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October 14th, 2020

Bartolomé de Las Casas was a Spanish friar whose writings were one of the first to expose Europe to the oppression of indigenous peoples¹, and John Locke was an English philosopher who articulated unique arguments for private property and against the monarchy². Both produced writings that provide a detailed understanding of the Spanish and English conquests in the Americas. The characterization of the relationship between Christianity and the Natives played an instrumental role in the Europeans' moral justification or objection to their oppression and to conquest. The purpose religion serves in these writings – as a self-centric lens through which the moral universe is constructed, with believers at its center – reflected Spain's and England's ambitions to shape the world through religious superiority, a belief that hardened from defeat and reunifying victory in the histories of both countries.

In “Brief Account of the Devastation of the Indies”, Bartolome de Las Casas makes an argument against the Spanish conquest by painting the Natives as equivalently Christian – in some instances, more Christian – than the Spaniards. He writes that the indigenous people were “very apt to receive our holy Catholic faith, to be endowed with virtuous customs, and to behave in a godly fashion”³; he even compares them with Biblical figures, noting that the meals of the indigenous people were “...such that the food of the holy fathers in the desert can scarcely be more parsimonious, scanty, and poor.”⁴ Through this casting of Biblically approbatory characteristics, it becomes morally questionable, if not objectionable,

¹ Michael Reagan. “Empire and Conquest” Lecture. TS History: American History to 1877. Class lecture at online UW, Seattle, Washington, October 8, 2020.

² Graham Rogers, “John Locke,” Encyclopædia Britannica, August 25th, 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/John-Locke>.

³ Bartolomé de Las Casas, “Brief Account of the Devastation in the Indies” (Spain: n.p., 1552), Para. 2.

⁴ Bartolomé de Las Casas, “Brief Account of the Devastation in the Indies”, Para. 2.

for any Christian to rape, enslave, or murder a Native, as was common during the Spanish conquest. This rhetorical strategy was designed to carry tremendous weight when considering that religion was a central part of the Spanish conquest – the guiding justification of the effort was to make nonbelievers “embrace the Catholic faith and be trained in good morals”⁵. The ruling class and the church of a religiously unified Spain viewed conversion and colonization as joint goals of conquest.⁶ Such an intertwined relationship between state and church grew from La Reconquista⁷, the fiercely religious Spanish retaking of land that had been conquered by the Moors. During the Spanish Inquisition, the Spanish, building upon strong Christian unification, used religion as grounds for torture and killings against non-Christians and even Christians who had converted from Judaism or Islam⁸. From these victories and advancements, a self-centric model of religion – the teachings of Christ applied only to His followers, and that Christians were superior – not only solidified but became the *only* truth; hence it was strong justification for the forceful conversion and killing of the Natives. The positioning of Bartolomé de Las Casas’s projection of Christianity on the Natives as the antithesis of Spanish conquest in the Americas reveals the inward-looking and viciously defensive religious view of the world that emerged from a history of religious setback and reclamation of superiority.

Wielding the same tool of Christianity, John Locke argues in *Two Treatises of Government* that private property is natural and morally justified by God. However, Locke subtly outlines two separate sets of rules for two groups of people: one who believes in private property has the right to protect it, and those that seek for property can always find more elsewhere; one who does *not* believe in private property wastes resources by not expending their labor upon it, and hence it is justified for others to appropriate it as their own private property. Under the premise that God made nothing to be wasted or spoiled⁹, Locke reasons that then “...if either the grass of his inclosure [sic] rotted on the ground, or the fruit... perished

⁵ Juan Gonzalez. *Harvest of Empire: A History of Latinos in America* (Penguin Books, 2011), 13.

⁶ Juan González. *Harvest of Empire: A History of Latinos in America*, 13.

⁷ Juan Gonzalez. *Harvest of Empire: A History of Latinos in America*, 7.

⁸ Michael Reagan. “Empire and Conquest” Lecture. TS History: American History to 1877. Class lecture at online UW, Seattle, Washington, October 8, 2020.

