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UNDERSTANDING AZTEC CANNIBALISM

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ABSTRACT

This essay seeks to examine the problem of explaining religious phenomena which appear very strange by focusing on a specific example, the Aztec complex of human sacrifice and cannibalism which reached its greatest intensity in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. Three scholarly approaches to this complex are described and evaluated in regard to explanatory power and evidential support: (1) an approach which explicates the Aztecs' own mythic self-understanding (historically likely but lacking much explanatory value); (2) an approach which tries to identify conscious and rational policy choices on the part of Aztec leaders (less likely but with greater explanatory power); (3) a materialist approach emphasizing ecological factors that sustained human sacrifice and cannibalism (poorly supported by evidence but with substantial explanatory power).

Though each of these explanatory strategies achieves some success, our puzzlement about Aztec human sacrifice and cannibalism persists. These efforts to make Aztec beliefs and practices appear coherent or rational do not keep them from being an affront to our notions of what it is to be human or overcome our surprise at horrendous violence inflicted without apparent hatred of the victims. There remains little danger that we shall explain away either Aztec violence or any other religious phenomenon.

This essay is an attempt to explore an issue that should be very familiar to those who are interested in the academic study of religion: To what extent can one explain and understand religious phenomena which seem very strange? One might approach this question by surveying explanatory resources—the various theories of religion which have become staples of academic discourse since the Enlightenment. Or one might reverse the direction, begin with an example of something hard to understand, and try to assess how much progress scholars have made. It is the latter strategy that I wish to pursue here. I have chosen for my example the complex of human sacrifice and cannibalism that reached its greatest intensity among the Aztecs

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in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. This example has called forth some strikingly different scholarly strategies, and I trust that it will seem sufficiently strange to merit our attention.

In the course of assessing these strategies, I shall make repeated use of a distinction which I owe to the philosopher Peter Lipton (1991) between the likeliest and the loveliest explanation, "between the explanation that is most warranted and the explanation that would, if true, provide the most understanding" (p. 3). This distinction will help us to assess the relative virtues of the explanations to be considered and will perhaps also help us to appreciate the challenge of applying theory, whether psychological, anthropological, or political, to a concrete and very complex historical example.

Aztec Sacrifice and Cannibalism

Let us begin with a brief sketch of our example. The short-lived empire of the Aztecs, whose most famous stronghold was the island city of Tenochtitlán, reached its ascendancy in the century immediately preceding the Spanish Conquest. During this century also the practice of human sacrifice and cannibalism, previously common in Mesoamerica, reached unprecedented intensity. As one might expect, estimates of the number of victims vary greatly, as do estimates of the population of the Valley of Mexico at the time of the Conquest (Harner, 1977, p. 119). Even the most modest estimates of the number of victims, however, are mind-boggling. Spanish observers reported skull racks in Aztec cities which each contained over one hundred thousand skulls (Harris, 1977, p. 106). The most extensive single sacrifice seems to have occurred at the dedication of the main pyramid in Tenochtitlán in 1487. Estimates of the slaughter vary from twenty thousand to eighty thousand victims (Harner, 1977, p. 119).

About the practices surrounding human sacrifice consensus is easier to achieve. Although for some purposes the Aztecs sacrificed slaves and even their own children, most of the victims seem to have been war captives. Indeed, when campaigns against enemies did not produce an adequate yield, military exercises called "flower wars" were scheduled with neighboring cities to sustain the supply of victims. Some captured warriors were beheaded after trying to defend themselves in simulated combat. Most captives were led or dragged to the top of pyramids, where they were stretched out over a stone platform by four priests while a fifth excised the victim's heart with

a flint knife. The heart was elevated as a special offering to the Sun God, and the corpse was rolled down the steps of the pyramid. A group of elderly men then butchered the corpse, cutting off the limbs for human consumption, sending the torso to feed animals at the zoo, and presumably saving the skull for the local collection. The limbs were delivered to the home of the soldier responsible for capturing the victim, where they characteristically became the chief ingredient in a stew flavored with peppers and tomatoes (Harris, 1977, p. 109). The soldier who had made the capture did not himself consume the meat and in fact regarded the death of the victim with sorrow since as a warrior he fully anticipated a similar fate for himself (Clendinnen, 1991, pp. 95-96).

