

Black Slaves and Messianic Dreams in Las Casas's Plans for an Abundant Indies

by Andrew Wilson

Bartolomé de Las Casas, the great »Defender of the Indians«, font of liberation theology, also stands at the genesis of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. In a series of *Memorials* to the Spanish crown, from 1516-1531, he repeatedly urged the importation of black slaves to the Indies.¹ His intent was sincere: to free the bodies of tyrannically enslaved Indians, and the souls of the Spanish sinners who illegally possessed them. A solution could not wait. Indians were dying *en masse* from disease, despair, and overwork. Settlers, frantic to replace their dead laborers, ventured further and further into untouched territory, abducting Indians and so disposing its inhabitants to distrust all Christians. The fate of the entire New World was at stake. A steady supply of alternative, legitimately secured workers would prevent the tiny Spanish population from further despoiling the land and assure that the Spanish Kings would become »one of the greatest – and perhaps most Christian and most peaceful – republics of the whole world«.² So amidst his long list of suggestions for the Spanish crown to »remedy« the Indies, he repeatedly recommended supplying »black or other« slaves to the Indian enterprise.

It's a shocking contrast, an unbearable contradiction, even: Black slaves for Indian freedom. And it has as a consequence borne a thousand commentaries, all asking for clarification at first »what?« then (with us) »How could he?« and finally perhaps, if the reflection bears fruit, »why?« We ourselves puzzle in full knowledge of what plantation slavery would become – the death of millions, the suffering and indignity of millions more, the long tail of racial and class segregation, democracy's quintessential foil: the foundational shame of the West. Of this Las Casas witnessed only a foretaste, and, late in life, repented before God for his youthful error. His regrets were so grave that he doubted

1 Bartolomé DE LAS CASAS, Memorial de Remedios para las Indias (1516); Memorial de Remedios para las Indias (1518); Carta al Consejo de Indias (1531), all found in *Obras Completas de Bartolomé de Las Casas* [hereafter OC] ed. PAULINO CASTAÑEDA DELGADO, vol. 13, *Cartas y Memorias*, Madrid 1995.

2 IDEM, *Historia de las Indias* [hereafter HI], ed. Isacio PÉREZ FERNÁNDEZ/Miguel ÁNGEL MEDINA/Jesús ÁNGEL BARREDA, OC 3-5, Madrid 1994, 2192 [3.102]. The bracketed number refers to the original book and chapter number.

3 HI 3.129, OC 5.2324.

4 »For the common good of the Spaniards, that they all be upright.« HI 3.102, OC 2190-91.

5 Fernando ORTIZ, La Leyenda Negra contra Bartolomé de Las Casas, in: *Cuadernos Americanos* 65, no. 5 (Septiembre-October 1952), 146-147. Article reprinted in: 217, no. 2 (Marzo-Abril 1978), 84-116.

6 William ROBERTSON, *History of America*, 2nd ed., vol. 1, London 1778, 226.

7 Henri GRÉGOIRE, Apologie de Don Barthélémy de Las Casas, évêque de Chiapas (22 floréal, an VIII-12; May 1804 [sic: 1800]), in: *Œuvres de Don Barthélémy de Las Casas évêque de Chiapa, défenseur de la liberté des*

naturels de l'Amerique, précédés de sa vie, et accompagnés d'additions, de notes historiques, développements, etc. etc. avec portrait, ed. Juan Antonio LLORENTE, Paris 1822, 2:365-66.

8 HI, preface; OC 3:338.

9 See, among many others, Benjamin KEEN, The Black Legend Revisited: Assumptions and Realities, in: *The Hispanic American Historical Review* 49 (Nov. 1969), no. 4, 703-719.

10 For example, Gérard DUFOUR, *Juan Antonio Llorente en France (1813-1822): contribution à l'étude du libéralisme chrétien en France et en Espagne au début du XIXe siècle*, Genève 1982.

even God's forbearance: »he was not certain that the ignorance and good intention he had in this would excuse him before divine judgment.«³

There's little to suggest that without Las Casas's creative genius the slave economy would never have developed. Besides, he claims, the idea of supplying black slaves came at the request of the settlers themselves, who longed to return to the church's fold after the Dominicans began refusing confession to those holding Indians.⁴ Yet again a *confession* – this time of the Spanish settlers – stands at the center of the unfortunate episode. It's an important motif to note, *the* leitmotif, in fact, for it is at such odds to the debate, indeed the entire courtroom of historical and moral prosecution that will follow.

But the deed was done. From the late eighteenth century onward an ongoing stream of studies have accused the sixteenth century Dominican and sometime bishop of Chiapas with unpardonable blindness to what is otherwise the clear implication of his »humanism and inflexible criteria of justice and peace«⁵. Some go as far as charge the great Defender for setting to motion »the first [...] regular form [of] that commerce for slaves between Africa and America, which has since been carried on to such an amazing extent.«⁶ Yet even more have sought to exonerate the bishop from a charge they consider cheap and slanderous, often simply gainsaying: »The works of Las Casas, far from presenting any evidence against him, resound throughout with the laws of liberty.«⁷ The episode provokes such vitriol on the one hand, and such lionizing on the other, that there must be something much greater at stake here than the mere establishment of facts. The whole story uncovers a vast rift, not between inconsistent elements of Las Casas thought, but between our modern era's secular obsession with establishing a constitutionally assured universal humanity – and its attendant culture heroes – and a sixteenth century cleric's apocalyptic fixation on »the final and terrifying day of God's most proper and exacting judgement«⁸. Understanding how and why Las Casas thought black slaves were not only just, but necessary, as well as seeing how later generations have criticized or defended his actions, gives us a laboratory in which to study the use and abuse of this great historical figure, as well as a chance to identify the moral convergence of our vastly different worlds.

1 Las Casas in the Courtroom of the Enlightenment

Up until the late nineteenth century, Bartolomé de Las Casas was known mostly indirectly. Compared to his contemporary Martin Luther, Las Casas's writings were mostly unpublished, his actions untraced, and his infamy limited largely to Protestant Europe, whose propaganda machines had greatly profited from the Dominican's catalogue of Spanish barbarity overseas.⁹ But the events of that revolutionary era would soon vault Las Casas's name from obscure archives to the height of public awareness as he became the patron saint of ecclesiastically faithful, yet politically liberal revolutionaries. It was Las Casas's example, as much as any doctrine of »liberty«, that was so inspirational, for the cleric and bishop spent his career haranguing officials for their negligence and abuse. This was just the stuff for a Europe set on upending its unjust nobility and colonies intent on recovering control of their own destinies from distant, abusive tyrants. Las Casas's tale of Spanish cruelty against the Indians in his occasional writings and larger *Historias* became central for the consciousness of ecclesiastical revolutionaries. Within a discourse dominated by »liberty« and »natural rights«, Las Casas took a privileged place not only as an articulate proponent for just rebellion, but as an ecclesiastical hero, whose faithfulness to crown and pope were unquestioned, despite the radical overthrow of jurisdiction he sought to foment.¹⁰

Las Casas's earliest modern interpreters, however, were intent on discrediting yet one more thinker whose ties to religion corrupted his judgment. One Dutch *philosophe* Cornelius de Pauw made hay out of the churchman, »who in the ultimate peculiarity of which the human spirit is capable, wrote a great number of memorials to prove that the conquest of the Americas was an unjust atrocity, yet imagined at the same time to reduce the Africans into servitude, to make them labor in this unjustly conquered land – in which he himself consented to hold the wealthy bishopric of Chiapas.«¹¹ A goodly amount of anti-clericalism, if not atheism itself, seems to be central to this bitter reception. Yet we can hear de Pauw's acidity repeated by the great African-American abolitionist pamphleteer, David Walker, a Protestant, whose *Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World* (1829) has lost any appreciation of Las Casas, *qua* freedom-fighter at all, knocking him as a »pretend preacher of the Gospel«, a »very notoriously avaricious Catholic priest« who »succeeded in his plans of oppression« when licenses to import blacks from Africa were awarded, so beginning »our wretchedness«, slavery in the Americas.¹² It's a reputation that's hard to shake. As recently as 2006, the mainstream *Encyclopedia of African-American Culture* mentions Las Casas as one of the creative geniuses behind the trans-Atlantic trade in human flesh.¹³

Armed with a – slightly – greater knowledge of his work, faithful churchmen realized quickly that, far from being a liability, Las Casas was potentially their greatest historical ally. He had to be defended from charges that threatened to discredit exhibit A of ecclesiastical rebellion.¹⁴ The first to offer a defense was the French revolutionary Abbé Henri Grégoire, who publicly defended Las Casas before the Académie Française on 22 floréal, year 8 of the republican calendar (that is, May 4, 1800 in the Gregorian calendar).¹⁵ This consul-approved bishop of Blois correctly assumed that Las Casas's sundry accusers had relied on incomplete secondary sources, in this case the *Historia general de los hechos de los Castellanos* by Antonio Herrera y Tordesillas. But Grégoire had not seen the supposedly corrective, as-yet unpublished *Historia de las Indias* by Las Casas himself, and based his rebuttal solely upon correspondence with a »savant mexicain« (likely Juan Servando de Teresa Mier Noriega y Guerra), who had given him word that he had »read the three volumes in folio, written in the bishop's own hand, without finding anything that inculpated him relative to blacks.«¹⁶

11 *Recherches philosophiques sur les Américains, ou, Mémoires intéressants pour servir à l'histoire de l'espèce humaine*, Berlin 1768, 18.

