in Europe* [Edinburgh: Adam and Charles Black, 1835], p. 16). Again Nietzsche "transvalues" the view of liberal philosophy on the Reformation: "That Luther's Reformation succeeded in the North suggests that the north of Europe was retarded compared to the South" (*The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann [New York: Vintage, 1974], #149, p. 195; see also *Daybreak* #88). For Nietzsche the Reformation was a disaster in that it stopped the tide of the Renaissance that might have moved humanity to its highest possible plane.

15. See D.H. Lawrence, *Studies in Classical American Literature* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), pp. 9–11; George Bernard Shaw, "The Sanity of Art," in *Major Critical Essays* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986), p. 337; Ralph Barton Perry, *Puritanism and Democracy* (New York: The Vanguard Press, 1944), p. 358; G. P. Gooch, *English Democratic Ideas in the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1954), p. 8; Egerton Ryerson, *The Loyalists of America and Their Times*, 2 vols. (Toronto: William Briggs, 1880), vol. 1, pp. 12ff.; Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 2 vols. (New York: Vintage Books, 1945), vol. 1, pp. 33–46.

16. See Goldwin Smith, *Lectures on Modern History* (Oxford: J. H. and Jas. Parker, 1861), p. 17.

17. Terence N. D'Altroy observes that "Depending on the perspective of the author, the Inka polity was considered to be a feudal, totalitarian, utopian, communistic or monarchic state" ("Introduction," *Ethnohistory* 34[1987]: 3). Unlike Prescott D'Altroy does not include "theocratic" as one of his key possible adjectives describing the Inca regime.

18. See Baron de Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws* (New York: Hafner Press, 1949), pp. 316–30, and Thomas Babington Macaulay, "Indian Education," in G. M. Young, ed., *Macaulay: Prose and Poetry* (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1967), pp. 722–24.

19. "The Multitude sufficient to confide in for our Security, is not determined by any certain number, but by comparison with the Enemy we feare" (*Leviathan*, chap. 17, p. 224).

20. In the state of nature Hobbes says there are "no Instruments of moving, and removing such things as require much force" (*Leviathan*, chap. 13, p. 186).

21. Lord Brougham's description of Christian aristocracy may stand for the interpretation of this period by any number of writers after Hobbes. "To the union of constraint and obedience with

the bravery inculcated by constant engagement in warlike pursuits, was added the superstitious veneration of the clergy, and the scrupulous observance of a religion full of ceremony and penances. . . . All these circumstances introduced a strange mixture of warlike independence with civil submission, religious enthusiasm and personal courtesy . . . the fury of their onset was such as might be expected from fanatics trained to a military life, and led on by their priests as well as their feudal lords . . . love of conquest engrafted itself on spiritual zeal" (*Political Philosophy*, vol. 1, pp. 321–22).

22. Prescott goes so far as to say that the conquests of the Aztec Empire were "greatly facilitated" by "the ferocity of character engendered by their sanguinary rites." Human sacrifice helped the Aztecs to acquire a kind of military virtue, the loss of which amongst modern Europeans was Machiavelli's despair. Prescott notes of Machiavelli's *Discourses*, 2.2, wherein antiquity's greater devotion to "liberty" is explained in terms of paganism's energy and ferocity in pursuit of "the honors and possessions of this world," that it "contains some ingenious reflections—much more ingenious than candid—on the opposite tendencies of Christianity" (*Mexico*, p. 52 n. 36).

23. "Cruelty is one of the oldest festive joys of mankind"; "Of all the means of producing exaltation, it has been human sacrifice which has at all times most exalted and elevated man" (Nietzsche, *Daybreak*, #18, #45). For Nietzsche the cruelty at the earlier stages of human development is quite "innocent," while that of the later Christianity is less so. At bottom human beings are made happy by the sight of the torment of others, while at the same time all high culture is the product of cruelty. (See *The Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Walter Kaufmann [New York: Vintage Books, 1967], II, 5–7, pp. 64–69; *Daybreak*, #77; and *Beyond Good and Evil*, #229). See also Evelyn Waugh, *Black Mischief* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965), pp. 228–30.

24. Prescott says of the Aztec society that the "degree of civilization which they had reached, as inferred by their political institutions, may be considered, perhaps, not much short of that enjoyed by our Saxon ancestors, under Alfred" (*Mexico*, p. 33).

25. "The existence of similar religious ideas in remote regions, inhabited by different races . . . furnish[es] one of the most important links in the great chain of communication which binds together the distant families of nations" (*Mexico*, p. 38 n. 5). Prescott says elsewhere that the Inquisition was "the most terrible engine of oppression ever devised by man,—not so terrible for its operation on the body as on the mind" (*Biographical and Critical Miscellanies*, p. 576). Robinson Crusoe seems to agree entirely with Prescott's view. He remarks to a Spaniard whom he had rescued, and with whose comrades he might escape to the Spanish colonies, "that I had rather be deliver'd up to the Savages and devoured alive, than fall into the merciless claws of the Priests, and be carry'd into the Inquisition" (Daniel Defoe, *The Life and Adventures of Robinson Crusoe*, ed. Angus Ross [Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965], p. 243).

