

Why Positivism Failed Latin America

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English Abstract

Latin America's widespread adaptation of Positivism in the late nineteenth century is reviewed, as is the rise of the equally pervasive anti-positivist movement at the turn of the century. We find that the most important legacy of Positivism for the region lay with the questions raised in its aftermath about the relevance of the region's pre-Columbian and colonial periods to Latin America's cultural identity. In addressing these questions, the paper argues for the differentiation of mythological and theological consciousness, explores concrete expressions of both in Latin American history, and finally argues for the importance of both for sustaining order in culture. Comte's most crucial error lay in thinking of his stages of history as successive rather than as layers of consciousness present and needed in all periods of history. Eric Voegelin's theory of the "Ecumenic Age" serves as the basis for this critique of Latin American Positivism.

Resumen en español

Se evalúa la adaptación generalizada del positivismo en Latinoamérica a finales del siglo diecinueve al igual que el también penetrante movimiento anti-positivista durante esta época. Nos parece que el legado más importante del Positivismo en la región se encuentra en las preguntas que surgieron como consecuencia del mismo movimiento acerca de la relevancia de los períodos pre-Colombino y Colonial en la identidad cultural de Latinoamérica. Al abordar estas cuestiones, el documento aboga por la diferenciación de la conciencia mitológica y teológica, explora expresiones concretas de ambas en la historia de Latinoamérica, y finalmente aboga por la importancia de ambas conciencias para mantener el orden cultural. El error más crucial de Comte se encuentra en pensar en las etapas de la historia como sucesivas, en lugar de verlas como capas de la conciencia actuales y necesarias en todos los períodos de la historia. La teoría de Eric Voegelin de "La edad ecuménica" sirve como base de esta crítica del positivismo en Latinoamérica.

Resumo em português

Revisamos a ampla adaptação da América Latina ao Positivismo no século XIX, considerando a chegada, junto com a virada do milênio, do igualmente difundido movimento Antipositivista. Descobrimos que o mais importante legado do Positivismo na região está nas questões levantadas sobre sua consequência a respeito da relevância dos períodos coloniais e pré-colombiano da região na identidade cultural da América Latina. Para resolver essas questões, o trabalho discute a diferenciação na consciência mitológica e teológica e explora as expressões concretas destas sobre a história da América Latina, finalmente debatendo a importância de ambas na sustentação da ordem na cultura. O maior erro de Comte está em pensar nos seus

estágios da história como sendo sucessivos, em vez de camadas de consciência presentes e necessárias em todos os períodos da história. A teoria de Eric Voegelin sobre a “Era ecumênica” serve como base para esta crítica do Positivismo latino-americano.

In our age the imagination operates critically. True, criticism is not what we dream of, but it teaches us to distinguish between the specters out of our nightmares and our true visions. Criticism is the imagination's apprenticeship in its second turn, the imagination cured of fantasies and determined to face the world's realities. Criticism tells us that we should learn to dissolve the idols, should learn to dissolve them within ourselves. We must learn to be like the air, a liberated dream.[1]

Latin American intellectuals began promoting Positivism as early as the 1860s, and the movement became dominant in the region in the last quarter of the century. Its influence was strongest in Mexico and Brazil, but was evident in most nations in the region. Auguste Comte's ordering of history into three periods—the theological, metaphysical and positive—seemed to fit well with the Latin American experience, and his theory of the third, positive stage seemed to many a promising path to progress at a time when Latin America was still struggling to define itself after independence from Spain and Portugal. Comte's vision of a positivist society appealed to Latin American intellectuals for a number of reasons. It was anticlerical at a time when Catholicism was seen as an impediment to progress, and it was authoritarian at a time when enlightenment ideals of democracy and individual rights seemed romantic and impractical. Positivism promoted utilitarianism, science (or scientism), an emphasis on material progress and Social Darwinism. This made sense to those who desired to compete economically with the United States and Europe and wanted ideological justification for the persecution of indigenous and mestizo groups, who were also regarded as impediments to progress.[2]

Remarkably, as enthusiastically as Latin American intellectuals put their hopes in Positivism, and as wide spread as the movement was in the region, its repudiation was just as vehement. The first criticisms surfaced at the turn of the century, and the Mexican Revolution of 1910 was in part a reaction against the Mexican version of Positivism under the rule of Porfirio Díaz. My agenda in this paper is to examine the failure of Positivism in light of the Latin American experience. I believe it is important to consider the movement in a concrete historical context, rather than simply as an abstract theory. I argue that Positivism offered an inadequate interpretation of Latin American history, but that the larger problems with the movement were political, cultural and philosophical. While Latin American history cannot be intelligently organized into Comte's three periods, the philosophical questions raised by the failure of Positivism

have to do with the failure of the so-called theological and metaphysical periods to disappear from Latin American culture. In the twentieth century, Latin Americans wrestled with key questions left behind by the legacy of Positivism. Chief among their concerns was whether it would be desirable to scrub Latin America clean of its indigenous and colonial legacies. The main preoccupation of those who took these questions seriously was the question of Latin American identity.

Comte's Theory of History

Auguste Comte (1798-1857) was a brilliant eccentric who began to slide into isolation, insanity and poverty in his middle years. His most influential work came early, and his late publications were uneven at best. Moreover, interpreting his work is made difficult by questions of development and perhaps redirections in his thinking. Still, Comte, who coined the term "sociology," established the basic methodology of the social sciences and won enthusiasts throughout Latin America.[3] The internal coherence and organic development of his work are not our concern. Instead, we want to understand Positivism as it was appropriated by Latin Americans and applied to their own situation. While Brazilians and Mexicans developed different versions of Positivism, the underlying essentials of Latin American Positivism remained the same.

Brazilian Positivism took on the characteristics of Comte's middle work, such as we find in his *A General View of Positivism* (1848); while Mexican Positivism had the hard edge of his earlier "Course in Positive Philosophy (six vols: 1830-1842)." In the 1848 treatise, one finds a new and important emphasis on human affect as the driver of social reform and on the importance of women, art and the "Religion of Humanity" as forces to form and manage human affect. We find attempts to implement these ideas in Brazil and Chile, but not in Mexico. While Brazilians were creating their own "Religion of Humanity," Mexican Positivists remained more accommodating of the Catholic Church. Moreover, while Brazilians can associate their Positivist period with the abolition of slavery, in Mexico the period is better remembered for the harsh treatment of indigenous groups.[4]

Despite these differences, essential components remain that characterize Positivism throughout the region. Comte envisioned a society based entirely on knowledge gained from the application of the scientific method. He regarded nature and society as a closed system with no transcendent ground. It was the responsibility of scientists to discover the laws of society, just as they discovered the laws of physics. This reductionist approach fit well with theories of ethnic and social determinism. He also favored an elitist and authoritarian social order and dismissed natural rights as both methodologically unjustified and a hindrance to the social order. He called for a society firmly managed by scientists and sociologists. One author ironically compared this vision to the centralized bureaucracies of the Soviet Union and Communist China.[5] In Mexico, these technocrats were dubbed *los Cientificos*. [6] Latin Americans were especially taken with Comte's emphasis on progress understood as industrialization and modernization. Some of Comte's eccentricities may have also appealed to Latin

Americans. He asserted, for instance, that Catholic rather than Protestant nations were better prepared to enter the final positive stage.[7] Finally, Latin Americans embraced Comte's three stages of historical progress, and attempted to apply these to Latin American history, just as Comte had used them to interpret the French Revolution.

Comte named his three stages of history the theological, metaphysical and positive. He argued that it is a universal law of history that a culture progresses by advancing through each of these stages, culminating in the final positive stage. The theological is the stage of superstition. While Comte recognizes differences between primitive, polytheistic and more advanced monotheistic religions, he groups all cultures dominated by religious belief into this one stage. In regard to the French revolution, the *ancien régime* was theological, while the Jacobins and enlightenment enthusiasts of liberty and equality represented the metaphysical stage.[8] In Comte's view, the primary function of this second period is destructive or "negative." It possesses the energy needed to bring down the old order but not to establish the new. Comte refers to it as metaphysical because it is the period of deism and belief in individual rights. These metaphysical concepts must be overthrown before the positive period can establish itself.

