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The Impact of Faith: Bartolomé de Las Casas' Cultural Turn in his Interpretation of Aristotle as a Resource for Overcoming Slavery in the West Indies

1 Introduction

Consuetudo similis est naturae, ideo difficile est ipsam mutare.[1] Or, in English, '*Consuetudo* (habit or custom) is similar to nature, therefore it is difficult to change it.'

In the sixteenth century, the Dominican friar Bartolomé de Las Casas (1484–1566) refers to Aristotle's idea of *ethos*[2]. The Dominican friar thus invokes Aristotle's notion of *consuetudo,* according to which habits, customs, ways of thinking and behaving either do not change at all or only do so with great difficulty. Differences in habit or custom can give the impression that they are fixed in human nature. Yet Las Casas argues instead that these differences between people should be attributed to cultural divergence.

At the core of their human nature, people are equal. Nevertheless, Las Casas does not deny differences in the natural realm. Indeed, following Aristotle, he describes variations in custom or habit as reactions to diverse climatic and environmental conditions.[3] However, for Las Casas, such differences do not constitute a difference that would abolish human unity and equality. The Dominican essentially attributes the striking and provocative differences between peoples to the *consuetudines*, i.e., to people's different ways of life – to their respective *ethos*, as Aristotle says, or to culture, as we might say[4].

1 Bartolomé de Las Casas, *Apologética historia sumaria* II, c. 74, *Obras Completas* [abbr. OC], vol. 7, eds. Vidal Abril Castelló et al. (Madrid: Alianza Editorial): 648.

2 Aristotle, *Rhetoric* I, 11; 1370a: ὅμοιον γάρ τι τὸ ἔθος τῇ φύσει ('Similar is, in fact, [the] ethos to [the] nature.'); *Nicomachean Ethics* VII 10 (1152a): '[. . .] for habit [*éthos*] is easier than nature to change. Indeed, the reason why habit is also difficult to change is that it is like nature [. . .]' (trans. Terence Irwin, *Aristotle – Nicomachean Ethics: Translated with Introduction, Notes, and Glossary*, 2nd ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1999): 114.

3 Aristotle, *Politics* VII, 7 (1327b20); trans. Charles D.C. Reeve, *Aristotle – Politics: A New Translation with Introduction and Notes* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2017): 168. Cf. Bruno Rech, "Bartolomé de Las Casas und Aristoteles," *Jahrbuch für Geschichte Lateinamerikas* 22, no. 1 (1985): 39–68.

4 Neither does a differentiation between ἔθος / *éthos* (custom, habit) and ἦθος / *êthos* (way of thinking and acting, mentality, character, basic attitude) play a role for Las Casas, nor is he interested in the exact meaning of the word in the differentiation of pathos and logos in Aristotle. Cf. Eckart Schütrumpf, *Die Bedeutung des Wortes ēthos in der Poetik des Aristoteles* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 1970). In any

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In this chapter, I will explain how Las Casas uses the term *ethos*, which he borrows from Aristotle, and how he formulates arguments to dispute the legitimacy of the enslavement of indigenous people in the Americas. In speaking to his own context, he uses Aristotle to argue against the Aristotle of his time. Against the Aristotle of the Renaissance, he must refute that the indigenous West Indian is a 'natural slave' (*physei doulos*[5]) because he allegedly has little mental power and therefore needs the guidance of the intellectually superior Europeans.[6]

In doing so, Las Casas develops a cultural view of human nature to accommodate Jesus' commitment to charity, which in his understanding, fundamentally excludes slavery. Las Casas' Christianity thus has immediate socio-political consequences. However, since he was writing in an era shaped by the Renaissance, the theological foundations of his approach had to pass through the medium of Greek philosophy.

2 Las Casas' Conversion

Before discussing Las Casas' argument against natural slavery, I would like to take a brief look at the life of this impressive Dominican.[7] Born in Sevilla in 1484, he arrived in 1502 at the age of 18 on the island of La Española (Hispaniola, Hispañola), where today Haiti and the Dominican Republic are located. He lived as a colonist and landowner. In 1507 Las Casas entered the priesthood, but initially his calling did not significantly impact his attitude towards slavery. Indeed, he held natives as slaves in both Hispaniola and Cuba.

While in Hispaniola, he heard of the first protest of the Dominicans against the exploitation of the aborigines. In his *Historia de las Indias,* which he started writing in 1527, Las Casas transmitted the famous sermon of Antonio Montesino, who cried out in Advent 1511, 'You are all in mortal sin [. . .] Say, by what right do you hold those Indios in such cruel and terrible bondage? Are they not human beings?'[8] These words made him think.

Finally, while preparing a sermon for Pentecost, a word from the Old Testament specifically from Jesus Sirach (Ecclesiasticus), struck him. Las Casas read in the Vul-

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case, according to Schütrumpf, *Bedeutung des Wortes*: 13, it is correct to understand by ἦθος / *êthos* also a habit formed by habituation. According to Wolfgang Kluxen, "Art. 'Ethos'," *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche* 3 (1995): 939–40, under certain circumstances ethos can be understood as a synonym for culture.

