Abstract
A revisionist view of Bartolome de las Casas as the ‘author’ of the introduction of African slaves to the Indies-Americas in the early 16th century. The article details Las Casas’ thinking and actions and concludes that while Las Casas did—among other contemporaries—suggest the importation of African slaves to lift the burden of oppression off the Amerindians, his perspective and view was altered radically in the last third of his life. The article explores the meaning of African slavery in the context of the place and time where Las Casas grew up—Andalucia in southern Spain—where slavery was quite different from the way it developed on the plantations of the Americas. And the article relates how Las Casas’ theoretical and practical defense of Amerindians eventually was extended by Las Casas’ into a defense of liberty for all men, including African slaves.

In 1516, to preserve the rapidly dwindling Taino population of the island of Española, Bartolome de las Casas (1485–1566) suggested importing some black and white slaves from Castile. He has been pilloried ever since for hypocritically advocating the initiation of the African slave trade in defense of American Indians.1 What did Las Casas really advocate? Was he the first to do so as so many have claimed?2 Did he sustain and defend his advocacy of the slave trade over the years? And, perhaps most important, how have scholars finally determined where Las Casas fits into the origins and nature of the African slave trade?3

Las Casas is far more complicated than the simple labels appended to him by both his supporters and detractors over the past five centuries. As ‘protector of Indians,’ a title he received from Cardinal Ximénez de Cisneros in 1516, he waged a lifelong war against the encomendero class of conquistadors and settlers whose actions—deliberate or accidental—caused a demographic disaster on the American Indians of unprecedented order. In that single minded—some would say paranoic—devotion can be found the origins of Las Casas and his advocacy of the African slave trade.

To understand the world in which Las Casas grew to manhood in Seville, we have to first turn to the Portuguese. In their maritime expansion down the coast of Africa they eventually arrived in the area of Senegal and captured some Africans brought back to Portugal and sold into slavery.4 We know that the Portuguese slave trade simply took advantage of a slave system already well developed in West Africa. As John Thornton wrote in his path breaking book, ‘slavery was widespread and indigenous in African society, as was, naturally enough, a commerce in slaves.5 Research in the last several generations, as exemplified by work done by John Thornton, Herbert Klein, David Eltis, and others, piggybacking sometimes on the work of earlier scholars, has pointed out clearly that African slavery was very much in existence and flourishing in such precolonial African empires as Dahomey and Ashanti (modern Benin and Ghana).6 And furthermore, the growth and development of this widespread slavery in Africa were ‘largely independent of the Atlantic trade’ which was pioneered by the Portuguese.7
Thornton summarized a whole generation of new research that very much corrected popular misconceptions of the African slave trade. ’Thus,’ he wrote, ‘…the slave trade (and the Atlantic trade in general) should not be seen as an ‘impact’ brought in from outside and functioning as some sort of autonomous factor in African history. Instead, it grew out of and was rationalized by the African societies who participated in it and had complete control over it until the slaves were loaded onto European ships for transfer to Atlantic societies.’8

This modern view gives credence to the Portuguese position that they were simply trafficking in people already in bondage, thus making the slave trade a ‘just’ trade and legal within the accepted norms of the age. By the time the young Las Casas reached the Indies for the first time in 1502 the Portuguese had been importing African slaves into Iberia for half a century.9 Many of these slaves were carried to southern Spain where most were employed in domestic service in urban centers such as Seville where Las Casas was born and grew up.10

The slaves in southern Iberia were rarely used in agriculture or plantation slavery as would develop in the Americas. Rather they fit into society much like the Moorish slaves who preceded them, eventually being absorbed into the local society, becoming members of Christian brotherhoods, developing a significant free colored population, and, as Klein noted, these ‘African slaves readily adopted the culture, language, and religion of their masters.’11

The plantation slavery that evolved in the Americas was not pioneered in the warm, southern regions of Iberia, but rather on the Atlantic islands, especially the Madeiras, the Canaries, and São Tomé in the Gulf of Guinea. By 1550, São Tomé had over 60 sugar mills and between 5,000 and 6,000 plantation slaves.

How conscious was the boy Las Casas of African slaves in his hometown of Seville as he grew to manhood at the end of the 15th century? They may have numbered at least 10% of the population by the early 16th century. Notarial records from 1501 to 1525 indicate 5,271 slaves in Seville, and of these almost 4,000 were listed as blacks or mulattoes.12 They were certainly visible and accepted as a part of the local scene, working in urban industries, going to Church, forming part of the general population, not particularly deprived, oppressed, or stripped of much of their humanity as would occur in the plantations of the Americas by the 18th century. They were well acculturated into early modern Hispanic society and there was even a small but significant element of free blacks in the population, manumitted by either owners or having bought their way to freedom through Spain’s slave codes. Numbers of Africans and their descendants in southern Spain worked in the maritime industries as well, some as sailors in the Atlantic commerce. It was this form of slavery that Las Casas was acquainted with when he suggested importing more slaves to the islands of the Caribbean in 1516.

Between 1502 and 1510 on the other hand he witnessed the brutal subjugation of the Tainos on the island of Española by Spanish settlers. Driven largely by an unbridled greed, they exploited the Tainos through outright slavery or by applying the enco-
mienda to extract their labor. It is Las Casas’ testimony as an eye witness we are interested in.

