



Dear Friends,

In Europe Christians are very often confronted with „bad chapters of the past“. „History“ is misused to argue against the validity of our convictions and the trueness of our faith. This „fashion“ takes some grotesque features such as fiction novels mixed with historic sources turning into best-sellers.

Generally it is difficult to understand and judge correctly processes and events dating far back into the past from a contemporary perspective. Especially problematic though is the *mostly self-righteous* judging of acting persons in a totally different time and culture. As Christians we should know about mistakes and injustices, sometimes even crimes, that have been committed (unfortunately also in the name of the Church). On the other hand we must not forget that so-called „sins of Christianity“ are actually sins *against* the true spirit of Christ, back then just as today. Today, we should also know about aspects of historical developments based on gospel lived that are now seen in a positive light. For particular epochs these reproaches have quite a systematic character and this is why it is worth evaluating some of the cases. Carlos Casanova is professor of philosophy at the catholic University of Santiago de Chile. In the following text he tries to summarize in what way our conceptions of the colonisation of Latin America are influenced by *black legends*.

To European Christians this can be very useful for a better understanding of our own history.

Your Europe for Christ! Team

PS: Don't forget the daily Our Father for a Europe embedded in Christian values!

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The Black Legend **by Carlos Casanova**

Mass historiography of our times often has been written by the enemies of Christianity. As Orwell used to say, the real holders of power know that the control of the future operates through the „control of the past“. For this reason, numerous myths hurting the image of the Church have been elaborated and spread. Most of them refer to the Middle Ages (in other words, Latin Christianity) and the *Conquista* (Spanish regime in the Americas). It is not our intention here to consider various aspects of all these myths, but rather to bring your attention to only some of them. Our goal is to encourage Christians to be most careful about any historiography not grounded upon solid direct sources (falsifiers tend to quote each other, in order to make their calumnies sound more serious), rather than list numerous documented proofs in so little space. We are here going to deal with the alleged slavery of the American Indians. The first contact between the Spanish and the Indians was most frequently a violent one, as is common for all conquests in the history of mankind. Still, there was one considerable difference from others. Very quickly, the *conquistadors* questioned the legitimacy of their actions; a great debate occurred among them, ending in the establishment of a constitutional network which was quite humane and wise. A good summary of this debate may be found in David Brading's *The First America* (Cambridge, 1990).



In comparison, the native peoples of North America were not familiar with agriculture, and the fact is that they were swept from the face of the earth by Locke's Anglo-Saxon disciples. He in fact declared that land which was not cultivated was really *res nullius* and as such could be occupied by whoever was ready to cultivate it. In the words of Tocqueville, it is from this very principle that the extermination of the native peoples resulted. On the contrary, in the Spanish part (today's middle of the USA and South America with the exception of Brazil), an entire process of social assimilation started, bringing about a rapid progress of the economy, as well as huge cultural changes. The assimilation proceeded essentially through a powerful means and the three institutions. The means was the *mestizaje* or assimilation. This phenomenon of commixture of a conquering power with the natives is quite unique in modern history. Of course, there were many tensions and even abuses, but from the very beginning there were Native Americans and *mestizos* among the learned, the rich, the religious and the priests of the Church, such as the famous Saint Martin de Porres. They could also be found among the powerful. For example, Francisco Fajardo was a *mestizo*, the founder of Caracas in the middle of the 16th century, the architect who designed the cathedral of this city was also a mulatto, and finally the great barrister and polemic Juan Germán Roscio had Native American ancestry.

The *encomiendas* are the first among of the three institutions. Through them, the *conquistadors* divided the Native Americans among themselves and had them work on their fields. It was not slavery, but a relation similar to that found in most villages of European countries at the time. Of course there were abuses on the part of the masters towards the Native Americans, especially at the beginning, but the Crown and the Council of the Indies established norms, as well as authorities to enforce them. In the missions of Latin America, as existing during the whole Spanish regime, the Native Americans were free, and among other things also in choosing to convert or not. In any case, they were provided education in terms of civic life, crafts, music, etc. Most folklore traditions of the Spanish-American villages, types of musical instruments, clothes, agricultural techniques, and even the writing of native languages, have originated in the missions led by the Franciscans, Dominicans and Jesuits.

The third institution was that of the Villages of Doctrine. They replaced the *encomiendas*, abolished almost everywhere in the course of the 18th century and priests called *doctrineros* taught about faith, family life, and customs regarding work. The Indians were joint owners of the land and worked together. By themselves, they were electing their local authorities and *caciques* (Indian Chiefs) and were able to rely on some royal officials, who were protecting them against possible abuses or frauds on the part of the Spanish. The class of independent peasants, small-scale land owners, very numerous in the entire country at the beginning of the 20th century, originated from these *comuneros*. Some claim that the laws referring to the Villages of Doctrine had no value. This is not true. An important document, *Relación de la Visita Pastoral del Obispo Martí a la Diócesis de Caracas*, describes the life of these villages in the 18th century. This particular form of joint property survived in many Spanish-American countries, for instance Peru and Venezuela, until the middle of the 19th century. At that point, anticatholic liberals declared as contrary to human rights both the joint property over the land, as well as the regime of guardianship over native communities. After abolishing these institutions, they despoiled, through fraud, all these poor people who were not at all prepared for a liberal regime guided by the «autonomy of will» and free disposition of workable land lots.

One more important and final observation before we conclude. Never in the entire history has a conquering royal power so-extensively discussed the legitimacy of its conquests as Christian Spain has done. Never have the authorities issued so many rules in order to ensure the well-being of the weak and conquered nations. It is enough to open one's eyes in Latin America in order to realize the great ethnical mixture, unlike other countries in Africa, Asia, and especially North America where very few natives have survived, whereas, those who have, were considered worthy of living only on reservations.

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