26. Ross Hassig is loath to enter into the question which is the whole purpose of pre-Columbian studies for Prescott, i.e., the relationship between, and comparative advantages for the human condition of, civilization on the one hand, and barbarism on the other. He approaches the world of the Aztecs "on the assumption that Aztec practices were as rational as those of any other society, albeit tailored to the social and technological realities of Mesoamerica" (*Aztec Warfare: Imperial Expansion and Political Control* [Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988] p. 267).

27. See "On the Vision and the Riddle," in *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Viking, 1966), p. 158. Zarathustra was a Persian, and "The Persians had a cycle of one hundred and twenty years" (*Mexico*, p. 65 n. 38). Nigel Davies comments that part of the difficulty in studying the world of the Aztecs is that their "concept of time, and hence of history, [was] so radically different from our own." Thus Marx's philosophy of history would have been incomprehensible to the Aztecs. "Marx inherited the Judeo-Christian notion in that respect; he thought in terms of a beginning and ending of history, in which, in a new Golden Age, proletarian power would restore the idyllic state of man's tribal past; he certainly did not believe, like the Aztecs, in a succession of worlds, with the implication that the proletarian revolution would one day succumb and the fight against capitalism would be resumed over and over again" (*The Aztec Empire*, pp. 8, 125). Compare Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1974), Aph #341, p. 274, with Lord Bryce, "What is Progress?" *The Atlantic Monthly* (August, 1907), p. 154.

28. One of the obvious similarities between New World cosmogony and that of the Greeks was their agreement on the divinity of the heavenly bodies. Describing the Incas, Prescott says that "Besides the Sun, [they] acknowledged various objects of worship in some way or other connected with this principal deity. Such was the Moon, his sister-wife; the Stars, revered as part of the heavenly train,—the fairest of them, Venus, . . . was adored as the page of the Sun, whom he attends so closely in his rising and in his setting" (*Peru*, pp. 778–79). Plato argues for the divinity of the heavenly bodies in *Laws*, 899b; Aristotle expresses this view in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1141b1–8 and *Physics*, 196a33–34; and Cicero makes the case in the *Tusculan Disputations*, 1.28. There is no space here to go into the context of the philosophers' defense of the idea of the divinity of the heavenly bodies, a stance which was bound up with a refutation of the atheists or "materialists." But it is important to note here that this stance puts the classical philosophers in the same camp as all ancient peoples, it would seem, except one. As one scholar has observed, "The deification of the heavens or of the chief heavenly bodies is for the most natural and universally operative reasons an element in all ancient religions (except the Jewish one)" (Hans Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion* [Boston: Beacon, 1963], p. 255). We must then keep in mind the relation of rationalist philosophy and "paganism" of all varieties on the one hand to the Bible and modern historical thought on the other. Prescott, for all his modern, enlightenment rationalism, is under the influence of the Bible.

Aristotle says that the "first human beings . . . are likely to have been similar to average or even simple minded persons today" (*Politics* 1296a6).

Plato sums up the point directly in the *Timaeus*, when he has an old Egyptian priest say to Solon: "There have been and will be again, many destructions of mankind arising out of many causes; the greatest have been brought about by agencies of fire and water, and other lesser ones by innumerable causes" (*Timaeus* 22c1–2). Consider also Plato's *Laws* 676a–c, and Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura* 6.670.

Consider Nietzsche, "On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense," in Daniel Breazeale, ed., *Philosophy and Truth* (New Jersey: Humanities International, 1979), p. 79.

29. Roy Harvey Pearce, speaking generally of American students of the indigenous peoples of North America, says that "They could learn of the law of progress from any number of learned authorities, especially from those Scots who were so influential in their thinking, and from those French social theorists who built upon and verified the works of the Scots." Pearce describes the "grand intention of the eighteenth century Scotch historians and writers on society," such as Francis Hutcheson, Thomas Reid, Adam Ferguson, Lord Kames and William Robertson, as being the construction of "a sociology of progress, a theory which would make comprehensible at once social stability and social growth" (*The Savages of America: A Study of the Indian and the Idea of Civilization* [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1965], pp. 155–56, 82–83.27.)

"If the Greeks lived in the infancy of civilization, the contemporaries of our day may be said to have reached its prime. The same revolution has taken place as in the growth of an individual. The vivacity of the imagination has been blunted, but reason is matured. The credulity of youth has given way to habits of cautious inquiry, and sometimes to a phlegmatic scepticism . . . a new standard of moral excellence was formed. Pursuits were estimated by their practical results, and the useful was preferred to the ornamental" (Prescott, *Biographical and Critical Miscellanies*, p. 77). Compare Thomas Babington Macaulay, *Critical and Historical Essays*, 2 vols. (London: J.M. Dent, 1961), vol. 2, pp. 366–71.

