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Reviews

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Daniel Castro, *Another Face of Empire: Bartolomé de Las Casas, Indigenous Rights and Ecclesiastical Imperialism* (Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press, 2007), pp. xii + 233, £55.00, £13.99, pb.

The title of the volume is its agenda, for the author tries to prove that Las Casas was in fact not a critical companion of the colonisation and evangelisation processes, not a voice of conscience, and not a true defender of the rights of the indigenous peoples. Las Casas' 'ethocentrism and benevolent paternalism' was instead 'another face of empire'. On page after page the author accuses Las Casas of, among other things, being the following: An instrument of imperial authority, one who endorsed the sovereignty of a ruling leader in Europe or overseas; one who believed indefatigably in the strengths of the imperial system; one who increasingly lost contact with the local people; one who was always an outsider; one who was not able to achieve any tangible improvements, but was always unsettled and restless; a man who was full of emotion, passion and intransigence. Castro declares that Las Casas never contemplated a resistance movement, nor did he champion the end of the Spanish colonisation at any time. In the Spanish duty to evangelise he also saw a right to rule. Las Casas was not a 'Father of America' since his alternative models for the continent corresponded more to the ideas of the Spanish crown than to the needs of the indigenous population. Las Casas contributed to forcing the *Indios* even further into an inflexible role as victims from which they could no longer escape: 'In the colonial world of Las Casas' time, indigenous people remained unprotected, and in order for their rights to be recognized they were forced to embrace an alien culture with its alien god and its alien religions.... Furthermore, his proposals for peaceful evangelization constitute a clear form of ecclesiastical imperialism' (p. 182). Rather than being a 'champion of justice and precursor of human rights', Las Casas was 'an active agent of Spanish imperialism' (p. 184). Rather than a missionary, he was 'a theoretician and tactician of a benevolent ecclesiastical imperialism' (p. 185). Castro's deconstruction of the 'Las Casas' myth culminates in the audacious thesis: 'Bartolomé de Las Casas must be remembered as an active and willing participant in the ecclesiastical and political imperialist domination of Indoamerica by Spain and as one of the best-known representatives of benevolent Spanish imperialism in the formative century of our continent' (p. 185).

Castro's literary work is a scholarly scandal. First of all because the author says nothing new here, but simply repeats well-known accusations against Las Casas and because, in the process, he relies not least of all on historical opponents of Las Casas (including Toribio de Benavente 'Motolinía', Fernández de Oviedo, López de Gómara, Ginés de Sepúlveda, among others). Secondly, because he views the past from the standpoint of the present, indeed from the standpoint of a particular present which starts out from a strictly moral assessment of the *conquista* and the evangelisation of America and even denies Europe, i.e. the West, the right to espouse a universalisation of its culture and religion – even if this is done peacefully. Finally, and

above all, it is a scandal because, with his anti-colonial, anti-Western diatribe, under the guise of 'scholarship', he does not do justice to the works of Las Casas.

Las Casas and his works do not, of course, exist in an 'unassailable zone' or criticism-free space. Criticism, however, must be 'objective' if it is to be taken seriously in the form of scholarship. The new Las Casas research, to which this reviewer has made some contributions, tries to take a middle course between 'idealisation' and 'demonisation' since both approaches are 'unscholarly'. As Castro says, Las Casas was undeniably a 'child of his times'. But precisely when one sees him as a child of his times, one should be able to notice how far ahead of his times he was. That is what constitutes Las Casas' greatness. He assumed a different perspective than the mainstream of his times in virtually all questions which the process of *conquista* and evangelisation raised, and he endeavoured to defend the rights of the indigenous peoples. Las Casas' writings are to be regarded as a 'work in progress'. He started a legal discourse and, using legal arguments (from divine law, natural law and positive law), tried to defend a form of encounter between Spain and the indigenous peoples that could be to the advantage of both. Work in progress also means that he was willing to learn from mistakes and that he only discovered the appropriate formula in certain matters in his final texts.

This is above all true with respect to the question concerning the legitimacy of Spanish rule which Las Casas treats in his writings on international law. In his late works (*De thesauris, Las doce dudas*), Las Casas clarified that Spanish rule was completely 'illegitimate' because the free assent of the indigenous peoples was lacking. He did not understand Pope Alexander VI's Bull of Donation (1493) as a 'title to rule', as did, for instance, Sepúlveda, but merely as a right to try to gain the free assent of the indigenous peoples in a non-violent manner. In this matter he granted the *Indios* a clear 'right to resist', analogous to the right of the Spanish to resist the invading Muslims. What more does one want?