12 Ed. Sean WILENTZ, New York 1995, 35.

13 Terry REY, Catholicism in the Americas, in: *Encyclopedia of African-American Culture*, 2nd ed., ed. Colin A. PALMER, Detroit 2006, 1:425.

14 Santa Arias claims that the black slavery was at the heart of earliest discussions of Las Casas, including the first modern edition of his works. See *Equal Rights and Individual Freedom: Enlightenment Intellectuals and the Lascasian Apology for Black African Slavery*, in: *Romance Quarterly* 55 (Fall 2008), no. 4, 279–291.

15 GRÉGOIRE, *Apologie de Don Barthélémy de Las Casas* (see note 7), 2:336–367.

16 *Ibid.*, 345.

17 *Ibid.*, 365–366.

18 See Jean-Daniel PIQUET, Controverses sur l'Apologie de Las Casas lue par l'abbé Grégoire, in: *Revue d'histoire et philosophie religieuses* 82 (2002), no. 3, 283–306.

19 José Servando MIER, Lettre écrite en 1806 par le Doctor Don Servando Mier, de Mexico, à M. Henri Grégoire, ancien évêque de Blois, à l'appui de l'apologie de don Barthélemy de Las Casas publiée par ce prélat, in: LLOR-ENTE, *Œuvres de Don Barthélemy de Las Casas* (see note 7), 2:395–96.

20 Antonio LLORENTE, Additions de M. Llorente aux mémoires de MM. Grégoire, Funes, et Mier, in: LLOR-ENTE, *Œuvres de Don Barthélemy de Las Casas* (see note 7), 2:440.

21 »Estudio preliminar« to Bartolomé de LAS CASAS, *Brevisima relación de la destrucción de Africa: Preludio de la destrucción de Indias, Primera defensa de los guanches y negros contra su esclavización*, ed. Isacio PÉREZ FERNANDEZ, Salamanca 1989, 33.

22 Coined by Fernando ORTIZ, La Leyenda Negra contra Bartolomé de Las Casas, in: *Cuadernos Americanos* 65 (Septiembre–Octubre 1952), no. 5, 146–147. Article reprinted in: 217 (Marzo–Abril 1978), no. 2, 84–116.

23 In addition to his »Estudio preliminar«, see also *Bartolomé de Las Casas, ¿Contra los negros? Revisión de una leyenda*, Madrid/México 1991 and *Bartolomé de Las Casas: De defensor de los Indios a defensor de los Negros*. Su intervención en los orígenes de la deportación de esclavos negros a América y su denuncia de la previa esclavización en Africa, Salamanca 1995.

24 LAS CASAS, *Brevisima relación de la destrucción de Africa* (see note 21).

25 PÉREZ FERNANDEZ, »Estudio preliminar« (see note 21), 124.

26 *Ibid.*, 125.

And in elision so typical of this apologetic literature, the Abbé continues: »The works of Las Casas, far from presenting any evidence against him, resound throughout with the laws of liberty. They judge him guilty of desiring well-being for all people, without distinguishing between color or nation; thus, the same principles he always professed, along with his unchanging conduct, refute the accusation which impartial persons can now judge.

Too few men have had the benefit of filling a life so long as his, or so bursting with favor toward his fellow creatures. Friends of religion, of morals, of liberty, and of letters, owe a tribute of respect to the memory of one who Eguiara called »the ornament of America«. For, though belonging to Spain by birth, he belongs to France by his ideals: he could be called rightly the ornament of two worlds.«¹⁷

But Juan Servando de Teresa Mier and the rest were wrong. Las Casas *did* advocate for black slavery, and his defenders had to admit as much eventually. Which also meant that Las Casas's reputation needed further rehabilitation. How could Las Casas, that champion of liberty, have had such a blind spot?¹⁸ Mier eventually came to the conclusion that, with regard to black slavery Las Casas was simply a man of an inferior epoch.¹⁹ Grégoire's – and Las Casas's – publisher, sometime Spanish exile Juan Antonio Llorente states this outright: »[Las Casas] never desired the enslavement of blacks, but the condition existed, and neither Las Casas nor anyone of his century found anything in it contrary to humanity, for the notion that was then held concerning blacks throughout Europe was completely different from what we think today, since our Divines have indeed become superior those of that era concerning the *ius gentium*.«²⁰

Others beg to differ, at least concerning the superiority of the Enlightenment. Las Casas latest bulldog, fellow Dominican Isacio Pérez Fernandez, has nothing but disdain for the decadent times when the legend of Las Casas, black slaver was born: »during the ascendancy of tight breeches..., coat-tails, frock-coats, lacy frills and cuffs, sundry snow-white wigs, tricorns, handkerchiefs tied to the little finger, bowing, one hand on the chest making with the other an ,S'; when perfume was invented to drown out the filth of the unbathed, the ritual of eating chocolate to fill the belly, of cropping the hair close so as to clear the emptiness of the head from I don't know what kind of cultural congestion. It was born in the full euphoria of the Enlightenment.«²¹ Pérez Fernandez has published no fewer than three book-length monographs as well as sundry articles piling witness upon witness opposing the mounting »black legend« against Las Casas,²² countering as slanderous the sundry charges of racism, profiteering, anthropological inconsistency, and single-minded dedication to the Indians alone (to the detriment of other races).²³

He mounts considerable evidence, especially against the anachronistic charge of racism, relying particularly upon Las Casas's *relación* of Spain's conquest of the Canary Islands. Pérez Fernandez has taken several chapters from Las Casa's *History of the Indies* and made them into stand-alone work, provocatively entitled *A Brief Description of the Destruction of Africa*.²⁴ Thus distinguished as a parallel to his brother's infamous pamphlet against Spanish crimes, he is able to proclaim »the openness of [Las Casas's] spirit to the defense of all those who suffer injustices, regardless of religion, race, or color«²⁵. Las Casas did not live long enough to witness the enslaving and trading done by the English, Dutch, French, Swedish, Danish, and Germans. But, insists Pérez Fernández, »had he lived through three more centuries, I am absolutely sure that he would have been denouncing them and crying out against such horrific activities.«²⁶

Be that as it may, the way Pérez Fernandez and others have chosen to tell the story reveals some things about Las Casas, but even more about how and why we ourselves read history. We are left with two imposing questions. One is much easier to answer: how could

Las Casas possibly imagine that bringing in black slaves was an improvement, a legitimate response to the pressures upon Indian life? The other is much more elusive, though more pressing, for it breaches our own process of hero-making (and un-making), of hagiography and historical apology: why do we care? For the matter of Las Casas and black slavery is not a mere establishment of fact. It is a test-case of our ongoing judgment of the past in the courtroom of the present – a gauzy chamber whose jury is constantly changing, whose judges keep updating the rule-book, and whose prosecution keeps altering the charges.

The diffuseness of the issue is made marvelously clear in a recent book by Daniel Castro, which treats a different historical stain upon Las Casas, though: the long shadow he cast into Spanish colonialism.²⁷ *Another Face of Empire* makes what is at first, for those who have read beyond the stock phrases, an otherwise unremarkable claim: Las Casas was and never ceased to be a colonist and a champion of Spanish hegemony in America. He qualified this, of course, with a great number of evangelical conditions, importantly conceding the legitimacy of armed resistance on the part of the Indians. But a colonist he remained. Castro's book goes even further, however, following the trajectory of Las Casas's colonizing plans forward, tracing specific proposals as they came to full fruition in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The book was first written as a dissertation in the early nineties, at the height of anti-colonial fervor in America (and just as the worst of US meddling in Central America was coming to light), which might help explain Castro's palpably implicit verdict: Las Casas was the unrepentant architect of oppressive Western hegemony in the Americas.