For about 10 years, or until 1511 when Las Casas accompanied an armed band of conquistadors to Cuba in the ‘pacification’ of that island, he witnessed the cruelty of the Spanish which he eventually recorded in his History of the Indies. He extracted the most egregious examples of his fellow countrymen’s behavior at mid-century and in 1552 published a short tract entitled A Brief History of the Destruction of the Indies. The Brief History achieved an almost instant notoriety among Spanish readers and it was soon translated.
into other European languages. Within a few years the Black Legend was well underway, based in large part on the Brief History (Fig. 1).

In the conquest of Cuba, Las Casas crossed the thin line dividing Las Casas the settler from Father Las Casas the Christian priest. A particular brutal and senseless massacre at Caonao in 1514 drove him into the camp of the Dominican reformers he had met earlier in 1510 on Española. An encomendero himself since his early days on Española, he gave away his encomienda Indians and started to preach against the settlers and their encomiendas which he viewed as the principle instrument of oppression destroying the Indians. Unable to convince the conquistadors to come to their senses and follow his leadership, Las Casas came upon an idea that eventually haunted him the rest of his life.

Some settlers complained to him that the Dominicans would not confess and absolve them if they did not set the Indians free. Las Casas listened, although agreeing totally with his friends the Dominicans.

‘If we could each get licenses to bring a few dozen Negro slaves from Spain or Africa,’ they suggested, ‘it would go better with the Indians.’ There were already a few Africans on the island—some slave and some free—, and the sugar industry was underway, sugar cane having been imported as early as Columbus’s voyages at the end of the 15th

![Fig. 1. An imagined scene of Bartolomé de las Casas and an American Indian. The Indian represents Las Casas’ lifelong devotion as protector of American Indians, while the pose with pen and quill certainly catches Las Casas’ incredibly prodigious career as chronicler, historian, and polemicist of the Indies. Painted in 1876 by Constantino Brumidi for the Capitol, Washington, DC. Credit: Architect of the Capitol.](image-url)
century. It was a natural fit, especially as the Indians were dying off in disastrous numbers and sugar fetched a good price in Europe.

Las Casas would do anything to lift the burden of oppression and death off the Indians. Typically tunnel-visioned, he picked up on the idea, and in 1517–1519 he suggested to young King Charles’s counselors that a license be issued to import Negro slaves directly from Spain or Africa to the islands. Later on he reflected on this.

‘This suggestion to issue a license to bring Negro slaves to the Indies was made first by the cleric Casas [he frequently wrote of himself in the third person], not seeing how unjust the Portuguese were in taking slaves [on the coast of Africa]. Later on he realized how unjustly and tyrannically Africans were taken slaves, in the same fashion as Indians.’

Two sides of Las Casas’ character emerge: one, Las Casas was quite honest in his admission of shortsightedness; and two, he was totally devoted to the Indians, so much so that he failed initially to see the implications of advocating licenses to import African slaves.

The young King Charles and his largely Flemish advisers took a liking to this passionate priest from Seville with his reports of life in the Indies. They followed up on his suggestion to import African slaves to reduce the devastating impact of the Europeans on the Indians and so the call went down to Seville to kick off this trade. It was thought that 4,000 slaves would do for the four islands of Española, San Juan [Puerto Rico], Cuba, and Jamaica.

Las Casas later was sorry for all of this. The Indians he meant to save remained ‘in captivity until there were none left to kill,’ and black slavery spread like a stain across the New World. What is interesting is that historiographically, with a few notable exceptions, historians, polemicists, and apologists have clung to the old canard that Las Casas was the first to advocate African slavery to the Americas, and, secondly, that it was basically a thoughtless, cruel, unexamined and hypocritical act.

One, he was not the first to advocate or import African slaves to the Americas, and, two, he later deeply repented for having contributed to this trade and its devastating consequences for Africans in New World plantations.

Exactly when the first African slaves were introduced into the Caribbean islands is not known. We know there were Africans—slave and free—on Española from even before the end of the 15th century. They accompanied Columbus and other early explorers.

When Las Casas suggested importing more African slaves he was probably thinking of African slavery as he knew it from his childhood in Seville and its environs. It was not the degrading form of plantation slavery later developed by the Portuguese, English, and French for example in other parts of the Americas in the 17th and 18th centuries. It was an urban form of slavery already described above, with Africans well integrated into the local society of Andalucia, with their religious brotherhoods, acculturated to Spanish, practicing crafts and skills in the community, some, in fact, becoming freedmen.

Slavery was part of life in the 16th century, an accepted form of servitude since ancient times, and unquestioned by anyone—theologians, philosophers, statesmen, anyone who spoke with authority in the community. For Las Casas to be held accountable for the future of the slave trade as it evolved in the 17th and 18th centuries is akin to pilloring Columbus for all the sins of Europeans in the wake of the discovery. Las Casas was no more prescient than any other of his contemporaries. Yet, curiously enough, different from most of his contemporaries, he did turn on the slave trade later in life, long before the morality of the slave trade was challenged by abolitionists almost 200 years later (Fig. 2).
At mid-century, Las Casas restudied the documents of the early period of discovery, poring over the reports of voyages by merchants and navigators in the service of Portugal and Spain—such as Christopher Columbus himself—to Guinea, to the Congo, to the Canary Islands. He began to perceive the nature of African slavery in its true dimensions and denounced it in his *History* as he worked in the Dominican monastery of San Pablo in Seville in the early 1550s.

