The Traditional Cosmos and the New World

Joachim Küpper

I
Looking back to the beginnings of the development which brought about the Western model's rise to global dominance—and leaving all moral considerations aside—we cannot but pay our respects to our ancestors' achievements. In 1492 a world entered the Europeans' horizon which was new in every sense of the word, a world at least as vast as anything known until then, a world not even dreamed of, a world that was to shake the foundations of the standard model of the cosmos to its roots. If we did not know what actually happened afterwards and, thus, were our judgment not biased by our knowledge of subsequent events, we would tend to expect a reaction characterized by disorientation or even fearful retreat. Yet, what happened within no more than fifty years was this: the new continents were opened up and their inhabitants acculturated. The Aztecs and the Incas—two highly developed indigenous civilizations that were in a number of respects superior to that of the conquerors—were subjugated with surprisingly little effort.

Fashionable skepticism might answer the questions these events raise by simply pointing to the contingency of everything historical. If we remain, however, at a level of abstraction where we are still capable of observing and seeking explanations for concrete developments, we must assume that contemporary Europeans were somehow capable of an immediate understanding of the New World's novelties—regardless of the established notions shaken by the hitherto unknown.
Otherwise the Europeans could not have taken possession of the New World with such an unproblematizing attitude as evidenced by the unmediated display of primary instincts, most prominent amongst them the greed for gold.¹

I shall hardly be able to find a better explanation than the one suggested by Hegel and recently reaffirmed by Tzvetan Todorov,² which argues that it was monotheism and its ideological equivalent, universalism, that enabled the Europeans to mentally assimilate the New World in such a remarkably smooth manner. Yet, I shall try to put this theory into a new perspective and to supplement it by distinguishing various, and partly contradictory, steps within the process of assimilation.

For even before Pope Paul III declared the natives of the New World homines veri,³ thus depriving them and their continent of their entirely novel quality, the conquerors reacted to the new situation differently from the conquered. The latter recoiled in shock when

¹ From the very earliest reports onwards, even in that by Columbus himself, this greed is expressed with great frankness “ [...] por donde espero que Su Magestad [i. e. Nuestro Señor] [a] de dar a V. A. tanto oro como abran menester” (Carta a los Reyes anunciando el Descubrimiento [4. 3. 1493], in Cristóbal Colón, Textos y documentos completos, ed. Consuelo Varela [Madrid: Alianza, 1992] 227–35, 232). In his report on the conquest of the Inca empire Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo quite casually names it as the conquerors’ main motivation (“para hacer hacienda”), which shows to which extent the New World was taken as a mere extension of the Old, where wars, in those times, tended to be no more than ill-disguised raids (Historia general y natural de las Indias [1535], ed. Juan Perez de Tudela Buesco, Biblioteca de autores españoles, 5 vols. [Madrid: Ediciones Atlas, 1959] 5: 32; see also 5: 33). A few decades later, especially with Fray Bartolomé de las Casas, this aspect became a standard element of the “leyenda negra.” But it did not acquire this prominence before—for reasons I shall explain below—the specifically novel of the New World became problematic and, therefore, had to be dealt with by annihilating its difference through Christianization. As soon as the conquerors claim their missionary activity to be their principal motivation for the subjugation of the Americas—a motivation that has both a subjective, i. e. Spanish, and an objective, i. e. divine side—the more material aspects of the conquest become open to censure.

² La Conquête de L’Amérique: La question de l’autre (Paris: Seuil, 1982). Apart from the point mentioned, Todorov foregrounds the Europeans’ superiority in terms of their cultural media. Their deployment of literacy provided the conquerors with far more complex forms of negotiating the difference between Self and Other than were available to illiterate (mythical, cyclical) communities (see esp. 165).

³ With respect to the bull Sublimis Deus (1537) see Lewis Hanke: “Pope Paul III and the American Indians,” Harvard Theological Review 30 (1937): 65–102. What is reflected in the bull is not some sort of “progressiveness,” but rather an inevitable consequence of a dogmatically fixed concept of the created, from which, for reasons of principle, one was not willing to distance oneself (see our following notes, esp. the quotes from Thomas Aquinas).
confronted with what we rather cavalierly call an alien “race,” to use a term from the nineteenth century. Their defeat largely resulted from the effects of irritation and from their application of interpretive frames that relegated the new to the realm of the supernatural. As a first hypothesis, one could assume that the systematic attempts that began in the thirties of the sixteenth century to make the New World commensurable to European thinking were preceded by an approach that I will call the conditioned effacement of concrete

\[\text{Cf. Hernán Cortes’s report on the speech with which Moctezuma welcomed the Spaniards and the one with which the Aztec ruler demanded that his vassals, like him, submit to the invaders (Carta segunda, enviada a Su Sacra Majestad del Emperador Nuestro Señor [1522], Historiadores primitivos de Indias, ed. Enrique de Vedia, Biblioteca de autores españoles, vol. 1 [Madrid: Real Academia Española, 1946] 12–52, esp. 25 and 30). Referring to the natives, Columbus had already stated in his Carta a los Reyes anunciando el Descubrimiento: “[...] creyeron y creen que yo con estos navíos y gente venía del cielo” (230). Polytheism does permit the concept of a plurality of worlds, as our own classical tradition shows. Thus, a polytheistic model of the world may initially be capable of reacting to the new with greater flexibility. But the emergence of new people always implies the emergence of new gods. Since polytheistic models favor anthropomorphic power hierarchies among their gods, the relationship between the old gods and the new is undecided at the outset of cultural contact, while for a community venerating the one and only god the issue of superiority is clear from the start. From a polytheistic point of view, theoretically, a complete change both of the celestial and the terrestrial power hierarchies (world models) is possible at any time, but a Christian perspective absolutely precludes such changes. This is illustrated by the different ways Aztecs and Spaniards reacted to the defeats they suffered during the conquest. Moctezuma, on the one hand, believed that his lack of success was due to the fact that the Spaniards were representatives of more powerful gods or even that they were gods themselves. The Spaniards, on the other, never doubted the existence of only one god who had sent them, and considered failures as temporary. They took them as stimuli for making greater efforts in order to reach the telos which they believed to be immovably fixed. One may call this particular feature of monotheism either a lesser degree of flexibility or a greater degree of forcefulness. Even such a circumspect and self-reflexive thinker as Montaigne does not realize the disproportion mentioned above when in Des coches he explains the defeat of the Indios (whose side he takes [cf. infra, n. 28]) with their confusion at the sight of the absolutely new, but does not ask himself, what prevented the Europeans from reacting in the same way, who were, after all, basically in the same situation as the Indios ("Car, pour ceux qui les ont subjuguez, qu‘ils ostent les ruses et batelages dequoy ils se sont servis à les piper, et le juste estonnement qu‘aportoit à ces nations lâ de voir arriver si inopinément des gens barbus, divers en langage, religions, en forme et en contenance, d‘un endroit du monde si esloigné et où ils n‘avoyent jamais imaginé qu‘il y eust habitation quelconque [...] des peuples surpris [...] par la curiosité de voir des choses estrangeres et incogneuses: contez [sic], dis-je, aux conquerans cette disparité, vous leur ostez toute l‘occasion de tant de victoires." [Des coches, Essais 3: 6, Œuvres complètes de Montaigne, ed. Albert Thibaudet and Maurice Rat, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade (Paris: Gallimard, 1962) 876–94, 887 sq.])

\[\text{This can be no more than a hypothesis since there is no way that the lack of surprise vis à vis the Other, the foreign or the new manifests itself textually.}\]
materiality. It was this approach that explains the “immediate understanding” we can extrapolate from what the conquerors actually did.

According to Thomistic doctrine, which was still authoritative at the time, the act of creation as described in Genesis constituted the forms of all beings (species) once and for all. The principle of individuation is matter. Hence, material diversity (determinata corporis complexio) is a feature of all given reality. As long as an individual being is subsumable, ex parte corporis, to some existing species, such diversity is irrelevant beyond the mere natura individui.

6 The basis of this concept is Platonic dualism which regards matter as of lesser value. A position that valorized the material, yet at the same time assigned lesser importance or even irrelevance to its individual manifestations is, perhaps, only possible within that hybrid fusion of monotheistic creationism and Platonism which we have come to call “Christian doctrine.” Thomas Aquinas, who developed the traditional Christian concept of the cosmos in its clearest form, refers to Platonism, but does not accept Plato’s thesis according to which the species rerum have an existence separate from the given individuals (Summa Theologiae Ia, q. 29, ar. 2, ra. 3 and 4).

7 “... universi enim perfectione attenditur quantum ad species, non autem quantum ad individua [...] unde non repugnat perfectione universi et animae de novo creentur. [...] Simul enim dicitur, Gen 1, quod deus [...] requievit ab omni opere quod patrarat. Sicut ergo consummatio sive perfectio creaturarum secundum species consideratur et non secundum individua, ita quies dei est intelligenda secundum cessationem a novis speciebus condendis: non autem a novis individuis, quorum similia secundum speciem praecesserunt. Et sic, cum omnes animae humanae sint unius speciei sicut et omnes homines, non repugnat praedictae quieti si deus quotidie novas animas creat” (Summa contra gentiles lb. 2, cp. 84, n. 5 and 6).

