


SCRIPTURE'S IMPACT ON BARTOLOMÉ DE LAS CASAS' THEOLOGY: LESSONS FOR THE INTERPRETATION OF KEY JOHANNINE THEMES

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Abstract: An exploration of the impact of Scripture in the theological transformation of Bartolomé de las Casas has important implications for the articulation of biblical theology from a distinctive Latin American perspective. Since the Gospel of John has been largely neglected in classic Latin American theology, this article offers a reading of three prominent Johannine topics through the lens of de las Casas' own encounter with Scripture. His interpretation of Scripture can be used heuristically in reading the ideas of conversion, community, and Christology in the Gospel of John.

Keywords: Bartolomé de las Casas. Christology. Community. Conversion. Gospel of John.

El impacto de la Biblia en la teología de Bartolomé de las Casas: Algunas lecciones para la interpretación de la teología joánica

Resumen: El estudio del impacto de la Biblia en la teología de Bartolomé de las Casas tiene importantes implicaciones para la articulación de teología bíblica desde una perspectiva latinoamericana. Puesto que tradicionalmente el evangelio de Juan no ha ocupado un lugar prominente en la teología latinoamericana, el presente artículo ofrece una lectura de tres temas destacados en la teología joánica utilizando como modelo el encuentro de Bartolomé de las Casas con las Escrituras a la luz de sus particulares circunstancias históricas.

Palabras clave: Bartolomé de las Casas. Comunidad. Cristología. Conversión. Evangelio de Juan.

1. Introduction

Two years before Martin Luther's criticism of the sale of indulgences in Germany, Bartolomé de las Casas protested in Spain against oppression of indigenous people in the new world (1515)¹. Two revolutions were taking place almost simultaneously, and the Bible was at the center of both of them.

Many of those who arrived in the new world during the sixteenth century used Scripture in several ways. Clergy mainly used the Bible for indoctrination, interpreting the Old Testament and the New Testament through Church tradition such as Catechisms. Others used it as an almost magic artifact that protected them against adversity. Bartolomé de las Casas recounts an episode about some Spanish sailors in the middle of a storm at sea. The tempestuous wind was so strong that they thought they were going to die. As a way of seeking divine protection, they recited the Gospel of John and, suddenly, they escaped from the storm (*O.E.* 2.24.63b)².

Yet others used Scripture to interpret the events surrounding their encounter with what they called the new world³. On the one hand, Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda used Johannine passages to defend the idea that the Church had authority to rule violently over the whole world⁴, and Juan

¹ Throughout this article, I will use terminology commonly used in scholarly publications about sixteenth century literature. The "new world" refers to the Europeans' perception that they "discovered" a new land and a new people in the sixteenth century. I use "Spaniards" to identify those explorers who eventually settled in the "new world". The *encomendero* is a grantee of the *encomienda*. The *encomienda* was a reward of land and labor to those involved in the conquest of the new world.

² References to Bartolomé de las Casas' works are mainly taken from PÉREZ DE TUDELA and LÓPEZ OTO, *Obras Escogidas de Fray Bartolomé de las Casas* = *O.E.* I refer to the volume, followed by chapter number, and page number. In this case, *O.E.* 2.24.63b indicates the second volume, chapter 24, the second column (b) in page 63.

³ STAM, "Exégesis bíblica en la teología de los conquistadores", 267; MACKAY, *El otro Cristo español, Un estudio de la historia espiritual de España e Hispanoamérica*, 52.

⁴ "Christ received from God the right to shepherd, rule, and govern his sheep in all the world, because he is called shepherd (John 10), as it is customary in Sacred Scripture to call shepherds to princes and kings" (*O.E.* 5.312b). See also GINÉS DE SEPÚLVEDA, *Tratado de las justas causas de la guerra contra los indios*. Unless otherwise indicated, translations from Spanish to English are my own.

Suárez de Peralta used Matthew 22 (and Luke 14) to legitimize the use of coercion in the evangelization of those who inhabited the newly discovered lands⁵. These examples explain why Spaniards renamed some places in the new world using Christian names such as El Salvador (*The Savior*) or La Evangelista (*The Evangelist*)⁶. On the other hand, Frair Luis de León read the Old Testament from an eschatological perspective. He used prophetic texts such as Isaiah 17 and even poetic sections from texts such as Song of Songs in order to interpret the interactions between the conquerors and those they wanted to conquer⁷.

Bartolomé de las Casas offers us a distinctive way of reading Scriptures from within this particular historical context. The Bible becomes for him a resource in his larger program of social reform. It deeply affected his mission, spirituality, and theology. He too read the Old Testament and the New Testament in light of his historical context. However, instead of using it to justify previously conceived ideas about “justice”, “mission”, and “authority”, he allowed Scripture to shape his worldview.

