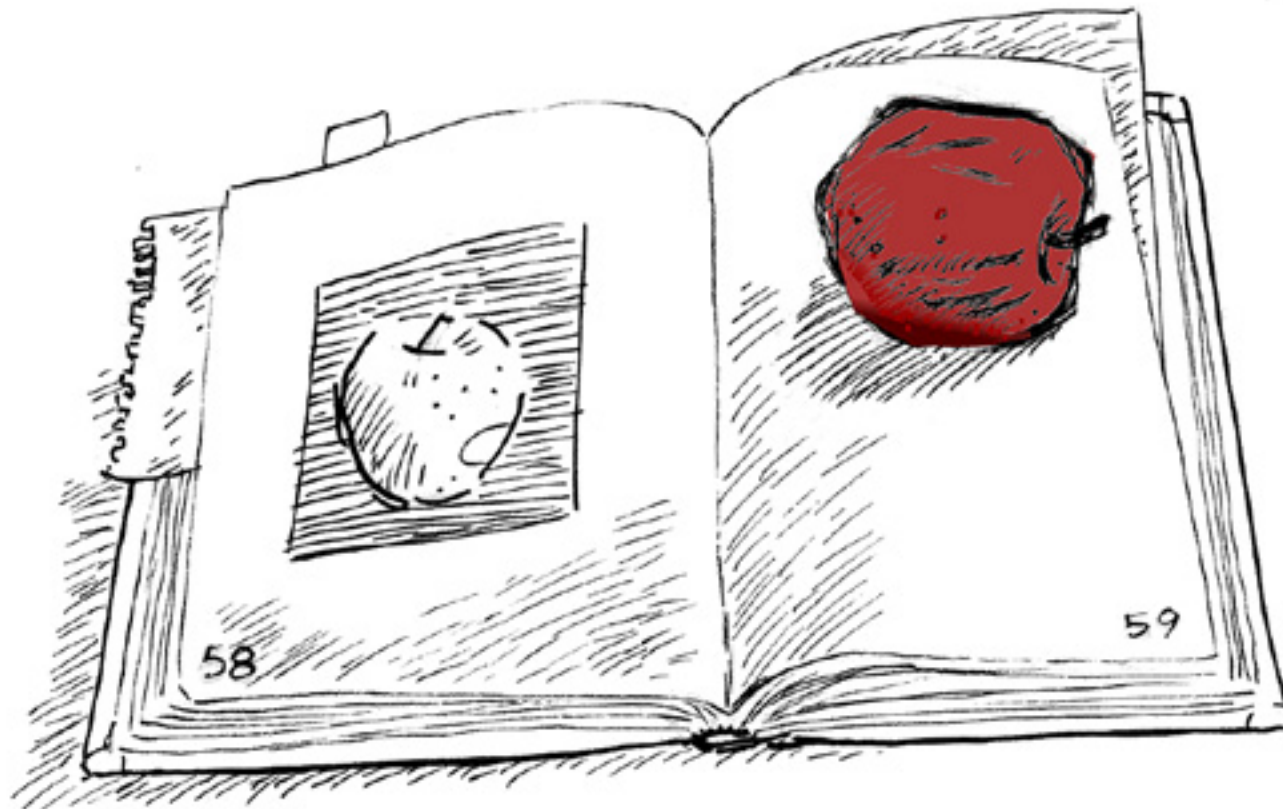


Bartolomé de las Casas



overview

Bartolomé de las Casas (1484 – 1566) was a Sixteenth Century Spanish Dominican priest and early humanitarian for Native Americans.

- Las Casas edited and preserved the now only existing record of the journal of Christopher Columbus. The original versions have been lost.
- As a settler in the New World he witnessed, and was driven to oppose, the torture and genocide of the Natives by Spanish colonists.
- Through his various writings he exposed complexities of Western Expansion into the New World.
- During his lifetime he was accused of producing biased reports and creating sensationalism by those who opposed his reforms.
- Tried twice to create missionaries co-existing with Native Americans in what is now northern Venezuela; both ventures failed.

Basic Tenets

Las Casas wanted coexistence with all people under Spanish rule.

- viewed Native Americans as misguided humans, not savages, nor animals as other claimed to justify their inhumane actions
- believed Spain was legitimate owner of the Americas due to the papal bull of 1493 by Pope Alexander VI: *Inter caetera*
 - > this decree was established after Christopher Columbus returned to Spain from his first trip to the Americas
 - > in simplest terms this papal decree allowed the Spanish Catholic rulers Ferdinand and Isabella sovereignty over all the new land discovered in the Atlantic, so long as the territory found was not already under another a Christian prince
 - > the papal bull sparked intense debate by all countries (Catholic and non-Catholic) who wanted to achieve territory for their own finances

Concerns

A major issue for Las Casas involves Spain's behavior in the territory.

