

Christ and the Conquest: Bartolomé de Las Casas and the Clerical Resistance to Spanish Colonialism

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The Spanish conquest of the Americas has created an ongoing debate among historians, politicians, and activists. Though the European discovery and conquest of the Americas altered the course of world history, the Spanish conquest has created the biggest controversies. Historian Lewis Hanke wrote that no other European nation, at any time, debated the justice of their actions so strongly or persistently.^[1] The debate grew from the Spanish priests in the New World and their concern for the Native Americans they evangelized. Bartolomé de Las Casas, a Dominican friar, led these concerned priests and devoted over half of his life to defending the Native Americans.

Las Casas' writings and arguments caused an uproar among Spanish intellectuals. Many Spaniards tried to justify the conquistadors and their actions as well as the resulting *encomienda* system, which was based on Indian slavery. Many others, however, joined Las Casas. Las Casas and his supporters had a major impact on the New World, both on Spanish law and colonial practice. Bartolomé de Las Casas' works and the clerical resistance to Spanish colonialism he led ultimately tempered the Spaniards' – and other Europeans' – colonial practices.

Las Casas became increasingly concerned with the plight of Native Americans after arriving in the Americas. He crossed the Atlantic at the age of twenty-eight, coming to the Caribbean as a priest in 1502.^[2] Later, in 1512, he took part in the conquest of Cuba. While there he received an *encomienda*.^[3] However, deeply troubled by the actions of the conquistadores and the *encomenderos*, he renounced his holdings in 1514 and committed himself to defending the Native Americans. He then gave a series of sermons in the Caribbean denouncing the conquistadores as sinful for their actions in the Caribbean. He continued his campaign for Native Americans, even after he returned to Spain later in his life. During these last years of his life, he kept up his work by debating leading Spanish intellectuals about the New World.

In addition to speaking against the Spaniards' treatment of the Native Americans, Las Casas wrote constantly, appealing to the King of Spain to change colonial practices. His depictions of Spanish atrocities in his histories clearly affected Spanish monarchs and intellectuals across Europe. Las Casas related the countless horrors that he and other

priests witnessed in the Americas in his many works, the most notable of which was the *Brevísima Relación de la Destrucción de Las Indias*, or *The Brief Relation of the Destruction of the Indies*. In this work, sent to the King of Spain in 1542 and later published throughout Europe, Las Casas estimated that more than twelve million Native Americans had died at the hands of the Spaniards.^[4] He also graphically told of the Spaniards' atrocities. In Nicaragua, for example, Las Casas wrote that more than four thousand Spaniards killed an Indian every day.^[5] These claims and statistics led him to call the Spanish conquest nothing short of a "holocaust."^[6]

Though his writings were very moving, Las Casas' history was not exactly accurate. The number of people that he claimed were killed seems very high. According to him, the Spaniards killed thirty thousand Native Americans during a massacre at Cholula.^[7] As was mentioned above, he also claimed that the Spaniards killed a total of twelve million Indians. However, many historians have discounted these claims. According to Latin American historian Peter Bakewell, Las Casas overestimated Native American populations. At the time of discovery, Bakewell says that Native American population estimates have ranged from 8.4 million to 112 million.^[8] Thus, Las Casas' estimated death toll has exceeded some estimates of the New World's entire 1492 population. Though the lower estimates may not be accurate, Las Casas' numbers still seem unrealistically high. Bakewell even refers to some of the Dominican's assertions as "notorious."^[9]

Las Casas exaggerated land areas as well. He claimed that Trinidad was as large as Sicily and that Trinidad was more fertile.^[10] However, a simple look at a world map shows that Trinidad is in fact only about one-fifth of Sicily's size.^[11] Las Casas continually made similar errors throughout his histories, both in estimating populations and land area. He did not make these exaggerations because he was trying to deceive the Spanish. He truly believed that twelve million people had died and that Trinidad was that large. Accurate or not, his numbers still related his images of death and destruction much more clearly than if he had not included them.

Las Casas' supporters and allies raised many similar concerns. Fray Antonio de Montesinos, who actually preceded Las Casas, first spoke against the Spanish conquistadores in 1511. During a Christmas sermon, he decried their practices in the New World, warning that they had jeopardized their salvation. Speaking with a great moral force, he proclaimed:

I have come up on this pulpit, I who am a voice of Christ crying in the wilderness of this island, and therefore it behooves you to listen, not with careless attention, but will [sic] all your hearts and senses, so that you may hear it; for this is going to be...the harshest and hardest and most awful and most dangerous that ever you expected to hear.... [Y]ou are in mortal sin, that you live and die in it, for the cruelty and tyranny you use in

dealing with these innocent people.^[12]

Montesinos made his message very clear, threatening the Spaniards with eternal punishment for their excesses. He also urged the Spaniards to give up their *encomiendas* to redress their sins, as Las Casas later did. In fact, Montesinos' teachings, as well as Las Casas' own Biblical studies, convinced him to give up his lands in 1514.^[13]

Many Dominican friars also supported the crusade to save the Indians. After Montesinos and Las Casas spoke about the New World atrocities, other Dominicans in the New World followed them by refusing absolution to any *encomenderos* who would not free the Indians in their charge.^[14] The Dominicans in Spain helped Las Casas compile and publish both his writings and the documents he brought back to Spain. Still other Dominicans spread his message of restraint and evangelism throughout Spain's American possessions.