In this article, I will focus on some specific texts where his reading of the Bible decisively influenced his life and mission⁸. I pay particular attention to his thoughts on conversion, community, and Christology. I have selected these topics not only because they figure prominently in his writings, but also because they were deeply relevant to his context and they remain relevant to the church in Latin America. I will proceed, first, by observing how his encounter with the Bible helped him propose new ideas in his particular historical context. Since he was not a Bible scholar in the modern sense of the word, his use of Scripture is often allusive. He does not provide a detailed exegesis of Biblical texts. Instead, he informs his interpretation of his historical context taking into account general ideas from the Bible⁹. Second, I read the Gospel of John keeping in mind de las Casas’ insights as hermeneutically heuristic. Although de las Casas does not offer

⁵ SUÁREZ DE PERALTA, *Tratado del descubrimiento de las Yndias y su conquista*, 48. See also PRIEN, *La historia del cristianismo en América Latina*, 163.

⁶ SALEM, *La Biblia en el pensamiento hispanoamericano*, 19.

⁷ DE LEÓN, *Escritos sobre América*, trans. Andrés Moreno Mengíbar and Juan Martos Fernández, 39, 40, 54, 56.

⁸ For an analysis of the impact of the Bible in other colonial texts, see MAURA, “La Biblia en los cronistas de Indias (Nueva España)”, in *La Biblia en la literatura hispanoamericana*, 37-50.

⁹ Also, his “Scripture” includes what Protestant theology customary calls “deuterocanonical books”.

close readings of the Gospel of John, I propose that his overall use of Scripture can help us enhance our appreciation of prominent Johannine themes.

2. Conversion

Bartolomé de las Casas was born in Seville, Spain in 1484. At age eighteen, he came to the newly “discovered” lands, and five years later he was ordained as a priest in Rome. As an *encomendero*, he owned indigenous people who worked for him in the gold mines. Although he claims he treated them kindly and fed them, he acknowledged that he neglected teaching them the Christian faith. He was also a horrified eyewitness of a massacre of Cuban natives by invading Spaniards¹⁰. However, in 1514, he read the Septuagint (Sirach 34), and decided to give up his privileges as an *encomendero* in order to devote himself to his newly-found mission of defending indigenous people. Eight years later, he became a Dominican. As a member of the Dominican Order, he had some time to write. He started his *History of the Indies* in 1527, composed *De unico vocationis modo* in 1534, and concluded his famous *The Devastation of the Indies, A Brief Account* in 1542. One year later (1543) he was named bishop of Chiapas. The authority attached to this position allowed him to engage in official debates with those defending the use of violence in the evangelization of indigenous people such as Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda (1551). After a fruitful life defending indigenous people in Spain and in the new world with his pen and his preaching, de las Casas died in Madrid at age eighty-two.

The text that was at the center of Bartolomé de las Casas’ “conversion” is Sirach 34¹¹. In April 1514 he read this text in preparation to preach to Spaniards who came to the new world to establish new villages¹². The passage immediately challenged his current privileges as an *encomendero*,

¹⁰ WAGNER, *The Life and Writings of Bartolomé de las Casas*, with the collaboration of Helen Rand Parish, 6. Dramatic descriptions of slavery are found in DE LAS CASAS, *The Devastation of the Indies, A Brief Account*.

¹¹ DUSSEL, *Desintegración de la cristiandad colonial y liberación, Perspectiva latinoamericana*, 141. Christian theology in Spain at the beginning of the sixteenth century was heavily influenced by Rabbinic exegesis, according to DEIROS, *Historia del Cristianismo en América Latina*, 246, and CANCLINI, *Colón y la Biblia*, 25.

¹² I use the most recent Spanish edition of the LXX in my consideration of those passages quoted or referred to by Bartolomé de las Casas, i.e. FERNÁNDEZ MARCOS and SPOTTORNO DÍAZ-CARO (eds.), *La Biblia Griega, Septuaginta*. For English translations of the LXX, I use PIETERSMA and WRIGHT (eds.), *A New English Translation of the Septuagint and the Other Greek Translations Traditionally Included under that Title*.

When one sacrifices from someone unjust, it is a blameworthy offering,
and the gifts of lawless persons are not for approval.

The Most High is not pleased with the offerings of impious persons,
nor by a multitude of sacrifices does he forgive sins.

One who slaughters a son in front of his father
is he who brings a sacrifice from the property of the needy

Bread is life for the poor when they are destitute;
he who withholds it is a person of blood

One who murders his fellow is he who takes away a way of living,
and one who pours out blood is he who deprives the wages of a worker.

