

A DUAL MINDSET: EXPLORING BARTOLOMÉ DE LAS CASAS'S TREATMENT OF INDIGENOUS AMERICANS

BY JOHNNA MCCLENDON
REVIEWED BY DR. ELIZABETH BISHOP
EDITED BY SARA FALLIS

The following paper discusses the mindset of Bartolomé de Las Casas towards indigenous communities. He is commonly believed to be a saint and defender of these communities despite his underlying disdain for them. The discussion will explore the nuances of Las Casas's support for indigenous communities, specifically, how his support was inhibited by his self-righteousness. The paper provides an important insight to an overlooked aspect of Bartolomé de Las Casas.

Bartolomé de las Casas is historically believed to be a noble defender of indigenous people. During the 1400s, Spanish leaders were setting out on expeditions to the Americas indigenous communities. Many natives during this time were enslaved or killed. In the book, *In Defense of the Indians*, Bartolomé de las Casas defended the native people, but he presented a duality in his attitude towards them. While he saw the humanity in these people and fought to defend them, he also saw them as something to be fixed. His complex view of Indigenous Americans was a product of past life experiences. Las Casas witnessed militaristic expeditions at a young age, made a full conversion to Catholicism in 1514, and then entered the Priesthood. Both these experiences and his work, *Defense of the Indians*, contribute to his condemnation of brutality towards natives and his desire to “save” Indigenous Americans from their own behavior. The system that Las Casas participated in and benefitted from in the military is a stark contrast to what he stood for after conversion. Realizing the unholy nature of this system is what motivated him to stop the murder of native people and embark upon a new journey of Catholic conversion.

Born to a noble family with French ancestry, Las Casas was highly privileged in his youth. His privileged upbringing developed a

mindset of moral superiority that ultimately led him to push conversion onto Indigenous people. Las Casas judged people’s value based on their practiced religion. He was the son of a merchant who traveled with Christopher Columbus on his journey to the Indies (Orique 325–33). This upbringing prevented Las Casas from ever fully understanding Indigenous people and placed him in a position to benefit from their exploitation. Since he was a young boy, Bartolomé “was also put directly into the path of history making events by providence or luck” (Clayton 23).

Las Casas was closely involved in many violent conquests against the natives. His writings suggest he both witnessed and participated in them. One such conquest was the attack on Granada, in which troops were sent from Seville in 1500 to suppress Moorish rebels. Amongst these troops were young Bartolomé and his father (Clayton 20). Las Casas also witnessed the 1503 massacre of Xaragua and participated as a provisioner in the second campaign against Higüey in 1504, orchestrated by Nicolás de Ovando, who was appointed Governor of the Indies by Queen Isabella I. This campaign resulted in the capture of the remaining chieftain, Cotubanamá, and “for his part, Las Casas received his second Indian slave, one of the fugitives of the Anacaona massacre” (Clayton 36). The last

notable massacre he witnessed was the expedition of Diego Velazquez – the first ordained Spanish governor of Cuba – in 1511, where Las Casas served and became good friends with him. The observations Las Casas made in his writings suggest that he marched alongside Velazquez. This expedition was a major turning point for Las Casas because he realized the proceedings of war were foreign to what was morally correct. He was surprised at the brutality of the Spanish against the natives (Clayton 40-41). These expeditions are essential to analyzing the ideals expressed by Las Casas in “Defense of the Indians.” These early experiences are the root of the duality in his thinking.

This created a space between him and the natives; throughout his life, he believed himself superior to them. He accepted slaves as a reward for his participation in conquests and participated in the exploitation of Indigenous people in the *encomienda* system, which rewarded conquistadors with slave labor. From 1502 to 1506, Las Casas worked as a provisioner for his father Indigenous slave labor. He was also one of the first major advocates for African slave labor. He stated that due to their higher survival rates, which he attributed to their race, Africans were naturally suited for slave labor. Although he later regretted his advocacy for African slave labor, his

writings are the source of suffering for thousands, and he directly participated in enslaving human beings, while also reaping the benefits of his conversion and later being painted as a savior for native slaves. Las Casas’ eventual change of heart held no significance to the Spanish crown, as the monarchy had already endorsed the new idea of slavery rooted in racist ideologies rather than militaristic conquest. The profit of this slave labor meant much more to the crown than Las Casas’ newfound revelation in Christ. Las Casas served as advisor to the emperor and the Council of the Indies later in 1547 until his death. As a result, he watched as African slave labor replaced that of the natives throughout the years.