5 Aristotle, *Politics*, trans. Charles David Chanel Reeve (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2017, kindle): 6. Kindle-Version, I 4, 1254a, p. 6.

6 Aristotle, *Politics* I, 3–5; 1253b–1254b: 5–7.

7 David Orique, "Bartolomé de Las Casas (1474–1566): A 'Brevísima' Biographical Sketch," *INTI, Revista de literatura hispánica* 85–86 (2017): 32–51.

8 Las Casas, *Historia de las Indias*, III, c. 4, OC, vol. 5 (Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 1994): 1762.

gata, 'A meagre diet is the very life of the poor, to deprive them of it is to commit murder, is a *homo sanguinis.* To take away a fellow man's livelihood is to kill him, to deprive an employee of his wages is to shed blood.'[9] Las Casas was driven to ask: was he such a *homo sanguinis, a man of blood*?

He had another life-altering experience when he was denied absolution in confession by a Dominican priest who belonged to Antonio Montesinos' community.[10] The Dominicans proclaimed in their sermons that they would not absolve anyone in confession who did not renounce his slaves and set them free. In confession Las Casas sought to justify his ownership of slaves. Nevertheless, the experience prompted great introspection. Eventually, it motivated him to give up his landed property, dismiss his slaves, and defend the *Indios*. He organized a religious resistance to the colonial politics of slavery and became an advocate for legislation to protect the indigenous population. Eventually, in 1522, he also joined the Dominican Order.

3 Valeat Aristoteles!

In a 1519 debate about the humanity of indigenous people, three years before Las Casas entered the Order, he dared to proclaim, *Valeat Aristoteles! A Christo enim qui est Veritas Aeterna habemus: Diliges proximum tuum sicut teipsum.*[11] 'Farewell, Aristotle! For from Christ, who is the eternal Truth, we have received: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."' The conclusion of this declaration is obvious: if, in the context of the conquest and colonization of the Americas, Aristotle's political philosophy can be used to justify the slavery of Native Americans, it contradicts the charity that Jesus commands. Incidentally, Las Casas also reminds his audience that the Greek philosopher was only a heathen and is consequently burning in the fires of hell.

Despite the gravitas with which he advocated for his position, Las Casas had to learn that an argument that followed only the principle of *sola scriptura* was insufficient. In his numerous writings which defend the Indians, Las Casas quotes Aristotle more frequently than any other interlocutor. As the U.S. historian of colonial Latin America, Lewis Hanke, remarks in his book *Aristotle and the American Indians*, during his studies in the Dominican Order, Las Casas was forced to recognize that Aristotle was the 'dominant philosopher in Renaissance times [. . .] whose ideas had prepared the philosophical substratum of Catholicism.'[12]

9 Las Casas, *Historia de las Indias*, III, c. 79, OC, vol. 5: 2081.

10 Las Casas, *Historia de las Indias*, III, c. 79, OC, vol. 5: 2082.

11 Las Casas, *Apología*, OC, vol. 9 (Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 1988): 100.

12 Lewis Hanke, *Aristotle and the American Indians. A Study in Race Prejudice in the Modern World* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1959): 17.

In his *Apologética historia sumaria,* which Las Casas started writing in 1527, he develops an *anthropology of faith*, as the editor of Las Casas' works in German, Mariano Delgado, explains.[13] On the one hand, this anthropology is based on the assumptions of the Christian faith and draws on the works of Augustine, Gregory the Great, and Thomas Aquinas. On the other hand, it draws on philosophical arguments and is distinguished by its rationality. Not only Aristotle but also other Greek and Roman Philosophers like Plato and, above all, Cicero, played a role in Las Casas' arguments.

4 Slaves by Nature

The reference point for all Christian discussions of slavery, whether in Europe or overseas, was Aristotle's treatise, *Politics,* and his thesis that there are people who are slaves by nature: φύσει δούλος/*phýsei doúlos*.[14] According to Aristotle, a particular set of indicators shows who is a natural slave. A natural slave, he says, has less mental power than a natural ruler. Those born to rule are those who know how to organize households and polities by virtue of their intellect and foresight. The slave, on the other hand, is to use his physical powers to serve the one who is born to rule.

Sixteenth-century Europeans somewhat predictably concluded that they belonged to the group of people with the capacity to rule and determine. In the indigenous peoples of the Americas, they saw a group of people with inferior mental capacities who, consequently, were slaves by nature and should serve the Europeans. Following Aristotle, they understood the peoples of the Americas as "uncivilized barbarians" who, due to their lack of mental power, were incapable of living a self-determined, free life in a polis.

To rebut these assertions, Las Casas shows that the indigenous populations of the Americas established civilized communities and consequently met the criteria Aristotle developed for identifying a functioning polis. Those particular aspects of indigenous life that seem "barbaric" and "inhuman" to Europeans, i.e., those points of argumentation used to undergird the notion that said ethnic groups possessed a "slave nature", Las Casas attributes to their culture rather than their human nature. However, Las Casas also defends their culture: in its otherness, he discovers a comprehensible *logos*, i.e., reason. Furthermore, he shows the Europeans that their own cultural and religious history is marked by many "abnormalities", which they now took as confirmation of the primitive human nature of indigenous people.

