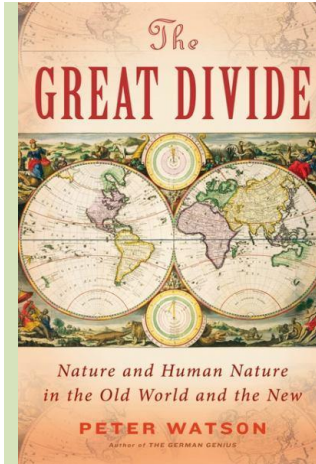


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### **Peter Watson**

*The Great Divide: Nature and Human Nature in the Old World and the New*

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### **Nicholas RUSSELL**

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Human sacrifice, cannibalism, practices of bloodletting, and the permanent institutionalization of brutal rituals of torture fall into the category of the nearly unspeakable. Peter Watson, in his recent book *The Great Divide: Nature and Human Nature in the Old World and the New*, delves fearlessly into these taboo subjects, especially as they pertain to perceptions of the pre-columbian Americas. Starting from the premise that cultures differ owing to environmental constraints, Watson explores how ancient Americans and Eurasians formed distinctive religious traditions and ideologies. At another level, Watson investigates the interplay of environment, mythology, and religion, arguing, in effect, that myths exist to perpetuate awareness of major past catastrophes and other definitive events, while religions are institutionalized attempts to control complex environmental problems. The book plausibly posits a number of ways that divergent environments may have driven historical change in the Old and New worlds in different ways. It also has a number of weaknesses, particularly in paucity of evidence, awkward organization, and astonishingly ignorant periodization of the medieval and late-medieval eras.

Starting with humans' first emergence from Africa roughly 125,000 BP, Part One traces the human journey from Africa to Alaska, in the end highlighting two hypotheses: that the first Americans came from shamanistic, Siberian stock and the rival notion that they came from a group colloquially termed the "beachcombers," who had wended around the southern and southeastern Asian coasts. Using an impressive array of archaeological, geological,

anthropological, biological, and linguistic evidence, Watson argues persuasively that both migrations happened, though at different times—the first (the Siberians), ca. 14000 BP, and the second around 8000 BP. Perhaps most interesting about this section is the way that the author integrates ancient religious practices and myths with objective, scientific types of evidence such as recovered artifacts. In particular, he draws out similarities between Siberian shamanism—“primarily concerned with [...] the idea that one has to pay for the souls of the animals one needs to kill in order to survive, and where the shaman flies [in soul or in spirit] to the owner of the animals to negotiate a price” (48)—and New World religions, with their deep interest in altered states of consciousness and unrelenting preoccupation with human sacrifice.

Parts Two and Three delineate broad climatological and cultural differences between the two hemispheres, which Watson links to religious practices and the development of ideology. He focuses on the role of the El Niño-Southern Oscillation (ENSO), a periodically recurring event in which a massive body of warm ocean water moves eastward toward Peru, bringing high winds and intense, devastating storms to much of the American coast. ENSO has been increasing in frequency since 8000 BP, causing in Eurasia a weakening of the monsoons (with Arabia and Mesopotamia, for example, turning into desert), while making American weather wetter, more unpredictable and more prone to violence. Indeed, Watson points out, Mesoamerica is regularly hit by tropical storms from the Atlantic as well as the Pacific, while both Meso- and South America are part of the Ring of Fire and contain an abnormally large concentration of volcanoes.

Watson’s argument as it pertains to the New World boils down to this: that the earliest Americans (in his parlance, referring strictly to a few Mesoamerican groups) derived their religious practices from Siberian shamanism and deployed them to contend with the vagaries of an already unpredictable climate that was worsening over time. Through the combination of bloodspilling and the ritual administration of sacred drugs, elite Mesoamericans entered altered states of consciousness, connected to the World Tree, and accessed divine realms. During these experiences, humans took on divine, animalian personas or even became animals for a short time. Connections particularly were sought with the jaguar, serpent, and falcon. Watson discusses several examples of Meso- and South American art characterized by half-human, half-jaguar beings—or, he argues, of humans transforming into jaguars. He also mentions a small amount of evidence directly associating sacrificial victims with adverse weather events.

In these assertions, Watson relies too much on sweeping generalizations about problems that have not yet been thoroughly addressed in the secondary literature. For example, he desperately needs to consult a global, comparative history of violent weather (to verify the “extremeness” of Mesoamerican patterns) as well as a far-ranging inventory of sacrificial victims whose deaths can be linked to specific events. On these data rests a major part of his thesis, that ENSO *caused* Old World religions to gravitate toward fertility and New World religions toward propitiation of the gods (to avert disaster). Whether this difference

between the hemispheres exists at all (regardless of how it arose) is a further issue that will spur acrimonious debate.