8 What I have said above and what is going to follow applies only to what can be grasped by sense perception and not, as far as human beings are concerned, to the soul. (“Ad tertium dicendum quod diversitas naturalium aliter est in angelis, qui differunt species; et aliter in hominibus, qui differunt solo numero. Differentia enim secundum speciem est proprius finem, sed differentia secundum numerum est proprius materiam”. [Summa theologicae Ia, q. 62, ar. 6, ra. 3]. “... materia enim est principium individuationis formarum [...]” [Summa theologicae Ia, q. 75, ar. 5, co.]).

9 See Summa theologicae Ia, q. 119, ar. 1, co.: “Sed natura dupliciter considerandi potest, uno modo, in communi, secundum rationem speciei; alio modo, secundum quod est in hoc individuo. Ad veritatem igitur naturae alcius in communi consideratae, pertinet forma et materia eius in communi accepta, ad veritatem autem naturae in hoc particulari consideratae, pertinet materia individualis signata, et forma per huiusmodi materiam individuata.” Even more explicitly in Summa theologicae Iae Iae, q. 63, ar. 1, co.: “[...] et quia unumquodque habet speciem secundum suam formam, individuatuer vero secundum materiam; forma vero hominis est anima rationalis, materia vero corpus, id quod convenit homini secundum animam rationalem, est ei naturale secundum rationem speciei; id vero quod est ei naturale secundum determinatam corporis complexionem, est ei naturale secundum naturam individui. Quod enim est naturale homini ex parte corporis secundum speciem, quodammodo referetur ad animam, inquantum scilicet tale corpus est tali animae proportionatum.” See also Summa theologicae Ia, q. 76, ar. 2, ra. 3: “[...] principia individuationis, quae sunt ex parte materiae. Si ergo forma per quam fit cognition, sit materialis, non abstracta a conditionibus materiae, erit similitudo naturae speciei aut generis, secundum quod est
It seems to have been this view that was responsible for the fact that the appearance of individuals who were physically different, yet subsumable to the given species did not affect the concept of an unchangeable order of nature established with the act of creation. At this level at least, the discoveries did not undermine the traditional concept of the cosmos (unde non repugnat perfectioni universi [...] si deus quotidian novas animas creat.\textsuperscript{10}) For the time being, novelties of this kind did not have any importance beyond the variety of the \textit{complexiones corporum}, which could easily be observed in the Old World, too, and had always been regarded as an aspect of contingency (in the sense of mere accident).\textsuperscript{11}

The problem remained, nevertheless, that the newly discovered world as such exceeded the limits of what Scripture laid down as the cosmos established by the \textit{potentia dei}. The narrative unfolding in the first chapters of the Old Testament is not entirely in harmony with the systematics of Christian dogma. According to the latter, the true nature of the world is grounded not primarily in the totality of the phenomena themselves but in its substance, after the manner of an unchanging grammar which brings forth the particulars. Hence, during the early phase of the discoveries spontaneous perception oscillates between speechless wonder, on the one hand, and instant and complete integration into the categories provided by the established world model, on the other. Due to the structure of the Thomistic concept of the cosmos, this second approach was perfectly straightforward and, therefore, always possible.\textsuperscript{12} Profound irritation in the face of the newly discovered world is a second step, both conceptually and in terms of chronology. Not until the new continent

\textsuperscript{10} See the citation in n. 7, \textit{Summa contra gentiles} Ib. 2, cp. 84, n. 5 and 6
\textsuperscript{11} “[...] dicendum quod in individualium compositum ex materia et forma, habet quod subest accidenti, ex proprietate materiae [...]” (\textit{Summa theologiae} Ia, q. 29, ar. 2, ra. 5). “[...] quia ea quae naturaliter variantur circa subjectum, sunt accidentia [...]” (\textit{Summa contra gentiles}, Ib. 2, cp. 83, n. 14); for the relationship between \textit{generatio}, \textit{corruptio} and \textit{contingentia} on the one hand, and of \textit{semper esse}, (relative) \textit{immobilitas} and \textit{necessitas} on the other (the latter features pertaining to the \textit{corpora celestia}) see also \textit{Summa contra gentiles}, Ib. 3, cp. 72, esp. n. 4 and n. 6.
\textsuperscript{12} Especially, since making the newly discovered phenomena commensurate consisted not so much in actually “measuring” them against some objective standard but rather in subjecting them to a hermeneutic process.
had been taken possession of with the striking smoothness I attempted to explain above, and the conquerors’ gaze began to focus on details, did questions emerge whose answers contributed to paving the way for the concept of historicity and, simultaneously, laid the conceptual foundations for technological modernity.

II

II. 1. To describe means to compare with what is already known. This may result in an acknowledgement of complete incommensurability. But if my initial hypothesis is correct, then it is likely that in this case the comparisons are characterized largely by a recognition of similarities between the new and the familiar. In the course of its conceptualization, the new is first of all reduced to a mere variant of the already known. Still, the innovative dimension of this form of appropriation may have been greater than it would have been had the novelties been perceived mainly in terms of their alterity. Because it had been integrated, but superficially, the new achieved a position of “mise en discours,” and its rather make-shift commensurability was thus capable of attaining an unexpected long-term explosive force.

The problems derive from the narratives in which the conquerors—usually for very material reasons—try to give those at home an impression of the new discoveries. The majority of the passages simply equate phenomena of the New World with those of the Old. The problems begin where the comparisons result in statements about things being “similar, but larger.” Already in his report on his first trip to America, Columbus describes the topography of Cuba and Hispaniola in these terms: “[...] estas dos son tierra muy alta, y en ellas ay sierras y montañas altísimas sin comparación de la isla de Tenerife [where the highest peak of the mother country is to be found].” In his report ten years later, Amerigo Vespucci remarks that the climate in the new continents was “more temperate and more pleasant than in any other known region of the world.” The territories discovered, he continues, were “more densely populated with men and beasts than our Europe or Asia and Africa.” Pliny, he

13 Their primary aim was to raise funds for further expeditions. Like so many others afterwards, Columbus’s first expedition did not cover the expenses (see Frauke Gewecke, Wie die neue Welt in die alte kam [Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1986] 95).
14 Columbus, Carta a los Reyes anunciando el Descubrimiento, 230.
says, had not even described the “thousandth part” of what was to be seen there.15

Corresponding to these testimonies, the “historias naturales” dedicated to the newly discovered continents in the succeeding decades contain recurrent observations according to which the New World is a “superior” version of the Old in a variety of important aspects. Its mountains are higher (“¿Cuántos montes más admirables […] que Etna o Mongibel, y Vulcano, y Estrongol […]?”16), its rivers broader, its land-mass is vaster, the quantities of precious metals to be found in its ground are greater and its soil is more fertile.17 Consequently, Charles V’s chronicler, Oviedo, argues, thus bringing his description to a climax, that the Nuevas Indias are not a “stepmother” to the Europeans but rather a “truer mother” than the continent that had sent them.18

Thus, the following, crucial problem presented itself: why did the one and only God who created both the old continents and the new withhold the better part of his creation from those who worshipped him and, instead, give it to those who prayed to the devil? Why did he inflict such a malum on the believers (for according to Christian doctrine the malum has no substance, it is a mere lack of bonum)? In this case it was hardly possible to answer the question with the theologoumenon of tribulatio which is the traditional reply to the irritating query “unde malum?” Like all dogma founded on the gospels, the concept of tribulatio is firmly linked to the individual and


16 Oviedo, Historia general 1: 8.

17 “¿En cuál […] breve tiempo […] se produciesen tantos ganados e granjerías […]? […] en más cantidad e mejor que en España se hacen algunas dellas, así de los ganados útiles al servicio de los hombres como de pan, y legumbres, e fructas, e azúcar […]” Oviedo, Historia general 1: 8.

18 “Las cuales ha recebido esta tierra no como madrestra, sino como más verdadera madre que la que se las envió”. (Oviedo, Historia general 1: 8); the strictly grammatical reference is to the granjerías mentioned in the note above, for which, however, it is made explicit that they are discussed in terms of their usefulness to human beings, so that it is justified to transfer the opposition of madrestra vs. verdadera madre metonymically to the conquerors, i. e. the settlers themselves.
his or her life-span. The person concerned must be conscious of the fact that he or she is being tried. But with respect to the Americas, the Christian God seemed for the larger part of the time span which was believed to lie between creation and judgment day (6000 years) to have kept his followers in darkness as to the more attractive parts of His creation.

With Cortés this line of argument reaches a third level, when for the first time not only nature but also the man-made world is subjected to a systematic comparison. The mere observation of a comparable level of civilization already provokes questions. But for the time being these are silenced through the figure of admiratio, i.e. through the attitude pious Christians were expected to assume when confronted with the glory of God’s creation that exceeds all human understanding.

Things become more complicated as soon as the invaders have to acknowledge the superiority of the New World’s civilization. This is how Cortés describes the marketplace of Tenochtitlan: “Tiene otra plaza tan grande como dos veces la ciudad de Salamanca [one of the contemporary peninsula’s largest towns], toda cercada de portales al rededor, donde hay cotidianamente arriba de sesenta mil animas comprando y vendiendo […].” Tlaxcala, the capital of a tribe

19 The tribal deity of the Old Testament was capable of punishing and trying its worshippers collectively. This is hardly conceivable within platonized Christianity with its individualized concept of the “soul.”

