

# **Christopher Columbus and Bartolome de Las Casas: Worshipping Christ Versus Following Jesus — Spiritual Roots of their Twin Christian Legacies**

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Christopher Columbus was no devil and Bartolome de Las Casas was no saint, although from the vantage point of the twenty-first century, the men do provide a tidy framework of “evil” and “good” for considering the Spanish invasion of the Americas starting late in the fifteenth century. Neither man was all that his reputation holds him out to be. Both men, the explorer and conqueror Columbus and the agitator and Amerindian advocate de Las Casas, scarcely a generation apart, were captives of their time and place. Yet both also were dedicated Christians, by profession as well as by act, participants in a religion whose inspiration, the first-century Jewish sage Jesus of Nazareth, taught and practiced love until the day he died, when Rome executed him on charges of fomenting revolution. So how could the Spaniards be so different? How could Columbus and the many like him be so violent and cruel? How could de Las Casas and the relative few like him be so humanitarian and benevolent? Both in the name of Christianity? Brutality and kindness have been twin legacies of the church from its earliest emergence as a sect of Judaism and its separation and formation amid Greco-Roman culture. How could the human response to the preaching of a Galilean sage be so bipolar? What follows will attempt an answer by examining the Christian philosophical premises and spiritual practices of Columbus and de Las Casas. Their differences rest on a dichotomy as old as the Christian faith itself: One, the self-promoting adventurer Christopher Columbus, seeing himself in the ancient prophecies of Scripture, worshipped the triumphant, death-defying Christ of faith, and saw peoples to conquer in Christ’s name. The other, the self-denying priest Bartolome de Las Casas, followed the self-sacrificing Jesus and saw him in the faces of the poor, lowly, and enslaved — he saw native people to comfort and to protect from exploitation.

## **Christopher Columbus**

It is common in progressive circles to dismiss Christopher Columbus’ Christian faith and his voyage of discovery as mere prototypes of the worst of European colonialism; he is seen as the alpha exploiter of the Americas’ peoples and natural resources, as a mere user of Christianity as a cover for violent conquest. After all, he was, in fact, the first to extend Christendom to the Americas.<sup>1</sup> Such a view has to assume that

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<sup>1</sup> A recent compilation that frames the Euro-American encounter as one of conquest initiated by Columbus, for Spain, is Lee M. Penyak and Walter J. Petry, eds., *Religion and Society in Latin America: Interpretive Essays from Conquest to Present* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2009), passim. Book chapters and articles that find various reasons to question Columbus’ morality or intentions include: Valerie

the quest to spread Christianity and the search for wealth were separate but intertwined endeavors. Columbus' own words, seen from the perspective of twenty-first-century capitalism, seem to speak of two missions — gold sought violently and God promoted ruthlessly — but Columbus spoke of just one because they were inseparable.<sup>2</sup> Lee M. Penyak and Walter J. Petry, seeing a disconnect between Columbus and first-century Christianity, put it bluntly: “When Spain expanded into the New World and initiated the ‘conversion’ of its ‘heathen’ indigenous populations, its extension of the borders of Christendom involved a great deal of violence and it imposed a form of Christianity that was far removed from its biblical origins.”<sup>3</sup>

Spanish expansion was violent. However, Spanish Christianity, with its tensions and contradictions, was not as far removed from biblical origins as it might seem; early Christianity, in fact, the epistles and Gospels themselves, reflect similar tension between the teachings of Jesus and the formation of Christianity as it blended elements of its parent Judaic religion with features of the dominant Roman culture.<sup>4</sup> One need not wait until the third century to plot the influence of Plato on Christianity. The very emergence of Christianity involved an evolving blend of teachings by Jesus, teachings about Jesus and disparate ideas of the early church with the underlying Middle Platonist thinking of the first century. It is similar to ecclesial triumphalism's fusion with the militaristic monarchies of Ferdinand and Isabella in the fifteenth and sixteenth century.<sup>5</sup>

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I.J. Flint, “Christopher Columbus and the Friars,” in *Intellectual Life in the Middle Ages: Essays Presented to Margaret Gibson*, eds. Lesley Smith and Benedicta Ward (London: The Hambledon Press, 1992), 295-310. T. Terrar, “Catholic Mission History and the 500th Anniversary of Christopher Columbus' Arrival: A Time for Mourning and for Celebrating,” *Mission Studies* 9, no. 1 (1992): 7-23. John V. Fleming, “Christopher Columbus as a Scriptural Exegete,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 5, No. 2 (summer 1991): 187-198. Kortright Davis, “‘Sunshine Christophers’: Bearers of Christ in Caribbean History,” *Journal of Religious Thought* 49, no. 2 (winter-spring, 1992-1993): 7-24. Dwight N. Hopkins, “Columbus, the Church, and Slave Religion,” *Journal of Religious Thought* 49, no. 2 (winter-spring, 1992-1993): 25-43. Dinesh D'Souza, “The Crimes of Christopher Columbus,” *First Things*, no. 57 (November 1995): 26-33.

<sup>2</sup> Perhaps nowhere in Columbus' journal of his 1492-1493 voyage to the New World is his sole mission clearer than in this entry from Jan. 6, 1493, on his selection of a site to harbor on the coast near present Monte Christi, Dominican Republic: “Thus, Sovereign Princes, I realize that Our Lord miraculously ordained that the ship should remain there, because it is the best place in all the island for forming a settlement and nearest to the mines of gold.” Conquest for Christendom, settlement — and gold. For what? To finance Isabella and Ferdinand's final *reconquista*: the retaking Jerusalem and the Holy Lands from the Ottoman Empire. *The Journal of Christopher Columbus: His Own Account of the Extraordinary Voyage to Discover the New World*, trans. Cecil Jane (New York: Bonanza Books, 1989), 128, direct quote on 140. Hereafter cited as Columbus, *Journal*.

<sup>3</sup> Lee M. Penyak and Walter J. Petry, “The Right to appropriate, the Duty to Evangelize: Spain and the Conquest of the New World,” in *Religion and Society in Latin America: Interpretive Essays from Conquest to Present*, Lee M. Penyak and Walter J. Petry, eds. (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2009), 17-18.

<sup>4</sup> Justo L. Gonzalez, *Essential Theological Terms* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 13, 133. Under “Apologetics,” Gonzalez reached back to the second century, but not to the New Testament itself, for the first offerings of “reasoned understanding” of the faith, and under “Platonism,” he refers generally to those who sought “bridges between Christianity and Platonism” but, again, does not look for it in Scripture itself. This work proposes to do just that.

<sup>5</sup> Venancio D. Carro, “The Spanish Theological-Juridical Renaissance and the Ideology of Bartolome de Las Casas,” in *Bartolome de Las Casas in History: Toward an Understanding of the Man and His Work*, eds. Juan Friede and Benjamin Keen (DeKalb, Ill.: Northern Illinois University Press, 1971), 241-242; Richard Bonney, *The European Dynastic States, 1494-1660* (Oxford: Oxford University Press,

This section of this paper will argue that Columbus can be better seen after teasing out these similarities, especially as regards his concepts of God, Christ, and humanity. Even the basis of Spanish violence against natives, although not the violence itself, can be traced back to a basis of early Christian clashes over the theology of Paul the apostle and Greek converts of his in Corinth who had a Middle Platonist theological world view, specifically regarding the existence and nature of the human soul.<sup>6</sup>