Las Casas' works, even with the exaggerated numbers he put forth, did not convince many Europeans. Most still thought the Spanish conquests were neither wrong or excessive. Juan Ginés de Sepulveda, a humanist scholar and a leading proponent of Spanish colonialism, became Las Casas' primary intellectual adversary after 1550.^[15] The two conducted a series of debates over the justice of Spanish claims to the New World and the morality of the conquest. Sepulveda argued that the horrors of Native American religions compelled the Spaniards to take action against the Indians. As he said in a discussion of the wars of conquest:

Greater evils than the death of the innocent followed from that war. His Lordship (Las Casas) has the figures all wrong. In New Spain, we are told, by all those who return and took care to find out, that twenty thousand persons a year were sacrificed.... [T]he war halted the loss of those countless souls who save themselves by converting to the faith, now, or later on.^[16]

Being a humanist, he also saw the Native Americans as barbaric. In order to civilize the Native Americans, Sepulveda thought, the Spaniards needed to conquer them. As a result, Sepulveda claimed that the Native Americans were slaves by nature and that the wars of conquest were therefore justified.^[17]

Other Spaniards disputed Las Casas' ideas during the sixteenth century, often for political reasons. Humanist lawyer Vasco de Quiroga, a proponent of the *encomiendas*, was one such dissenter. He advocated *encomiendas* and quasi-utopian Indian communities, claiming that they were the most effective way to bring the Native Americans out of their barbarism and under Spanish tutelage.^[18] Like Sepulveda, Quiroga clearly believed that the Native Americans were barbarians and that the Spaniards had a duty to civilize them.

The debate's dynamics proved rather interesting. Wolfgang Reinhard considered the opposing sides in the sixteenth-century debates. In his study, he argued that most humanists, like Sepulveda, believed that Spanish

colonialism was just. These men, the leading scholars of the time, were usually not affiliated with the Church. Many defenders of the Indians, however, were members of the clergy.^[19] Reinhard notes the irony that the humanists, considered the intellectual leaders of the Renaissance, embraced more traditional thought in the debates. They did so by supporting the Pope's right to distribute lands in the New World and the Spaniards' right to savagely conquer these lands in the name of the Gospel. Meanwhile, strangely enough, the friars, who are supposedly the main supporters of the Church and traditional thought, vehemently protested Spanish colonial policies.^[20]

These debates did not simply disappear with the end of the sixteenth century or with the end of Spanish colonialism in the New World, though. Critics in later times have discounted Las Casas' works, mainly to discredit the points that he made. Many historians have discounted his works to create a more tempered view of the Spanish conquest. Argentine historian Rómulo D. Carbia even accused Las Casas of falsifying documents to prove his points; however, Carbia died before he could prove his accusations.^[21] Even though no one has proven Las Casas actually did falsify his work, Carbia's claims still remain. Further, other historians have been quick to note his bias. Again, though his bias does not negate his ideas, it does hurt his credibility as a literal historian.^[22]

Las Casas, despite his inconsistencies, still has many defenders. Some historians have said that he did not intend to convey absolute accuracy as much as he wanted to help his readers visualize the destruction and desolation that the Spaniards left in the wake of their New World conquests. One historian in particular, Ramón Iglesia, noted as much in his writings about Las Casas, remarking that the priest's version of history "is history written to prove something."^[23] Clearly, if read with a sort of suspended disbelief, Las Casas made the conquest of the Indies every bit the horrendous chapter in history that he wanted to convey to his readers.

The emotion and power of Las Casas and his supporters' works were definitely not lost on the Spaniards. In fact, a 1512 transcription of a Montesinos sermon created such an uproar in the Spanish court that King Ferdinand commissioned six theologians to formulate an adequate reply to Montesinos' accusations. Las Casas' work caused even greater uneasiness in the Spanish court. Both his relation of atrocities in the New World and Dominican arguments that the Indians were in fact reasonable human beings led Charles V to pass many new laws in 1542. In these laws, he included many provisions protecting Native Americans. Most notably, Charles outlawed Indian slavery and the *encomienda* in the Americas. He passed these laws because, according to him, "The preservation, the fostering of the Indians, has always been the primary purpose of our policy and that they receive instruction in matters concerning our Catholic faith, and that they be treated exactly as the free peoples they are, as our vassals."^[24]