‘The Portuguese,’ Las Casas wrote, ‘had made a career in much of the past of raiding Guinea and enslaving blacks, *absolutely unjustly* [emphasis added]. When they saw we [the Spanish sugar planters and sugar mill operators on the islands] had such a need of blacks and they sold for high prices, the Portuguese speeded up their slave raiding… They took *slaves in every evil and wicked way they could*. And blacks, when they saw the Portuguese so eager on the hunt for slaves, they themselves used unjust wars and other lawless means to steal and sell to the Portuguese.’

‘And we,’ Las Casas reflected, ‘are the cause of all the sins the one and the other commit, in addition to what we commit in buying them.’

Slavery, of course, had been in existence since antiquity and Christians and the Church accepted slavery as legal. But the Atlantic slave trade was new and Las Casas was persuaded to denounce this trade from his experience as an eye witness in the Indies, and from the documentary record preserved by Portuguese chroniclers.

Las Casas recorded one of the first Portuguese slaving expeditions to Africa in 1444 in his *History* by using the chronicle written by the Portuguese Gómez Eanes de Zurara. It is a story filled with cruelty and sadness. The Eanes de Zurara accounts provoked great ire, disappointment, and chastisement as Las Casas contemplated the scenes. They included the division of families, children stripped from parents, mothers clinging to their toddlers, husbands divided from wives. As Eanes recalled in a callous phrase, ‘the partition took a lot of trouble.’

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Fig. 2. This map shows the immense spread of the African slave trade, and its impact, on the Atlantic world. It began with the relatively thoughtless suggestion by Las Casas to alleviate the cycle of work and death which had been imposed by the Spanish on the Amerindians of the Greater Antilles, especially of Española and Cuba. Las Casas later turned against the slave trade and slavery itself, but by then the infamous African slave trade, driven by the plantation economics of the New World, was well underway. Credit: PBS and NYLife documentary (http://www.slaveryinamerica.org).
Eanes attempted to excuse this pitiful scene by emphasizing that, at least, the Africans were brought to Christianity in subsequent years. ‘He seems,’ Las Casas weighed in, ‘little less foolish than the Infante [Prince Henry the Navigator], unable to see that neither the Infante’s good intentions [Henry refused to take possessions of his slaves, but allowed them to be taken by others, to preserve ‘his good conscience’], nor the good results that later followed [conversion], excused the sins of violence, the deaths, the damnation of those who perished without faith or sacrament, the enslavement of the survivors.’

Las Casas continued, ‘nor did [good] intention or results make up for the monumental injustice. What love, affection, esteem, reverence, would they have, could they have for the faith, for Christian religion, so as to covert to it, those who wept as they did, who grieved, who raised their eyes, their hands to heaven, who saw themselves, against of the law of nature, against all human reason, stripped of their liberty, of their wives and children, of their homeland, of their peace?’ Las Casas saw no mitigating circumstance that could assuage the monstrosity of the slave trade.

As noted, the legitimacy of slavery as an institution was hardly questioned during Las Casas’ lifetime. What divided some scholars and philosophers was the question of a just war.22 If declared ‘just,’ then the enslavement of prisoners and captives was acceptable. If the war was not just, as Las Casas claimed in attacking all violence done on the Indians, then the taking of captives and enslaving them was illegal.

Some—such as the Dominican scholar Francisco de Vitoria—did question the Portuguese enslavement of Africans. Were they captured in just wars? What indeed was a just war? Concurrently, could Christians engage in just wars since all wars were wrapped in violence, and Jesus Christ, at the very core of Christianity, did not condone violence?

Secondarily, but no less important, was whether one could use force to evangelize. Suffice it to say that there were some who agreed with, and some who denied such a position. Returning to Las Casas and the African coast, it became increasingly clear to Las Casas that neither rationalization—just war or the use of force—could be invoked to take and sell slaves. The question was, of course, complicated by taking place along the coasts and interior of West and Central Africa, at a far remove from the common experiences of Europeans.

Were the slaves sold to the Portuguese already slaves in their own societies, and thus could be purchased with no damage to one’s moral and spiritual scruples, as the Portuguese claimed?23 Francisco de Vitoria waffled a bit on this question. Vitoria declared that if deception had been used to capture Africans, then it “must have been a bit of an exception. If the king of Portugal…has authorized this traffic, he must have reasonable motives for doing so, as it is not likely that he would ‘permit such inhumanity, nor that no one would point it out to him.’”24 This was a bit disingenuous on the part of the famous Salamancan scholar, trying to explain away the possibly illegal acts of a Christian prince such as the King of Portugal as an oversight.

The argument that enslavement was a natural step to Christianity was dismissed contemptuously by Las Casas and other of his like-thinking contemporaries.25 Furthermore, it not was until late in the 17th century, more than a full hundred years after Las Casas’ death, that slavery began to be seriously questioned.26 In a text that Gustavo Gutiérrez labeled ‘the most extensive and spirited abolitionist call of the time,’ a Capuchin friar named Francisco José Jaca de Aragón denounced slavery in 1681.27

But, as Gutiérrez pointed out, generally speaking, the documents—our voices from these years—‘only protest abuses, call for decent treatment, forbid the enslavement of Christian converts, and recall the exigencies of being brothers and sisters in Christ.’28 The great jurists and political thinkers of the 17th century, such as Hugo Grotius,
Thomas Hobbes, and John Locke for example, ‘not only do not question, but actually seem to justify black slavery as integral to social harmony, and the logic of power.’