By his own admission, he read these verses in light of the situation of the indigenous people working for him in the Indies and realized that he was living in darkness; he was blind to the fact that he had become a tyrant who treated people unfairly¹³. Thus, Bartolomé de las Casas embraced the mission of “preaching against injustice in order to bring light to those dominated by the darkness of ignorance” (*O.E.* 2.79.357b, 358a)¹⁴. His audience comprised people unable to realize the injustice behind their actions against indigenous people, “such was and still is their blindness” (*O.E.* 2.79.357b, 358a)¹⁵. He then proceeded to preach sermons against the oppression of indigenous people and to highlight their deplorable condition¹⁶. His words were later followed by his decision to give up his “right” to possess slaves. His fellow Spaniards were in shock, “Everyone was surprised, even astonished, to hear this, and some walked away remorseful while others thought they had been dreaming – the idea of sinning because one used Indians was as incredible as saying man could not use domestic animals” (*O.E.* 2.79.358b)¹⁷.

Through his reading of Sirach 34, Bartolomé de las Casas understood an important dimension of the fatherhood of God. He grasped, perhaps for the very first time, that oppressing another human being is an offence to God himself. It is like slaughtering a son in front of his father (Sirach 34,24).

¹³ Several times in his writings, de las Casas uses the motif of blindness to portray the oppression of indigenous people (DE LAS CASAS, *Devastation*, 65).

¹⁴ DE LAS CASAS, *History of the Indies*, 210.

¹⁵ *Ib.*, *History*, 210. For de las Casas, those who exploited people are to be regarded as “insensitive men”. He even claims that ambition and greed was a manifestation of a degenerated humanity (e.g. DE LAS CASAS, *Devastation*, 69).

¹⁶ *O.E.* 2.79.358b.

¹⁷ DE LAS CASAS, *History*, 211.

Elsewhere¹⁸, de las Casas recounts the exploration of Africa by the Portuguese. On their return to Europe, these explorers brought Africans to be sold as slaves and gave one of them to the church in “la villa de Lagos” as an offering to God. Bartolomé de las Casas criticizes this “offering” by referring to Sirach 34,21-23. For de las Casas, the actions of the Portuguese revealed their ignorance of Scripture and their faulty theology, “they wanted to offer gifts to God from the killing of innocent people, as if God were a violent and wicked tyrant”¹⁹. Bartolomé de las Casas also highlights the contradiction of their actions. He portrays these people as attempting to express reverence to God by taking one of his children and slaughtering that child before his very eyes²⁰.

He also realized that the work of the poor upheld his lifestyle as a cleric allowing him to devote time to pursuits such as prayer. He was bringing sacrifices to God “from the property of the needy” (Sirach 34,24). Since Sirach indicates that “the Most High is not pleased with the offerings of impious persons” (34,23), de las Casas realized that his current life was at best worthless and at worst an offence to God himself. The text he quotes from Sirach, then, depicted not only his context but his own life. He became aware that far from being a person at God’s service, he was “a person of blood”, “a murderer”, “one who pours out blood” (34,25-27)²¹. As Gustavo Gutiérrez has observed, “Las Casas allows himself to be challenged by the biblical passage, which calls in question his position in the nascent colonial system”²².

Bartolomé de las Casas’ theology was deeply affected by his reading of Sirach 34. Although he regarded himself as a Christian because he was a member of the Roman Catholic Church, he realized that his ideas about God were closely related to the way he was treating God’s creation, i.e. indigenous people. This led him to question whether his perception of reality was correct eventually deciding that it was faulty. He thought that having slaves working for him and remaining silent when Spaniards oppressed and killed them was, if not contradictory, at least not acceptable to his Christian faith. Sirach, helped him realized that he was in darkness, he was blind. His conversion needed to include a new vision of reality, a new way of relating to people from other ethnicities.

¹⁸ O.E. 1.24.92-93.

¹⁹ O.E. 1.24.92b.

²⁰ GUTIÉRREZ, *Las Casas, In Search of the Poor of Jesus Christ*, 49.

²¹ For other uses of Sirach 34 in Bartolomé de las Casas, see GUTIÉRREZ, *Las Casas*, 49-51.

²² GUTIÉRREZ, *Las Casas*, 47.

Bartolomé de las Casas challenges readers of the Gospel of John to see beyond the popular interpretations of the “conversion” motif in this Gospel which argue that it consists of a sort of spiritual awareness that allows an individual to establish a mystical relationship with God²³. Although the specific word “conversion” is absent from the Gospel of John, the idea of believing in Jesus in order to experience a novel relationship with God is prominent in this text (e.g. John 3.3)²⁴.