- due to the mistreatment of the Indians, the conquistadors were not following the papal decree sufficiently
- treating the Natives as animals is an act against God's laws and the laws of nature
- the mistreatment and acts of genocide by the Spanish gave Native Americans just cause to retaliate and to wage war against any invading country—this plausible war was what Las Casas was trying to prevent.

Publications and Brief Biography

His writings deal primarily with the mistreatment of the Indians.

A brief list of his important work:

- “Memorial de remedios para las Indias” (1516)
- *Brevísima relación de la destrucción de las Indias* (1542 / pub. 1552)
- *Apologética historia summaria de las gentes destas Indias* (1566)

He arrived in Hispaniola in April 1502.

- member of a merchant fleet purposely set out to capture slaves and land
- participated in slave raids
- gained a handful of native slaves and property for farming

Change of Philosophy

While in the Americas, he took the Dominican Orders in 1510.

Las Casas based his opinions on the Biblical text of Ecclesiasticus 34: 21-22.

The text reads:

34:25 The bread of the needy, is the life of the poor: he that defraudeth them thereof, is a man of blood.

34:26 He that taketh away the bread gotten by sweat, is like him that killeth his neighbour.

Through this passage Las Casas acquaints the Native Americans with the needy; the conquistadors and the slave-owners are men “of blood” taking away the fruit of the Indian labour. In this verse, such an act is equal to sin of murder.

Encomienda

At this stage of history, four major military-campaigns were on-going, conquering Latin America and Florida:

Juan Ponce de Leon	> in Florida
Francisco Pizarro	> in Peru
Hernán Cortes	> in Mexico
Diego Velázquez de Cuéllar	> in Cuba

A feudal labor sytem was begun, backed by the Spanish crown.

- *encomienda* system: granted any Spaniard a specified number of natives for basic labor, such as servants or farmhands
- an *encomendero* was to instruct the natives in the Spanish language and in the Catholic faith, and protect them from other warring tribes
- Conquistadors often took this “authority” to extreme measures of violence

The Very Brief Relation

The publication was intended to be read by the nobility in Spain.

- the end goal was to stop the events spiralling against the Indian population
- at the same time, the book was mass produced for average readers
to understand the full situation for themselves
- Nigel Griffin, a translator of the text mentions that the original version of the publication uses common language so the everyday Spanish citizen would understand the situation better
- Las Casas likewise wants to alert the King's moral imagination
- this is an informative as well as a persuasive piece of literature;
both rhetorical elements are important to Las Casas' goals.

Propaganda or Historical Document

Debate continues regarding how much validity exists in this work by Las Casas, some historians have said he embellishes the number of deaths used as evidence.

- what results is the work cannot be used as factual evidence as far as *statistics* are concerned—however, the horrific punishments and tortures described have been verified through other sources of the time
- current studies are still underway to prove the estimates of the native populations; for instance under the section titled “The Islands of Puerto Rico and Jamaica” Las Casas mentions that the Spanish were “killing off these poor innocents to such effect that where the native population of the two islands was certainly over six hundred thousand (and I personally reckon it more than a million) fewer than two hundred survive” (26).
- a conservative figure states that the largest group of these people was 3,000 (Saunders) — however, the reduced population was approximately 200

Propaganda or Historical Document

- the style of the time for such writing was to over-inflate numbers when discussing a social matter before heads of state
- —at the time, to be a valid historical document chroniclers had to witness the action they report, or to have a first hand account reported to them directly. quoting a victim of a calamity was not always enough for rhetoric of the time, authors were expected place themselves in the text in an obvious manner as a participant in the action
- Las Casas wants a strong reaction, an emotional response from his audience; the more pathos he uses, the possible, stronger reaction from the king
- historical documents for thousands of years used similar narrative style; the practice of embellishment was expected
- factual evidence can only be verified by a witness, a first-hand emotional account of the event; what Las Casas presents is not an analysis of facts and data, but instead, they bear witness to political and civil situations
- In the *Norton Anthology of American Literature*, a good example exists on page 37.

Consequences

Las Casas greatest fear was Spain would eventually pay for crimes against humanity.

In the end, God would punish the country for the deliberate genocide of an indigenous people.

- likewise, he feared a re-emergence of the Muslim rule over Christianity
- from 711 CE until 1492 CE a strong Islamic presence existed in Spain
- In this year the marriage of Isabella and Ferdinand unified two separate Christian kingdoms in Spain, which created a political and economic force strong enough to expel any followers of the Moslem faith, plus ultimately unifying the country to its present day status and creating a world power.
- It is believed Las Casas was born in 1484 before the conflict was finalized.
- In his mind, as with Rome, the Muslim presence was still a possible, future threat.

Opposition

The conquistadors, on the other hand, pictured themselves as representatives of the Spanish historical hero El Cid, from the first century.