Las Casas was no savior; he was not even a changed man. If he truly valued human life, he would not have stood idly by as another race of individuals were exploited in the same manner that Indigenous people were years prior. In 1507, he started his journey to priesthood, but when he returned to the Indies, he continued to enslave Indigenous slaves. Although he was a chaplain at the time, he still pursued wealth (Orique 325-33). In this time, he continued to attend military expeditions and stood witness to massacres, the enslavement of natives in the mines, and various *encomienda* systems. He eventually had to stop his involvement in the *encomienda* system to remain

consistent with his newfound purpose., but his friendship did not prevent him from owning slaves This power and privilege shaped who he was and the way he thought. His later push of Christian ideals onto Indigenous Americans reflected this privileged mindset. He wanted to help these people, but only under the condition of conversion. People who lack privilege, power, and influence were not capable of pushing their viewpoints onto others the way Las Casas was able to.

The conversion of Las Casas was a major turning point that motivated him to speak out against the mistreatment of Indigenous people and allowed him to further impose his Christianity upon them. It was not until 1514 when Las Casas decided to fully convert that “by Las Casas own account... [it was the] day darkness left his eyes” (Vickery 89-102). After Las Casas was “hardened by experience and informed by scripture,” he started to speak out on behalf of natives (Clayton 42). Las Casas’ views on the enslavement of other human beings and his participation in conquests did not change until his awakening and repentance. Las Casas’ conversion was influenced by Ecclesiasticus 34:20-21, which reads: “To offer a sacrifice from the possessions of the poor is like killing a child before his father’s eyes. Bread is life to the destitute, and to deprive them of it is

murder” (Orique 325-22). This transition further revealed dual thinking. Earlier on his expeditions, he recognized that what the Spaniards were doing was inhumane, but he didn’t speak up on it because he lacked the motivation of scripture to advocate for change. Eventually, he gained power from these experiences that gave him the influence he needed to enforce his Christian ideals and to show how conversion would save the Indigenous people. After Catholicism became more present in his life, he devoted himself to the conversion of natives. Las Casas believed that “the principal end for which all that has been ordained, or might be ordained, is accomplished, and for this we are to strive and aim, is the salvation of the Indians, to be effected through the Christian doctrine that His Highness commands be imparted to them” (Gutiérrez and Barr 69).

Bartolomé wanted to save the indigenous Americans, and his conversion and entry into priesthood allowed him the space to do it. He believed this was his divine calling, which was impetus for his savior complex. Las Casas saw the lack of Christianity to be a fundamental flaw in the natives. We see this reflected in his account, “Destruction of the Indies.” In this account, he described brutal and gruesome attacks on the natives, instances such as natives being burned alive, attacked by dogs, and their babies killed.

Despite all these descriptions of heinous acts carried out on the native people, he wrote that the thing that broke his heart the most was the lack of evangelism. He did not want the natives to think of Christians in a negative light from that point forth and reject the religion completely (Vickery 99-100).

His true mindset is reflected most in his anxieties over the natives' opinions of Christianity, and his value of that issue over their persecution. Las Casas was "adamant that Christianity if taught and demonstrated according to the example of Christ, peacefully and rationally, would soon supplant the native faiths." His goal after fighting for the basic rights of native people was to convert them. To Las Casas, defending "the life and temporal welfare of the Indian [would] be from [that] point forward to affirm the living God proclaimed to us by Jesus Christ" (Gutiérrez and Barr 61). Natives deserved freedom and fair treatment because they are God's creation, and they have equal potential to be converted and become followers of Christ. Las Casas never respected the humanity of the natives but instead valued the opportunity to convert them to glorify God, which was further revealed through his conversion methods. The natives were never given a choice to refuse the conversion process. Indigenous Americans already had a strong

culture and religion but lacked the resources to resist militaristic domination; they were forced to succumb to the beliefs of those who conquered them. Las Casas initially sought to convert the natives through peaceful persuasion, but he still ultimately asserts his own ideals on an unwilling congregation. If he valued the humanity of the natives, they would have been able to freely express their own ideals without being coerced to follow Christian principles.

As we analyze *In Defense of the Indians*, we can see a clear stance against the brutalization of native people as well as a condescending undertone that suggests there is something flawed about these communities. In this *és de Sepúlveda*, they argued before the royal commission of Valladolid about the place that natives hold in society. The capability of natives to be taught, treated as fellow humans, and their "barbaric" nature were all topics of discussion. This writing is the argument Las Casas posed in favor of the natives.

The first argument Las Casas provided in support of the natives was to make a distinction between two different types of barbarians. Las Casas used the work of Aristotle to prove that some barbarians are "dull witted and lacking in the reasoning powers necessary for self-

government,” while others are “in accord with justice and nature, have kingdoms, royal dignities, jurisdiction, and good laws, and there is among them lawful government” (Poole 41). This is the first instance where we see the duality in his thinking, although he recognizes that they have a governmental structure they operate under, he still views them as flawed. His goal was not to completely disassociate the natives with the title of barbarians and certainly not to proclaim them as equal to Europeans. Instead, he seeks to prove that they are less barbaric than other communities because they have established systems of governing. Las Casas was painting them in a more humane light while maintaining a separation between himself and these ‘type two’ barbarians.