⁹ John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government* (London, Great Britain: n.p., 1689), §31.

without gathering and laying up; this part of the earth, notwithstanding his inclosure [sic], was still to be looked on as waste, and might be the possession of any other.”¹⁰ The “wild Indian who knows no enclosure”¹¹ is plentiful in land but cultivates it less; Jared Diamond writes in *Guns, Germs, and Steel* that “hunter-gatherers occupied a larger fraction of the Americas' area than of Eurasia's”¹² due to geographic factors: indigenous societies lingered as hunter-gatherers because of the limited number of domesticable species on the North American continent.¹³ Locke acknowledges this explicitly: “I ask, whether in the wild woods and uncultivated waste of America, left to nature, without any improvement, tillage, or husbandry, a thousand acres yield the needy and wretched inhabitants as many conveniencies [sic] of life, as ten acres equally fertile land do in Devonshire, where they are well cultivated.”¹⁴ Equally – if not more – important, as a matter of principle, the Native that does not believe in Christianity cannot believe in the principles that form the basis for private property. Hence, Locke justifies theft of indigenous lands on a fundamentally religious basis – the ‘wild Indian’ is not civilized and Christian enough – two descriptors that are synonymous in Locke’s writings. Like the attitude adopted by the Spanish in the application of Christ’s teachings, Locke’s theory of private property gives protections only to those that believe in it. This reflects a pattern of viewing the world with what one believes to be the superior religion as a compass; there is only one *right* way to do things, and as conviction in one’s religious superiority strengthens, the tolerance of the ‘wrong’ way diminishes severely.

As in Spain, this belief developed from conflict and unification: right out of the Middle Ages, England was plagued by civil war as feuding Houses fought for power¹⁵; soon after, Henry VII created a successful centralized government and a reliable system of taxation, and hence under his rule the English believed that out of Europe, they were best off¹⁶. This conflict and unification, although not religious,

¹⁰ John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, §38.

¹¹ John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, §26.

¹² Jared Diamond, *Guns, Germs, and Steel: the Fates of Human Societies* (Great Britain: Norton, 1997), 356.

¹³ Jared Diamond, *Guns, Germs, and Steel: the Fates of Human Societies*, 367.

¹⁴ John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, §37.

¹⁵ Juan Gonzalez. *Harvest of Empire: A History of Latinos in America*, 7.

¹⁶ Juan Gonzalez. *Harvest of Empire: A History of Latinos in America*, 7.

gave rise to the assumption of Anglo-Saxon superiority, which was used as justification for later conflicts religious in nature, like the colonization of Catholic Ireland¹⁷ and later the Natives, who were referred to by the English Kings with explicitly religious language as “heathens and infidels”¹⁸. Locke offers another interpretation of the Bible to propose what he believes is a truer and more Christian form of government structure but retains the premise of Christian superiority; this shows both in the exclusive nature of his ideas and in his rhetoric – determining what is “wild” and “uncivilized”. While a strong belief in religious superiority was certainly widespread in England, it was certainly to a lesser extent than in Spain, in large part because England’s division and unification was not inherently religious. This discrepancy is displayed in the treatment of the Natives; “English kings... ordered their agents to... conquer... the lands [of the Natives]... but said nothing of the people inhabiting them”¹⁹, whereas the Spanish ravaged both the land and the indigenous peoples on them in the name of Christianity.

Through historical episodes of conflict and unification – initially religious or not – Spain and England developed strong beliefs of religious superiority and religiously exclusive ideas. Its presence is reflected in the characterization choices and ideas of Bartolomé de Las Casas’s and John Locke’s writings. Las Casas projects Christianity onto the indigenous peoples in defense of their humanity and opposition to their ill treatment; this mirrors in opposite Spain’s rationalization for brutal conquest. Similarly, Locke formulates exclusionary ideas that reward property rights to Christians and takes them away for ‘wild Indians’. In the conquests and colonization of Spain and England, religious superiority – echoed in the works of Las Casas and Locke – would be used to justify the dehumanization of the Natives.

¹⁷ Juan Gonzalez. *Harvest of Empire: A History of Latinos in America*, 8.

¹⁸ Juan Gonzalez. *Harvest of Empire: A History of Latinos in America*, 13.

¹⁹ Juan Gonzalez. *Harvest of Empire: A History of Latinos in America*, 13.