Comte also regarded his theory of stages as a dialectic that reconciles order and progress. The *ancien régime* in France, like all theocratic monarchies, provided order but inhibited progress. The metaphysical reaction created an opening to progress, but sacrificed order to anarchy. The positive period reconciles the dichotomy by providing both progress and order. Science replaces superstition, and elite specialists replace the tendency of liberal systems to mob rule. Comte explains: "The question of reconciling the spirit of Order with that of Progress now came into prominence. It was the most important of all problems, and it was now placed in its true light. But this made the absence of a solution more manifest; and the principle of the solution existed nowhere but in Positivism." [9]

The Latin American Positivists attempted to interpret their own history by applying Comte's stages to the events of the nineteenth century in Latin America.[10] Thus, while the French were burdened with the *ancien régime*, Latin America suffered through the last decades of colonialism, and while the French underwent a revolution, Latin Americans fought successful wars for independence in Mexico, Central and South America. Finally, the success of the wars for independence led to a period of anarchy, not unlike what the French experienced after the Revolution. As a consequence, it seemed to make sense to interpret the seemingly interminable battles between the conservatives and liberals in Latin America in terms of Comte's dialectic of (1) conservative order without progress, (2) liberal progress without order, and (3) the Positivist promise of both order and progress.

Comte died in 1857 disappointed by political developments in France. In Latin America, however, in the 1860s Positivism was just beginning to win supporters. In fact, during the 1850s and 60s in Latin America, the struggle between conservatives, who

remained attracted to colonial style theocracy, and liberals, who represented Comte's second, "negative" stage, continued to rage. Events in Mexico make this clear.

Benito Juárez, who represented the liberal cause, was elected President in 1861. Juárez had been working for Enlightenment-style reforms in Mexico throughout his career, while the balance of power between liberals and conservatives seesawed back and forth. In 1853, during the presidency of Antonio López de Santa Anna, Juárez went into to exile in New Orleans, but returned in 1855 after Santa Anna's resignation. Reformists like Juan Álvarez, Ignacio Comonfort and Juárez were Enlightenment Liberals in classic sense of the term. The reforms that they enacted after 1855 included the new *Federal Constitution of the United Mexican States* of 1857 and other laws enacted during the presidencies of the men just named. The new constitution declared the equality of all citizens before the law; guaranteed rights similar to those found in the United States Bill of Rights; instituted the separation of church and state; established a separate judiciary; forced the sale of large land holdings by the Church and otherwise restricted Church privileges. However, the conservatives of the period simply would not accept this form of Liberalism.

The balance of power shifted again in 1862 due to French intervention, and Juárez fled Mexico City for the north, managing his government-in-exile from the state of Chihuahua.[11] Meanwhile, Mexican conservatives with the support of the French invited Maximilian von Habsburg of Austria to accept monarchical rule in Mexico in order to reestablish a theocratic empire. However, faced with the opposition of the United States and weakened French support, Maximilian, a misguided idealist, was finally executed by Juárez's supporters in 1867. Juárez's presidency restored, he remained in office until 1872 when he died of a heart attack.

In 1867, with Juárez restored to power, Gabino Barreda gave a speech in Guanajuato, Mexico promoting Positivism. He had recently returned from France where he had met Comte and become an enthusiast of his philosophy. In his speech, Barreda argued that Positivism offered the means to transform Mexico by supplanting an "order based on the divine will" with an "order based on the positive sciences." [12] Barreda's speech impressed Juárez, who recognized that the principles of Positivism offered a solution to the impasse between the conservatives and liberals in Mexico. Juárez appointed Barreda to a commission charged with writing a new plan for education. The new plan announced later that year was based on Positive principles.[13]

The point of this episode is that the first Positivists in Mexico made their appeal to the liberals of Juárez's reform movement. However, in his speech Barreda had glossed over the true nature of Comte's three stages of history and his negative interpretation of Liberalism. Rather than interpreting Mexican Liberalism as the second, negative period of history, he praised the Mexican liberals as "the positive spirit of human progress." [14] The true nature of the opposition between Positivism and Liberalism would not become a matter of political concern in Mexico until after Juárez died in 1872. The period between 1872 and 1876, when Porfirio Díaz seized the presidency, was the period of

growing hostility between the liberals and the Positivists, and Díaz's victory was a defeat for Liberalism in Mexico.

Comte's theory of history is not easily dismissed if one's focus remains limited to the nineteenth century. In this period, both in Europe and the Americas, the conflict between reactionary and liberal forces led to exhaustion and opened the door to the great theorists of history, of which Comte is one. Hegel, Comte and Marx all envisioned a predefined path to progress and a final point when human conflict would give way to a resting point of some kind in which humanity would continue to live in peace and prosperity without end. Comte's theory interests us because of the widespread enthusiasm with which it was received in Latin America and because his theory of historical progress set the stage in Latin America for the most important cultural and political questions of the twentieth century.

If Comte's theory fits well with the nineteenth century, it is far too simplistic to accommodate the complexity of Latin American history from the pre-Columbian period to the present. It simply fails to offer any insight into the European Conquest, arguably the greatest cultural upheaval in history, and, of course, it also offers no explanation for its own repudiation and demise at the turn of the century. We must inquire why Latin American thinkers eventually found this approach threatening to their culture. Moreover, from the perspective of philosophy, the question arises whether history can be intelligently organized into Comte's three stages. One problem with this approach is that the so-called "theological" stage seems a gross over-generalization of the function of religion in history. For example, it simply ignores what Karl Japer's named the "axial age" and Eric Voegelin, the "ecumenic age." [15] Both of these authors give a great deal of importance to the transition from mythological to theological forms of religion, while Comte seems relatively indifferent to this distinction. And yet both mythology and theology have been powerful forces in Latin American history. [16]

Another problem with the theory of three stages is that it envisions that the earlier stages will become obsolete. The period of superstition has no contribution to make once it has been destroyed by the metaphysical period, which in turn serves only to prepare a culture for the "normal" positive stage of human existence. However, we will see that one of the primary questions of the twentieth century in Latin America concerns the so-called obsolescence of these earlier stages. Increasingly, Latin Americans sought for ways to understand the continued relevance of the pre-Columbian and colonial periods for Latin American identity.

Latin America Rejects Positivism

The historians' accounts of the anti-Positivist movement in Latin America are in general agreement. [17] One key factor was the uneven benefits of industrialization. Leaders encouraged foreign investment and ownership, and what profits remained behind in the region benefited Creole elites but few others. Changing perceptions of Spain and the United States also played a part in the reaction. In the nineteenth century

many Latin Americans admired the United States for its democratic institutions. However, the Spanish-American war of 1898 solidified growing concerns about American imperialism and brought new sympathy for Spain. American aggression in the hemisphere brought to light its own Positivist leanings and led to a reconsideration of the importance of Iberian culture for Latin American identity.[18]

Spain had been deeply resented after independence, but Spain's humiliation at the hands of the *Norte Americanos* coincided with new questions about Latin American identity. Positivism was a universal, one-size-fits-all approach to social, political and economic development. Thus it was now perceived as a threat to the distinctiveness of Latin American culture, just as United States imperialism was perceived to threaten the region with the imposition of Anglo-American institutions. If the United States was the external enemy, Positivism was now perceived as the enemy within. In 1900, José Enrique Rodó of Uruguay published what was arguably the most influential attack against Positivism with his book *Ariel*. It soon won adherents from Mexico to the southern cone of South America and remains influential to this day.[19] In the following comment, Rodó expresses the idea that Positivism is the enemy within but also—as was common among the anti-Positivists—associates Positivism with the United States: “We imitate what we believe to be superior or prestigious. And this is why the vision of an America de-Latinized of its own will, without threat of conquest, and reconstituted in the image and likeness of the North, now looms in the nightmares of many who are genuinely concerned about our future.”[20]