13 Mariano Delgado, "Einleitung: Las Casas als 'Anthropologe des Glaubens'," in *Bartolomé de Las Casas, Werkauswahl*, vol. 2, *Historische und ethnographische Schriften*, ed. Mariano Delgado (Paderborn: Schöningh, 1995): 327–42.

14 Aristotle, *Politics*, I 2, 1252a; p. 2; I 4, 1254a, p. 6.

5 Indigene Polis?

Las Casas agrees with Aristotle's conception of human beings, which asserts that all people by nature strive for the Good and for knowledge: *Omnes homines natura scire desiderant*.[15] To this Aristotelian concept, the Dominican adds that the pursuit of knowledge and truth also includes the desire for knowledge of God. For Las Casas, the universal human pursuit of knowledge also includes a practical component. Drawing on Aristotle's and its reception by Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274), he states that this practical knowledge involves the virtue of prudence, which is useful for shaping human life and ensuring that it succeeds by doing good in its entirety.[16] With prudence, human persons shape their lives as individuals, their private environment (family), and their societies. With understanding and prudence, humans also adopt and form the *ethos* that shapes their character and the realization of their nature.[17]

Las Casas focuses on proving that the indigenous peoples of the Americas also possess prudence, especially political prudence, with the help of which they organize their polity.[18] Political prudence is so crucial for Aristotelian anthropology because it describes the human person as a social being, a ζῷον πολιτικόν / *zôon politikón*. Human life, therefore, succeeds not privately but through the organized coexistence of free people in the polis.[19]

Despite the discovery of the advanced civilizations in Mexico and Peru, namely, the Aztecs and Incas, various actors denied that the aborigines of America were capable of such an organized coexistence of free people in a polis. The humanist and translator of Aristotle, Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda (1490–1573), for example, passes a harsh judgment in his treatise *Democrates secundus* (1545). Sepúlveda claims that the fact that, prior to the European conquest, the Aztecs lived in an organized polity only masks their barbaric savagery and slave nature. According to him, it further demonstrates that they are not bears or apes who lack any use of reason. Their artistry reveals the same lack of distinctively human cleverness as other animals, for even bees and spiders demonstrate a more artificial talent when constructing honeycombs and

15 Las Casas, *Apologética historia sumaria*, c. 40, OC, vol. 6: 465; Aristotle, *Metaphysics* (*Aristotle in 23 Volumes, Vols. 17, 18*), trans. Hugh Tredennick (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1933, 1989): I 1, 980 a 21.

16 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* (Rome: Editiones Paulinae, 1962): I–II q. 57, a. 3; 58: Virtues, so also prudence, are a 'habitus perficiens hominem ad bene operandum': Las Casas, *Apologética historia sumaria*, c. 40, OC, vol. 6: 466.

17 Las Casas, *Apologética historia sumaria*, c. 40–44, OC, vol. 6: 465–87.

18 Las Casas, *Apologética historia sumaria*, c. 45–46, OC, vol. 6: 488–92; OC, vol. 7: 523–27.

19 Aristotle, *Politics*, 1253 a 1; 4: '[. . .] it is evident that a city is among the things that exist by nature, that a human is by nature a political animal, and that anyone who is without a city, not by luck but by nature, is either a wretch or else better than human [. . .]'.

geometric webs.[20] Moreover, according to Sepúlveda, the degree to which even civilized indigenous people were mentally and physically inferior to Europeans was also evidenced by the fact that Cortes conquered Mexico with only a few men. Thus, Sepúlveda argues that the civilizations of the Aztecs are no exception, nor are those of the Maya and Incas; their peoples must be understood as slaves by nature.[21]

For Sepúlveda, above all, religion and cult prove the civilizational failure of the indigenous peoples. Idolatry and human sacrifice reveal the *impia religio*[22] of indigenous peoples. They do not obey the natural law that forbids human sacrifice. Through their blasphemy and human sacrifices, they deprive their community of God's blessing and objectively harm it. A just war to redress this grievance and save the human victims is, therefore, for Sepúlveda, imperative and inevitable.

6 Las Casas' Application of Aristotle's Criteria of a Polis

Las Casas opposed Sepúlveda's arguments in a public dispute in Valladolid in 1550/51. In his *Apologética historia sumaria,* he consults Aristotle's treatise Πολιτικά/*Politiká* (Politics) and its reception in Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologiae*.[23] In his treatise, Aristotle lists six indispensable fields of activity that characterize a polity organized with political prudence. Six estates are assigned to these fields of activity: farmers, artisans, warriors, providers of capital, priests, and judges. Farmers, for instance, secure sustenance for the polis' inhabitants. The defence of the community was the task of the warriors. The priests' task was to perform service to the Divine for the good of the polis. In other words, religion manifests political prudence because practised religion guarantees divine benevolence towards the polis.

In his *Apologética historia sumaria*, Las Casas focuses most of his attention on the institution of the priesthood.[24] This is, of course, no coincidence, nor is it due only to the predilections of a Catholic priest. The special attention he pays to the institution of the Greek priesthood and, more specifically, to sacrifice and lived religion, is due to the critiques of indigenous religion.

