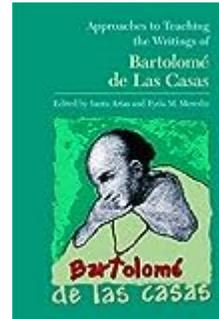


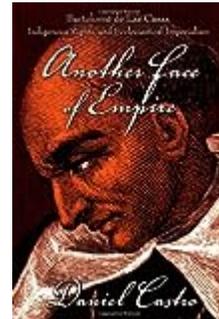
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Santa Arias, Eyda M. Merediz, eds. *Approaches to Teaching the Writings of Bartolomé de las Casas*. New York: Modern Language Association of America, 2008. xiv + 284 pp. \$19.75 (paper), ISBN 978-0-87352-945-7; \$37.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-87352-944-0.



Daniel Castro. *Another Face of Empire: Bartolomé de Las Casas, Indigenous Rights and Ecclesiastical Imperialism*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2007. 248 pp. \$21.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8223-3939-7.



Jeremy Lawrance. *Spanish Conquest, Protestant Prejudice: Las Casas and the Black Legend*. Nottingham: Monographs in Post-Conflict Cultures, 2009. 62 pp. \$7.50 (paper), ISBN 978-1-60271-020-7.

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On Lascasian Studies

Those who write about Bartolomé de las Casas (1485-1566) generally fall into his admirers and his detractors, benign descriptors for the divisions that the life of the "universal protector of the Indians" usually provokes. The four hundredth anniversary of his death was

marked by a flurry of literature about him. At one end of the spectrum was Ramón Menéndez Pidal, the great Spanish philosopher historian, who labeled Las Casas a delusional paranoic in his biography of the Dominican priest, and at the other end Lewis Hanke, the equally

prominent U.S. historian of Spain and its empire, led the admirers, seeing in Las Casas a champion of social justice and human rights.

In the past twenty years, the flow of articles and books diminished somewhat from the outpouring in the mid-twentieth century—with one major exception, the fourteen volume *Fray Bartolomé de las Casas: Obras completas* (hereafter *Obras completas*) (1988-98)—but the friar's life still arouses historical controversy over such issues as truth, justice, honor, greed, cupidity, and virtue, all set within a Christian milieu. Modern scholars have added their own lens to viewing Las Casas and his times, throwing agency, myths, imagination, race, and even gender into the equation as they try to figure out this remarkable man.

Daniel Castro's *Another Face of Empire* is one of a number of new works in the past two decades on the famous protector of American Indians, a title bestowed in 1516 by Cardinal Francisco Ximenez de Cisneros, twice regent of Spain. Las Casas was already launched on a career that turned him into the most controversial person of the Encounter. He later became a Dominican and certainly the most passionate defender of Amerindians in the face of the Spanish onslaught. He polarized his peers and contemporaries with his explosive polemics and rhetoric, and his works and life still set off raucous arguments five hundred years later. Castro's work, for example, views Las Casas as an imperialist, albeit with a religious twist, and his book has been received critically with both approval and reprobation.

Another new work, by Jeremy Lawrance, *Spanish Conquest, Protestant Prejudice*, directs attention to the making of the Black Legend. It probes beyond the normal boundaries associated with Hispanophobia, into historical and even some modern expressions of ethnic demonization, racial stereotyping, and the banalization of atrocities in modern warfare.

In a more pedagogical vein, Eyda M. Merediz and Santa Arias recently coordinated and contributed to a volume, *Approaches to Teaching the Writings of Bartolomé de las Casas*, that contains biographical information within its didactic context. It is a compilation of modern, largely literary approaches to Las Casas, demonstrating that he does not belong to historians alone, but his life and times have universal appeal.

Perhaps the most important work to appear in the last two decades is the massive *Obras completas*. It was published between 1988 and 1998 by the Dominican Founda-

tion Instituto Bartolomé de las Casas de los Dominicos de Andalucía and Alianza Editorial, Madrid. The overall director of the project was Paulino Castañeda Delgado. Some of these volumes number well over one thousand pages each. While not all are Las Casas's works (the entire first volume, for example, is a biographical study by Alvaro Huerga), the output is impressive.