In Mexico, sympathizers of Rodó responded with the formation of the *Ateneo de la Juventud* (The Athenaeum for Youth) in 1907. Antonio Caso, José Vasconcelos and Alfonso Reyes were the most prominent voices in this organization, which helped to crystallize opposition to Porfirio Díaz's regime. Other important figures from this period were José Martí of Cuba and José Mariátegui of Peru. The anti-Positivist movement is correctly associated with a rising nationalism in the region, but if there were voices of excess, the movement in general gave voice to healthy and important questions about Latin American identity. Its importance lay not in simple assertions of cultural superiority (in which Rodó, for example, did not skimp), but in the ensuing debate about the influence of the region's pre-Columbian and colonial past. While the Positivists had simply dismissed these periods as impediments to progress, this new generation asked to what extent being Latin American was bound up with the region's history. In his essay, “Our America,” José Martí complained about those “who are ashamed of the mother that raised them because she wears an Indian apron,” and argued that leadership must come from those who know their own country and history.[21] Mariátegui was perhaps the greatest champion of the Indigenous from this period, not only rejecting the legacy of racism that sustained the class system both before and after independence, but also arguing against the westernization of the Indigenous of Peru. Mariátegui was one of the first Latin Americans to embrace Marxism, and one of the first Marxists to rethink Marx's focus on the proletariat, arguing instead that his nation's hopes rested with the resurgence of the native Peruvians.[22]

Williamson divides the movement into two factions, adherents of *Arielismo* and *Indigenismo*.^[23] “*Arielismo*” was coined as a reflection of Rodó’s book, *Ariel*. Authors like Rodó and Antonio Caso of Mexico emphasized the region’s Hispanic heritage and argued that some form of Christian humanism lay at the heart of Latin American culture. Their hope was to preserve the best of the Classical and Christian periods in the region’s future. Unfortunately, this Christian humanism had not been very evident in the Counter-Reformation Catholicism that reigned during the colonial period. Nor did *Arielismo* show much concern for the pre-Columbian period, the influence of indigenous groups, nor necessarily for their rights. Yet indigenous groups who spoke native languages and identified strongly with their pre-Conquest traditions survived in most countries in the region. Thus the advocates of *Indigenismo* argued that the formation of Latin American identity would not progress until the region began to understand and integrate its pre-Columbian history into its culture. While the debate between *Arielismo* and *Indigenismo* was important, both groups shared their disdain for Positivism with its ancillary racism and Social Darwinism. They rejected it as a force that would rid the region of its cultural identity and replace it with a bland industrialization and urbanization.

The anti-Positivist movement left an important legacy for the twentieth century. Latin Americans embraced the questions about identity first posed during this period, and for the remainder of the century sought answers.^[24] Thus we find rising interest in anthropology and archeology, complemented by linguistic and historical studies of pre-Columbian cultures. Miguel León-Portilla, whose study of the Aztecs I discuss in this paper, is one important example of this newfound appreciation for the pre-Columbian period. The movement’s legacy is also evident in the astounding museums of anthropology found in the great capitals and regional cities of Latin America. The ruin sites that have been studied in Mexico alone number in the thousands, and throughout the region one finds the names of important pre-Columbian figures adorning broad avenues and city parks. This new point of view is summed up quite well by a plaque placed in Tlateloco Square, Mexico City. “On August 13, 1521, heroically defended by Cuauhtémoc, Tlatelolco fell into the hands of Hernán Cortés. It was neither a triumph nor a defeat: it was the painful birth of the *mestizo* community that is Mexico today.”^[25]

The rejection of Positivism and quest for identity also informed the great flowering of art in twentieth-century Latin America. One could argue that the artists, more so than the philosophers, advanced the conversation about the possibility of integrating the past with the future and finding the basis for unity among extremely diverse classes of people. Appreciation for African folk culture is evident in the rise of Rumba (Cuba) and Samba music (Brazil). This was part of a more general interest in primitive and folk art forms. The work of Diego Rivera and the other Muralists should also be understood in this context. However, the most significant achievement came with the literary movement called *lo real maravilloso*. Commonly called magical realism in English, the genre, with some debt to European modernism, sought to explore the intermingling of the rational and mythical in the Latin American experience.^[26]

One of the earlier and most important representatives, Miguel Angel Asturias of Guatemala, made anthropological studies of the Maya before incorporating Mayan myths into his fiction. His novels criticize the typical Positivist dictator—like Díaz of Mexico or Cabrera of Guatemala—and the destruction of the human bonds of traditional society due to the evils of Capitalism, industrialization and urbanization. Asturias was awarded the Noble Prize in 1967. Some other authors identified with *lo real maravilloso* are José María Arguedas (Peru), Alejo Carpentier (Cuba), Carlos Fuentes (Mexico), Isabel Allende (Chile), and the most celebrated of the movement, Gabriel García Márquez of Columbia. *Lo real maravilloso* celebrates the diversity and complexity of Latin American culture.[27] This diversity, however, is not simply ethnic; it is also a blending of the mythic, metaphysical and modern. It consists of diverse points of view, worldviews and types of consciousness. Arguedas, whose first language was Quechua, is especially noted for his efforts to incorporate an indigenous viewpoint in his novels. However, “viewpoint” is too vague a word for what Arguedas was after. More precisely, he attempts to help his readers understand the world of post-Conquest Peru through the mythic consciousness of Peru’s Indians.[28] In my view, one finds in the *lo real maravilloso* genre a more accurate depiction of Latin American reality than in Comtianism due to the latter’s efforts to segregate the mythic, metaphysical and scientific into separate periods of history.

The region’s rejection of Positivism brings to light the naiveté in Comte’s dismissal of myth, theology and metaphysics. At the heart of the failure of Comtianism in Latin America lies the impossible goal of ridding the region of these facets of its culture. Authors like Rodó and Mariátegui perceived that Positivism was a threat to the region’s cultural integrity because of its assault on the region’s past. In the two remaining sections of this paper, I will argue that a vital culture retains mythic and metaphysical components. In other words, the Positivists’ assault on the past was not a threat in the sense that an archivist or curator might perceive it; it was a threat because a culture reduced to science and technocrats does not satisfy the full reality of human consciousness.

Myth

To begin this topic we first need some clarification of terms. The term “mythic consciousness” does not refer to myths, the interpretation of myths or even *mythic thinking*. The reader of this paper can think mythically and can also step back to interpret and think critically about myths, but the reader of this paper does not possess mythic consciousness. The person who possesses mythic consciousness lives fully confined within the horizon of his or her mythic world. This person possesses no metaphysical or scientific constructs with which to complement, augment or surpass mythic understanding of his or her experience. At the start of the first millennium B.C., it would be unlikely to find an individual who did not possess mythic consciousness. At the start of the fifteenth century A.D., this type of person continued to dominate in the Americas and most, if not all, other regions of the world. However, in the twenty-first century, persons who, while continuing to use mythic constructs, also use metaphysical

and scientific constructs, probably outnumber, those who remain limited to mythic consciousness.

The primitive mythology that emanates from mythic consciousness has distinctive features that may not be found in later forms of myth. Primitive myths do not include theological constructs, which are logo-centric and rooted in metaphysical thought. For mythic consciousness precedes the application of *logos* to ultimate questions of human meaning. Primitive myth has a variety of features including animism, the divinization of nature and kings, and polytheism. Most crucial, however, is that this mythology always consists in a narrative, a recounting of past events or a prophecy of how the future will unfold. The narrative, however, forgoes explanation. It is a telling of what happens, but not a rational explanation of how and why things happen. Moreover, primitive myth, while usually concerned with notions of divinity, does not clearly differentiate between the mortal, finite reality in which the narrative is told and the way in which the divine transcends this reality. A concrete example of this is seen in many mythologies when immortal gods die in conflicts among themselves. This ambiguity concerns the meaning of divinity itself. Is a god a kind of human superhero, ultimately subject to the same vicissitudes of fortune as we mortals, or something so fundamentally different, so fundamentally *other*, that no anthropomorphism and no unfolding drama can adequately express the nature of this reality?