The claim is at once perceptive and puerile – not because it is false, but because it both obvious and irrelevant. If Las Casas was so evil, why bother engaging him at all? In criticizing the much-lauded Dominican, Castro taps into a still unstaunched wound of anticlerical, anti-religious vitriol. His final insult is to prove that Las Casas was not only an imperialist, but, still worse, an ecclesiastical imperialist, whose evident good intentions only hide the ultimate decadent stroke of the West, infecting the rest of the world with the diseased structure of a greedy, divinely sanctioned hierarchy with we-know-who on top. The past, then, for Castro, is a decadent superstructure whose wizened, decrepit frame deserves to be smashed to bits by the hammer of historical truth. Castro's politics remain unstated, and his religion even more so, but it's quite clear that his present is a demanding, unforgiving court: our present darkness has at its origins a do-gooding ecclesiastical superiority, whitewashed over time with successive paeans to absent human rights. It can now be seen in its wretched nakedness by the mere observance of the stark and continuing inequality written into Latin America and the rest of the world that had the misfortune to fall under the power of the West's spell.

Just what the alternatives to this are, Castro doesn't spell out, but the fact that he provides us with a verdict: this is the most important thing. And it is an old catholic one at that: self-flagellating and penitent. Black slavery became a stain for Las Casas, too, and working out how he read the punishments and suffering that followed will invite us into the celestial

27 *Las Casas: Another Face of Empire*, Durham, NC 2006.

28 Found in: OC 13, *Cartas y Memoriales*, Madrid 1995.

29 LAS CASAS, Carta al Consejo de Indias (1531), in: OC 13, 76.

30 A dated but accessible portrait can be found in Marcel BATAILLON, The Clérigo Casas, Colonist and Colonial Reformer, in: *Bartolomé de Las Casas in History*, eds. Juan FRIEDE/Benjamin KEEN, DeKalb, IL 1971, 353-440.

31 LAS CASAS, Memorial de Remedios para las Indias (1516), in: OC 13, 38.

32 *Ibid.*, 27.

33 *Ibid.*, passim.

34 HI bk 3, ch. 128. See also Antonio BENÍTEZ-ROJO, Bartolomé de Las Casas: Entre el infierno y la ficción, in: *Modern Language Notes* 103 (March 1988), no. 2, 265.

35 The request is first mentioned in LAS CASAS, Memorial de Remedios para las Indias (1516), 36.

courtroom he himself imagines. From there, a place of confession and hoping for mercy, we can begin see larger, apocalyptic tragedy of the Indies, of which he was the chief witness.

And so we shall not focus primarily upon the texts where Las Casas proposed black slavery but on his later reflections. For this is the best place to appreciate Las Casas's own evaluation of events as an old man, preparing to meet his own last judgment before Christ's eternal throne. We need not go as far as his own Last Will and Testament, but to the much grander *Historia de las Indias*, which he amended and fiddled with well into the 1560s, constantly inserting new assessments of his youthful failures, and throwing himself upon the mercy of the God.

2 Saving the Blessed Indies

Las Casas spelled out his *remedios* for the Indies in a series of *memoriales* to the Spanish crown and Council from 1516 into the 1540s.²⁸ These letters are full of specific proposals to protect the Indians and better life (and profitability) for all in the Indies. But much more that the lives and souls of the Indians – or profits to the crown – were at stake. Las Casas locates the Indies as the sight of a cosmic battle. Would the newly discovered, as-yet uncorrupted world be ruled by Christ and his abundant life. Or would they be subject to the hellish yoke of the devil himself.²⁹

Las Casas was a ceaseless schemer, a bustling man of action intent on his plans and sure of his God-given vocation to protect the lives and souls of America's natives.³⁰ His ambition was exhausting, and from his very first embassy to Spain he began assembling a bricolage of ready-made solutions to »remedy« the ailing Indies. These *Memoriales* paint a dire picture of the young colonies and the land they occupy. Swift and decisive action is needed. As early as 1516, many Native peoples stood in danger of being »finished« as a race,³¹ and those distant and still alive are being »corrupted« against Christianity by cruel, gold-lusting, slave-raiding colonists.³²

Much has been made of Las Casas's full blown structural critique of *encomienda*, that system whereby colonists received allotments Indians to work their settlements. But Las Casas early *memoriales* take a pragmatic, ecological approach to managing the Indies' vicious *hidalgos*. *Contain* the settlers by providing them what they need, setting up coastal forts, which would keep the colonists from spreading their plague through illegal raids. Then *control* them by levying fines, offering various incentives, as well as using ecclesiastical discipline to hold them accountable to their evangelical and human duty: returning Indians to their family units, resting them from hard labor, and provide instruction in Christian doctrine.³³

It is under the »contain« rubric that Las Casas first introduced the idea of black slaves. A 1516 smallpox outbreak had decimated the natives of Española, driving the settlers' raids ever further in search of labor for their mines.³⁴ The practical Las Casas had no illusions that the settlers would sacrifice their hard-won plots for some priest's scruples. And so to keep their long, groping hands at bay, to keep the existing settlers where they could do little more damage, he encouraged the crown to license the importation of black (and white, we should not forget to mention) slaves.³⁵ Replacement labor – *not* tyrannically subjected Indians – would facilitate the release of natives from their bonds. But equally importantly it would prevent or at least slow down the settlers' rapacious raiding of other islands (and later the mainland) for workers to replace their weak and swiftly diminishing indigenous labor source.

Such containment was necessary to take full advantage of the enormous human and natural capital of the Indies for God's glory. The land, despite being only recently reached by Christians, was in very real danger of being irreversibly ruined. He writes to the Council of the Indies in 1531, »Your lordships have at your command six or seven thousand leagues – and many more – of coastline, not counting the immensity of the lands within.«³⁶ They're not just big; all of them are »great and wide and [having] almost immeasurable kingdoms neither seen nor believed«, each one »more filled with human peoples than the most populated corner of« Spain, with »the greater part and nearly all the lineage of humanity.«³⁷ The people »exceed the number of stars«³⁸. There are »millions«³⁹. No. Not just millions. It is an entire »New World«, home to a veritable »infinity« of people.⁴⁰ All this promise, yet even by 1518 he writes that the Indies »are all destroyed«⁴¹. »Two thousand leagues of coastline, the most populated in the world«, have been »depopulated and made a desert, all by violence and tyranny, with infinite other insults and evils«⁴².

Just as with the settlers, Las Casas did not appeal to the crown's benevolence or selflessness alone. Stop the »violence and tyranny« and, he assured them, the land will return to its natural abundance. A most striking feature of these memorials is the fantastic – if not fantastical – rates of return he consistently promises. Investment in sugar will yield »marvelous rents within three years«⁴³. Buy a few baubles to trade for gold and silver, and »With five-hundred ducats [5500 *castellanos*],⁴⁴ I am certain Your Highness will get back more than fifteen-thousand *castellanos*.«⁴⁵ There's no better place to start off with raising any number of products: silk, cañafistula, sugar, cloves, pepper, ginger.⁴⁶

These plans reveal his visions of Eden lost. The Indies are new-world technicolor to sepia Spain. They are positively bursting with life. Even the people (in their natural state, unimpeded by the Spanish, we are to presume) »multiply marvelously«⁴⁷. It's as if the Indies were a new and different kind of land itself, preternaturally disposed – down to its original inhabitants – to produce, reproduce, populate, abound. Establishing just labor practices is never a matter of merely doing the right thing. Justice in the land will restart the inter-

36 LAS CASAS, Carta al Consejo de Indias (1531), in: OC 13, 66.

37 Ibid., 68.

38 Ibid., 70. Compare with Abraham's covenant, Gen 15:5.

39 LAS CASAS, Carta al Consejo de Indias (1531), in: OC 13, 70.

40 Ibid., 76.

41 LAS CASAS, Memorial de Remedios para las Indias (1518), in: OC 13, 49.

42 LAS CASAS, Carta al Consejo de Indias (1531), in: OC 13, 77.

43 LAS CASAS, Memorial de Remedios para las Indias (1518), in: OC 13, 53.

44 Calculating relative values in early Spanish American currency is a confusing and often inexact. See Martin L. SEEGER, Media of Exchange in 16th Century New Spain and the Spanish Response, in: *The Americas* 35 (Oct. 1978), no. 2, 168-184.