Though the *encomienda* ban never took effect in the Americas (it was repealed shortly thereafter), the spirit of

the ban as well as the other provisions of the laws showed the effects that Las Casas and his supporters had upon Charles V. The arguments he heard were very convincing. The brutal imagery and the conclusions that the priests drew from them deeply concerned the King, and the laws he made for administrating the New World show as much.^[25]

Bartolomé de Las Casas and others who thought like him changed Spanish colonialism during the sixteenth century. As historian Lewis Hanke noted, the Dominicans made evangelization, the supposed initial motive for the Spanish conquest of the New World, important. They did so because the Spaniards had largely ignored evangelization until the Dominicans began resisting Spanish policies in the New World.^[26] Indeed, this conclusion seems to hold true. Before Montesinos and Las Casas first questioned Spanish methods and practices in the New World, no real resistance to the Spaniards' tactics existed. Afterward, debates concerning Spanish colonialism began in earnest. These debates have lasted well beyond the sixteenth century, as people wrestle with the questions the Dominicans raised even today. Without the Dominican resistance, the Spanish crown likely would have heard little about the atrocities committed in the New World. As a result, the reforms in colonial law that came from Charles V in the 1500s would likely not have happened. The priests who spoke against Spanish practice served as a sort of national conscience, imploring the Spanish to focus on evangelism, the one colonial goal the Spaniards had neglected for so long.

^[1] Lewis Hanke, *Bartolomé de Las Casas: An Interpretation of His Life and Writings* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1951), 2.

^[2] Peter Bakewell, *A History of Latin America: Empires and Sequels, 1450-1930* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, Inc., 1997), 146; and Guillermo Cabrera Leiva, "Bartolomé de Las Casas: Champion of Human Rights," *Américas (Organization of American States)* 31, no. 4 (1979): 32.

^[3] Many detractors use Las Casas' time as an *encomendero* to argue that he was a hypocrite. However, he was quick to renounce his lands. Further, being an *encomendero* does not disqualify him as an Indian advocate. V.I. Lenin, who ran a factory before he became the first Communist leader in the Soviet Union, was in a similar situation. Even though he had been a member of the Marxist bourgeoisie, he still spoke with great vigor against the same bourgeoisie during the Russian Revolution.

^[4] Bartolomé de Las Casas, *The Devastation of the Indies: A Brief Account*, trans. Herma Briffault (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), 31.

^[5] *Ibid.*, 57.

^[6] *Ibid.*, 70.

^[7] *Ibid.*, 59.

^[8] Bakewell, *A History of Latin America*, 151.

^[9] *Ibid.*

^[10] Las Casas, *The Devastation of the Indies*, 92-3.

^[11] To be more precise, Trinidad has a land area of 1,864 square miles, while Sicily has a land area of 9,926 square miles. - *Microsoft Encarta Online Encyclopedia*, 2002 ed., [database online]; available from: <<http://encarta.msn.com>>.

^[12] Lewis Hanke, *The Spanish Struggle for Justice in the Conquest of America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1949), 17.

^[13] *Ibid.*, 20.

[14] Peter Riga, "Columbus, the Church, and the Indies: A Reflection," *Journal of Religious Thought* 49, no. 2 (Winter 1992/Spring 1993): 39.

[15] Wolfgang Reinhard, "Missionaries, Humanists and Natives in the Sixteenth-Century Spanish Indies – a Failed Encounter of Two Worlds," *Renaissance Studies* 6, No. 3-4 (September 1992): 367.

[16] Juan Ginés de Sepulveda, "Eleventh Objection," in *Indian Freedom: The Cause of Bartolomé de Las Casas, 1484-1566: A Reader*, trans. Francis Patrick Sullivan (Kansas City: Sheed & Ward, 1995), 290.

[17] Bakewell, *A History of Latin America*, 148; and Leiva, "Bartolomé de Las Casas," 35.

[18] Quiroga's ideas opposed Las Casas also because Quiroga's colonies in the New World (where he served as a bishop) were established on a model very different from Las Casas' ideal of farmers coexisting with the Indians. Hanke, *The Spanish Struggle for Justice*, 54; and Reinhard, "Missionaries, Humanists, and Natives in the Sixteenth-Century Spanish Indies," 367.

[19] Reinhard, "Missionaries, Humanists, and Natives in the Sixteenth-Century Spanish Indies," 367.

[20] *Ibid.*

[21] Hanke, *Bartolomé de Las Casas*, 51.

[22] *Ibid.*, 52.

[23] *Ibid.*, 59.

[24] Charles V, King of Spain, "Selections from the New Laws of 1542," in *Indian Freedom*, 248.

[25] One of the strongest conclusions that Las Casas drew involved the King directly. He argued that the King's salvation would come into question if he continued to allow the atrocities committed against the Indians in the New World. Hanke, *Bartolomé de Las Casas*, 45.

[26] *Ibid.*, 9.