

measure from the mists of superstition which obscure the best productions of an earlier period. From these causes, the work, notwithstanding its occasional prolixity, and the disagreeable aspect given to it by the profusion of uncouth names in the Mexican orthography, which bristle over every page, has found merited favor with the public, and created something like a popular interest in the subject. Soon after its publication at Cesena, in 1780, it was translated into English, and more lately, into Spanish and German.



P.C. Monumental de la Alhambra y Generalife
CONSEJERÍA DE CULTURA

CHAPTER III.

MEXICAN MYTHOLOGY. — THE SACERDOTAL ORDER. — THE TEMPLES.
— HUMAN SACRIFICES.

THE civil polity of the Atzecs is so closely blended with their religion, that, without understanding the latter, it is impossible to form correct ideas of their government or their social institutions. I shall pass over, for the present, some remarkable traditions, bearing a singular resemblance to those found in the Scriptures, and endeavour to give a brief sketch of their mythology, and their careful provisions for maintaining a national worship.

Mythology may be regarded as the poetry of religion, — or rather as the poetic development of the religious principle in a primitive age. It is the effort of untutored man to explain the mysteries of existence, and the secret agencies by which the operations of nature are conducted. Although the growth of similar conditions of society, its character must vary with that of the rude tribes in which it originates; and the ferocious Goth, quaffing mead from the skulls of his slaughtered enemies, must have a very different mythology from that of the effeminate native of Hispaniola, loitering away his hours in idle pastimes, under the shadow of his bananas.

At a later and more refined period, we sometimes find these primitive legends combined into a regular system under the hands of the poet, and the rude outline moulded into forms of ideal beauty, which are the objects of adoration in a credulous age, and the delight of all succeeding ones. Such were the beautiful inventions of Hesiod and Homer, "who," says the Father of History, "created the theogony of the Greeks"; an assertion not to be taken too literally, since it is hardly possible that any man should create a religious system for his nation.¹ They only filled up the shadowy outlines of tradition with the bright touches of their own imaginations, until they had clothed them in beauty which kindled the imaginations of others. The power of the poet, indeed, may be felt in a similar way in a much riper period of society. To say nothing of the "Divina Commedia," who is there that rises from the perusal of "Paradise Lost," without feeling his own conceptions of the angelic hierarchy quickened by those of the inspired artist, and a new and sensible form, as it were, given to images which had before floated dim and undefined before him?

The last-mentioned period is succeeded by that of philosophy; which, disclaiming alike the legends of the primitive age, and the poetical embellish-

¹ ποιήσαντες Στοργίην Ἑλλήσι. Herodotus, Euterpe, sec. 53. — Heeren hazards a remark equally strong, respecting the epic poets of India, "who," says he, "have

supplied the numerous gods that fill her Pantheon." Historical Researches, Eng. trans., (Oxford, 1833,) vol. III. p. 139.

ments of the succeeding one, seeks to shelter itself from the charge of impiety by giving an allegorical interpretation to the popular mythology, and thus to reconcile the latter with the genuine deductions of science.

The Mexican religion had emerged from the first of the periods we have been considering, and, although little affected by poetical influences, had received a peculiar complexion from the priests, who had digested as thorough and burdensome a ceremonial, as ever existed in any nation. They had, moreover, thrown the veil of allegory over early tradition, and invested their deities with attributes, savoring much more of the grotesque conceptions of the eastern nations in the Old World, than of the lighter fictions of Greek mythology, in which the features of humanity, however exaggerated, were never wholly abandoned.²

In contemplating the religious system of the Aztecs, one is struck with its apparent incongruity, as if some portion of it had emanated from a comparatively refined people, open to gentle influences, while the rest breathes a spirit of unmitigated ferocity. It naturally suggests the idea of two distinct sources, and authorizes the belief that the Az-

² The Hon. Mountstuart Elphinstone has fallen into a similar train of thought, in a comparison of the Hindoo and Greek Mythology, in his "History of India," published since the remarks in the text were written. (See Book I. ch. 4.) The same chapter of this truly philosophic work suggests some curious points of resemblance to the Aztec religious institutions, that may furnish pertinent illustrations to the mind bent on tracing the affinities of the Asiatic and American races.

tecs had inherited from their predecessors a milder faith, on which was afterwards engrafted their own mythology. The latter soon became dominant, and gave its dark coloring to the creeds of the conquered nations, — which the Mexicans, like the ancient Romans, seem willingly to have incorporated into their own, — until the same funereal superstition settled over the farthest borders of Anahuac.

The Aztecs recognised the existence of a supreme Creator and Lord of the universe. They addressed him, in their prayers, as “the God by whom we live,” “omnipresent, that knoweth all thoughts, and giveth all gifts,” “without whom man is as nothing,” “invisible, incorporeal, one God, of *perfect perfection* and purity,” “under whose wings we find repose and a sure defence.” These sublime attributes infer no inadequate conception of the true God. But the idea of unity — of a being, with whom volition is action, who has no need of inferior ministers to execute his purposes — was too simple, or too vast, for their understandings; and they sought relief, as usual, in a plurality of deities, who presided over the elements, the changes of the seasons, and the various occupations of man.³ Of these, there were thirteen principal deities, and more than two hundred inferior; to each of whom some special day, or appropriate festival, was consecrated.⁴

³ Ritter has well shown, by the example of the Hindoo system, how the idea of unity suggests, of itself, that of plurality. History of Ancient Philosophy, Eng. trans., (Oxford, 1838,) book 2, ch. 1.

⁴ Sahagun, Hist. de Nueva España, lib. 6, passim. — Acosta, lib.

