Living Antiquity:  
Lafitau's *Moeurs des sauvages amériquains*  
and the Religious Roots of the Enlightenment  
Science of Man  

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At the close of the eighteenth century, Joseph-Marie Degerando wrote: "The traveler-philosopher who sails to the farthest corners of the Globe, travels, in fact, along the road of time. He travels in the past. Every step he takes is a century passed. The islands he reaches are for him the cradle of human society."¹ Degerando's words express a perception of the relationship between European and non-European societies that had become widespread by the time he wrote. Native American, African, and Oceanic cultures, instead of being seen as radically separate from those of the West, were incorporated into a panorama of universal history as the functional equivalents of the European past. By visiting exotic locales and observing their primitive inhabitants, the Western traveler could, in a sense, go back in time and see firsthand how his own remote ancestors had once lived. Although this progressive, universalist view of history is most commonly associated with the Enlightenment, its early elaboration owes much to the Jesuit missionary-scholar Joseph-François Lafitau, whose massive study *Moeurs des sauvages amériquains, comparées aux moeurs des premiers temps* (1724) offered a specific methodology for the interpretation and comparison of disparate cultures.

Lafitau drew upon five years of "fieldwork," and he based

his descriptions of Iroquois practices—which ranged from religious and funeral rites to marriage customs, hunting, and warfare—upon direct observation. For a work ostensibly about Native Americans, however, Lafitau spent a great deal of time discussing little-known peoples of classical antiquity. In contrast to his eyewitness descriptions of the Iroquois, Lafitau's knowledge of these peoples was indirect; most of it came from often unreliable Greek observers, such as Herodotus, Strabo, and Diodorus Siculus. As a scholar positioned midway between Renaissance humanism and the Enlightenment sciences humaines, Lafitau based his claims to authority both on his status as direct observer of New World peoples and on his mastery of the canon of classical texts.²

The running parallel between contemporary America and classical antiquity reveals Lafitau's broader ambitions, which he stated clearly in the title of his work. By comparing the moeurs, or customs, of contemporary Native Americans with those of ancient primitive peoples, Lafitau sought above all to prove three points. First, he sought to demonstrate that all of the peoples of the world stemmed from a common origin as described in Genesis. Second, he hoped to prove that all of the religions of the world were derived from the primitive natural religion of man, which had been revealed to Adam and his descendants by God himself. This pure and simple faith, Lafitau maintained, was subsequently corrupted following the destruction of the tower of Babel and the dispersion of peoples. Finally, Lafitau sought to construct a unitary and progressive universal history in which today's "savage" peoples offered a glimpse of how the ancestors of civilized people had once lived, while civilized Christian Europe provided an example of what today's "savages" could

² Joseph-François Lafitau, *Moeurs des sauvages amériquains, comparées aux moeurs des premiers temps* (Paris, 1724), 1:3-4. While early modern humanists such as Lafitau accepted the classical historians as authorities, modern scholars have questioned their credibility, citing their reliance upon hearsay and tendency to blend history and mythology. See Margaret Hogden, *Early Anthropology in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971), 18-40.
become.

For two centuries before LaFitau, Europeans had grappled with a series of questions presented by the discovery of America. As Anthony Grafton has shown, Columbus’ discovery did not bring about a dramatic break with existing scholastic and humanist views of the world, but rather initiated a long period of accommodation and efforts to integrate the new discoveries into a familiar synthesis. Medieval cosmographies, fantastic voyages, and encyclopedic works such as Pierre D’Ailly’s *Imago mundi* had maintained that the far corners of the earth were peopled by monstrous races—cyclopes, dog-headed men, giants, and other figures on the margins of humanity. Long after Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda had argued against Bartolomé de Las Casas that the natives of America were "natural slaves" in the Aristotelian sense, Native Americans continued to be seen as savages, essentially different from and inferior to Europeans. Even the "noble savage" trope defined Native Americans primarily in terms of what they lacked: no clothing, no government, no private property, even no religion. The discovery of America also presented the question of the origin of its inhabitants, as Christian doctrines required that all of humanity descend from the three sons of Noah: Shem, Ham, and Japhet. Several iconoclasts, including Paracelsus, Giordano Bruno, and Isaac La Peyrère, had argued that the Americans formed part of a separate creation, thus proving that the Deluge was not universal and that Adam was not the common father of all mankind. In response, the Spanish Jesuit Martín del Río denounced polygenesis in 1606. "[N]othing can be more mad, more blasphemous, and more distant from the true faith," he wrote,