With the above background, let us return to Las Casas and the 16th century. There were Africans—as slaves and free men—in the Indies as early as 1502, for in that year a group came over with Nicolas de Ovando, the new governor of Española. In 1516, Las Casas asked that ‘in place of the Indians which are needed in those communities, Your Highness should provide 20 negroes or other slaves for the mines, with necessary food, and this will be of a greater service and more profit for Your Highness because much more gold will be collected than is now being collected by Indians now bent over in that labor.’

Las Casas did not suggest enslaving people in Africa who were not already slaves, nor did he attach any ethnic or racial label to the slaves of Castile, black, or white. He simply wanted to lift the burden off the backs of the Indians, and since slavery was accepted throughout the Western world, why not import slaves?

Las Casas has often been excoriated for this suggestion. He was not, however, an isolated example of a Spaniard who wished to bring slaves to the Indies. As early as 1510, a member of the cabildo (or town council) in Santo Domingo, Cristóbal de Tapia, petitioned the Crown to allow the importation of black slaves. Sometime in this time period, Gil González Dávila, the comptroller of Española, made the same suggestion, while the Hieronymite friars sent to govern the island in 1517 came up with a similar strategy. In a letter written in 1516 or 1517 by the Dominicans on Española—including the prior Pedro de Córdoba—they asked that the Indians be taken away from the Spaniards and ‘as temporary compensation to the Christians and to their farms... His Highness grant them license to import slaves.’

Gutiérrez rightly comes to the conclusion: ‘As we see, Bartolomé was not alone in his request.’ Las Casas continued to advocate the importation of African slaves over the next several decades. Various petitions and letters, dating from 1518, 1531, and lastly in 1543, all suggested or requested that slaves be shipped to the Indies. Until mid-century, when a dramatic about face took place in his attitude toward slavery and the slave trade, Las Casas merely mirrored the prevailing philosophical and social currents of his age. But then something happened, as Gutiérrez records: ‘After his last involvement in the matter (1543), things began to change. There cannot be the least doubt of a reversal in his thinking. We have forthright, painful documents expressing his repentance for the blindness in which he had lived up to the middle of the 16th century.’

In 1547, on his return from the Indies to Castile, Las Casas stopped in at Lisbon. It was probably during this visit that he learned of Portuguese chronicles describing exploration and exploits down the African coast. As he delved deeper and deeper into the slave trade, and slavery itself, he found himself being changed by the very same process that had so radically altered him from settler/encomendero to protector of Indians. He could not reconcile the Jesus Christ he knew from Scripture with the cruel reality of the growing slave trade (Fig. 3).

On advocating the importation of slaves back in 1516, Las Casas wrote ‘the cleric [he often wrote in the third person], many years later, regretted the advice he gave the king on this matter—he judged himself culpable through inadvertence—when he saw proven that the enslavement of blacks was every bit as unjust as that of the Indians. It was not, in any case, a good solution he had proposed, that blacks be brought in so Indians could be freed. And this even he thought that the blacks had been justly enslaved. He was not certain that his ignorance and his good intentions would excuse him before the judgment of God.’
What produced such a profound change? It flowed from three major sources. One was Scripture. How could one reconcile the love of Jesus Christ with the inhumanity of the trade? The second was the testimony of the Portuguese chroniclers themselves, especially Go´mez Eanes, whose accounts were heart rending. And the third was Las Casas' own experience with slavery, both Indian and African. What was different was that at this point in his life he was beginning to conflate the Indian experience with slavery with the African one.

When this illumination took place we do not know exactly, but it is clear that Las Casas considered Indian slavery and African slavery in the same breathe, and both were illegal and tyrannical.

‘This note to give license to bring black slaves to these lands was first given by the cleric Casas, not taking into account the injustice with which the Portuguese captured and enslaved them; then, having discovered this, he would not for all the world advocate this, for he held enslaving them both unjust and tyrannical; and the same goes for the Indians.’42 Gutiérrez’ translator renders it slightly differently.

‘Accordingly, he [Las Casas] adds, speaking of himself:…’ But after he found out, he would not have proposed it for all the world, because blacks were enslaved unjustly, tyrannically, right from the start, exactly as the Indians had been.43 [italics added]
We have been following a long thread here, from Las Casas first suggesting the importation of a few black and/or white slaves from Africa or Spain in 1516 to a full blown denouncement at mid-century of the African slave trade he had once advocated. Once Las Casas accepted the truth that the African slaves in the plantations and mines of the Indies were as equally oppressed as the Indians, then it was but one step further to denounce not only the slave trade, but also African slavery itself, which was a big step far beyond the box of the accepted norms in the 16th century (Fig. 4).

Las Casas the documentary historian left no doubt where his sympathies lay. He discovered in the Portuguese chronicles of the slave trade all the evidence he needed to pronounce Portuguese behavior illegal, immoral, and plain horrific. He contemptuously dismissed the ‘we-did-this-to-covert-them-to-Christianity’ excuse as a pitiful defense of a heinous crime.