At the head of all stood the terrible Huitzilopotchli, the Mexican Mars; although it is doing injustice to the heroic war-god of antiquity to identify him with this sanguinary monster. This was the patron deity of the nation. His fantastic image was loaded with costly ornaments. His temples were the most stately and august of the public edifices; and his altars reeked with the blood of human hecatombs in every city of the empire. Disastrous, indeed, must have been the influence of such a superstition on the character of the people.⁵

5, ch. 9. — Boturini, *Idea*, p. 8, et seq. — Ixtlilxochitl, *Hist. Chich.*, MS., cap. 1. — Camargo, *Hist. de Tlascala*, MS.

The Mexicans, according to Clavigero, believed in an evil Spirit, the enemy of the human race, whose barbarous name signified "Rational Owl." (*Stor. del Messico*, tom. II. p. 2.) The curate Bernaldez speaks of the Devil being embroidered on the dresses of Columbus's Indians, in the likeness of an owl. (*Historia de los Reyes Católicos*, MS., cap. 131.) This must not be confounded, however, with the evil Spirit in the mythology of the North American Indians, (see Heckewelder's *Account*, ap. *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society*, Philadelphia, vol. I. p. 205,) still less, with the evil Principle of the Oriental nations of the Old World. It was only one among many deities, for evil was found too liberally mingled in the natures of most of

the Aztec gods, — in the same manner as with the Greek, — to admit of its personification by any one.

⁵ Sahagun, *Hist. de Nueva España*, lib. 3, cap. 1, et seq. — Acosta, lib. 5, ch. 9. — Torquemada, *Monarch. Ind.*, lib. 6, cap. 21. — Boturini, *Idea*, pp. 27, 28.

Huitzilopotchli is compounded of two words, signifying "humming-bird," and "left," from his image having the feathers of this bird on its left foot; (Clavigero, *Stor. del Messico*, tom. II. p. 17;) an amiable etymology for so ruffian a deity. — The fantastic forms of the Mexican idols were in the highest degree symbolical. See Gama's learned exposition of the devices on the statue of the goddess found in the great square of Mexico. (*Descripcion de las Dos Piedras*, (México, 1832,) Parte 1, pp. 34–44.) The tradition respecting the origin of this god, or, at least, his appearance on earth, is curious.

A far more interesting personage in their mythology was Quetzalcoatl, god of the air, a divinity who, during his residence on earth, instructed the natives in the use of metals, in agriculture, and in the arts of government. He was one of those benefactors of their species, doubtless, who have been deified by the gratitude of posterity. Under him, the earth teemed with fruits and flowers, without the pains of culture. An ear of Indian corn was as much as a single man could carry. The cotton, as it grew, took, of its own accord, the rich dyes of human art. The air was filled with intoxicating perfumes and the sweet melody of birds. In short, these were the halcyon days, which find a place in the mythic systems of so many nations in the Old World. It was the *golden age* of Anahuac.

He was born of a woman. His mother, a devout person, one day, in her attendance on the temple, saw a ball of bright-colored feathers floating in the air. She took it, and deposited it in her bosom. She soon after found herself pregnant, and the dread deity was born, coming into the world, like Minerva, all armed, — with a spear in the right hand, a shield in the left, and his head surmounted by a crest of green plumes. (See Clavigero, *Stor. del Messico*, tom. II. p. 19, et seq.) A similar notion in respect to the incarnation of their principal deity existed among the people of India beyond the Ganges, of China, and of Thibet. "Budh," says Milman, in his

learned and luminous work on the History of Christianity, "according to a tradition known in the West, was born of a virgin. So were the Fohi of China, and the Schakaof of Thibet, no doubt the same, whether a mythic or a real personage. The Jesuits in China, says Barrow, were appalled at finding in the mythology of that country the counterpart of the Virgo Deipara." (Vol. I. p. 99, note.) The existence of similar religious ideas in remote regions, inhabited by different races, is an interesting subject of study; furnishing, as it does, one of the most important links in the great chain of communication which binds together the distant families of nations.

From some cause, not explained, Quetzalcoatl incurred the wrath of one of the principal gods, and was compelled to abandon the country. On his way, he stopped at the city of Cholula, where a temple was dedicated to his worship, the massy ruins of which still form one of the most interesting relics of antiquity in Mexico. When he reached the shores of the Mexican Gulf, he took leave of his followers, promising that he and his descendants would revisit them hereafter, and then, entering his wizard skiff, made of serpents' skins, embarked on the great ocean for the fabled land of Tlapallan. He was said to have been tall in stature, with a white skin, long, dark hair, and a flowing beard. The Mexicans looked confidently to the return of the benevolent deity; and this remarkable tradition, deeply cherished in their hearts, prepared the way, as we shall see hereafter, for the future success of the Spaniards.⁶

⁶ Codex Vaticanus, Pl. 15, and Codex Telleriano-Remensis, Part 2, Pl. 2, ap. Antiq. of Mexico, vols. I., VI. — Sahagun, Hist. de Nueva España, lib. 3, cap. 3, 4, 13, 14. — Torquemada, Monarch. Ind., lib. 6, cap. 24. — Ixtlilxochitl, Hist. Chich., MS., cap. 1. — Gomara, Crónica de la Nueva España, cap. 222, ap. Barcia, Historiadores Primitivos de las Indias Occidentales, (Madrid, 1749,) tom. II.

Quetzalcoatl signifies "feathered serpent." The last syllable means, likewise, a "twin"; which furnished an argument for Dr. Siguen-

za to identify this god with the apostle Thomas, (Didymus signifying also a twin,) who, he supposes, came over to America to preach the gospel. In this rather startling conjecture he is supported by several of his devout countrymen, who appear to have as little doubt of the fact as of the advent of St. James, for a similar purpose, in the mother country. See the various authorities and arguments set forth with becoming gravity in Dr. Mier's dissertation in Bustamante's edition of Sahagun, (lib. 3, Suplem.,) and Veytia, (tom. I. pp.

We have not space for further details respecting the Mexican divinities, the attributes of many of whom were carefully defined, as they descended, in regular gradation, to the *penates* or household gods, whose little images were to be found in the humblest dwelling.

