

José de Acosta's Middle Ground: Negotiating the Religious and Economic Motives of the  
Spanish Conquest in the Sixteenth Century

By

Caitlin Filiato

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Professor Elise Bartosik-Vélez, Supervisor  
Professor Amaury Leopoldo Sosa, Reader  
Professor Mariana Past, Reader

## **Abstract**

The Spanish colonial project of the sixteenth century was undergirded by a unique political structure that was critical to its success. I argue that this political structure is characterized by a system of checks and balances that was enforced by the competing religious and economic motives for Spanish presence in the Indies. After establishing the conditions of the political environment, this paper looks at the evangelization projects proposed by important theologians and historical figures of the time to determine how they justified and envisioned the Spanish presence in the Indies. All but one of the figures discussed prioritized either the economic or the religious motives of the conquest, resulting in their failures to adapt to the political environment and the ultimate weakness of their proposals. José de Acosta is the sole theologian to take a middle ground when developing a project for evangelization and colonization that took into account both the religious and economic motivations for Spanish presence in the Indies.

## Introduction

The New World proposed a new dilemma for Spain during the sixteenth century. A moral decision was to be made on the treatment of the natives and the rights of the Spanish in the Americas.<sup>1</sup> In 1504, this dilemma was faced head-on when King Ferdinand sat down with a committee comprised of theologians and lawyers to assess the problem of the Americas.<sup>2</sup> According to Anthony Pagden, “what the crown wished to be told by its advisors was not whether it might rule the Indians... but whether it might legitimately benefit from the fruits of their labour and from the profits to be had from their land, and, more crucially, from what lay beneath their land.”<sup>3</sup> There was no question that the Spanish had the right to rule the natives, as they felt this was granted to them by God, who had appointed them to spread the “divine mission” in order to create a universal empire under the umbrella of Catholic Christianity.<sup>4</sup> The Pope further legitimized this goal with his bulls of 1493 that granted the Spanish rulers not only possession of but also ecclesiastical power in the Indies. Ferdinand and Isabella thereafter took the model of militarized religion that had proved successful in the reconquista and applied it to the Indies.<sup>5</sup> They used the papal bulls as a way to justify their actions, but their need to justify their economic dominance and extraction of resources from the Indies led to a dilemma that highlighted their competing motives. Principal among these was not only the desire to protect and convert the natives, but also the desire to benefit from

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<sup>1</sup> I use the term native to describe all of the indigenous people of the Americas throughout my paper. Although I understand that this potentially erases the differences between different indigenous peoples, the historical figures discussed and the policies that were established referred to the natives as one body of people, regardless of origin or ethnicity, unless otherwise referred to, so I do the same in my work to remain consistent.

<sup>2</sup> Anthony Pagden, *Spanish Imperialism and the Political Imagination* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1990), 14.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. 15.

<sup>4</sup> J.H. Elliott, *Spain and its World 1500-1700* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989), 9.

<sup>5</sup> J.H. Elliott, “Spain and America in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries,” *The Cambridge History of Latin America* 1 (1984): 287-339, 300.

their labor and land.<sup>6</sup> In both theory and practice, these motives – the religious and the economic – were diametrically opposed to each other. This contradiction laid at the heart of Spain's imperial project.

Different political and theological figures approached this contradiction with different priorities. Bartolomé de Las Casas (1474-1566), who greatly influenced policy in the Indies, championed the natives, and tried to convince the Crown to create laws that would prohibit their mistreatment, including their exploitation for economic gain. If Las Casas was almost exclusively focused on promoting the religious motives of the conquest, on the other end of the spectrum were figures like the Viceroy of Perú, Francisco de Toledo (who ruled from 1569 to 1581), and Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda (1494-1573), who both prioritized profit and believed that force was essential to conquer and convert the natives. Another important voice in the debate about the justification for Spain's presence in the Indies is that of José de Acosta (1540-1600), a theologian with more moderate views about Spain's economic and religious activities.

Although Las Casas was able to influence policy, as I discuss below, and Toledo had significant political power as a viceroy, it is clear that neither of their ideologies flourished without controversy in the Americas. I propose that this is due to the inflammatory nature of their proposals, which inherently contradicted the manner in which political power in the Spanish monarchy was exercised. Acosta's flexible ideology, which adapted according to specific circumstances, complemented the government system of the time that emphasized the dispersion of power and checks and balances.<sup>7</sup> The political structure of the monarchy relied on different government agents with competing religious and economic motives to

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid. 310.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. 292.

govern the New World. Rather than the monarch having total control over the implementation of policy in the Indies, there was constant discussion between the different agents, resulting in the sustainability of a structure that managed to forestall any serious rebellions that could fundamentally threaten it. Acosta's policies meshed well with this decentralized structure. He advocated for the creation of a flexible system of conversion, one based on his own typology of the natives. Not only that, Acosta developed a means to integrate both government and religious institutions to carry out his ideology in the New World. In this paper, I argue that Acosta's proposals for the religious conversion of the natives managed to find a middle ground between the competing religious and economic motives of the conquest and to utilize them to his advantage in developing a project that was a viable solution for the seemingly inherent conflict between religious conversion and economic gain in the Indies.

This model of competing motives within the government structure can help us better understand specific approaches to justifying the Spanish presence in the Indies. It provides a viable framework to assess what qualities of governance and justification led to the success and longevity of the Spanish colonial project in the Americas. The characteristics of this project developed an environment that allowed the religious and economic competing motives to keep either side in check and maintain the power of the Spanish monarchy. If a theologian or historical figure's project is able to reflect these same characteristics, then it can function viably as part of the justification of Spanish presence in the Indies and their rights to evangelize. Many scholars have considered the individual historical figures I discuss in this paper, as well as their ideologies.<sup>8</sup> They have also considered the extent to which their

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<sup>8</sup> Regarding scholarship that discusses Las Casas, see: David Brading, "Prophet and Apostle: Bartolomé de las Casas and the Spiritual Conquest of America," *New Blackfriars* 65, no. 774 (1984): 513-534; Daniel Castro,

texts responded to each other. Many scholars have also researched the political structure in the Indies and the role of these different historical figures in forging royal policy.<sup>9</sup> However, I have not found any scholarship that uses the government structure of the Spanish monarchy in the Indies as a means to evaluate the viability of the different historical figures' projects in the Indies. Thus, I utilize research about the nature of political power in the Spanish empire to develop a better understanding of the different historical figures' ideologies and where

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*Another Face of Empire: Bartolomé de Las Casas, Indigenous Rights, and Ecclesiastical Imperialism*, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007); Ignacia Cortés Rojas, *Bartolomé de las Casas y el Parecer de Yucay* (Lima: Universidad Ricardo Palma, 2011); Gregory Murry, "'Tears of the Indians' or Superficial Conversion? José de Acosta, the Black Legend, and Spanish Evangelization in the New World," *The Catholic Historical Review* 99, no. 1 (January 2013): 29-51; Luis N. Rivera-Pagán, "A Prophetic Challenge to the Church: The Last Word of Bartolomé de las Casas," *The Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 24, no. 2 (2003): 216-240; David M. Solodkow, "The Rhetoric of War and Justice in the Conquest of the Americas: Ethnography, Law, and Humanism in Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda and Bartolome de Las Casas," in *Coloniality, Religion, and the Law in the Early Iberian World*, ed. Santa Arias and Raúl Marrero-Fente (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2014), 181-199. For scholarship that discusses Sepúlveda or Toledo, see: Solodkow, "The Rhetoric of War and Justice" and Cortés Rojas, *Bartolomé de las Casas y el Parecer de Yucay*. Regarding scholarship that discusses Acosta, see: Ivonne Del Valle W, "José de Acosta: Colonial Regimes for a Globalized Christian World," in *Coloniality, Religion, and the Law in the Early Iberian World*, ed. Santa Arias and Raúl Marrero-Fente (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2014), 3-26; Ivonne Del Valle, "José de Acosta, Violence and Rhetoric: The Emergence of Colonial Baroque," *Caliope* 18, no. 2 (2013): 46-72; Bill Mitchell, "José de Acosta: 'Siervo de los indios, apóstol de las Américas,'" *Academia*, 1-20; Gregory J. Sheperd, *Jose de Acosta's De Procuranda Indorum Salute: A Call for Evangelical Reforms in Colonial Perú* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing Inc., 2014); David Solodkow, "Una etnografía en tensión: 'Barbarie' y evangelización en la obra de Acosta," *Nuevo Mundo Mundos Nuevos* (2010): 1-15.