The conclusion to Chapter 24 in the first volume of Las Casas’ History leaves no doubt where he stood on the issue of the Portuguese enslavement of Africans to send to the Indies.

‘Even the historian himself [Gómez Eanes], and the people who stood around, wept with compassion over the sorry affair, especially when they saw the separation of children from parents, of mothers and fathers from children. It is obvious, the error, the self-deception of those people back then. Please God it did not last, it does not still last [a misplaced hope it turns out]. It is from his exclamations, so I think, that the historian [again Eanes] shows the event to be the horror that it is, though later he seems to soft-soap it, to blur it with the mercy and goodness of God. If anything good did come of it later, it all came from God. What came from the Infante [Prince Henry the Navigator] and the raiders he sent out was brutality, theft, tyranny—nothing more.’

If Las Casas was sympathetic to the slave trade, the evidence will have to come from somewhere other than his own testimony which is clear, condemnatory, absolutely, and unequivocally straightforward.
While the Portuguese are held to account in the main, he does not excuse Spaniards whose greed in fact drove the slave trade. As Gutiérrez noted, “Spanish interests motivated the slavers. To boot, greed is infections, with the result that the Africans themselves began to wage ‘unjust wars’ and take other ‘illicit ways’ to make slaves and sell them to the Portuguese,” who then transported them across the Atlantic to be sold in the Spanish and Portuguese (largely Brazil) plantations of the New World.45

At the core of the illegal and inhumane slave trade, Las Casas, as a Christian missionary friar imbued with Scripture, spoke clearly. He laid the blame squarely on sin, of which greed and cupidity are two of the most egregious transgressions of God’s commandments. An historiographical question whose answer remains somewhat ambiguous is did Las Casas condemn slavery across the board as an evil as strongly and clearly he condemned the slave trade? These are two related but distinct issues. He had no problem in labeling the slave trade evil and illegal: evil within the context of Christian doctrine and illegal within the Thomistic doctrine of natural law that all men are born free, and deserve to remain free. Las Casas simply extended his doctrinal defense of Indians to the slave trade. Gutiérrez, Parish and other biographers of Las Casas conclude that his condemnation of the slave trade extended to slavery itself, placing Las Casas awkwardly against the norms of his age since the abolitionist movement is not thought to have begun until the 18th century.46

But this interpretation is consistent with Las Casas and his fervent defense of the Indians. He extended this passion—some would claim his obsession—to the slave trade, and finally to slavery itself as practiced in the Indies, whose face was of course largely either Indian or black. That it put him at odds with prevailing sentiments, legal traditions, and contemporary practices weighed little on his balance of doing what he thought was right or wrong.

The man often pilloried for advocating, hypocritically, the initiation of the African slave trade was instead one of the philosophical and spiritual progenitors of the abolitionist movement that sprang to life a century and a half after he died47 (Fig. 5).

None of these findings and interpretations was entirely novel or unknown to scholars of earlier generations. What seems to have been operating here was the old Black Legend versus White Legend view of the Conquest. Blame for the African slave trade was attributed to the acts of the Portuguese and Spaniards, and Las Casas was an easy target given his outspoken and prominent place among chroniclers of the 16th century. Benjamin Keen’s wonderful introductory essay, ‘Approaches to Las Casas, 1535–1970,’ in the book he and Juan Freide edited on *Bartolomé de las Casas in History*, traces the pro- and anti-Lascasian sentiments over a four and a half century span.48 As Keen noted, holding ‘Las Casas responsible for the beginnings of the African slave trade to the Americas [was a] canard…to have a long life.’49

It is a canard that has run its course and needs to be dismissed as part of the long polemic on the Encounter. What we need is an honest interpretation of the life of Las Casas, one striped both of sentimentality and advocacy. He emerges as a curmudgeonly figure, given to holding grudges and taking his enemies seriously, a prophetic-like character in the mold of the Jeremiah of the Old Testament. He divided people everywhere he went, pronouncing and acting in the interests of Amerindians across the Indies. In doing so he articulated a remarkable apologetic based on all the religious and secular resources he could muster, and they were considerable, as he proved in a debate at mid-century against the leading Aristotelian scholar of all Spain, Juan Gines de Sepúlveda. Always at the center of Las Casas’ arguments was Scripture, and it was from Scripture, interpreted by such giants as his fellow Dominican, Thomas Aquinas, that he founded his defense of
Indians based on the understanding that all men were in fact born free to determine their destiny. To strip them of this freedom was tyranny, and he moved slowly over three decades of his life to extend the application of those principles from Amerindians to Africans. It is more suitable and truthful to give him credit for that contribution to the history of human rights, than to continue to hold him responsible for introducing African slaves into the New World.

Short Biography

Lawrence Clayton’s research in the past 10 years has focused on the life of the Dominican Bartolomé de las Casas (1485–1566). A short book, Bartolomé de las Casas and the Conquest of the Indies is in preparation for an undergraduate series published by Wiley Blackwell while a much longer biography is now under review by several university presses. His earlier books include a textbook co-authored with Michael Conniff, A History of Modern Latin America (2003), Peru and the United States: the Condor and the Eagle (1998), and The De Soto Chronicles (1985) which he co-edited. He received his undergraduate degree from Duke and his PhD from Tulane where he studied with Richard Greenleaf. In between Duke and Tulane he spent two years in the Navy as an officer on
an amphibious warfare ship with numerous cruises in the Caribbean and Mediterranean. He has been on the faculty at the University of Alabama since 1972 in the Department of History and also directs the Latin American Studies Program.