Without diminishing the importance of spiritual “conversion” in Christian life, the Gospel of John seems to enlighten the reader in a broader way. Jesus, as the light who comes from God (1,9), reveals the current broken state of the world and signals the existence of a radically different way of living (1,12). The Gospel of John insists that this world is dominated by darkness, falsehood, evil, disbelief, and death (John 1,5; 3,18-19; 12,46). Those living in this world have a faulty perception of their own reality because they too, as their world, are dominated by darkness (8,12). Being enlightened by Jesus’ life means that his followers grasp their new status in relationship to God but also realize their position and responsibility *vis-à-vis* the world (20,22-23).

Readers of the Gospel of John are confronted with a new reality characterized by light, truthfulness, love, belief, and life (9,5; 13,34; 14,6). This new reality should produce a “conversion” in the way they relate to the world. The word “conversion” here refers to a new reality made possible through belief in Jesus. In the Gospel of John, an encounter with the Word made flesh should produce a new relationship between the believer and creation (20,22-23). The disciples live in this world, but their life is shaped by their new reality acquired through Jesus (John 17,15-21). Although the Gospel of John does not offer examples of oppression as dramatic as those found in Bartolomé de las Casas’ accounts (cf. James 5,1-6), it has the potential to provide a conceptual framework to interpret, challenge, and change the reader’s own personal and social reality²⁵.

²³ LINCOLN, *Truth on Trial, The Lawsuit Motif in the Fourth Gospel*, 262, finds this reading of the Gospel of John in BULTMANN, *Theology of the New Testament*, 2,11-14. The identification of the Gospel of John as “spiritual” is found in Clement of Alexandria as preserved in Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* 6.14.7.

²⁴ TAM, *Apprehension of Jesus in the Gospel of John*. The word “conversion” is found in e.g. Mark 1,4. The absence of this noun in the Gospel of John is not surprising. John usually uses language that is not found in the Synoptic Gospels.

²⁵ See RENSBERGER, “The Politics of John: The Trial of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel”, 394-411; CARTER, *John and Empire: Initial Explorations*; LABAHN, “Heiland der Welt”,

3. Community

Bartolomé de las Casas writes *Tract to prove the sovereign empire and universal dominion by which the kings of Castile and Leon hold the West Indies* (1552)²⁶ fifty years after his first encounter with the harsh realities indigenous people were suffering²⁷. His purpose was to defend a peaceful evangelization arguing that the Church received from Jesus universal authority. He uses a number of Biblical references from the Old Testament, Paul, and Revelation. For example, he alludes to the idea of community found in Revelation 7 and Paul's thoughts about the Church as the body of Christ,

They have ignored that (according to Sacred Scripture) the great multitude of predestined people, who the apostle Paul calls "the body of Jesus Christ" and "the Church", and "a full-grown man", comprises people from every tribe, and language, and nation, especially people born after the incarnation and resurrection of our Lord²⁸.

His argument, basically, proceeds in the following way. First, the authority of Jesus Christ extends to the whole of creation. He is the head of creation, the pastor of humanity, and the priest of believers and non-believers (he uses here John 10,1-21), "Jesus is shepherd, head, and priest of unbelievers because he was involved in the works of creation and redemption. The whole world should be prepared through the preaching of the Gospel to embrace his universal rule" (*O.E.* 5.33.354a). His providence extends to the whole of creation (*O.E.* 5.33.353). This implies, in de las Casas thought, that Jesus' sheep are not restricted to those who already belong to the Church. Indigenous people too belong to his sheepfold (5.33.354b, 356b). Second, each human being has an intrinsic dignity because they were created by God. His own image is found in each of them. Therefore, God is concerned with the salvation of his own creation,

God cares about his creation, especially about human beings because they were created in his own image. God created them free and responsible of their own deeds. God provided them with free will that cannot be forced. Believing is an act of free will²⁹.

147-173; LOADER, *Jesus in John's Gospel: Structure and Issues in Johannine Christology*, 466; THATCHER, *Greater Than Caesar: Christology and Empire in the Fourth Gospel*.

²⁶ *O.E.* 5.33.350-423.

²⁷ *O.E.* 5.33.351a.

²⁸ *O.E.* 1.11a.

²⁹ *O.E.* 5.33.357-358.

Since each human being bears God's image, they are intrinsically free. Their will cannot be forced, and they should be led to faith without violence or coercion. At a time when theologians wondered whether people of the new world had a soul³⁰, de las Casas understood the soteriological implications of the idea of God as Creator. Since God is the Creator of the whole world, he has a salvific concern for the whole of humanity. This leads us to the third important component of his argument. The Gospel should be preached to all people, and the inhabitants of the newly discovered lands were worthy of receiving the Christian baptism. They can fully become part of the larger Christian community³¹. The implication of this argument is that they should not be seen as second-class Christians or a subcategory in the overall structure of the Church. Through the preaching of the Gospel, they can be attracted to Christianity and received in the church as God's children through baptism. In this context, de las Casas refers to the Church as the "universal church"³². Thus, the universality of the Church is founded on Christology, "the Son of God is the universal King and Lord of all creation. He is above temporal and spiritual, human and divine beings" (*O.E.* 5.33.360).