Our intrepid author finds more solid ground when he turns to botany. Following other scholars, Watson counts between eighty and one hundred hallucinogens that occurred naturally in the New World, whereas a far smaller number (ten or less) were indigenous to the Old. He uses these facts to argue that New World religions fostered more “vivid” otherworldly experiences. The word choice is sloppy and also tragic owing to the damage it might do to the underlying idea, which is quite appealing. Heightened states of consciousness can be induced without hallucinogens, for example via meditation, dancing, bloodletting, or fasting. But it is conceivable, as Watson posits, that the mere prevalence of hallucinogens may have had a fundamental effect on the nature of New World religions. This roughly parallels Diamond’s argument that the predominance of grain-based, beer-drinking civilizations in the Old World owed in part to the large number of domesticable grains available. Might not New Worlders have become especially reliant on hallucinogens owing to the fortuitous convergence of the interest in soul flight and the widespread availability of substances assisting that quest? This is not to argue that environment determines culture but to recognize that it is constrained by abundance or scarcity of resources.

For Watson, the Axial Age (ca. 1<sup>st</sup> millennium BC), which saw the widespread destruction of ancient empires by hill- and steppe peoples, was the defining moment for the Old World and the era when the two hemispheres first diverged in a substantive way. He argued that the crucial difference was the presence in the Old World of horses, cattle, sheep, and other domesticable animals, whose ability to survive on sparse grasses made life on the central Eurasian steppes possible. Over the long term, the Axial Age invasions by mounted steppe warriors had a beneficent effect: from the ashes arose the founders of several major religions; human sacrifice was gradually discontinued; and moral systems resembling those still widely respected today first came to be widely practiced. The New World, by contrast, had no Axial Age because there were no significant domesticable animals.

Watson is at his best when summarizing trends in the archaeological remains left by ancient civilizations or explicating the vagaries of New World sacrificial rituals. In the late-medieval era, he makes blunders that, while they do not substantially affect his primary arguments, hurt his work as a whole. His interpretation of the significance of major religions appears grossly inadequate. For example, Islam, despite its enormous importance, is mentioned only in passing. Too, Watson’s periodization is deeply flawed. He asserts that Christian Europe overtook the rest of the Old World as early as the eleventh through thirteenth centuries, and no later than the fifteenth—the collapse of the Mongol Empire, the spread of the Black Death, and China’s withdrawal from overseas trade being critical factors setting back other civilizations. But this analysis ignores at least a decade and a half of major advances in global history, the upshot of which is the seemingly incontrovertible conclusion that the West’s “rise” to global prominence occurred much later. (See for example Fernández-Armesto, *Millennium* [1995]; Gunder Frank, *ReORIENT* [1998];

Pomeranz, *Great Divergence* [2000]; Hobson, *Eastern Origins of Western Civilisation* [2004]; and Goody, *Theft of History* [2006].)

In style and organization, improvements can be made. Watson's writing is discursive and vaguely reminiscent of a lecture, or series of lectures, which sometimes results in an unpolished presentation. He often presents quotations without in-line authorial attribution, and block quotations are more common than they should be. Worse, important authors in several fields are not mentioned; in addition to the global historians mentioned above, Watson appears to be ignorant of important scholars of Mesoamerica such as Knight and Restall. As for organization, chapters are divided partly by chronology, but headings and introductions contain little indication of the period under consideration. As a result, the reader may not immediately realize that a particular chapter specifically covers, for example, 1–1000 AD; this information is buried in the text. Sometimes, indeed, as in chapter 22, "Monasteries and Mandarins, Muslims and Mongols," the title is entirely misleading: the chapter addresses the rise of Christian Europe, and its namesakes appear only in passing.

There is also a missed opportunity: beyond the maps (which, incidentally, contain several omissions and errors) and a few sketches of Mesoamerican art, there are few illustrations. One wonders who is more to blame—author or publisher. Regardless, additional imagery would constitute a substantial augmentation. Watson draws heavily on religious symbolism, an arcane subject highly susceptible to artistic depictions.

This book leaves the reader with mixed impressions. Watson's arguments about ENSO, the Axial Age, and hallucinogens provoke and fascinate—I think that these make the book worthwhile, in spite of any other considerations. He presents intriguing evidence, which I did not here have time to discuss, about what he alleges were the maritime and vegetal (not grain-based) underpinnings of the economy of the earliest Mesoamerican cities at Aspero and Caral, which he compares to Mesopotamia's Eridu. I also am sympathetic to his attempts to demonstrate that myths are memories of major events from the deep past. On the other hand, there are many points at which Watson overextends himself: he is very familiar with a few cultures at the expense of many others; he is better at ancient than at modern history; and he seems unaware of a number of authors whose work is highly pertinent. These limitations significantly affect his reasoning and considerably diminish his contribution.