First, God, for Columbus, was a transcendent Creator yet, owing to the admiral's eschatology and belief to have been personally called to usher in the end of time, one who dealt directly, at least, with heads of state and their agents.<sup>7</sup> Columbus, in his first voyage to the New World, was on a mission from God, one assigned by Isabella and Ferdinand, as Columbus spelled out at the start of his journal.<sup>8</sup> The monarchies, because of their vigor and the papacy's weakness, functioned more as vicars of Christ on earth than the pope did.<sup>9</sup> Columbus saw God's hand, then, guiding the crowns in their commissioning of Columbus to seek gold and converts to Spanish Catholic Christianity; the admiral felt God's hand directing him, and protecting him, on his journeys in 1492-1493; later in 1493, Pope Alexander VI's bull *Inter Caetra* handed over rule of newfound lands to Isabella and Ferdinand and their successors "to the end that you might bring to the worship of our Redeemer and the profession of the Catholic faith their residents and inhabitants."<sup>10</sup>

The quest for gold and conversions was one and the same, with neither aspect of the endeavor meant to justify the other. Columbus, on behalf of Isabella and Ferdinand, sought nations to convert and lands and gold to seize, to expand Christendom and to fund missions to nations to convert and lands and gold to seize, to expand Christendom, and so on.<sup>11</sup> His three voyages, in 1492, 1493 and 1498, were the first of more than 130 major Spanish-led expeditions in the Western Hemisphere between 1492 and 1598, the one most familiar to people in Oklahoma being Francisco Vazquez de Coronado's *Entrada* of northwest Mexico and what is now the U.S. Southwest in 1539-1542.<sup>12</sup> The heart of

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1991), 91-92; Luis N. Rivera, *A Violent Evangelism: The Political and Religious Conquest of the Americas* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1992), 49-52, 60.

<sup>6</sup> This part of my argument draws heavily on Bernard Brandon Scott, *The Trouble with Resurrection: From Paul to the Fourth Gospel* (Salem, Ore.: Polebridge Press, 2010), 123-143; and Alan F. Segal, *Life After Death: A History of the Afterlife in Western Religion* (New York: Doubleday, 2004), 421-435.

<sup>7</sup> Pauline Moffitt Watts, "Prophecy and Discovery: On the Spiritual Origins of Christopher Columbus' 'Enterprise of the Indies,'" *American Historical Review* 90, no. 1 (February 1985): 73-102.

<sup>8</sup> Columbus, *Journal*, 3-6.

<sup>9</sup> Rivera, *A Violent Evangelism*, 25-28.

<sup>10</sup> Quoted in Paul S. Vickery, *Bartolome de las Casas: Great Prophet of the Americas* (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 2006), 10.

<sup>11</sup> Vickery, *Bartolome de las Casas*, 9-10.

<sup>12</sup> Richard Flint, *No Settlement, No Conquest: A History of the Coronado Entrada* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2008), 261-265. Flint's work provides an up-to-date perspective and demythologized account of Coronado's expedition in comparison with the other two comprehensive accounts of the *entrada*: Herbert Eugene Bolton, *Coronado: Knight of Pueblos and Plains* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1964; originally published New York: McGraw-Hill, 1949), and A. Grove Day, *Coronado's Quest: The Discovery of the Southwestern States* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1940, 1964).

Columbus' eschatology was Matthew 24: 14, which declares that the Second Coming of Christ cannot occur until the Gospel has been preached in every nation. It is one of numerous verses of Scripture, prophecies, letters and quotations from patristic sources on how to interpret Scripture that Columbus compiled in something like a scrapbook he called *Book of Prophecies* in 1502.<sup>13</sup> The practical aim, based on prophecies regarding the city of Jerusalem such as Jeremiah 3:17 and Zephaniah 3:20, and prophecies about the temple such as Isaiah 44: 28, Zephaniah 8: 9 and Micah 4: 1, among others from which Columbus drew inspiration, was to seize Jerusalem to make it ready for the establishment of a New Heaven and New Earth.<sup>14</sup> At the start of his journal, Columbus made explicit his understanding of his commission:

In the Name of Our Lord Jesus Christ. Most Christian and most exalted and most excellent and most mighty princes, King and Queen of the Spains and of the islands of the sea, our Sovereigns: Forasmuch as, in this present year of 1492 ... (realizing) how so many nations had been lost, falling into idolatries and taking to themselves doctrines of perdition, and Your Highnesses, as Catholic Christians and as princes devoted to the holy Christian faith and propagators thereof, and enemies of the sect of Mahomet and of all idolatries and heresies, took thought to send me, Christopher Columbus, to the said parts of India, to see those princes and peoples and lands and the character of them and of all else, and the manner which should be used to bring about their conversion to our holy faith ...<sup>15</sup>

On Dec. 26, 1492, he recorded their understanding regarding the use of wealth gained from the journey: "For so, I protested to Your Highnesses that all the gain of this my enterprise should be expended on the conquest of Jerusalem, and Your Highnesses smiled and said that it pleased them, and that without this they had that inclination."<sup>16</sup> Upon his return, Columbus judged his journey a success in a report dated Feb. 15, 1493:

So that, since our Redeemer has given the victory to our most illustrious King and Queen, and to their renowned kingdoms, in so great a matter, for this all Christendom ought to feel delight and make great feasts and give solemn thanks to the Holy Trinity ... in the turning of so many peoples to our holy faith, and afterwards for the temporal benefits, because not only Spain but all Christendom will have hence refreshment and gain.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> See Kay Brigham, *Christopher Columbus' Book of Prophecies: Reproduction of the Original Manuscript with English Translation* (Barcelona: Libros CLIE, 1991); and Kay Brigham, *Christopher Columbus: His Life and Discovery in the Light of His Prophecies* (Barcelona: Libros CLIE, 1990). Brigham's veneration of Columbus surpasses adoration, but takes nothing away from Columbus' own sense of having been set aside by God for God's work.

<sup>14</sup> Brigham, *Christopher Columbus*, 103-113.

<sup>15</sup> Columbus, *Journal*, 3-4.

<sup>16</sup> Columbus, *Journal*, 128.

<sup>17</sup> Columbus, *Journal*, 201.

Such contradictions, so jarring when viewed from the twenty-first century, beg questions. Penyak and Petry, in an editor's note introducing a section of Columbus' dogma-soaked writing, ask some: "Is it possible to determine the genuineness of this apparent religiosity? Is it merely a commonplace formula in an age when the church was a strong presence in society? Is it rhetoric useful for advancement in society?"<sup>18</sup> To which another question must be posed: Are Penyak and Petry unaware of the rest of Christian history, its contradictions, hypocrisies and abject failures to live up to Jesus' ideals? God, for Columbus, was a master pulling strings from afar to get God's desired results. That is not far from the image of far-away God envisioned by Middle Platonist-informed Christianity, which is different from the earliest known notions of God in Christianity, as expressed by Paul in his letters and as voiced by Jesus in places in the Gospels.<sup>19</sup>

God was an intimate Creator for Paul, so close as to be personally experienced by all, not just monarchs and explorers. It was God who, in Christ, called Paul, a Jew's Jew, to extend God's covenant with Israel to the Gentiles, to hear Paul himself tell it.<sup>20</sup> It was the God of the Israelites, and now Christians, whom the philosophers in Athens were seeking with the altar to the unknown god, and God, rather than impersonal and far away, was personal and "not far from each one of us," according to Paul in Acts 17: 27.<sup>21</sup> Acts is to be considered here, even though it "is not history in the modern sense of the word," as Barbara E. Reid puts it, precisely because the author's "primary purpose is theological."<sup>22</sup> Paul, as portrayed in the Bible, preached God as Creator therefore as God of heaven and earth — a familiar idea in Greek philosophy. But he emphasized God's intimate involvement with humans — right then and right there, imminent in potential relationship rather than immanent in theoretical philosophy — and, as Carl R. Holladay notes, Paul, to great rhetorical effect, makes his main point "explicitly supported by quotes from pagan poets."<sup>23</sup> Acts 17: 28 has Paul say: "For 'In him we live and move and have our being'; as even some of your own poets have said, 'For we too are his offspring.'"<sup>24</sup> In the Athens episode, then, Paul is playing early Judeo-Christian concepts of God off of the surrounding Middle Platonist philosophical milieu, which conceived of God as virtually unreachable.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Lee M. Penyak and Walter J. Petry, eds., *Religion in Latin America: A Documentary History* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2006), 19.