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noting that, if Adam were not the father of all men, the sacrifice of Christ, the "second Adam," would not have universal significance for man's salvation.\(^5\)

Over the next few centuries, commentators advanced countless fanciful theories of how America came to be inhabited, introducing a bewildering array of unlikely progenitors. Most derived the Native Americans from Old Testament peoples: the children of Japhet, the Canaanites, or the ten lost tribes of Israel. Francisco López de Gómara, chronicler of the conquest of Mexico, preferred classical sources, citing Plato to argue that Native Americans were the survivors of Atlantis.\(^6\) The sixteenth-century *History of Cambria* traced the origin of Native Americans from the Welsh prince Madoc, who had disappeared to the west in the twelfth century.\(^7\) The learned Dutch jurist Hugo Grotius developed a particularly convoluted theory in which North Americans derived from Norwegians, the Maya from Ethiopians, the Amazonian peoples from the Malays, and the Incas from the Chinese.\(^8\) Even at the time, scholars found Grotius's arguments absurd and flimsy. Jean de Laet contested them in print, sparking a spirited exchange in the mid-seventeenth century. Although in 1590 José de Acosta had correctly speculated that the earliest Americans had crossed a land bridge from Asia in the far north, this topic continued to inspire speculation and debate for centuries.

In the century before Lafitau's work, French critics of Catholic orthodoxy and royal absolutism often cited Native Americans as a counter-model to existing French society. Michel de Montaigne questioned the attribution of barbarism to Native

\(^5\) Quoted in Gliozzi, *Adam*, 257.

\(^6\) Ibid., 161. López de Gómara, as chaplain to the conquistador Hernán Cortés, shaped the "official" narrative of the Spanish conquest based upon direct testimony, but never himself set foot in the New World.

\(^7\) Ibid., 28-29.

\(^8\) Hugo Grotius, *On the Origin of the Native Races of America* (Edinburgh, 1884). Gliozzi's extensive discussion of the debate suggests that Grotius' agenda in writing the treatise was to justify the claim of his patron, the King of Sweden, to ownership of North America. Gliozzi, *Adam*, 373–75.
Americans, contrasting their supposed savagery to French atrocities such as the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre and advancing a cosmopolitan cultural relativism in which no culture had a privileged vantage point to judge another.9 Pierre Bayle disputed the universality of religious belief, arguing that a well-regulated society of atheists was possible and that some primitive peoples were without religion.10 Finally, the Baron de Lahontan had popularized the noble savage trope in a philosophical dialogue with the Huron chief Adario (a fictional character based loosely on a real Huron leader named Kondiaronk), who stressed the superiority of the natural simplicity and rational religion of the Native Americans to the artificial, alienating culture of Europe.11

It was to combat such impious and, to his eyes, false representations that Lafitau took up his pen. Criticizing both Bayle and Lahontan specifically, Lafitau argued that the Native Americans were neither atheists nor rational Deists. Rather, theirs was a form of polytheism reminiscent of classical antiquity, that is, a false religion, but one which reflected vague, distant memories of divine revelation. "All the foundations of the ancient religion of the savages of America," Lafitau asserted, "is the same as that of the barbarians who first occupied Greece and later spread throughout Asia."12 Lafitau further argued that all forms of paganism, both ancient and modern, were corruptions of the natural religion of the first patriarchs, spread by the sons of Noah to the ends of the world.