<sup>9</sup> Regarding scholarship that discusses the political environment of the Spanish conquest and colonization or specific policies within that time, also see: Tony Ballantyne, "Race and the Webs of Empire," *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History* 2, no. 3 (2001): 1-36; Josep M. Barnadas, "The Catholic Church in Colonial Spanish America," *The Cambridge History of Latin America* 1 (1984): 511-540; Elise Bartosik-Vélez, "Recovered Possibilities: Moving the Seats of Empire from England and Spain to America," *Atlantic Studies* (2018): 1-20; Pedro Cardim, Tamar Herzog, José Javier Ruiz Ibáñez and Gaetano Sabatini, *Polycentric Monarchies: How did Early Modern Spain and Portugal Achieve and Maintain a Global Hegemony?* (Eastbourne: Sussex Academic Press, 2012); José Javier Ruiz Ibáñez and Gaetano Sabatini, "Monarchy as Conquest: Violence, Social Opportunity, and Political Stability in the Establishment of the Hispanic Monarchy," *The Journal of Modern History* 81, no. 3 (September 2009): 501-536; J. H. Elliott, *Spain and its World 1500-1700* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989); J. H. Elliott, "Spain and America"; J. H. Elliott, *Empires of the Atlantic World: Britain and Spain in America 1492-1830* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2006); J. H. Elliott, "A Europe of Composite Monarchies," *Past & Present* 137, no. 1 (1992): 48-71; Regina Grafe, "Empire of Charity: Imperial Legitimacy and Profitable Charity in Colonial Spanish America," *New Global Studies, De Gruyter* 12, no. 2 (July 2018): 131-155; Lewis Hanke, *The Spanish Struggle for Justice in the Conquest of America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1949); Anthony Pagden, *Spanish Imperialism*; Nathan Wachtel, "The Indian and the Spanish Conquest," trans. Julian Jackson, *The Cambridge History of Latin America* 1 (1984): 207-248; John F. Schwaller, "The Ordenanza del Patronazgo in New Spain, 1574-1600," *The Americas* 42, no. 3 (January 1986): 253-274; Timothy J. Yeager "Encomienda or Slavery? The Spanish Crown's Choice of Labor in Sixteenth-Century Spanish America," *The Journal of Economic History* 55, no. 4 (Dec, 1995): 842-859.

those are positioned in relation to the competing religious and economic motives of the Spanish. I then draw my own conclusions about the viability of the different projects based on their relationship with the concepts of competing motives.

### **Historical Context**

It is important to recognize the political and cultural make up of Spain at the time of the early modern era to understand its desire to conquer the Americas and the importance asserting dominance had on the crown. The context of Isabel and Ferdinand's reign is important to understand the conversation between theologians that I discuss which occurred during the reign of Charles I, who then became Charles V (1516-1555) and his son Felipe II (1556-1598). Before Isabella and Ferdinand came to power, Spain was in a state of civil war. Henry IV of Castile ruled for 20 years, and many felt that he was poorly governing the nation.<sup>10</sup> In 1464 the "Liga nobilitaria" rebelled against Henry IV, and once he and Isabel's younger brother died, she was promoted to be the heir to the throne.<sup>11</sup> When it was her time to come into power, Spain was divided into four different kingdoms.<sup>12</sup> Isabel's marriage to Ferdinand, heir to Aragon, marked a new era began in the Spanish monarchy, one characterized by power, domination, and the unification of Spain. Isabel and Ferdinand gave Spain a new identity, they took a poor and divided collection of kingdoms and unified them under one monarchy. Their desire to expand their dominions can be seen as a need to outwardly demonstrate their power and stability. For so long, Spain was not a world power, but that changed after Columbus discovered the New World and the age of European expansion and conquest began.

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<sup>10</sup> Manuel Fernández Álvarez, *Isabel la Católica* (Madrid: Espasa Calpe, 2003), 84, 95.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. 95, 111.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. 111.

Isabel and Ferdinand restored royal authority and were named the Catholic Monarchs, officially tying their power and dominance to the Catholic mission.<sup>13</sup> The monarchs had several goals, primarily driven by this Catholic mission, during her reign that included finishing the reconquista victoriously, the promotion of religious unity, and the political incorporation of the territories of the New World into Castile.<sup>14</sup> After the reconquista, which recaptured the Iberian Peninsula from the Arabs, The Catholic Monarchs began the expulsion, which either forced Jews and Muslims to convert to Christianity or expelled them from Spain.<sup>15</sup> This is just one example of how religious intolerance “constituted the very foundation of a society that would proclaim itself to be harmonious.”<sup>16</sup> One way the religious orthodoxy was enforced was via the Inquisition which started in Spain in 1469. This background of religious intolerance sets the stage for conquest in the Americas where the Inquisition was officially installed a century later. The push for infidels to assimilate in Spain was carried over into the New World, where the Spanish felt it was their duty to convert the natives.<sup>17</sup> Their desire to convert and integrate the natives into the Spanish monarchy was no less fervent than their desire to exploit the natives for economic gain. The Spanish sense of duty to convert non-Christians and their desire for profit developed the competing religious and economic motives in the Indies.

Papal support of the reconquista and its eventual success provided a contemporary framework for Ferdinand and Isabella to use religion as a justification for military action.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Elliott, *Empires of the Atlantic World*, 130.

<sup>14</sup> Cristián García Godoy, “Isabel La Católica. Su destino, su ubicación histórica.” *Revista de historia de América*, n. 199 (enero – junio 1995): 71-80, 72.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. 73.

<sup>16</sup> Ruiz Ibáñez and Sabatini, “Monarchy as Conquest,” 510.

<sup>17</sup> Barnadas, “The Catholic Church in Colonial Spanish America,” 511.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. 511.



The papal bulls' justification of violence perpetuated the concept of a "just war," meaning the Spanish were legitimately called to fight because of the divine mission that God had called them to complete.<sup>19</sup> The concept of a "just war" was defended and justified by several different theologians of the period, including Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda and Francisco de Vitoria (1483-1546). Sepúlveda's argument for a "just war" was based on Aristotle's concept of a "natural slave." Aristotle considered natural slaves to be peoples with no political organization; they are more beast than human, and they violate natural laws.<sup>20</sup> Sepúlveda utilized this concept as a way to view the indigenous people of the Indies. He argued that they were natural slaves, and in their degraded human state they required Spain's help.<sup>21</sup> Vitoria undermined the Aristotelian view that Spain was justified in its conquest of the Americas because of the papal donation. He argued that the Spanish had the right to trade with and preach the Gospel to the natives, and if the natives resisted receiving the Word, the Spanish "had cause for just war."<sup>22</sup>

Isabel and Ferdinand's religious domination in the Indies promoted Spain as a world power and it is important to highlight this shift in the perceptions about Spain's world presence in order to understand the Spanish debates surrounding the justification of its domination of another group of people. The historical record reveals their apparent need to prove themselves as a powerful monarchy and to show their dominance as a "universal empire," a desire that seemed to many to come to fruition when Charles I was elected Holy Roman Emperor in 1519.<sup>23</sup> This election in theory universalized Christian rule (at least in

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<sup>19</sup> Elliott, *Spain and its World 1500-1700*, 9.

<sup>20</sup> Solodkow, "The Rhetoric of War and Justice," 195.

<sup>21</sup> David M. Solodkow, "The Rhetoric of War and Justice," 195.

<sup>22</sup> Elliott, "Spain and America," 305-306.

<sup>23</sup> Elliott, *Empires of the Atlantic World*, 119.

Europe) and the discoveries of the Indies abetted enthusiasm for the goal of achieving a universal empire. It also appeared to further legitimize God's continued favor of the dynasty established by Isabel and Ferdinand.<sup>24</sup> The Christian empire encompassed everyone and created a universal system for the classification of civilizations.<sup>25</sup> The classification seen in this system is mirrored by the one that Acosta employs in his conversion project, as I discuss below. Spain also became more economically dominant as a result of its commercial activities in the Indies, which came to be tightly controlled by the Casa de Contratación in Seville.<sup>26</sup>

Spain's desire to become a world power further emphasizes the contradictions that were at play in the royal thought process regarding the Indies. In general, the development of an empire relied on a sense of a collective identity, which was developed in the Spanish monarchy in part through religious intolerance. However their desire to acquire new territory was in some ways counterproductive to the unitary tendencies of Spain at the moment as it resulted in the acquisition of new vassals with a variety of religious beliefs.<sup>27</sup> Within the New World, Spanish religious motives led to the protection of innocent natives from the violence of Spaniards on the ground, but the Crown's desire for profit was also strong. It sought to utilize cheap Indian labor in order to reap high rents from American goods. The religious desire of the Spanish to protect and convert the natives conflicted with their desire to exploit the natives for economic gain. This dilemma led to the question of whether or not the Spanish were justified in exploiting the natives for economic means. As alluded to previously, there was a wide spectrum of responses to this issue. The remainder of this study

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<sup>24</sup> Elliott, *Empires of the Atlantic World*, 130.

<sup>25</sup> Del Valle W, "Colonial Regimes," 7.

<sup>26</sup> Elliott, "Spain and America," 290.

<sup>27</sup> Elliott, "A Europe of Composite Monarchies," 51-52.

considers some of these different approaches, taking into account the extent to which they reflected the inherent flexibility of the political structure of the Spanish monarchy.