<sup>19</sup> Gonzalez, *Essential Theological Terms*, 68. Under "God," Gonzalez briefly outlines the effect of the use of Platonic and other Greek philosophy in early Christian apologetics and its introduction into Christian theology "a series of elements that are at odds with the more personal language about God" that predominated earlier.

<sup>20</sup> Gal 1: 1-17.

<sup>21</sup> All Scripture quotations from New Revised Standard Version unless noted otherwise.

<sup>22</sup> Barbara E. Reid, "The Acts of the Apostles," in *The New Interpreter's Study Bible*, ed. Walter J. Harrelson et al. (Nashville: Abingdon, 2003), 1953.

<sup>23</sup> Carl R. Holladay, "Acts," in *HarperCollins Bible Commentary, Revised Edition*, ed. James L. Mays et al. (New York: HarperCollins, 1988), 1010.

<sup>24</sup> First quotation possibly from Epimenides, circa sixth century B.C.E.; second quotation likely from Aratus, circa third century B.C.E., Stoic. Holladay, "Acts," 1010. Reid, "Acts 17: 28," in *The New Interpreter's Study Bible*, 1989.

<sup>25</sup> Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, 3d ed. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2003), 388.

For Jesus, and perhaps for other Jews of the time, God was “Abba,” a child’s name for its father, not “Daddy,” but perhaps something like “Papa.”<sup>26</sup> Even scholars of the notoriously skeptical Jesus Seminar agree on that, giving “Father,” the Greek translation of the Aramaic *Abba*, a rare red designation for “Jesus undoubtedly said this or something very like it.”<sup>27</sup> Early ideas surrounding the Incarnation, as well as the likely desire to distinguish Jesus and his Father from the Roman emperor’s title, *Pater Patriae*, “Father of the Fatherland,” led the first followers of Jesus to use “Father” in a distinctly Christian sense.<sup>28</sup> For Jesus, as depicted by the author of the Gospel of John in the encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well, God was neither here nor there, so to speak — neither in Jerusalem, where Jews believed God was to be worshiped, nor on Mount Gerizim, where Samaritans believed God was to be worshiped, but God was to be worshiped “in spirit and truth” because “God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship him in spirit and truth.”<sup>29</sup> Whether Jesus actually said these words is irrelevant to the theology here of an intimate familial closeness to God, which stands out all the more because of John’s otherwise generally lofty notions of God; for John, it is Jesus, in fact, the Incarnation, despite John’s high Christology, that brings God close, making God accessible.<sup>30</sup> Raymond E. Brown argues that it was an even higher Christology that led to schism in the John community, giving the Gospel itself, and the later epistles of “John,” the marks of an evolving theology that detached Jesus from his humanity.<sup>31</sup> This suggests the influence of Platonic thinking and a distancing and reduction in intimacy between Jesus followers and God.

Another New Testament example of the distancing of God under the influence of a Platonic world view is in the fluidity of theology as it met politics and was expressed in liturgy among the earliest Jesus followers, which can be found in the different formulations of the Lord’s Prayer. Scholars agree that the shorter version, in Luke 11: 2-4, is closest to the version inherited by the authors of both Luke and Matthew in the Q source.<sup>32</sup> There, it reads: “When you pray, say: Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread. And forgive us our sins, for we

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<sup>26</sup> Mark 14: 36; Mary Ann Tolbert, “Mark 14: 34-36,” in *The New Interpreter’s Study Bible*, ed. Walter J. Harrelson et al. (Nashville: Abingdon, 2003), 1839; Mary Rose D’Angelo, “Abba,” in *The New Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. Katharine Doob Sakenfeld et al., 5 vols. (Nashville: Abingdon, 2006), 1:6; Thomas R.W. Longstaff, “God,” in *HarperCollins Bible Dictionary*, ed. Paul J. Achtemeier et al. (New York: HarperCollins, 1996), 382.

<sup>27</sup> Robert W. Funk, Roy W. Hoover and The Jesus Seminar, *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus* (New York: Scribner, 1993), 36, 326.

<sup>28</sup> Nicholas Purcell, “Pater Patriae,” in *The Oxford Classical Dictionary: The Ultimate Reference Work on the Classical World*, 3d ed., revised, eds. Simon Hornblower and Antony Spawforth (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 1121; D’Angelo, “Abba,” 6.

<sup>29</sup> John 4: 23-24.

<sup>30</sup> D. Moody Smith, “John,” in *HarperCollins Bible Commentary, Revised Edition*, ed. James L. Mays et al. (New York: HarperCollins, 1988), 964.

<sup>31</sup> Raymond E. Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple: The Life, Loves, and Hates of an Individual Church in New Testament Times* (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1979), 109-119, 124-125.

<sup>32</sup> John Y.H. Yieh, “Lord’s Prayer,” in *The New Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. Katharine Doob Sakenfeld et al., 5 vols. (Nashville: Abingdon, 2006), 3:690-691; John S. Kloppenborg, *Q, the Earliest Gospel: An Introduction to the Original Stories and Sayings of Jesus* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 89-92.

ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us. And do not bring us to the time of trial.”<sup>33</sup> The longer version in Matthew adds what John Y.H. Yieh calls “traces of liturgical elaboration” and the “creation of cosmic space.”<sup>34</sup> The evolving liturgy surely reflects early embracing of Hellenistic concepts of God and the cosmos by the Matthew community. Where in Luke the prayer addresses “Father,” in Matthew it addresses “Our Father in heaven.”<sup>35</sup> Luke’s address, according to Yieh, “reflects a view of God who is intimate to believers as children,” while Matthew’s reflects the author’s goal of “showing people how to pray rightly to honor God.”<sup>36</sup> Matthew reiterates the addition of cosmic distance: “Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.”<sup>37</sup> The Didache, which, as a set of guidelines for an early Jewish-Christian community, probably came later than Q, Luke or Matthew, takes it even further with a doxology familiar to churchgoers, present in the King James Version, but redacted from modern translations: “For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.”<sup>38</sup> John Dominic Crossan, however, argues that the original prayer predates the Didache, and Matthew and Luke, therefore even Q; he finds its core in Paul’s writings, in Galatians 4: 6 and Romans 8: 15, dating to the mid-50s, in the simple acclamation, “*Abba*, Father!”<sup>39</sup> To borrow a phrase from a secular twentieth-century poet, “what a long, strange trip it’s been” for the Lord’s Prayer — buffeted by liturgical needs and Platonist notions almost from the time Jesus exclaimed *Abba*, in prayer.<sup>40</sup>

Second, Christ, for Columbus, was the full-fledged master of the universe, all but ready to return in glory to reign over his earthly kingdom, which made Columbus’ mission for the holy Catholic kingdoms of Isabella and Ferdinand crucial.<sup>41</sup> Columbus saw himself as the “Christ bearer” for the world in a way that entangled his sense of self with his sense of Christ’s self in his mission for God.<sup>42</sup> For Columbus, Christ was Christ triumphant; the dual monarchies Columbus served, already great in earthly deed for having turned back Islamic usurpers, were destined for heavenly crowns; and Columbus’ role as admiral of the vanguard fleet was that of a knight of the seas sailing for the sake of Christ and his kingdom.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Luke 11: 2-4.

<sup>34</sup> Yieh, “Lord’s Prayer,” 691.

<sup>35</sup> Luke: 11: 2; Matt 6: 9.

<sup>36</sup> Yieh, “Lord’s Prayer,” 691.

<sup>37</sup> Matt 6: 10.