45 LAS CASAS, Memorial de Remedios para las Indias (1518), in: OC 13, 57.

46 Ibid., 53.

47 LAS CASAS, Memorial de Remedios para las Indias (1516), in: OC 13, 25.

48 See Alain MILHOU, *Colomb et le messianisme hispanique*, trans. Mayi MILHOU-BINARD et revue par l'auteur (Espagne médiévale et modern 10), Montpellier 2007, 160-161.

49 Ibid. See also p. 43, and Memorial de Remedios para las Indias (1518), in: OC 13, 49-50.

50 LAS CASAS, Carta al Consejo de Indias (1531), in: OC 13, 77.

51 See HI, preface, in: OC 3, 338.

Also Eduardo FRADES GASPAS, *El uso de la Biblia en los escritos de Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas* (Colección Santa Rosa de Lima 2), Caracas 1997, 91.

52 See Luis N. RIVERA-PAGÁN, A Prophetic Challenge to the Church: The Last Words of Bartolomé de las Casas, in: *Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 23 (2003), no. 2, 216-240.

53 FRADES GASPAS, *El uso de la Biblia* (see note 51), 454.

54 Book 3, chapters 102 and 129, in: OC 5, 2189-94; 2321-25.

55 This point is made a great length in the third »book« of Manuel GIMÉNEZ FERNÁNDEZ, *Bartolomé de las Casas*, vol. 1, *Delegado de Cisneros para la reforma de las Indias*, 1516-1517, Seville 1953.

56 ALEXANDER VI, Inter Caetera (May 4, 1493), in: *European Treaties Bearing on the History of the United States and Its Dependencies*, ed. Frances GARDINER DAVENPORT/Charles Oscar PAULLIN, Clark, NJ 2004, 1, 71-78 [Reprint of 1902].

57 Ibid.

58 Bible translations, unless noted, are from the English Standard Version, Crossways 2001.

rupted Indian life-cycle, and the natural abundance of the land, now properly ruled, will cause the king's coffers to overflow with rents and tributes.

But such riches never appeared, and the corrupting scab of nasty men spread itself over the new world like a cancer, prematurely aging its young vitality and potential with the same vices that brought the old world to its knees before Turk and Protestant.⁴⁸ How could this possibly have happened? How could »the best and richest land of the earth«⁴⁹, instead of being completed in its blessing by the life-giving presence of Christ, have instead been turned into a »desert« by the chosen Christians of his Spanish nation.⁵⁰ This is Las Casas's question of questions, and it takes the whole of his *Historia* to tell the tragedy.⁵¹ But the black slave debacle, as he came to understand it, served as a microcosm of the destroyed moral ecosystem. The presence of an original sin – in this case the Spanish failing their evangelical task – corrupted and blinded the whole operation. Even the best and most well-intentioned of men, even Father Las Casas himself, did not escape the circle of corruption.

When we come to Las Casas's later relation of the events, his narrative defies both nay-sayer and champion. For they would reduce the man to a single principle, be it »racism«, »justice«, or »empire«, making a hero or a villain in their enlightened courtroom of democracy and equal rights. Las Casas himself fears the testimony of different witnesses, the verdict of another than these earthly judges, an other-worldly sentence.⁵² As the aging bishop reports the events leading up to the eventual importation of black slaves, his only hope is that God may have mercy on his soul – and on his nation. For the whole story is not of the violation of rights, nor of the lesser of evils, and certainly not about the necessary ravages of empires. For Las Casas, the whole thing went wrong because all parties involved had forgotten the one thing God had required of them: that they bring the Indians to knowledge of their savior, Jesus Christ.⁵³

This story of corruption and repentance we find in the last complete volume of his monumental *relación*, the *Historia de las Indias*.⁵⁴ Its form is positively biblical. Not generically biblical, it is specifically Deuteronomic, complete with covenants, promised lands, blessings, plagues, deserts, wilderness, curses, and death. Perhaps the most surprising thing for the occasional student of Las Casas is that the object of this charged theological vocabulary is not, in fact, the Indies or even the Indians themselves, but Spain – or perhaps more specifically the kingdoms of Castille and León. For it was with them (and not Ferdinand's thieving and usurping Aragonese court) that God had made his pact.⁵⁵ He had blessed them first by virtue of Columbus's successful voyage, and then with Alexander VI's donation to them all land discovered West of the meridian found 100 leagues west of the Azores or Cape Verde Islands.⁵⁶ As with Canaan, this was not a land of promise alone, for its largesse was to depend upon the execution of Spain's sole obligation, »to lead the peoples dwelling in those lands and countries to embrace the Christian religion«⁵⁷. Failure to uphold her end of the bargain, in Las Casas's covenantal logic, would forfeit Spain her claim, and render the donation void.

Deuteronomy 4:1 provides a serviceable summary of Las Casas's reading of his own nation's special arrangement with God: »And now, O [Spain], listen to the statutes and the rules that I am teaching you, and do them, that you may live, and go in and take possession of the land that the Lord, the God of your fathers, is giving you.«⁵⁸ Later on, Moses provides us the very image that Las Casas conjures of the potential for a blessed life in the Indies: »Blessed shall you be in the city, and blessed shall you be in the field. Blessed shall be the fruit of your womb and the fruit of your ground and the fruit of your cattle, the increase of your herds and the young of your flock ... The Lord will establish you as his holy people, as he promised you on oath, if you keep the commands of the Lord your God and walk in

his ways. Then all the peoples on earth will see that you are called by the name of the Lord, and they will fear you. The Lord will grant you abundant prosperity ... The Lord will open the heavens, the storehouse of his bounty.«⁵⁹

On the other hand, disobedience to the conditions of the donation of the Indies («the conversion and spiritual and temporal profit of [the Indians]»)«⁶⁰ will result in the withdrawal of God's blessing. Spain's breach has called down God's curse. The Indies have lost their powers of »generation«⁶¹. Las Casas again echoes Deuteronomy 28: »The fruit of your womb will be cursed, and the crops of your land, and the calves of your herds and the lambs of your flocks ... you will sow much seed in the field but you will harvest little ... You will plant vineyards and cultivate them but you will not drink the wine or gather the grapes ... You will have olive trees throughout your country but you will not use the oil ... All these curses will come upon you. They will pursue you and overtake you until you are destroyed, because you did not obey the Lord your God and observe the commands and decrees he gave you.«

His story has a Deuteronomic structure on the one hand. But it's also a Pauline parable. For Las Casas's slave narrative fits within what Eduardo Frades Gaspar calls the key if unspoken text for comprehending the vast swath of vice and folly that fill the numerous folios of the *History of the Indies*.⁶² It is the profile of God's passive curse that is so important for Las Casas's Thomistic synergism: God is being itself, and He need only remove His sustaining, life giving hand, and creation's life – let alone human wisdom – will fall apart into chaos. »Since they did not see fit to acknowledge God«, Paul writes in Romans 1:28, »God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not be done.« The failure – sprung from greedy short-sightedness – to profit (both financially and spiritually) from the Indian encounter was Spain's curse to be borne for its foundational disobedience. Nothing else could explain for Las Casas, how, after so many years of colonization, after so much true and helpful counsel, the Spanish crown could possibly have seen such potential wealth »consumed as if it were a puff of smoke or a bit of blowing chaff«⁶³. The immense and superabundant Indies should have been »the best and most fertile land on earth«⁶⁴, yet they have ended up nothing but a »desert«⁶⁵.