The Aztecs felt the curiosity, common to man in almost every stage of civilization, to lift the veil which covers the mysterious past, and the more awful future. They sought relief, like the nations of the Old Continent, from the oppressive idea of eternity, by breaking it up into distinct cycles, or periods of time, each of several thousand years' duration. There were four of these cycles, and at the end of each, by the agency of one of the elements, the human family was swept from the earth, and the sun blotted out from the heavens, to be again rekindled.⁷

160-200.) Our ingenious countryman, McCulloh, carries the Aztec god up to a still more respectable antiquity, by identifying him with the patriarch Noah. *Researches, Philosophical and Antiquarian, concerning the Aboriginal History of America*, (Baltimore, 1829,) p. 233.

⁷ Cod. Vat., Pl. 7-10, ap. *Antiq. of Mexico*, vols. I., VI. — *Ixtlilxochitl, Hist. Chich., MS., cap. 1.*

M. de Humboldt has been at some pains to trace the analogy between the Aztec cosmogony and that of Eastern Asia. He has tried, though in vain, to find a multiple which might serve as

the key to the calculations of the former. (*Vues des Cordillères*, pp. 202-212.) In truth, there seems to be a material discordance in the Mexican statements, both in regard to the number of revolutions and their duration. A manuscript before me, of *Ixtlilxochitl*, reduces them to three, before the present state of the world, and allows only 4394 years for them; (*Sumaria Relacion, MS., No. 1*;) Gama, on the faith of an ancient Indian MS., in *Boturini's Catalogue*, (VIII. 13,) reduces the duration still lower; (*Descripcion de las Dos Piedras, Parte 1, p. 49, et seq.*;) while the cycles of the Vat-

They imagined three separate states of existence in the future life. The wicked, comprehending the greater part of mankind, were to expiate their sins in a place of everlasting darkness. Another class, with no other merit than that of having died of certain diseases, capriciously selected, were to enjoy a negative existence of indolent contentment. The highest place was reserved, as in most warlike nations, for the heroes who fell in battle, or in sacrifice. They passed, at once, into the presence of the Sun, whom they accompanied with songs and choral dances, in his bright progress through the heavens; and, after some years, their spirits went to animate the clouds and singing birds of beautiful plumage, and to revel amidst the rich blossoms and odors of the gardens of paradise.⁸ Such was the heaven of the Aztecs; more refined in its character than that of the more polished pagan, whose elysium reflected only the martial sports, or sensual gratifications, of this life.⁹ In the destiny they assigned to the

ican paintings take up near 18,000 years.—It is interesting to observe how the wild *conjectures* of an ignorant age have been confirmed by the more recent *discoveries* in geology, making it probable that the earth has experienced a number of convulsions, possibly thousands of years distant from each other, which have swept away the races then existing, and given a new aspect to the globe.

⁸ Sahagun, Hist. de Nueva España, lib. 3, Apend.—Cod. Vat., ap. Antiq. of Mexico, Pl. 1-5. —

Torquemada, Monarch. Ind., lib. 13, cap. 48.

The last writer assures us, "that, as to what the Aztecs said of their going to hell, they were right; for, as they died in ignorance of the true faith, they have, without question, all gone there to suffer everlasting punishment"! Ubi supra.

⁹ It conveys but a poor idea of these pleasures, that the shade of Achilles can say, "he had rather be the slave of the meanest man on earth, than sovereign among

wicked, we discern similar traces of refinement; since the absence of all physical torture forms a striking contrast to the schemes of suffering so ingeniously devised by the fancies of the most enlightened nations.¹⁰ In all this, so contrary to the natural suggestions of the ferocious Aztec, we see the evidences of a higher civilization, inherited from their predecessors in the land.

Our limits will allow only a brief allusion to one or two of their most interesting ceremonies. On the death of a person, his corpse was dressed in the peculiar habiliments of his tutelar deity. It was strewn with pieces of paper, which operated as charms against the dangers of the dark road he was to travel. A throng of slaves, if he were rich, was sacrificed at his obsequies. His body was burned, and the ashes, collected in a vase, were preserved in one of the apartments of his house. Here we have

the dead." (Odys. A. 488-490.) The Mahometans believe that the souls of martyrs pass, after death, into the bodies of birds, that haunt the sweet waters and bowers of Paradise. (Sale's Koran, (London, 1825,) vol. I. p. 106.) — The Mexican heaven may remind one of Dante's, in its *material* enjoyments; which, in both, are made up of light, music, and motion. The sun, it must also be remembered, was a spiritual conception with the Aztec;

"He sees with other eyes than theirs; where
they
Behold a sun, he spies a deity."

¹⁰ It is singular that the Tuscan bard, while exhausting his invention in devising modes of bodily torture, in his "Inferno," should have made so little use of the *moral* sources of misery. That he has not done so might be reckoned a strong proof of the rudeness of the time, did we not meet with examples of it in a later day; in which a serious and sublime writer, like Dr. Watts, does not disdain to employ the same coarse machinery for moving the conscience of the reader.

successively the usages of the Roman Catholic, the Mussulman, the Tartar, and the Ancient Greek and Roman; curious coincidences, which may show how cautious we should be in adopting conclusions founded on analogy.¹¹

A more extraordinary coincidence may be traced with Christian rites, in the ceremony of naming their children. The lips and bosom of the infant were sprinkled with water, and "the Lord was implored to permit the holy drops to wash away the sin that was given to it before the foundation of the world; so that the child might be born anew."¹² We are reminded of Christian morals, in more than one of their prayers, in which they used regular forms. "Wilt thou blot us out, O Lord, for ever? Is this punishment intended, not for our reformation, but for our destruction?" Again, "Impart to us, out of thy great mercy, thy gifts, which we are not worthy to receive through our own merits." "Keep peace with all," says another petition;

¹¹ Carta del Lic. Zuazo, (Nov., 1521,) MS. — Acosta, lib. 5, cap. 8. — Torquemada, Monarch. Ind., lib. 13, cap. 45. — Sahagun, Hist. de Nueva España, lib. 3, Apend.