20 “[...] no quiero decir más sino que en su servicio y trato de la gente della hay la manera casi de vivir que en España, y con tanto concierto y órden como allá, y que considerando esta gente ser bárbara y tan apartada del conocimiento de Dios y de la comunicación de otras naciones de razón, es cosa admirable ver la que tienen en todas las cosas” (Cortes, Carta Segunda 34). Stephen Greenblatt is only partially right in saying: “Wonder is, I shall argue, the central figure in the initial European response to the New World, the decisive emotional and intellectual experience in the presence of radical difference […]” (wonder being an “experience which is resistant to reintegra- tion, containment, ideological recuperation”), since his argument becomes problematic as he continues: “Columbus’s voyage initiated a century of intense wonder” (Marvelous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World [Chicago: University of Chicago P, 1991] 14, my italics, see also passim, esp. 19, 24, and chapter 3, Marvelous Possessions [52–85]). Silent wonder was only a first reaction. What followed almost immediately, however, was a process of mental classification and assimilation. Without such a mental process, the systematic appropriation of the whole continent would hardly have been possible within a few years. Greenblatt neglects the ambiguous meaning of “wonder.” In the early chronicles the term is to be taken literally. It refers to the actual incapability of classifying what has been seen. From the 1530s onwards the chroniclers use it rhetorically as one of the (standardized) topoi of epideictic description.

21 Cortes, Carta Segunda 32; similar statements to be found in subsequent passages (see our following notes), see also 28 (“[…] habían visto una casa de aposentamiento
inferior to the Aztecs, “was better fortified and provisioned than Granada,” which at the time was the wealthiest city of Spain. Tlaxcala served as a marketplace for a multitude of costly goods “such as to be found on no other market in the world.”

The unintentional provocation reaches its peak when Cortés judges Aztec jewelry to be more splendid than anything worn by other princes in the whole world. Certain artifacts, he says, were so perfect that onlookers believed they were seeing not imitations of natural objects but rather “the objects themselves.”

Thus, in Cortés’ descriptions, Indio art is raised to the level of the masterpieces of the ancients (Zeuxis), whom no contemporary European artist would have dared to rival. And in

y fortaleza, que es mayor y mas fuerte y mas bien edificada que el castillo de Búrgos” [which was the most impressive fortress of Spain]).

22 “[... ] Hay joyerías de oro y plata y piedras, y de otras joyas de plumaje, tan bien concertado, como puede ser en todas las plazas y mercados del mundo [...]” (Cortes, *Carta segunda* 18; the town was given the name mentioned above by the Spaniards only at a later date; Cortés simply calls it the capital of the Tlaxcaltecs).

23 “[... ] las cuales [las cosas de valor], demás de su valor, eran tales y tan maravillosas, que consideradas por su novedad y extrañeza, no tenían precio, ni es de creer que alguno de todos los príncipes del mundo de quien se tiene noticia las pudiese tener tales y de tal calidad. [...] todas las cosas criadas [...] tenía [Muteczuma] contrachegas muy al natural, asi de oro y plata [...] en tanta perfeccion, que casi ellas mismas parecían [...]” (Cortes, *Carta Segunda* 31).

24 It were most of all these undeniable facts that in 1550 brought about the Dominican Fray Bartolomé de las Casas’s remarkable victory not only within the academy but even at court. His “leftist” positions carried the day against the Aristotelian Ginés de Sepúlveda, who tried to solve the problem after the manner of classical communitarianism. According to Sepúlveda’s theories, the others (barbaroi) were no human beings in the full sense (as was evidenced by their cultural practices, the sacrifice of humans, cannibalism and deviant sexuality being the most frequently mentioned). They could, therefore, be treated like (domestic) animals. Hence, their discovery was worth no more attention than the discovery of some unknown species of fauna (for Sepúlveda’s views see also my essay, “Teleologischer Universalismus und kommunitaristische Differenz. Überlegungen zu Calderóns La aurora en Copacabana, zu Voltaires Azteire ou les Américains, zu Sepúlveda und zu Las Casas,” Karlheinz Stierle and Rainer Warning, ed., *Das Ende: Figuren einer Denkform*, Poetik und Hermeneutik. 16 [München: Fink, 1996] 435–66.). We may assume that the somewhat drastic and probably exaggerated descriptions of cannibalism and sexual deviance which dominate part of the chronicle tradition (see for instance Oviedo, *Historia general* 5: 42), were motivated by the desire to assign the Indios a sub-human quality. When present-day Third-World enthusiasts hold that the acceptance of the Indios as “full” human beings boils down to mere ideology (not so much in Las Casas’s case, but with the emperor as the prime representative of the ruling class), they are falling prey to anachronism. After all, the contemporary quality of “homo verus” in no way guaranteed a treatment according to the human rights principles we take for granted nowadays. One need only remind oneself of the atrocities the Spaniards committed against French settlers, and vice versa (see Gewecke, *Wie die neue Welt in die alte kam* 29–35). Montaigne gives explicit expression to this problem, as far as Europe is concerned. During the French religious
Oviedo’s report on the empire of the Incas this observation is complemented with a universal theory of progress which sees the centralized absolutist state as the goal towards which both hemispheres are developing. Under these auspices the New World actually looked more advanced than the Old.25

II. 2. The concept which was chosen if not to resolve the issue, then at least to contain it, was the re-employment of a mode of thinking that had been developed previously in an analogous situation. Early Christianity had had to contend with the problem of a presumably endless length of time filled with ever-new events which were unnecessary from the standpoint of the rather rudimentary model of history to be found in the gospels (Christ as the *typos* who erases what his *anti-typos*, Adam, had done). The Church Fathers, most prominently St. Augustine, made the post-incarnation world commensurable by detaching the biblical concept of *figura* from its specific role in establishing correspondences between the Old Testament and the New.26 History as a whole, they argued, whose end only

---

25 See Oviedo, *Historia general* 5: 41. In this passage, Oviedo describes in great detail and with much admiration the infrastructure of Atahualpa’s realm. There is, he says, a 300-mile-(2500 km)-long road from Cuzco to Quito on which takes place the larger part of the commerce to which the Inca empire owes its remarkable prosperity despite its lack in natural resources. The road is broad and perfectly constructed and is furnished with rest houses at intervals of one day’s travel; in between, wells provide for short rests. To use it one has to pay a fee. Any attempt to evade paying the fee is punished by death. The fees finance the troops under Atabaliba’s (Atahualpa’s) command. Their main task is to secure the payment of the taxes on which his huge empire rests. In other words: as early as the beginning of the sixteenth century the Inca empire had attained the level of a centralized absolutist state with its corresponding efficiency of rule and concomitant accumulation of wealth. This is a state of affairs the contemporary late feudal monarchies of Europe were only just beginning to strive for. In *Des coches*, Montaigne reproduces this passage from Oviedo almost literally without indicating his source (893 f.).

26 The central idea in this line of argument was developed by St. Augustine, mainly in *De diversis quaestionibus ad Simplicianum* II, II, 2, namely that from God’s point of view the dimension of time is irrelevant since He knows and effects by his own will the past, the present and the future (Erich Auerbach’s *Typologische Motive in der mittelalterlichen Literatur* [Krefeld: Scherpe, 1953] esp. 21 ff., remains the seminal study of this problem; see also my essay “Diskursskizze Mittelalter, Renaissance und Manierismus” (*Diskurs-Renovatio bei Lope de Vega und Calderón: Untersuchungen zum spanischen Barock-Drama* [Tübingen: G. Narr, 1990] 230–304, esp. 230–62).
God knows, is a repetition of schemes revealed in Scripture (typoi), the purpose of which is the propagatio fidei. This concept provided a working explanation of the Old World’s post-incarnation history. A thousand years later, the same intellectual approach was deployed for the reintegration of something which, thus, saw itself reduced to a kind of secondary supplement to biblical history. Already legitimized, the Old World’s post-incarnation history assumed the position of a sort of anti-typos. Consequently, it became possible to consider it as a “prefiguration” of the history which began to unfold with the discovery of the Americas. For this purpose, the New World’s alterity could no longer be seen as static but had to be afforded an intrinsic development. Yet, as time is valorized, the problems raised by the material reality of the New World are relegated to the background and, hence, the capacity of this concept to actually solve the problems it was revived for is considerably reduced—a problem I shall treat in greater detail below.

It is probably no coincidence that it was the son of a conquistador and an Inca princess who elevated the attempts, already visible in other chroniclers,\(^\text{27}\) to explain the novelties of the discoveries typologically to the status of an elaborate concept. His origin and the knowledge he derived from it enabled Garcilaso de la Vega (el Inca) to provide the historical material without which such an “Aufhebung” (in the Hegelian sense of the term) of alterity by historicity would not