The class of warriors was clearly essential for sustaining the sacrificial complex since they were in charge of supplying victims through their campaigns and were prepared to meet their own deaths through sacrifice when captured. In the context of the highly structured Aztec society, rewards and punishments were cleverly manipulated to produce and maintain this class of warriors. Public abuse and insult were inflicted upon aspiring warriors who seemed weak or unsuccessful, whereas those who emerged victorious were recognized by special modes of dress and hair adornment and provided with greater sexual opportunity and superior housing (Brundage, 1979, pp. 201-202).

A Mythic Explanation

The Aztecs developed an extraordinarily elaborate mythic explanation of the complex of sacrifice and cannibalism. For present purposes, a brief summary will suffice.

The universe, according to one cycle of stories, had been destroyed four consecutive times in the struggles of the gods. When the gods met to settle their jealousies and begin the present era (the "fifth sun"), they agreed to do so through a voluntary sacrifice of their own blood, a sacrifice which made the existence and motion of the sun possible. The Aztecs believed that the fifth age would also end in a cataclysm, but that this destruction could be averted and the present age prolonged by their devoting themselves to the task of furnishing the sun with the vital energy to be found in the blood that keeps humans alive. Sacrifice, and the attendant warfare necessary to obtain victims, therefore became the Aztecs' national mission (Leòn-Portilla, 1980, pp. 28-29).

In even cursory reading about the Aztecs, one cannot help but be impressed by the intensity of their commitment to warfare and destruction. This commitment was not rooted, as one might imagine, in a cosmic dualism of good versus evil, but rather in a belief that war was "the one and eternal order itself, supremely right and supremely acceptable because it carried no possibility of a negation" (Brundage, 1979, p. 218). There were some opposing voices, some awareness of ethical objections to human sacrifice. These can be found most explicitly in stories about the god-hero Quetzalcoatl, who opposed human sacrifices and was driven from the fabled city of Tula by sorcerers (Ingham, 1984, p. 396). But such dissonant tales are a minor theme in a cultural and political system that seemed to value war as an end in itself.

In 1978 the foundations of the Templo Mayor in Mexico City were discovered and extensive excavations begun. The recent scholarship of Davíd Carrasco has demonstrated how the architecture of the Temple, which the Aztecs understood as the center of the cosmos, was intimately connected with their principal foundation myth. According to this story, Coatlicue, the Mother Goddess, was threatened by her children, "the four hundred gods of the south." They were incensed because she had been miraculously impregnated by a ball of "fine feathers" that descended from above. As they sought to kill her, Huitzilopochtli, the Aztec patron god, emerged from her womb and annihilated them all. This action occurred on the Coatepec, the Serpent Mountain, located near the city of Tula. The Temple, Carrasco argued, should be understood as an image of this sacred mountain and thus a link to the Toltec traditions. The story of Huitzilopochtli's birth is clearly about a sudden increment of killing and a rise to power against numerous opponents through this killing. Dramatic increases in the scale of sacrifice at the Temple were reenactments of this foundation myth (Carrasco, 1987, pp. 62-64).

Reconstructing the myths that legitimated the complex of sacrifice and cannibalism does provide an explanation of that complex. We can come to see that human sacrifice was not pursued arbitrarily by the Aztecs but was rather an integral component of a complex and highly elaborated conception of themselves and their cosmos. From the standpoint of likelihood, the mythic explanation seems very secure. Despite the complexity of the myths, the evidence for reconstructing them is extensive and has been thoroughly examined, especially in the last two decades. But from the standpoint of loveliness, of

increasing our understanding, we have not progressed very far. We should expect that rituals would be legitimated by beliefs and myths. However much we may admire the Aztecs' creativity in elaborating their world-view, what still puzzles us is why they had this world-view and the practices that went with it. The Aztecs practiced human sacrifice on a scale far beyond that of any other human society we know of. Comparable emergent states in the Old World, whose religions were centered around sacrifice, explicitly forbade *human* sacrifice and cannibalism even though they did not hesitate to slaughter large numbers of people. We still wonder what set the Aztecs apart.