Prescott says that there were "points of resemblance" in respect of "social relations and culture" between the Aztecs and the Egyptians (*Mexico*, p. 33). We recall here Plato's reliance on an Egyptian priest in the *Timaeus* who says to Solon: "You Hellenes are never anything but children, and there is not an old man among you . . . in mind you are all young; there is no old opinion handed down among you by ancient tradition, nor any science which is hoary with age" (22b5–c3). If Prescott had been more classical or Platonic in his outlook, he might have laid greater stress on the value of the "American" Egyptians' ancient wisdom and less on what they reveal to the historian regarding the preconditions for social progress. It is interesting to note that in the *New Atlantis*, in which Bacon presents the outlines of the new scientific society, "Peru, then called Coya," and Mexico, "then called Tyrambel," are described together with Atlantis as being "mighty and proud

kingdoms, in arms, shipping and riches." Bacon suggests that it was Tyrabel or Mexico which the ancient Athenians repulsed in the *Timaeus* (*A Book of Seventeenth Century Prose*, ed. Robert P. Tristram Coffin and Alexander M. Witherspoon [New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1929], p. 44).

In his *Laws* Plato makes the Athenian Stranger say to his two interlocutors: "Well, then, do you both believe that there's some truth in the ancient sayings? The ones that tell of many disasters—floods and plagues and many other things—which have destroyed human beings and left only a tiny remnant of the human race." Kleinias replies: "This sort of thing seems entirely credible to everyone" (*Laws* 677a3; see also *Phaedrus* 229b5–230b1). Mircea Eliade says that "Plato could be regarded as the outstanding philosopher of 'primitive mentality', that is, as the thinker who succeeded in giving philosophic currency and validity to the modes of life and behaviour of archaic humanity" (*The Myth of the Eternal Return* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1954], p. 34). See also John Stuart Mill, *Dissertations and Discussions* (London: George Routledge, n.d.), pp. 168–71.

30. In *Deuteronomy* 4:19–20 it is said: "And lest thou lift up thine eyes unto heaven, and when thou seest the sun, and the moon, and the stars, even all the host of heaven, shouldest be driven to worship, and serve them/ which the Lord thy God hath divided unto all nations under the whole heaven/ But the Lord hath taken you, and brought you out of the iron furnace/ even out of Egypt, to be unto him a people of inheritance/ as ye are this day."

31. Dugald Stewart explains that the "very hinge of the controversy" between those who emphasize a progressive future for humanity and those prone to what he calls "Atheistical or Epicurean prejudices" is "the essential difference between the present state of society, and any which has occurred in the preceding ages of the world." Following Francis Bacon he insists that the art of printing, the discovery of the New World, the purity of modern religion and the increasing store of science available to modern man provide assurance that "retrogradation" has become impossible. (*The Collected Works of Dugald Stewart*, ed. Sir William Hamilton [Edinburgh: Thomas Constable, 1854], vol. 1, p. 500). According to Nietzsche there is now in place a "chain of tremendous prophylactic measures which are the conception of modern times and through which we separate ourselves from the Middle Ages." "We make it henceforth impossible for the fruitful fields of culture again to be destroyed overnight by wild and senseless torrents" ("The Wanderer and His Shadow," #275, in *Human, All Too Human*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986], pp. 376–77).

32. According to Stewart we are entitled to reject "every theory which represents either the physical or the moral order of the universe, in a light calculated to damp the hopes, or to slacken the exertions of the friends of humanity." But at the same time Stewart allows for the possibility of "some physical convulsion which shall renovate or destroy the surface of our planet." Thus he must explain that "The object which I have in view at present is comparatively confined, extending no further than to the history of our species during the last three centuries" (*Collected Works*, vol. 1, pp. 490, 500). In other words the progressive vantage point is satisfactory as long as one's focus is on a few centuries or millenia. But extending one's gaze beyond this necessarily forces one to consider the possibility of telluric or life-ending catastrophes on the planet earth, which is as much as to concede the Aztecs, and Plato's, point. See Carl Becker, "Progress" in James C. Hepburn and Robert A. Greenberg, eds., *Modern Essays* (New York: Macmillan, 1962), pp. 125–35.

33. Prescott explains that "the genius of the Peruvian monarchy" and the "key to its habitual policy" was that "Science was not intended for the people" and that the "amautas" or wise men "engrossed the scanty stock of science—if science it could be called," that was available to them (*Peru*, p. 791). While this may in fact have served to preserve the polity, it would put very clear limits on how far society might progress, if it be allowed that the diffusion of an elementary understanding of nature and its laws is the sine qua non of society's advancement.

34. "The Seven Seals (Or: The Yes and Amen Song)," in *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, III, 16, p. 231. See Wyndham Lewis, *Time and Western Man* (Boston: Beacon, 1957), pp. 220–27; 437–40; and Karl Lowith, *Meaning in History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949), pp. 191–22.