<sup>38</sup> Jonathan A. Draper, “Didache,” in *The New Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. Katharine Doob Sakenfeld et al., 5 vols. (Nashville: Abingdon, 2006), 2:122; Yieh, “Lord’s Prayer,” 691; Matt 6: 13 (KJV).

<sup>39</sup> John Dominic Crossan, *The Greatest Prayer: Rediscovering the Revolutionary Message of The Lord’s Prayer* (New York: HarperOne, 2010), 21, 101-103.

<sup>40</sup> Jerry Garcia, in the song “Truckin’,” on the album *American Beauty* by the Grateful Dead; lyrics by Robert Hunter, music by Garcia, Bob Weir and Phil Lesh. (Burbank, Calif.: Warner Bros. Records, 1970).

<sup>41</sup> Brigham, *Christopher Columbus*, 103-113; Watts, “Prophecy and Discovery,” 79.

<sup>42</sup> Roger A. Johnson, “God, Self, and Others: Christopher Columbus as Endangered and Endangering Self,” in *The Endangered Self*, Richard K. Fenn and Donald Capps, eds. (Akron, Ohio: A&A Printing Co., for The Center for Religion, Self and Society, Princeton Theological Seminary, Princeton, N.J., 1992), 61, 63.

<sup>43</sup> Brigham, *Christopher Columbus*, 103-113; Watts, “Prophecy and Discovery,” 79.

In earliest Christianity, as reflected in the New Testament, obviously there was disagreement concerning Jesus of Nazareth and the Resurrected Christ among Jesus' own disciples as well as others around him. For just one example, the disciples' persistent confusion over what it was that Jesus seemed to be trying to say, especially with his parables, and who it was that Jesus seemed to be, is a kind of trope for latent enlightenment in Mark, the earliest Gospel, and is used and reinterpreted by Matthew for that author's own purposes.<sup>44</sup> Evolving ideas surrounding the features of the Resurrection experience itself, as well as the meaning of the Resurrection for followers of Jesus Christ, reflect further reliance on Middle Platonist philosophy for some early and fluid notions of Christology.<sup>45</sup> For Paul, God came down from heaven and resurrected Jesus Christ from the dead as the beginning of the New Creation on earth.<sup>46</sup> For Paul, followers of Jesus, in community, were the risen, egalitarian, mutually dependent Body of Christ, although Paul also maintained that Christ's full return was imminent, in a mix of metaphor and metaphysics that falls hard on twenty-first-century ears.<sup>47</sup> Upon Christ's return, Paul wrote, the dead in Christ — those who by the 50s had died and remained fully yet soullessly in their graves, for Judaism, mostly, knew of no souls — would rise first; those living fully, soullessly, in Christ then would rise to meet him.<sup>48</sup> Later, followers of Paul, writing in his name, informed more by Hellenistic philosophy and coping with the delay in the Parousia, promoted Christ to heaven as head of the church, left behind on earth, separating Christ from his body.<sup>49</sup> More importantly, promoting the risen Christ to heaven separated him from the human souls that made up his body, a dualist arrangement that led to confusion — and reckless, “sinful” behavior in at least one Jesus community in Paul's time, in Corinth.<sup>50</sup> It is in the saga of the Corinthians that an explanation for the

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<sup>44</sup> M. Eugene Boring, “Matthew,” in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, ed. Leander E. Keck et al., 12 vols. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 8: 300-301; Gary A. Phillips, “History and Text: The Reader in Context in Matthew's Parables Discourse,” *Semeia* 31 (May 1985): 119-120; C. Clifton Black and Adela Yarbro Collins, “Mark 4: 11” and “Mark 4: 12,” in *The HarperCollins Study Bible, Revised Edition*, ed. Harold W. Attridge et al. (New York: HarperCollins, 2006), 1730; J. J. M. Roberts, “Isa 6: 9-12,” in *The HarperCollins Study Bible, Revised Edition*, ed. Harold W. Attridge et al. (New York: HarperCollins, 2006), 922-923; Dennis C. Duling, “Matt 13: 1-53,” in *The HarperCollins Study Bible, Revised Edition*, ed. Harold W. Attridge et al. (New York: HarperCollins, 2006), 1666; Funk et al., *The Five Gospels*, 56.

<sup>45</sup> Karen Baker-Fletcher, Michelle A. Gonzalez, David H. Jensen, Joerg Rieger, Cynthia L. Rigby and Deanna A. Thompson, “Jesus Christ,” in *Constructive Theology: A Contemporary Approach to Classical Themes*, Serene Jones and Paul Lakeland, eds. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 165-166; Justo L. Gonzalez, *A Concise History of Christian Doctrine* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005), 171-173.

<sup>46</sup> Scott, *The Trouble with Resurrection*, 132-134, 139-142; Gonzalez, *A Concise History*, 171-172; 1 Cor 15: 20, 42-43, 45.

<sup>47</sup> Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, “1 Corinthians,” in *HarperCollins Bible Commentary, Revised Edition*, ed. James L. Mays et al. (New York: HarperCollins, 1988), 1088; 1 Cor 12: 14-21; PHEME PERKINS, “1 and 2 Thessalonians,” in *HarperCollins Bible Commentary, Revised Edition*, ed. James L. Mays et al. (New York: HarperCollins, 1988), 1134; Raymond F. Collins, “1 Thess 5: 1-11,” in *The New Interpreter's Study Bible*, ed. Walter J. Harrelson et al. (Nashville: Abingdon, 2003), 2120-2121; 1 Thess 5: 1-11.

<sup>48</sup> Raymond F. Collins, “1 Thess 4: 13-18,” in *The New Interpreter's Study Bible*, ed. Walter J. Harrelson et al. (Nashville: Abingdon, 2003), 2120; Thess 4: 14-17; Segal, *Life After Death*, 123-124; Gonzalez, *A Concise History*, 171-172.

<sup>49</sup> Nils Alstrup and Donald H. Juel, “Ephesians,” in *HarperCollins Bible Commentary, Revised Edition*, ed. James L. Mays et al. (New York: HarperCollins, 1988), 1117-1118; Eph 4: 15-16; E. Elizabeth Johnson, “Colossians,” in *HarperCollins Bible Commentary, Revised Edition*, ed. James L. Mays et al. (New York: HarperCollins, 1988), 1127; Col 1: 17-18.

<sup>50</sup> Scott, *The Trouble with Resurrection*, 123-143.



reckless, inhumane treatment of natives by Columbus and others in the fifteenth and sixteenth century can be found.

For, third and finally, it is the immortal human soul that is to blame for such hostility toward fellow human beings — or the idea of the soul, at least. The soul is very Platonist, and Middle Platonist, and Neoplatonist.<sup>51</sup> It is very Greco-Roman, although the meaning varied.<sup>52</sup> Presently, it is very Christian.<sup>53</sup> But the idea of the soul is not all that Jewish, if what is meant is something separate from the human that persists in an afterlife.<sup>54</sup> Therefore it was not very Jewish-Christian. Alan F. Segal speculates that the dearth of references to an afterlife in Hebrew Bible passages from First Temple Judaism suggests that the very idea was an invitation to idolatry and a threat to monotheism — because any being, human or otherwise, venerated or not, surviving after death would be like God.<sup>55</sup> William G. Dever is among those who point out that the religious elite who wrote and redacted the ancient Scriptures condemned necromancy, divination and other forms of magic — but would have had no reason to if some people were not trying to communicate with dead loved ones, which indicates folk belief in the soul.<sup>56</sup> Segal and others see hints of an afterlife in some passages, such as Saul's consultation with a witch in 1 Samuel 28: 6-14, as vestiges of encounters between Judaic and Canaanite, Ugaritic, and other Mesopotamian cultures.<sup>57</sup> However, where Segal encounters the Hebrew *nefesh* usually translated “soul,” or *refa*, usually translated “spirit,” he argues that even if the words do refer to something like “personality” or “personhood” that survives death, then it is no more or less similar to other words used in other religions meaning “ghost.”<sup>58</sup> Segal asserts: “If there is no beatific afterlife and no judgment, then it does not matter much whether the ‘soul’ is a ‘wraith,’ a ‘spirit,’ a ‘ghost,’ or a ‘shade,’ it is not an afterlife to be desired.” He adds, “There is no evidence that the ancient Hebrews conceived of an ‘immortal’ soul in the philosophical sense of the term.”<sup>59</sup>

As for Paul, at best, his concept of the soul was “quite limited, unschooled by Platonic ideas of the soul's immortality,” according to Segal.<sup>60</sup> Segal takes Paul at his word in 2 Corinthians 12: 1-6 when Paul tells, in the third person, of his mystical

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<sup>51</sup> Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, 334-335, 387-388, 392-394.