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20 Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda, *Democrates secundus. Zweiter Demokrates*, trans. and ed. Christian Schäfer (Stuttgart: frommann-holzboog, 2018): lib. 1, 10; 64–65.

21 Sepúlveda, *Democrates secundus*, lib. 1, 10; 64–65.

22 Sepúlveda, *Democrates secundus*, lib. 1, 11; 66.

23 Aristotle, *Politics*, VII, 8, 1328 a 25–1328 b 20; 169–70; Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* II-II, q. 47, a. 11–12; Las Casas, *Apologética historia sumaria*, c. 40, OC, vol. 6: 466–67.

24 Las Casas, *Apologética historia sumaria*, c. 71–74, OC, vol. 7: 633–50. Cf. the excellent explanations by Mariano Delgado, "III. Fünfter Teil des wohlgeordneten Gemeinwesens: Priesterschaft und Opfer," in *Las Casas, Werkauswahl*, vol. 2: 380–81, 388–89, 412–14, 431–32, 451–52.

Las Casas even adopts the demonological interpretation of indigenous religion, which traces its origin to demonic seduction; human sacrifice and ritual cannibalism are the devil's work. However, this traditional demonological interpretation of indigenous religion does not prevent Las Casas from discovering political wisdom in it. This is the extraordinary hermeneutical achievement of this sixteenth-century Dominican, which was possible because he understood the religion of the indigenous people to be a part of their *ethos*.

Incidentally, Las Casas understood the devil was not *only* at work in indigenous religions: the devil was even more present in the deeds of the conquerors and colonists because it was they who sacrificed the Indians as human victims to the god of gold and money, thus betraying their faith. So how does Las Casas discover reason and political prudence in polytheism, idolatry, and human sacrifice?

7 Sepúlveda's Position

For Sepúlveda, being human includes a natural knowledge of the one and only God, that is, a knowledge of the Divine based on human reason. The Apostle Paul affirms this in the first chapter of the Epistle to the Romans (1:20). And it is Aristotle who offers the philosophical proof of Apostle Paul's affirmation: in the twelfth book of his *Metaphysics*, he proves the existence of the Unmoved Mover, of the one God.[25] Due to Aristotle's knowledge of God,[26] Sepúlveda is convinced that the great philosopher does not burn in the fires of hell, as Las Casas suggests; rather, the Greek has found his place in heaven with the saints. Sepúlveda is persuaded that Aristotle and other Greek and Roman philosophers believed in Divine Providence and possessed a genuine knowledge of God as the Unmoved Mover. Nevertheless, those who believe in Providence also implicitly affirm all the means God provides to bring about people's salvation. The decisive means for the salvation of all people is Jesus, the Son of God. The conclusion is clear: whoever believes in the one God and his Providence also *implicitly* believes in Jesus Christ. Through this indirect faith in the Saviour, the philosophers of Greece and Rome are saved.[27]

Therefore, if only the indigenous peoples believed in God the way Aristotle did, Sepúlveda would advocate for their protection from any use of violence. As God-believing pagans, he would even appreciate them.[28] In this respect, Sepúlveda develops modern-style thinking around the salvation of non-Christians, which we do not

25 Sepúlveda, *Democrates secundus*, lib. 1, 12; 80–81.
26 Sepúlveda, *Democrates secundus*, lib. 1, 13; 84–85.
27 Sepúlveda, *Democrates secundus*, lib. 1, 14; 88–89.
28 Sepúlveda, *Democrates secundus*, lib. 1, 12; 76–77.

even find in the same form or to the same degree in the works of Las Casas.[29] Despite the apparent openness of Sepúlveda's soteriology, however, for him, the indigenous peoples remain lost because they have not become disciples of Aristotle nor turned towards the Unmoved Mover. Instead, they continue following their polytheistic religion, which is contemptuous of humanity.

8 Las Casas' Response

Las Casas objects that Aristotle is an exceptional case. Not everyone is an Aristotle, neither in Europe nor the New World. Moreover, the philosophers of Greece had not been dissuaded from their belief in the gods of Olympus. In ancient Greece, the habit, i.e., the *ethos* of religious polytheism, was stronger than Aristotelian philosophical monotheism.[30] This preference for polytheism in ancient Greece was *a fortiori* the typical case for all peoples of Europe. Las Casas proves this through detailed accounts of European cultural and religious history. Consequently, the indigenous and European *ethoi* are remarkably similar in content, though they are far from one another from a temporal perspective.

According to Las Casas, this factual correspondence proves that the polytheism and idolatry of indigenous religions do not betray a barbarically degenerate human nature; instead, they are ordinary and widespread forms in which human nature presents itself. In Las Casas' estimation, Europe's distance in time from polytheism only shows that overcoming idolatry takes a long time and cannot be taken for granted. Once established, the *ethos* that perpetuates polytheism as the norm resists change as if it were *second nature*.[31] On this point, Las Casas refers to the history of Israel as another striking example of the nature-like immutability of *ethos*. Although the one and only God revealed himself to Israel, even the people of God found it difficult to overcome polytheism; idolatry shaped the people of Israel so much through their sojourn in Egypt and the religious environment of the Promised Land that they, too, had to struggle to overcome it. It is not difficult to see that the way Las Casas portrays Israel's polytheism is not free of anti-Judaic connotations.[32]

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29 Mariano Delgado, "Glaubenstradition im Kontext. Voraussetzungen, Verdienste und Versäumnisse lascasianischer Missionstheologie," in Bartolomé de las Casas, *Werkauswahl*, vol. 1, *Missionstheologische Schriften*, ed. Mariano Delgado (Paderborn: Schöningh): 35–58, here 54–57.