- El Cid was an extreme legend by the time of the 14th and 15th Century—his exploits and military campaigns are equal to the King Arthur legends from England.
- Griffin notes that Las Casas believed these men were using false analogies of glory by distorting the language: *conquistadores* = conquerors in English. These men felt God gave them authority to conquer a non-Christian territory.
- Later within *The Devastation of the Indies*, Las Casas argues that conquest is defined as “tyrannical, Mohammedan, abusive, improper, and infernal” — furthermore a conquest should only be applied to situations when someone has seized your property, persecuted a Christian population, and work for the general destruction of your faith.

Opposition

- Las Casas further reports that many people involved in the genocide of the natives had become desensitized to their barbarous actions, so much so “they ceased to be men in any meaningful sense of the term”(3).
- To Las Casas, it is the Europeans who are reduced to savagery—not the natives themselves. He states these men have “given over to a reprobate mind” (3).
The phrase he selects is from a Biblical text:
“And even as they did not like to retain God in *their* knowledge, God gave them over to a reprobate mind” (Romans 1:28).
- The denotation of the word shows it has two meanings:
 1. a depraved, unprincipled, or wicked person.
 2. a person rejected by God and beyond hope of salvation.
- Las Casas chose this passage with a strong strategy.

Strategy

Through the biblical passage he reverses the situation.

- The conquistadors use the same logic for removing the Natives from their lands. Since the Indians were savages and less than human they did not deserve to own their own territories.
- Las Casas is describing the conquistadors with the same words they use on the Native population.
- He will later state the conquistadors were acting as savages themselves; they were a defamation of the word Christian.
- To the natives, “Christians” act as violent demons.
- Las Casas expected from the Spanish conquistadors was to peacefully seek out the natives and converted them to the true faith.

Conclusion

Las Casas closes with a subtle prophecy: if God is to protect the kingdoms of Spain, the King needs to take drastic action as soon as possible.

- without humanistic change, the country could fail
- the book caused a major scandal during it's time
- before the end of the century translations appeared:
Flemish, English, French, German, and Latin
- Las Casas ultimate conclusion stresses that the Spanish were not converting the Indians to Roman Catholic faith as the Pope intended with this conquest. The natives were perishing without the benefit of Sacraments.

Controversy

Early in his humanitarian years, Las Casas made a radical proposal to remedy the suffering of the natives.

- To this day it haunts his later writing, sparks much debate:
- In 1516 he wrote in his “Memorial de remedios para las Indias:”

pero que en lugar de los indios que había de tener [en] las dichas comunidades, sustente S.A. en cada una veinte negros, o otros esclavos en las minas, de comida de la que hubiera menester, y será muy mayor servicio para S.A. y ganacia, porque se cogerá mucho más oro que se cogerá teniendo doblados indios de los que había de tener en ellas” (9).
- Which roughly suggests instead of using native Indians in these colonial communities, twenty blacks or other slaves could be used as labor.
- Ironically, as a means of defending the rights of native Americans, Las Casas becomes an unfortunate advocate of slavery of native African people.

Slavery

- Some historical critics would defame Las Casas as a hypocrite and suggest he is the starting point of the slave trade to the New World.
- However, it is important to keep in mind that the institution of slavery, as we view today, slowly developed over time— the term ‘slavery’ in the 16th Century meant something different for the 17th and 18th Centuries.
- In the 16th Century, with the discovery of the New World, the concept of slavery took a slightly new direction.

Slavery

- *Before* the Americas were discovered an individual was brought into slavery:
 - > financial losses, excessive debts
 - > a lower class family selling a child
 - > the results of criminal behavior, serving a punishment
 - > the resulting act of one country's dominance over another
- *After* the discovery of the Americas, slavery developed into an economic industry involving more than one country; a global enterprise
 - > What resulted, a specific race of people became possessions of another

Slavery

- Las Casas awkward logic runs something like this:
 - > The Bible in both the Old Testament and New Testament references slavery as an accepted practice, a necessity of civilization
 - > The African slaves themselves were obtained through the process of a “just” war, or in other words, a “defensive war” against Islam
 - > The war between Islam and Christianity developed over centuries
 - > The Indians, like the African slaves, should be converted to Christianity and saved from heathenism
 - > Africans physically could endure stronger hardships than the American Indians due to the geography and living conditions of certain African countries

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- however, Las Casas does change his position by 1566 within the publication of *Historia de las Indias*
- in this text he “apologized for his early suggestions and bad judgment as to how any sort of slavery could be justified to halt the rapid decline of the indigenous populations” (Arias 279)

Arias, Santa. “Equal Rights And Individual Freedom: Enlightenment Intellectuals And The Lascasian Apology For Black African Slavery.” *Romance Quarterly* 55.4 (2008): 279-291. *Academic Search Complete*. Web. 2 Jan. 2012.