<sup>52</sup> Christopher J. Rowe, “Soul,” in *The Oxford Classical Dictionary: The Ultimate Reference Work on the Classical World*, 3d ed., revised, eds. Simon Hornblower and Antony Spawforth (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 1428.

<sup>53</sup> Gonzalez, *A Concise History*, 173; Gonzalez, *Essential Theological Terms*, 163-164.

<sup>54</sup> Jerome H. Neyrey, “Soul,” in *HarperCollins Bible Dictionary*, ed. Paul J. Achtemeier et al. (New York: HarperCollins, 1996), 1055; Joel B. Green, “Soul,” in *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. Katharine Doob Sakenfeld et al., 5 vols. (Nashville: Abingdon, 2006), 5:358-359.

<sup>55</sup> Segal, *Life After Death*, 123-124.

<sup>56</sup> William G. Dever, *Did God Have a Wife? Archeology and Folk Religion in Ancient Israel* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 2005), 125-127.

<sup>57</sup> Victor H. Matthews and Don C. Benjamin, *Old Testament Parallels: Laws and Stories from the Ancient Near East*, rev. 3d ed. (New York: Paulist Press, 2006), 117, 128; Mark S. Smith, *The Early History of God: Yahweh and the Other Deities in Ancient Israel*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 2002), 162-172; Segal, *Life After Death*, 124-134.

<sup>58</sup> Segal, *Life After Death*, 142-143.

<sup>59</sup> Segal, *Life After Death*, 143.

<sup>60</sup> Segal, *Life After Death*, 411.

experience of having ascended to heaven.<sup>61</sup> Paul wrote that he was “caught up to the third heaven — whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows.”<sup>62</sup> Paul wrote that he, again, “whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows — was caught up into Paradise ....”<sup>63</sup> Segal, then, concludes,

Not being sure of whether the ascent took place in the body or out of the body is the same as saying that one is not taking account of the Platonic concept of the soul. Had Paul been using the Platonic version, he certainly would have known quite well that the only way to go to heaven, to ascend beyond the sublunar sphere, was by leaving the body behind.<sup>64</sup>

The distinction is important for understanding what Paul meant, then, by “resurrection.” Segal and Bernard Brandon Scott argue that it is crucial for understanding how Jesus followers in Corinth could have so misconstrued Paul’s preaching, and why it led to such bizarre behavior on the Corinthians’ part: Paul was preaching resurrection from a Jewish standpoint, and the Corinthians, reading their Platonic souls into it, were hearing with thoroughly Greek ears.<sup>65</sup>

In Paul’s time, Corinth, refounded by Rome on ancient Greek ruins, was a cosmopolitan city of some 60,000, an urban commercial center on a major trade route. Paul preached to and ministered to Jewish Christians there, but most of the Jesus followers were Gentiles.<sup>66</sup> It is impossible to know exactly what the Corinthians thought. However, the work of two scholars gives important clues. Hal Taussig’s research of Roman symposia and festive meals, with their expectation that guests would present lofty notions and erudite observations for group consideration, concludes that such supper clubs served as social crucibles for the earliest churches.<sup>67</sup> Dennis Smith examines the Corinthian letters and sees Paul’s concerns having mostly to do with the Corinthians’ behavior at communal mealtime, where the highest ideas of the faith were to be expressed in “a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation.”<sup>68</sup> No doubt then, the Corinthian Jesus followers, at least the wealthier ones most able to play host for

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<sup>61</sup> Carolyn Osiek, “2 Cor 12: 1-6,” in *The New Interpreter’s Study Bible*, ed. Walter J. Harrelson et al. (Nashville: Abingdon, 2003), 2075; John T. Fitzgerald, “2 Cor 12: 2,” in *The Harper Collins Study Bible, Student Edition*, rev. ed., eds. Harold W. Attridge et al. (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2006), 1969-1970; Segal, *Life After Death*, 411.

<sup>62</sup> 2 Cor 12: 2.

<sup>63</sup> 2 Cor 12: 3-4.

<sup>64</sup> Segal, *Life After Death*, 411.

<sup>65</sup> Scott, *The Trouble with Resurrection*, 123-143; Segal, *Life After Death*, 421-435.

<sup>66</sup> Charles H. Miller, “Corinth,” in *HarperCollins Bible Dictionary*, ed. Paul J. Achtemeier et al. (New York: HarperCollins, 1996), 198-201; Antony J.S. Spawforth, “Corinth, Roman,” in *The Oxford Classical Dictionary: The Ultimate Reference Work on the Classical World*, 3d ed., revised, eds. Simon Hornblower and Antony Spawforth (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 391; J. Paul Sampley, “The First Letter of Paul to the Corinthians,” in *The New Interpreter’s Study Bible*, ed. Walter J. Harrelson et al. (Nashville: Abingdon, 2003), 2035-2038.

<sup>67</sup> Hal Taussig, *In the Beginning Was the Meal: Social Experimentation & Early Christian Identity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 87-113.

<sup>68</sup> Dennis E. Smith, *From Symposium to Eucharist: The Banquet in the Early Christian World* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 200-214; 1 Cor 14: 26.

others, therefore most likely to have been corresponding with Paul, talked about ideas of primary importance to their faith; therefore, since most of them were Gentiles, not Jews, it was a Platonic cosmology within which they worked. In short, they had soul.

Paul had no truck with souls. Paul preached resurrection of the entire dead unitary self from the grave — not the resurrection of a saved soul, nor the raising of a dead body to reunite with an eternal soul, a relatively new and still rare idea in Judaism, based on the idea of martyrdom as mentioned in the Hebrew prophetic Book of Daniel, circa 167-163 B.C.E., and later elaborated in 2 Maccabees.<sup>69</sup> Paul preached the Resurrection of Christ, and so imminent in his mind, apparently, as to be verging on cosmically simultaneous, the resurrection of those who trusted in Christ, as the inauguration of the New Creation.<sup>70</sup> That is the source of the disagreements in Corinth, and between Paul and the Corinthians, over the meaning of resurrection: The Corinthians did not deny resurrection, but resurrection from the dead.<sup>71</sup> Practically speaking, the Corinthians' Greek concept of the soul led them to two Greek extremes: One, seeing the body as "bad," possibly believing the resurrection already had begun and their bodies were separating from their souls, concentrated haughtily on spiritual gifts, that is, evidences of heavenly abilities and characteristics<sup>72</sup> The other extreme, seeing the body as irrelevant in light of the immortality of the soul, or possibly believing the resurrection already had begun therefore their bodies were separating from their souls, allowed the body its every base desire.<sup>73</sup> Such confusions left Paul vexed and his relationship with the Corinthians so strained and damaged as to leave "the final outcome not really known."<sup>74</sup>

The problem in Corinth was the Platonic soul — and the soul has been a problem for Christianity ever since. In Corinth, the problem was the idea that the soul separated from the body somehow during the process of resurrection-salvation. Therein, arguably, lie the basis for 2,000 years of conceit, meanness and downright wickedness done to others at the hands of dualist-thinking Christians — including, and especially in some ways, Christopher Columbus and his beloved monarchs, Ferdinand and Isabella. Columbus saw native bodies and souls as means to an end — to THE end, in the eschatological sense — and at first glance concluded they "would easily be made Christians, as it appeared to me that they had no creed."<sup>75</sup> Columbus saw objects. How else to explain the clear disconnect between Jesus' messages and examples of love for the other and the church's running roughshod over others, time and time again in its history? Once the other's soul is saved, the other's body can be seen as irrelevant, or something to be used and used up. How else to explain present efforts to save souls but let bodies rot in poverty and disease? How else to explain how anyone could think it possible to hate the sin (body) but love the sinner (soul)? How else to explain Columbus, who, from his first encounter with natives in the Americas, saw souls to save — and bodies to enslave? Neither Columbus nor the church, then or now, got that from Jesus. Or from Paul. They

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<sup>69</sup> Scott, *The Trouble with Resurrection*, 7-14, 23-38; Dan 12: 3; 2 Macc 7.