30 Sepúlveda, *Democrates secundus*, lib. 1 c. 13; 82–85, interprets polytheism among the Greeks and Romans as a way of describing the different ways and forms in which the one God acts; the gods are personalized operational attributes of the one God. Las Casas obviously does not share this interpretation, but applies it in his interpretation of indigenous polytheism.

31 Las Casas, *Apologética historia sumaria*, c. 74, OC, vol. 7: 648: 'otra natura'; c. 163, OC, vol. 8: 1135: 'otra naturaleza'.

32 Cf. Delgado, *Las Casas, Werkauswahl*, vol. 2: 431–32.

9 Polytheism as Natural Knowledge of God

Las Casas does not stop at these comparisons in the history of religion and culture. He goes further when he claims that it is plausible that polytheism represents a primal form of the knowledge of God rather than its failure. To justify his assertion, he invokes the most important theologian of his order, Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274), who in turn takes his cue from Aristotle. Aquinas adopts Aristotle's epistemological thesis that all human knowledge begins with the senses and argues that the senses are also the starting point for knowledge of God. In other words, he asserts that the knowledge of God is based on all accessible observations of the material world, which provide the conclusion that God exists. In Aquinas' *Summa contra gentiles*, which Las Casas quotes, the order in (or of) nature (*ordo naturae*), which everyone can observe, is the starting point of reason. This order of nature leads to the conclusion that an *ordinator naturae,* an Ordainer of nature, exists. Aquinas excludes the possibility that nature gives itself its order or has developed by pure chance.[33]

Crucial for Las Casas is the following formulation, with which Thomas admits how unclear the knowledge of this *ordinator naturae* remains: *quis autem, vel qualis, vel si unus tantum est ordinator naturae, nondum statim ex hac communi consideratione habetur* – 'but who or how the Ordainer of the nature is and whether only one, one does not learn immediately from this general consideration'. Aquinas thus implies that it is not immediately recognizable whether the Ordainer of nature is only one agent. Las Casas takes up this formulation *vel si unus tantum* – 'or whether only one' and uses it to make an explicit claim; he writes 'or if one or if many are the ones who order the natural things',[34] remains an open question at the outset.

Building upon the authority of medieval theology, Las Casas thus succeeds in supporting his claim that it is plausible for one to recognize the *ordinator naturae* as a polytheistic reality, at least initially. He agrees with Aquinas' general consideration that the knowledge of God about the Ordainer of nature, which is accessible to all human beings, is, first, a *confusa Dei cognitio*, that is, a vague cognition. Even the natural *desiderium* for truth and happiness, which Aquinas attributes to every human being, does not lead with certainty to a clear knowledge of God, because for many the highest happiness lies elsewhere, for example in pleasure.[35]

With an ironic twist, Las Casas cites Aristotle, who ascends to the knowledge of the One Unmoved Mover, only in the twelfth book of his *Metaphysics, i.e.,* only after

33 Las Casas, *Apologética historia sumaria*, c. 71, OC, vol. 7: 634–35; Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra gentiles*. *Pars prima tomi tertii, I–LXXXIII*, eds. Karl Allgaier and Leo Gerken (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1990): III, c. 38; 138–39.

34 Las Casas, *Apologética historia sumaria*, c. 71, OC, vol. 7: 634: 'quién sea o cuál sea, o si uno o si muchos sean los que ordenan las cosas naturales no lo pueden luego cognoscer por sólo este universal y confuso cognoscimiento.'

35 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* I, q. 2 a. 1 ad 1.

protracted intellectual toil.[36] Therefore, how can one, as Sepúlveda does, demand a monotheistic creed from philosophically untrained indigenous peoples?

Las Casas quotes at length the versatile Roman orator, politician, and philosopher Cicero (106– 43 B.C.), who states in his treatise *De natura deorum* that all peoples of the earth have come to the conviction that there are gods.[37] In the fact that all peoples had come to a knowledge of gods or divine powers, Cicero recognizes a proof of God *e consensu gentium*. However, this *consensus* of the peoples about the existence of gods and divine powers remains, according to Las Casas, open regarding the conception and identity of the gods: as to which or how many gods there are, philosophers have manifold, different, and discordant ideas.[38]

Consequently, the indigenous peoples of the Americas, in their polytheistic religions, likewise possess a vague knowledge of God, which as such, is not false but imperfect, as measured by Aristotle and monotheistic religions. Las Casas' argument here represents a tremendous interpretive step.