Notes
* Correspondence: Dr Lawrence Clayton, Box 870212, Tuscaloosa, AL 35487, USA. Email: lclayton@simple-com.net, lclayton@bama.ua.edu.

1 The best summary of how the legend of Las Casas as the progenitor of African slavery in the Americas is in Isacio Pérez Fernández, Bartolomé de las Casas, ¿contra los Negros? (Madrid: Editorial Mundo Negro; México: DF.: Ediciones Esquirla, 1992), especially beginning pp. 34ff, where he describes the origins of this legend to the Encyclopedist Cornelius de Pauw and his Recherches philosophiques sur les Américains, ou Mémoires intéressants pour servir à l’histoire de l’espèce humaine (2 vols.: Berlin, 1768–1769). One really has to read this to catch the spirit of Pérez Fernández’s deeply critical, and sarcastic, assessment of a part of the Enlightened movement which was powerful in projecting its views—especially anti-Spanish prejudices—but rather skimpy or downright wrong in documentary evidence. Eyda M. Merediz and Verónica Salles-Reese, ‘Addressing the Atlantic Slave Trade: Las Casas and the Legend of the Blacks’ in Santa Arias and Eyda M. Merediz, Approaches to Teaching the Writings of Bartolomé de las Casas (New York: The Modern Languages Association of America, 2008), pp. 177–86 also cover much of the literature.

2 Pérez Fernández, Bartolomé de las Casas, p. 9, recounts a marvelous story of Pancho Villa and his meeting with the legend in 1914.

‘In 1914 the guerrilla Pancho Villa arrived in Chihuahua and entered the state capital; he saw a copy of a painting from the Academy of San Carlos in Mexico City, in which father Las Casas was depicted praying over an Indian woman desolated by the death of her husband and the destruction of her home.

Pancho didn’t know what this was all about so he asked his lieutenant, the lawyer Miguel Díaz Lombardo, ‘Who is this priest?’

Miguel responded, ‘That’s Bartolomé de las Casas, famous defender of the Indians who, to free them from slavery, introduced Negro slaves.’

Pancho said, ‘Listen here; I’m not too good on catechism, but to me it looks like Jesus Christ came to the world for the Negroes as well as the Indians.’

And, so having said that, Pancho ordered ‘Take down that priest and burn him!’’ [author’s translation].

3 One of the newest books on Las Casas points to the immense diversity of the man and the world he created and altered by his life. This is the Arias and Merediz, Approaches to Teaching the Writings of Bartolomé de las Casas which contains, as noted at least one chapter devoted to the subject of Las Casas and slavery; Merediz and Salles-Reese, ‘Addressing the Atlantic Slave Trade: Las Casas and the Legend of the Blacks.’


5 Thornton, p. 73.


7 Thornton, p. 74.

8 Thornton, pp. 74, 94–6.


10 Here following Klein, Atlantic Slave Trade, pp. 10ff.

11 Klein, p. 13.

12 Egerton, Games, et al., The Atlantic World, p. 59, a useful insert labeled ‘Early Iberian Slavery.’

13 Slightly paraphrased from where Las Casas wrote in his Historia de las Indias, Obras completas, V, pp. 2190–2191, when explaining his role in promoting the importation of Negro slaves from Castile to the Indies: ‘y porque algunos de los españoles desta isla dixeran al clerigo Casas—viendo lo que pretendía y que los religiosos de Sancto [sic] Domingo no querían absolver a los que tenían indios si no los dexaban—que, si les tráía licencia del rey para que pudiesen traer de Castilla una docena de negros esclavos, que abrirían mano de los indios, acordándose desto el clérigo...’ Or, ‘since some of the Spaniards on this island told the cleric Las Casas—realizing what he wanted and that
the Dominican friars did not want to absolved those who had Indians if they weren’t freed—that, if he could get a license from the King to bring a dozen Negro slaves from Castile, this would allow them to free the Indians, and remembering this the cleric…” Las Casas completes the thought by saying he then included this desire expressed by the settlers in his memorial to the King proposing to bring some blacks slaves from Castile to Españaola to help free the Indians.

14 Las Casas explains his position in Obras completas Bartolomé de las Casas, 15 vols. (Madrid: Editorial Alianza, 1988–1998). This is the most complete and recent version of Las Casas’ Complete Works. This one prepared and published by the Spanish Fundación ‘Instituto Bartolomé de las Casas,’ of the Dominicans in Andalucía, Spain. The edition was edited by Paulino Castañeda Delgado and is a richly annotated edition. This note comes from Las Casas, Historia de las Indias [hereafter HI], Vol. V of the Obras completas, pp. 2190–91. A long explanatory footnote by the editors is well worth reading for modern interpretations of this controversial position. See especially Isacio Pérez Fernández, Bartolomé de las Casas ¿contra los negros? (Edít. Mundo Negro, Madrid, Edic. Esquila, México, 1991).

15 For a good modern presentation of the subject, through the lenses of a student of literature, but well founded in history, see Rolena Adorno, The Politics of Possession in Spanish American Narrative (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), pp. 64ff.