Late in his life, this is Las Casas's theodicy. It's not as if king and counsel didn't have fair warning of the abuses carried out »not for a single day, nor year, nor for ten, or twenty years, but for sixty years and more«, for »every day they knew through letters and personal testimony« from »many religious and persons of importance [...] and from [official] observers, and legal, authorized affidavits«.⁶⁶ Nor were they lacking in ideas for fixing it. As early as 1516, Las Casas, having been duly appointed »Protector of the Indians«, conceived broad plans to remedy the sundry ills inflicted upon his beloved islands – prophetic plans for the release of captives, healing of the sick, binding up of the broken hearted. Such evangelical concern would have reaped covenantal blessing, at least in the rhetoric of Las Casas's *remedios*. Care, concern, and love would lift the pall of »infernial death«⁶⁷ that has

59 Deuteronomy 28:9-12.

60 HI 3.102, in: OC 5.2192.

61 LAS CASAS, Memorial de Remedios (1518), in: OC 3, 52.

62 FRADES GASPAR, *El uso de la Biblia* (see note 51), 73-77.

63 HI 3.102, in: OC 5.2193.

64 LAS CASAS, Memorial de Remedios (1516), 43.

65 LAS CASAS, Carta al Consejo de Indias (1531), 77.

66 HI 3.102, in: OC 5.2193.

67 LAS CASAS, Carta al Consejo de Indias (1531), 72.

68 See VÍCTOR N. BAPTISTE, *Bartolomé de Las Casas and Thomas More's Utopia*. Connections and Similarities: A Translation and Study, Culver City, CA 1990.

69 All this in HI 3.102, in: OC 5.2191.

70 Ibid.

71 Ibid., 2192.

72 Ibid., 2191.

73 Ibid.

74 Ibid., 2193.

cursed the crown's investments, and return fruit from the Indies' good soil, »sometimes a hundred, sometimes sixty, sometimes thirty fold« (Mt 13:8), an abundant harvest of rents and tribute for his majesty, to be reaped from minimal capital investments. The details of Las Casas's plans have received attention elsewhere – most profitably in the striking parallels they bear to the contemporary *Utopia* of humanist Thomas More.⁶⁸ But much more important than any resemblance it may have had to the humanist's tract is the overwhelming preoccupation of Las Casas's early plans: the restoration of the Indies' natural and human abundance to pre-Colombian levels. Evangelism and sound profit are all of a piece for the early Las Casas. Greater knowledge of God, the font of being and source of all life, should have increased life and abundance.

But when presented with such a constellation of plans – amounting to a total colonial overhaul – we can easily imagine the faces of young King Charles's advisors glazing over before the starry-eyed cleric. The newly transplanted Flemish court had little interest in investing in intercontinental ventures. Their concern was to lift their well-bred liege – and their fortunes with him – to the heights of European politics. One item alone arrested their waning attention: licenses to import black slaves. Now here was an »investment« that would cost nothing but an act of sheer political will. How many? they immediately asked, dispatching memos to the house of contracts in Seville, swiftly receiving a round number response: four thousand. They were as quick to act as they were short-sighted, according to the elder Las Casas's report: »When the response came, not a single of the Spaniards – in order to gain favor – failed to pass on this recommendation to the governor of Brussels [Bressa] ... a Flemish nobleman ... of the first rank« to whom the king conceded the right to sell licenses for the import of black slaves, which »later the Genoese bought [the licenses] themselves for twenty-five thousand ducats« with eight years monopoly rights on the trade.⁶⁹

Las Casas was floored. Licenses for money? He had »agreed that the licenses would be given free and clear.«⁷⁰ And so he blew his short supply of political capital to manage an audience with the young king to argue his case. »It would be better to have simply given the governor of Bressa twenty-five thousand ducats, and given the licenses away for free; then the land would be healed, augmented, and greatly improved, the Indians going free, and the Spanish back within the limits of ecclesiastical discipline, their souls saved – to say nothing of the temporal benefit that would accrue to the king had he put but a very little to properly handling Indian affairs. But as the king then had little money, and was unable to devote himself to understanding, he profited nothing.«⁷¹

Waste, here broadly conceived, is a moral judgment, stemming from lack of »understanding«. What should have gone to Spain, for the benefit of the Indians, was simply taxed back upon the crown: »The Genoese later sold the licenses and the blacks to [the Spanish] for many *castellanos* or ducats, such that it was believed that they earned more than two-hundred and eighty, even three-hundred thousand ducats in [the deal] – all taken from [the Spanish].«⁷² Worst of all, »not a single fruit of it came to the Indians...for in the end they remained in their captivity until there were none left to kill.«⁷³

And so in the matter of black slaves, as more generally the hopes of »remedying« the Indies, the Spanish, by their »distinguished and iniquitous wickedness« have ignored the words of the prophet: »I pleaded to God that in truth they might gather the benefit and harvests from the royal estates, but they didn't even attempt to except in voice and words. And since they took no care for his honor, nor for proclamation of his law, nor for the health of souls [of both Indians and Spaniards], God permitted that they be blinded, so they would discover neither the form nor substance of good governance that they were obligated to establish in these Indies, nor hit upon in the matter anything suitable to it.«⁷⁴

3 Las Casas, Crusade, and Black Slavery

The moral plague here manifest as blindness to »the form [and] substance of good governance« spread far beyond its vicious source. The Indian problem was so great, so acute, so pressing, that in his industriousness the great humanitarian himself was »blinded« to the massive ethical debacle of replacing illegitimate Indians with illegitimate blacks. The urgency of his apostolate was too pressing a matter to shelve simply to assure a difficult to establish historical possibility. Thus were his later thoughts, anyway, found as marginal notes in the original manuscript: »he later discovered the captivity of the blacks to be as unjust as that of the Indians.«⁷⁵

In truth, despite later critics crying »foul«, incensed at a sixteenth-century man's lack of Enlightenment-era political anthropology, the younger Las Casas had no reason to object to the importation of black slaves. Despite Isabel's manumission of the Indians in 1502, and increasing regulation of the institution in Europe, general abolition simply did not exist as a movement, much less an individual preoccupation.⁷⁶ But neither did slavery then exist on such a scale – neither in Europe, nor in its nascent global networks – in any degree comparable to its 18th and 19th century apogees, during the height of plantation agriculture and the triangle trade. Scholarly consensus is that sixteenth century slavery was small scale, and largely urban – more a heightened degree of servanthood than the cog-in-the-machine it would later become.⁷⁷

Nor is there any evidence that Las Casas had any ideologically racial basis for specifying »black« slaves. Punishment was indeed the active justification, but the notion of Africans deserving the punishment inherited from Ham would not arise until the early seventeenth century.⁷⁸ He evidently shared a common conviction that »blacks« were strong and durable workers, able to withstand the elusive weakness that so afflicted the Indians.⁷⁹ But these are practical matters, having nothing to do with their »legitimacy« or not. If there's anything to distinguish Las Casas's words on the matter from the assumptions of his critics, it's that he doesn't really bother to explain it at all!

The best evidence we have comes from one line in the aforementioned marginal note: »Las Casas supposed they were justly captured.«⁸⁰ and a few chapters on, where he claims to have recommended black slaves, »not realizing the injustice with which the Portuguese took them and made them slaves.«⁸¹ His assumption is that there is a form of just capture and just enslavement. But Las Casas's marginal note implying a just slavery makes reference

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ See PIQUET, *Controversies sur l'Apologie de Las Casas lue par l'abbé Grégoire* (see note 18), 294.

⁷⁷ See Robin BLACKBURN, *The American crucible. Slavery, Emancipation and Human Rights*, New York/London 2011. Also for Europe, Nelson H. MINNICH, *The Catholic Church and the Pastoral Care of Black Africans in Renaissance Italy*, in: *Black Africans in Renaissance Europe*, eds. T. F. EARLE/K. J. P. LOWE, Cambridge/New York 2005, 280-300.

⁷⁸ Alphonse QUENUM, *Les Églises chrétiennes et la traite atlantique du XVe au XIXe siècle*, Th. Doct., Université Strasbourg; Faculté théologie Catholique, 1991, 28, 32. See also David WHITFORD, *The Curse of Ham in the Early Modern Era. The Bible and the Justifications for Slavery* (St. Andrews Studies in Reformation History), London 2009.

⁷⁹ See, for example, HI 3.129, in: OC 5.2324-25.

⁸⁰ HI 3.102, in: OC 5.2191.

⁸¹ HI 3.129, in: OC 5.2324.

⁸² QUENUM, *Les Églises chrétiennes* (see note 78), 40-50.