Eric Voegelin refers to the discovery that the ground of being transcends the spatial and temporal finitude in which beings exist as the differentiation of consciousness.[29] This differentiation was achieved in both the Hellenic and Judaic traditions and to a degree in other cultures. For Voegelin this differentiation constitutes a crucial moment in history. It is the moment when one first steps out of the cocoon of primitive or “compact” (Voegelin’s term) mythology. Moreover, it makes possible the realization of a common humanity united in one transcendent ground. Glenn Hughes explains Voegelin’s point of view:

Of course, there have been ‘advances’ in this searching process, by far the most notable among them being, in Voegelin’s view, the complex of occasions in various societies during the ‘ecumenic age’ when the search for order underwent a crucial transformation as thinkers discovered that the divine source of order is a reality incommensurate with the limitations and contingencies of the world conditioned by space and time, that is, when the *transcendence* of the divine ground became explicitly understood, carefully identified, and pondered *as such*. This discovery, the discovery of the nonworldly, genuine ‘eternity’ of divine transcendence, dramatically affected the process of the human search for order in a number of ways.[30]

By the “ecumenic age” Voegelin refers to that period of history when Asian, Near Eastern and European cultures suffered for the first time from the domination of multi-ethnic, multi-cultural empires. The Persian, Macedonian and Roman empires are the prime examples. However, Voegelin does not limit his scope of inquiry to this region. In addition to the empires listed above, Voegelin is especially interested in analogous

events in China occurring at about the same time. In Voegelin's view, it is during this era of empires that the discovery of transcendence and the differentiation of consciousness first occur. He argues that the crisis created by the destruction of smaller societies and their assimilation into larger, impersonal empires precipitated the need for this new and more profound religious understanding. Just as these large empires pushed back the boundaries of the known world and began to envision global domination, so did their victims begin to broaden the boundaries of their gods in the quest to find the meaning of their new situation. During this process, there was a trajectory of development from the local god to the one god of all nations that Moses, for example, encountered in the burning bush.[31]

Voegelin recognizes that this event of discovery—the “eruption” as he often calls it—will vary with respect to the clarity of one's understanding and the intensity of one's experience.[32] The most powerful discoveries and successful articulations of transcendence occurred in Hellas and Israel. However, Greece and Israel did not abandon their mythologies because of their discoveries, but rather reinterpreted them in light of their new understanding. Mythological and symbolic expressions of the divine remained important, therefore, but now as expressions of a reality more tenuously related to the mythic and symbolic expressions of its existence. These symbolic expressions of the divine were now understood as flawed, human expressions of the transcendent reality to which they merely pointed. This new understanding of the tenuous relationship between the divine and its symbols seems to be the point behind the Muslim prohibition against representational imagery. Without representational images, one avoids the risk of confusing the image for the reality.[33]

In a differentiated culture, it is always difficult to sustain the discovery of differentiation and to remain mindful of the fully symbolic nature of myth. In other words, it is difficult to remain mindful of the complete transcendence and mystery of the divine. Even in cultures that have benefitted from the transformative influence of the ecumenic age, there remains a tendency to deform this achievement. Such deformations are often identified as fundamentalism or literalism. However, in Voegelin's view the essential aspect of these deformations is the collapse of the transcendent back into immanence. In this situation, the traditional symbols of transcendence may remain culturally important, but the understanding of these symbols becomes deformed. The symbols of transcendence remain, but the unconditioned ground, the fundamental otherness of the divine, is compromised for a more domestic, worldly and comprehensible god. Our purpose in reviewing the mythologies of Spain and the Aztecs below is to interpret them in light of Voegelin's theory and to understand more concretely the political and cultural importance of myth, the discovery of transcendence and the implications of the deformation of this discovery. In doing so we can offer a final answer to our question about Positivism.

Spanish Mythology

Iberia had access to the Judaic and Hellenic traditions, while indigenous Americans did not. Thus, it would seem that the Conquest pitted a “differentiated” culture against a cluster of “undifferentiated” cultures. However, things were not so simple, for while a differentiated understanding has concrete cultural ramifications, it remains tied to mythic and symbolic expressions of the divine. Moreover, while primitive mythic thought reflects the limitations of an undifferentiated culture, a deformed mythology may reflect the way in which a culture has distorted the legacy of the spiritual achievement of the ecumenic age.

Spain’s conquest of Latin America was driven by its own mythic self-understanding. Spain’s mythology grew out of the Islamic conquest of Iberia (which began in 711) and the centuries-long struggle to complete the reconquest of the peninsula. Christian Europe shared in Spain’s ambition to drive the Muslims back into Africa, but, of course, the primary burden of the reconquest fell to the Iberians. The marriage of Isabel of Castile and Ferdinand of Aragon in 1469, prepared the region for the final push, and Granada, the last Islamic stronghold on the peninsula, fell in early 1492. Within the span of a year, Spain experienced two other notable events. One, of course, was Columbus’s successful voyage across the Atlantic. The second was the decree requiring all Jews in Spain either to convert or leave the nation. Despite guarantees given in 1492, Muslims faced the same ultimatum in 1502.

These events allow us to understand the meaning of conquest for Spain. For centuries, Christian Iberians fought on the frontier of Christianity and Islam, slowly, in fits and starts, reclaiming the peninsula. As the several principalities of the peninsula began to crystallize into the Kingdom of Spain, the new kingdom welcomed its role as the defender of the faith and champion of extending Christianity beyond its existing boundaries. Many Spaniards anticipated that after Granada fell, Spain would push into North Africa and advance east toward Jerusalem. Considering that Medieval Iberia had participated in previous crusades, this plan would probably have been put into effect if Columbus hadn’t returned with such startling news. The interests of Spain and Portugal were redirected with respect to geography, but not with respect to the meaning of conquest. Ferdinand and Isabel were called *Los Reyes Catholicos* (The Catholic Monarchs) because of their fundamental commitment to theocracy. Few nations, besides Portugal, can be compared to Spain for its zealous unification of faith and empire. The crisis of the Reformation only reinforced the legacy of *Los Reyes Catholicos*, such that the peninsula took up the Counter-Reformation cause with as much conviction and energy as it had leveled against the Muslims. Spain saw itself as pivotal in the conversion of the world to the Catholic faith and believed that success in this cause would bring the end-times. Then the Spanish king could ascend Mount Calvary in Jerusalem and return the world to god.[34]

This mythology—what we might call a myth of triumph—propelled the great conquistadors like Cortéz in Mexico and Pizarro in Peru to challenge and defeat major

civilizations with small bands of soldiers. Spain in the Renaissance possessed the classic ambition of the empires of the earlier period that Voegelin refers to as the ecumenic age. That is, Spain envisioned its eventual rule of the known world. Moreover, the discovery of the “new world”—which vastly increased the size of the world—so far from daunting this ambition seems to have been interpreted as further validation of Spain’s special mission.[35] However, unlike the self-interpretation of the ecumenic empires or the later mythology in the United States of “manifest destiny,” Spain’s mythic conception incorporated its Catholic heritage—albeit in a distorted confusion of transcendence and history. In other words, while the “manifest destiny” of the United States can be interpreted as a denial of transcendence in favor of a worldly utopia, Spain’s mythic conception went in a different direction. This was required by Spain’s fundamental commitment to the theocratic empire as exemplified by “*Los Reyes Catholicos*” and their successors.[36] This myth, therefore, did not substitute the reality of the transcendent ground of being—the god of Jewish and Christian scripture—with some worldly, immanent victory over time, but instead envisioned the absorption of history into transcendence. It was an apocalyptic myth that set the concrete conditions under which Spain would bring history to its triumphant conclusion. The myth domesticated the divine with claims of knowledge about the conditions that the divine required for the end of history.

