

Francisco de Vitoria's More Excellent Way: How the Bible of Empire Discovered the Tricks of [the Argument from] Trade*

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Abstract

In this paper I explore the invention of a cultural and political version of the Bible that originated in the context of the first Spanish Empire in the so-called New World. Patented (so to speak) by the Spanish theologian Francisco de Vitoria, writing in the late 1530s, this Bible became a model for far more famous (which is to say northern European/English) names such as John Locke, as they attempted to negotiate just ownership of that far more famous segment of the Americas, to the north. This Bible—which I'm calling the Bible of Infinite Hospitality and International Trade—was first designed as a riposte to the so-called *Requerimiento*: a literal application of Deut. 20.10-15, interpreted as a divine mandate and quasi-legal document to be read aloud by a notary to the 'Indians' before taking possession of the New World. (In fact, as I also explore in the paper, the *Requerimiento* is a Christianisation of Islamic jurisprudence, a curious hybrid of Bible and Qur'an.) Opposing divine mandates or literal applications of the biblical and stressing that Christianity and its Bible represent a local law that is not applicable to the Indians, Vitoria's Bible makes a great show of making it as difficult as possible for the Spaniards to enter the land. But this only prepares the way for the grand denouement: the revelation of a more excellent way, the way of love and trade.

Keywords

Spanish Empire; Francisco de Vitoria; Bartolome de las Casas; the Requirement/*Requerimiento*; trade; hospitality; colonisation; Canaan mandate; *kenosis*; John Locke

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Though in the form of God, Christ/the Bible did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied him/itself (ἐκένωσεν) ... and humbled him/itself ... and became obedient unto death Therefore God has highly exalted Christ/the Bible and bestowed on them the name that is above every name. (Philippians 2.5-9 [adapted])

Now I will show you a more excellent/hyperbolic [ὑπερβολήν] way. (1 Corinthians 12.31)

The Power of Kenosis: How the Bible became Eternal by Losing Itself

It is hardly surprising that those of us who work on the cultural and political afterlives of the Bible¹ have concentrated on moments when the Bible is present and clearly referenced. This is perfectly commonsensical. It might also be a mistake. By studiously concentrating on biblical presences, we might be missing the most revealing cultural and political incidents: those where *the Bible strategically stages its own self-limitation and portrays itself as creating, of its own volition, space for something else.*

I am not simply referring to the traditional narrative of the limitation or death of Christian scripture where the Bible functions as the ultimate emblem of the 'sacred' as that which had to be 'drained, ... emptied out, in order to provide modern culture with sufficient intellectual and symbolic capital to start up its own economy.'² This wearily familiar story is hardwired into our stories of becoming-modern—so much so that it is hard to imagine how we could possibly rehearse a story of becoming-modern without mentioning Christianity and its scriptures, and without using some version of the moment where the Western world was forced to confront the limits of a 'universal' Bible/Christendom and was catapulted over the Bible's edge. As I have explored elsewhere, the parochialization of the Bible is so intrinsic to the production of the 'modern' that it is hard to find the unique path

¹) Cf. Timothy K. Beal, 'Reception History and Beyond: Toward the Cultural History of Scriptures,' *Biblical Interpretation* 19 (2011), pp. 357-72.

²) Debora Kuller Shuger, *The Renaissance Bible: Scholarship, Sacrifice and Subjectivity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), p. 3.