⁸³ See Charles-Martiale DE WITTE, *Les bulles pontificales et l'expansion portugaise au XVe siècle*, in: *Revue de Science Missionnaire* 48, (1953),

nos. 3-4, 683-718; 49 (1954), nos. 2-3, 438-61; 51, no. 1 (1956), 413-53, 809-836; 53, no. 1 (1958) 5-46, 443-71; and *Les lettres papales concernant l'expansion portugaise au XVIe siècle*, in: *Neuen Zeitschrift für Missionswissenschaft/Nouvelle Revue de science missionnaire* 40 (1984) 1-25, 93-125, 194-205; 41 (1985) 41-68, 118-37, 173-87, 271-87 [Reprinted in *Schriftenreihe der Neuen Zeitschrift für Missionswissenschaft/Cahiers de la Nouvelle Revue de science missionnaire* 31, Immensee 1986]. Taken as a piece, the papal bulls are a powerful testimony that the religious legitimization for exploration and conquest was driven by the panic to keep various Muslims at bay.

not to any proto-genetic rhetoric but to the dominant slave discourse of the early sixteenth century: crusading war. For it was the ongoing conflicts with various Muslims that produced, by any canonical measure of the day, legitimate slaves.⁸² There's good evidence, in fact, that the nascent Portuguese African trade got its religious imprimatur as a crusade, its revenues meant to finance Christendom's various Mediterranean skirmishes and protection-funds.⁸³ The fact that many slaves were bought from Arabic-speaking Muslim traders helped confuse the matter, such that – although the Portuguese on the ground knew perfectly well that the Africans they bought were as pagan as the ancient Scythians – in the popular imagination their servitude remained associated less with their skin color than with their Islam. As late as 1539, a letter from one trader, Goes, to humanist Paul Jovius reports »that Africans deserved to be treated as beasts, for they spoke Arabic and were circumcised.«⁸⁴

It's not surprising, then, that Las Casas's logic would be chiefly formed by the Crusades. His ceaselessly cited debate with the humanist Juan Ginés Sepúlveda, who claimed that Indians deserved a benevolent domination based on their evident inferiority, demonstrates this in spades.⁸⁵ Las Casas's edited manuscript was not published until the second half of the twentieth century, as *Defense of the Indians*⁸⁶ (*Apologia* in Latin), and is now famous for its tireless refutation of Sepúlveda, the culturally sophisticated racial bigot.⁸⁷ But a simple page count reveals a Las Casas arguing less against racism than the implication that the Indians, because of their religious difference and initial resistance to the Christian faith, deserved to be subjected to a Christian prince.⁸⁸ Spain's ongoing crusade against the »Moor, Turk, and Saracen« (and, in slightly different fashion, the Jew) is the immediate background to this treatise.⁸⁹ And its main point, so obvious it's been largely left unstated, is that it is unjust to treat the Indians like these other, Old World infidels.

The best guess as to why Las Casas eventually changed his mind about the blacks – finally »realizing the injustice with which the Portuguese took them and made them slaves« – comes from his having eventually read mid-fifteenth century Portuguese *relaciones* from Africa. What these reports clarify beyond a shadow of a doubt is that the Africans captured had no necessary connection with Islam and no more hostile objection to the Christian religion than their American indigenous counterparts.⁹⁰ After he did the research, Las Casas was able confidently to claim that »this was not an appropriate remedy, which advised that blacks be brought in order to free the Indians.«⁹¹ Now fully informed, »he would not advise [black slavery] for anything in the world, for [from that point] he always thought them taken unjustly and made slaves tyrannically – for the same reason as for the Indians.«⁹²

84 DE PAUW, *Récherches Philosophiques* (see note 11), 19.

85 The current critical edition, with a Spanish parallel translation is Bartolomé de LAS CASAS, *Apologia*, ed. Ángel LOSADA, in: OC 9 (1988).

86 *Defense of the Indians*, trans. & ed. Stafford POOLE, DeKalb 1974. This English translation of the original manuscript (Bibliothèque nationale, Paris, Nouveau fonds Latins, 12926) was published before either a transcript or the Latin original were put into print in their entirety.

87 George M. FREDERICKSON, *Racism. A Short History*, Princeton, NJ 2002, 36-37, takes this as Las Casas's main message.

88 Only 18 of his *Defense's* 236 double-sided folios deal directly with the question of what kind of »barbarians« the Indians are (or are not). The remaining 218 folios clarify the church's teaching on the Christian's proper exercise of coercive power among non-Christian nations, a legal corpus developed in response to Iberia's *reconquista*.

89 See Andrew WILSON, *Willing Assent and Forceful Jurisdiction in Bartolomé de Las Casas: a Provocation toward the Territorial Problem of Interreligious Human Rights Practice*, in: *Eutopias* 1 (forthcoming).

90 Pérez Fernández mentions those of Zurara, Resende, Castanheda, and Barros. Bartolomé de Las Casas *¿Contra los negros?* (see note 23), 206.

91 HI 3.129, in: OC 5.2324.

92 HI 3.102, in: OC 5.2191.

4 The global reach of Spain's sin

The punishment, however, had already begun. Failing to uphold their end of the bargain («they took no care for [God's] honor, nor for proclamation of His law, nor for the health of souls»), the Spanish had evaded »the final end to which all their works and orders, laws and mandates and decisions« should have been directed, »not having held for black and white ... the conversion and spiritual and temporal profit of [the Indians].«⁹³ Instead, the King's council has abused their mandate against all divine law toward »the acquisition of property for the king and for themselves, or for their relatives and friends.«⁹⁴

And so it comes as no surprise that when Las Casas's memory turns to the events surrounding black slavery, they unfold for him as a series of plagues: of ants, slave revolts, and dog attacks. These truly biblical castigations have been perceptively analyzed by Antonio Benítez-Rojo, whose quest to uncover the foundational absence of the plantation in Caribbean literature has led him to Las Casas.⁹⁵ But in what is otherwise an astute treatment, Benítez-Rojo reads a later racial consciousness into the late medieval friar, who we find subconsciously mixing dates and events to cover up his own uncomfortable culpability in the black slave affair. Las Casas's subconscious aside, the larger narrative the friar worked with was a biblical arc of disobedience, hardness of heart, and finally destruction itself for breach of contract. The Deuteronomic judgment is lost in the literary scholar's deconstruction of events. Perhaps it's too obvious.

There is something, nevertheless, to Benítez-Rojo's reading – something eerily prescient. But far from inculcating Las Casas for racial sins, the later bishop's reflections demonstrate an uncanny discomfort at what will become, though only eventually, the economic machine of Ibero-America: black slaves and sugar plantations, and the far-reaching slave trade that they drove. The young Defender's plans outline an ordered, gradual, and sustainable settling of the Indies. He was keen on quickly supplanting the frantic boom-economy driven by gold fever and its now-or never exploitation with a settled, agrarian society. It's somewhat muddling, for us, that black slaves got mentioned at all. For their damning presence obscures how simple, really, was Las Casas's medieval model for economic development. His grand vision is obviously monastic feudalism at its best, where willing servant and benevolent Lord support each other with mutual exchange of gifts.⁹⁶

We today, having witnessed the perfect storm of black slavery and plantation agriculture, may fault Las Casas's naïveté, but not his pedigree. Such a system, in various forms, had been in place in the Mediterranean world as far back as Romans and their *latifundia*, a notion most recently appropriated for the reoccupation of land progressively won back from Iberia's Moors during the *reconquista*. Despite Las Casas's accumulated revolutionary patina, despite his battles against this adapted practice as *encomienda*, his problem in this case was not with the arrangement itself. It was that it was unjustly applied to the Indians, who had been given no opportunity to accept Christianity voluntarily.⁹⁷ The gifts, therefore, were never reciprocal. Most glaringly of all, the Spanish had failed to turn over their most

93 HI 3:102, in: OC 5:2192.

94 Ibid., 2192–93.

95 Bartolomé de Las Casas: Entre el infierno y la ficción, in: *Modern Language Notes* 103 (March 1988), no. 2, 259–288.

96 Four centuries later, when slavery came under attack by economists and reformers, white elites continued support slavery as embodying the feu-

dal spirit. See Peter GROENWEGEN, Thomas Carlyle, »The Dismal Science«, and the Contemporary Political Economy of Slavery, in: *History of Economics Review* 34 (Summer 2001) 74–94.

97 See Las Casas's treatise on the subject: *The Only Way*, ed. Helen RAND PARISH, trans. Francis P. SULLIVAN, S. J., New York 1992.