\(^{27}\) Garcilaso does not, of course, develop this concept ab ovo. A similar analogy between the Indios and pre-Christian pagans of the Old World is to be found already in the Historia natural y moral de las Indias by José de Acosta, ed. Barbara G. Beddall (Valencia: Valencia Cultural, 1977) (parts of it published in Latin in 1588, with a complete Spanish version following in 1590). Acosta tries to deprive certain cultural practices of the Indios which were repulsive to European beholders of their shocking quality by employing a historicist approach (Indio deities are paralleled to those of the classical pantheon, most of all to those of ancient Greece and Egypt (“semejante disparate al que usavan los antiguos” [314]), their cult of the dead to comparable cults in India or of the pagan Anglo-Saxons, etc. (see 303–20). Like Garcilaso, Acosta historicizes the past in a move that seems to a certain extent to resemble tolerance, but he does it in the service of a teleology which, ultimately, aims at annihilating relative difference in favour of Christian universalism. Isolated typological structures can be observed even before Acosta and Garcilaso. In his chronicle (published in 1535) Oviedo is incapable of explaining the victory of Pizarro’s mere 200 men over Atahualpa’s enormous army (whose empire he considers culturally superior to Spain in some respects, as already mentioned) other than by referring to Fortune. In order to contain the potentially dangerous idea of senseless contingency, he draws on a similar example of world historical importance, namely the Spartan victory under Leonidas over Xerxes’s Persian army which counted several million warriors (Historia general 5: 45).
have been possible. What is remarkable about Garcilaso’s theology of history, inspired by St. Augustine, is the elegance with which it palliates at least some of the tensions mentioned above. The New World’s (partial) superiority is reduced to an advantage merely in terms of the *civitas terrena*, which corresponds to an inferiority on the one level that really counts, that of the *civitas Dei*. The relationship between pagan Rome and the land where the cult of Christ emerged is the *figura* that provides the key to understanding the relationship between the Old World and the New. Just as the materially superior and much vaster Roman empire was destined to surrender to the true faith, would the newly discovered continents become Christian and within this process shed all their peculiarities in favor of the universalism of God’s congregation. A retrospective historicization corresponds to this forward-looking one. Garcilaso draws a line between the time before the Incas and after, thereby establishing the basis for a teleological model in the context of which the highly developed civilization of the Incas had the function of raising the savages to the cultural level that was prerequisite for their adopting the faith—in analogy to the function St. Augustine assigned to the pagan Roman empire (“[...] para que cuando ese mismo Dios, sol de justicia, tuviese por bien de enviar la luz de sus divinos rayos a aquellos idólatras, los hallase, no tan salvajes,

28 It should not cause surprise then that those (in the literal sense of the word “Renaissance”) thinkers who inclined more than others to absorbing models from pagan antiquity developed concepts which constitute a recurrent counter-discourse to the all-powerful philosophy of history, the myth of progress. Montaigne, for instance, characterizes the New World in the following way: “C’estoit un monde enfant [...] Bien crains-je que nous aurons bien fort hasté sa declinaison et sa ruyne par nostre contagion. [...] quant à la devotion, observance des loix, bonté, liberalité, loyauté, franchise, il nous a bien servy de n’en avoir pas tant qu’eux [...] nous nous sommes servis de leur [...] inexperience à les plier plus facilement vers la trahison, luxure, avarice et vers toute sorte d’inhumanité et de cruauté, à l’exemple et patron de nos meurs” (*Des coches* 887–89).

29 “Para que se entienda mejor la idolatría, vida y costumbres de los indios del Perú, será necesario dividamos aquellos siglos en dos edades: diremos cómo vivían antes de los Incas y luego diremos cómo gobernaron aquellos Reyes [los Incas], para que no se confunda lo uno con lo otro [...]. Para lo cual es de saber que en aquella primera edad y antigua gentildad unos indios había pocos mejores que bestias mansas y otros mucho peores que fieras bravas”. (Garcilaso, *Comentarios reales de los Incas* [1609], ed. Aurelio Miro Quesada, 2 vols. [Caracas: Biblioteca Ayacucho, 1985] 1: 26 sq.). As his narrative progresses, this measuring of the Indio communities against the standards set by pagan antiquity becomes a matter of course; see for instance “Y así vinieron a tener tanta variedad de dioses y tantos que fueron sin número, y porque no supieron, como los gentiles romanos, hacer dioses imaginados como la Esperanza, la Victoria, la Paz y otros semejantes, porque no levantaron los pensamientos a cosas invisibles, adoraban lo que veían [...]” (1: 27).
sino más dóciles para recibir la fe católica y la enseñanza y doctrina de nuestra Santa Madre Iglesia Romana [...]”

Hence, in contrast to Las Casas, Garcilaso does not feel the necessity of denying against all evidence the barbaric features of the Indio civilization (he gives a very vivid description of the “crueldades y tiranías de Atahualpa,” who appears as a new Nero or Diocletian), in order to hold that the savages are predestinated by the one and only God to be absorbed by occidental civilization. In the same way the primitivism of many of the indigenous communities need no longer be denied, but can be explained as a remnant of a state of development that ended, basically, with their subjugation by the Incas. And finally, the Inca emperors’ myth of origin is presented in a light which displays a prefigurative affinity to Christian narratives: “Nuestro Padre el Sol” [i.e. the sun-god of the Incas] sent his own son and his own daughter down to earth out of pity for the savages “para que les diesen preceptos y leyes en que viviesen como hombres en razón y urbanidad [...]”

The question that remained, namely, why God chose to become the

50 Garcilaso 1: 36.
51 Garcilaso 1: 36.
52 “ [...] y las gentes en aquellos tiempos vivían como fieras y animales brutos, sin religión ni policía, sin pueblo ni casa, sin cultivar ni sembrar la tierra, sin vestir ni cubrir sus carnes [...]” (Garcilaso 1: 37; see also 34 f.)
53 Garcilaso 1: 37 f. (the feature of pity is limited, however, to the earthly dimension).

This report is imbued with a high degree of supposed authenticity, since Garcilaso stages it as direct speech from an uncle who was grown-up already before the conquest and who now hands down to his nephew his genuine knowledge unaffected by Spanish cultural influence. See also 1: 75, where Garcilaso relates the Inca notion of the nature of man. Human beings consist of an immortal soul and a body made of earth. Man differs from the animals because of his entendimiento y razón but shares with them the ánima vegetativa y sensitiva. The Incas, he continues, believed in a life after death where the evil-doers would be punished and the just would be rewarded. Accordingly, they divided the cosmos into this world, a heaven and a nether word. Yet they lacked the concept of the other world’s life being wholly spiritual (“No entendían que la otra vida era espiritual, sino corporal, como esta misma” [75]). Heaven was to them a realm of earthly happiness. In short, the Incas’ views, in Garcilaso, appear as direct analogues to those of pagan antiquity. In Calderón’s dramatized version of the conquest of Peru (La aurora en Copacabana [~ 1661]), the dogmatic affinities between Christianity and the Inca religion are expounded in detail, but they are reduced to the orthodox explanation by the “priority thesis” (see infra, p. 14) and with an emphasis on the aspect of disfigurement (see my essay “Teleologischer Universalismus und kommunistische Differenz.” This thesis, or rather its entirely naive version, as it was held by Las Casas, Garcilaso treats with un concealed mockery. If, as the “opisbo de Chiapa” argued, some tribes had already prayed to the cross or known about the mystery of the Trinity and the doctrine of incarnation before the arrival of the Spaniards, how was one to explain the fact that after decades of indefatigable missionary activity most Indians were still incapable of understanding the relatively simple doctrine of the existence of
universal redeemer at that specific point in time and neither earlier nor later, could be referred to the domain of the *arcana Dei.*\textsuperscript{34} *Mutatis mutandis* the same question could have been raised with respect to the point in time of Christ’s incarnation and the ensuing problem of God’s justice towards those who as gentiles could not have worshipped him before the coming of Christ. As the problem concerned only the defunct, its explosive force was minor. And both in those times and during the discoveries coincidences were found which made it possible to reduce the arcane and inexplicable. Just as according to St. Augustine a universal empire, i. e. that of Augustus, was a necessary prerequisite for the propagation of the faith preached by God’s incarnate son, the kingdom God had chosen to unite the “remainder” of creation with its traditional center\textsuperscript{35} first had to establish peace at home.\textsuperscript{36} The coincidence of the fall of Granada and the discovery of the Americas was, in fact, one of those events which were able to provide seemingly irrefutable evidence for the concept of a divine plan for earthly history.

\textsuperscript{34} The way Pedro Cieza de León handles this problem in his chronicle, published in 1553, can be taken as paradigmatic: “[... considering that, pues nosotros y estos indios todos, todos traemos origen de nuestros antiguos padres Adán y Eva, y que por todos los hombres el Hijo de Dios descendió de los cielos a la tierra, y vestido de nuestra humanidad recibió cruel muerte de cruz para nos redimir y hacer libres del poder del demonio, el cual demonio tenía estas gentes, por la permisión de Dios, opresas y captivas tantos tiempos había, era justo que por el mundo se supiese en qué manera tanta multitud de gentes como destos indios había fue reducida al gremio de la santa madre Iglesia con trabajo de españoles; que fue tanto, que otra nación alguna de todo el universo no los pudiera sufrir. Y así, los eligió Dios para una cosa tan grande más que a otra nación alguna” (La crónica del Perú, ed. Manuel Ballesteros [Madrid: Historia 16, 1985] [1984] 62). The problem of the exact moment is referred to but withdrawn from further discussion by the concept of “quia vult” (“por la permisión de Dios”).

\textsuperscript{35} Chosen for this mission because God had from its very beginnings used it as his earthly instrument of Christianisation by military means.

\textsuperscript{36} “[...] en acabándose la conquista de los moros, que había durado más de ochocientos anos, se comenzó la de los indios, para que siempre peleasen los españoles con infieles y enemigos de la santa fe de Jesucristo” (Francisco López de Gómara: *Historia general de las Indias y vida de Hernán Cortés* [1552], ed. Jorge Gurria Lacroix [Caracas: Biblioteca Ayacucho, 1979] 31).
II. 3. As I have already said, the philosophy of history, in its Augustinian rather than the Hegelian version we can observe here, has a limited capacity for solving the problems posed by the novelty of the discoveries. What the concept does is to compel observers to subject the newly discovered world to a closer scrutiny. Thus, it brings about the New World’s internal differentiation. It meant a further step towards overcoming the simplistic label of barbarism which, in imitation of classical communitarianism, some of the leading contemporary intellectuals, most notably Ginés de Sepúlveda, were applying to the New World in order to prevent its entering the discourse of the Old. Yet, however smoothly the reappropriation of the Augustinian philosophy of history may have solved the problem of cultural difference, its dependence on typology tied it to the text of the Bible in its literal sense. Hence it perpetuated the Scriptures’ exclusive focus on the Mediterranean world and, in consequence, laid bare its own principal weakness, its failure when confronted with the materially new, the conceptualization of which was still bound to an unquestioned premise, namely that the one and only God, the God of the Old World is, of necessity, the “Hacedor de tantas maravillas.” Notwithstanding Christianity’s relative disrespect for materiality, the creation narrated in the Bible is a concrete one and the Americas did not have a place within this biblically guaranteed cosmos.