The polytheism of the religion and culture (*ethos*) of indigenous peoples in no way indicates that they have a poorly endowed human nature that fails to know God. Rather, their religion and culture manifest an imperfect knowledge of the Divine. Therefore, indigenous polytheism must be considered a sure indicator of the intellectual capacity of humanity to know the Divine and thus also of political prudence. This political wisdom determines the religious cult of the indigenous peoples, namely their concern for the welfare of their community.

10 Can the Indigenous People be Saved Without Baptism?

From the standpoint of Christianity, Las Casas apparently understands this positive interpretation of indigenous religion as theological truth. He asserts that all peoples sacrificed to what they believed to be God, thereby performing true worship that is, in effect, directed towards the one and true God. Indeed, for him, it is only on this One and True God that the welfare of the polity can actually depend.[39]

36 Las Casas, *Apologética historia sumaria*, c. 71, OC, vol. 7: 635.

37 Las Casas, *Apologética historia sumaria*, c. 71, OC, vol. 7: 636.

38 Las Casas, *Apologética historia sumaria*, c. 71, OC, vol. 7: 636: 'pero cuáles eran o cuántos los dioses varias y diversas y no conformes son las opiniones de los philósophos.'

39 Las Casas, *Apologética historia sumaria*, c. 72, OC, vol. 7: 642: 'a Dios como causa primaria y universal de toda criatura y autor de todos los bienes, pero nunca a los hombres, se ofreció jamás sacrificio, porque ninguna cosa tan propriamente [sic] a Dios compete como es el sacrificio, y esto ninguna nación jamás lo ignoró y así ninguno jamás estimó que sacrificio se debía ofrecer sino a aquel que tenía por Dios o fingía tener por Dios.'

All this means that Las Casas is on the verge of saying that the religions of the Indigenous Americans could become the medium through which they receive the grace of Christ. However, he does not explicitly state the possibility of salvation for the unbaptized, which Sepúlveda took for granted in the case of the monotheistic philosophers of antiquity. In the School of Salamanca, the question was discussed by Juan Luis Vives, Francisco de Vitoria, and Domingo de Soto. They considered whether or not people born after Christ's appearance were *implicitly* aligned with God in their orientation toward the Good[40] and whether or not this opened a chance of salvation for them (*facienti quod in se est, Deus non denegat gratiam*). Las Casas did not participate in these discussions.[41] He quotes the principle *facienti quod in se est . . .*, but, as Mariano Delgado explains, Las Casas does not affirm the thesis of the School of Salamanca that a *fides implicita* could save the indigenous peoples.[42]

In the place of a theory of *fides implicita*, Las Casas develops a provocative Christology and "iconography" according to which Christ identifies himself with the oppressed, beaten, and murdered Indians by giving his life for them ("for whom Christ gave his life").[43] This "Christological iconography" is manifested in the words Las Casas wrote when leaving for a colony in the territory of present-day Venezuela, which was directed only by religious brothers. He writes: 'I leave in the West Indies Jesus Christ our God, scourged and afflicted, slapped and crucified, not once but thousands of times, inasmuch as the Spaniards are putting down and destroying the people there.'[44]

One could interpret Las Casas' statement about the presence of the suffering Christ in the suffering Indios as an indication of a hope for a salvific presence of Christ in the maltreated Natives.

In any case, Las Casas was interested in defending the living aborigines. The demonstration of their political prudence served this goal, but it also buttressed his radical eschatology. Las Casas was wont to say that nobody should die 'before the time'.[45] Everyone should have enough time to hear the proclamation of the Christian faith and to be baptized. Therefore, the indigenous people must be given the necessary time to

40 Cf. Francisco de Vitoria: "De eo, ad quod tenetur homo, cum primum venit ad usum rationis," in *Francisco de Vitoria, Vorlesungen II (Relectiones)*, eds. Ulrich Horst, Heinz-Gerhard Justenhoven, and Joachim Stüben (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1997): 92–187, here 148; Thomas F. O'Meara, "The School of Thomism at Salamanca and the Presence of Grace in the Americas," in *Angelicum* 71 (1994): 321–70.

41 Delgado, "Glaubenstradition im Kontext," in *Las Casas, Werkausgabe*, vol. 2: 52–57.

42 Mariano Delgado, "Glaubenstradition im Kontext," in *Las Casas, Werkausgabe*, vol. 2: 55–56.

43 Las Casas, *Apología*, 252v, OC, vol. 9: 664: 'Indi fratres nostri sunt, pro quibus Christus impendit anima sua.'

44 Las Casas, *Historia de las Indias* III, c. 138, OC, vol. 5: 2366: 'Yo dexo en las Indias a Jesucristo, nuestro Dios, azotándolo y afligiéndolo y abofeteándolo y crucificándolo, no una sino millares veces, cuanto es de parte de los españoles que asuelan y destruyen aquellas gentes.' Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Dios o el oro en las Indias. Siglo XVI* (Salamanca: Ediciones Sígueme, 1989): 156.