While Enlightenment writers would later contrast "natural religion" to what they viewed as the corrupted teachings of the official church, the concept had deep roots in the Christian tradition. The idea of *prisca theologia* or "ancient theology,"

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11 Louis-Armand Lom d'Arce, Baron de Lahontan, *Dialogues de Monsieur le Baron de Lahontan et d'un Sauvage, dans l'Amérique* (Amsterdam, 1704).
which first emerged in late antiquity with Eusebius and Clement of Alexandria and was revived by the Renaissance scholars Marsilio Ficino and Giovanni Pico, maintained that the pagan philosophers and sages of antiquity, notably Plato, Pythagoras, and the legendary Hermes Trismegistus, had received some aspects of the true religion. While these arguments were originally articulated to convert pagans by reconciling Christianity and Neo-Platonism, they were interwoven with beliefs in magic and astrology and were often accused, as D. P. Walker notes, of "Platonizing Christianity instead of Christianizing Plato."\textsuperscript{13}

During the Counter-Reformation, as Paul Nelles has shown, Catholic theologians increasingly turned to "natural religion" arguments in their struggle against Protestant biblical literalism. Following the Council of Trent, Cardinal Bellarmine argued that the spiritual heritage of Christianity comprised not only written scriptures, but also unwritten religious traditions and customs; he cited as an example the fact that religion had existed without sacred texts during the period from Adam to Moses.\textsuperscript{14} During the seventeenth century, Richard Simon went even further, arguing that tradition was essential because the literal meaning of the Bible was often absurd or contradictory. While Simon's intention had been to deny that individuals could find spiritual truth through reading the Bible for themselves without the intermediary of the Catholic clergy and its traditions, his suggestion that the Bible was not literally true appeared dangerous to many of his fellow clergymen, including Bishop Bossuet, who convinced Louis XIV’s council to burn Simon's book and to prohibit its circulation in France.\textsuperscript{15}


\textsuperscript{15} Richard Simon, \textit{Histoire critique du Vieux Testament} (Rotterdam,
The concept of *prisca theologia* was developed in relation to ancient Egypt and Greece, and was initially taken to mean that the sages of classical paganism had "stolen" their doctrines from the chosen people around the time of Moses or shortly thereafter. In the early modern period, however, the geographic and temporal horizons of "natural religion" were dramatically expanded. Jesuit missionaries to China, in their efforts to convert the mandarin elite, argued that Confucian doctrines were derived from the true faith, perhaps spread to the East by Noah or his sons following the Deluge and thus predating the Mosaic codification of the law. The Jesuit order, in particular, embraced the concept of natural religion as proof of the *consensus gentium* or the universality of belief in the supreme being and the immortality of the soul. Given the prevalence of such views within his order, it was natural that Lafitau should have turned to the idea of an original "primitive religion" of the antediluvian patriarchs in order to prove his theory that all world religions derived from a common source.

Throughout his text Lafitau presented arguments to bolster his case, citing numerous passages from Genesis that indicated that patriarchs preceding Moses (notably Noah and Abraham) were in direct communication with the deity and honored him with sacrifices. Lafitau also cited biblical examples of Gentile practitioners of the natural religion, such as Melchizedek, Jethro, and Job, to prove that divine revelation had not been limited to the ancestors of the Jews. He further appealed to chronology, observing that the dispersion of peoples after the destruction of the Tower of Babel preceded Moses by several centuries; he

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asserted as well that the other peoples encountered by the Israelites in Moses' time (the Egyptians and Canaanites, for example) clearly had religions of their own that could not plausibly be seen as deformations of early Judaism. Finally, Lafitau argued that his interpretation alone could prove the universality of religious belief, for if religion had begun with Moses, as Pierre-Daniel Huet had argued, "it would be true that before Moses, all of the Gentiles were without religion and without gods."17