A Conscious Policy Choice

In their monograph *Religion and Empire*, Godfrey Conrad and Arthur Demarest (1984) have argued that specific policy decisions on the part of the Aztec leadership were responsible for the massive intensification of sacrifice and cannibalism. The decisions were made shortly after Tenochtitlán defeated its former Tepanec overlords in the neighboring city of Azcapotzalco. A new ruler, Itzcoatl, rose to power in Tenochtitlán and instituted a new social code that permitted the military elite to monopolize the land and wealth acquired in the Tepanec conquest. Further benefits, such as the right to practice polygamy and to live in two-story houses, were also reserved for the nobles. A local patron god, Huitzilopochtli, was transformed into a manifestation of the sun god and became the patron of a unified imperialist cult that imposed upon the Aztecs the sacred duty of warfare, conquest, and sacrifice (pp. 28-29). In fact, Conrad and Demarest maintain, the explicit belief that sacrifice is necessary to sustain the cosmic order may be a product of this transformation (p. 41).

Military expansionism went hand-in-hand with explicit social stratification, and these changes were bolstered by a program of propaganda, including oral literature and especially sculpture. Earlier picture-books of Aztec history were burned and new ones produced to give the Aztecs ancestral legitimacy by claiming descent from the ancient Toltecs. The educational system was enlisted to support the program of reform (pp. 42-43).

What made these changes palatable and even attractive was that they provided concrete economic advantages to all segments of Aztec society *in the short run*. The imperialist cult instilled in Aztec soldiers

a level of fanaticism that must have been of considerable military advantage. The booty and tribute continually flowing back to Tenochtitlán created new opportunities to gain wealth and improve one's status. As the Aztec empire expanded, more military leaders and administrators were needed and pathways opened for ordinary people to ascend to the elite orders (pp. 47-48).

An important virtue of the Conrad and Demarest argument is that it also helps to explain why, in the judgment of many historians, the Aztec empire was on the verge of collapse when the Spanish arrived.[1] For the policy of imperial expansion inevitably yielded diminishing returns. After wealthy and convenient neighbors had been conquered and compelled to pay tribute, warfare had to be conducted at greater distances and with much smaller returns. Continuous warfare must have hindered stable food production, both in the provinces and at home. The cruelty of Aztec conquest and oppression certainly won the Aztecs few friends, a fact that Hernando Cortés was quick to grasp and exploit. In short, an imperial policy that led to immediate success and wealth yielded no model of how to maintain a stable empire. Once warfare and sacrifice had become sacred duties, it was hard to break the habit and consider alternative policies (pp. 58-60).

Let us begin our assessment of this explanatory narrative with the issue of likelihood. Conrad and Demarest have clearly moved into problematic terrain. They are dependent at the crucial points in their account on a history written by the Dominican friar Diego Durán, who based his work on interviews with Aztec elders conducted half a century after the conquest.[2] Durán attributes the construction of the distinctive features of the Aztec system, including the re-writing of their history and the belief that sacrifice is necessary to sustain cosmic order, to the work of one leader, Tlacaélel, a contemporary of Itzcoatl, but evidence for this claim is presumably limited to oral recollection transmitted at second hand.[3] What arouses suspicion is the idea that there is a single author of the whole system, a kind of Aztec Moses, for this notion can be found in many societies. Where

[1] For a dissenting view, see Townsend, 1992, p. 106.
[2] For reservations about Durán, see Clendinnen, 1991, p. 9.
[3] For accounts of the role of Tlacaélel, see León-Portilla, 1963, pp. 158ff.; 1992, pp. 99-111, and Padden, 1967, chs. II-IV.

more precise historical investigation has been possible, the belief in a single lawgiver has usually proved to be imaginative, to say the least.[4]