98 LAS CASAS, Memorial de Remedios (1516), 36.

99 The following is all found in HI 3:129, in: OC 5:2322–24.

100 LAS CASAS, Memorial de Remedios (1516), 36.

101 Resuming the narrative of HI 3:129, in: OC 5:2322–24.

precious treasure, the salvation that comes from knowledge of the true God through His Son Jesus. With such a breach, failure and curses were all the Spanish deserved. And so in good Deuteronomic fashion, they were visited by a series of plagues, which specifically attack the ecological and animal abundance which otherwise would have made the Indies the most productive and populated land on earth. Sugar, sweetness itself, pure biological energy, should have been tonic for the ailing Indies. Instead it became, in a diabolical transubstantiation, the agent of death for the blacks and the vector for the first great global cancer, spreading Spanish iniquity around the globe.

In his original plans, Las Casas had no intention of intimately linking black slaves and the sugar economy – constructing mills was simply one way among many they could help.⁹⁸ It's a distinction he takes pains to narrate, describing in the development of sugar exportations in a degree of detail only an insider could provide.⁹⁹ »The residents of [Española]«, he reports, »entered into another venture, which was to seek a way to produce sugar«, from »that sweet cane« that »this land produced in great abundance«. The technological background is given an aficionado's loving treatment: »Now in 1506 or 7 a resident of La Vega named Aguilón was the first who made sugar ... in the Indies.« La Vega managed this »with certain wooden equipment with which he pressed the cane juice.« But even though »it was still real and nearly good sugar«, it wasn't refined enough to manage the return trip to Europe without spoiling. Ten years later, though, »around the year 1516, a certain resident of Santo Domingo« named Velloso, »an educated man and a surgeon« came up with »more effective equipment« for pressing and refining the juice. Velloso »produced better and whiter sugar« that could then be pressed into stable, easily transportable cakes (*alfeñique*). Of this demonstration Las Casas claims he was an eyewitness.

Now in and of itself, this should have been a positive development. It was the mercantile breakthrough needed to jumpstart Las Casas's envisioned transition from treasure boom to settled life – an economy where Indians would have their freedom and a good living. »The Jeronymite friars«, then regents of Española, »seeing how profitable it would be ... ordered – along with the *Audencia* and the king's officials – that five hundred pesos of gold be lent from the royal treasury to any resident who should set himself to construct a refinery, big or small, to make sugar.« With the king's capital stimulus package, »some of the residents volunteered to construct *trapiches*, which mill the cane with horses«, and others »put themselves to constructing water powered devices that could mill more cane and extract more sugar than three *trapiches* together.« Perhaps this is precisely what Las Casas had in mind when, in 1516, he requested investment in sugar.¹⁰⁰ The fascination with the technology is clearly exciting for the former *ecomendero*. But to the older prophet, these new-fangled »devices« (*ingenios*) don't bode well. The coincidence of this technological advance with Indian death and slave imports had ill effects that went well beyond what Las Casas had imagined in his Indian experiment. Actual humans were about to be inserted, mere cogs in an increasingly diabolical machine of wealth production.

Sugar started out as a small industry, Las Casas again takes pains to report, a little in Valencia, perhaps »six or seven mills in the Canary Islands«.¹⁰¹ But the Crown's seed money made the Caribbean sugar's true home, because it happened to coincide with the introduction of black slaves. Las Casas's own efforts had nothing to do with this, he objects, claiming that his advocacy came »before the [refineries] were invented« and these only so that »some of the settlers« who had profited »by the sweat and blood of the Indians... might let free the Indians they possessed«. That black slaves would be co-opted to labor in new enterprises, and not to replace the Indians who were perishing, Las Casas's did not foresee. Just as he did not foresee the short-sighted insider dealings of the king's advisors, which

saw a slave-trading monopoly sold to the Genoese for a 25,000-ducat mess of pottage. »By such means, what the cleric Las Casas had achieved so that the Spaniards would be aided [by the black slaves] in being sustained in the land, in order that they would free the Indians, became a commodity to be sold to merchants.« Which was »no small obstruction to the well-being and freedom of the Indians«.

With the Indians still dying, their plight ignored, calamity followed calamity. Sugar became the instrument of torture for the blacks now caught in its sticky web of moral corruption. When Las Casas made his recommendations, »there were on the island maybe ten or twelve blacks, property of the king, who had been brought to construct the fort above and along the mouth of the river.« But »after this license was given and expired, many other [licenses] always followed, so that more than thirty thousand blacks have been brought to the Island; and to the whole Indies more than one hundred thousand, I believe.« Numbers are always important for Las Casas and here are charged with significance. To claim one hundred thousand for the Indies is on the one hand to dwarf the Spanish population; on the other, it is also meant to contrast with the ever-diminishing Indians, who had been nearly completely supplanted on Española by blacks, but whose pre-Colombian population dwarfed these imports by an order of magnitude and more.¹⁰² The figures are also a measure of corruption, of all the wasted royal income, and further an indication of the magnitude of rejuvenated suffering and moral turpitude this stain will now spread around the entire globe.

Black slaves, now revealed to Las Casas as illegitimately captured and owned, heaped a new guilt upon the whole Indies. The blindness of king and Council extended their sin to ends of their enterprising influence: »As the [number of mills] increased daily, [so did] the need to place blacks in them. For every one of the water mills required at least eighty, and the *trapiches* thirty to forty. And, consequently, the earnings from the king's taxes [increased daily]. From here it followed that, as the Portuguese had for many years taken charge of robbing Guinea and making slaves of the blacks in an intolerably unjust manner, seeing that we were buying [slaves] eagerly, hurried and still hurry [more] every day to rob and capture from Guinea by as many evil and iniquitous ways as they were able to capture them. Which is to say, once the [blacks] see that [the Portuguese] seek and want [slaves], they themselves make unjust wars one against the other, and [the blacks], by still other illicit means, hurry to sell them to the Portuguese.«¹⁰³

And so in an impressive display of the long arm of global trade, Las Casas makes a prescient and portable judgment: »In this way we ourselves are the cause of all the sins that the one and the other commit – not to mention our own sins we commit in buying the black slaves.«¹⁰⁴

Las Casas's *relación* plays fast and loose with a number of details. He claims the king was »short of funds« and yet the crown financed the building of sugar mills. He criticizes payment for licenses, yet the numbers he cites suggest that the fees were certainly not the barrier he had imagined. He did imply – though he certainly did not imagine the scale and exclusiveness – that black slaves could be put to work in a soon-to-be established sugar economy. His constant refrain his early recommendations is that death and destruction are everywhere in the Indies, and that their salvation will come through just investment

102 Las Casas estimated 500,000 for Española in 1518, *Memorial de Remedios para las Indias* (1518), 52. Pre-colombian population figures are notoriously controversial. David E. STANNARD's *American Holocaust: Columbus and the Conquest of*

the New World, New York 1992, 58, claims the figure of eight million for Española alone!

103 HI 3.102, in: OC 5.2193.

104 Ibid.

105 The following all come from HI 3.129, in: OC 5.2324-25.

106 Cf. HI 3.128.

107 BENÍTEZ-ROJO, *Entre el infierno y la ficción* (see note 34), 265-269.

108 Ibid., 282-283.

109 The following are from HI 3.129, in: OC 5.2325.

and cultivation – all things which here he describes as coming to wonderful, productive fruition, including »marvelous rents« for the crown.

But these success stories are of no interest for Las Casas the prophet. While they may indicate a material success, they are a moral catastrophe. »The revenue that the king is given from these licenses [by the Venetians, Portuguese, etc.] and taxes [from the sale of slaves and from sugar production] the Emperor designated for the building of the royal palaces in Madrid and Toledo.«¹⁰⁵ Las Casas reiterates his point: »It is with this specific revenue that they were built.« King and court now quite literally inhabit houses of iniquity (cf. Ez 4:4-6) from which they rule over a hemisphere of suffering and death.

It is sugar's very success that causes its stain. When he begins his tale of the trials of the black slaves, it is not – as with the Indians – a catalogue of Spanish abuse, whippings, and beatings. It is in contrast to how it should have been, given the natural abundance of the Indian soil. »It is certain that the blacks had found«, he says of the Indies, »their proper land«. Just like the imported orange trees had so thrived in fertile Indian soil, the Indies were for the blacks »more natural to them than their [native] Guinea«. But instead of life, like other things in the now sterile Indies, the blacks, too, »discovered their death and pestilence« – which flowed in sticky rivers right from the newly invented sugar crushing devices.