In regard to the prominent historical figures of the time whose ideas I will be examining, it is important to understand that their ideas worked in conversation with one another and must be evaluated as such. An important point to begin considering the century-long conversation about the justification of the conversion and colonization of the natives in the Indies is the enactment of the New Laws in 1542. The New Laws, influenced by Bartolomé de Las Casas and enacted by Charles V, restricted many of the rights of the Spanish in the Americas. These laws were highly controversial and elicited strong opposition among Spaniards in the Indies. Two voices in the vehement reply to the New Laws were those of Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda and Francisco de Toledo. Sepúlveda engaged with Las Casas in 1550 in the famous debates in Valladolid about the nature of the indigenous people and the legitimacy of the Spanish conquest. More than 20 years later in 1571, Toledo's opinion was represented in an anonymous manuscript, the *Paracer de Yucay*, that widely circulated in Perú and openly opposed Las Casas' ideology. I am bringing these instances of reaction up to demonstrate the importance in understanding that these figures interacted, and their writings are intertextual, with some responding to the others. The debate regarding the legitimacy of Spanish rule in the Americas and how evangelization should proceed was an ongoing discussion that constantly evolved, similar to the constant evolution of the political structure of the Spanish monarchy.

Las Casas not only was fundamental in starting the debate within the Spanish world about the Indies, but he also opened up the discussion internationally. He helped develop what became known as the Black Legend, which is based on his portrayal of the cruelty of

the Spanish toward the natives, whom he characterized as docile, intelligent, and willing to adopt Christianity. Spain's enemies, such as the English Protestants, appropriated this characterization of the Spanish as "intolerant, cruel, and violent religious fanatics."<sup>28</sup> The *Parecer de Yucay*, specifically cites the Black Legend and its portrayal of the Spanish in the Indies as a means to discredit Las Casas, providing an example of how texts about Spain's presence in the Indies often responded in conversation with one another.

## **Government**

The monarchy of Spain during the sixteenth century can be characterized as a web-like structure.<sup>29</sup> While empires have previously been understood as hierarchical, centralized structures, they have more recently been defined as a "complex agglomeration of overlapping webs," and the Spanish monarchy is no exception.<sup>30</sup> In this web-like empire, an overarching monarch governed a conglomerate of separate realms, each with its own unique laws and traditions.<sup>31</sup> J.H. Elliott describes this political typology as a "composite monarchy," which incorporated the different realms under one central umbrella, while allowing each to remain distinct.<sup>32</sup> The book *Polycentric Monarchies: How did Early Modern Spain Achieve and Maintain a Global Hegemony?* offers a recent interpretation of the concept of "composite monarchy." The editors define a polycentric monarchy as allowing "for the existence of many different interlinked centers that interacted not only with the king but also among themselves, thus actively participating in forging the polity."<sup>33</sup> What is especially important to understand about this definition of a polycentric structure is that it is constantly shifting

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<sup>28</sup> Gregory Murry, "'Tears of the Indians,'" 30.

<sup>29</sup> Tony Ballantyne, "Race and the Webs of Empire," 2.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> J.H. Elliott, *Empires of the Atlantic World*, 120.

<sup>32</sup> Cardim, et al., *Polycentric Monarchies*, 4.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid. 4.

and mobile, and this helped make it both durable and flexible.<sup>34</sup> In the case of the Spanish monarchy, the adaptability of the structure allowed the multi-nodal political system to last as long as it did without major contention.

The polycentric nature of the Spanish monarchy is characterized in part by the heavy reliance of the Crown on intermediate players dispersed throughout its large geographical expanse.<sup>35</sup> A variety of functionaries were assigned specific areas of control within the monarchy. Each of these held the others accountable and often had conflicts of interest that allowed a constant “check” on the exercise of local power. The most important of the government officials was the viceroy. In the sixteenth century there were two viceroys in the Indies, one in New Spain and one in Perú, and each was the principal representative of the king. Other important agents were the *gobernadores*, who had the right to dispose of Indians and land. Many initially started out as conquistadors, but their positions changed to more administrative roles once the era of conquest was complete. Another important system in place were the *audencias*, or the judicial system. The *oidores* within the *audencias* served to ensure that everyone followed the laws.<sup>36</sup>

In Spain, the one main body that advised the crown and governed the Indies was called the Council of the Indies, created in 1523, and in theory it had equal power to the councils of any other realm of Spain.<sup>37</sup> The Council of the Indies was in charge of bringing to the king any concerns regarding the Indies and transmitting the information on policy back to the Americas. The Council of the Indies was responsible for “government, trade, defence and

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid. 4.

<sup>35</sup> Grafe, “Empire of Charity,” 135.

<sup>36</sup> Elliott, “Spain and America,” 292-296.

<sup>37</sup> Elliott, “Spain and America,” 290.

the administration of justice in Spanish America.”<sup>38</sup> It also administered the ecclesiastical control of the monarch. For example, the Council was responsible for enforcing the *pase regio*, which required that all correspondence between the Pope and the Indies be examined first by the Council for approval before going to its final destination.<sup>39</sup>

The functions and power of the Council of the Indies might seem to indicate that power within the monarchy was centralized; however this was not the case. Recent research has shown that even given the role of the Council, the monarchy as a whole was characterized by a “high degree of decentralization.”<sup>40</sup> In practice, the Spanish monarchy relied on the participation of local elites, who actively checked each other depending on their motives.<sup>41</sup> The crown often pleased the local elites, by aligning its interests with theirs, in order to assure their continued participation in and support for the monarchy. Elliott argues, “[s]trong loyalty to the home community – the sixteenth-century *patria* – was not inherently incompatible with the extension of loyalty to a wider community, so long as the advantages of political union could be considered, at least by influential groups in society as outweighing the drawbacks.”<sup>42</sup> Thus, as long as the “wider community” of the Spanish empire was aligning its interests with the interests of the “home community” of the local elites, the empire could still reap the benefits from its peripheral territories.

Discussing in economic terms the power of local elites within the structure of the empire, Regina Grafe emphasizes that although the Spanish empire was extractive, meaning that it took resources and goods from the Indies, this was not entirely a directive of Madrid.

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<sup>38</sup> Elliott, *Empires of the Atlantic World*, 122.

<sup>39</sup> Rivera-Pagán, “A Prophetic Challenge to the Church,” 227-228.

<sup>40</sup> Barosik-Velez, “Recovered possibilities,” 2.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid. 2.

<sup>42</sup> Elliott, “A Europe of Composite Monarchies,” 58.

Rather, she argues, “extraction in Spanish America was a political practice of local elites first and foremost rather than of a faraway imperial power.”<sup>43</sup> In essence, local elites were allowed to maintain and improve their financial status in order to be pacified. Grafe stresses the longevity of such a system, writing that “in polycentric imperial structures governance practices aimed at reducing potential opposition by local elites were the better strategy for guaranteeing the survival of empire and hegemonic rule.”<sup>44</sup> It becomes evident that in the highly decentralized structure of the Spanish monarchy power and resources were given to the local elites in order to ensure their compliance with the Spanish monarchy and the longevity of the empire. Elliott best describes this system:

It is this fragmented character of authority, both in church and state, which is one of the most striking characteristics of Spanish colonial America. Superficially, the crown’s power was absolute, both in church and state... But in practice there was so much jockeying for power between different interest groups – between viceroys and audiencias, viceroys and bishops, secular clergy and regular clergy, and between the governors and the governed – that unwelcomed laws, while deferentially regarded because of the source from which they emanated, were not obeyed, while authority itself was filtered, mediated and dispersed.<sup>45</sup>

The jockeying of power developed a system of checks and balances and created a system that remained successful for many years. “For all the flaws and defects in the system,” Elliott continues, “the built-in conflicts between competing authorities, the numerous opportunities for procrastination, obstruction and graft – this creation of a ‘State of Indies’ was by any measure a remarkable achievement, not least because it seems to have defied successfully the normal laws of time and space.”<sup>46</sup> While its sprawling geographical expanse made it difficult

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<sup>43</sup> Grafe, “Empire of Charity,” 145.

<sup>44</sup> Grafe, “Empire of Charity,” 145.

<sup>45</sup> Elliott, “Spain and America,” 302-303.

<sup>46</sup> Elliott, *Empires of the Atlantic World*, 129.

to govern the empire, its shape – and through that, how power was exercised – facilitated its survival.

The structure of political power in the Indies allowed for an environment that permitted conflict and disagreement with official policy, as demonstrated by the concept of “*se obedece pero no se cumple*.” Policies that the crown would send to the Indies were often outdated and overall not applicable to the times because communication between Madrid and its representatives in the Indies was often delayed by one and even two years due to the difficulties of transatlantic travel.<sup>47</sup> In addition, the Council of the Indies was stationed in Spain and through the years of its existence only seven of the 249 people on the Council of the Indies had American experience.<sup>48</sup> Between the communication delay and lack of American experience of the Council members who made policies, officials in the Indies sometimes considered official mandates to be inapplicable to the local situation. In this case:

an official or an individual receiving a royal order which he considered inappropriate or unjust would symbolically place it on his head while pronouncing the ritual words that he would obey but not comply: *se acata* (or *se obedece*) *pero no se cumple*. This simultaneously demonstrated respect for the royal authority while asserting the inapplicability of royal orders in this particular instance.<sup>49</sup>

Essentially, officials in the Americas would sometimes ignore royal mandates. This allowed for both the autonomy of local officials and the maintenance of respect for royal authority. This also speaks to the extent to which governing in the Indies was situational. If the policy did not apply to the situation, local functionaries would not enforce it, ensuring that the best was being done for the area. In this sense, checks were set on the crown when local elites blocked a policy from Madrid that was not applicable to the situation.