16 Las Casas, Obras completas, V, p. 2191.

17 Kirkpatrick Sale, Christopher Columbus and the Conquest of Paradise (New York: Knopf, 1990) is perhaps the most egregious example of this perspective, hauling Columbus before the forum of judgment on everything evil that occurred in the wake of his voyage in the next 500 years.

18 Las Casas, Obras completas, V, p. 2324.


20 Klein, The Atlantic Slave Trade, his Chapter One, ‘Slavery in Western Development,’ pp. 1–16, a good overview of the subject. Plus, Klein’s bibliographical essay, pp. 213–24, an excellent discussion of the major works—especially the newer ones—on slavery and the slave trade. Virtually all the books written by David Brion Davis, beginning with his prize-winning The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), trace the origins and evolution of slavery in western culture.


22 Here following a very thorough and knowledgeable discussion in Gustavo Gutiérrez, Las Casas: In Search of the Poor of Jesus Christ, translated by Robert R. Barr (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993) pp. 321ff. This excellent intellectual and spiritual biography was originally published as En busca de los pobres de Jesucristo in 1992.

23 This is a huge question that has been addressed by scholars over the centuries, but never with as much rigor and focus as by ‘Atlantic world’ historians of the late twentieth and early 21st centuries. This new paradigm cuts across national boundaries, racial and ethnic identities, old geographic and political frameworks and looks at the ‘Atlantic world’ as a place and time loosely tied together by the waters of the Atlantic Ocean which of course wash the shores of four of the world’s six continents. New research, piggybacking on the work of earlier scholars, has pointed out clearly that African slavery was very much in existence and flourishing in such precolonial African empires as Dahomey and Ashanti (modern Benin and Ghana). The Portuguese slave trade simply took advantage of a slave system already well developed in West Africa. While this in no way ameliorates the terrifying dimensions of the slave trade which Las Casas so heavily weighed into, it does give some credence to the Portuguese position that they were simply trafficking in people already in bondage, thus making the slave trade a ‘just’ trade and legal within the accepted norms of the age.

24 Gutiérrez, p. 322, citing in footnote #62 ‘Carta del maestro fray Francisco de Vitoria al padre Bernardino de Vique acerca de los esclavos con que trafican los portugueses y sobre el proceder de los escribanos,’ Gutiérrez also adds: ‘See Höfner, La ética colonial, 461–2; Pagden, The Fall of Natural Man, p. 33.’

25 Gutiérrez, p. 322, footnote #68, citing his own ‘La Iglesia y los negros,’ and J. F. Maxwell, Slavery and the Catholic Church and J. Dutilleul, ‘Esclavage.’ See Gutiérrez’ full bibliography for full citations. Gutiérrez cited—among others—Bartolomé de Albornoz, a Dominican who taught at one time at the University of Mexico. In his Arte de los contratos (1573) Albornoz questioned ‘the alleged justifications for slavery (war, conviction of a crime, purchase) …Against those who were saying that enslaved blacks actually profited in the balance, since they received the Christian faith, he replies that according to the law of Jesus Christ the soul’s freedom may not be purchased with the body’s enslavement.’

26 Virtually all modern studies on the origins and development of abolitionist sentiments and actions, look to English and French society of the 18th century for the origins of the condemnation of the slave trade, and, by extension, of slavery itself. Even the Society of Friends, the Quakers, the most ardent abolitionists of the era, did not start their campaign until the 18th century in their crusade against the slave trade.
27 Gutiérrez, p. 323. Jaca de Aragón had worked in Cartagena for a number of years. There he witnessed the entry of African slaves into that great colonial entrepôt, with its slave markets and the inhumanity of the institution exposed at full throttle as thousands of African slaves passed through each year. In 1681 in Havana he [Aragón] wrote a lengthy memorial…which questions all the reasons given in favor of legal slavery [and] with good feeling Jaca protests against the subjugation of blacks to slavery and also against the yoke placed on the Indians. In Havana, Jaca met French Capuchin Epifanio de Borgoña, or de Moirans, who in turn wrote a text against slavery entitled Siervos libres o la justa defensa de la libertad natural de los esclavos (Both memoranda have been published in J. T. López, Dos defensores de los esclavos negros en el s. XVII.)

28 Gutiérrez, p. 323, footnote #72 cites extensive documentation for this position.


30 Gutiérrez, p. 324, footnotes #77 and 78. See also Manuel Giménez Fernández, Bartolomé de las Casas, Capellán de S. M. Carlos I, Poblador de Cumaná (1517–1523) (Sevilla, 1960) who has a—typically—long passage on Las Casas and slavery. See ‘La trata de esclavos negros en las Indias hasta 1518 y su aceptación por Bartolomé de las Casas,’ pp. 549–69.


32 For a long note on further sources for this subject, see Luis N. Rivera-Pagán’s article ‘A Prophetic Challenge to the Church: The Last Word of Bartolomé de las Casas’ the Inaugural lecture as Henry Winters Luce Professor in Ecumenics and Mission, delivered on April 9, 2003, at Princeton Theological Seminary. ‘Las Casas’s view of the slavery of the Africans is the object of a long bibliography. Among the most important contributions are: Silvio A. Zavala, ‘¿Las Casas esclavista?’ Cuadernos americanos, Ano 3, No. 2, 1944, 149–54; Robert L. Brady, ‘The Role of the Church: The Last Word of Bartolomé de las Casas,’ pp. 549–69.