Unlike many of his contemporaries, Lafitau relied less upon what he called the "unsustainable" practice of speculative etymology than upon comparing the customs of contemporary Native Americans with those of early antiquity. Lafitau's extended residence in New France allowed him to produce a more thorough and insightful description of Iroquois society than had previously been available for the indigenous peoples of North America. He was the first European observer to describe the matrilineal structure of Iroquois society, which he took as proof of a connection between the Iroquois and the matrilineal Lycians of antiquity. He also found similarities between the snowshoes of the peoples of New France and the footwear used by the ancient peoples of the Caucasus as described by Strabo; between the canoes used by native peoples along the St. Lawrence and the boats of antiquity; and between the scalping of enemies by Native Americans and the head-hunting of the ancient Scythians. He even declared that "nothing more greatly resembles the Caduceus of Mercury than [the peace pipe]."18

In his emphasis on what he perceived as cultural similarities, Lafitau, like many travel writers before him, followed what Anthony Pagden has called the "principle of attachment . . . to assimilate the unknown to the known."19 Within Lafitau's work, the comparative function served to disenchant a distant land that many Europeans still associated with the monstrous or

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17 Lafitau, Moeurs, 1:12.
18 Ibid., 2:222, 257-58, 325.
19 Pagden, European Encounters, 24.
marvelous. Lafitau denied, for example, that monsters such as giants, pygmies, or dog-headed men really existed. He argued instead that such stories were based on unreliable hearsay testimony that had been accepted as fact by Herodotus, Pliny, and Diodorus, then repeated reflexively by subsequent writers. Lafitau's take on the *Acephales* indicates his general approach: "One should not believe that these people have absolutely no heads, but rather that they have them . . . practically at the level of the shoulders, and hidden by hair."\(^{20}\) Lafitau further suggested that such deformities could be the result of human modifications, such as foot-binding among the Chinese or the flattening of foreheads among some Native American peoples. The effect of such relativization, as Georges Tissot notes, is to suggest that "men resemble one another, and their oddities are only superficial,"\(^ {21}\) creating, in the words of Marie-Christine Pioffet, "an archaeology of the primitive . . . to explore human diversity."\(^ {22}\)

Lafitau's model for the comparative analysis of cultures contains a number of internal contradictions. One of the central contradictions revolves around the question of time. Markus Krist has written that Lafitau's method "is clearly not situated in an evolutionary perspective,"\(^ {23}\) while Michel de Certeau argues that Lafitau's work sought "to kill time in order to produce . . . absolute knowledge detached from history."\(^ {24}\) On the other hand, the fact that Lafitau presents the European past as culturally equivalent to the American present suggests an evolutionary model in which European societies are literally more "advanced"


along a common path than their New World counterparts. The reviewer of the Mémoires de Trévoux remarked upon Lafitau's evolutionary assumptions, noting that, "seeing that the distances of space were entirely analogous to distances of time, [he] found the Americans to be . . . in the same relation of distance from us as the ancient Romans, Greeks, Gauls, [and] Persians."\(^{25}\) Although Lafitau refers to the Aztecs and the Incas and cites Garcilaso de la Vega, who drew an extended parallel between the Inca and Roman empires in his Comentarios reales,\(^ {26}\) the presence of advanced civilizations in the Americas does not cause Lafitau to qualify his association of Native Americans with prehistory. On the contrary, as Sabine MacCormack has noted, Lafitau "tended to conflate into one single whole what he read about Aztec and Inca religion and what he observed himself in Canada," with the result that even "the Incas and Aztecs came to be imbued with an aura of the primitive they had not possessed earlier."\(^ {27}\) While Lafitau considered Europe superior to America primarily because of its knowledge of the true faith, he also recognized its technological and organizational superiority, making little effort to trace these factors to religious causes. In this regard, Lafitau anticipates what Michèle Duchet has called the partage des savoirs between history and anthropology that emerged in the late eighteenth century and that constructed a dichotomy between the dynamic Europeans, protagonists of a progressive universal history, and the backward, static Other, whom Hegel dismissed as "people without history."\(^ {28}\)

Of course, Lafitau could not have seen himself as a

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\(^ {25}\) Mémoires de Trévoux, September 1724, 1569.