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<sup>47</sup> Elliott, *Empires of the Atlantic World*, 129.

<sup>48</sup> Elliott, “Spain and America,” 291.

<sup>49</sup> Elliott, *Empires of the Atlantic World*, 132.



The decentralized Spanish monarchy allowed for the survival of the simultaneous competing motives of the colonial project – religious and economic. As discussed previously, the flexibility of the political structure was the root of its strength. As seen in the “se obedece pero no se cumple” concept, there was mutual respect between the monarchs and the local elites. The former allowed the latter to ensure the policies were relevant to the situation, and the latter were pleased enough by the former to continue to support them economically. In essence, “the very looseness of the association was in a sense its greatest strength.”<sup>50</sup> The relationship between the local elites and the crown allowed for the elites to have privileges while still maintaining the benefits of being a part of the Spanish empire.

### **Bartolomé de Las Casas**

While Bartolomé de Las Casas is remembered today as a “defender of the Indians,” in his day he was a controversial figure surrounding the colonization of the Americas. His American experience began in 1502 in Española with his time as a grantee of the *encomienda* system.<sup>51</sup> However after a crisis of conscience twelve years after his arrival in the Indies, he realized his own culpability in the harsh treatment of the natives and changed his life’s mission. His legacy in the Americas is not characterized by his time as an *encomendero*, but rather by his fight to destroy the systematic domination and exploitation of the natives by the Spanish in the Indies. His argument is clear: the only reason that the Spanish should be in the Indies is that God has a fixed number of souls to save, and it was Spain’s divinely sanctioned mission to save the souls of the New World. Las Casas felt that this must be done solely

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<sup>50</sup> Elliott, “A Europe of Composite Monarchies,” 69.

<sup>51</sup> “An *encomienda* was an organization in which a Spaniard received a restricted set of property rights over Indian labor from the Crown whereby the Spaniard (an *encomendero*) could extract tribute (payment of a portion of output) from the Indians in the form of goods, metals, money, or direct labor services. In exchange, *encomenderos* provided the Indians protection and instruction in the Catholic faith, promised to defend the area, and paid a tax to the Crown.” Yeager “Encomienda or Slavery?” 843.

through peaceful methods, without the use of force. He was able to influence King Charles V to create the New Laws of 1542 that attempted to protect the natives by taking steps to dismantle the encomienda system.<sup>52</sup>

Las Casas felt that the only justification of the Spanish to claim possession of the Indies was their right to evangelize.<sup>53</sup> He characterized the natives as “docile and intelligent” and ready to adopt Christianity.<sup>54</sup> This characterization of the natives further bolstered Las Casas’ argument that the Spanish had no right to economic gain from the natives, and he worked tirelessly to advocate for their fair treatment.<sup>55</sup> He respected the natives’ ability to choose religion for themselves, but he also felt that there was no other viable option besides Christianity.

The New Laws of 1542 were influenced by the ideology of Las Casas and were promulgated by Charles V. The laws provided “regulations so sweeping and so strongly in favor of the Indians that Las Casas himself might well have drafted them.”<sup>56</sup> The New Laws forbade the creation of new encomiendas and ensured that existing encomiendas would be passed on to the crown when the encomendero died, rather than his next of kin.<sup>57</sup> They also stipulated that the Council of the Indies would meet every day and ensured the just conduct

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<sup>52</sup> Brading, “Prophet and Apostle,” 515.

<sup>53</sup> Del Valle, “José de Acosta, Violence and Rhetoric,” 56.

<sup>54</sup> Gregory Murry, “Tears of the Indians,” 30.

<sup>55</sup> For example, Castro states, “As Gustavo Gutierrez points out in his examination of Las Casas and his Christian mission in the Americas: ‘From the beginning of his struggle in defense of the Indian, Las Casas considers that the only thing that can justify the presence of Christians in the Indies is the announcement of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.’ That is, as long as the Spaniards intended to preach the Christian Gospel among the indigenous infidels, then their presence should be tolerated and welcomed.” Castro, *Another Face of Empire: Bartolomé de Las Casas*, 7.

<sup>56</sup> Hanke, *The Spanish Struggle*, 91.

<sup>57</sup> Elliott, *Empires of the Atlantic World*, 132.

of the council members.<sup>58</sup> The New Laws also institutionalized the new viceregal system.<sup>59</sup> Essentially the New Laws reduced some of the rights of the Spaniards in the Indies, required just conduct by members of the Council of the Indies, and promoted the equal treatment of the natives. One particular regulation was: “ordenamos y mandamos, que de aquí adelante por ninguna causa de guerra ni otra alguna, aunque sea so título de rebelion, ni por rescate, ni de otra manera, no se pueda hacer esclavo indio alguno, y queremos que sean tratados como vasallos nuestros de la corona de Castilla, pues lo son.”<sup>60</sup> This regulation not only outlawed the enslavement of the natives, but requires that they be treated equally, like any other vassal in the Spanish empire. Las Casas fought against the exploitation of the natives and these laws created new checks on the cruelty and mistreatment by the Spanish. Charles V was conscious of the cruel and violent representations of the Spaniards in the Indies circulating in other countries, which further prompted him to enact the New Laws and attempt to adjust Spain’s image.<sup>61</sup> The New Laws can also be seen as the crown’s attempt to maintain power in the Indies. The number of vassals was decreasing due to the diseases brought over by the Spaniards and the cruel work conditions that the natives were subjected to by the Spaniards. Attempts to stop the cruelty of the encomienda system, like the New Laws, were, in effect, an attempt to protect Spain’s dominion in the Indies.

Although the New Laws were enacted, the dominant response to them in the Indies was “se obedece pero no se cumple.” As soon as the laws were promulgated, they faced

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<sup>58</sup> “Council members should not be attorneys or officials before the court, that those officers should not accept bribes or engage in private business, that they should take special care for the preservation and increase of the Indians.”

Lewis Hanke, *The Spanish Struggle*, 91.

<sup>59</sup> Elliott, “Spain and America,” 294.

<sup>60</sup> Martín Fernández de Navarrete, ed. *Colección de documentos inéditos para la historia de España* (Madrid: Imprenta de Miguel Ginesta, 1879) 159.

<sup>61</sup> There are various European accounts that provide a visual depiction of Spanish cruelty such as Spaniards killing babies and dismembering human beings. Hanke, *The Spanish Struggle*, 90.

immediate backlash by Spaniards in the Indies. The most notable is the revolt by Gonzalo Pizarro in Perú.<sup>62</sup> Pizarrists already were creating a tense environment in the Indies, but once the New Laws were enacted, their response was explosive.<sup>63</sup> Pizarro and his followers used the fact that the laws that were enacted did not represent the views of all Spaniards residing in the Indies as a justification for going to war to try to win an independent Perú. Pizarro was defeated in battle, but the fact that there was such an uproar over the New Laws demonstrates the controversial nature of what was essentially Las Casas' ideology.<sup>64</sup> The New Laws prioritized the needs of the natives, which was perhaps important from a religious perspective, but not in the end viable in the Indies. The Indies were essentially a political unit that was part of the Spanish monarchy, which was propped up by competing motives, both religious and economic, that worked to disperse power among multiple political and religious actors. The New Laws threatened the economic power of Spaniards in the Indies and created unequal support for the religious goals of the monarchy. Thus, there was a strong reaction, because the "se obedece pero no se cumple" policy was not enough to offset the disequilibrium that had been set in motion by the New Laws. Seeing this strong reaction, Charles V reverted to more conciliatory practices.<sup>65</sup>

If the New Laws were not viable in practice, neither were Las Casas' attempts to create an ideal community of natives and Spaniards. Las Casas himself twice attempted to develop communities that lived based on his ideologies, and both attempts failed. The first was at Cumaná in northern Venezuela, where Las Casas tried, before the New Laws were

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<sup>62</sup> Pizarro was the brother of Francisco Pizarro, who was the governor and had been assassinated. Gonzalo Pizarro took his place. Elliott, *Empires of the Atlantic World*, 132.

<sup>63</sup> Elliott, "Spain and America," 307.

<sup>64</sup> Elliott, *Empires of the Atlantic World*, 132-133.