<sup>70</sup> Scott, *The Trouble with Resurrection*, 39-45; 1 Thess 4: 13-18.

<sup>71</sup> Scott, *The Trouble with Resurrection*, 123; 1 Cor 15: 12.

<sup>72</sup> Scott, *The Trouble with Resurrection*, 123-128; 1 Cor 12.

<sup>73</sup> Scott, *The Trouble with Resurrection*, 123-128; 1 Cor 5.

<sup>74</sup> Scott, *The Trouble with Resurrection*, 84.

<sup>75</sup> Columbus, *Journal*, 24.

got it from Plato, who lurks everywhere between the lines of the New Testament. Forgive Columbus or not. But do not, as Penyak and Petry did, accuse him of “Christianity that was far removed from its biblical origins.”<sup>76</sup>

### **Bartolome de Las Casas**

The sixteenth-century Spanish priest and agitator Bartolome de Las Casas’ Christian legacy as defender of American indigenous peoples provides both examples to follow and cautionary tales to heed. A review of his writings, interactions with contemporaries both pro and con, as well as others’ interpretations of his life and influence, yields deep wells of inspiration for Christians in twenty-first-century America. Not that Las Casas was perfect, even if he was a prophet. He had ecclesial blind spots. For all of his lifelong opposition to certain laws and policies of the proto-Spanish empire, Las Casas was forever a loyal subject of the crown, his king and queen Ferdinand of Aragon and Isabella of Castile, and their successors. However, his dedication to social justice sustained his willingness to quite literally preach truth to principalities and powers of both church and state. He fearlessly defended the defenseless and remained steadfast in his devotion to the way of Jesus. All and more are potential sources of motivation and connection to the cloud of Christian witnesses, at times so sparse, that have challenged empire to its face when it tramples people like gravel.<sup>77</sup>

Las Casas, born in 1484 in Seville, grew up as a merchant’s son in a joint Aragon-Castile Christian empire on lands that won a centuries-long cold war, turned intermittently hot, as Christian kingdoms in the *Reconquista* fought back the early-700s Muslim conquest. He was 8 years old when the Treaty of Granada was signed in 1492, signaling the reconquest of the Iberian Peninsula and the end of a 700-plus-year clash of Christian and Islamic civilizations. The two Catholic kingdoms soon to be united as Spain were heady from vanquishing and subduing what they considered Islamic infidels, their royals having known nothing but war for generation upon generation.<sup>78</sup> That same year, Jews in the Spanish lands were ordered to convert to Christianity or leave — given six months to sell their often valuable belongings at ruinous prices.<sup>79</sup> These bellicose

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<sup>76</sup> Penyak and Petry, “The Right to Appropriate,” 18.

<sup>77</sup> This summary and interpretation is based on my reading of the following: Richard Bonney, *The European Dynastic States, 1494-1660* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991); Bartolome de Las Casas, *A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies*, trans. and ed. Nigel Griffin (New York: Penguin, 2004); Bartolome de Las Casas, *In Defense of the Indians*, trans. and ed. Stafford Poole (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1992); Lawrence A. Clayton, *Bartolome de Las Casas and the Conquest of the Americas* (Malden, Mass.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011); Juan Friede and Benjamin Keen, eds., *Bartolome de Las Casas in History: Toward an Understanding of the Man and His Work* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1971); Jean Hippolyte Mariejol, *The Spain of Ferdinand and Isabella*, trans. and ed. Benjamin Keen (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1961); Luis N. Rivera, *A Violent Evangelism: The Political and Religious Conquest of the Americas* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 1992); Paul S. Vickery, *Bartolome de Las Casas: Great Prophet of the Americas* (New York: Paulist Press, 2006); Andrew Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1996); and *Witness: Writings of Bartolome de Las Casas*, trans. and ed. George Sanderlin (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1992).

<sup>78</sup> Clayton, *Bartolome de Las Casas and the Conquest*, 11-12.

<sup>79</sup> Mariejol, *The Spain of Ferdinand and Isabella*, 52.

regions of Christendom, then, were poised to take the fighting — ostensibly in the name of the Cross, for the salvation of souls — across the seas when the explorer Christopher Columbus, with whom Las Casas' father would later sail, returned in 1493 from “the Indies” with reports of encountering simple people ripe for saving and exploiting. As historian Lawrence A. Clayton put it: “The triumph of Ferdinand and Isabel was a triumph of the militant church, and the two — Christianity and arms — were indelibly linked in the Spanish consciousness of the age.”<sup>80</sup>

Las Casas came of age at a time of weakness for the papacy, which translated into royal power for the pious Ferdinand and Isabella. Just two years after his birth, the papacy had conferred the right of patronage to the monarchs, giving them the power to appoint all church posts in Granada and other Muslim-controlled areas as they fell to the Christians.<sup>81</sup> In 1493, as has been noted, Pope Alexander VI's bull *Inter Caetera* gave earthly rule of newfound lands to the royals of Aragon and Castile and their successors “to the end that you might bring to the worship of our Redeemer and the profession of the Catholic faith their residents and inhabitants.”<sup>82</sup> Church and state were intertwined in a way that would inform Las Casas' worldview and underlie his arguments for justice.<sup>83</sup>

On Hispaniola, in Santo Domingo, the present Dominican Republic, lies the genesis in 1511 of Las Casas' lifelong advocacy for native peoples. For previous expeditionary service, the crowns made Las Casas, in his mid-20s, an *encomendero* and *doctrinero*, or secular priest — that is, they granted him a holding of native peoples to use as laborers, while protecting them from hostile tribes and teaching them Christianity. Las Casas saw atrocities and participated in abuses that pierced his conscience; his experiences gave him ears to hear when, in abhorrence of the cruel treatment and outright butchery of the island people, the tiny Dominican order chose Anton Montesino to preach fiery condemnation and threaten the colonists themselves with hell if they did not repent and live out the gospel by their actions in order to convert the natives. Las Casas did not turn immediately, but his continued witness of abuse and the weight of the hypocrisy in which he was entangled led him to repent, divest himself of his royal holding, and by 1514-1516 start to advocate for the native peoples of the New World, first as a secular priest, then as a Dominican and ordained regular priest, and ultimately as a bishop of the church.<sup>84</sup>

Las Casas seems to have had a robust sense of the importance of both cultural spiritual practice, which Bradley P. Holt summarizes as “the existential forms of life that we adopt in order to live in this universe,” and Christian spiritual practice, which Holt summarizes as “walking in the Holy Spirit of the risen Jesus.”<sup>85</sup> A.D. Nock considered the differences “the two opposing poles of man's spiritual history.” At one end, what humans say and do to cope with life's mysteries make up traditional religion, “which

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<sup>80</sup> Clayton, *Bartolome de Las Casas and the Conquest*, 12.