Sometimes the body was buried entire, with valuable treasures, if the deceased was rich. The "Anonymous Conqueror," as he is called, saw gold to the value of 3000 castellanos drawn from one of these tombs. Relatione d' un gentil' huomo, ap. Ramusio, tom. III. p. 310.

¹² This interesting rite, usually solemnized with great formality, in the presence of the assembled friends and relatives, is detailed with minuteness by Sahagun, (Hist. de Nueva España, lib. 6, cap. 37,) and by Zuazo, (Carta, MS.,) both of them eyewitnesses. For a version of part of Sahagun's account, see *Appendix, Part 1, note 26.*

"bear injuries with humility; God, who sees, will avenge you." But the most striking parallel with Scripture is in the remarkable declaration, that "he, who looks too curiously on a woman, commits adultery with his eyes." These pure and elevated maxims, it is true, are mixed up with others of a puerile, and even brutal character, arguing that confusion of the moral perceptions, which is natural in the twilight of civilization. One would not expect, however, to meet, in such a state of society, with doctrines as sublime as any inculcated by the enlightened codes of ancient philosophy.¹³

But, although the Aztec mythology gathered nothing from the beautiful inventions of the poet, nor from the refinements of philosophy, it was much indebted, as I have noticed, to the priests, who endeavoured to dazzle the imagination of the people by the most formal and pompous ceremonial. The influence of the priesthood must be greatest in an imperfect state of civilization, where it engrosses all

¹³ "¿Es posible que este azote y este castigo no se nos da para nuestra correccion y enmienda, sino para total destruccion y asolamiento?" (Sahagun, Hist. de Nueva España, lib. 6, cap. 1.) "Y esto por sola vuestra liberalidad y magnificencia lo habeis de hacer, que ninguno es digno ni merecedor de recibir vuestras larguezas por su dignidad y merecimiento, sino que por vuestra benignidad." (Ibid., lib. 6, cap. 2.) "Sed sufridos y reportados, que Dios bien os vé y responderá por vosotros, y él os vengará (á) sed humildes con todos, y con esto os hará Dios merced y tambien honra." (Ibid., lib. 6, cap. 17.) "Tampoco mires con curiosidad el gesto y disposicion de la gente principal, mayormente de las mugeres, y sobre todo de las casadas, porque dice el refran que él que curiosamente mira á la muger adultera con la vista." (Ibid., lib. 6, cap. 22.)

the scanty science of the time in its own body. This is particularly the case, when the science is of that spurious kind which is less occupied with the real phenomena of nature, than with the fanciful chimeras of human superstition. Such are the sciences of astrology and divination, in which the Aztec priests were well initiated; and, while they seemed to hold the keys of the future in their own hands, they impressed the ignorant people with sentiments of superstitious awe, beyond that which has probably existed in any other country,—even in ancient Egypt.

The sacerdotal order was very numerous; as may be inferred from the statement, that five thousand priests were, in some way or other, attached to the principal temple in the capital. The various ranks and functions of this multitudinous body were discriminated with great exactness. Those best instructed in music took the management of the choirs. Others arranged the festivals conformably to the calendar. Some superintended the education of youth, and others had charge of the hieroglyphical paintings and oral traditions; while the dismal rites of sacrifice were reserved for the chief dignitaries of the order. At the head of the whole establishment were two high-priests, elected from the order, as it would seem, by the king and principal nobles, without reference to birth, but solely for their qualifications, as shown by their previous conduct in a subordinate station. They were equal in dignity, and inferior only to the sovereign, who

rarely acted without their advice in weighty matters of public concern.¹⁴

The priests were each devoted to the service of some particular deity, and had quarters provided within the spacious precincts of their temple; at least, while engaged in immediate attendance there, — for they were allowed to marry, and have families of their own. In this monastic residence they lived in all the stern severity of conventual discipline. Thrice during the day, and once at night, they were called to prayers. They were frequent in their ablutions and vigils, and mortified the flesh by fasting and cruel penance, — drawing blood from their bodies by flagellation, or by piercing them with the thorns of the aloe; in short, by practising all those austerities to which fanaticism (to borrow the strong language of the poet) has resorted, in every age of the world,

“In hopes to merit heaven by making earth a hell.”¹⁵

¹⁴ Sahagun, *Hist. de Nueva España*, lib. 2, *Apend*; lib. 3, cap. 9. — Torquemada, *Monarch. Ind.*, lib. 8, cap. 20; lib. 9, cap. 3, 56. — Gomara, *Crón.*, cap. 215, ap. Barcia, tom. II. — Toribio, *Hist. de los Indios*, MS., Parte 1, cap. 4.

Clavigero says that the high-priest was necessarily a person of rank. (*Stor. del Messico*, tom. II. p. 37.) I find no authority for this, not even in his oracle, Torquemada, who expressly says, “There is no warrant for the assertion, however probable the fact

may be.” (*Monarch. Ind.*, lib. 9, cap. 5.) It is contradicted by Sahagun, whom I have followed as the highest authority in these matters. Clavigero had no other knowledge of Sahagun’s work than what was filtered through the writings of Torquemada, and later authors.

¹⁵ Sahagun, *Hist. de Nueva España*, *ubi supra*. — Torquemada, *Monarch. Ind.*, lib. 9, cap. 25. — Gomara, *Crón.*, ap. Barcia, *ubi supra*. — Acosta, lib. 5, cap. 14, 17.