Because of an understanding of Scripture we would nowadays qualify as fundamentalist, but which in those times was the generally accepted one, this concept led to a dilemma which we can observe in the writings of the Jesuit Acosta, whose text is otherwise a model of intellectual brilliance. In the fourth book of his chronicle (1590), Acosta discusses the issue of why there are animals in America which are to be found nowhere else in the world. A phenomenon that was simply registered during the phase of spontaneous observation, as for instance in Vespucci, is now reassessed as a problem. These animals, too, must have been created by God. Secondly, they, too, must have disembarked from Noah’s Ark. Had there been a space on earth untouched by the Deluge with a complete fauna of its own, Acosta reasons, then the Ark would not have been necessary for restoring the animal world after the flood receded. What was astonishing, though,

---

57 For Sepúlveda see supra, n. 23, and also my essay, “Teleologischer Universalismus und kommunitaristische Differenz.”
58 Oviedo, Historia general 1: 3.
59 See Vespucci, Mundus novus.
was that all these animals had left no trace whatever in the region where they disembarked from the Ark (“¿[...] quién los llevar al Pirú? ¿o como fueron? Pues no quedó rastro dellos en todo el mundo; y si no fueron de otra region, ¿como se formaron y produxeron allí? ¿Por ventura hizo Dios nueva formacion de animales?”). Acosta proves incapable of solving this problem, which is why he returns to his initial axiom, adding to it a mere “statement of fact” without further discussing the question, which was, by the way, unanswerable under these premises ("Sino es, que digamos, que aunque todos los animales salieron del arca, pero por instinto natural, y providencia del cielo, diversos generos se fueron a diversas regiones [...]").

A satisfactory answer was only to be found on the basis of a nominalist concept of God as had already been developed by William of Ockham, a concept Acosta actually hints at in one of his questions: “¿Por ventura hizo Dios nueva formación de animales?” This question suggests the concept of a God whose *potentia absoluta* must be considered absolute even with respect to his own revelation, a God free to change his will and to create new and other worlds. Yet, at least in this passage, Acosta refrains from adopting this position, since according to Tridentine, i. e. Thomistic, doctrine, the act of creation had determined the shape of earthly beings once and for all. And, what is even more important, such a (nominalist) concept of God would have necessitated redefining the status of the text of revelation, of Scripture.

**II. 4.** Before this decisive step was eventually taken roughly a century after Columbus’s first voyage, considerable efforts were made

---

40 Acosta, *Historia natural* 283 sq.; see also the entire chap. I, 36 (282–84).


42 See once more the quote from Thomas Aquinas cited in n. 7 (*Summa contra gentiles* lb. 2, cp. 84, n. 5 and 6).
to resolve the question not by reinterpreting Scripture, i. e. to the
detriment of a literal understanding of the sacred text, but rather by
reducing conceptually the novel qualities of the discoveries. This
strategy finds its most elementary expression in the initial naming of
the new continents: Nuevas Indias. This label implies that the New
World is no more than a part, hitherto unknown to the Europeans, of
that Eastern land mass with which there had always been contacts.
Though Scripture did not describe them with any exactitude or
detail, these territories could always be considered as part of what the
Bible, with its specifically Mediterranean and Oriental perspective,
referred to as the whole world.

The urgency of the issues implied in the initial naming is evidenced
by the fact that it was Columbus himself who already developed an
extremely bold yet often repeated construction, which enabled him
to interpret the newly discovered world as something which had by
implication always been part of the biblical world. In his report on his
first voyage which was written shortly before his arrival in Spain and
which is, therefore, the product of a first stage of reflection, the
discoverer’s description of the natives alludes to the myth of paradise:
“Todos, ansí mugeres como hombres, andan desnudos como sus
madres los parió [...] No tienen fierro ni armas [...] Y no e podido
entender que alguno tenga bienes propios [...] En ninguna parte
d’estas islas e conoció en la gente d’ellas seta ni idolatría ni mucha
diversidad en la lengua de unos a otros, salvo que todos se entienden.”

Elaborating on Columbus’s improvisation, the first generation chroniclers systematically painted the image of the New World as a region
adjacent to Paradise. The advantages of this construct were twofold.
First, the discoveries lost their quality of being entirely new in relation
to what Scripture said. Second, it provided a simple explanation for
all those problems which derived from making the New World
commensurable by employing the formula of “similar but better.”
Thus, one did not have to appeal to any kind of philosophy of
history.

It was a necessary premise of this construction that no one doubted
the existence of the earthly Paradise, which, contemporaries be-
lieved, was ratified by Genesis. Yet, it was taken to have been closed to

43 Columbus, Carta a los Reyes anunciando el Descubrimiento 229 sq.
44 Amerigo Vespucci, who by mere chance came to give his name to the new
continent, does in a certain way seem to merit this singular distinction. In contrast to
the many attempts to deny the newness of the world discovered, which in literary texts
continued until the seventeenth century, he clearly states in his report dating from
living human beings since the Fall. Isidore of Seville had suggested the image of a wall reaching up to heaven. Still, if despite its being withheld from humans Paradise had a place on earth, it was likely that neighboring regions did to a certain extent participate in its para-di-siacal nature.

The whole idea became more concrete as the regions adjoining Paradise were linked to the realm of Prester John, the mythical Christian king in Central Asia first mentioned in the chronicle Otto of Freising finished in 1158. The chronicler of the Holy Roman Emperor Frederick Barbarossa refers to a letter written by Prester John offering the Europeans military support for a crusade. In this (fictitious) letter, the priestly monarch situates his realm in the “three Indias.” As time went by, the myth of Prester John merged with the classical tradition of the Ethiopians as one of the happiest of nations, which in turn was supplemented with the Biblical story of the Queen of Sheba and contemporary knowledge of the Ethiopians being Christians. The whole complex of ideas led to a belief in the existence of a great Christian empire located in a vaguely delimited “East” comprising both India and Ethiopia. By placing the discoveries in the neighborhood of that empire the chroniclers deprived them of their provocative nature—at least as long as one was prepared to accept them as (Nuevas) Indias in the literal sense. 45

This somewhat roman-esque construction did not, of course, resolve the problem, and this was noted soon, as in Oviedo’s Chronicle published in 1535. 46 If the concept of the “Nuevas Indias” had taken

1503–04: “[...] apud maiores nostros nulla de ipsis fuerit habita cognitio [...]” (Mundus novus 85). He explicitly rejects Columbus’s view that the continent is a part of India. The novus mundus he describes is an ignotus mundus (86). Martin Waldseemüller’s map of the world from 1507, which is the first to name the continents after Amerigo Vespucci is, by the way, the first to show the territories discovered as a land mass separated from Asia.

45 For European geographic concepts obtaining before the discoveries see Gewecke, Wie die neue Welt in die alte kam 72–87; see also William H. Babcock: Legendary Islands of the Atlantic: A Study in Medieval Geography (1922; Plainview, NY: Books for Libraries P, 1975) and George H. T. Kimble: Geography in the Middle Ages (1938; New York, Russell and Russell, 1968). For Prester John’s letter which was spread after the failure of the Second Crusade and may have been influential in launching the Third, see especially Gewecke 84. Concerning the entire legend see Gustav Oppert, Der Presbyter Johannes in Sage und Geschichte: Ein Beitrag zur Völker- und Kirchenhistorie und zur Heldendichtung des Mittelalters (Berlin: J. Springer, 1864).

46 At the beginning of his chronicle, Oviedo mentions the construction described above, only to push it aside without further discussion announcing that he would deal with “a different India,” not wholly logically contrasting the older theory with the
care of the new territories themselves, then their inhabitants still presented a problem, since quite obviously they had never had any contact with a revelation that claimed universality. The dilemma becomes even more evident when one takes into consideration that traditional Christian dogma invests space with meaning because God himself is localized. A topographical affinity to regions ranking higher in the chain of being cannot be without importance.

Faced with this problem—and because of the rather confusing character of the concept as such—Oviedo (who can be taken as an exemplar of the middle generation of chroniclers) attempts to develop an alternative approach. Yet, it is indicative of the virulence of the problem that this author, whose descriptions are already committed to modern standards,47 should continue to cling in his interpretations to the very strategic goal, i.e. the effacement of novelty, that the theory of the Nuevas Indias he criticizes is based on. Oviedo’s concept could be called a “topographization” of the priority thesis. Since the Church Fathers were incapable of flatly denying the importance of pagan wisdom, they tried to integrate it by maintaining that non-believers had previously either belonged to the people of God or else had been under their influence.48 Similarly, Oviedo claims that at some distant point in the past the New World had already been a part of the Spanish empire. The conquista, he holds, is no more than a reconquista of territories that had belonged to the West all along and which God returned to the Spaniards as a reward for their reconquista of the peninsula. Yet only fifty years later, Acosta, whose theology is no less orthodox than Oviedo’s, derides the ahistorical mixture of wildly interpreted authorities (Aristotle, Eusebius and Isidore of Seville) and etymology49 which dominates Oviedo and the other chronicles of the middle period.50

"verdadera cosmografía": “Quiero significar y dar a entender por verdadera cosmografía, que aquí yo no tracto de aquestas Indias que he dicho, sino de las Indias, islas e tierra firme del mar Océano, que agora está actualmente debajo del imperio de la corona real de Castilla [...]” (Historia general 1: 71).