This is the best of the several editions of his various works, and the editors have heavily annotated the presentation to help readers place Las Casas's works and life in the context of the times. For example, the treatises originally composed in Latin appear in that language with accompanying Spanish translations. Earlier versions of Las Casas's collected works exist, but none approximates the coverage and commentary prepared by a small army of historians who worked on the *Obras completas*, which represents a truly vast new resource—as yet largely untapped—for those interested in the dynamics of the sixteenth century. Plus, the annotations—some of them book-length essays by the editors—represent a wealth of information and interpretation in their own right. It now awaits someone to mine it for its riches and render those riches comprehensible to students of the sixteenth century.

The *Obras completas* remind me of Pierre and Huguette Chaunu's monumental work on *Seville et l'Atlantique (1504-1650)*, an eleven-volume treasure trove published in 1955 on the almost eighteen thousand voyages by Spanish ships on the Atlantic. I remember reading the wonderful two-volume work published in the mid-1960s by John Lynch, Spain and the Hapsburgs, being eternally grateful for his mining of the Chaunu's work and rendering into a comprehensible piece. Now someone needs to do the same with *Obras completas*.

Controversy has almost always marked Lascasian studies, and Castro's *Another Face of Empire* is no different. Castro's basic premise is that Las Casas represented the face of ecclesiastical imperialism during the Spanish conquest of the Americas. Castro's characterization of Las Casas studies underscores the controversial nature of those works: a few participants in the imperial expansion of Spain into the New World have generated as much controversy, been as demonized, become the object of such uninhibited hagiographic adoration and derision, or received so much attention from contemporaries and modern students of the Indoamerican colonial period as Bartolomé de las Casas (pp. 2-3).

The author of the Black Legend, the universal protector of American Indians, and the fly in the ointment

of conquistadors, settlers, and the encomenderos of the Indies for more than half a century, Las Casas, as Castro demonstrates, represented one of the church's many swords in the New World. This evangelical calling, which Castro labeled as an "important motivation underlying the friar's relationship with the natives," was something that Las Casas shared with fellow Spaniards: to wit the "belief that the dissemination of the Christian faith was their divinely ordained mission" (pp. 6, 7). This, in fact, was the driving force in the Dominican's life, and for many Las Casas scholars, it becomes a line in the sand, a litmus test of sorts. It is not the only part of his life that generates controversy, but this book does take issue with Las Casas's Christian calling, and in doing so sets the tone for the rest of the book.

After briefly populating the philosophical and theological stage, Castro goes on to explore the multiple roles Las Casas played in his long life, and he does so well. Castro's basic criticism of Las Casas is that "the protector" unwittingly ignored or never truly understood Amerindian realities, so wrapped up was the friar making his cases before councils and court in Spain. And, secondarily, but no less important, Las Casas never questioned the imposition of Christianity as a goal, thereby himself becoming a Christian imperialist.

It is an interesting argument that Castro makes, but as a number of reviewers have pointed out, it fails to take into account the multiple dimensions of Las Casas's long life that often undermine some of Castro's arguments. One example will suffice. Instead of being a consistent "ecclesiastical imperialist" throughout his life, at the end he advocated a return of everything to the Amerindians, the principle of restitution carried to its ultimate implication. He made these arguments with respect to the Incas of Peru as he waged a long battle to prevent the encomenderos of Peru from gaining rights to their encomiendas in perpetuity. Everything that had been stripped from the Amerindians—their property, their liberty, their sovereignty, and their dominion—should be returned. Of course, by then the conquest was a reality and there was no turning back. But this was no ecclesiastical imperialist making his case for Christianity across all boundaries and over all people. It was an intensely committed thinker and activist who truly believed in the liberty of all people, and that Christianity could only be legitimately introduced peacefully, the "only way" as he wrote in his first book.

Jeremy Lawrance's study of Las Casas's *Brief Relation of the Destruction of the Indies* (1552) is a model of

brevity. The principal goal of this little monograph is to examine and describe how the images of the Black Legend sensitized "the European public to the horrors of mass violence," during which "a leading role was played by technical advances in the serial printing of graphic images ... paving the way to a fresh iconography of atrocity" (p. 30). At the center of this new development were the seventy-two plates by Theodore de Bry used to illustrate Girolamo Benzoni's *History of the New World* (1565), some of which were in turn incorporated into various sixteenth-century versions of the *Brief Relation* that subsequently was the cornerstone of the Black Legend. Lawrance includes twenty-four images from de Bry and other illustrators at the end of the monograph, plus a good list of "Works Cited." Just browsing the images is enough to turn one's stomach, to wonder in astonishment at the capacity for the cruelty and barbarity men were and are capable of doing. Lawrance's brief study of each image provides some provenance and historical context and is an excellent guide to the iconography of the Black Legend.