Suppose, however, that we do accept this account of the origin of Aztec practices as factual. What have we gained in understanding the Aztecs? The Conrad and Demarest proposal, I should like to suggest, is lovelier than the mythic explanation because it helps us to understand religious beliefs and practices in terms of some other aspects of human life. We are asked to accept the intensification of human sacrifice and cannibalism as rational because it led to Aztec prosperity and hegemony. The Aztec leaders were not blinded by superstition into ordering vicious and brutal acts but were rather pursuing eminently rational, if somewhat short-sighted, dictates of *Realpolitik.*

There is, alas, a blemish in the loveliness of this scheme. The explanation lacks what I have elsewhere called "first-person evidence," evidence that permits us access to actual deliberation (Burhenn, 1976). We may be able to recognize the rational shape of the actions of Aztec leaders, but we do not know whether they considered their actions in terms of the reasons we infer. Consequently, we must wrestle with a reservation that often bedevils functional explanations: Were there not other ways of achieving these ends? Granted that Aztec leaders had to work within existing cultural and religious traditions, one can surely imagine other strategies that might have been employed in pursuing power and prosperity. The rationality of the chosen strategy is at best highly relative.

A Materialist Approach

Michael Harner (1977) has proposed that the peculiarities of Aztec sacrifice can be accounted for in terms of the distinctive ecological problems this people confronted. Chief among them was the absence in Mesoamerica of large herbivores suitable for domestication. Population density in the Valley of Mexico was high, and expansion of farming beyond the valley was not feasible because the surrounding

[4] For a later dating of the intensification of human sacrifice, see Townsend, 1992, p. 100.

terrain was far less desirable. Maize agriculture as practiced by the Aztecs was very productive, but vulnerable to drought. The food supply was consequently problematic, especially in regard to protein:

> Intensification of horticultural practices was possible and occurred widely; but for the necessary satisfaction of essential protein requirements, cannibalism was the only possible solution. . . . From the perspective of cultural ecology and population pressure theory, it is possible to understand and respect the Aztec emphasis on human sacrifice as the natural and rational response to the material conditions of their existence (p. 132).

Harner was careful to respond to what might seem a serious problem with his proposal, namely, that lower-class persons were forbidden to eat human flesh. This prohibition was, he argued, actually an important stimulus in maintaining the Aztec war machine. The only way a lower-class person could obtain human flesh was by single-handedly taking a captive in war, and such an achievement would lead to a hereditary elevation of status (pp. 129-130).

The Aztec priesthood, Harner maintained, had managed to develop the practice of cannibalism into a homeostatic system that secured their own power. If they seemed to be failing in their efforts to negotiate with the gods for more rain, they could demand more sacrificial victims. The resultant hostilities, with the seizure of human captives and probably crop stores as well, would bring in food from other regions, and the priests' dealings with the gods would again appear to be successful. The priests played an active role in exhorting the warriors, and the continuing power of the priesthood was reinforced by a kind of "fail-safe" mechanism (pp. 130-131).

Drawing on Harner's work, Marvin Harris developed a somewhat different version of the ecological explanation of Aztec cannibalism by changing the "contrast space" of the explanation.[5] Warfare cannibalism, the eating of captives, Harris argued, is a common practice in tribal societies because there is usually no better use to which captives can be put. Such societies typically produce food in ways that cannot readily be intensified. With the rise of state forms of political organization, however, warfare cannibalism tends to disappear. States engage in large-scale agriculture and can easily inten-

[5] I am indebted for the notion of "contrast space" to Garfinkel, 1981, ch. 1.

sify production as more labor becomes available. They have achieved a level of organization capable of governing conquered territories and exacting tribute and taxes from conquered peoples. Captives consequently become more valuable alive than dead (Harris, 1985, pp. 218-222).

The problem then becomes not to explain why the Aztecs ate human flesh, as Harner attempted, but rather to explain why they did not give up this dietary preference when they achieved the level of a state. Indeed, the systematic organization that went along with becoming a state made it possible for them to practice cannibalism on a scale that no tribal society could begin to match. Harris maintained that the lack of domesticated herbivores and the other ecological constraints of the Valley of Mexico "made the political advantages of suppressing cannibalism less compelling by leaving the residual utility of prisoners of war more or less where it had been among societies like the Tupinamba and the Iroquois" (pp. 232-233). For the Aztecs the captured warrior was still more valuable as an item on the dinner menu than as a tax-paying subject.