However, if the myth is apocalyptic, it is also militaristic. The world must be conquered and converted by force in order to prepare for its end. Thus, this myth joins a narrative about the apocalyptic end-of-history with a narrative of heroic responsibility for bringing history to its proper conclusion. I find it remarkable that Spain shouldered this responsibility, with all its economic and military implications. Still this mythology seems more probable in the context of Spain’s centuries long struggle to rid Iberia of Muslim occupation. In the light of centuries of conflict, Spain adopted for itself the responsibility of transforming the finitude of history into the end-time when it would return the world, now purified and fully converted, to god come again.[37] This end-time only awaited Spain’s conquest and conversion of the known world. The grandiose project was, of course, doomed to failure.

Aztec and Nahuatl Mythology

The Aztecs, a Nahuatl-speaking group that settled in the central plateau of Mexico, strove to understand the arrival of the Europeans in their territory in terms of their own mythic history. However, here as in many other aspects of the Conquest, they were at a disadvantage. For their primitive mythology was one of anxious survival. While the Spaniards aimed to bring history to a triumphant conclusion, the Aztecs worked strenuously to stave off the cataclysmic end of history. Their first encounter with the Spaniards triggered profound confusion. Interpreting events through their own mythology caused the Aztec’s emperor, Moctezuma II, to fall into a paralysis of guilt and fatalism. Octavio Paz, who interprets their experience of the encounter in these terms, argues that the shock of the encounter exacerbated the Aztec’s own sense of illegitimacy, of having imposed a hegemony over the region that was in reality a

usurpation.[38] Guilt, in this sense of the word, however, also implies resignation to events beyond one's control—in this case, a fate preordained by the Aztec's own mythology. However, the Aztec usurpation was not simply geo-political, it was also cosmic. For their mythology foretold the end of their own epic called the "fifth sun." This "epic" was not simply the period of their political hegemony. That is, it was not a segment of historical time at all, but rather the existence of the world itself that was to end, as it had four times before.[39]

The Aztecs had adopted a herculean task of their own sometime in the early fifteenth century, the task of saving history through conquest and appeasement of their god Huitzilopochtli. Increasingly, the Aztecs emphasized the cult of Huitzilopochtli, the "Hungry God", in contrast to their neighboring Nahuatl-speaking communities that tended to favor the god Quetzalcoatl. Apparently, this choice was intentional because it conveniently conflated the ambitions of empire with the need to preserve their epoch as long as possible, despite the much-anticipated cataclysm that would destroy it. By conquering neighboring cities and then sacrificing tens of thousands of victims to the "Hungry God" atop Huitzilopochtli's pyramid in Tenochtitlan (present day Mexico City), the Aztecs believed they could buy themselves time and continue to preserve their epoch. It was this "buying of time" that they perceived as their act of usurpation.[40]

In light of Voegelin's account of the ecumenic age, it would seem that the Iberians and Aztecs stood on opposite sides of the most crucial fissure in history, dividing those who benefitted from the spiritual achievement of the ecumenic age from those who did not. Yet despite this distinction, we have noted a crucial commonality. Each culture had burdened itself with the responsibility of determining the outcome of history. As these two worlds collided in 1519, the conflict was driven by the mythologies that imposed this common burden. So we cannot reduce these events to the simple collision of pre- and post-ecumenic cultures. Rather, they involve two problematic mythologies—one primitive and the other a deformation of the ecumenic achievement. Neither mythology offered a clear articulation of the transcendence of the divine; nor, of course, did either culture think through and pursue the implications of transcendence.

The Road Not Taken

It is quite significant that Spain moved politically within its mythic horizon. That is, metaphysical considerations did not drive Spain's zeal for conquest. Spain certainly had rich traditions of Christianity and Thomistic philosophy to draw on. If measured by its scholars and mystics, Spain may well have been a paradigmatic example of what Comte meant by a metaphysical culture, but this was of little consequence in its prosecution of the Conquest. In fact, one of the tragic side-notes of the Conquest is the futility with which Spain's best thinkers labored to reverse the systematic destruction of indigenous groups. Scholars often note the impressive labors Spain took to review its American policies in light of legal, moral and theological considerations, and while this, in my view, led to significant advances in European philosophy, I also think it would be misleading to imply that these efforts made much difference for the Indians.[41]

Among the thinkers who sought to protect the Indians, Bartolomé de las Casas and Francisco Vitoria are arguably the two most important. In the early colonial period, Las Casas—moving between the two worlds of Latin America, where the Conquest was moving systematically forward, and the lofty world of Iberian Scholastic discourse in intellectual centers like Salamanca—labored to change the course of the Conquest with his appeal for a peaceful, non-violent program of conversion. Sadly, while his arguments carried the day in Iberia, he failed in the final analysis to alter the main trajectory of subjugation, forced labor and conversion in Latin America.[42] Vitoria's efforts, while more academically oriented and philosophically innovative, were equally futile. An accomplished Scholastic, he further developed Thomistic philosophy, finding an implicit theory of natural rights in Aquinas's theory of natural law, and used this analysis in support of his claim that the Conquest constituted an unjust war in violation of the natural rights of the indigenous peoples.[43]

The efforts of Las Casas and Vitoria depended on the underlying Thomistic metaphysics that had no significant rival in Renaissance Spain. It was this metaphysics that grounded Iberia's theism and theory of natural rights. Yet the Spanish monarchy, despite rather concerted political and legal efforts, could not bring these intellectual achievements to bear on political practice across the Atlantic. Spain, rather than implementing the pragmatic implications of its metaphysics of transcendence, pursued its grand mythic vision of its mission in history. Of course, this vision was reinforced by the basic greed and individual ambitions of the Conquistadors. However, distinctions between theological, monarchial and individual ambitions are of secondary importance because the Renaissance Spaniard experienced the underlying unity of all these purposes. If these layers of ambition at times came into conflict, for the most part they were of a piece and were intuitively understood as parts of a larger whole. This can be seen in fact that the Conquistadors eagerly sought to destroy the most prominent monuments of the pre-Columbian cultures they defeated and to erect with all alacrity the monuments of the new faith and the new regime. In Mexico City, the national cathedral was built with the stones of the Aztec's ruined pyramids, and in Cholula a baroque church was built atop the Cholulan's tallest pyramid in a clear display of triumph.

This review of the mythologies involved in the conquest of Mexico supports my underlying point. The specific mythic interpretation with which a culture may view its place in history may be primitive, differentiated or a deformed expression of transcendence, but, regardless, a culture will have a mythic expression of its place in history. This observation holds with Voegelin's conviction that myth and religious symbolism remain important in all stages of history. Of course, it also contradicts Comte's idea of successive stages of history with the latter replacing the former. More fundamentally, it suggests that Comtianism fails as a theory of history because it contradicts the reality of human consciousness. The question of the meaning of history always plays itself out in history. History is the record of the human quest to find its place within but also somehow beyond the finite march of time.

Now if a mythic interpretation of one's place in history is inevitable, then the problem shifts from one of overcoming myth to one of taking responsibility for myth.[44] I want to suggest that one of the key dangers of the mythic self-interpretation of a culture is evident in the mythologies of both Renaissance Spain and Aztec imperialism: I refer to a "neurosis" of sorts that overburdens a people with responsibility for preserving history and determining its final outcome. We have seen that both cultures were burdened in this way. Such projects—which have been shouldered by numerous peoples, including the Nazis in Germany and the Marxists in the Soviet Union—cannot succeed, but can introduce a frenetic need to dominate the natural and political environment. The question, therefore, arises whether it is possible to find a proper balance in symbolic expressions of the divine? In other words, one can ask whether there is a critical apparatus with which to evaluate the constructive and destructive features of human mythology? For while a people need symbolic expressions of their purpose in creating order in history, they must also in the end be prepared to acquiesce to the intransigence of time.