But Lawrance's study is more than just about images. It is as much about Las Casas and his nature and goals as the images that made him if not a household name, at least recognizable by every student who has visited the conquest of the New World, voluntarily or otherwise. Did Las Casas lie or exaggerate the grotesque and brutal tales he recorded in the *Brief Relation*? Was he just an over-the-top publicist, whose defense of the Indians plunged him into excesses of rhetoric, playing to the heart rather than the minds of his readers? The author finds and defines shortcomings all along the way, but then admits to the central truth of the work: "If *Brief Relation* fails to achieve its declared intention of reportage because its facts are too slipshod, its rhetoric too crude, and ... its oversimplifications too dogmatic, the text nevertheless wins respect as testimony" (p. 22).

The *Brief Relation* is also examined for what it did to the image of Spain in the world. Las Casas's passion ended up portraying Spain "in the popular conception as the most inhumane empire of all time" (p. 23). While Las Casas pleaded for the Indians, everyone else read what barbarities the Spaniards committed in the Indies. In the process, the Black Legend gradually shifted in focus from a "religio-political hostility to ethnic demonization" (p. 25). Their Protestant rivals, reducing their actions to genetic dispositions to behave like their ancestors, the Goths and the Saracens, described Spaniards as a "cursed race."

Lawrance blames Las Casas for some of this, for his gross oversimplifications that appealed to the heart, not the mind. The very witness who in his defense of the Indians went overboard in his indictment of his fellow Spaniards provided the fuel for the fire. And there is some truth to this. In the end, what we need to see is the whole Las Casas, not just the author of the *Brief Relation*, with all those de Bry images, that sealed the fate of Spain's reputation with her Protestant neighbors for centuries. He was part of a movement within Spain itself—certainly larger than Las Casas—that promoted a view of Christian evangelization as the only true and legitimate context for the Spanish conquest.

That is a much broader question that has been addressed in various ways over the past two decades of Las Casas scholarship. Merediz and Arias, in their *Approaches to Teaching the Writings of Bartolomé de las Casas*, bring together an eclectic group of essays, dealing with a wide range of issues, including literary texts and editions; Las Casas in literature; Las Casas online; his intellectual life; Las Casas through the lens of historians, anthropologists, linguists, and others; his place in religious studies; stereotypes and realities; the *Brevisima*; human rights; the noble savage; restitution; Christopher Columbus; Fernández de Oviedo; barbarism; the slave trade; liberation theology; film; and demons and devils. The book's contents are interesting and informative on two levels: first, they discuss how Las Casas fits into these many categories; and, second, they examine how the categories themselves are reflections of the concerns of modern scholars.

The most thorough biography produced in the last twenty years came from the mind and spirit of the Peruvian Dominican Gustavo Gutiérrez, one of the pioneers of liberation theology in the mid-twentieth century. His biography of Las Casas, *En busca de los pobres de Jesucristo: El pensamiento de Bartolomé de las Casas* (1992) (translated as *Las Casas: In Search of the Poor of Jesus Christ* [1993] by Robert R. Barr), is a tour de force. Gutiérrez portrays Las Casas as a forerunner of liberation theology. This sympathetic and brilliant biography is a window into the mind and philosophy that drove Las Casas, especially connecting his theological foundations to other philosophical and political themes, such as the beginnings of international law and the rights of a people to self-determination.

It is tempting to say Gutiérrez's study is dated, frozen into a time when liberation theology was at its peak, and so is now merely an artifact of curiosity from

early Lascasian studies. But that would be as absurd as relegating Hanke's pioneering studies, such as his classic *The Spanish Struggle for Justice in the Conquest of the Americas* (originally published in 1949, latest edition published in 2002), to the same category. They are windows into Lascasian studies in the context of their scholarly and religious culture, and, as such, add to our knowledge of the man and his times.