<sup>65</sup> Elliott, "Spain and America," 307.

enacted, to implement the proposals that he was giving to the king. This attempt showed his surprising lack of awareness of the environment in the Indies. His goal was a “project of peaceful colonisation, justified by the prospect of some profit but animated by the long-term expectation of the conversion and purification of the mainland Indians.”<sup>66</sup> He wanted to trade with the natives in the area and allow the Spanish to participate in agriculture in order to gain profits for the crown, however this project failed. Las Casas was blind to the fact that the Spaniards had previously raided the mainland and enslaved some natives, antagonizing them against the Spanish. The Spanish were forced to abandon Cumaná in 1520 due to the understandable violence of the natives.<sup>67</sup> Las Casas’ second attempt to implement his ideology occurred after the New Laws were enacted, when he was assigned to be bishop of Chiapa to ensure their implementation there. Las Casas did so without leniency, and was immediately challenged by the settler community. He did not allow “untrustworthy” clergy to complete their duties, which led to an uproar from the citizens of Chiapa who were unable to take part in Easter rituals. The opposition to Las Casas was so strong that he returned to Spain a little over a year after he began his work in this diocese.<sup>68</sup>

Both of these cases exemplify Las Casas’ lack of understanding about the political and religious environment in the Indies. His proposals lack a sensitivity to the fundamental dynamic of the competing religious and economic motives at work in the Spanish imperial project. Rather than looking at the issues with a mindset that understood the environment facing the natives and the Spaniards in the Indies, he chose to remove himself and focus solely on his own goals, the evangelization of the natives through peaceful measures, as if

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<sup>66</sup> Brading, “Prophet and Apostle,” 519.

<sup>67</sup> Brading, “Prophet and Apostle,” 519.

<sup>68</sup> Brading, “Prophet and Apostle,” 529.

they could exist in a vacuum.<sup>69</sup> This was not viable in the Indies because of the competing economic goals of the Spanish colonizers. Las Casas failed to develop an ideology that possessed characteristics similar to those of the Spanish political structure, adaptability and the acknowledgement of the competing motives in the Indies. His policies were too heavily based on religious motives, rather than taking more of a middle ground that considered both the religious and economic motivations for the occupation of the Indies.

Las Casas wrote a letter to Pope Pius V in 1566 in which this greater lack of awareness is evident. This letter, written prior to his death later that year, focused on Spain's religious duties in the Indies and it demonstrates how he challenged the systems of the Spanish monarchy.<sup>70</sup> The letter serves as a brief summary of his desires for the Indies and provides for a call to action for the Pope to right the "wrongs" of the Spaniards in the Indies. For example, he writes, "I humbly beseech that a decree be enacted in which are declared excommunicated and anathema, all those who affirm that wars against the infidels are just if waged to combat idolatry, or for the convenience of spreading the Gospel, specially in regard to those infidels who have never injured or are not injuring us."<sup>71</sup> Here he is pleading directly with the Pope that a war not be waged against the infidels as the infidels are docile and undeserving of cruel treatment. Another important aspect of this letter is that it disregards the *pase regio* established in the Indies. Rather than have the letter first go through the Council of the Indies, Las Casas sends the letter directly to the Pope, disobeying the regulations in

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<sup>69</sup> Castro takes this argument to the extreme when stating Las Casas "throughout his career was unable, or unwilling, to get close to the natives beyond his self-appointed role of provincial protector of the colonized." He argues that Las Casas was so unaware of the situation in the Indies, that he was unable to become close with the people he was trying to help. Castro, *Another Face of Empire: Bartolomé de Las Casas*, 14-15.

<sup>70</sup> Rivera-Pagán, "A Prophetic Challenge to the Church," 227.

<sup>71</sup> Rivera-Pagán, "A Prophetic Challenge to the Church," 239-240.

place.<sup>72</sup> This act speaks to Las Casas' fundamental challenge to the systems of the Spanish monarchy, but it also suggests his lack of a full understanding of the political environment.

Although Las Casas was able to influence royal policy to the extent that the New Laws were issued in 1542, these were never fully realized or changed the fundamental course of how things were done in the Indies, meaning his ideas in their entirety were never successfully translated to policy. If they had been fully implemented, the laws would have "realized Las Casas' ideals," but because they failed to properly acknowledge economic factors, the laws never implemented real change.<sup>73</sup> It is evident that Las Casas solely supported the religious motivation of evangelization in the New World. Rather than allowing a space for the competing motives of the Spanish, Las Casas imposed religion as the dominating force in the Indies, restricting the powers of those who supported economic gain and disrupting the equilibrium that the competing motives provided, meaning that his ideology remained an ethereal force, one that had, in the end, only a symbolic impact on reality.

### **Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda**

The ideas of Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda were fundamentally opposed to those of Las Casas' ideas falling on the opposite side of the spectrum, as they focused on the motivation for economic gain in the Indies. Like Las Casas, Sepúlveda also failed to consider the full reality of the competing motives of the Spanish occupation of the Indies, and his project and ideology therefore did not provide lasting changes in the Indies. His beliefs were founded on the Aristotelian concept of a "natural slave," and they helped further legitimize Spanish

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<sup>72</sup> Rivera-Pagán, "A Prophetic Challenge to the Church," 227-228.

<sup>73</sup> Elliott, "Spain and America," 307.

occupation and exploitation of the Indies which helped him rationalize Spanish dominance and exploitation of the Indies.<sup>74</sup> Sepúlveda argued that the Spanish must fill a paternalistic role for the natives, as they possessed a diminished rational capacity.<sup>75</sup> He believed that violence against the natives was justified, especially when the Spaniards were faced with force.<sup>76</sup> Sepúlveda felt that it was the settlers who needed to perform the mission of colonization, rather than the crown and missionaries as Las Casas proposed.<sup>77</sup> Sepúlveda is commonly interpreted in relation to Las Casas in their famous debates in Valladolid in 1550 about the justification for Spanish occupation in the Indies.

The debates in Valladolid in 1550 emphasize the polarization of thought about the natives of the Indies in the Spanish world. They centered on the proof of bestiality (which would prove whether the natives were “humans” and deserving of equal treatment) in order to justify “natural slavery.” Las Casas worked tirelessly to prove that the natives were civilized, while Sepúlveda worked to ensure that the natives were seen as barbarians and beasts.<sup>78</sup> Sepúlveda’s views are summarized in *Democrates secundus* (also known as *Democrates alter*), a manuscript that was never granted a license to be published and circulated in 1554-1555. Written in response to the New Laws, *Democrates secundus* defended the crown’s rights in America.<sup>79</sup> With regard to each of the four causes of just war in the Indies, Sepúlveda emphasizes the idea that the natives were incompetent and undeserving of the right to rule themselves. The first cause he discusses is the anthropological cause, which means that the natives are barbarians and uneducated. The

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<sup>74</sup> Pagden, *Spanish Imperialism*, 28.

<sup>75</sup> Elliott, “Spain and America,” 308.

<sup>76</sup> Solodkow, “The Rhetoric of War and Justice,” 185.

<sup>77</sup> Elliott, “Spain and America,” 309.

<sup>78</sup> Elliott, “Spain and America,” 309.

<sup>79</sup> Pagden, *Spanish Imperialism*, 27.



second cause is that idolatry and cannibalism are punishable. The third cause is the tutelary cause or the defense of the innocent and the fourth cause is Christian evangelization with force if necessary.<sup>80</sup> It is important to note that this manuscript was not allowed to be published. This is telling of the fact that it was not aligned with the systems in place at the time. Since the manuscript did not consider the religious motives for occupation of the Indies, it can be assumed that there was religious pushback against the publication, demonstrating how it played into the checks and balances system, rather than utilizing it to its advantage. Further, it shows that Sepúlveda's ideology only bolstered the Spaniards' claim to the Indies and diminished the legitimization of religious power, seeking peaceful means of conversion. The *Democrates secundus* did outline faith as the fourth cause for a just war in the Indies. However, Sepúlveda uses religion and evangelization as a justification for violence in the Indies, not as a motivation for the occupation of the Indies. In essence, he is using a religious concept in order to legitimize the motivation for economic gain. Therefore, he is not utilizing both of the motivations to his advantage because he is promoting economic gain more. Sepúlveda provided too much support for the economic motive, and his use of the religious motive was only to further the economic one. He does not manage to negotiate a middle path between the competing economic and religious motives of the conquest because his appeal to the religious motive is not checking the economic one, it is merely furthering economic goals.

Sepúlveda's ideas were supported by the *encomenderos*, who saw them as promoting their rights in the Indies.<sup>81</sup> It is evident that Sepúlveda's ideology legitimized the negative

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<sup>80</sup> Solodkow, "The Rhetoric of War and Justice," 195-196.

<sup>81</sup> Elliott, "Spain and America," 308.

perceptions of Spaniards regarding the natives' capabilities and promoted the settlers' desires to exploit them. In conversation, Sepúlveda and Las Casas' ideologies worked as checks and balances on one another, mirroring the checks and balances at work in the governing structure of the Spanish monarchy and the competing motives, both religious and economic, of the greater colonial enterprise. Individually, they provided too much support for one of the motives, either religious or economic, which helps explain the fact that neither ended up serving as the base of official policy in the Indies.

