

Apologetic History of the Indies

Apologetic and Summary History Treating the Qualities, Disposition, Description, Skies and Soil of These Lands; and the Natural Conditions, Governance, Nations, Ways of Life and Customs of the Peoples of These Western and Southern Indies, Whose Sovereign Realm Belongs to the Monarchs of Castile

Bartolomé de Las Casas

Argument of the Work

The ultimate cause for writing this work was to gain knowledge of all the many nations of this vast new world. They had been defamed by persons who feared neither God nor the charge, so grievous before divine judgment, of defaming even a single man and causing him to lose his esteem and honor. From such slander can come great harm and terrible calamity, particularly when large numbers of men are concerned and, even more so, a whole new world. It has been written that these peoples of the Indies, lacking human governance and ordered nations, did not have the power of reason to govern themselves—which was inferred only from their having been found to be gentle, patient and humble. It has been implied that God became careless in creating so immense a number of rational souls and let human nature, which He so largely determined and provided for, go astray in the almost infinitesimal part of the human lineage which they comprise. From this it follows that they have all proven themselves unsocial and therefore monstrous, contrary to the natural bent of all peoples of the world; and that He did not allow any other species of corruptible creature to err in this way, excepting a strange and occasional case. In order to demonstrate the truth, which is the opposite, this book brings together and compiles [certain natural, special and accidental causes which are specified below in Chapter CCLXIII]...Not only have [the Indians] shown themselves to be very wise peoples and possessed of lively and marked understanding, prudently governing and providing for their nations (as much as they can be nations, without faith in or knowledge of the true God) and making them prosper in justice; but they have equalled many diverse nations of the world, past and present, that have been praised for their governance, politics and customs, and exceed by no small measure the wisest of all these, such as the Greeks and Romans, in adherence to the rules of natural reason.

This advantage and superiority, along with everything said above, will appear quite clearly when, if it please God, the peoples are compared one with another. This history has been written with the aforesaid aim in mind by Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas, or Casaus, a monk of the Dominican Order and sometime bishop of Chiapa, who promises before the divine word that everything said and referred to is the truth, and that nothing of an untruthful nature appears to the best of his knowledge.

Chapter CXXVII.
The Indians Possessed More Enlightenment and Natural Knowledge of God
Than the Greeks and Romans

...These Indian peoples surpassed the Greeks and Romans in selecting for their gods, not sinful and criminal men noted for their great baseness, but virtuous ones—to the extent that virtue exists among people who lack the knowledge of the true God that is gained by faith...The following argument can be formed for the proof of the above: The Indian nations seem to show themselves to be or to have been of better rational judgment and more prudent and upright in what they considered God to be. For nations
 30 which have reached the knowledge that there is a God hold in common the natural concept that God is the best of all things that can be imagined. Therefore the nation which has elected virtuous men as God or gods, though it might have erred in not selecting the true God, has a better concept and estimation of God and more natural purity than one which has selected and accepted for God or gods men known to be sinful and criminal. The latter was the case of the Greek and Roman states, while the former is that of all these Indian nations...It seems probable that none of these Indian peoples will be more difficult of conver-
 40 sion than the ancient idolaters. First, because, as we have proved and are still proving, all these peoples are of good reason. Second, because they show less duplicity and more simplicity of heart than others. Third, because they are in their natural persons better adjusted, as has been proved above—a quality characteristic of men who may more easily be persuaded of the truth. Fourth, because an infinite number in their midst have already been converted (although some with certain difficulty, namely, those who wor-
 50 shiped many gods; for it is not possible except by a great miracle for a religion so aged, mellowed and time-honored to be abandoned suddenly, in a short time or with ease—as proven by all of the world's past and ancient idolaters)...

Chapter CCLXII.
From All That Has Been Said It Is Inferred That the Indian Nations Equalled
and Even Surpassed All the Ancient Ones in Good Laws and Customs

...Let us compare [the ancients] with the people of the realms of Peru as concerns women, marriage and chastity. The [Peruvian] kings honored and favored marriages with their presence and performed them themselves or through their proconsuls and delegates. They themselves exhorted the newlyweds to live happily, and in this these people were superior to all nations. They were certainly superior to the Assyrians and Babylonians,...even to our own Spaniards of Cantabria,...more especially to the re-
 50 nowned isle of England...and to many others...To whom were they not superior in the election and succession of kings and those who were to govern the country? They always chose the wisest, most virtuous and most worthy of ruling, those who had subordinated all natural and sensual affection and were free and clean of repugnant ambition and all private interest.