45 Las Casas, OC, vol. 5: 2366: 'Les quitan la vida antes del tiempo.'

authentically learn about the Christian faith: the use of violence and forced baptism prevent this. In his work *De unico vacationis modo omnium gentium ad veram religionem*, he claims to show that only with comprehensible arguments can indigenous people be led to the knowledge of the true God.[46] This kind of mission requires wisdom and prudence. Thus, since baptism alone opens the door of heaven and because the reception of baptism presupposes explicit faith, the Spaniards are called upon to change their behaviour. Unless they do so, Las Casas is convinced, the eternal fate of these baptized Christians will be more abysmal than that of the unbaptized indigenous people.[47]

Las Casas' eschatology, which seems rigorous by today's standards, must be viewed through the lens of its parenetic function. As is well known, Jesus also speaks of hellfire, but does not give precise descriptions of the afterlife or announce the number of the redeemed. It is traditionally believed that he chose to remain silent on these questions to make people aware of their responsibility, i.e., to shake them awake. Las Casas similarly expresses himself: he wants to make the Spaniards aware of their responsibility for their eternal destiny in order to bring about a change in their behaviour toward indigenous people. Explicit reflection on the eternal salvation of the unbaptized indigenous population would have weakened this paraenesis.

11 European and Indigenous Gods

The extent to which indigenous religions were characterized by reason and prudence is demonstrated by Las Casas through another consideration. He not only compares the polytheistic beliefs native to Europe with those of the Americas to make it comprehensible that both are indications of human reason and political prudence. He also

46 Las Casas, *De unico vocationis modo*, c. 5 § 1, OC, vol. 2: 17: 'Unus et idem modus et solus docendi homines veram religionem fuit per divinam Providentiam institutus in toto orbe atque in omni tempore, scilicet, intellectus rationibus persuasivus et voluntatis suaviter allectivus vel exhortativus.'

47 Las Casas cites the Second Synod of Braga in Portugal (celebrated in 572) to illustrate this: 'If some went out of this life without the grace of baptism, it is necessary that an account of their perdition be asked of those who by their violence instilled fear in them, causing them to subtract themselves from the grace of baptism.' Las Casas, *De unico vocationis modo*, c. 6, § 6, OC, vol. 2: 453: '"Qui [. . .] si sine gratia baptismi de hac vita recesserint, necesse est ut ab illis eorum perditio requiratur, quorum spolia pertimescentes, a baptismi gratia se retraxerunt." Para que la pobreza y la falta de ofrendas no impidan el bautismo, y para que las donaciones de los pobres no sean obligadas, el Sínodo de Braga declara lo que se recoge en la colección de derecho canónico en el Decretum Gratiani C. 1, q. 1. C. 103: "Nam multi pauperes, hoc timentes, filios suos a baptismo retrahunt, qui forte, dum differuntur, si sine gratia baptismi de hac vita recesserint, necesse est, ut ab illis eorum perditio requiratur, quorum spolia pertimescentes a baptismi gratia se subtraxerunt."' Cf. José Orlandis and Domingo Ramos-Lisson, *Die Synoden auf der Iberischen Halbinsel bis zum Einbruch des Islam (711)* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 1981): 90; Delgado, *Las Casas, Werkauswahl*, vol. 1, 292, footnote 38.

ventures to make comparisons between the moral qualities of the gods on the two sides of the Atlantic. Unsurprisingly, he concludes that the indigenous peoples worship morally superior gods than did the pre-Christian Europeans.[48] The European gods were no strangers to human vice: drunkenness, jealousy, adultery, hatred, and murder – they practised all of them in abundance. The Greeks and Romans, so highly esteemed by Sepúlveda, are given even lower scores than their deities: who cultivates the intoxicating wine cult of Bacchus makes a fool of himself.[49] In contrast, the Andean myth of Viracocha, the creator of all reality, appears to Las Casas to be more rational.[50]

12 The Rationality of Human Sacrifices

After establishing the cultural naturalness of polytheism, Las Casas addresses the practice of human sacrifices, which was considered the epitome of religious perversion and proof of the barbarically underdeveloped humanity of the indigenous peoples of the Americas.[51] In contrast to these interpretations, Las Casas identifies a logic in the practice of human sacrifice found in many cultures and religions and is part of the respective cultural *ethos*. He invokes Aristotle, who explains in the *Nicomachean Ethics* that humans must honor the gods to the best of their ability.[52] However, it is impossible even to give sufficient honor to one's own parents because one owes them so much.[53] Based on this reference, Las Casas concludes that the offerings with which one seeks to honor the gods are always insufficient. People, therefore, logically offer their most valuable possessions to deities. The most valuable thing one can offer is undoubtedly human life, even to the extreme of offering the life of one's own chil-

48 Las Casas, *Apologética historia sumaria*, c. 127, OC, vol. 7: 896: '[. . .] en la elección de los dioses tuvieron más razón y discreción y honestidad que las más de todas cuantas naciones idólatras antiguamente hubo, bárbaros, griegos y romanos [. . .]'.

49 Las Casas, *Apologética historia sumaria*, c. 78, OC, vol. 7: 665–68.

50 Las Casas, *Apologética historia sumaria*, c. 121, OC, vol. 7: 874–77; c. 126, OC, vol. 7: 892: Las Casas is also able to make sense of the idea that Viracocha brought forth a son, who, however, turned away from his divine father and interspersed negative elements into the creation of man: this myth refers to the sin of the angels who seduce man.