The proposals of Harner and Harris have evoked strenuous objections and frequent dismissals from specialists in the study of Mesoamerica, most of them hinging on the issue of likelihood (e.g., Conrad and Demarest, 1984, pp. 167-170). Was there a shortage of protein in the Valley of Mexico and did cannibalism alleviate it? The principal reason for believing that there might have been such a shortage is the absence of large domesticated herbivores, but no shortage has in fact been documented.[6] Whether the Aztecs consumed enough human flesh to have nutritional consequences would seem to depend on the number of victims. Harner examined estimates of the numbers and accepted the largest. Critics have opted for the smallest (e.g., Ortiz de Montellano, 1978 and 1983). Because of the problematic character of the evidence, this dispute is not likely to be resolved. In any case, the meat apparently went to those who needed it least, the families of warriors who were already provided with an ample and varied diet.

[6] Ortiz de Montellano, 1990, has provided a detailed defense of the adequacy of the Aztec diet, noting that the Aztecs retained from their hunter-and-gatherer past a willingness to consume almost anything edible in their environment, including insects, lake slime, and tadpoles.

With regard to loveliness, we must first confront a standard reservation. Both Harner and Harris clearly worked within a functionalist framework. They proposed that Aztec sacrifice and cannibalism could be explained if we can understand how they functioned in the Aztec world construed as an ecological system. But such an understanding does not by itself tell us how or why these practices emerged. What it accomplishes, rather, is to rebut our assumption that these practices were irrational and self-destructive—in short, to help us understand why such practices persisted. Harris clearly understood this point; Harner was too ambitious.

Once we accept this qualification, the materialist approach becomes immensely appealing. Like the proposal of Conrad and Demarest, it connects religious belief and practice with another dimension of human life. Its beauty and power lie in its claim to help us understand that a culture can be very different from our own because the material conditions of life are different. In the case of the Aztecs, an apparently aberrant culture is the product of environmental problems that have led to a materially deficient mode of life. Feedback mechanisms that would ordinarily keep population and food supply in balance have been disrupted and bizarre beliefs and practices have emerged as desperate stop-gap measures. Negative moral judgments about the Aztecs are out of place. Our society has not abandoned human sacrifice and cannibalism because we are morally better, but because we have other ways to meet our nutritional needs and to deal with subjugated peoples.

Standards of Rationality

Very often, it would seem, when we wish to understand religious beliefs and practices, what we are seeking is a grasp of their logic, of their systematic interconnections. In the case of the Aztecs, we have a rich representation of their beliefs and practices in literature and the visual arts and many interconnections to be explored. Recent scholarship has pursued this task with considerable success and has achieved a high degree of likelihood in reconstructing the logic of Aztec religion. Looking at this scholarship, however, can also help us to appreciate the limits of such an approach. However internally coherent Aztec beliefs and practices may have been, the massive intensification of human sacrifice and cannibalism remains, as David Carrasco (1987)

acknowledged, a "scandal," an affront to our notions of rationality and what it is to be human (p. 128). We are reminded all too easily that the ideology of Nazism had its internal logic as well.

In our search for greater adequacy of explanation, we find ourselves led to try to connect the coherent Aztec system with something else, something that will help us to grasp why the Aztecs had the sort of system they did. We have looked here at two efforts to construct such an explanation, one in terms of political and economic motives and the other in terms of the material conditions of life in Mesoamerica. As we have noted, each of these explanations pays a price in likeliness as it tries to establish connections that are harder to espy than the internal connection of Aztec belief and practice. Each is also subject to the criticism that it has trivialized the scandal of the Aztecs as it proposes too easy a standard of rationality for the Aztecs to meet.