In the extended version of the text, Las Casas elaborated, “Even though these peoples may be completely barbaric, they are nevertheless created in God’s image. They are not so forsaken by divine providence that they are incapable of attaining Christ’s kingdom” (Poole 72). This reveals that the only reason he wanted to change the standard opinion of natives was due to the possibility that “some of them are predestined to become renowned and glorious in Christ’s kingdom” (Poole 39). For this reason and this reason alone, “these men who are wild and ignorant in their barbarism we owe the right

which is theirs, that is, brotherly kindness and Christian love.” If his faith did not allow him to see the potential in the natives, he probably would continue to mistreat them (Poole 39). He pities their lack of knowledge about Christianity and sees potential to convert because these people are God’s creation despite his perception of them as barbaric.

Although Las Casas recognized the humanity of the natives, he still viewed their lack of Christianity as a flaw fixable by conversion. Las Casas did recognize the inconsistencies that arise when giving the natives the title of barbarians. Doctor Sepúlveda attempted to justify the wrongful treatment of the natives, stating that they were “natural slaves,” and if anything, European presence in the new world was a benefit of the Indigenous people. Las Casas then responds by drawing upon the success of the natives to prove that “Doctor Sepúlveda has spoken wrongly and viciously against peoples like these,” and has “slandered them before the entire world” (Poole 42). Las Casas argues indigenous Americans built an advanced governmental and societal structure, and are far from the “ignorant, inhuman, or bestial” stereotypes that many Europeans believed them to be (Poole 42). From here, his savior complex and condescending attitude towards the natives is revealed again. Bartolomé wants them to

be seen as human but still thinks they need “to be taught about the Catholic faith and to be admitted to the holy sacraments” (Poole 42). Salvation is a condition that he places on native humanity.

Las Casas continued his argument by drawing a comparison between the Spanish and the indigenous. He argued that Sepúlveda should see how the actions of the Spaniards were barbaric at a certain point. Las Casas reminded Sepúlveda that he himself “called the Spanish people barbaric and wild” (Poole 45). He then proceeded to ask him a series of hypotheticals regarding the historic barbarism of the Spaniards, revealing their hypocrisy. He claimed that the Spaniards are “unhappy people torturers” and asked if all their acts of violence were necessary (Poole 45). Las Casas then was directly challenged Sepúlveda and asked if he permitted violence. Las Casas then discredited Spaniards by describing them as the true barbarians whilst natives are “easy to teach and very talented in learning all the liberal arts, and very ready to accept, honor, and observe the Christian religion” (Poole 45). Las Casas speaks from experience when detailing the barbaric practices of the Spanish.

Following his description of Spanish brutality, Las Casas circles back to the salvation of the natives. Las Casas claimed they should be

willing to “correct their sins (as experience has taught) once priests have introduced them to the sacred mysteries and taught them the word of God” (Poole). Again, we are faced with Las Casas’ savior complex and his true perception of the indigenous people as valuable only due to their potential contributions to Christianity. When we enter the mindset of someone who is in a position of power, we see an unwavering belief in their own worldview with no room for opposition. For Las Casas, this worldview is one that centers around the importance of Catholicism. For colonizers, it is a belief in their own superiority over people deemed other or foreign. Las Casas’ roles as both a priest and a colonizer resulted in a duality of his mindset. Although he was fighting to get others to see the humanity of natives, he was incapable of placing them in league with Europeans and could not separate them entirely from his negative perceptions. Even if he claimed they have value, that value hinges upon their ability to repent and accept his faith.

Bartolomé de las Casas was a historical figure that fought for the basic rights of native people. His writings reflected basic Christian morals but had an undertone of privilege and power. These ideals were formulated based on his socioeconomic status and early exposure to the corrupt system surrounding him. He changed

the narrative after his conversion and entry to priesthood but ultimately, the damage was done. Nothing came from his debate with Sepúlveda in 1550 and the natives were irreversibly bound to servitude in the Indies (Dussel). Las Casas did become an adviser to the Council of the Indies but ultimately Sepúlveda's teachings were followed and thousands of natives still had no savior. Bartolomé de las Casas passed at the age of 90 and became popular in Europe for his writings. He was seen as one who fought tirelessly for the natives, but the system he participated in prior to conversion had won and indigenous Americans continued to suffer years of oppression.

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