The reasoning of de las Casas can be used heuristically in reading the idea of community in the Gospel of John. This Gospel intentionally begins with a clear reference to the active involvement of the Word in the creation of all that exists (John 1,1-3). His unity with the Father allowed him to take a prominent place in the creation of the world (John 1,10) and, therefore, he has received authority over all flesh (John 17,2). Jesus' universal authority implies that the Gospel of John regards humanity as intrinsically valuable and worthy of God's salvation (John 3,16).

During his earthly ministry, Jesus encounters a number of people experiencing different social conditions. The man born blind, for example, was

³⁰ Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda, for example, indicated that human rights are reserved for people, not to those "barbarians living in the margins of humanity" (*ut humanitatem prorsus exuisse videantur*). See GARCÍA-PELAYO, "Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda y los problemas jurídicos de la conquista de América", 9.

³¹ *O.E.* 5.33.358a.

³² *O.E.* 5.33.360. The anthropology of de las Casas is far more practical. For example, he proposed a distinctive approach in order to "conquer" the "spirit" of the indigenous people, 1) eliminate *la encomienda*, 2) provide them with schools, hospitals, and churches, 3) introduce in each of their villages an economy based on cattle raising, 4) allow their leaders to rule their own villages, 5) allow those working in the mines at least three hours of rest, 6) prevent women from engaging in work reserved for men, 7) each of them should benefit financially from their work in the gold mines. See MIREs, *La colonización de las almas, Misión y conquista en Hispanoamérica*, 83-84.

implicitly called “sinful” when the disciples asked their teacher whether he is blind because of his parents’ sin or because of his own personal sin (John 9,2). After the miraculous restoration of his sight, he suffered exclusion from the synagogue (John 9,34). However, he experienced God’s life through Jesus’ light (John 9,35-39). The same agent of creation, God’s Word, was his agent of salvation, Jesus. The exclusion from the synagogue left him out of his social circle. However, he became part of Jesus’ sheep (John 10,2), because Jesus’ mission includes the care for his current sheep and the search of his “other sheep” that are not of his fold so that “there will be one flock, one shepherd” (John 10,16). The formerly blind man became a full member of Jesus’ sheep in unity with other children of God (1,12)³³. In this new community, there is no evidence of a distinction of people in terms of importance or value. All of them belong to the same community united with Jesus (John 17,21). In distinction from some religious leaders, who claimed a special position among God’s people due to their alleged closeness with Moses (John 9,28), the new community of Jesus’ disciples is characterized by unity.

Bartolomé de las Casas incisively perceived that the gold of the new world converted Catholic Spanish settlers into idolaters³⁴. They rejected the only true God who is the Creator of each human being and instead worshiped “mammon”. As Luis Rivera has indicated in his interpretation of the conquest of the Americas, “The idolatry of mammon is hidden behind rhetorical allegiance to the crucified Christ”³⁵. Similarly, the rhetorical allegiance to Moses and Abraham in some of Jesus’ opponents in the Gospel of John (John 8,33; 9,28)³⁶, covered their behavior toward the formerly blind man. Instead of rejoicing for the restoration of someone who is part of God’s creation, they were more concerned with the fact that the healing took place during the Sabbath. Their actions – casting out this man from the synagogue – revealed their dramatic condition. They are still blind and, therefore, their sin remains (John

³³ DEVILLERS, “Jean 9, ou la christologie interactive de Jean”, 227-238. Shepherd imagery is prominent in Jewish and pagan Hellenistic contexts. See BEUTLER, “Der alttestamentlich-jüdische Hintenrgrund der Hirtenrede in Johannes 10”, 18-32.

³⁴ RIVERA, *A Violent Evangelism, The Political and Religious Conquest of the Americas*, 258-271. Bartolomé de las Casas also argued strongly that those who used war in order to convert people were guilty of a mortal sin. In order to support this idea, he refers to Romans 1,32; 13,8. See DE LAS CASAS, *The Only Way*, 165.

³⁵ RIVERA, *Evangelism*, 259.

³⁶ Since comparing Jesus’ opponents to Spanish settlers may imply anti-Judaism, I need to clarify that there are significant differences between the two groups, and that it was only a specific selection of individuals who held religious power in the first century who opposed Jesus, not Judaism as a whole. Cf. John 9,40, “Some of the Pharisees near him heard these things”.