He was also ahead of his times in his consistent defence of peaceful evangelisation. Las Casas was not involved in a form of 'ecclesiastical imperialism' since he advocated (in *De unico vocationis modo* …) radically non-violent evangelisation in which the missionaries, without any protection from soldiers, were supposed to be completely free of the desire to dominate and without greed, preaching more by way of the example of a good life than with words. Here he sharply criticised the use of certain coercive measures, and granted the indigenous peoples the right to reject Christianity: on the one hand because of the unfamiliarity of its teachings (Trinity), and on the other hand because of the unchristian example of the *conquistadores* and the *encomenderos*.

He was ahead of his times as well in the interpretation of indigenous cultures. Las Casas' apologetical works (*Apologética historia sumaria*, *Apologia*) represent a new type of apologetical literature! Since Socrates' apologetics has been understood as the defence and justification of one's own position over un-objective accusations. Thus, the first Christian authors, not without reason called 'apologists', also defended the truth of Christianity against the criticism of pagan philosophers and polemicists. Las Casas, however, wrote his apologetical works to defend the truth of the alien, of the other, of the indigenous peoples and cultures against the Spanish-Christian demonisation of the same. In his intuitive sense for the logic of what Levi-Strauss would call 'savage reasoning', of the values of alien religiosity, he goes so far that he does not demonise 'idolatry', but rather understands it as a (misguided) expression of the quest for the true God. Although he considers human sacrifice

and cannibalism to be despicable practices, he denies that they are a reason for 'humanitarian intervention'. Finally, he thinks that Christians and the church could learn from some of the values or principles of indigenous religiosity.

For Las Casas, Christianity is of course the true religion. However, through both his discovery of 'authentic religiosity' in the shadow of idolatry and his rejection of an inner-worldly claim to absolute truth over the Indios, Las Casas opens up real possibilities for a genuine enculturation in the work of evangelisation. His position is very close to the Declaration on Non-Christian Religions of the Second Vatican Council which states, among other things, that: 'The Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions'. In the last analysis, Las Casas' argument also amounts to the right to freedom of worship – in the 16th century! – as is documented in the Declaration on Religious Freedom of the Second Vatican Council. It is no accident that, as a justification for the merely discursive contestation of 'idolatry', Las Casas quotes the parable of the weeds among the wheat (Mt 13: 24–30) which was also being quoted in Europe during this period by the advocates of religious tolerance and freedom of conscience. For Las Casas, 'idolatry' is, ultimately, something which only concerns God and the sinner, but not human jurisdiction. Finally, Las Casas was ahead of his times in his historical works (*Historia de las Indias*, but also *Brevísima relación* …). Here, he tells the 'tale of woe' in the shadow of the historical process of *conquista* and evangelisation from the perspective of the victims, thus engaging in an *anamnetic* writing of history as it was called for by Walter Benjamin, for example, in the 20th century.

One can certainly criticise Las Casas, but any criticism should adhere to the fundamental scholarly principle of objectivity. Las Casas, who was well-versed and learned in all good scholarly pursuits (according to the judgment of the German Wolfgang Griesstetter in 1571, and the Franciscan, Jerónimo de Mendieta in 1596), defends five basic rights of the indigenous peoples and individuals in the age of discovery with apologetical enthusiasm for the other, namely: to voluntary acceptance of Spanish rule; the right to resistance against illegal Spanish rule; to the recognition and the preservation of indigenous culture; to respect for indigenous religiosity and to the preservation of those elements compatible with Christianity; and finally, to reject the Christianity preached in the shadow of the *conquista*. These basic rights can also be regarded today as the foundation of a more just world order in the shadow of globalisation. In any case, the universalisation of Western culture and religion will only have a chance in the future in compliance with these basic rights of the other. In this sense Las Casas, who viewed the first globalisation phase of the 16th century critically with the eyes of the other, is 'our contemporary', a view which the renowned scholar Immanuel Wallerstein, has recently acknowledged in his book *European Universalism: The Rhetoric of Power*, New York: The New Press, 2006).

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James E. Wadsworth, *Agents of Orthodoxy: Honor, Status and the Inquisition in Colonial Pernambuco, Brazil* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007), pp. xviii + 267, £49.00, hb.

The word 'inquisition' in a title focuses the attention of a reader on an institution which evokes images of secrecy, cloaked judges, incarceration, torture, trials,