33 Gutiérrez, p. 324, footnote #80, ‘Item. He begs to be permitted the favor that the said citizens may freely import black slaves, as a remedy will thereby be provided: and they will mine a great quantity of gold, the Indians will be relieved of their toil, and many other advantages will accrue’ (DII 13:57; the memorandum is undated, but questions all the reasons given in favor of legal slavery [and] with good feeling Jaca protests against the subjugation of blacks to slavery and also against the yoke placed on the Indians. In Havana, Jaca met French Capuchin Epifanio de Borgoña, or de Moirans, who in turn wrote a text against slavery entitled Siervos libres o la justa defensa de la libertad natural de los esclavos (Both memoranda have been published in J. T. López, Dos defensores de los esclavos negros en el s. XVII.)

34 Gutiérrez, p. 324, footnote 81, while fn. 82 reads, ‘In May 1517 the Hieronymites request of Cardinal Cisneros that they “be allowed to bring…in bozal slaves,” that is, slaves who had not been living in Spain, but directly from Africa, concretely, from Guinea (see Pérez Fernández, ¿Contra los negros? 84); Las Casas’s requests were for slaves from Spain. Mere months before, Cisneros had opposed sending slaves to the Indies, not out of any opposition to slavery, however, but only because he regarded it to be unsuitable for the governance of the Indies: Africans, he thought “become much like the Indians, and do evil, and cause harm as in past times has been seen by experience” ‘ (Giménez Fernández, Bartolomé de Las Casas: Capellán, 554).

35 Gutiérrez, p. 325, fn. #85,which reads Carta a los dominicos, DII 11:214. The text goes on: ‘And, even to those who have none of their own at present, let Your Highness send them some, to be sold to them on credit over a stipulated term’ (214).

36 Gutiérrez, p. 325.

37 Ibid.

38 Ibid.

39 See Parish and Sullivan, Bartolomé de las Casas, the Only Way (1992), pp. 201–8, a section entitled ‘Addendum III: Las Casas’ Condemnation of African Slavery’ for Helen Rand Parish’s take on the issue of Las Casas and slavery; also cited is Isacio Pérez, Bartolomé de las Casas ¿contra los negros? (1991) which was used extensively by Gutavo...
Gutiérrez. In the Parish and Sullivan ‘Addendum’ the authors have included three passages from Las Casas History, including the key ones where he recommends the slave trade, then repents and condemns it.

40 Gutiérrez, p. 326; Obras, III, 429–93.
41 Obras, V, 2324. Translation by Parish and Sullivan, p. 203; also in Gutiérrez, p. 327.
42 Author’s translation. In the Obras, V, p. 2191, there is a long explanatory footnote (#5, on p. 2571) by the editors which is itself a mini-essay on the pros and cons of evidence for where Las Casas stood on slavery and the slave trade, and how those who are both his detractors and defenders have used the documentary evidence. And for the dio primero phrase, or ‘first gave that advice,’ see Gutiérrez, pp. 573–4, footnote #96, who explains the context quite convincingly in the following passage: ‘The expression dio primero has been curiously interpreted—against all historical and literal evidence—as meaning that Bartolomé had been the first to make the petition he now repoves. Surely it is obvious, especially in view of the context, that the declaration is part of his retraction; what he held in the past (primero) is not his view today.’
43 Gutiérrez, p. 327. There is a long history in itself of how Las Casas came to be labeled as the ‘first’ advocate of African slavery in the New World. Henry Raup Wagner, The Life and Times of Bartolomé de las Casas (Albuquerque, New Mexico: University of New Mexico Press, 1967), pp. 246–7, especially his footnotes 6 and 7, deals with the historiography of this well in his biography. Basically it was the Scottish historian, William Robertson, who introduced the notion in the English language in his History of America (1777), although earlier histories by French philosophers of the Enlightenment also had picked up the ‘fact’ from Spanish histories of the period.
44 Parish and Sullivan, p. 208; original Obras, III, p. 475, which is Book I of the original History.
45 Gutiérrez, p. 329.
46 See for example, Klein, p. 184; Egerton, et al., pp. 462–3.
47 For the traditional beginning of the abolitionist movement, see, for example, David Brion Davis, Slavery and Human Progress (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), pp. 129ff which dates the beginnings of the end of the slave trade to the second half of the 18th century.
48 Juan Freide and Benjamin Keen, editors and contributors, Bartolomé de las Casas in History: Toward an Understanding of the Man and His Work (DeKalb, Illinois: Northern Illinois University Press, 1971), especially pp. 20–2. See also, as Keen notes, the illuminating essay by Marcel Bataillon in an appendix to his essay in this volume entitled, ‘The Clérigo Casas, Colonist and Colonial Reformer,’ appendix, pp. 415–8.
49 Ibid., p. 21.

Bibliography

This is only a very small piece of the immense literature on Las Casas, and does not even include all the works on the subject at hand. A number not included here are in the notes of the article. We have included in this short bibliography only those that contributed directly to the research and writing of this essay, and only books or chapters in books.


Arias, SANTA, and Merediz, Eyda M., Approaches to Teaching the Writings of Bartolomé de las Casas (New York: Modern Language Association, 2008).


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