»Formerly«, he reports, »before there were mills, it was commonly believed on the island that if a black was not hanged, he would never die.« Outside the Indies, and before the sugar mills, »we had never seen a black die from infirmity«, unlike the native Indians, who dropped like flies. In Las Casas's logic, how much more, then, should these robust blacks, now in their »true home« have thrived? But instead, »after the Spanish placed them in the mills«, they »discovered their death and pestilence«, which were, respectively, »the great toil they were made to suffer, and the swill they brewed from the can juice and drank«. Instead of proving a robust source of morally clean labor, »many of them die every day«, just as had the Indians. Nothing, not even invincible blacks, can withstand the diabolical forces working against life and prosperity on Indian soil.

It's a disconcerting substitution: the suffering of blacks as the punishment for Spain. Benítez-Rojo suggests that the elder chronicler's recalling of an Indian-killing smallpox »plague«¹⁰⁶ dredged up repressed memories of black slave suffering engendered by his own ensuing labor replacement efforts.¹⁰⁷ These feelings escaped in an »uncanny« (à la Freud) elision, in which a »plague« of ants (black slaves) is eradicated by their attraction to and consumption of a »piedra solimán« (aka philosophers stone, in this case mercury bichlorate, a toxic white crystal used in alchemy and medicine, here standing in for sugar).¹⁰⁸ This, in turn, finally inspired the chapter long *mea culpa* related above.

Be that as it may, Benítez-Rojo's deconstructed narrative demotes Las Casas's more overt tale of biblical punishment upon His recalcitrant, chosen people. Indians die from »a plague« of smallpox. Then a »plague« of ants afflict the settlers. And then suffering blacks revolt: »when they are able, they flee in groups, and rebel, wreaking death and cruelty among the Spaniards.«¹⁰⁹ The whole story, it turns out, is from and for the Spanish: by their »distinguished iniquity« upon the Indians, their equally cruel treatment of blacks in the mills, they have reaped a harvest of iniquity. Slave mutiny and retaliatory brigandage create great anxiety amongst the settlers. The »villagers of the island do not live very protected.« »This«, according to Las Casas, »is another plague«.

And it is quickly followed by another: »packs of dogs, which cannot be numbered, nor can the harm they have done be estimated.« They attack the wild pigs, who like sugar, oranges, and blacks, had found in the Indies their »natural« land. The pigs, once »unfathomable« in number, »so that at every league there was marvelous, felicitous, and profitable hunting.«

»All of which«, he concludes, »the dogs have destroyed.« An apocalyptic scene follows: »Not satisfied with the pigs, they attack the calves, especially just as the mothers are giving birth.«

In the large arc of Las Casas story, it is the Spanish who have brought down God's wrath upon themselves. »We should recall«, he sums up, »that we found this island full of peoples«, good and strong peoples, alluding to Joshua's forays into Canaan (Nm 13). All these plagues, including and especially those stemming from the importation of black slaves, have flowed from ignoring the one thing, »the conversion and spiritual and temporal profit of [the Indians].«¹¹⁰ The chapter ends with a final lament: »According to divine judgment, compelled by our own power, we ourselves have been injured and vexed.«¹¹¹

5 Las Casas before God's eternal judgement

It's a strange tale, Las Casas's involvement in black slavery, uncanny even. Strange, because there has to be some beginning to the tragedy of black slavery in the Indies. Stranger still that the person found holding the smoking gun should be none other than the great father of freedom, Las Casas, caught in the chaos and tumult of those heady years and their apocalyptic dreams. It's all perfectly explicable, of course: they were legitimate, or so he once believed, by terms accepted among righteous company. And the commensurate good to be had from safeguarding the Indians from his own countrymen, how great it was. As great as the immensity of the Indies themselves!

It's also the most notable instance, apart from his initial conversion to the Indian cause, of Las Casas making an about-face – a belated and puzzled one, but an about-face all the same. Despite the bishop's usual moral high ground, he seems just as bewildered as William Robertson, whose *History of America* (1778) admired Las Casas's »bustling, indefatigable activity«¹¹², yet lamented that »while [Las Casas] contended earnestly for the liberty of the people born in one quarter of the globe, he laboured to enslave the inhabitants of another region.« For the Scottish clergyman, Las Casas suffered (as did so many culture heroes of that era) from a character flaw, an honorable but unfortunate narrowness of purpose, an »inconsistency natural to men who hurry with headlong impetuosity towards a favourite point.« It's a criticism Las Casas would have accepted.

But not, as suspects his enlightenment descendant Roberston, because he »was incapable of making the distinction« between freedom itself and the incongruous means of black slavery. That's our own scruple, born in the age of revolutions and sustained by the continued inequality of the poorer, darker citizens of the world. Las Casas was an unrepentant colonist, a Christian imperialist as well. Is he first among the racists, too? Can we trust anything from such a tainted man? We can hardly blame Pancho Villa, the great Mexican general, who burned a painting of Las Casas he found in Chihuahua's liberated capital, saying, »I'm not strong in my catechism, but it seems to me that Jesus Christ came to the world just as much for blacks as for Indians.«¹¹³ The enslavement of blacks is, as wrote Jorge Luis Borges, the dark underbelly of Las Casas's greatness.¹¹⁴

110 HI 3.102, in: OC 5.2192.

111 HI 3.102, in: OC 5.2325.

112 The following are from ROBERTSON, *History of America* (see note 6), 225–226.

113 As related in Pérez FERNÁNDEZ, *Bartolomé de Las Casas, ¿Contra los negros?* (see note 23), 9.

114 Jorge Luis BORGES, *El Atroz Redentor Lazarus Morell*, in: *Historia universal de la infamia* (1935), *Jorge Luis Borges: Obras Completas*, ed. María KODAMA, Barcelona 1996, 1.295.

115 HI 3.102, in: OC 5.2324.

But this is not the judgment Las Casas himself feared, to be panned in the courts of posterity. To enter into that tribunal, with its updated law-books, is also to draw down its merciless verdict upon ourselves, too. For what, from among all we now do in our ignorance and in the name of greater freedom, will manifest demons in the generations to come? Las Casas, at least, admitted his error, and submitted his soul to the only – and only gracious – court that mattered to him. »He found himself repentant, judging himself inadvertently guilty«, and having confessed, »was not certain that the ignorance and good intention he had in this would excuse him before divine judgment.«¹¹⁵ We study the past not only to learn from our mistakes, not only to distance our lofty era from previous error. We study the past to claim it as our own, and ask for forgiveness.

Abstract

As part of comprehensive plans to revitalize the Indies, the great Defender of the Indians, Bartolomé de Las Casas (1484–1566), urged the crown to import Black slaves into the New World; he later repented of this advocacy before God and in his *Historia de las Indias*. This paper explores this topos from its origin in the Enlightenment, and offers a literary reading of the relevant letters and chapters of his writings, placing them within a Deuteronomic framework of Spain's abandonment of her special covenant with God. Las Casas' attitudes toward Blacks are traced to the crusades, and his »repentance« is understood opposite the expansion of Spain's now global injustice.

Zusammenfassung

Im Rahmen umfangreicher Pläne, Westindien neu zu beleben, drängte der große Verteidiger der Indios, Bartolomé de Las Casas (1484–1566), die Krone dazu, schwarze Sklaven in die Neue Welt zu bringen. Später wird er dieses Eintreten dafür vor Gott und in seiner *Historia de las Indias* bereuen. Der vorliegende Beitrag geht diesem Topos seit seiner Entstehung in der Aufklärung nach und bietet eine literarische Deutung der Briefe und Kapitel seiner diesbezüglichen Schriften. Dabei stellt er diese Schriften in einen deuteronomistischen Rahmen von Spaniens Preisgabe seines besonderen Bundes mit Gott. Las Casas' Haltungen gegenüber Schwarzen werden auf die Kreuzzüge zurückgeführt und seine »Reue« wird im Gegensatz zur damaligen globalen Ungerechtigkeit Spaniens verstanden.

Sumario

En el marco de un plan para revitalizar »Las Indias«, Bartolomé de Las Casas (1484–1566), el gran defensor de los indios, urgió a la Corona a transportar esclavos negros al Nuevo Mundo. Más tarde lamentará ese plan ante Dios y en su *Historia de las Indias*. El artículo analiza este tópico desde su origen en la Ilustración, y estudia las cartas y los capítulos de los escritos lascasianos respectivos, presentándolos en un marco deuteronomico: España ha echado por tierra su alianza especial con Dios. La postura de Las Casas respecto a los negros es vista bajo la perspectiva de las cruzadas, y su »arrepentimiento« es presentado como un contraste a la expansión de la injusticia global de España.