The great cities were divided into districts, placed under the charge of a sort of parochial clergy, who regulated every act of religion within their precincts. It is remarkable that they administered the rites of confession and absolution. The secrets of the confessional were held inviolable, and penances were imposed of much the same kind as those enjoined in the Roman Catholic Church. There were two remarkable peculiarities in the Aztec ceremony. The first was, that, as the repetition of an offence, once atoned for, was deemed inexpiable, confession was made but once in a man's life, and was usually deferred to a late period of it, when the penitent unburdened his conscience, and settled, at once, the long arrears of iniquity. Another peculiarity was, that priestly absolution was received in place of the legal punishment of offences, and authorized an acquittal in case of arrest. Long after the Conquest, the simple natives, when they came under the arm of the law, sought to escape by producing the certificate of their confession.¹⁶

¹⁶ Sahagun, Hist. de Nueva España, lib. 1, cap. 12; lib. 6, cap. 7.

The address of the confessor, on these occasions, contains some things too remarkable to be omitted. "O merciful Lord," he says, in his prayer, "thou who knowest the secrets of all hearts, let thy forgiveness and favor descend, like the pure waters of heaven, to wash away the stains

from the soul. Thou knowest that this poor man *has sinned, not from his own free will*, but from the influence of the sign under which he was born." After a copious exhortation to the penitent, enjoining a variety of mortifications and minute ceremonies by way of penance, and particularly urging the necessity of instantly procuring *a slave for sacrifice* to the Deity, the priest concludes with

One of the most important duties of the priesthood was that of education, to which certain buildings were appropriated within the inclosure of the principal temple. Here the youth of both sexes, of the higher and middling orders, were placed at a very tender age. The girls were intrusted to the care of priestesses; for women were allowed to exercise sacerdotal functions, except those of sacrifice.¹⁷ In these institutions the boys were drilled in the routine of monastic discipline; they decorated the shrines of the gods with flowers, fed the sacred fires, and took part in the religious chants and festivals. Those in the higher school — the *Calmecac*, as it was called — were initiated in their traditional lore, the mysteries of hieroglyphics, the principles of government, and such branches of astronomical and natural science as were within the

inculcating charity to the poor. "Clothe the naked and feed the hungry, whatever privations it may cost thee; for remember, *their flesh is like thine, and they are men like thee.*" Such is the strange medley of truly Christian benevolence and heathenish abominations which pervades the Aztec litany, — intimating sources widely different.

¹⁷ The Egyptian gods were also served by priestesses. (See Herodotus, Euterpe, sec. 54.) Tales of scandal similar to those which the Greeks circulated respecting them, have been told of the Aztec virgins. (See Le Noir's dissertation,

ap. *Antiquités Mexicaines*, (Paris, 1834,) tom. II. p. 7, note.) The early missionaries, credulous enough certainly, give no countenance to such reports; and father Acosta, on the contrary, exclaims, "In truth, it is very strange to see that this false opinion of religion hath so great force among these young men and maidens of Mexico, that they will serve the Divell with so great rigor and austerity, which many of us doe not in the service of the most high God; the which is a great shame and confusion." Eng. Trans., lib. 5, cap. 16.

compass of the priesthood. The girls learned various feminine employments, especially to weave and embroider rich coverings for the altars of the gods. Great attention was paid to the moral discipline of both sexes. The most perfect decorum prevailed; and offences were punished with extreme rigor, in some instances with death itself. Terror, not love, was the spring of education with the Aztecs.¹⁸

At a suitable age for marrying, or for entering into the world, the pupils were dismissed, with much ceremony, from the convent, and the recommendation of the principal often introduced those most competent to responsible situations in public life. Such was the crafty policy of the Mexican priests, who, by reserving to themselves the business of instruction, were enabled to mould the young and plastic mind according to their own wills, and to train it early to implicit reverence for religion and its ministers; a reverence which still maintained its hold on the iron nature of the warrior, long after every other vestige of education had been effaced by the rough trade to which he was devoted.

To each of the principal temples, lands were

¹⁸ Toribio, Hist. de los Indios, MS., Parte 1, cap. 9. — Sahagun, Hist. de Nueva España, lib. 2, Apend. ; lib. 3, cap. 4-8. — Zurita, Rapport, pp. 123-126. — Acosta, lib. 5, cap. 15, 16. — Torquemada, Monarch. Ind., lib. 9, cap. 11-14, 30, 31.

good father last cited, "to eschew vice, and cleave to virtue, — according to their notions of them; namely, to abstain from wrath, to offer violence and do wrong to no man, — in short, to perform the duties plainly pointed out by natural religion."

"They were taught," says the

annexed for the maintenance of the priests. These estates were augmented by the policy or devotion of successive princes, until, under the last Montezuma, they had swollen to an enormous extent, and covered every district of the empire. The priests took the management of their property into their own hands; and they seem to have treated their tenants with the liberality and indulgence characteristic of monastic corporations. Besides the large supplies drawn from this source, the religious order was enriched with the first-fruits, and such other offerings as piety or superstition dictated. The surplus beyond what was required for the support of the national worship was distributed in alms among the poor; a duty strenuously prescribed by their moral code. Thus we find the same religion inculcating lessons of pure philanthropy, on the one hand, and of merciless extermination, as we shall soon see, on the other. The inconsistency will not appear incredible to those who are familiar with the history of the Roman Catholic Church, in the early ages of the Inquisition.¹⁹

¹⁹ Torquemada, *Monarch. Ind.*, lib. 8, cap. 20, 21. — Camargo, *Hist. de Tlascala*, MS.

It is impossible not to be struck with the great resemblance, not merely in a few empty forms, but in the whole way of life, of the Mexican and Egyptian priesthood. Compare Herodotus (*Euterpe*, *passim*) and Diodorus (lib. 1, sec. 73, 81). The English reader

may consult, for the same purpose, Heeren, (*Hist. Res.*, vol. V. chap. 2,) Wilkinson, (*Manners and Customs of the Ancient Egyptians*, (London, 1837,) vol. I. pp. 257–279,) the last writer especially, — who has contributed, more than all others, towards opening to us the interior of the social life of this interesting people.