Differentiation

In the discussion of Aztec mythology, I have drawn on the work of Miguel León-Portilla. The main argument in Portilla's *Aztec Thought and Culture* is that the historical record evidences a nascent philosophical development in the Nahuatl-speaking world that began prior to the Conquest and was aborted by it. This development, in my opinion, is compatible with and illustrative of Voegelin's theory of the differentiation of consciousness. If I am correct about this, then we find in the experience of the Nahuatl further corroboration of Voegelin's theory. More importantly, we can also gain some insight into the cultural and political importance of differentiation.

There are some striking similarities between the Nahuatl-speaking cities of central Mexico in the fifteenth century and the Greek *poloi* that two millennia earlier harbored the first pre-Socratic philosophers. In both cases, common language and mythic traditions unified people who otherwise competed politically and militarily. In the central plateau of Mexico we find a poetic-philosophic literature that points to a shared culture at a time when the militarization of the Aztecs created a crisis not unlike the one created by the Peloponnesian war.[45] The crisis seems to have prompted Nahuatl intellectuals to explore what can be called the *temporality of being*. In a literature that reminds one of Heraclitus's preoccupation with pervasive change, we find authors lamenting the passing away of all things and the consequent anxiety that in reality no absolute or "root" (*nel* in Nahuatl) exists. León-Portilla compares this concept of "root" to Greek reflections on the *arche*. Thus in both cultures we seem to find a philosophical quest for the ground of being. The following poem offers one of the most explicit expressions of this theme:

Truly do we live on earth?
Not forever on earth; only a little while here.
Although it be jade, it will be broken,

Although it be gold, it is crushed,
Although it be quetzal feather, it is torn asunder.
Not forever on earth; only a little while here.

The poem relates the human experience of mortality to a more general truth. Moreover, the objects selected—jade, gold and quetzal feathers—were of symbolic importance to the Nahua. This suggests that the observation about temporality is being generalized, as if to observe that nothing, regardless of how valuable, escapes this law.

This insight into the finitude of being also led to questions about what one can know and about what one can value in life. The first of the two poems that follow concerns the possibility of truth and the second concerns the possibility of meaningful life:

Does man possess any truth?
If not, our song is no longer true.
Is anything stable and lasting?
What reaches its aim?

What does your mind seek?
Where is your heart?
If you give heart to each and every thing,
You lead it nowhere: you destroy your heart.
Can anything be found on earth?[46]

Time is the shared thread that ties these two poems together. Time calls into doubt the value of “our song,” that is the Nahua’s ritual and literary writings, and also calls into doubt the meaning of human existence. We must give our heart a focus, for it is foolish to try to give ourselves to all things. We must find our purpose, but regardless of the focus we choose, the thing we love will be as assuredly led to its ruin as everything else.

No doubt, such reflections as these called into doubt, at least for an elite intelligentsia, the legitimacy of the dominant mythology of Nahuatl culture. If it is true that nothing escapes the rule of time, what of the gods themselves? After all, even the epoch of the Aztecs, the epoch called the fifth Sun, was foretold to reach an end. León-Portilla argues, however, that this nihilism was met by a new “theological” insight, that is, an insight into the divine that benefits from metaphysical reflection. He argues that this is evident in the tendency among a few intellectuals to move away from the polytheism of the traditional mythology toward an emphasis on the one god, Ometéotl, as the ultimate god. Moreover, he argues that these same authors began to articulate the nature of Ometéotl in new ways that emphasized the god’s fundamental transcendence.[47]

Some of the most telling evidence in support of Portilla’s interpretation is a list of five names that the Nahua attributed to Ometéotl. He was called (1) the god who is

“invisible and intangible”; (2) the god “of close vicinity” or “who is near to everything and to whom everything is near”; (3) the god “through whom one lives”; (4) “our Lord, master of heaven, of earth and the region of the dead”; and (5) the god “who invents himself.”[48] Each of these names suggests transcendence, meaning that the ambiguity between the divine and immanent history is being worked out. Moreover, collectively the five names make clear that this transcendence does not imply Ometéotl’s irrelevance. Ometéotl, while imperceptible, is close to every neighborhood; gives and sustains life, and is Lord of all three aspects of the cosmos (earth, heaven, and the place of the dead). Finally, of crucial importance is that Ometéotl creates himself. While being the source and sustainer of all, he is not rooted in an earlier source or greater power.[49]

León-Portilla’s argument may be open to further scrutiny, especially concerning matters of translation.[50] Nonetheless, he offers strong evidence for his basic argument. The militarism of the Aztecs led to reflections about the fundamental temporality of being. While giving voice to anxieties about a nihilistic landscape of absolute finitude, they also gave voice to an alternative. The Nahua reflected on the idea of “root,” which compares well to reflections on the arche in ancient Greece. The fruit of these reflections was the teaching that Ometéotl was root, the transcendent ground of all being. Hence, our discussion at this juncture has less to do with the merits of his argument than with its implications.

The importance of Ometéotl was evident up to the very last moments of the cultural independence of the Nahua. In a dramatic scene, the Spanish missionaries assembled the Aztec priests in a public square in 1524 to condemn their false religion and proclaim to them the one true faith. The reply of the Aztec leaders has been preserved, and in it one finds their polite but committed defense of Ometéotl, invoking him through several of the names listed above.[51] However, this cult of Ometéotl had not reached the general population of Nahua, where polytheism and undifferentiated mythology (mythic consciousness) remained dominant. Thus, one can only conjecture about what might have emerged if Nahuatl culture had remained free to develop on its own terms. Nonetheless, it is helpful to ask whether there would be any political and social benefits to a reordering of Nahuatl culture around the cult of Ometéotl, and we can form some ideas about this by contrasting the two cults of Ometéotl and Huitzilipochtli.

The cult of Huitzilipochtli was clearly based on an undifferentiated myth, part of a larger narrative about the rise and fall of the “Fifth Sun,” the epoch of the Aztecs. Moreover, his relation to transcendence is almost wholly obscured by his “hunger.” This god must be sustained with victims of Aztec imperialism, and if he is not, he and the Aztecs will perish. Thus Huitzilipochtli, so far from pointing past the *temporality of being*, only reinforces the finitude of all dimensions of reality. This leaves the Aztecs laboring anxiously to stave off disaster. Ometéotl, on the other hand, was rendered fully transcendent, and by removing him from the limitations of the world, his relationship to the world and the social order was also changed. One did not need to labor for Ometéotl, for this god sustained all things. Nor did one need to agonize over the

prospects of his demise, for he was the “nel,” the root and ground of all being. Moreover, as he was not brought into existence by any greater power, no power could undo him. He was truly eternal. Finally, by acknowledging Ometéotl to be the ground and giver of life to all, the Nahua were implicitly uniting all people, sustained by one common ground. Thus, at least in theory, Ometéotl could have served as a principle of political unity in a fractured world.

Still, one cannot assert with any degree of certainty that the popularization of the transcendent Ometéotl would have brought an end to Aztec imperialism and inspired a new spirit of cooperation in Central Mexico. After all, if this were assured, one would have expected that Christianity would have accomplished something similar for Iberian policy in America. I do want to suggest, however, that if Ometéotl’s potential to bring new order to the region did not materialize, the reason would have been similar to the reason why Spain was never able to implement a more humane approach to its encroachment in the Americas, as Las Casas, Vitoria and others had pleaded for. Popular mythology can either support and reinforce the transcendence of the divine or distort it, reducing the transcendent to the immanent and returning responsibility for the final outcome of history to an overly burdened people. In short, a transcendent god requires a popular mythology of transcendence.