<sup>81</sup> Rivera, *A Violent Evangelism*, 25-28.

<sup>82</sup> Vickery, *Bartolome de Las Casas, Great Prophet*, 10.

<sup>83</sup> Vickery, *Bartolome de Las Casas, Great Prophet*, 9.

<sup>84</sup> Vickery, *Bartolome de Las Casas, Great Prophet*, 44-49, 57-68.

<sup>85</sup> Bradley P. Holt, *Thirsty for God: A Brief History of Christian Spirituality*, 2d ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 22.

embodies the collective wisdom of the community ... often thought to rest upon some original revelation or revelations, given by higher powers, or upon the communing of specially gifted persons with these powers.” Followers have no reason to be interested in other traditions and no interest in communicating their tradition to others: “It makes no sudden imperious demands ... and it asks of him action and not belief.” At the other end of human experience are the prophetic religions, such as Christianity, originating when a prophet emerges, animated by a new way of thinking and doing, believing that he is being led by something outside himself. Nock explains that in religions of tradition, practice is important “and there is no underlying idea other than the sanctity of custom hallowed by preceding generations.” In prophetic religions, “the reason is all-important and the practice flows from it and is in a sense secondary even if indispensable.” In the first, Nock writes, “there is no religious frontier to cross, no difficult decision to make between two views of life,” and in the other “the individual stands before a choice” between “the renunciation of his past and entry into a kingdom” or “the refusal of this dream as chimerical.” Nock contrasts adhesion, which can occur when two religions meet, with conversion. Adhesion, he writes, is “an acceptance of new worships as supplements and not as substitutes” that does not “involve the taking of a new way of life in place of the old.” Conversion is “the reorientation of the soul of an individual, his deliberate turning from indifference ... a turning which implies a consciousness that a great change is involved, that the old was wrong and the new is right.”<sup>86</sup>

The gulf between cultural spiritual practices and Christian spiritual practices did not seem that great to Las Casas. In the 1550-1551 debate at Valladolid with theologian and fellow Dominican Gines Sepulveda over the very justice of Spain’s colony-making, Las Casas cited St. Thomas of Aquinas in arguing that value could be found in the cultural “rites of heretics and pagans” as precursors to Christian conversion.<sup>87</sup> Las Casas must have seen such rituals as empty but imbued with latent spirituality, as examples of what is now considered folk religion. For the church, as Sepulveda and others desired, to abolish such practices among indigenous nonbelievers, Las Casas claimed, would leave them open to mere religious affectation as they embraced Catholic rites, not actual conversion. He argued,

Because nature itself teaches that every race of man must worship God and because divine worship is made up of ceremonies, it follows that, just as men cannot live without the true God or a false god believed to be true, they cannot live without the exercise of some ceremonies, especially since the common opinion among the gentiles has been that the whole status of a country is preserved in happiness by means of ceremonies and sacrifices.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> A.D. Nock, *Conversion: The Old and the New in Religion from Alexander the Great to Augustine of Hippo* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998; reprint, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1933), 1-7.

<sup>87</sup> Las Casas, *In Defense of the Indians*, 69.

<sup>88</sup> Las Casas, *In Defense of the Indians*, 69-70.

Las Casas had insisted, at least since the 1530s, that peaceful persuasion and exhortation of the will — not force — were the only legitimate means to conversion.<sup>89</sup>

Las Casas' sensitivity to the cultural and spiritual practices of others seems tied to the importance he attached to his own Christian practices. A sampling of his writings and observations of others show that his life mission of defending the "Amerindians," over against colonists, merchants, the crowns and the church itself, was framed by his understanding of God's mission and rooted in his concept of what Christ was all about; he sensed, and cited, the Holy Spirit's guidance; his thinking and practices were steeped in Scripture; and he did utilize his imagination and see the power of the imagination in others — all elements of Christian spiritual practices. Las Casas credited the first Dominican friars in Santo Domingo with setting the example of piety among the Spanish colonists — and for him as a secular priest among them — with regular fasting, penance, and abstinence.<sup>90</sup> Las Casas recorded that his own practices of prayers, deep reflection, meditation, and Scripture reading prefaced his own conversion.<sup>91</sup> His *A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies*, a broadside he leveled against the excesses of colonists, is peppered with references to his own Bible reading, meditation and the Sacraments.<sup>92</sup> In the debate with Sepulveda, Las Casas referred to Bible reading, meditation, Communion, sacrifice, service, charity, fasting, and prayer among the marks of a follower of Christ.<sup>93</sup> Las Casas wrote that it was his deep meditation on Scripture, in fact — Ecclesiasticus, or the Wisdom of Jesus Son of Sirach, chapter 34, which disparages "the gifts of the godless" and "the offerings of the wicked" — that eventually spawned his conversion and repentance from participating in "the misery and servitude that those peoples suffered."<sup>94</sup> Finally, *In Defense of the Indians* is replete with evidence of the main practice, along with Bible study, that informed his contest with Sepulveda, and his entire mission: learning. Upon his initiation into the Dominican Order in 1523, Las Casas turned from the world that was breaking his heart and offending his sense of justice and turned to studies, which he pursued for a dozen years under the friars' tutelage.<sup>95</sup>

In most of his writings reviewed here, Las Casas explicitly references the Holy Spirit and Divine Wisdom, crediting them as the source of his own and the church's discernment of God's will. In the debate with Sepulveda, he argued that "gentleness, service, meekness and charity," rather than subjugation, would attract the indigenous to Christian faith and credited "the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit" with the church's

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<sup>89</sup> Las Casas, *Witness*, 137-142.

<sup>90</sup> Vickery, *Bartolome de Las Casas, Great Prophet*, 43.

<sup>91</sup> Vickery, *Bartolome de Las Casas, Great Prophet*, 59.

<sup>92</sup> Las Casas, *A Short Account*, 5, 26, 32, 56, 70.

<sup>93</sup> Las Casas, *In Defense of the Indians*, 29, 31, 39, 57, 98-99, 218, 228-229.

<sup>94</sup> Las Casas, *Witness*, 73. The passage is Ecclesiasticus 34: 21-27. George Sanderlin's translation of Las Casas' recollection of the verses in Las Casas' *History of the Indies* reads: "Tainted his gifts who offers in sacrifice ill-gotten goods; mock presents from the lawless win not God's favor. The Lord is the salvation of those sustaining themselves in the way of truth and justice. The Most High approves not the gifts of the godless, nor does he have regard for the offerings of the wicked; nor for their many sacrifices does he forgive their sins. Like the man who slays his neighbor is he who offers sacrifices from the possessions of the poor. He who sheds blood and he who defrauds his servant are brothers."

<sup>95</sup> Clayton, *Bartolome de Las Casas and the Conquest*, 98.

understanding that Christ, not the church, judges sin.<sup>96</sup> He reported that he and others were “moved by the Lord” — which suggests discernment — to offer kindness with preaching in Guatemala.<sup>97</sup> Tying the Bible to spiritual discernment, Las Casas insisted that biblical writing is “what the author of Sacred Scripture, that is, the Holy Spirit, intends it to be.”<sup>98</sup> In drawing, not compelling, people, “the Lord gently moves each thing to its end: ‘She (Divine Wisdom) deploys her strength from one end of the earth to the other, ordering all things gently,’” he wrote, quoting Wisdom of Solomon 8: 1.<sup>99</sup> Las Casas’ reliance on the Holy Spirit for guidance in the face of opponents in the church with more hostile intentions surely colored the favorable view of liberal Catholic scholar Manuel Gimenez Fernandez, who wrote in the late 1960s: “His life is a magnificent lesson and example of the conduct (the honesty, study, and valor) that should guide the actions of the Christian intellectual confronting a hostile political environment.”<sup>100</sup> A more critical admirer, Luis N. Rivera, while describing the Spanish church as defined by a providentialist view — seeing God’s direct hand in its “discovery” of the New World for purposes of salvation — nonetheless differentiated Las Casas’ approach from his opponents: “The fact is their providentialism is triumphalistic and bellicose while that of Las Casas is evangelical and peaceful.”<sup>101</sup>

Las Casas’ life demonstrates important themes in Christian mission. Andrew Walls, in *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith*, outlines several mission themes. Three are examined here, starting with Las Casas’ view of salvation.