\(^ {26}\) Garcilaso de la Vega, Comentarios reales (1609; repr., Buenos Aires: Espasa-Calpe, 1987). Garcilaso compares Cuzco to Rome in order to defend the Incas against charges of barbarism, but does not claim a common origin for the two imperial peoples.


predecessor of Hegel; rather, he operated within the intellectual paradigms of earlier Jesuit missionary-scholars such as Matteo Ricci and Acosta. While Lafitau presented Native American society as currently static and frozen in time, he did not, as would Hegel, see it as essentially immobile and outside of history. On the contrary, the nature of the missionary enterprise assumed that conversion and assimilation could bridge the divide between Europe and the Americas. The New World seemed to offer a vast blank canvas upon which the indefatigable fathers could seek to construct new Christian utopias, most famously in the Jesuit commonwealth in colonial Paraguay, but to a lesser extent along the frozen frontiers of New France.

Just as the (European) past could be invoked to explain the (American) present, the present could be invoked to fill the lacunae of the recorded past. Certeau declares that Lafitau "wants to read signs . . . He needs 'figures that speak.' And indeed, where those of antiquity are silent, destroyed by Time, he turns toward the Savages, 'monuments' too of the primeval age, and still 'speaking.'"29 The Mémoires de Trévoux noted with enthusiasm this unexpected utility of the discovery of the New World, calling it "a library . . . in which one discovers the entire history of the earliest times" and asking, "When America was discovered, who would have believed that it was antiquity that was reborn before our eyes? Could one have believed that in the depths of its barbarity it carefully conserved, perhaps without the slightest alteration, all the premises of the history of the human race?"30

Fellow Jesuits praised Lafitau's work. The Mémoires de Trévoux gave extensive coverage to Lafitau's project, announcing the initial subscription to finance the work's publication and dedicating three articles to favorable reviews of its contents.31 The missionary and historian Pierre-François-Xavier de Charlevoix praised the Moeurs in his own Histoire de

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29 Certeau, "Writing," 42.
30 Mémoires de Trévoux, November 1724, 2001-03.
31 Mémoires de Trévoux, February 1725, 238-39.
la Nouvelle France, writing that "the parallel between ancient peoples and the Americans appears quite ingenious, and demonstrates a great knowledge of antiquity." Secular observers, however, took a less favorable view. Voltaire mocked Lafitau's methods and conclusions in his Essai sur les moeurs, writing, "Lafitau has the Americans come from the ancient Greeks, and here are his reasons. The Greeks had fables, some Americans have them as well. The first Greeks went hunting, the Americans do so as well. The first Greeks had oracles, the Americans have sorcerers. The ancient Greeks danced at their festivals, the Americans dance, too. One must admit that these reasons are convincing." After being widely read and discussed in the eighteenth century, Lafitau's work was largely forgotten in the nineteenth; twentieth-century anthropologists of Iroquois society rediscovered him, first as an ethnographic source, then as a methodological predecessor. While not incorrect, these latest assessments run the risk of anachronism, transforming the missionary into a social scientist. Scholars today who present Lafitau as a pioneer of ethnography ignore or downplay his extended discussions of classical antiquity, focusing instead on his "thick description" of Iroquois religious rites, governing institutions, and daily practices. Yet such discussions, for Lafitau himself and for his eighteenth-century readers, would have been of interest not for their own sake, but only as data supporting his broader diffusionist theory of universal history.

