

**Bartolomé de las Casas, OP: History, Philosophy,
and Theology in the Age of European Expansion**
David Thomas Orique and Rady Roldán-Figueroa (Editors)
Leiden: Brill, 2019 (485 pages)

Fray Bartolomé de las Casas is a freighted and iconic figure in Latin American studies, postcolonial political theory, and liberation theology, to name just a few of the significant fields of academic inquiry affected by his life and work. While he remains a constant source of scholarly inspiration and engagement, the man himself was first and foremost a pastor and missionary, situated in a volatile political environment and desirous of practical and immediate change in the lives of the souls under his care (whether Amerindian native or Spanish colonist). Beginning the study of such a fraught person is of course a challenge, as is furthering the collective understanding of one whose work, motives, and legacy have been examined from numerous angles. Brill's new collection of essays on Las Casas's context in the world of sixteenth-century Spanish colonialism does an excellent job of offering a starting point for the newcomer as well as many fascinating treatments of the Dominican for those more familiar with the topic.

The introductory essay alone is worth obtaining the book, as it provides a fantastic bibliography for scholarship on Las Casas as well as a succinct but informative history of the reception of Las Casas by scholars from the nineteenth century to present day. Interested readers are directed to more detailed accounts of this history, but the framework of "three waves" provided by Orique and Roldán-Figueroa allows the essays that follow to fall into place as part of the "third wave" of Lascasian scholarship. By this they mean that the volume is intentionally interdisciplinary in its content, as well as international in its scope. Without choosing either Latin America or Spain as the primary locus for interpreting Las Casas's life, the editors and collaborators reveal the continued importance of Las Casas for a variety of projects and histories.

A few of the essays are particularly striking. Rolena Adorno's history of Las Casas's *Brevissima relación* and Laura Dierksmeier's account of Toribio de Motolinía's criticisms provide a helpful framework for opposition to Las Casas. Whether it was loyalty to those on the receiving end of Las Casas's invectives or disagreement about how to be a priest and missionary in the first place, the varied kinds of resistance Las Casas encountered reveal the complexities of seeking and instituting reform in Spain's colonial enterprise. Equally revealing are the critiques of Las Casas leveled by current scholars—although more about our own anxieties and preoccupations than those of Las Casas or his contemporaries. Luis Fernando Restrepo provides insight into the self-made image Las Casas fashions in his memorials, noting that the relationship between chronicler and chronicled always betrays a colonially imposed mindset, despite Las Casas's efforts to change that relationship. Related to this, Carlos A. Járegui and David Solodkow offer a compelling argument that "biopolitics" in the Foucauldian sense began not in eighteenth-century France but in sixteenth-century Spanish colonies, as Las Casas crafted a meticulous program of health and wellness for the indigenous people. Járegui and Solodkow make

the case that Las Casas structured his program around spiritual and material production; that is, he defended his plan on the grounds that it would generate more wealth and more conversions in the long run. Their argument is tight and the overall point well-taken, although it is also true that they could have acknowledged the rhetorical benefit Las Casas took advantage of by framing his plan in terms of gains for the Spanish Crown. After all, the task was to convince the leader of a large and prosperous empire that reforms were in his interest.

Las Casas's radical approach to his role as a priest and bishop is delineated in David Thomas Orique's treatment of Las Casas on confession and Rady Roldán-Figueroa on Las Casas's theory of episcopal power. These essays helpfully situate Las Casas's innovations in practice and theory within the Catholic Church's tradition (including a history of confession starting in the early days of the Church) and the Dominican order in particular. Las Casas's enduring legacy within Church discipline and structure is thus clarified. And while the two essays on Las Casas's use of just war theory are mostly redundant, they raise the issue of Las Casas's defense of human sacrifice, a feature of his thought which easily confuses or scandalizes the sensibilities of modern scholars. David Lantigua's essay on the natural virtue of religion helpfully explains the Aristotelian and even Thomist dimensions of this human sacrifice defense, as strange as this may seem.

The second essay in the book is a reflection by Matthew Restall on the lives of Hernando Cortés and Las Casas (as they shared a lifespan and were in many of the same places at the same times); the most striking contribution Restall provides is a translation of Las Casas's account of a dinner conversation between Cortés and himself. The friar relates how Cortés boasted of Montezuma's surrender only to admit, upon Las Casas pressing the matter, that he had in fact lied about this to the Crown—Montezuma did not freely accept the sovereignty of Spain but had actually asked Cortés and company to leave many times. "Thus by his own words did I publically prove him to be a liar." (63) This story marvelously captures the reason Bartolomé de las Casas has continued to be such an object of fascination—as a prophetic witness of apocalyptic significance, this priest demonstrates the possibility of breaking through one's own historical limits and speaking to every generation concerned with truth, justice, and charity.

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