### **Francisco de Toledo**

Francisco de Toledo was the Viceroy of Perú from 1569 to 1581. Similar to Sepúlveda, Toledo tended to support more violent efforts to subdue, colonize, and convert the natives. Toledo created several reforms during his time as viceroy. He wanted to maintain full control of the lives of the natives, specifically through two reforms: the *reducciones* and the *mita*. The *reducciones* were forced resettlements of the natives into villages and the *mita* was a forced labor system that made natives work in construction zones and mines.<sup>82</sup> It was important to Toledo that the legitimacy of the Incan rulers was destroyed to ensure that there was no challenge to Spain's authority.<sup>83</sup> His ideas directly contradicted those of the crown and the New Laws of 1542. Toledo, therefore, does not fit the description of a typical viceroy. As stated above, viceroys were in theory supposed to reflect the ideas of and represent of the king in the Indies, however Toledo disagreed with official policy.

The *Parecer de Yucay* is an anonymous manuscript that "corresponde al proyecto politico del virrey Francisco de Toledo."<sup>84</sup> Recent scholarship suggests that while Toledo

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<sup>82</sup> Sheperd, *Jose de Acosta's De Procuranda Indorum Salute*, 13.

<sup>83</sup> Cortés Rojas, *Bartolomé de las Casas y el Parecer de Yucay*, 110.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid. 19.

was not the author, his cousin, Fray García de Toledo, wrote the document. García de Toledo clearly understood Toledo's project and criticism of Las Casas.<sup>85</sup> The anonymity of the author can be assumed as a means to protect the author from royal sanctions, as a criticism of Las Casas was seen as a criticism of official policy.<sup>86</sup>

An important aspect of Toledo's beliefs that contradict those of Las Casas was his efforts to delegitimize the Incan rulers. In 1572, Toledo beheaded Tupac Amaru, the leader of the Incas in order to subdue them and more easily integrate them into the Spanish monarchy.<sup>87</sup> Toledo worked to learn about the history of the Incas in order to discredit them, and did so in several ways. He researched their claim to power and the violence they used to get it, which furthered his point that the Spanish should have the right to do the same.<sup>88</sup> This argument is expressed in the *Parecer de Yucay*, which asserts, "los Ingas fueron tiranos recientes" to justify the violence used by the Spaniards in their conquest of the Indies.<sup>89</sup> The manuscript cites the Incans' recent violence in their process of conquest as a means to justify Spanish violence in the Indies. The *Parecer de Yucay* also proposes that Incan rule poses competition to Spanish legitimacy in the Indies: "Diciendo que estos Ingas eran perfectos reyes y señores legítimos, ataba acá las manos a su Majestad."<sup>90</sup> The *Parecer de Yucay* argues that by giving legitimacy to the Incas, the Spanish monarchy would be restricting its power in the Indies. In arguing this point, the *Parecer de Yucay* predicts that granting legitimacy to the Incas will cause "Daño a los vasallos españoles de Indias."<sup>91</sup> If the natives

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid. 55.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid. 91.

<sup>87</sup> Wachtel, "The Indian and the Spanish Conquest," 240.

<sup>88</sup> Sheperd, *Jose de Acosta's De Procuranda Indorum Salute*, 37-38.

<sup>89</sup> Cortés Rojas, *Bartolomé de las Casas y el Parecer de Yucay*, 129.

<sup>90</sup> Cortés Rojas, *Bartolomé de las Casas y el Parecer de Yucay*, 117.

<sup>91</sup> Cortés Rojas, *Bartolomé de las Casas y el Parecer de Yucay*, 125.

are permitted to maintain power, they will cause harm to the Spanish imposing on their lands. Like Sepúlveda, Toledo makes the case that the natives are unable to rule, but rather than use their state as a “natural slave” to justify Spanish violence, Toledo refers to the violence of the natives as the justification of Spanish violence or, as he would sometimes refer to it, as their “pacification” through any means necessary.

As with Sepúlveda, the *Parecer de Yucay* also functions as a response to the ideology of Las Casas. Again we see the conversational nature of the writings and ideologies of the time that work to compete with one another for legitimacy. In the *Parecer de Yucay*, the anonymous author attempts to discredit Las Casas by titling a section: “La causa del engaño fue Fray Bartolomé De Las Casas, y sólo él ...”<sup>92</sup> The section goes on to discredit the ideology of Las Casas and his legitimization of the natives. The ideologies of Las Casas and Toledo work in tandem to compete with one another. In the end, neither set of ideas was able to instill an impactful change on the Indies. They played into the environment in the Indies that allowed for competing motives to occur, rather than utilizing it to their advantage.

### **Comparing Las Casas with Sepúlveda and Toledo**

Although the previous three historical figures had some influence over policy and beliefs in the Americas, none were successful at developing an ideology or policy that was successful in creating long-term significant change in the Indies. While both Toledo and Sepúlveda believed that the Spanish were completely justified in their presence in the Indies and that they had legitimate rights to everything there, Las Casas took the opposite stance, saying that they were justified solely in evangelization, and not in exploiting or harming the natives. While both sides of the argument presented a plethora of evidence supporting their

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<sup>92</sup> Cortés Rojas, *Bartolomé de las Casas y el Parecer de Yucay*, 107.

opinions, and Las Casas even influenced policy to be enacted in his favor, neither saw their ideas play out in the Americas to a long-lasting effect. I argue that this is because they did not frame their proposals or mindsets in a way that was consistent with how political power functioned in practice in the Indies. The decentralized structure of political power that was put in place by the Spanish crown was characterized by its system of checks and balances that never allowed a single entity to get too powerful. Each institution had its own specific powers, which often challenged the interests of the other institutions. A parallel can be drawn between two opposing ideological parties, whose extreme interests are kept in check by the other side, so that neither ideology can gain too much momentum in the Americas. Alone, each opposing ideology is unviable in the Indies, because it supported either the religious or the economic motive at the expense of the other, rather than utilizing the checks and balances in place to its advantage.

The Spanish monarchy allowed for competing motives, and while each of the individuals whose proposals I have discussed stood rigid in their ideals, their policies and writings reflecting that, ultimately resulting in their inability to be viable in the long-term. Rather than acknowledging the full scope of the political and religious environment, Las Casas, Sepúlveda, and Toledo can be thought of as perhaps not allowing sufficient space for how opposing ideas might be incorporated into their own. Thus, their ideas competed with one another, perpetuating this system of checks and balances that cancel each other out. Instead of cultivating an environment that allowed for the competition of motives within it, they tried to delegitimize the other and disallow this competition. This is in contrast with José de Acosta, whom I discuss next. Acosta utilized compromise and a situational approach to his advantage, creating a system that served as a viable solution.

## José de Acosta

José de Acosta was a Jesuit theologian who was taught by Francisco de Vitoria at the Salamanca School. He arrived in Perú in 1572 and was appointed Jesuit Provincial of Peru in 1576. He completed his time as Jesuit Provincial in 1581 and returned to Spain in 1586.<sup>93</sup> Acosta's ideology regarding the natives and the manner in which they should be treated in the Indies is outlined in his *De procuranda Indorum salute*. Acosta himself states the purpose of the work in his *dedicatoria*:

La causa principal que movió a emprender esta tarea fue comprobar la múltiple variedad y discrepancia de opiniones en torno a los asuntos de Indias y la desconfianza de los más en la salvación de los indios: además, la novedad y complejidad de muchos acontecimientos, que oponían o al menos parecían oponerse, a la verdad del Evangelio. Total, que me puse a estudiar con ahínco todo este problema, y a examinar con interés apasionante cuál era la situación real, al margen de todo partidismo.<sup>94</sup>

It is evident from this statement of purpose that Acosta recognizes the current state of competing ideas that are at play in the Indies, the first being his reference to the “discrepancia de opiniones en torno a los asuntos de Indias.” In this phrase he acknowledges that there is a debate occurring in the Spanish empire surrounding the issues in the Indies. The second reflection on the competing ideas in the Indies is that “acontecimientos, que oponían o al menos parecían oponerse, a la verdad del Evangelio,” which demonstrates his understanding that what is happening on the ground is contradictory to the Gospel. He concludes this passage by stating he will be objective in his investigation of the real situation in the Indies. This is important to note because unlike Las Casas or Toledo, who openly

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<sup>93</sup> Mitchell, “José de Acosta: ‘Siervo,’” 4, 11.

<sup>94</sup> José de Acosta. *De Procuranda Indorum Salute*, (Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 1984), 4.

demonstrated bias in their ideologies, Acosta is at least claiming to be impartially addressing the situation, although his “interés apasionante” suggests otherwise.

Prior to writing his *De procuranda Indorum salute*, Acosta took part in a collaborative project on the topic of evangelization called *Universae tractationi de procuranda salute indorum*, in which he created a congregation of the provincial members and experts on the subject to debate the issues. The minutes of the meeting appear to be a draft of *De procuranda Indorum salute*, which suggests that the work was collaborative in nature, although Acosta was almost surely the main architect and writer.<sup>95</sup> His very efforts to collaborate mirror the consensual nature of governing the Indies, with the crown relying on advisors from the Council of the Indies and local elites to weigh in on policy regarding the Indies.

