



Bartolomé de Las Casas,  
Indigenous Rights, and Ecclesiastical Imperialism

*Another Face  
of Empire*

*Daniel Castro*



# Another Face of Empire

— A book in the series —

LATIN AMERICA OTHERWISE: LANGUAGES, EMPIRES, NATIONS

---

SERIES EDITORS:

Walter D. Mignolo, *Duke University*

Irene Silverblatt, *Duke University*

Sonia Saldívar-Hull, *University of California, Los Angeles*







# ANOTHER FACE OF EMPIRE



Bartolomé de Las Casas, Indigenous Rights,  
and Ecclesiastical Imperialism



Daniel Castro

Duke University Press  
DURHAM & LONDON 2007



© 2007 Duke University Press

All rights reserved

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper ∞

Designed by Jennifer Hill

Typeset in Granjon by Keystone Typesetting, Inc.

Duke University Press gratefully acknowledges the support of the  
Program for Cultural Cooperation between Spain's Ministry of Culture  
and United States Universities.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data appear  
on the last printed page of this book.



*This book is dedicated to*  
Mariella Ruiz-Castro  
*who made it possible*







## Contents

<i>About the Series</i> . . . . .	ix
<i>Acknowledgments</i> . . . . .	xi
<i>Introduction</i> . . . . .	I
Bartolomé de Las Casas, Savior of Indoamerica?	
<i>Chapter One</i> . . . . .	17
Defining and Possessing	
<i>Chapter Two</i> . . . . .	40
American Crucible	
<i>Chapter Three</i> . . . . .	63
Conversions, Utopias, and Ecclesiastical Imperialism	
<i>Chapter Four</i> . . . . .	105
Theory and Praxis	
<i>Chapter Five</i> . . . . .	135
Toward a Restoration of the Indies	
<i>Chapter Six</i> . . . . .	150
The Legacy of Las Casas	
<i>Conclusion</i> . . . . .	177
<i>Notes</i> . . . . .	187
<i>Bibliography</i> . . . . .	215
<i>Index</i> . . . . .	229







## ❧ About the Series ❧

LATIN AMERICA OTHERWISE: LANGUAGES, EMPIRES, NATIONS is a critical series. It aims to explore the emergence and consequences of concepts used to define “Latin America” while at the same time exploring the broad interplay of political, economic, and cultural practices that have shaped Latin American worlds. Latin America, at the crossroads of competing imperial designs and local responses, has been construed as a geocultural and geopolitical entity since the nineteenth century. This series provides a starting point to redefine Latin America as a configuration of political, linguistic, cultural, and economic intersections that demands a continuous reappraisal of the role of the Americas in history, and of the ongoing process of globalization and the relocation of people and cultures that have characterized Latin America’s experience. Latin America Otherwise: Languages, Empires, Nations is a forum that confronts established geocultural constructions, rethinks area studies and disciplinary boundaries, assesses convictions of the academy and of public policy, and correspondingly demands that the practices through which we produce knowledge and understanding about and from Latin America be subject to rigorous and critical scrutiny.

The words and deeds of Father Bartolomé de Las Casas have invited recurrent interpretations for nearly half a millennium. He has been portrayed as the saintly conscience of Spanish imperialism and adopted as the father of Latin American liberation theology. In *Another Face of Empire*, Daniel Castro seeks to complicate the picture of Las Casas created by his hagiographers. Castro draws on Las Casas’s own extensive writings and reappraises the consequences of the friar’s advocacy to provide a nuanced portrayal of Las Casas as a historical agent. He also addresses what few scholars have emphasized—the ways in which the Indians themselves confronted Spanish domination and abuses. *Another Face of Empire* highlights these strategies of resistance while showing how Spanish imperial policies undermined attempts at reform.