Another excellent relatively recent biography is by the Brazilian Dominican Frei Carlos Josaphat, *Las Casas, todos os direitos paratodos* (2000). Josaphat, a Dominican, is one of the best-known liberation theologians of Brazil, and his biography is a wonderful spiritual and intellectual journey. Josaphat was exiled for many years from his native land and much of the pain and marginalization that he experienced endowed his work with sympathy and compassion for Las Casas.

Huerta too wrote a complete biography, *Fray Bartolomé de las Casas*, that appeared as the first volume of the *Obras completas*. Although rather selective in content, it portrays Las Casas not only with sympathy, but also with his many flaws. It emphasizes a dimension—namely the scriptural basis—that drove much of Las Casas's life. This fountain of inspiration in his life is often ignored in favor of philosophical, legal, anthropological, historical, and other aspects of Las Casas.[1]

I would guess that after Columbus, no other figure appears more often in historical literature than Las Casas. Just about any study set in the sixteenth century will have a reflection on Las Casas, directly or indirectly illuminating some phase of the Encounter, from the devil in the New World to the origins of the African slave trade.[2] Las Casas belongs to no specialist, although we historians like to claim him—even with all his warts, exaggerations, and frenetic politicking—as one of our own. One of his modern champions in literature, for example, is Rolena Adorno who in *The Polemics of Possession in Spanish American Narrative* (2008) makes a perceptive argument, using Las Casas in many cases, that the central debate in the sixteenth century centered on the legitimacy of the conquest, or the polemics of possession as she phrased the title of her book. And see especially the range of essays put together by Merediz and Arias in their *Approaches to Teaching the Writings of Bartolomé de las Casas* for more examples of his wide-ranging appeal to scholars of all stripes.

Younger scholars continue to probe into his life as well. For example, one of the newest works on Las Casas's first book, *The Only Way* (1550), is the 2007 dis-

sertation by Jesús Rodríguez, SJ, "Stating His Purpose: Autobiographical, Confessional, and Testimonial Disclosure in Bartolomé de las Casas's *De Unico Vocatione Modo*." And a quick look into abstracts of theses and dissertations (ProQuest) using Las Casas as the search phrase produced over forty hits in the last twenty years.

In the spirit of tomorrow, Las Casas has gone global. The principal portal into Lascasiana on the Web is www.lascasas.org. The site has numerous sections, including links to various pages and sites devoted to Las Casas, such as a link to the Biblioteca Virtual Miguel de Cervantes/ Biblioteca Americana/ Bartolomé de las Casas, one of the most complete sources for online resources devoted to Las Casas. In this virtual library (www.cervantesvirtual.com/bib_autor/bartolomedelascasas) one can navigate easily to many of his original works now digitized, as well as to major secondary works of books and articles (some even in English), and to images—especially graphic ones of the Black Legend by de Bry—and other resources. The www.lascasas.org site contains the newest books, articles, and conference papers given on Las Casas as well as some longer articles that are biographic in nature, and an entire page is devoted to links to other Las Casas's pages and institutes named in his honor. PARES (or Portal de Archivos Españoles) is the online portal to the archives in Spain, and one can easily navigate to the various archives with major Las Casas holdings: <http://pares.mcu.es>. A simple search using "Bartolomé de las Casas" produces hundreds of references to documents in at least nine Spanish

archives, many with the digitized documents (letters, petitions, etc.) online. So, he is both a man for the future and a man of the past.

He was at the core of his existence a prophet cut from the same mold as Jeremiah and Ezekiel of the Old Testament and John the Baptist of the New. Prophets are dramatic, divisive eruptions in their cultures, claiming the high ground of truth and principle with little regard for evenhandedness, objectivity, or any other compromise of their message. They are not particularly liked. They rub people the wrong way. Their facts may not hold up to cross examination in a court of law. But their message is pure and unalloyed. That was Las Casas and he continues to fascinate and engage us precisely because he crosses human boundaries of time and space.

Notes

[1]. I have included this dimension as a main theme in two of my books: *Bartolomé de las Casas and the Conquest of the Americas* (Hoboken: Wiley Blackwell, 2011), and in a much longer biography, *Apostle to the Indians: The Life of Bartolomé de las Casas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming 2012).

[2]. For a revisionist piece on Las Casas and that trade, see, for example, my "Bartolomé de las Casas and the African Slave Trade," *History Compass* 7, no. 6 (September 10, 2009): 1526-1541, <http://history-compass.com/caribbean-latin-america/>.

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