In one respect the materialist approach is reminiscent of Freudian psychoanalysis: it shows Aztec cannibalism to be a rational practice, but rational in terms of an analysis of Aztec society of which the Aztecs themselves were presumably unaware. In contrast, the idealist approach of Conrad and Demarest regards the complex of human sacrifice and cannibalism as deliberately designed policies that were rational in a way apparent to the Aztecs—namely, that they produced political power and economic prosperity. From another perspective, of course, these practices could hardly be regarded as rational, for they achieved these ends at the cost of imposing grotesque brutality upon a society that was otherwise dignified, decorous, and, to the Spaniards' amazement, very clean. Perhaps, from a materialist point of view, one could argue that the Aztecs had no other way to meet their need for protein, though ruling out functional alternatives is always difficult. But one could hardly maintain that other economic or political strategies were unavailable to the Aztecs. The rationality of the choices they made is at best highly qualified.

Searching for Our Puzzlement

> *Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I shall show you (Genesis 22.2).*

Despite Kierkegaard's lengthy ponderings on this story, the tale of Abraham seems surprisingly intelligible. It is not hard to understand

why people might regard the sacrifice of a first-born son as the ultimate gift to God, and it is certainly a relief to know that the literal application of God's demand for the first-born came to be replaced by animal sacrifice. And although the meat of sacrificed animals was usually eaten, God fortunately did not mention anything to Abraham about eating his son.

Perhaps we can better understand what is puzzling about the Aztecs if we draw some comparisons to Abraham. Contemplating human sacrifice as an ultimate gift to God would seem to require a heightened sense of human contingency, a belief that some desperate dealing was necessary in order for anyone to survive. The Aztecs surely shared such a sense. They lived in a land that was volcanically active and subject to floods, drought, and famine. They came as outsiders of dubious ancestry to live among peoples with a long history of internecine war and sudden shifts of power. They expressed their sense of contingency through the belief that the present era was of finite duration and would end cataclysmically. Some Aztec sacrifice does fit the model of offering an ultimate gift—specifically, offering some of their own children, selected by the astrological significance of their date of birth, to the god Tlaloc to insure the maize harvest. Their throats were slit, and there is no indication that their bodies were eaten (Clendinnen, 1991, pp. 98-99).

All the other victims of sacrifice seem to have been outsiders, either war captives or slaves, the latter probably having been obtained through war. Some victims who participated in ceremonies that reenacted the sacrifice of a god were accorded extensive privileges while they were impersonating the god (p. 89). Most of the victims seem to have been kept as prisoners for a period of time, and many citizens were involved in feeding them and eventually dressing them for the ritual sacrifice. Here is the point at which the behavior of the Aztecs becomes especially baffling, for their attitude toward the victims seems to involve neither intense love, as with one's own children, nor intense hatred. Perhaps some of the outsiders could be identified as enemies who were a direct threat, but many were secured on distant campaigns or perhaps in "flower wars." How could such large-scale horrendous violence be inflicted in a manner that appears so dispassionate? This was, after all, violence that required considerable physical exertion, even to the point of exhaustion. Could one seriously believe that sheer quantity of victims was pleasing to the

gods—when the victims were human? We who have experienced the twentieth century are no strangers to mass murder, on a scale far grander than the Aztecs could achieve. But at least such murder has characteristically been carried out under the cloak of hatred, however contrived.

By now it should be obvious that the notion of understanding Aztec cannibalism is ambiguous and elusive. We have looked at three attempts at such understanding and should be able to acknowledge that each attempt has achieved some success. But the process of understanding must go hand-in-hand with trying to figure out what it is about the Aztecs that puzzles us. Each explanation we have examined proposes a different answer to a slightly different question, and each leaves us wondering whether we have yet defined our puzzlement. No single explanatory approach is likely to satisfy us, and those who worry that using theories amounts to "explaining religion away" have little to worry about.

Finally, the search for understanding reminds us how far removed we are from the world of the Aztecs. Our world is hardly a kinder world, but there is nonetheless an intensity and a sense of contingency about the Aztec world which it is very difficult for us to share. If understanding entails grasping reasons for actions—whether the reasons were apparent to the actors or not—we are likely to achieve only partial satisfaction.

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