Despite his strenuous efforts on the Indians’ behalf, Las Casas failed to grasp the difficulties and contradictions in imposing an alien religious belief, Christianity, on a people who already had their own highly developed religious beliefs, as well as forms of social, economic, and political organiza-



tion. By carefully critiquing Las Casas's ethnocentrism and benevolent paternalism, Castro illuminates contemporary struggles against injustice in Latin America.

x



## ❧ Acknowledgments ❧

ALTHOUGH IN MOST CASES it is only one person who receives credit for the production of a book, nothing could be further from the truth. A book is rarely a solitary endeavor; it is the result of a collective effort and a willingness to create.

This modest undertaking might have never materialized without the patience, cooperation, support, and understanding of many people and institutions. I would like to thank the administration of Southwestern University which graciously extended its support in the form of grants of funds and time. I have also received support from Gene and Trudy Yeager in the form of invitations to lecture and the opportunity to do additional research at the Howard Tilton Library.

I want to single out and thank Sara Castro-Klarén, who encouraged me to present my work publicly at a symposium on human rights at Johns Hopkins University. She read the original manuscript and made invaluable suggestions about its content and its potential for publication. I also want to acknowledge the help and support I received from one of the maestros of Indoamerican colonial history from the inception of this project, Colin MacLachlan of Tulane University.

At different times, I have received support and critical suggestions from Richard E. Greenleaf, James Boyden at Tulane, Ida Altman at the University of New Orleans, and Peter Klarén at George Washington University.

I have contracted a profound debt of gratitude with Walter D. Mignolo of Duke University, who is one of the editors of the Latin America Otherwise series at Duke University Press, for taking a chance and offering me the opportunity to submit the original manuscript for evaluation. I feel fortunate to have this work published by Duke University Press and I am particularly indebted to my editor, Valerie Millholland, who has graciously guided me through the task of preparing the manuscript and navigating this delicate process. I would also like to thank Duke's assistant editor Miriam Angress for her support and cooperation. I am indebted to Lynn Walterick, my copyeditor, and to Katharine Baker, who, as assistant managing editor, helped me to navigate the complex editorial process. My appreciation also goes to the critical readers of the manuscript for their valuable suggestions, which have contributed to make it a better work.



Along the way, I have received invaluable support and encouragement from my colleagues at Southwestern, in particular Jan Dawson, Thom McClendon, Elisabeth Piedmont-Marton, and Jim Hunt. I would like to thank Amy Wink for her editorial suggestions and for preparing the index. I have also benefited from constructive evaluations received in conferences and symposia, in particular the advice offered by Judith Ewell, Mark Burkholder, and Vincent Peloso, among others.

xii

Last, but not least, I want to thank and dedicate this modest effort to Mariella Ruiz-Castro, my untiring *compañera*, spouse, and best friend. Words will never capture my debt of appreciation to her for her unqualified support through the years, and for always being there with the right question and the right word. I dedicate this book to her because of her love of justice and her support for those who struggle for a better life.



## Introduction



# Bartolomé de Las Casas: Savior of Indoamerica?

*The early discourse of the New World then is full of questions that cannot be asked or answers that cannot be understood.*

—Stephen Greenblatt, *Marvelous Possessions*

*I am Indian: Because of the ignorance of the white men who arrived to the lands ruled by my grandparents. I am Indian: Now I am not ashamed to be called this way, because I know of the historical mistake of the Whites.*

—Natalio Hernández, *Canto nuevo de Anahuac*

CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS's fortuitous landing on the island of Guanahani, the morning of October 12, 1492, marked the irreversible demise of one world, the expansion of another, and the birth of a third and unique creature, Indoamerica.<sup>1</sup> This was a "New World" shaped by the collision and fusion of conquerors and conquered, the forced encounter of Europe and the wondrous "an other world" (*un otro mundo*) encountered by the Genoese adventurer.<sup>2</sup> From its inception Indoamerica became a world shaped by the intense, and often violent and cruel, interaction between colonizers and colonized.