9,40-41). Ironically, the man has received sight and illumination because he is able to see Jesus and to identify him as worthy of worship (John 9,38).

4. Christology

One of the clearest examples of Bartolomé de las Casas' Christology is found in his defense of his plans to travel to the new world along with fifty companions. He asked the king for permission to travel and offered him in return some income. He also asked for remuneration for his fifty companions. A lawyer from the Inquisition and from the royal council found out about this negotiation and started to question de las Casas. This influential person (he was an executor of Queen Isabella's will) expressed disappointment at de las Casas' idea of mixing temporal interests with evangelical preaching.

In his defense, de las Casas clarified that the contract with the king "aimed at aiding the unfortunate Indians to prevent their disappearance" (*O.E.* 2.138.511a)³⁷. He further compared indigenous people with Jesus himself, asking a rhetorical question, "Sir, if you saw people mistreat Our Lord Christ, laying hands on him, insulting and reviling him, would you not try to have him handed over to you, that you might love him, serve and cherish him, and be unto him all that a true Christian should be?" (*O.E.* 2.138.511b)³⁸. In his argument here, de las Casas likely alludes to Matthew 25, Ephesians 4,15, and Acts 9,3³⁹.

This astonishing comparison between Jesus and the inhabitants of the new world should be set within the larger dispute in the sixteenth century about the humanity of indigenous people. Scholars such as Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda argued that the inhabitants of the new world were slaves by nature and even questioned their status as human beings⁴⁰. This aberrant anthropology contrasts with de las Casas' Christology. For him, there is no question whether they are human beings. They are people because they are God's creation⁴¹. Furthermore, he even claims that they resemble Jesus Christ him-

³⁷ The English translation comes from DE LAS CASAS, *History*, 264.

³⁸ COLLARD, *History*, 264.

³⁹ GUTIÉRREZ, *Las Casas*, 65.

⁴⁰ ANDRÉ-VINCENT, *Bartolomé de Las Casas, prophète du Nouveau Monde*, 144.

⁴¹ See DE LAS CASAS, *Devastation*, 27-32. He compares those who use violence against indigenous people with Nimrod (Gen 10,8-9), "who was the first hunter and oppressor of human beings (according to Sacred Scripture)" (*O.E.* 5.33.350-351).

self in his sufferings. Certainly, people laid hands on Jesus, insulting him and reviling him during his earthly ministry. The surprising turn in de las Casas' thought is that he compares indigenous people with the exalted Christ. He refers to him as "Lord Christ", and in doing this, he refrains from using a "low Christology" (Jesus' humanity) in order to support his argument. Instead, he uses a "high Christology" (Christ' exaltation) when comparing Jesus with the inhabitants of the new world. The implications of this insight are far reaching. First, the identity of Jesus in his exaltation may include suffering. Second, indigenous people may partake of Christ's exalted status. Third, those who love, serve, and cherish suffering people are true Christians. Gustavo Gutiérrez perceptively observes that these implications are rooted in de las Casas' use of Scripture, "The Biblical roots of Bartolomé's proposition are clear, and the demands of his outlook very great"⁴².

Bartolomé de las Casas, however, does not develop these insights. He continues his defense by saying that he "left Christ in the Indies not one but a thousand times beaten, afflicted, insulted and crucified by those Spaniards who destroy and ravage the Indians" (*O.E.* 2.138.511b)⁴³. This is why he is willing to offer the king an income if he allows him and his companions to go back to the new world. He wants to prevent their exploitation and even extermination. Also, de las Casas perceptively notices that the current situation in the Indies carries a theological problem. Spaniards supposedly brought the Gospel to the new world and facilitated the conversion of indigenous people to Christianity. This, they thought, benefited the Church and brought glory to God. For Bartolomé de las Casas quite the contrary was happening, "for Spanish violence and the bad example they set make the Indians curse the name of Christ" (*O.E.* 2.138.511b)⁴⁴. Their exploitation becomes "blasphemy of the name of Christ"⁴⁵. In allowing Spaniards to oppress people, or even in remaining silent in the middle of their terrible situation, the Church is guilty of a serious theological charge. Therefore, "to defend the life and temporal welfare of the Indian [is for de las Casas] to affirm the living God proclaimed to us by Jesus Christ"⁴⁶. Bartolomé de las Casas concludes his defense with the following words,

Elsewhere (DE LAS CASAS, *Devastation*, 34-35), he portrays the Spaniards as "inhuman, ruthless, and ferocious, enemies of the human race".

⁴² GUTIÉRREZ, *Las Casas*, 65.

⁴³ COLLARD, *History*, 264-265.

⁴⁴ *Ib.*, 265.

⁴⁵ GUTIÉRREZ, *Las Casas*, 65.