Acosta blames the Spaniards in the Indies for their lack of success in converting the natives. Rather than criticizing their mistreatment of the natives like Las Casas did, Acosta argues that the Spaniards are in danger of “falling into a moral abyss,” meaning the environment of the Indies provided the opportunity to Spaniards to be tempted by greed and violence.<sup>96</sup> Acosta is very clear in *De procuranda Indorum salute* that “los españoles son los responsables absolutos de que el establecimiento del cristianismo entre los indios no haya producido hasta la fecha ni siga produciendo hoy el resultado apetecido, porque no solamente no les hemos anunciado a Cristo con sinceridad y buena fe, sino que sobre todo negamos con los hechos al que confesamos de palabra.”<sup>97</sup> This is the first sentence of the section titled “Los obstáculos principales para la predicación del Evangelio entre los indios derivan más

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<sup>95</sup> Mitchell, “José de Acosta: ‘Siervo,’” 6-7.

<sup>96</sup> Del Valle W., “Colonial Regimes,” 9-11.

<sup>97</sup> Acosta, *De Procuranda Indorum Salute*, 169-171.

bien de los españoles.”<sup>98</sup> The use of the phrases “responsables absolutos” and “los obstáculos principales” solidify his opinion. Without a doubt, he is putting the blame on the Spaniards, suggesting that they are undermining the mission of evangelization in the Indies, but only because of the temptation that they are facing.

Acosta disagrees with both Las Casas and Sepúlveda in their characterizations of the natives. In contrast, Acosta develops a situational understanding about them. In *De procuranda*, Acosta often refers to the natives as “bárbaros,” rather than using the terms “indio” or indígena,” as Las Casas did, however he does recognize their inherent humanity. He categorizes the natives into three categories or tiers based on their degree of civilization. Each tier of the barbarians is compared to the European cultural standards that defined what made a people “civilized”: laws, an alphabet, and private property.<sup>99</sup> He utilizes *comparativismo* as a method of evaluating the situation in the Americas, with Europe as a base point.<sup>100</sup> This comparison leads to his justification for total colonization and the use of violence.<sup>101</sup>

As discussed above, Acosta’s classification system categorized the natives into three tiers based on their degree of civilization. The first category of people “possessed stable governments, laws, cities, commerce, and letters.”<sup>102</sup> Essentially, the “barbarians” in the first category had social organization, and all they lacked was Christianity. It was only necessary to use reason to convert them and, Acosta argued, violence was not necessary and should not be used. The second tier of people were those who “did not possess written script, laws, or

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<sup>98</sup> Acosta, *De Procuranda Indorum Salute*, 169.

<sup>99</sup> Solodkow, “Una etnografía en tensión,” 9.

<sup>100</sup> Solodkow, “Una etnografía en tensión,” 9.

<sup>101</sup> Del Valle W., “José de Acosta, Violence and Rhetoric,” 58.

<sup>102</sup> Del Valle W. “Colonial Regimes,” 5.



science, but did have governments, resided in fixed settlements and had military leaders and religious authorities.”<sup>103</sup> In order to convert this group to Christianity, strategic violence was required, however they would be allowed to maintain their territories and goods. The third category of people “consisted of nomadic groups that, according to Acosta, lacked any recognizable form of government or laws and essentially lived as ‘beasts.’”<sup>104</sup> This definition of the third group aligns with the definition of barbarians that Aristotle uses, which is the same that Sepúlveda used to defend Spain’s “just war” in the Indies. The natives of this group, Acosta argues, need to be taught how to be truly human before being taught Christianity. This tripartite categorization of natives demonstrates Acosta’s more situational approach. Rather than generalizing that all “barbarians” are good and docile beings, such as Las Casas does, or that all are like the third category of barbarians, as Sepúlveda does, Acosta argues that there are a variety of different types of natives. For example, the Aztecs and Incas, who have created complex social organization, cannot be compared to more nomadic groups who do not know the same type of civilization.

Despite demeaning the natives by calling them barbarians and suggesting that they be forced into labor, it can be argued that Acosta respected the natives more than many of his contemporaries. In the Proemio in the *De procuranda*, Acosta refers to the different native groups as “naciones,” which suggests that Acosta respects the legitimacy of the natives’ political and social organizations.<sup>105</sup> This suggests that Acosta’s ideologies were complex. He takes the middle ground between Sepúlveda, who thinks of the natives as natural slaves,

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<sup>103</sup> Del Valle W. “Colonial Regimes,” 5.

<sup>104</sup> Del Valle W. “Colonial Regimes,” 5.

<sup>105</sup> Sheperd, José de Acosta’s *De Procuranda Indorum Salute*, 50.

and Las Casas, who idealizes them. The complexity of Acosta's project is similar to that of the complexity of the political structure of the Spanish monarchy in the Indies.

The complexity of Acosta's proposals is also seen in his use of fabrication in order to convert. In his methodology of conversion, he emphasizes the importance of "fabricating Christianity" in order for it to be understood by the natives. Acosta and the other evangelizers had to fabricate meaning into the name of Christ, as it meant nothing to the natives before then.<sup>106</sup> He felt that there were two additional aspects important in converting the natives: destruction of native idols and channeling native customs into Catholic practices.<sup>107</sup> Acosta saw that the religious practices of the natives had similar qualities to the Catholic religion. Thus, he felt it was possible to replace native rituals with Catholic ones.<sup>108</sup> Acosta is able to recognize the malleability of religion and use it to his advantage. As Ivonne Del Valle has argued, "Acosta's recognition of the artificial and fictitious foundation of culture, religion, and subjectivity does not weaken his ideological system; on the contrary, it represents the very possibility of this system's expansion. It was possible to spread Christianity among the Andean Indians precisely because it was a fabrication."<sup>109</sup> In other words, Acosta uses the fact that religion is a construction to allow him to develop a middle ground and find a flexible solution to the justification for Spanish presence in the Indies and the evangelization of the natives. He takes advantage of religion in this case to fabricate a method that would be most viable in the conversion of the natives. This process is also characteristic of the Spanish monarchy. In order to ensure policy that would support the Spanish colonial project, the

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<sup>106</sup> Del Valle W., "Colonial Regimes," 8.

<sup>107</sup> Murry, "Tears of the Indians," 37.

<sup>108</sup> Murry, "Tears of the Indians," 36, 39.

<sup>109</sup> Del Valle W., "Colonial Regimes," 15.

crown recognized the situation in the Indies and fabricated new concepts and policies, working the ambiguity of the situation to its advantage.

Another important aspect of Acosta's ideology of conversion is his desire to put the conversion of the natives in terms the natives can understand. He advocated for a slow and deliberate conversion that contrasted with some of the previous mass baptisms that had been criticized as superficial. He advocates using the framework of the natives' rituals to implement the Catholic faith. He "recommended a judicious mix; destruction of idols was to be coupled with the channeling of old customs into acceptable Christian practice."<sup>110</sup> Acosta also asserts that language is an important vehicle in the conversion process: "Pues bien, como *la fe sigue al mensaje y el mensaje es el anuncio de Dios*, es imprescindible la lengua para la obra de la evangelización."<sup>111</sup> In this respect, Acosta emphasizes the importance of communication in the process of conversion: "La lengua era considerada por Acosta como el medio más eficaz de 'penetración' espiritual y, por ende, como el medio más efectivo para la conversión y evangelización del indígena."<sup>112</sup> If those you are trying to convert cannot understand you, it is impossible to make a meaningful conversion. Acosta therefore suggests that it is essential that evangelization methods evolve so that God's word can be understood in the language of the natives. This means priests must learn indigenous languages in order to convert the natives.<sup>113</sup>

Acosta intertwines both motives of religious and economic gain into one project that can be deemed viable in the Indies. He uses the necessity of sustaining the Christian universe

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<sup>110</sup> Murry, "Tears of the Indians," 37.

<sup>111</sup> Acosta, *De Procuranda Indorum Salute*, 95.

<sup>112</sup> Solodkow, "Una etnografía en tensión," 10.

<sup>113</sup> Del Valle W, "Colonial Regimes," 16.

as a justification for utilizing native labor for Spanish gain.<sup>114</sup> For example, “si se abandona la explotación de minas de metales,” writes Acosta, “toda promoción y organización pública de los indios cae por los suelos.”<sup>115</sup> He argues that the organization of natives into labor forces is key in developing the civilization of the natives so that they can eventually be converted to Christianity.<sup>116</sup> This is seen through two different means in his project. First, he utilizes the *reducciones* system put in place by Toledo, however he modifies it to insert a religious element. Acosta establishes a plan to teach missionaries how to evangelize while being surrounded by military force:

Hechas estas aclaraciones, vamos a ver ahora cuáles son los deberes del predicador del Evangelio en la misión de nuevos infieles. Y ante todo hay que advertir que por el hecho de que va a anunciar a Cristo de un modo nuevo y con un plan distinto, rodeado de escolta y mucho aparato militar, no por eso crea que cumple menos con su misión apostólica, ni se desanime como si no predicase el Evangelio de manera evangélica. Conviene que el siervo de Dios se someta en todo generosamente en ser regido por su eterna sabiduría.<sup>117</sup>

Here Acosta is developing a plan to insert religious personnel into the *reducciones* to ensure that conversion was being conducted in the most impactful way possible. Acosta is critical of military involvement with the natives and feels that it is better to insert religious personnel into a system structured for economic gain in order to protect the natives from militaristic violence and ensure their conversion is done effectively. The second way this is seen is through Acosta’s emphasis on the importance of teaching Christianity in the *encomienda* system. The *encomienda* system is another system developed to reap economic benefits in the Indies while also providing religious instruction to the natives. When it came to the *encomienda* system, Acosta clearly thought that the religious motives had taken a backseat to

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<sup>114</sup> Del Valle W., “Colonial Regimes,” 19.