The Mexican temples — *teocallis*, “houses of God,” as they were called — were very numerous. There were several hundreds in each of the principal cities, many of them, doubtless, very humble edifices. They were solid masses of earth, cased with brick, or stone, and in their form somewhat resembled the pyramidal structures of ancient Egypt. The bases of many of them were more than a hundred feet square, and they towered to a still greater height. They were distributed into four or five stories, each of smaller dimensions than that below. The ascent was by a flight of steps, at an angle of the pyramid, on the outside. This led to a sort of terrace, or gallery, at the base of the second story, which passed quite round the building to another flight of stairs, commencing also at the same angle as the preceding and directly over it, and leading to a similar terrace; so that one had to make the circuit of the temple several times, before reaching the summit. In some instances the stairway led directly up the centre of the western face of the building. The top was a broad area, on which were erected one or two towers, forty or fifty feet high, the sanctuaries in which stood the sacred images of the presiding deities. Before these towers stood the dreadful stone of sacrifice, and two lofty altars, on which fires were kept, as inextinguishable as those in the temple of Vesta. There were said to be six hundred of these altars, on smaller buildings within the inclosure of the great temple of Mexico, which, with those on the sacred edifices in other

parts of the city, shed a brilliant illumination over its streets, through the darkest night.²⁰

From the construction of their temples, all religious services were public. The long processions of priests, winding round their massive sides, as they rose higher and higher towards the summit, and the dismal rites of sacrifice performed there, were all visible from the remotest corners of the capital, impressing on the spectator's mind a superstitious veneration for the mysteries of his religion, and for the dread ministers by whom they were interpreted.

This impression was kept in full force by their numerous festivals. Every month was consecrated to some protecting deity; and every week, nay, almost every day, was set down in their calendar for some appropriate celebration; so that it is difficult to understand how the ordinary business of life could have been compatible with the exactions of religion. Many of their ceremonies were of a light and cheerful complexion, consisting of the national songs and dances, in which both sexes joined. Pro-

²⁰ Rel. d'un gent., ap. Ramusio, tom. III. fol. 307. — Camargo, Hist. de Tlascala, MS. — Acosta, lib. 5, cap. 13. — Gomara, Crón., cap. 80, ap. Barcia, tom. II. — Toribio, Hist. de los Indios, MS., Parte 1, cap. 4. — Carta del Lic. Zuazo, MS.

This last writer, who visited Mexico immediately after the Conquest, in 1521, assures us that

some of the smaller temples, or pyramids, were filled with earth impregnated with odoriferous gums and gold dust; the latter, sometimes in such quantities as probably to be worth a million of *castellanos*! (Ubi supra.) These were the temples of Mammon, indeed! But I find no confirmation of such golden reports.

cessions were made of women and children crowned with garlands and bearing offerings of fruits, the ripened maize, or the sweet incense of copal and other odoriferous gums, while the altars of the deity were stained with no blood save that of animals.²¹ These were the peaceful rites derived from their Toltec predecessors, on which the fierce Aztecs engrafted a superstition too loathsome to be exhibited in all its nakedness, and one over which I would gladly draw a veil altogether, but that it would leave the reader in ignorance of their most striking institution, and one that had the greatest influence in forming the national character.

Human sacrifices were adopted by the Aztecs early in the fourteenth century, about two hundred years before the Conquest.²² Rare at first, they became more frequent with the wider extent of their empire; till, at length, almost every festival was closed with this cruel abomination. These religious ceremonials were generally arranged in such a manner as to afford a type of the most prominent circumstances in the character or history of the deity

²¹ Cod. Tel.-Rem., Pl. 1, and Cod. Vat., passim, ap. Antiq. of Mexico, vols. I., VI. — Torquemada, Monarch. Ind., lib. 10, cap. 10, et seq. — Sahagun, Hist. de Nueva España, lib. 2, passim.

Among the offerings, quails may be particularly noticed, for the incredible quantities of them sacrificed and consumed at many of the festivals.

²² The traditions of their origin have somewhat of a fabulous tinge. But, whether true or false, they are equally indicative of unparalleled ferocity in the people who could be the subject of them. Clavigero, Stor. del Messico, tom. I. p. 167, et seq.; also Humboldt, (who does not appear to doubt them,) Vues des Cordillères, p. 95.

who was the object of them. A single example will suffice.

One of their most important festivals was that in honor of the god Tezcatlipoca, whose rank was inferior only to that of the Supreme Being. He was called "the soul of the world," and supposed to have been its creator. He was depicted as a handsome man, endowed with perpetual youth. A year before the intended sacrifice, a captive, distinguished for his personal beauty, and without a blemish on his body, was selected to represent this deity. Certain tutors took charge of him, and instructed him how to perform his new part with becoming grace and dignity. He was arrayed in a splendid dress, regaled with incense and with a profusion of sweet-scented flowers, of which the ancient Mexicans were as fond as their descendants at the present day. When he went abroad, he was attended by a train of the royal pages, and, as he halted in the streets to play some favorite melody, the crowd prostrated themselves before him, and did him homage as the representative of their good deity. In this way he led an easy, luxurious life, till within a month of his sacrifice. Four beautiful girls, bearing the names of the principal goddesses, were then selected to share the honors of his bed; and with them he continued to live in idle dalliance, feasted at the banquets of the principal nobles, who paid him all the honors of a divinity.