47 As long as singular items are concerned, Oviedo accepts the new things as new.
48 For the so-called priority theory see Ernst Robert Curtius, Europäische Literatur und Lateinisches Mittelalter, 2nd ed. (Bern: Francke, 1954) 533 sq.
49 The Nuevas Indias, Oviedo says, are identical with the Hesperides, whose name derives from the twelfth king of Spain, who supposedly ascended the throne some 1600 years before Christ and was called Hespero (Historia general 1: 16–20).
50 In his Historia general 49–51 Acosta discusses the wide-spread assumption that “este nuestro Piru” is the same as the Biblical land of Ophir (3. Reg 10, 11 sq. and 2. Par 9, 10). The basis of this assumption was that Ophir, too, was rich in precious metals
II. 5. It is this very Acosta (c. 1590) who takes the decisive step mentioned above. He, too, is a Christian theologian. But he distances himself from the attempts to efface the novel qualities of the discoveries through the means of hermeneutics and rhetoric. Thus, he leaves no doubt as to the earth being a globe. Hence, it is the Sacred Text and not the World that he must subject to a rhetorical reading. This rhetorical understanding of Scripture does not yet attain a systematic level—one need only recall Acosta’s literal acceptance of the Deluge—but in some cases it does, nevertheless, achieve a remarkable degree of consistency. For instance, Acosta reads the columns bearing God’s creation according to Ps 74 as the “columnas [...] de la palabra eterna de Dios, que con su virtud sostiene cielos y tierra.” And when St. Paul calls the earth and the heavens a “house” (“domus”) in Heb 3, 3–6, a concept adopted by the Church Fathers and which, up to then, had been taken as a legitimization for conceiving of the world as a sort of a building, Acosta does not even try to construe an explanation. Instead, he invokes a principle which would be capable of legitimating even the most liberal products of modern Protestant exegesis: “Basta pues saber que en las divinas escrituras, no hemos de seguir la letra que mata, sino el espíritu que da vida como dize san Pablo.”

(Solomon let huge quantities of gold, precious stones and fine wood be brought from there). Furthermore, its name was taken as etymological evidence (“deduciendo el un nombre del otro”). Acosta’s comment is that even though large quantities of silver are to be found in Peru it does not possess gold. And even though Peru is not devoid of precious stones and fine wood, none of them deserve the special praise which the Bible lavishes on Ophir’s natural wealth. Neither does he find the argument of etimología convincing, since “Piru” is not the traditional name of the country. The Spaniards named the whole country after the indigenous name of the first river they came across. Moreover, he says, etymology in general is a “muy ligero indicio para afirmar cosas tan grandes.” But Acosta’s prime argument is the earth’s spherical shape (cf. infra, n. 57). If Solomon had ordered the treasures described in Scripture to be imported from Peru, his men would have had to circumnavigate India and China and cross a huge ocean on top of that. And it was rather unlikely that Solomon’s men would have travelled around the whole globe just in order to search for gold (“[...] y no es versimil, que atreueassassen todo el mundo para venir a buscar aca el Oro”).

51 Acosta 21.

52 Acosta 25 (with reference to 2. Cor 3, 6). Only in later times does this position become a systematic approach. With Acosta it results from the difficulty of finding a satisfactory allegorical reading for the term “house” that can be reconciled with the experiential fact that the earth is a globe. In general, however, Acosta sticks to the traditional allegorical reading, glossing the allegorized terms one by one, even when his interpretations border on the absurd. In order to prove that the Bible does actually contain references to the New World he cites a verse from Eph 2, 1, which can hardly be
The leap we observe here inverts by and large the relationship between Scripture and the World. The material world is no longer adapted to the text of revelation by way of hermeneutics or allegory, but rather, scriptural “truth”—without losing its authority—undergoes a constant re-coding, in accordance with the ever-changing picture of material reality. Given this, Acosta’s revolutionary transformation of the approach to Scripture constitutes a more important step than that taken by the Reformation, even though his call for a reading of the text not according to the letter but to the spirit looks remarkably similar at first glance. Important as the move of linking exegesis to grace instead of authority may be, its primary effects are nonetheless limited to the domain of belief. What is really new about the concept to be found in Acosta is that from this point onwards, the logic of an extra-religious, empirical worldview begins to determine the interpretation of scripture.

II. 6. As the discoveries are mastered intellectually, the post-incarnation world (in the sense of a model of the world) is endowed with the dimension of time. Garcilaso and his predecessors take this step by applying a concept originally developed in late antiquity to compensate for the unfulfilled expectations of an imminent *parousia*. This model historicizes the past by considering it an imperfect precursor of the present. But the present itself as “accomplished time” is no more than a link in a chain of mere repetitions ending only with the Day of Judgment. Given this, I hesitate to call Garcilaso’s reapplication of the Augustinian concept of earthly time (and the

understood but as an anticipation of St. Augustine’s doctrine of the two *civitates*: “Et vos, cum essetis mortui delictis et peccatis vestris, in quibus aliquandoambulastis secundum saeculum huius mundi [...]” (see *Historia natural* 43 sq.). We shall not discuss the Council of Trent’s impact on the conceptualization of the discoveries. It is, nevertheless, worth noting that Gómara’s *Historia*, which was published during the liberal, pre-Tridentine period, investigates the same issue, namely whether the New Testament’s various hints at the existence of a second world may be read as oblique references to the New World. Gómara’s terse comment quotes as follows: “El reino de Cristo, que no era de este mundo, [...] es espiritual y no material; y así decimos el otro mundo, como la otra vida y como el otro siglo [...]” (*Historia* 11).

53 These remarks on the Protestant approach to Scripture may seem surprising since Luther himself insisted on a literal reading of the sacred text to such an extent that he believed all ambiguities and obscure passages could be clarified by grammar and philology. Yet the reformer considered the status of being an *electus* as an indispensable prerequisite for understanding scriptural truth. *De facto*, Luther’s style of exegesis is rhetorical. This applies even more to the other reformers and the kind of exegetical practice that developed within most of the reformed churches.
original Augustinian concept as well) ‘historicist’ in the true sense.\footnote{54} With respect to the future, it does not go beyond the idea of “time as repetition.” With Acosta, however, the Scripture, i.e. the logos as such, is subjected to historicization.\footnote{55} The Scriptural text turns into a form of revelation that is fundamentally affected by the time and place of its being recorded. Thus, in principle, it is opened up to limitless possibilities of hermeneutic activity.\footnote{56} Consequently, the sacred text

\footnote{54 For St. Augustine, the fundamental time scheme of the \textit{civitas diaboli} is cyclical (the permanent rise and fall of the power struggle instigated by \textit{superbia}), while the principle of the \textit{civitas Dei} is a teleology that knows, however, no substantial development between the time of Christ’s resurrection and his \textit{parousia}. The experience of the discoveries may also help to explain why in Christian late antiquity no concept of historicity was developed, despite Christianity being founded on the concept of a \textit{history} of salvation. At the time, there was no need for historicity. The saved do not ask why they achieved the state of grace at this point and not at another. For them, it is sufficient to know that they are recipients of God’s grace; hence the question of the actual moment in time becomes irrelevant. The question has provocative implications only for those who know nothing about God and cannot, therefore, expect redemption. Yet, for the same reason, they are incapable of grasping the problem. The problem attains, however, a certain urgency for those who are not directly concerned as individuals but whose basic assumptions about the world—Christianity’s pretensions to universality, the idea of a God who includes his whole creation in his grace or even the concept of the one and only creator itself—in as much as they are linked to Christian belief and dogma, are shaken by the discoveries.

\footnote{55 The quote from Acosta seems to be one of the earliest testimonies for a reassessment of Scripture’s literal text, a reassessment which does not achieve a breakthrough before the seventeenth and does not become fully dominant before the nineteenth century.

\footnote{56 It is a much later phenomenon that the Biblical text is entirely deprived of its privileged status and is understood as one out of many myths whose “truth” consists in their being a repository where the answers to the problems of life given by hundreds and hundreds of human generations are collected. Seen retrospectively, the reactivation of the priority thesis mentioned above amounts to an intermediate step in this process of remythologization. The priority thesis asserts that the myths and religions of the New World are not radically different from their Christian counterpart, but rather stresses their partial affinities to Judaeo-Christian concepts. This is linked to the idea that at some point lost in history the inhabitants of the New World had had knowledge of revealed truth, but that they had handled it with negligence, so that in the native myths it survived in disfigured versions only. For the presence of this theory in the chronicles see, for instance, Bernardino de Sahagún’s \textit{Historia general de las cosas de Nueva España} (1547–82), a text which is very often and somewhat precipitately taken as the first founding document of modern ethnography. The following quote is typical of Sahagún’s views: “[...] esta diosa se llama Cihuacóatl, que quiere decir mujer de la culebra; y también la llamaban Tonáztin, que quiere decir nuestra madre. En estas dos cosas parece que esta diosa es nuestra madre Eva, la cual fue engañada de la culebra, y que ellos tenían noticia del negocio que pasó entre nuestra madre Eva y la culebra” (ed. Angel María Garibay [México, Porrúa, 1982] 32 [Lib. I, cap. 6]). The efficacy of this line of argument is impressive. By postulating a common origin the (conceptually) new is completely reduced to what is already known. By assuming that Christian knowledge has become disfigured at the hands of the Indios, the perpetrators of this theory had}
loses its “canonical” status in the most fundamental way. A form of revelation which does not pretend to literal truth anymore can no longer serve as a guideline (canon) for reading the liber naturae.