They were likewise more than moderate in exacting tribute of vassals and, so that the people should not be molested, in levying the costs of war. Their industries existed so that nations might communicate among each other and all live in peace. They had a frequent and meticulous census of all deaths and births and of the exact number of people in all estates of the realms. All persons had professions, and each one busied himself and worked to gain his necessary livelihood. They possessed abundant deposits of provisions which met all the necessities of their warriors, reduced the burden and trouble for the subjects and were distributed in the lean years...Who of the peoples and kings of the world ever kept the men of

60 their armies under such discipline that they would not dare to touch even a single fruit hanging over the road from a tree behind a wall? Not the Greeks, nor Alexander, nor the Romans, nor even our own Christian monarchs. Has anyone read of soldiers who, no matter where they were marching when not in battle, were as well commanded, trained, sober and orderly as good friars in a procession? They established order and laws for the obedience which vassals must show toward their immediate lords and for reverence between each other, the humble to the humble and the mighty to the mighty. The rearing of children, in which parents inculcate the obedience and faithfulness owed to superiors—where is it surpassed?...Has anyone read of any prince in the world among the ancient unbelievers of the past or subsequently among Christians, excepting St. Louis of France, who so attentively assisted and provided for the poor among his vassals—those not only of his own village or city but of all his large and extensive realms? They issued
70 public edicts and personal commands to all nobles and provincial governors, of whom there were many, that all poor, widows and orphans in each province should be provided for from their own royal rents and riches, and that alms should be given according to the need, poverty and desert of each person. Where and among what people or nation was there a prince endowed with such piety and beneficence that he never dined unless three or four poor people ate from his plate and at his table?...Then, there is that miracle—such it may be called for being the most remarkable, singular and skillful construction of its kind, I believe, in the world—of the two highways...across the mountains and along the coast. The finer and more admirable of these extends for at least six and perhaps eight hundred leagues and is said to reach the provinces of Chile...In Spain and Italy I have seen portions of the highway said to have been built by the Romans from Spain to Italy, but it is quite crude in comparison with the one built by these peoples...

Chapter CCLXIII.

The Indians Are as Capable as Any Other Nations to Receive the Gospel

80 Thus it remains stated, demonstrated and openly concluded...throughout this book that all these peoples of the Indies possessed—as far as is possible through natural and human means and without the light of faith—nations, towns, villages and cities, most fully and abundantly provided for. With a few exceptions in varying degrees they lacked nothing, and some were endowed in full perfection for political and social life and for attaining and enjoying that civic happiness which in this world any good, rational, well provided and happy republic wishes to have and enjoy; for all are by nature of very subtle, lively, clear and most capable understanding. This they received (after the will of God, Who wished to create them in this way) from the favorable influence of the heavens, the gentle attributes of the regions which God gave them to inhabit, the clement and soft weather; from the composition of their limbs and internal and external sensory organs; from the quality and sobriety of their diet; from the fine disposition and healthful-
90 ness of the lands, towns and local winds; from their temperance and moderation in food and drink; from the tranquility, calmness and quiescence of their sensual desires; from their lack of concern and worry over the worldly matters that stir the passions of the soul, these being joy, love, wrath, grief and the rest; and also, *a posteriori*, from the works they accomplished and the effects of these. From all these causes, universal and superior, particular and inferior, natural and accidental, it followed, first by nature and then by their industry and experience, that they were endowed with the three types of prudence: the monastic, by which man knows how to rule himself; the economic, which teaches him to rule his house; and the political, which sets forth and ordains the rule of his cities. As for the divisions of this last type (which presupposes the first two types of prudence to be perfect) into workers, artisans, warriors, rich men, religion (temples, priests and sacrifices), judges and magistrates, governors, customs and into everything which
100 concerns acts of understanding and will,...they were equal to many nations of the world outstanding and famous for being politic and reasonable...We have, then, but slight occasion to be surprised at defects and uncouth and immoderate customs which we might find among our Indian peoples and to disparage them

for these; for many and perhaps all other peoples of the world have been much more perverse, irrational and corrupted by depravity, and in their governments and in many virtues and moral qualities much less temperate and orderly. Our own forbears were much worse, as revealed in irrationality and confused government and in vices and brutish customs throughout the length and breadth of this our Spain, which has been shown in many places above. Let us, then, finish this book and give immense thanks to God for having given us enough life, strength and help to see it finished.