At length the fatal day of sacrifice arrived. The

term of his short-lived glories was at an end. He was stripped of his gaudy apparel, and bade adieu to the fair partners of his revelries. One of the royal barges transported him across the lake to a temple which rose on its margin, about a league from the city. Hither the inhabitants of the capital flocked, to witness the consummation of the ceremony. As the sad procession wound up the sides of the pyramid, the unhappy victim threw away his gay chaplets of flowers, and broke in pieces the musical instruments with which he had solaced the hours of captivity. On the summit he was received by six priests, whose long and matted locks flowed disorderly over their sable robes, covered with hieroglyphic scrolls of mystic import. They led him to the sacrificial stone, a huge block of jasper, with its upper surface somewhat convex. On this the prisoner was stretched. Five priests secured his head and his limbs; while the sixth, clad in a scarlet mantle, emblematic of his bloody office, dexterously opened the breast of the wretched victim with a sharp razor of *itztli*, — a volcanic substance, hard as flint, — and, inserting his hand in the wound, tore out the palpitating heart. The minister of death, first holding this up towards the sun, an object of worship throughout Anahuac, cast it at the feet of the deity to whom the temple was devoted, while the multitudes below prostrated themselves in humble adoration. The tragic story of this prisoner was expounded by the priests as the type of human

destiny, which, brilliant in its commencement, too often closes in sorrow and disaster.²³

Such was the form of human sacrifice usually practised by the Aztecs. It was the same that often met the indignant eyes of the Europeans, in their progress through the country, and from the dreadful doom of which they themselves were not exempted. There were, indeed, some occasions when preliminary tortures, of the most exquisite kind, — with which it is unnecessary to shock the reader, — were inflicted, but they always terminated with the bloody ceremony above described. It should be remarked, however, that such tortures were not the spontaneous suggestions of cruelty, as with the North American Indians; but were all rigorously prescribed in the Aztec ritual, and doubtless were often inflicted with the same compunctious visitings which a devout familiar of the Holy Office might at times experience in executing its stern decrees.²⁴ Women, as well as the other sex,

²³ Sahagun, *Hist. de Nueva España*, lib. 2, cap. 2, 5, 24, et alibi. — Herrera, *Hist. General*, dec. 3, lib. 2, cap. 16. — Torquemada, *Monarch. Ind.*, lib. 7, cap. 19; lib. 10, cap. 14. — *Rel. d' un gent.*, ap. Ramusio, tom. III. fol. 307. — Acosta, lib. 5, cap. 9–21. — *Carta del Lic. Zuazo*, MS. — *Relacion por el Regimiento de Vera Cruz*, (Julio, 1519,) MS.

Few readers, probably, will sympathize with the sentence of Torquemada, who concludes his

tale of woe by "coolly dismissing "the soul of the victim, to sleep with those of his false gods, in hell!" Lib. 10, cap. 23.

²⁴ Sahagun, *Hist. de Nueva España*, lib. 2, cap. 10, 29. — Gomara, *Crón.*, cap. 219, ap. Barcia, tom. II. — Toribio, *Hist. de los Indios*, MS., Parte 1, cap. 6–11.

The reader will find a tolerably exact picture of the nature of these tortures in the twenty-first canto of the "Inferno." The fan-

were sometimes reserved for sacrifice. On some occasions, particularly in seasons of drought, at the festival of the insatiable Tlaloc, the god of rain, children, for the most part infants, were offered up. As they were borne along in open litters, dressed in their festal robes, and decked with the fresh blossoms of spring, they moved the hardest heart to pity, though their cries were drowned in the wild chant of the priests, who read in their tears a favorable augury for their petition. These innocent victims were generally bought by the priests of parents who were poor, but who stifled the voice of nature, probably less at the suggestions of poverty, than of a wretched superstition.²⁵

The most loathsome part of the story — the manner in which the body of the sacrificed captive was disposed of — remains yet to be told. It was delivered to the warrior who had taken him in battle, and by him, after being dressed, was served up in

tastic creations of the Florentine poet were nearly realized, at the very time he was writing, by the barbarians of an unknown world. One sacrifice, of a less revolting character, deserves to be mentioned. The Spaniards called it the "gladiatorial sacrifice," and it may remind one of the bloody games of antiquity. A captive of distinction was sometimes furnished with arms, and brought against a number of Mexicans in succession. If he defeated them all, as did occasionally happen, he was al-

lowed to escape. If vanquished, he was dragged to the block and sacrificed in the usual manner. The combat was fought on a huge circular stone, before the assembled capital. Sahagun, *Hist. de Nueva España*, lib. 2, cap. 21. — *Rel. d'un gent.*, ap. Ramusio, tom. III. fol. 305.

²⁵ Sahagun, *Hist. de Nueva España*, lib. 2, cap. 1, 4, 21, et alibi. — Torquemada, *Monarch. Ind.*, lib. 10, cap. 10. — Clavigero, *Stor. del Messico*, tom. II. pp. 76, 82.

an entertainment to his friends. This was not the coarse repast of famished cannibals, but a banquet teeming with delicious beverages and delicate viands, prepared with art, and attended by both sexes, who, as we shall see hereafter, conducted themselves with all the decorum of civilized life. Surely, never were refinement and the extreme of barbarism brought so closely in contact with each other!²⁶

Human sacrifices have been practised by many nations, not excepting the most polished nations of antiquity;²⁷ but never by any, on a scale to be compared with those in Anahuac. The amount of victims immolated on its accursed altars would stagger the faith of the least scrupulous believer. Scarcely any author pretends to estimate the yearly sacrifices throughout the empire at less than twenty thousand, and some carry the number as high as fifty!²⁸

²⁶ Carta del Lic. Zuazo, MS.—Torquemada, Monarch. Ind., lib. 7, cap. 19.—Herrera, Hist. General, dec. 3, lib. 2, cap. 17.—Sahagun, Hist. de Nueva España, lib. 2, cap. 21, et alibi.—Toribio, Hist. de los Indios, MS., Parte 1, cap. 2.