⁴⁶ *Ib.*, *Las Casas*, 61.

They refused [to disallow Spaniards where missionaries have begun preaching the Gospel], saying a territory occupied by priests would bring no income to the King. I understood they wanted to sell me the Gospels, and, consequently, Christ; and when I saw Him beaten, insulted and crucified, I agreed to buy Him, offering the King benefits and temporal goods, as you have heard (O.E. 2.138.511b)⁴⁷.

Bartolomé de las Casas' defense against lawyer Aguirre (the executor of Queen Isabella's will) can be used fruitfully when reading Johannine Christology. Typically, the point of discussion among scholars is whether John's high Christology leads to the theological problem of Docetism⁴⁸. Stimulated by de las Casas' use of Scripture in articulating Christology, I suggest that the discussion can be taken in another direction.

The identity of Jesus in the Gospel of John is not only related to his unique association with his Father⁴⁹. Rather, his unity with his disciples is also an important component of who he is. Bartolomé de las Casas encourages the reader of the Gospel of John to see more closely the relationship between Jesus and his disciples. The farewell discourses (John 13-16) include several instances of the close identification between Jesus and his followers. After washing his disciples' feet, Jesus claims that "whoever receives the one I send receives me, and whoever receives me receives the one who sent me" (John 13,20). The disciples become the representatives of Jesus on earth and, consequently, the representatives of God himself. Jesus reveals himself to the world (his love, his life-giving power, his grace and truth) through a group of fearful disciples (John 14,1), many of whom belong to the low levels of first century Galilean society (John 1,35-51). This identification comes close to de las Casas' emphasis that Jesus is to be found in the poor, the oppressed, and the marginalized.

These disciples are the privileged recipients of the Spirit who will convict the world concerning sin, righteousness, and judgment (John 14,17; 16,8-11). Thus, Jesus invites his disciples into a divine community, "I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you" (John 14,20). Therefore, an important component of Jesus' identity includes his unique relationship with his disciples. In order to illustrate this point, Jesus compares himself as the "true vine" with his disciples as "branches" (John 15,1-2). If we take this comparison further, we can observe that an important component of a "vine"

⁴⁷ COLLARD, *History*, 265.

⁴⁸ The classic example is KÄSEMANN, *The Testament of Jesus, A Study of John in the Light of Chapter 17*, 25-26. For a balanced approach to Johannine Christology, see HURTADO, *Lord Jesus Christ, Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity*, 353-396.

⁴⁹ BYERS, *Ecclesiology and Theosis in the Gospel of John*.

includes its “branches”. There cannot be a living vine without branches. Similarly, Jesus continues his mission on earth after the resurrection through the fruitful work of the disciples, “I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit” (John 15,5).

This position of the disciples *vis-à-vis* Jesus is effective after his exaltation. This makes their relationship even more remarkable. The exalted Jesus identifies himself with a group of disciples who are far from holding a privileged position in society. They face hate from the world (John 15,18-19; 17,14), persecution (John 15,20-21), expulsion from the synagogues (John 16,2), tribulation (John 16,33), and even death (John 16,2). Paradoxically, the world can find Jesus in those the world rejects because they are the bearers of the Spirit (John 16,7). Similarly, de las Casas suggested that the exalted Christ is found in the despised inhabitants of the new world. The living God reveals himself in those who were being rejected and oppressed.

The identity of God in Judaism was closely related to his glory. In the Gospel of John, Jesus' obedience during his earthly ministry brings glory to his Father (John 17,4). The disciples' obedience to Jesus will also bring glory to him, “All mine are yours, and yours are mine, and *I am glorified in them*” (John 17,10). The glorification of Jesus is related to his disciples living in unity among themselves and showing love for the world (John 13,34-35; 17,20). Remarkably, the disciples are not reduced to mere instruments that bring glory to God. They are even partakers of God's own glory, “The glory that you have given me *I have given to them*, that they may be one even as we are one” (John 17,22). They are invited to become members of the divine community. This idea is repeated several times in Jesus' prayer in John 17, “just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us” (17,21), “I in them and you in me” (17,23), “the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them” (17,26). This Johannine idea resembles de las Casas' statement that those who defend indigenous people bring glory to the living God.

The anthropological and Christological implications of Johannine thought are far reaching. On the one hand, Christians bear not only God's image because they were created by him, but also they bear Jesus' glory in his exaltation. On the other hand, the world cannot properly apprehend God independently of Jesus' representatives on earth. The community of disciples becomes an important component of God's identity. Jesus reveals himself in those who are persecuted, hated, and even executed for his name. Bartolomé de las Casas perceptively noticed that “the reason for killing and destroying [indigenous people] is that the Christians have an ultimate aim, which is to acquire gold, and ... thus rise to a high estate disproportionate

to their merits”⁵⁰. This kind of “exaltation” is demonic⁵¹. The Gospel of John offers a radically different way of achieving exaltation, because the disciples partake of Jesus’ sufferings in their mission to the world.