II. 7. At first glance, it may seem that during this phase of our history a model of experiential knowledge was replacing dogma. Experiencia had, however, already possessed a legitimate place in the occidental discourse of the pre-modern era, yet its task had been to empirically reaffirm dogmatic truth—otherwise experiencia incurred the suspicion of deceit. But now, in a truly decisive step, it became opposed to demostracion philosophica, that is, to the principle of authority according to scholastic understanding. It is, nevertheless, of central importance that the ascendancy of the new paradigm is not—or not yet—coupled with a turning away from traditional belief. On the contrary, the empirical paradigm is grounded, if not on the more sophisticated elaborations of dogma, then certainly on the basic tenet of monotheism, namely the limitless power of the one and only God. If God’s potentia absoluta was not restricted by what he himself created at the beginning of the world, as the discoveries seemed to prove, this implied a potentially ever-changing form of the given

found a legitimation for turning the conceptual erasure of difference into a factual one, i.e. for christianizing the natives. The reverse side of this strategy becomes evident when one considers it in the context of changes in attitude to Scripture that were emerging at the time, namely the Bible’s losing its pretensions to literal truth. As soon as Scripture ceases to provide the one and only version of truth, the activity of observing points of contact between the Bible and native cults generates the paradigm of modern anthropology. Of the chronicles treated in this paper it is Gómar’s sober report that comes closest to such a view. Of the native medicine men he says, for instance, that to a large extent their practices corresponded to those of “nuestros médicos” (Historia 46). He even claims that there were practices in the native cults which corresponded to the celebration of the Eucharist: “Tomabanlo [el pan] los sacerdotes, bendecíanlo y repartíanlo como nosotros el pan bendito [...]” (47). What is important is that Gómar does not try to give explanations for these parallels. The same attitude can be observed in his descriptions of the natives’ sexual behavior. He concludes neither that they are barbaroi, as Sepúlveda does, nor that it is necessary to teach them Christian morals, as Las Casas thinks, but leaves it at acknowledging cultural difference: “Por no ser prolijo, quiero concluir este capítulo de costumbres y decir que todas sus cosas son tan diferentes de las nuestras cuanto la tierra es nueva para nosotros” (48).

57 Magellan’s expedition, Acosta says, had proved beyond doubt that the earth is a globe (“la redondez del mundo”). Acosta carefully yet clearly states that this piece of experience had made the fact more manifest than philosophical reasoning could ever have done: “[...] harto mas manifiesta por la experiencia, de lo que nos pudiera ser por cualquiera razon y demostracion philosophica” (Historia natural 16). Thus the one principle is being superseded by the other.
world, a form that did not only change in the past, but was capable of changing in the present and the future, too.\textsuperscript{58} A concept of \textit{experiencia} derived from this process of thinking is conscious of the provisional status of all attainable knowledge. This model made possible an approach to reality which seems to have enabled modernity in its material and technological sense since it meant the substitution of a static, ontological “truth” with a paradigm that conceived of knowledge as tentative and open to revision through experience at any given moment.

\textbf{III}

\textit{III. 1.} My argument looks a little as though I had fallen prey to a rather insipid materialism: The event of the discoveries launches historicity. We can, however, be sure nowadays that Columbus was not the first European to set foot on American soil. The “real” discoverer was Leiv Eiriksson who, starting off from Greenland in the year 1000,\textsuperscript{59} reached a territory he called “Vinland.”\textsuperscript{60} Excavations have

\textsuperscript{58} It is a striking feature of the mental process described in this paper that at the end of the conceptual assimilation of the discoveries the Europeans are, once again, the self-confident proprietors of a “true tradition” they were when they first came into contact with the New World. Through the discoveries the West ratified, so to speak, at the level of its factual world-model a conceptual revolution which in terms of theory had been outlined already a few centuries earlier. Ockham’s argument was the product of mere deduction, of thinking to the end what the principle of monotheism really entails if one pushes aside all opportunistic reasoning. One is tempted to say that drawing solely on its own mental reservoir, the Occident had succeeded in devising a world model that would two hundred years later enable it to free itself of the shackles of its own traditional myth and become the universal civilisation. And it is, for sure, one of the reasons for the singular success of the Western model that even nowadays the Occident is still capable of harmonizing an ever-changing reality with the basic tenets of its traditional beliefs. Yet one should not forget that, just as the modern, empiricist conception of reality resulted from the confrontation with a foreign world, late medieval theological nominalism was a reaction to a mentally foreign world, i. e. to Averroist Aristotelianism.

\textsuperscript{59} Greenland was colonized by Leiv’s father, Erik the Red, from 982–85. The latter was a Norwegian who had been banished to Iceland.

\textsuperscript{60} The reports on Leiv’s voyage found in the sagas (which were written down no earlier than the fourteenth century) were rediscovered during Romanticism and have been subject to scholarly discussion from the second half of the nineteenth century onwards. It was Helge Ingstad who provided the archaeological evidence for the saga narratives. Tools which could not have been produced by contemporary native Americans (iron artifacts, spinning implements) and which radiocarbon dating ascribes to the year 1000 prove the theory—generally accepted today—that a European discovery of America took place long before Columbus set out on his voyages. (Ingstad’s first publication, \textit{Vesterweg til Vinland} [Oslo 1965], did not conform to
demonstrated that the Norsemen’s visit to America was not a mere episode but that they actually settled on the coast of what we now call Newfoundland. This raises the question of why the same kind of historical event, the sudden emergence of continents hitherto unknown to Europeans, could in one case kindle the process of modernity, while in the other it remained virtually irrelevant—so irrelevant, indeed, that despite Leiv’s discovery being a generally accepted fact nowadays, Columbus alone continues to be considered as the actual discoverer.

Certainly, a discovery undertaken by one of the materially and culturally central powers of an age will have a different impact from one made by the members of a somewhat marginal community (Norway, Iceland, Greenland). But it would be superficial to attempt to solve the problem by referring simply to the material circumstances of the respective discoveries. After all, as the historical process part of which this paper deals with shows, marginality does not necessarily preclude a world-historical impact. The belief in the one and only God from which historical thinking ultimately derives developed with a small nomadic tribe living on the outskirts of the high civilizations of its time. The reasons for Leiv’s discovery remaining no more than an anecdotal fact of history must, therefore, be found elsewhere than in the marginality of his community.

III. 2. It is hardly conceivable that there can be conscious activity of the human mind (i.e. human existence) without a consciousness of time. Life is finite and every being capable of conceptually representing scholarly standards. The findings were then re-examined by a large team of Scandinavian and Anglo-American experts supported by the Norwegian Council for Science and the Humanities. The result was a volume edited by Anne Stine Ingstad, The Discovery of a Norse Settlement in America: Excavations at L’Anse aux meadows, Newfoundland, 1961–68 [Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1977], which contains the detailed reports by the specialists. Ingstad himself subsequently published a thoroughly revised version of his first book, The Norse Discovery of America: The Historical Background and the Evidence of the Norse Settlement Discovered in Newfoundland (Oslo: Norwegian UP, 1985). This volume provides translations of all the passages in the sagas which refer to Leiv Eiriksson’s expedition.

61 We will not be able to solve the question of whether Leiv’s expedition was intentional or simply the result of mere chance. Ingstad points out that, according to the sagas, previous voyagers had already sighted the foreign coast and told the settlers in Greenland what they had seen. It would have been astonishing in any case if the Norsemen had not eventually come across the North American coastline after settling Greenland. The territories are separated by no more than 200 miles of sea, the Davis Strait between Greenland and Baffin Island, whereas the distance between Norway and Greenland is 1500 miles.
its own life or the lives of others will necessarily attain to the
knowledge that things change unstoppably and vectorially. We are
used to calling the dimension of this vectorial change “time.”

It is trivial to say that all non-modern consciousness of time is
cyclical. The cyclicity of non-modern concepts of time seems to derive
directly from the same experience as the consciousness of time itself,
from the conceptual representation of life. Decline and death are
succeeded by new beginnings which are no more than new versions
of that which has passed away.

How then, does a consciousness of historicity differ from a cyclical
concept of time? They share the basic concept of “time” as such. In
the final analysis, the difference seems to consist merely in the
valorization of what remains stable compared to what changes in this
vectorial process of constant change. Hence, the problem lies first
and foremost in a difference between two models of interpretation. If
a community ascribes a greater importance to what remains stable
within a process of change, then its frame of reference is cyclical. If,
on the other hand, a community ascribes greater importance to
things changing as time goes by, then it displays a form of “historical”
thinking. The difference between a cyclical consciousness of time and
a consciousness of historicity has nothing whatsoever to do with the
actual speed of innovation within a community. It seems to consist
of something between conceiving of change as a kind of repristination,

62 I use this term both for pre-modern concepts of time and for concepts of time
obtaining in communities which did not develop cultural stages equivalent to Western
modernity.

63 The cyclical approach, too, precludes reversibility or any other form of returning
to the past. All repetitions are repristinations.