Conclusion

León-Portilla points out that the dominance of the cult of Huitzilopochtli in Tenochitlan was no accident. The historical record suggests that one man recognized the potency of this myth for a nation bent on empire. The man’s name was Tlacaélel. He never rose to become emperor, but served three emperors with great distinction and is largely credited with transforming the Aztecs from the weak and bullied latecomers to the region into the dominant imperial power that Cortéz encountered in 1519. Tlacaélel understood that Aztec society needed to be reorganized for its new role in the region. Hence, he created a noble class of warriors; he reallocated land taken from neighboring cities, and “finally and perhaps most importantly, Tlacaélel set out to create for his people a new version of their history.” He arranged for Aztec historical codices to be burned, and created an alternative history and mythology that marked the Aztecs as the direct recipients of the wisdom and cultural heritage of the earlier and now dispersed Toltec society. Especially important is that he also adopted the Toltec god of war, Huitzilopochtli, as the patron of the Aztecs, “whose mission was to subdue the nations of the earth in order to provide sacrificial blood for the nourishment of Tonatiuh, the heavenly body ‘which makes the day.’”[52]

The relevant facet of this fascinating story for our purposes is that Tlacaélel recognized the need for a mythology in support of his politics. This takes us to the crux of the matter: mythology is a human creation, intentional in its purpose. Tlacaélel’s work is little different than the work of those who created the myth of Manifest Destiny or the myth of the Third Reich. Myth is one layer of human experience and may either function as a destructive or constructive force in history. Voegelin argues that Positivism also has

mythic dimensions in deifying science and the notion of progress. Myth is also evident in Comte's claim to envision the ultimate, positive conclusion of history. Of course, the gods of Comtian mythology are immanent, not transcendent. The point is that, as I suggested earlier, the issue is not one of overcoming myth but one of taking responsibility for myth. Constructive myth guides its community toward the transcendent that sustains, unifies and brings order to an otherwise fractious and violent reality.

Let us examine one final poetic-philosophic insight of the Nahua. It is a poem that considers the way in which Ometéotl gives meaning to life. The poem is attributed to one who "without doubt knew the giver of life" and reads as follows:

Now do I hear the words of the coyolli bird
As he makes answer to the Giver of life.
He goes his way singing, offering flowers.
And his words rain down
Like jade and quetzal plums.
Is that what pleases the Giver of Life?
Is that the only truth on earth?[53]

In the poem, the coyolli bird is, of course, a metaphor. The Giver of Life, in the very act of giving life, poses a question. 'Now that I have given you life, how will you answer me?' The coyolli bird answers with song. "Song" is also a metaphor for the human creative impulse, the human voice and literature. What matters in life is one's "song," one's attempt to express something in accordance with the brute fact that one has been given life. Reality is a cosmic conversation between the creator and the created. This is the meaning of existence. The poem, then, also offers a kind of mythic account of life and one's relation to the transcendent. However, since in this myth, the divine is the "Giver of Life," the poem does not call one to war, but to "song," to the creative act that brings order into being.

In this paper, I have bracketed the question of the existence of god. I have done this not because I believe that such a bracketing is systematically necessary, but only to bring my argument into better focus. I have not argued that god must exist, but that god must and will exist *in history*. Attempts to alter this basic fact of human consciousness can only have a destructive outcome. God, as Voegelin insists, is the ground of order in history.[54] Thus, Positivism's failure in Latin America can be accounted for with an insight into human consciousness and an understanding of history as the outpouring of the many specific ways in which this conscious dynamic manifests itself. Just as a Freudian would argue that the repressed energy of the id never really dissipates, the point here is that the religious impulse will, in one way or another, manifest itself.

I have also argued that recognizing the transcendence of god brings even greater opportunities for order and peace because through the process of differentiation we gain the means of better understanding the destructive and constructive tendencies of narrative and symbolic expressions (mythic) of the divine. We have seen that mythic expressions of the divine have equal capacity to destroy as to bring order. In order to

ensure the latter, these expressions of the divine must submit to the critique of a differentiated, transcendent viewpoint. This is the viewpoint of metaphysics. Mythic symbolism must remain compatible with a god “who creates himself.” Only in this way can a people avoid the pitfall of laboring anxiously to sustain god. It is pointless to labor on god’s behalf by waging war on one’s neighbors, for it is the divine who sustains us, not we who sustain the divine. Moreover, mythic symbolism must remain compatible with a god “of every neighborhood.” Only in this way can a people achieve insight into the universality of humanity and human rights. Finally, mythic symbolism must remain compatible with a god who creates and sustains our world. For only in this way, can the religious impulse be channeled into participation with the divine project of bringing order into existence. This is meaning of the song of the coyolli bird.

Notes

[1] Octavio Paz, *The Labyrinth of Solitude and Other Writings*, trans. Lysander Kemp *et alia* (New York: Grove Weidenfield, 1985), 325.

[2] On the rise and fall of Positivism see Carlos Fuentes, *The Buried Mirror: Reflections on Spain and the New World* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1992); Susana Nuccetelli, *Latin American Thought: Philosophical Problems and Arguments* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 2002); Howard J. Wiarda, *The Soul of Latin America: The Cultural and Political Tradition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001); Edwin Williamson, *The Penguin History of Latin America* (London: Penguin Books Ltd., 1992); Leopoldo Zea, *Positivism in Mexico*, trans. Josephine Schulte (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1974).

[3] See the introduction by Stanislav Anreski in *The Essential Comte: Selected from the Cours de Philosophie Positive* [six vols: 1830-1842], trans. Margaret Clarke (London: Croom Helm Ltd., 1974); and the introduction by Mihaly Csikszentmihaly in *A General View of Positivism*, trans. J. H. Bridges (1865; reprint, Dubuque Iowa: Brown Reprints, 1972). The latter is a translation of *Discours sur l’ensemble du positivisme* (1848).

[4] See Fuentes, 285-87; Nuccetelli, 183-93; Wiarda, 162-67; Zea, 56.

[5] “The place of the party in the Communist system corresponds to a considerable extent to that which Comte envisaged in his ideal society for the positivist lay priests alias sociologists. They too were supposed to be the guardians of the true doctrine and control the thinking of ordinary folk” (Stanislav Anreski in his introduction to *The Essential Comte*, 15).

[6] In Mexico, the Positivists José Limantour and Justo Sierra were the most important *Científicos* to serve under Díaz. (Nuccetelli, 189-90) Interesting, however, is that Sierra lived long enough to repudiate Positivism and embrace the rising tide of anti-Positivism in Mexico at the turn of the century. (Williamson, 305).

[7] Comte, *A General View of Positivism*, 64-5; 75; & 92-3.

[8] Comte adopted the third element of the famous slogan—fraternity—as an element of Positive society, but rejected liberty and equality as idiosyncratic of the metaphysical stage. “Thus the first stage of the revolutionary movement was accomplished under the influence of principles [Liberty and Equality] that had become obsolete, and that were quite inadequate to the new task required of them” (Comte, *A General View of Positivism*, 70).

[9] Comte, *A General View of Positivism*, 73.

[10] Nuccetelli identifies Tobias Barreto and Luís Pereira Barreto as the first proponents of Positivism in Brazil and Gabino Barreda as its first proponent in Mexico. We will discuss Barreda’s influence below. It is also noteworthy that in Mexico both Barreda and Justo Sierra served as Ministers of Education (the latter during the Díaz regime), a key post for the promotion of Positivism. (Nucetelli, 190-91).

[11] France had also once again entered a conservative phase under the reign of Emperor Napoleon III.

[12] Zea, 41.

[13] *Ibid.*, 40.

[14] *Ibid.*, 41.

[15] We will discuss Voegelin’s theory below, but Jaspers’s will not be considered.

[16] As previously noted, Comte recognized different forms of religious systems and developments from more primitive polytheistic to more advanced monotheistic forms of religion. However, he did not see fit to separate these forms into separate stages of history, as Voegelin and Jaspers do. However, the key problem here is not that Comte should have recognized four stages of history instead of three—perhaps an easy enough correction to make—but that he does not comprehend the distinct contributions of mythological and theological forms of symbolic expression to culture. This will be argued below.