Chapter CCLXIV. *The Meaning of the Word "Barbarian" and the Several Classes of Barbarian Peoples*

110 In certain places above we have referred to this term or word "barbarian," which many call and consider these Indian peoples and other nations to be. Sometimes in the Holy Scriptures and frequently in holy decrees and lay histories barbarians are named and referred to, especially since the Philosopher [Aristotle] makes particular mention in his *Politics* of barbarians. Many times I find the term wrongly used, owing to error or to confusion between some barbarians and others. In order therefore to avoid this error and confusion I wish to explain here what it is to be a barbarian and what nations can properly be called barbarian. For such a clarification one must make the following fourfold distinction. A nation or people or part thereof can be called barbarian for four reasons: first, considering the term broadly and improperly, for any strangeness, ferocity, disorder, exorbitance, degeneration of reason, of justice and of good customs and human benignity; or also for evincing opinion which is confused or flighty, furious, tumultuous or beyond reason. Thus, there are men who have deserted and forgotten the rules and order of reason and the gentleness and peacefulness which man should naturally possess; blind with passion, they change in some way, or are ferocious, harsh, severe, cruel, and are precipitated into acts so inhuman that fierce and wild beasts of the mountains would not commit them. They seem to have been divested of the very nature of man, and the word "barbarian" thus signifies a strangeness and exorbitance or novelty which is in discord with the nature and common reason of men...

120 The second manner or species of barbarian is somewhat more limited; it includes those who lack a written language corresponding to their spoken one as the Latin language corresponds to our own. In short, people who lack the practice and study of letters are said to be barbarians *secundum quid*,¹ which means that they fall short by some measure or quality of not being barbarian, because in all else they can be wise, polished and lacking in ferocity, strangeness and harshness. Because the English lacked the practice of letters, the Venerable Bede, who was an Englishman, translated the liberal arts into the English language so that his people would not be considered barbarians...In like manner, it is customary to call barbarian a man whose manner of speech is strange compared to another's, when one does not pronounce well the language of the other or when in conversation people do not manage to deal and converse with one another. According to Strabo, Book XIV, the first occasion the Greeks took to call other peoples barbarian was when the latter mispronounced the Greek language crudely and defectively. Hence there is no man or nation which is not considered barbarian by some other...just as we consider these peoples of the Indies barbarians, so they, since they do not understand us, also consider us barbarians and strangers. From this has arisen a great error in many of us, laymen, ecclesiastics and monks, concerning these Indian nations of diverse languages, which we neither understand nor penetrate, and of different customs. People of every profession and quality came to these lands from our nation after these people had lost their republics and their order of life and government, for we had put them in such great disorder and so reduced their numbers that they became almost completely annihilated. These arrivals find them in this state and

1. [*Secundum quid* means in some respect. This is in contrast to *simpliciter*, or absolutely, which is used later on.]

think that the confusion and abasement in which they now live was always so and comes from their barbaric nature and disorderly government, while in truth we can affirm that in many ways they have seen in us no few customs which, with justifiable reason, might cause us to be taken for extreme barbarians by them—not so much barbarians of this second type, which means strangers, but of the first, for our being exceedingly ferocious, harsh, severe and abominable...

Chapter CCLXV. Other Meanings Which the Name "Barbarian" May Have

150 The third species and manner of barbarians, interpreting the term or word most strictly and properly, comprises those who by their strange, harsh and evil customs, or by their evil and perverse inclination, turn out cruel and ferocious and, unlike other men, are not governed by reason. They are, on the contrary, stupid and foppish, and do not possess or administer law, justice or communities. Nor do they cultivate friendship or conversation with other men, for which they have no villages, townships or cities since they do not live in a society. Thus they do not possess or tolerate masters, laws, ordinances or a political regime. Nor do they maintain the communication necessary to mankind, such as buying, selling, trading, renting, directing and having gatherings among neighbors. They do not use deposits, loans and other contracts which are a part of the law of peoples, treated by the laws of the Digest and Institute and by the doctors. For the most part they live scattered through the wilderness, fleeing human contact, contenting themselves with only the company of their women, in the fashion of such animals as monkeys, wildcats and other nongregarious beasts. Such as these are, and are called, *simpliciter*, strictly and properly, 160 barbarians. The inhabitants of the province called Barbary must have been like this, bereft of everything essential to the state of man, such as human reason and all these common and natural things which most men follow and use. Particular mention is made of them in the *Politics*, Book 1, Chaps. II and V, where it says that they are slaves by nature and worthy of always serving and being the subjects of others, because among them there is no natural dynasty, for they have no ordered government, nobility or subjects... In this regard Aristotle says: "One who is not a citizen of any State, if the cause of his isolation be natural and not accidental, is either a superhuman being or low in the scale of civilization. The clanless, lawless, hearthless man so bitterly described by Homer is a case in point; for he is naturally a citizen of no state and a lover of war."

