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## Review/Reseña

Daniel Castro, *Another Face of Empire: Bartolomé de Las Casas, Indigenous Rights, and Ecclesiastical Imperialism*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2007.

### **Bartolomé de Las Casas: Ecclesiastical Imperialist?**

**Nicole von Germeten**

Oregon State University

In *Another Face of Empire*, Daniel Castro takes on the daunting task of de-sanctifying Bartolomé de Las Casas. Las Casas still satisfies some students' and scholars' craving for a hero in the vast expanse of colonial Latin American history. The hero worship of Las Casas today partially derives from the tendency to see history in good vs. evil dichotomies.<sup>1</sup> Of course these dichotomies create passive victims of evil, and, as readers, we congratulate ourselves with our sympathy with the victimized. As Castro writes: "By anointing Las Casas as a symbol of resistance and as a savior of the Indians, all of us can share in his accomplishments" (178). While

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Lawrence A. Clayton's unpublished biography of Las Casas on [www.lascasas.org/manissues.htm](http://www.lascasas.org/manissues.htm).

Castro's book suffers from repetitiveness and a few internal contradictions, in general, *Another Face of Empire* provides a convincing argument for finally retiring the myth of Las Casas as the "father of America" and the "protector of the Indians."

At the crux of Castro's argument are two key points: Las Casas was an ecclesiastical imperialist, utterly convinced of the rightness of evangelizing indigenous Americans, and that any influence Las Casas had on Spanish monarchs only served to solidify and centralize Spanish rule. Las Casas was a product of his era and sought royal favor to achieve his goals. According to Castro, Las Casas felt more at home in Spain than in the Americas. He had success lobbying the monarchs Charles V and Philip II, but failed miserably at any projects he undertook in the New World. He was an excellent self-promoter but terribly unsuccessful at carrying out his ideals. Castro details Las Casas's endeavors in Venezuela and Nicaragua, which ended disastrously, especially for indigenous residents. Las Casas's efforts in Spain, such as formulating the New Laws and his Valladolid debate with Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda, achieved little to improve indigenous lives in practice and only made him a less popular figure in America. Instead, Castro compares Las Casas to Viceroy Francisco de Toledo, who in the 1570s helped enforce Spanish rule in the Andes by executing Tupac Amaru I and attempting to congregate native Andeans in larger communities. However, the fact that Las Casas was so intensely disliked by the colonists made it virtually impossible for him to achieve anything in the New World.

In his analysis of Las Casas' works, Castro observes that the Dominican's publications recycle his initial impressions drawn from the Spanish conquest of the Caribbean, and lack a sense of historical change over the course of the first half of the sixteenth century, as Spaniards encountered different empires *and* indigenous peoples developed survival strategies in the face of Spanish rule. Las Casas could not report on these later events because he did not witness them and they did not fit into his vision of childlike Indians living in a state of nature.

Castro also criticizes Las Casas's relationship to the Indoamericans he proposed to help. Not unlike many reformers, his paternalistic

benevolence worked entirely within a repressive system, and only applied to those who accepted his religion. To him, Indians were passive objects, not active participants in their own fate. Because of Las Casas's total conviction in his mission to Christianize the Indians, Castro views him as "pseudo-humanis[t]," who "only partially recognizes the humanity of indigenous people" (7). Unlike the Franciscans of his era and the Jesuits slightly later, Las Casas never bothered to learn indigenous languages, the first step to the most basic understanding of their worldview.

Because of the self-evidence of these main points, and the fascinating history of Las Casian propaganda, Castro's brief study of the use of Las Casas's writings throughout the last four centuries leaves the reader wanting more. Latin American historians tend to de-emphasize the fact that information spread around Europe and the world in the early modern era. Castro does not give enough credit to the way Elizabethan and other European enemies of Spain propagated the Las Casas myth internationally for their own imperialistic goals. Numerous early modern translations of Las Casas's works, especially the *Brevísima relación*, helped keep the Dominican's reputation alive over the centuries, especially for English-speakers. These translations explain why Las Casas's reputation overshadows dozens of other reforming Spanish clerics. Castro focuses more on criticizing both nineteenth- and twentieth-century proponents of the Golden Legend, most notably Ramón Menéndez Pidal and Lewis Hanke. While Menéndez Pidal denounced Las Casas's character and challenged his devotion to Spain, Hanke sees Las Casas as an example of the "Spanish struggle for justice" (174).

Castro observes that since the sixteenth century, everyone from the Dominican Order to Independence leaders such as Simón Bolívar to Liberation Theologians have used Las Casas to symbolize the rightness of their causes. While this book probably will not change the attitudes of those who view Las Casas as a hero, it does provide a clear set of arguments to oppose moralizing approaches to colonial history and helps place Las Casas in the context of his historical era.