[17] See my sources in note 2.

[18] Wiarda, 175-76; Williamson, 304-06.

[19] “And yet, what is striking is the tremendous—and continuing—impact of Rodó and *Ariel* on Latin America. He may be the single most important influence in twentieth-century Latin American cultural history. His ability to sway generation after generation of Latin American young people is immense” (Wiarda, 192).

[20] José Enrique Rodó, *Ariel*, trans. by Margaret Sayers Peden (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1988), 1.

[21] “To know the country and govern it in accordance with that knowledge is the only way of freeing it from tyranny. The European university must give way to the American university. The history of America from the Incas to the present must be taught in its smallest detail, even if the Greek Archons go untaught.” *José Martí: Selected Writings*, trans. and ed. by Esther Allen (New York: Penguin Books, 2002), 289 & 291.

[22] Williamson, 522-23; Nuccetelli, 204-8.

[23] Williamson, 304-6.

[24] “Latin American intellectuals from the 1900s started upon a tortuous quest for their national essence—for *argentinidad*, *mexicanidad*, *peruanidad* and so on. By the

1920s the quest had led intellectuals to the discovery of popular traditions and ethnic lore, which came to be regarded as the touchstones of cultural authenticity.” (Williamson, 512).

[25] “El 13 de agosto de 1521, heroicamente defendo por Cautémoc, cano Tlateloco en poder de Hernán Cortés. No fue triunfo ni derrota. Fue el dolorosa nacimiento del pueblo mestizo que es el Mexico de hoy.”

[26] For further discussion of music and primitive art forms see Williamson, 511-20.

[27] For more detailed discussion of *lo real maravilloso* and the authors associated with the genre, see Williamson, 511-55.

[28] Arguedas’ *Yawar Fiesta* (1941) is perhaps Arguedas’ novel most illustrative of this.

[29] Eric Voegelin, *Order in History*, vol. 4, *The Ecumenic Age* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1974).

[30] Glenn Hughes, *Transcendence and History: The Search for Ultimacy from Ancient Societies to Postmodernity* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2003), 68.

[31] “The Ecumenic Age will denote a period in the history of mankind which roughly extends from the rise of the Persian to the fall of the Roman Empire. Since the concept is not established in contemporary science, the study must begin with an exposition of the epochal events that made its creation necessary, that is, the fall of Israel and Hellas to the power of empire” (Voegelin, *The Ecumenic Age*, 114).

[32] “The truth of existence, finally, does not emerge from one single spiritual event. It does not penetrate a mankind engulfed by imperial drives from one definite point of origin, but assumes the historical form of a plurality of movements springing up in Persia and India, Israel and Hellas. The differentiation of the one truth of existence, thus, is broken in a spectrum of spiritual eruptions each bearing the mark of the ethnic culture in which it occurs” (Voegelin, *The Ecumenic Age*, 301).

[33] “Only when the gulf in the hierarchy of being that separates divine from mundane existence is sensed, only when the originating, ordering, and preserving source of being is experienced in its absolute transcendence beyond being in tangible existence, will all symbolization by analogy be understood in its essential inadequacy and even impropriety.” Eric Voegelin, *Order in History*, vol. 1, *Israel and Revelation* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1956), 9.

[34] “The beginning of each new reign, therefore, aroused eschatological expectations. Was the new king the *Encubierto* or the Bat who would defeat the Antichrist in Andalusia, retake Granada from the Muslims, cross the sea, defeat all Islam, conquer the Holy City of Jerusalem, and become the last world emporer?” Raymond Carr, *Spain: A History* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2001), 92.

[35] This is evident in the *Requerimiento*, written in 1513 by the Spanish jurist Palacios Rubio. This document was legally required to be read to any new indigenous groups that were encountered. While reading the lengthy legal justification for Spanish subjugation in *Castellano* to a group of Maya or Quechua must have had a touch of the absurd, the document nicely articulates the theocratic meaning of conquest. It makes an outline of the hierarchy of authority from God to Peter, the first Pope, to the Spanish Monarchs who received their authority from the present Pope, Peter’s successor. It

discusses the unity of all history through the common ancestry of Adam and Eve, the process of dispersion into many cultures and languages (suggestive of the “Tower of Babel” narrative), and explains that what has been dispersed must be united again. For God entrusted all lands and peoples into the care of Peter. Moreover, God gave Peter the authority “to judge and govern all Christians, Moors, Jews, Gentiles, and all other sects.” Of course, the authority given to Peter was handed down to the present Pope, who entrusted certain territories to the care of the Spanish Monarchs. In this way, the *Requerimiento* informed the Indians of their required submission and that any resistance would be justly met with violence. For the full text see *People and Issues in Latin American History: The Colonial Experience*, ed. by Lewis Hanke and Jane M. Rausch (New York: Markus Wiener Publishing, Inc., 1997).

[36] Recall Philip II who unleashed the Spanish Armada against Protestant England in 1588.

[37] “There certainly existed a belief in a Last World Emperor who, at the end of days, would resign his *imperium* directly to God in Jerusalem at Golgatha” (Carr, 92).

[38] Paz, *The Other Mexico in The Labyrinth of Solitude and Other Writings*, 308-15.

[39] “The Pre-Columbian Concept of Universe” in Miguel León-Portilla, *Aztec Thought and Culture: A Study of the Ancient Nahuatl Mind*, trans. Jack Emory Davis (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1963), 25-61.

[40] Ibid.

[41] See Rafael Alvira and Alfredo Cruz, “The Controversy between Las Casas and Sepúlveda at Valladolid” in *Hispanic Philosophy in the Age of Discovery*, vol. 29 of *Studies in Philosophy and the History of Philosophy*, ed. by Kevin White (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1997). The title of this essay alludes to the famous debate conducted in 1550-51 in which a committee of jurists and theologians evaluated the opposing viewpoints of Bartolomé de las Casa and Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda. Sepúlveda, who defended the Conquest and the enslavement of the Indians, was eventually repudiated.

[42] See the previous note and also in *Hispanic Philosophy in the Age of Discovery* (1) Mauricio Beuchot, “The Philosophical Discussion of the Legitimacy of the Conquest in Mexico in the Sixteenth Century”, and (2) Marcelo Sánchez-Sorondo, “Vitoria: The Original Philosopher of Rights.”

[43] On Vitoria’s contribution to rights theory see Brian Tierney, *The Idea of Natural Rights: Studies on Natural Rights, Natural Law, and Church Law 1150-1625* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1997), 255-72.

[44] “Now in Voegelin’s estimation, the presence of some kind of imaginative representation of the meaning of the whole process of reality, providing an ultimate meaning-context for human living, is a constant in the structure of consciousness. There is no ‘overcoming,’ as he says, of the myth; there is only the choice between more or less appropriate, or more or less inappropriate, mythoi of the Whole.” In Glenn Hughes, *Mystery and Myth in the Philosophy of Eric Voegelin* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1993), 112-13.

[45] Cortéz capitalized on this crisis, most notably by winning the aid of the Tlaxcalans who had managed to resist the hegemony of the Aztecs.

[46] León-Portilla, 3-8.

[47] “Metaphysical and Theological Ideas of the Nahuas” in León-Portilla, *Aztec Thought and Culture*, 62-103.

[48] *Ibid.*, 91.

[49] While this understanding of Ometéotl should not be equated with strict monotheism, it does seem to invite comparison with Aristotle’s uncaused cause.

[50] See his “Preface to the Paperback Edition.”

[51] *Ibid.*, 62-7.

[52] *Ibid.*, 158-64.

[53] *Ibid.*, 74-5.

[54] This should not be taken to imply that Voegelin brackets the question of god. To the contrary, he insists that the epiphanic realization of the transcendent discloses the true reality of human existence as situated in-between the world and the ground of being.