Walls uses the metaphor of a stage whereupon the Jesus Act is presented, as part of the drama of human life, to an auditorium full of people with different vantage points to get across the idea that people perceive the Incarnation, a specific act of translation, as he characterizes it, differently depending on where they are sitting. People sit in blocks of seats defined by culture, and no one can change seats: “Culture is simply a name for a location in the auditorium where the drama of life is in progress. ... We hear and respond to the Gospel, we read and listen to Scriptures, in terms of our accumulated experience and perceptions of the world.”<sup>102</sup> Las Casas sat in a block of seats defined first by the military success of the *Reconquista*, the Aragonese-Castilian culture clash with Muslim peoples. His vantage point was further outlined by successful Aragonese maneuvering against the French Valois dynasty and successful warring in Italy, the belief that discovery of the New World was due to Providence and therefore blessed, and a sense that the crowns were duty-bound to advance Christianization of the colonies and Catholic

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<sup>96</sup> Las Casas, *In Defense of the Indians*, 98.

<sup>97</sup> Las Casas, *In Defense of the Indians*, 180.

<sup>98</sup> Las Casas, *In Defense of the Indians*, 269.

<sup>99</sup> Las Casas, *In Defense of the Indians*, 275-276.

<sup>100</sup> Manuel Gimenez Fernandez, “Fray Bartolome de Las Casas: A Biographical Sketch,” in Friede and Keen, *Bartolome de Las Casas in History*, 117.

<sup>101</sup> Rivera, *A Violent Evangelism*, 62

<sup>102</sup> Walls, *The Missionary Movement*, 44.



orthodoxy at home.<sup>103</sup> Officially, the whole point of colonization was to save indigenous souls in “conversion to our Holy Catholic faith,” as Ferdinand and Isabella put it in their instructions to Christopher Columbus for his second journey.<sup>104</sup> Many, such as Hernan Cortes, took the papal grants of dominion and responsibility for advancing the faith so seriously they were ready to wage war to “to bring the natives to the knowledge of our Holy Catholic faith.”<sup>105</sup> The monarchs’ fear of failing God can be seen as partial inspiration for the *Requerimiento*, the infamous document that, once read to natives, could, if unheeded, be used to justify plunder and enslavement.<sup>106</sup> However, to return to Walls’ metaphor, Las Casas’ seat fell at the edge of such militaristic views, for when he realized his own complacency and participation in abuse, he turned his attention to the message of the Gospel and away from the idea that its spreading by force was justified or foreordained. He turned with a prophetic voice to his seatmates and defied them, harangued them, begged them not to be distracted by their own presence in the auditorium and to concentrate on the play before them. “The one and only method of teaching ... the true religion ought to be gentle, enticing and pleasant. This method is by persuading the understanding and by attracting the will,” he wrote. “War brings with it ... evils.”<sup>107</sup> In other words, Las Casas’ view of salvation formed, after he repented and as his faith matured, in reaction to the dominant culture.

Regarding theology, Walls writes, “Theology is about testing your actions by Scripture.” It “springs out of practical situations” and “is therefore occasional and local in character.”<sup>108</sup> Las Casas would seem, then, to be an archetype of Bible-based praxis. Scripture came to mind as he meditated and sought God’s will.<sup>109</sup> The commandment to love one’s neighbor underlies not only the Gospel but also “underpins the Law and the Books of the Prophets,” he wrote.<sup>110</sup> Peacefully persuading and attracting people’s will, following the example of Jesus, is “the only way” to bring them to God in Christ, he argued again and again.<sup>111</sup> He identified the natives with Christ and, relying on Chryostom and Augustine in interpreting Matthew 25, preached against sins of omission, the failure to help the helpless and the poor, which he saw as failures to help Christ.<sup>112</sup> Las Casas’ life was one of theology in action.

Las Casas also embodied Walls’ ideas of the “indigenizing principle,” which is “the desire to live as a Christian and yet as a member of one’s own society,” and the “pilgrim principle,” the notion that being faithful to Christ will put one out of step with society.<sup>113</sup> Las Casas, despite all his efforts, lived and died a Spaniard, never stumbled in

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<sup>103</sup> Venancio D. Carro, “The Spanish Theological-Juridical Renaissance and the Ideology of Bartolome de Las Casas,” in Friede and Keen, *Bartolome de Las Casas in History*, 241-242; Bonney, *The European Dynastic States*, 88-92; and Rivera, *A Violent Evangelism*, 49-52, 60.

<sup>104</sup> Rivera, *A Violent Evangelism*, 43.

<sup>105</sup> Rivera, *A Violent Evangelism*, 48.

<sup>106</sup> Anthony Pagden, introduction to Las Casas, *A Short Account*, xxiv, xxv.

<sup>107</sup> Las Casas, *Witness*, 138-140.

<sup>108</sup> Walls, *The Missionary Movement*, 10.

<sup>109</sup> Clayton, *Bartolome de Las Casas and the Conquest*, 67.

<sup>110</sup> Las Casas, *A Short Account*, 93.

<sup>111</sup> Las Casas, *Witness*, 137-138.

<sup>112</sup> Vickery, *Bartolome de Las Casas, Great Prophet*, 99-100.

<sup>113</sup> Walls, *The Missionary Movement*, 7-8.

his support of the crown and was so dedicated to Catholic orthodoxy that he asked that the Inquisition be brought to the New World, exhibiting the indigenous principal.<sup>114</sup> Yet as a pilgrim, he felt compelled to place himself outside the mainstream of society by calling for Spain to repent, cease its atrocities, pay restitution, and preach the Gospel rather than impose it.<sup>115</sup> As for the indigenous peoples, he clearly believed they could become Christians without being subjected to Spanish culture.<sup>116</sup>

## Conclusion

Thoughtful Christians have to deal with the twin Christian legacies of Christopher Columbus and Bartolome de Las Casas. Broader, more diverse American culture could benefit from better awareness of what truly drove Columbus the man, as opposed to a two-dimensional figure of him, whether venerated or reviled, and what drove Las Casas to preach and agitate against the violent excesses of Spanish colonialism. Progressive Christians, especially, should see Las Casas as a sixteenth-century version of the kind of Christian they strive to be: questioning authority, whether church, state or commerce; exhibiting faith without suspending mind; speaking uncomfortable truth to entrenched power; and acting on conscience as informed by the messages and examples of Jesus. Many would differ with Las Casas in his unwavering devotion to the church and certainly would not follow his example of loyalty to the crown as it might be construed now, as allegiance to a particular political or philosophical orientation or individual leader. Some would be put off by Las Casas' piety — although some would embrace it — and all would be appalled to learn, if they did not know, the details of the church's dealing with indigenous people. All who are chagrined today by the schisms erupting in church and society over disagreements surrounding the marginalized, whether poor, minority, gay or non-Christian, might steel themselves for dealing with eternal questions of such temporal consequences with these facts: The fundamental dichotomy of worshiping Christ versus following Jesus is nothing new under the Son.

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<sup>114</sup> Rivera, *A Violent Evangelism*, 48-49, 52.

<sup>115</sup> Vickery, *Bartolome de las Casas, Great Prophet*, 78.

<sup>116</sup> Las Casas, *In Defense of the Indians*, 274-284, 326-329, for example.