<sup>115</sup> Acosta, *De Procuranda Indorum Salute*, 531.

<sup>116</sup> Del Valle W., “Colonial Regimes,” 19.

<sup>117</sup> Acosta, *De Procuranda Indorum Salute*, 357.

the motives for economic gain, and he used the *De procuranda Indorum salute* as a means to remind Spaniards of their religious duties. As discussed earlier, Acosta felt that the Spanish in the Indies had been tempted by greed in the Indies, focusing on economic gain, rather their religious duty to convert. Therefore, in the *De procuranda Indorum salute*, he emphasized the importance of the religious motives within the encomienda system. "El cuidado principal," states Acosta, "es el servicio espiritual de los indios ya cristianos."<sup>118</sup> Acosta emphasizes that it is the encomenderos' duty, as Christians, to function as good examples of the Christian faith and teach the infidels the ways of Christianity. These two examples provide opportunities to see how Acosta utilized the economic systems that were already in place and adapted them to include religious motives.

It is important that Acosta recognized the subtleties of the situation that he was in in the Indies. He is realistic in his evaluation of the best practices to continue evangelization there. His project attempted to improve the situation for the natives by ensuring they were treated like humans while also being realistic about the Spanish desire to extract resources from the Indies using the natives' labor.<sup>119</sup> He acknowledged the difficulties of converting the natives and the dilemma that the Spanish monarchy faced in its conflicting desires to protect the natives while simultaneously benefiting from their labor.

Acosta's general ideology and his characteristic inclusion of both the religious and economic motives of the conquest are consistent with the Ordenanza del Patronazgo, a policy promulgated in 1574, two years before Acosta was appointed Jesuit Provincial of Perú. The Ordenanza reorganized the Church in the Indies and gave more power to the crown to assign bishops there. The viceroys had administrative power over this process, thus creating another

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<sup>118</sup> Acosta, *De Procuranda Indorum Salute*, 481.

<sup>119</sup> Del Valle W., "Colonial Regimes," 22.

dimension in the competing motives within the monarchy.<sup>120</sup> Religious leaders felt as though this reorganization hindered their ability to remain in complete control of their dominance because they had to be checked by the viceroys. John Schwaller argues that Bishops like Juan de Medina Rincón, Bishop of Michoacan, “feared losing power to the viceroy.” In the eyes of Medina Rincón, “the Ordenanza violated the traditional clerical immunity from supervision by secular authorities.”<sup>121</sup> The Ordenanza utilizes checks and balances by having the viceroy supervise the bishops, ensuring that the bishops do not get too powerful. At the same time, this system created push-back by the religious personnel, creating a further check on secular authority. Thus, conflicts arose between the bishops and the viceroys in the struggle for power and control over religious administration and reformation.<sup>122</sup> The push-back between the two further reiterates how the crown utilized contrasting interests to limit the amount of power that could be accumulated by one agent in the complicated web of governance in the Indies.

Although the Ordenanza was not written by Acosta, it is consistent with his ideology and provides a tangible policy that shows how the “situational approach” was employed in a successful and sustainable way. For example, the Ordenanza required that potential Indian parish priests be given an exam to ensure their credentials. This appointment system created competition that elevated the quality of applicants. The applicants began to increasingly hold university degrees and have knowledge of an Indian language.<sup>123</sup> The exam ensured the readiness of the priests to face the situation that they were about to enter and the knowledge of at least one Indian language facilitated better communication between the priest and their

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<sup>120</sup> Schwaller, “The *Ordenanza del Patronazgo*,” 254.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid. 263.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid. 263.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid. 267.

community. The Ordenanza reflected the importance of checks and balances on the exercise of power in the Indies, just as Acosta's proposals incorporated religious forces to check economic ones.

## Conclusion

In her article, "José de Acosta: Colonial Regimes for a Globalized Christian World," Ivonne Del Valle argues that Acosta's project functioned as a "shock absorber."<sup>124</sup> Del Valle focuses on Acosta's normalization of violence through its integration into the administrative and technological program that Acosta developed in the Indies. She quotes Acosta's *De procuranda* to demonstrate her point:

A pesar de que la acumulación de grandes riquezas y los derechos, sobre todo, de los imperios la mayoría de las veces se han introducido con injusticia, sin embargo vemos que la Sagrada Escritura respeta a los príncipes su poder, y manda a los súbditos que les presenten obediencia. Así, *haya sido usurpado injustamente el dominio de las Indias, o – lo que más bien hay que creer y proclamar* por lo que toca al menos a la administración de los Reyes – con derecho y debidamente, de ninguna manera es conveniente hacer que abandonen los príncipes cristianos la gobernación de las Indias, que por lo demás es utilísima para su salvación eterna.<sup>125</sup>

While I agree with Del Valle's argument that the finished product of Acosta's project provided a shock absorber for the Indies in terms of the clergy controlling the violence against the natives, there is more to this argument.<sup>126</sup> While Del Valle limits herself to considering the results of Acosta's project, it is also important to consider the conditions that allowed for its success. *De procuranda Indorum salute* acknowledges the challenges faced by religious personnel in the Indies and provides a comprehensive project that was able to work within the context of the Spanish monarchy. Acosta uses the competing motives of religion and economic prosperity to his advantage, just as the Spanish monarchy relies on

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<sup>124</sup> Del Valle W., "Colonial Regimes," 22.

<sup>125</sup> Acosta, *De Procuranda Indorum Salute*, 335-337.

<sup>126</sup> Del Valle W., "Colonial Regimes," 22.

those same competing motives when governing in the Indies. His project not only worked to diminish the violence towards the natives by the Spaniards, but it also justified the Spanish desire for economic gain from their labor. He inserted both motives into one project that allowed for the checking of one motive on the other, leading to the constant competition that helped develop the “shock absorber” in the Indies.

In the Spanish monarchy church and state were, of course, not separated. Since the Spanish crown had absolute power over religion, there was no distinction between religious and government policy. As one collective body, regulators worked to integrate religion and economics into one. Thus, it was essential that an ideology do both in order to be valid and function effectively within the system. This is where the policies that would promote the ideologies of Toledo and Las Casas ultimately fail. Toledo’s ideology outlines his economic reasonings for why the Spanish should profit as well as delegitimizes the Incan authority and cites their cruelty towards their inferiors as a justification to use violence against the natives. His emphasis on economic matters is at the near total exclusion of religious matters. Las Casas takes the opposite approach. He gives a religious justification for not exploiting the natives, and while he did influence royal policy in this way, he did not sufficiently develop institutions or sound economic reasonings as to why there should be no economic benefit from the colonial project. Ivonne del Valle agrees that in the ways that Las Casas failed, Acosta is triumphant:

But it is his [Acosta’s] intention to *regulate* the chaotic world created by the conquest that separates his proposal from that of Las Casas. While the latter concentrated on showing the gap between the principles and the foundations that *ought to have* determined the relations between Spain and the Indies, and those which operated *de facto*, Acosta decides to make a case-by-case examination of the entire situation and, on that basis, to propose measures to improve it.<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>127</sup> Del Valle W., “José de Acosta, Violence and Rhetoric,” 58.



While Sepúlveda, Toledo, and Las Casas failed to fully develop proposals that encompassed both religious and economic motivations of the Spanish colonial project, I have argued that Acosta was able to do this. His ideas, as I have shown, more easily dovetailed with the government structure of the time, making them more viable. Acosta was able to develop a project could be acceptably incorporated into the political efforts of the Spanish monarchy. His project was able to accomplish long-term results, which is seen through the use of his concepts years later by other theologians. One example of this can be seen in Bernabé Cobo's, *History of the Inca Empire*. Cobo lived between 1582 and 1657, and his book was finished in 1653.<sup>128</sup> In the foreword of the modern English translation, John Howland Rowe writes that "Cobo's handling of the problem of the peopling of the New World ... is based directly on Acosta's."<sup>129</sup> This is clearly seen in Chapter 10 of the work, which is titled, "In which all the Indian nations are divided into three categories."<sup>130</sup> In this chapter Cobo outlines the three categories of natives, and his categories mirror those of Acosta. It is clear that even over fifty years later, the ideas communicated in Acosta's *De procuranda Indorum salute* continued to be relevant to the Spanish colonial project and served as a means for subsequent theologians to conceptualize Spanish presence in the Indies and the conversion of the natives in ways that were acceptable with the political structure of the Spanish monarchy.

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<sup>128</sup> Bernabé Cobo, *History of the Inca Empire*, trans. Roland Hamilton (Austin and London: University of Texas Press, 1979), ix.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid*, x.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid*, 43.

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