Lafitau was "writing against time" in another sense, as during his own age, intellectual paradigms were already shifting away from the single-origin, diffusionist model of the origin of religion and society. D. P. Walker observes that, "with the great increase in knowledge about the past and present religions of exotic peoples, what had begun as just one element in a Christian apologia . . . had begun to grow lushly and, like a parasitic plant, to swamp and eventually kill its host. The Ancient Theology had started to turn into the comparative study of religions, with Christianity as only one member of a very large class.\textsuperscript{35} Frank Manuel has likewise noted that the eighteenth century witnessed a shift in the comparative study of religion away from biblically rooted interpretations, which traced all religions and all peoples back to a putative ancestor in Genesis, toward a new emphasis on the separate, autonomous development of different religions in different places and times in which "myth-making was a stage in the history of reason common to all peoples."\textsuperscript{36} One of the most influential works in framing the Enlightenment theory of comparative religion, Bernard de Fontenelle's \textit{De l'origine des fables}, was published in the same year as Lafitau's \textit{Moeurs}.\textsuperscript{37} Alfonso Iacono stresses the importance of the differences between these authors' assumptions, writing that "while Lafitau postulates a sole origin from which peoples' times unfold genetically . . . for Fontenelle the principle that unites men and peoples . . . [is] the uniformity of human nature."\textsuperscript{38} The work of Fontenelle and of his successors later in the century marked a fundamental intellectual shift, as the roots of religion were no longer sought in a single moment of divine revelation, but rather

\textsuperscript{35} Walker, \textit{Ancient Theology}, 215.
were located in man's common need to make sense of the world.

As a result of this epistemic shift in the interpretation of religion, the method of cross-cultural comparison that Lafitau endorsed would ultimately prove dangerous to the cause he served, constituting yet another *machine de guerre* in the arsenal of Enlightenment anticlericalism. French censors recognized its implications; in 1740, they denied permission to Lafitau to publish an expanded version of his chapter on primitive religion as a separate book. Lafitau himself drew clear distinctions between different religions: the supreme truth of Christianity, the lesser truths of Mosaic Judaism, the Adamic natural religion that had preceded it, and the false doctrines of pagan idolatry, which were distortions of the true religion inspired by demonic influence and human folly. This distinction, however, rested upon the assumption that the "true" religion was the product of divine revelation rather than human construction. In practice, Lafitau restricted himself to comparing different forms of paganism while seeking to separate the wheat of divine truth from the chaff of error. Nothing inherent in Lafitau's method, however, necessarily privileged Christianity or excluded it from comparative analysis; rather, he based his truth claims on the comparative analysis of historical and anthropological data, an open-ended and secular model that others could use to reach sharply different conclusions. Without belief in divine revelation, there was no reason to place Christianity above any of the other religions of the contemporary world as all could be perceived either as imperfect reflections of an underlying truth or as the products of human imagination. The notion of a simple and austere religion of nature, corrupted by priestcraft and imposture, would become a recurrent trope for the Deists of the Enlightenment. Lafitau's work thereby forms an intellectual bridge of sorts between the sacred chronologies of the seventeenth century and the *histoires philosophiques* of the

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eighteenth.

Some of Lafitau's successors would likewise use the past to explain the present—and vice versa. In *La culte des dieux fétiches*, Charles de Brosses argued that, during an early and barbaric stage of their development, the ancient Egyptians had developed a religion similar to the "fetishism" of West Africa, centered on the veneration of totems such as sacred animals, locations, and objects, and that they had maintained that religion long after they became civilized. De Brosses stated that "what is today the religion of black Africans and other barbarians was once that of ancient peoples."\(^{40}\) For de Brosses, as for Lafitau, contemporary "primitives" held the key to unlock the mysteries of antiquity that had perplexed modern scholars. Unlike Lafitau, however, de Brosses rejected the notion that paganism and fetishism were corruptions of a pure, natural religion; he declared instead that human nature dictated that religion should become more, rather than less, abstract and philosophical with the passage of time and the advancement of civilization. While de Brosses explicitly affirmed the truth of Christianity as revealed religion and excluded it from his analysis, his model of "fetishism" emerging from primitive man's struggle to comprehend and control the forces of nature abandoned the attempt to prove the "unanimous consent" of peoples in belief in God that was central to Lafitau's purposes, adopting instead Fontenelle's naturalistic explanation.