Having illuminated Johannine Christology with de las Casas’ insights about the relationship between the exalted Christ and indigenous people, it is now important to notice a significant difference between the Gospel of John and de las Casas’ thought. The Gospel of John highlights Jesus’ identity in relationship to his disciples, i.e. those followers who believed in him. Although these disciples are portrayed as a group of suffering and even marginalized people, there are no references in this Gospel to the presence of Jesus in those who have not confessed Jesus as Messiah. This does not mean that humanity is portrayed negatively in the Gospel of John, since it is said that the Word gave light to every human being (John 1,3, 9), that God loved the world (3,16), and that Jesus’ mission concerns the whole of creation.

5. Conclusion

A conversation with a classic author from Colonial literature has resulted in fruitful ways of engaging major Johannine themes. Although Bartolomé de las Casas’ exegesis of Scripture can be subjected to critique from different perspectives, in this article I have taken a more positive approach. I have paid attention to the impact of the Bible in his interpretation of his specific historical context in order to suggest fruitful readings of three major Johannine themes: conversion, community, and Christology.

Bartolomé de las Casas has helped us realize an important dimension of Christian conversion. This religious experience is not limited to an individual, spiritual, or mystical relationship between a person and God. It includes a larger transformation that deeply affects the way a person relates to the world. From a Johannine point of view, those who embrace Jesus as

⁵⁰ DE LAS CASAS, *Devastation*, 31.

⁵¹ DE LAS CASAS, *Devastation*, 78. This way of achieving glory is captured in the sixteenth century poem written by Alonso de Ercilla y Zúñiga [1533-1594], “Muchos hay en el mundo que han llegado a la engañosa alteza desta vida, que Fortuna los ha siempre ayudado y dádoles la mano a la subida para después de haberlos levantado, derribarlos con mísera caída, cuando es mayor el golpe y sentimiento y menos el pesar que hay mudamiento / No entienden con la próspera bonanza quel contento es principio de tristeza ni miran en la súbita mudanza del consumidor tiempo y su presteza, mas con altiva y vana confianza quieren que en su fortuna haya firmeza, la cual, de su aspereza no olvidad, revuelve con la vuelta acostumbrada”. GARGANIGO, et. al. *Huellas de las literaturas hispanoamericanas*, 100.

the revelation of God should love what God himself has loved, i.e. the world (John 3,16). A truly Christian conversion should be an enlightenment that allows one to see reality from a heavenly perspective. Conversion should make us more perceptive and sensitive to situations of oppression, injustice, and racism in this world.

Bartolomé de las Casas' insights about community enhance our reading of Jesus' interactions with people in the Gospel of John. A case in point is the man born blind. In that story, Jesus clearly sides with the one who is socially stigmatized (people referred to him as sinful due to his blindness) and religiously marginalized (he is cast out of the synagogue). He restores his sight, reveals himself to him, and invites him to join his sheep. The man born blind finds in Jesus a new community formed by children of God who are led by the good shepherd. On the contrary, Jesus strongly criticizes those who held an important religious and social position because they are more concerned with religious observance than with the restoration of a man and because their arrogance does not allow them to see Jesus as the revelation of God.

Bartolomé de las Casas' bold Christology is also heuristically valuable when engaging John's presentation of Jesus. After his resurrection, Jesus reveals himself to the world through a group of disciples that are far from holding an exalted position in society. This group of mainly fishermen from Galilee become the privileged recipients of the Spirit. They exist in Jesus and, remarkably, Jesus exists in them. Furthermore, Jesus is glorified in them and he shares his own glory with his followers. The disciples, then, become members of the divine community through the Spirit where the Father and the Son enjoy a unique relationship.

Bartolomé de las Casas teaches us that the social context of the interpreter has significant implications in the way readers engage Scripture. I suggest that de las Casas' theology has potential to articulate biblical theology in a Latin American context. My personal impression when reading classic Latin American theology is that the historical Jesus and the Synoptic Gospels occupy a place of honor in the articulation of Latin American theology. It seems Latin American Christology has been articulated using a "low Christology" (Jesus' humanity), highlighting what can be historically recovered from the carpenter of Galilee. However, the powerful Christology of de las Casas that fueled his commitment to justice was based on a high Christology; Jesus' exaltation was its center. In light of this, it is worth asking whether a fruitful line of research in Latin American theology is the use of distinctive presentation of Jesus in the Gospel of John in the articulation of Christology. Here, I can only raise the question.

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