

3. LAS CASAS AND THE GREAT DEBATE (2/10/04)

Bartolomé de las Casas was most famous defender of the Indians.

Challenges to historical understanding: to truly grasp his point of view and his rhetoric; to get past layers of myth and *hagiography*; to try to understand his true influence. Also important historian himself, part of what known about Columbus from him.

The excerpts in reading give little sense of scope of life and work.

His life embodies a lot of the early colonial struggle.

Born in Spain, went to Caribbean 1502.

Said to be first person made priest in Americas, not in missionary order.

After profiting from conquest, famous conversion, supposedly from hearing famous 1512 sermon by Fray Antonio de Montesinos against despoiling Indians: "Are they not men?"

Then famous eastern sermon by Las Casas, 1514 freed his own Indians.

1515 returned to Spain, campaigned at court for six years. Rest of life and back and forth across Atlantic.

Some of his proposals enacted, perhaps partly by his influence. Did not oppose colonization. Proposed: 1. Regulate Indian labor, pay them. 2. Keep Indians and Spaniards apart, with Indians in villages headed by priests. 3. Encourage settlement by Spanish farmers rather than freebooters. 4. Take pressure off Indians: bring in African slaves. This idea later notorious---Las Casas did change mind on point. 5. On American mainland, have centers with forts, trading, attract Indians peacefully.

1520 tried to put into practice, North coast of what now Venezuela. Great failure.

1524 joined Dominican order, aged forty. 1534 became ordinary missionary. Later got great credit for success of mission, recently historian says fabrication by biographer, shows dangers.

1538, got in great trouble Mexico City, preached against mass conversion by Franciscans. Same period wrote tract on missionization: "One True Way."

Throwing self into reform. Dangers of giving one person too much credit, part of wider movement. 1542 wrote tract we read parts of.

Notice no names mention. King Charles read version with names put back in. Attacks Cortes among others. Las Casas later claimed to have criticized Cortes to his face.

Movement had effect. "New Laws" of 1542: Indian slaves to be emancipated, rebels stripped of *encomiendas*, *encomiendas* to end with life of holder. Huge uproar, rebellion. Council of Indies backtracked some.

1543 Las Casas made Bishop of Chiapa (today Chiapas). Stormy tenure, soon out.

Controversy in Mexico on way back to Spain, insisted on enforcement of laws.

Back in Spain, continued agitation, 1547-1566, from approximately age 63-82.

Most famous event, great debate 1550-1551.

Moral crisis.

Las Casas vs. Father Sepúlveda. Well-known hawk, pro-conquest.

assumed that Las Casas one-down, was the lonely voice, not favored; actually Las Casas had considerable support; Sepúlveda had more trouble publishing.

Also image of head-to-head debate, never happened.

Big question: Is it lawful to wage war on Indians before preaching to them?

First day, S. spoke for three hours, reviewed tract. Then 5 days reading from manuscript.

Q. What justifies war against Indians? A. Gravity of Sins. Their rude natures---the key point. Can spread faith better. Must protect weak among Indians.

Said Indians truly bad, extreme view even for time.

Las Casas in reply enumerated all good things about Indians.

Board overwhelmed, met several months later. No official record of outcome survive, seems no clear decision. They kept at each other for long time. C. still had much easier time publishing views.

Didn't end there. C. had power of attorney for Indians of Oaxaca and Chiapa. Continued with lots of tracts, polemic.

1554-1562 controversy in realm over *encomienda*.

Last years wrote long tract, "History" but really more comparative sociology. Very pro-Columbus and anti-Cortes.

Clear that some of C's success because lived very long life, because tenacious. Much better at agitation than other things.