Other, more radical writers, notably Nicolas-Antoine Boulanger and Charles-François Dupuis, would use comparison to undermine the privileged position of Christianity and to deny its divine inspiration, placing it on the same level as ancient and modern paganism. Boulanger argued that the biblical Deluge was a real historical event that had nearly destroyed humanity and left its survivors in a state of primordial fear of the power of nature, which they personified in the form of angry, vengeful gods whom they sought to appease and placate through acts of sacrifice and contrition. Memories of the Deluge remained

\(^{40}\) Charles de Brosses, *La culte des dieux fétiches* (Paris, 1760), 182.
within ancient religious traditions in the form of apocalyptic prophecies, the importance attributed to eclipses and comets as evil omens, and allegorized legends of battles between angels and demons, giants and demigods, and so forth. Boulanger wrote that this fearful, superstitious state led mankind to become "the dupe, the plaything, and the victim of all fanatics and all impostors," suffering under priestly theocracies and absolute monarchies that mirrored the despotic order of heaven on earth.\footnote{Nicolas-Antoine Boulanger, \textit{Recherches sur l'origine du despotisme oriental} (London, 1763), 52, 69. On Boulanger's life and work, see Paul Sadrin, \textit{Nicolas-Antoine Boulanger (1722–1759) ou avant nous le déluge} (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1986).} Boulanger charged that primitive theocracies had debased humanity, making it "slavish, barbaric, and savage," and leading to the opposing extremes of anarchy and despotism.

A generation later, against the backdrop of the Revolution, Charles-François Dupuis launched a still bolder attack on Christianity as a false and oppressive religion. Dupuis began by giving a rationalist, naturalistic explanation of the religious impulse, arguing that "the word God seems destined to express the idea of the universal, ever-active force that gives movement to all of nature."\footnote{Charles-François Dupuis, \textit{De l'origine de tous les cultes} (1794; repr., Paris, 1869), 1.} He then went on to compare religious traditions from different cultures, arguing that the principal deities, including Christ as well as Krishna, Osiris, and Mithra, were simple allegories of the sun and other celestial bodies. Having convincingly demonstrated (to his own satisfaction, at least) that the Christian story of the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Jesus was but a common solar myth, Dupuis triumphantly declared: "[I]t will appear proven that the Christians are no more than worshippers of the Sun, and that their priests hold the same religion as those of Peru whom they have had slaughtered."\footnote{Dupuis, \textit{De l'origine}, 191.} Dupuis concluded with a resounding denunciation of religion as an "epidemic" of "collective madness," from which philosophers are called upon to free
While the works of such later authors as de Brosses, Boulanger, and Dupuis reached radically different conclusions from that of Lafitau, they are, to a great degree, logical elaborations of his comparative model for the study of religion and society. Lafitau wrote to defend the historical truth of Genesis, the universality of belief in God and in the immortality of the soul, and the common descent of all mankind from Adam by way of the sons of Noah. To prove these points, he constructed a model of universal history that was unitary and progressive, with all peoples past and present situated along a common evolutionary ladder from savagery to civilization. Lafitau sought to draw a firm distinction between the direct line of transmission of true revealed religion and the errors and distortions of the natural religion of the pagans. Yet that distinction, based on faith in the truth of Christianity, could not logically be proven by the comparative method itself, which intentionally emphasized the parallels, rather than the differences, between Christian and pagan practice. Ultimately, scholars of comparative religion in the Enlightenment and beyond would use Lafitau's method against the grain, as it were, to desacralize Christianity, conserving cross-cultural comparison and belief in universal progress while rejecting biblical literalism and divine revelation as sources for religious belief. The emerging disciplines of history and anthropology would draw from the same sources for methods and inspiration, unconsciously adopting many of their predecessors' assumptions regarding the divide between historic and prehistoric societies.

44 Dupuis, De l'origine, 267-68.
the linear and progressive character of history, and the significance of culture in establishing lines of descent and influence between peoples. The new secular *sciences humaines*, seeking to document and analyze the human experience across space and time, were themselves the descendants of the spiritual universalism of the Jesuits that their proponents so often decried.