51 A very good orientation to the topic of human sacrifice and its controversial evaluation is given by Delgado in *Las Casas, Werkausgabe*, vol. 2: 412–14.

52 Las Casas, *Apologética historia sumaria*, c. 143, OC, vol. 7: 968–67; c. 183, OC, vol. 8: 1215.

53 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, VIII, 16; 1163b: 'For friendship seeks what is possible, not what accords with worth, since that is impossible in some cases, as it is with honor to gods and parents. For no one could ever make a return in accord with their worth, but someone who attends to them as far as he is able seems to be a decent person.' IX, 1; 1164b: 'For its worth is not measured by money, and no equivalent honor can be paid; but it is enough, presumably, to do what we can, as we do toward gods and parents.'

dren.[54] That is why a wide variety of cultures have practised human sacrifice, even in Europe. The Greeks on Rhodes are said to have sacrificed humans to Saturn. Human sacrifices were also offered to Zeus and Diana.[55] The Carthaginians sacrificed children.[56] Human sacrifices among the indigenous peoples of the New World are thus to be placed in the context of a broader cultural history of humankind. Human sacrifice belongs to the cultural *ethos* and is as culturally natural as the natural knowledge of God in the form of polytheism. The presence of human sacrifice in a culture, therefore, proves its political prudence and, thus, the full humanity of those involved.

In the context of valuing human sacrifice, Las Casas provokes his Spanish audience with another consideration: he recommends to his countrymen the indigenous *ethos* expressed in the willingness to offer human sacrifice. If one adopts this virtue of willingness, he says, one can also live the Christian religion authentically.[57] For Las Casas, the *despicable* Indios thus became shining examples of genuine religiosity.

Las Casas' positive evaluation of indigenous polytheism and human sacrifice does not imply an endorsement of the phenomena. As a Catholic, he naturally welcomes the overcoming of polytheism and the practice of human sacrifice. The *ethos* – the culture has changed in this regard, although Las Casas, with Aristotle, sees it as virtually unchanging. With his deployment of the concept of the persistence of *ethos*, Las Casas wants, above all, to gain time – time for the advent of the cultural change that is also destined to take place in the New World. His confident hope in the possibility of cultural change does not rely primarily on the mission of the Church. Rather he relies on an intrinsic dynamic for change that is present within the indigenous culture itself.

Las Casas even cites an example from Aztec culture as an alternative to the practice of human sacrifice. The Dominican invokes the worship of the deity Quetzalcóatl among the Toltecs, Aztecs, and Maya, as well as the Toltec priest-king of the same name. Las Casas notes that Quetzalcóatl wanted to know nothing of wars and human sacrifices.[58] Just as Europeans overcame the practice of human sacrifice, Las Casas predicts the same for indigenous cultures. It is, therefore, essential that Europeans do not destroy this culture – this *ethos* – but rely on its innate dynamism: they must promote, support, and partner with it in a shared mission.

54 Las Casas, *Apologética historia sumaria*, c. 161, OC, vol. 8: 1123, c. 183, OC, vol. 8: 1217.
55 Las Casas, *Apologética historia sumaria*, c. 161, OC, vol. 8: 1125.
56 Las Casas, *Apologética historia sumaria*, c. 161, OC, vol. 8: 1125.
57 Las Casas, *Apologética historia sumaria*, c. 191, OC, vol. 8: 1255–56.
58 Las Casas, *Apologética historia sumaria*, c. 127, OC, vol. 7: 898.

13 Conclusion

Las Casas was fundamentally a missionary, convinced of the truth of Christianity. He was neither an ethnologist nor a religious scholar nor did he study or describe indigenous cultures and religions of the "New World" from a "neutral point of view". He wanted to lead indigenous peoples to Christ, who revealed not only God but also the true image of the human person. From this image of humans in Christ, Las Casas derived his understanding of the determination of human nature, its equality and unity in Adam and before God. Due to his historical context, he had to begin by questioning the inequality asserted by Aristotle as a natural distinction between rulers and "slaves by nature". Using and freely adapting Aristotle's concept of *ethos*, Las Casas ascribes differences and inequalities between people on both sides of the Atlantic to the formative force of different cultures. By comparing European and indigenous religions, the differences are shown to exist only in time and not in substance. Polytheism, idolatry, and human sacrifice are understood as normal, rationally comprehensible phenomena. Las Casas describes the polytheism of indigenous religion as the first form of natural knowledge of God, which can be justified philosophically with the help of Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas. The Dominican thus succeeds in making the possibility of further developments within a given *ethos* comprehensible. By applying the borrowed concept of *ethos* to the cultures and religions of the Americas, Las Casas initiates a cultural turn in understanding the characteristics of a polity. By applying Aristotelian criteria, he attributes political prudence and, thus, full humanity to indigenous peoples. Motivated and committed by Jesus' commandment to love one's neighbor, Bartolomé de Las Casas uses Aristotle's concept of *ethos* to argue against Aristotle's thesis of the slave by nature. Who would have thought that in this way, the Dominican could turn the Greek philosopher into a *defensor de los Indios*?

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