170 Such inclinations arise from many causes. Sometimes it is from the region in which they live and a type of sky which is unfavorable to them and intemperate; men who are born and live under these conditions are short of intelligence and show perverse inclinations toward the aforementioned evils... The Philosopher adds in Chap. V that wise men can hunt or track them like animals in order to bring them under control and make use of them, causing the one who rules them to use his good judgment in attending to their welfare and keeping them from doing harm to others. In this way they can serve and profit their wise regent with their physical strength, because nature has made them robust for any work and chores which they might be ordered to do. Therefore to be *simpliciter*, properly and exactly, a barbarian is, as the Philosopher here concludes, to be a slave by nature...

180 There are others in a state of slavery who are not barbarians, and they are not properly called slaves but will always be free. They can only in a very broad sense be called slaves, for the meaning here is merely that they must be ruled by others and told what to do, as if they were slaves. These are people who are born feeble-minded or half-witted, or almost so, or who lack the reasoning power to govern themselves. In this sense the children of freeborn men and gentlemen can at birth be called slaves, and this is what St. Paul means when he says: *Quanto tempore haeres parvulus est, nihil difflert a servo*,² et cetera. The Philoso-

2. [As long as an heir is young, he is in no way different from a slave.]

pher deals with these in Book I of the *Politics*, wherein he proves that servitude is as natural to some as is command to others, and that nature has produced some men apt and disposed to be governed by others and not to govern, and others to govern and rule their fellows and not to be commanded. It does not follow from this, however, that anyone who is wise and able to govern should then be the master of another who is not his equal; but it should be understood that nature has produced some to govern and others to be governed, and thus the question is one regarding aptitude and not the act of governing itself. In any other sense, kings would be slaves of any wise men in their kingdoms—just as they are in a fashion servants of their council and senate, to the extent that the latter determine and the king is guided by them and obliged by natural reason to obey and execute what they decide...From what has been said, then, the distinction made by the Philosopher between the two types of barbarian seems clear...Not all barbarians are either lacking in reason or slaves by nature, nor can they, for merely being barbarians, be subjugated by force if they possess kingdoms and are free.

Chapter CCLXVI. *The Fourth Type Of Barbarian Nation*

The fourth manner or species of barbarians, which can be inferred from the things said above, embraces all those who lack true religion and Christian faith—that is, all unbelievers, however wise and prudent they may be as philosophers and statesmen. The reason is that there is no nation (excepting that of the Christians) which does not possess and suffer many and great defects, and have barbarism in its laws, customs, way of life and government. The latter are not corrected nor is the manner of life cleansed or reformed through any ordering except by entry into the Church and acceptance of our holy Catholic faith; for this alone is the stainless law which converts souls and cleans away the filth of all evil customs by banishing idolatry and superstitious rites, from which originate all other infamies, vices and impurity, private and public...But there is a clear distinction among unbelievers, as the doctors declare and as we too see from experience, for there are some unbelievers and barbarians whose lack of faith is purely negative. This means that they have never heard of Christ or our faith and doctrine, and thus are called unbelievers because they do not have the faith. They are like those whom we properly call Gentiles, meaning the offspring of people who have not yet been saved through holy baptism. They are like all nations (with the exception of the Jews), who in the beginning, before the advent of Christ, were allowed by the mysterious divine wisdom to fall into idolatry and the vices growing out of it, as appears in the *Acts of the Apostles*, XIV: “Who suffered all the nations to walk in their own ways.”...The lack of faith of such people does not constitute a sin by reason of their not having faith in Christ, but rather is punishment for the sin of our parents, Adam and Eve...Such unbelievers are not condemned except for other sins they commit, those which cannot be pardoned without faith; and this is the opinion of St. Thomas. Thus we call such unbelievers barbarians, and they are so, because through lack of doctrine, faith and the grace which goes with them they cannot but abound in many corrupt customs and suffer great defects in their laws and nations, as already proven for the Romans and others. We should not marvel at the vices and brutalities which they had and may have, but rather at those which they do not have. For according to St. Jerome every man who has no word of his Creator is not a man but a beast, and we should thank the One Who summoned us, before them, out of such dark shadows into the wondrous light of His faith; for our forbears suffered much greater shadows and darkness than do these people...