²⁷ To say nothing of Egypt, where, notwithstanding the indications on the monuments, there is strong reason for doubting it. (Comp. Herodotus, Euterpe, sec. 45.) It was of frequent occurrence among the Greeks, as every school-boy knows. In Rome, it was so common as to require to be interdicted by an express law, less

than a hundred years before the Christian era,—a law recorded in a very honest strain of exultation by Pliny; (Hist. Nat., lib. 30, sec. 3, 4;) notwithstanding which, traces of the existence of the practice may be discerned to a much later period. See, among others, Horace, Epod., In Canidiam.

²⁸ See Clavigero, Stor. del Messico, tom. II. p. 49.

Bishop Zumarraga, in a letter written a few years after the Conquest, states that 20,000 victims were yearly slaughtered in the capital. Torquemada turns this into 20,000 *infants*. (Monarch. Ind., lib. 7, cap. 21.) Herrera,

On great occasions, as the coronation of a king, or the consecration of a temple, the number becomes still more appalling. At the dedication of the great temple of Huitzilopotchli, in 1486, the prisoners, who for some years had been reserved for the purpose, were drawn from all quarters to the capital. They were ranged in files, forming a procession nearly two miles long. The ceremony consumed several days, and seventy thousand captives are said to have perished at the shrine of this terrible deity! But who can believe that so numerous a body would have suffered themselves to be led unresistingly like sheep to the slaughter? Or how could their remains, too great for consumption in the ordinary way, be disposed of, without breeding a pestilence in the capital? Yet the event was of recent date, and is unequivocally attested by the best informed historians.²⁹ One fact may be considered certain. It was

following Acosta, says 20,000 victims on a specified day of the year, throughout the kingdom. (Hist. General, dec. 2, lib. 2, cap. 16.) Clavigero, more cautious, infers that this number may have been sacrificed annually throughout Anahuac. (Ubi supra.) Las Casas, however, in his reply to Sepulveda's assertion, that no one who had visited the New World put the number of yearly sacrifices at less than 20,000, declares that "this is the estimate of brigands, who wish to find an apology for their own atrocities, and that the

real number was not above 50"! (Œuvres, ed. Llorente, (Paris, 1822,) tom. I. pp. 365, 386.) Probably the good Bishop's arithmetic, here, as in most other instances, came more from his heart than his head. With such loose and contradictory *data*, it is clear that any specific number is mere conjecture, undeserving the name of calculation.

²⁹ I am within bounds. Torquemada states the number, most precisely, at 72,344. (Monarch. Ind., lib. 2, cap. 63.) Ixtlilxochitl, with equal precision, at

customary to preserve the skulls of the sacrificed, in buildings appropriated to the purpose. The companions of Cortés counted one hundred and thirty-six thousand in one of these edifices!³⁰ Without attempting a precise calculation, therefore, it is safe to conclude that thousands were yearly offered up, in the different cities of Anahuac, on the bloody altars of the Mexican divinities.³¹

Indeed, the great object of war, with the Aztecs, was quite as much to gather victims for their sacrifices, as to extend their empire. Hence it was, that an enemy was never slain in battle, if there were a chance of taking him alive. To this circumstance the Spaniards repeatedly owed their preservation.

80,400. (Hist. Chich., MS.) *¿Quien sabe?* The latter adds, that the captives massacred in the capital, in the course of that memorable year, exceeded 100,000! (Loc. cit.) One, however, has to read but a little way, to find out that the science of numbers — at least, where the party was not an eyewitness — is any thing but an exact science with these ancient chroniclers. The Codex Tel.-Remensis, written some fifty years after the Conquest, reduces the amount to 20,000. (Antiq. of Mexico, vol. I. Pl. 19; vol. VI. p. 141, Eng. note.) Even this hardly warrants the Spanish interpreter in calling king Ahuitzotl a man “of a mild and moderate disposition,” *templada y benigna condicion!* Ibid., vol. V. p. 49.

³⁰ Gomara states the number on the authority of two soldiers, whose names he gives, who took the trouble to count the grinning horrors in one of these Golgothas, where they were so arranged as to produce the most hideous effect. The existence of these conservatories is attested by every writer of the time.

³¹ The “Anonymous Conqueror” assures us, as a fact beyond dispute, that the Devil introduced himself into the bodies of the idols, and persuaded the silly priests that his only diet was human hearts! It furnishes a very satisfactory solution, to his mind, of the frequency of sacrifices in Mexico. Rel. d’ un gent., ap. Ramusio, tom. III. fol. 307.

When Montezuma was asked, "why he had suffered the republic of Tlascala to maintain her independence on his borders," he replied, "that she might furnish him with victims for his gods"! As the supply began to fail, the priests, the Dominicans of the New World, bellowed aloud for more, and urged on their superstitious sovereign by the denunciations of celestial wrath. Like the militant churchmen of Christendom in the Middle Ages, they mingled themselves in the ranks, and were conspicuous in the thickest of the fight, by their hideous aspect and frantic gestures. Strange, that, in every country, the most fiendish passions of the human heart have been those kindled in the name of religion!³²

The influence of these practices on the Aztec character was as disastrous as might have been expected. Familiarity with the bloody rites of sacrifice steeled the heart against human sympathy, and begat a thirst for carnage, like that excited in the Romans

³² The Tezcucan priests would fain have persuaded the good king Nezahualcoyotl, on occasion of a pestilence, to appease the gods by the sacrifice of some of his own subjects, instead of his enemies; on the ground, that, not only they would be obtained more easily, but would be fresher victims, and more acceptable. (Ixtililxochitl, Hist. Chich., MS., cap. 41.) This writer mentions a cool arrangement entered into by the allied monarchs with the republic of Tlascala and her confederates. A battle-field was marked out, on which the troops of the hostile nations were to engage at stated seasons, and thus supply themselves with subjects for sacrifice. The victorious party was not to pursue his advantage by invading the other's territory, and they were to continue, in all other respects, on the most amicable footing. (Ubi supra.) The historian, who follows in the track of the Tezcucan Chronicler, may often find occasion to shelter himself, like Ariosto, with "Mettendolo Turpin, lo metto anch' io."