64 This is one of the lessons postmodernity has taught us by undermining the
prevailing, “naive” interpretation of the discoveries according to which a sudden and
radical change of material reality automatically induces the rise of historicity. The era
of postmodernity doubtlessly witnesses an increase in the speed of innovation com-
pared to that of modernity; yet it is, nevertheless, an era of re-emerging cyclical
concepts of time. I wish to emphasize that my thesis argues not only against
“materialist” explanations of the beginnings of historical thinking (which are particu-
larly widespread in the historiography of the discoveries), but even more against Karl
Löwith’s (very impressive) theory that reads the development of philosophy of history
as a secularization of Judaeo-Christian monotheism. Since Islam, which existed in the
same world as Judaism and Christianity, possessed a rival monotheism without
developing an equivalent to the occidental philosophy of history, the question is why
this secularisation took place in the Judaeo-Christian world only. Secularisation being
an inevitable and even necessary development in the sense of a Hegelian philosophy of
history (as Löwith sees it), is the position against which this paper is primarily directed.
on the one hand, and conceiving of change as the development of things (entirely) new.

Thus the crucial question is why a given community ascribes greater importance to change than to stability, and why it valorizes what remains stable.

The contribution to answering this question, which can be derived from a study of the intellectual processes by which the discoveries were negotiated, could perhaps be characterized as follows: novelties can only become so momentous as to assume a greater importance than what is already known if there is a generally accepted model that defines what is beyond change, if there is an atemporal ontology. The overtly paradoxical prerequisite for the emergence of historical thinking is a static concept of the given reality, the rigidity of whose assumptions exceeds that of the models prevalent in polytheistic communities, whose concepts of repetition necessarily entail a certain flexibility. Only such a model—namely a creationist, monotheistic view of the world—is liable to be shaken fundamentally by the emergence of “new” worlds neither included in nor incorporable into its rigid understanding of the material world. Historicity is a

65 The reason is the belief in the existence of many gods. Such a configuration necessarily induces conflicts amongst the gods, revolutions etc., i. e. features that provide satisfactory explanations for any deviation from a strictly recursive cyclical development.

66 The (violent) Christianisation of Norway by Olav Tryggvesson began precisely at the time of Leiv Eiriksson’s expedition, in the year 1000. It was just as violently continued and brought to a successful end by St. Olav from 1015–1030. Iceland, the base of Eirik’s and Leiv’s westward expeditions, was more or less a Norwegian settlement. Ingstad believes that Eirik died an adherent of the traditional Germanic religion but that his wife Tjohild and their son Leiv converted to Christianity. Passages in the sagas (which, as mentioned above, date from later times) claiming that it was his missionary zeal that instigated Leiv’s expedition have to be attributed to the ahistorical conventions of the saga genre. What is important in our context is, however, that the world model of these discoverers was at the very best influenced vaguely by the one codified in Scripture. It would have had next to nothing in common with the strictly systematical concept of the cosmos as we find it in Thomas Aquinas or Dante, that is, the kind of system prevailing when Columbus made his discoveries.

67 Many classical scholars hold that classical Antiquity had already developed a concept of continuous progress and thus had overcome the cyclical thinking of the archaic ages (see e. g. Ludwig Edelstein, The Idea of Progress in Classical Antiquity, [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1967]). One of the two main points of reference for this line of argument is Lucretius (“Navigia atque agris moenia leges / […] / usus et impigrae simul experienda mentis/ paulatim docuit pedetemptim pro- gredientis. / Sic unumquicquid paulatim protrahit et actas/ in medium ratioque in luminis erigit oras;/ namque alid ex alio clarescere corde videbant,/ arribus ad summum donec venere cacumen.” // “Ships and agriculture, fortifications and laws,
parasitical conceptual figure, a figure that undermines stasis. Without the pre-existing assumption of stasis, there is no need for developing a concept of historicity.

A possible counterargument against my thesis could be based on the fact that the occidental Europeans were unique neither in their possession of monotheistic creationism nor in their experience of being confronted with novelties that were not immediately assimilable to their traditional worldview. Islam, too, fulfills these prerequisites but did not produce either a consciousness of history or a modernity of its own.68

[...] all these as men progressed gradually step by step were taught by practice and the experiments of the active mind. So by degrees time brings up before us every single thing and reason lifts it into the precincts of light. For they saw one thing after another grow clear in their minds, until they attained the highest pinnacle of the arts" [De rerum natura, trans. W. D. Rouse, Loeb's Classical Library (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1975) 5, 988 ssq., esp. 1448–57]. Even more important seems to be a passage from Seneca, Naturales quaestiones, lb. VII, cap. 25, 4 sq.: "Veniet tempus, quo ista, quae nunc latent, in lucem dies extrahat et longioris aevi diligentia; ad inquisitionem tantorum aetas una non sufficit, ut tota caelo vacet: quid, quod tam paucos annos inter studia ac vitia non aequa portione dividimus? Itaque per successionem ista longas explicabuntur. Veniet tempus, quo posteri nostri tam aperta nos nescisse mirentur."

"There will be an age when things now hidden will be brought to light through time and the work of longer periods; one human being's life span does not suffice for exploring issues of this magnitude even if it is devoted to the heavens only. Moreover, we do not divide the few years assigned to us between industry and vice equally. These questions will, therefore, be answered by the work of many generations. There will be a time when our descendants will marvel at our lack of knowledge of things quite obvious to them." Yet, what this at first glance remarkable passage actually refers to, is this: "Quid ergo miramur cometas, tam rarum mundi spectaculum, nondum teneri legibus certis nec initia illorum finesque notescere, quorum ex ingentibus intervallis recursus est?" (lb. VII, cap. 25, 3)/ "So, we should not be surprised that we have not yet found the exact laws governing the course of the comets, these rare spectacles of the heavens, and that we know neither their beginning nor their end, since they appear again only at excessively long intervals" (my translation) The problem discussed by Seneca is not one of progress, but the problem of the asynchronicity of the human life cycle and the cycle of the comets. It is this asynchronicity (and not a general "progress of knowledge") which will make it possible only for future generations to describe the stellar cycles. I have neither the time nor the place for discussing these issues at length, but I would flatly contest the idea that there was a concept of progress in Antiquity. Nevertheless, my main point is this: even if there seem to be concepts of progress in the writings of classical authors, these concepts remain isolated phenomena. They never attain the level of systematicity. So, the decisive question is why the concept of progress became a dominant one in the modern West and why it remained marginal in classical Antiquity.

68 My remarks on Islam have to be read with the caveat that I possess no scholarly competence in this field whatsoever. I would, nevertheless, stick to the essence of my argument, regardless of what corrections to details a scholar of Islam would probably feel bound to make. It is a political (and a politically useful) thesis that Islam is as "valuable" as Christianity and as far as the religious sphere is concerned the idea is virtually uncontestable. Yet the historical fact remains that Islam did not produce an
What seems to be important in this respect is a feature Thomas S. Kuhn describes in his theory concerning the structure of scientific revolutions. Novelties of a revolutionary dimension are able to gain access to a given community’s discourse only if the traditional model of discourse contains elements under which the new experience can be subsumed provisionally. Otherwise the new will not prevail but will be subject either to incomprehension or even overt suppression.\(^69\) To put it into concrete terms: When the New World entered Western consciousness, early modern Europe did not have to leave behind its revealed truth and its traditional God instantaneously. The excessive-ness of such an imposition would probably have resulted in something close to what Kuhn has observed for those potential scientific revolutions which never took place. During the initial phase, the Occident could be content with reinterpreting its revealed truth after a fashion that had been developed two hundred years earlier by one of the most clear-sighted theorists of monotheism, William of Ockham. The mental frame in which to think the new existed already, and, what is more, it existed on the basis of the authoritative world model, though only on its most abstract level. The subversive consequences this reinterpretation would, ultimately, have were unforeseeable at the time. Would it be too wild a speculation if I suggested that had the West not been able provisionally to reconcile its traditional system of belief with the new through the means of theological nominalism, the reaction to the novel experience might perhaps have been a fundamentalist rejection or even the attempt to physically annihilate the discoveries, at the very least to prevent their mental assimilation? Yet, the fact of the discoveries could not have been rejected for long. But only thanks to a very contingent configuration of events and concepts, the West found itself in possession of a mental resource that enabled it to historicize its truth at the very moment that this truth proved untrue and thus was spared the journey into collective schizophrenia.

This line of argument may help also to explain why as Christianity’s general dominance is waning, so, too, historical thinking is on the decline. As soon as there is no longer a fixed concept of what is equivalent to modernity of its own. Moreover, Islamic cultures’ relationship to a Western modernity they adopted partly of their own accord and partly because they were forced to do so is structurally schizophrenic.

\(^69\) The Structure of Scientific Revolutions (Chicago: University of Chicago P, 1962) esp. 77.
unchangeable, it becomes more difficult to conceptualize the new in terms of the emphatically new, that is, of what has never existed before. Indeed, it need no longer be conceptualized in this way. In order to maintain a minimum of orientation in the endless passage of time it may then be more gratifying to conceptualize the new (even something radically new such as the imminent self-recreation of man) as a cyclical repetition of things already known. Historical thinking seems to be no more than a short episode in the history of human thought, and—like Western modernity as a whole—it is a most improbable variant, if one considers the panorama of other possibilities. The development of the concept of historicity possesses a high degree of internal logic, but its occurrence in history seems to be occasioned by factors entirely contingent.