Chapter CCLXVII. Conclusion of the Explanation of the Several Types of Barbarian Nations

There are other unbelievers and barbarians whose lack of faith is different from that of the foregoing; this is, and is called, the contrary species because of the perverseness shown toward the faith. They have heard the message of the Gospels, refuse to receive it and resist its preaching—it being known that they resist through the pure hatred they bear our faith and the name of Christ. They not only refuse to receive the faith and hear it but battle and persecute it, and were they able, they would destroy it by exalting and spreading their own sect. In these people real faithlessness and its sin achieve their full measure...

Epilogue

From the whole discourse concerning barbarians the following differences seem clear. There are four types of barbarian. Three of them, the first, second, and fourth types, are barbarians *secundum quid*, which is to say, barbarian in that certain peoples have or suffer a certain defect or defects in their customs. This is especially so of those who lack our holy faith and applies to all unbelievers, however intelligent and wise they may be. The first two types may also include Christian nations whenever they stray from reason because of any cruel, harsh, disorderly and ferocious affairs or the furious impact of fearful ideas; this was well shown in Castile in 1520 at the time of the Communities³...Only those barbarians contained in the third species are called and are *simpliciter*, properly and strictly, barbarians, because they are very remote from reason, neither living nor capable of living according to its rules, whether through lack of understanding or from excessive malice and depraved customs. It has been proved that it is expressly of those and not of the others that the Philosopher speaks in Book I of his *Politics* when he refers to barbarians.

...These peoples of the Indies are not of the first category, because all in that one are accidental and not natural (we will not explain here what is natural, or nearly so), and such defects cannot by nature befall a whole nation; for it would be a great monstrosity of human lineage if nature were to err to the extent of making men of one nation furious and foppish, foolish or blind with passion. We have indicated above at various times that nature cannot, for the most part, make mistakes as far as man is concerned; these people can, however, fall into this type accidentally like any others by conducting affairs with comparable disorder. Similarly, these nations do not belong to the third type, as is clear, because they have their kingdoms and kings, armies, well-ruled and orderly states, houses, treasuries and homes; they live under laws, codes and ordinances; in administering justice they prejudice no one. Hence they cannot belong to this type as they are completely the opposite. Nor do they belong to the second subgroup of the fourth type, for they have never harmed or done evil to the Church. They did not know or have word that the Church was in the world or what sort of people Christians were until we went seeking them. They had their lands, provinces, kingdoms and kings—how distant from ours everyone knows—each kingdom and province living among the others in peace. It follows, then, that all these peoples are barbarians in the broad sense, according to some quality; and the primary one is that they are unbelievers. This is only through their lack of our holy faith, which means a purely negative faithlessness, caused by mere ignorance, and is not a sin, as has been declared. Hence they belong, on these grounds, in the fourth category. They can also be included in the second one because of three qualities. One is that they are illiterate, or lack a written language as did the English. The second is that they are most humble peoples and obey their kings in a strange and admirable manner. The third is that they do not speak our language well nor

3. [This refers to an unsuccessful series of outbreaks by the lower classes of the towns, or "Communities," against the nobles and bourgeoisie. The protest was against the privileges accorded to non-Spaniards in the realm under Emperor Charles V.]

260 understand us; but in this we are as barbarian to them as they to us. These, then, are the infinite peoples or nations that we call the western and southern Indies, which were populated for so many thousands of leagues and were discovered by that illustrious Don Christopher Columbus who first broke the isolation that had for so many thousands of years lain upon the Ocean Sea, of which he was most rightfully the first admiral.

THANKS BE TO GOD FOR EVER AND ALWAYS

[Columbia College, *Introduction to Contemporary Civilization in the West*, 3d ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1960), 1:530–539.]