America, as the new continent was baptized, created boundless opportunities and unexpected challenges for the Europeans and their attempt to impose their way of life on the newly discovered territory and its inhabitants.<sup>3</sup> The dialectics of creation and destruction so evident in the birth of this New World, a world so radically different from both progenitors, was defined by the hegemonic domination of the Europeans, and the subser-



vience and decline of the natives, or Indians, a term used by Columbus to describe the inhabitants of the newly encountered territories.<sup>4</sup>

2 In the absence of legal mechanisms to safeguard the integrity of the natives against the predatory exploitation of the newcomers, the responsibility for protecting them fell to the members of the religious orders present in the new territory. The Dominican order, under the leadership of Antonio Montesinos and Pedro de Córdoba, led the group of reformers emerging as defenders of indigenous human rights in America.<sup>5</sup> In those early years of imperial expansion, these reformers became the main intercessors between the natives and the Spanish crown. By the end of the second decade of occupation, the leadership of the “indianist” movement, as the reformers were collectively identified, was transferred to one of the latest converts to their cause: a “champion of rightful and lost causes,” the earlier cleric-*encomendero*, prolific writer, historian, activist, and enduring symbol of the reformers’ struggle for the protection of the natives, Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas.<sup>6</sup> The American historian Lewis Hanke, one of his most fervent admirers and a sympathetic biographer, describes him thus:

A reformer in the Spanish court, failed colonizer in Venezuela, friar in Española, obstructor of unjust wars in Nicaragua, fighter for justice for the Indians in acrid debates with the Mexican ecclesiastics, sponsor of a plan to Christianize the Indians in Chiapa and Guatemala exclusively by peaceful means, fortunate agitator in the Court of Charles V in favor of the New Laws and bishop of Chiapa.<sup>7</sup>

Bartolomé de Las Casas emerges in contraposition and opposition to the large number of antiheroes and villains during Spain’s early years in the Americas, the likes of Nuño de Guzmán, Pedro de Alvarado, Pedrarias de Ávila, Fernando Cortés, or Lope de Aguirre, among innumerable others. Of all these personages, it is Bartolomé de Las Casas, the tireless activist, who is remembered as a paradigm of virtue and as a larger-than-life archetypal hero. In a void created by the absence of autochthonous heroes, Las Casas and his work become a powerful symbolic presence, a palliative to counter the ills that afflicted, and continue to afflict, Indoamerica from the time of that fateful first encounter to the present.

At the same time, few participants in the imperial expansion of Spain into the New World have generated as much controversy, been so demonized, become the object of such uninhibited hagiographic adoration and derision,



or received so much attention from contemporaries and from modern students of the Indoamerican colonial period as Bartolomé de Las Casas.<sup>8</sup>

Because of the vitriolic denunciation of the abuses committed by his compatriots against the Indians, Las Casas earned the dubious distinction of being identified as the progenitor of the “Black Legend” of the Spanish conquest, published in bookform. The slim tract was originally written in 1542 and published in 1552 under the title *Brevísima relación de la destrucción de las Indias* (often translated into English as *A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies*). The book was widely read throughout Europe and provided Spain’s enemies with a unique opportunity to attack the Spanish venture in the Americas. Despite its close association with Las Casas, the Black Legend “has a history much older than the term itself,” going back to the Italians’ anti-Spanish stance in the fourteenth century and extending as well to the unfavorable opinion of Spaniards held by the Germans and the Dutch in the sixteenth century.<sup>9</sup>

As Spanish power declined in Europe and the Americas at the end of the eighteenth century, Spaniards became less tolerant of criticism, and many mainstream intellectual and political figures assumed the responsibility of dispelling the negative images conjured by the Black Legend. This attempt to exalt the virtues of Spain is known as the *leyenda aurea* (Golden Legend). Unlike Spain and its former domains, where the proponents of the Golden Legend were almost uniformly conservative, in the United States, where the legend is identified as the White Legend, adherents included moderate, conservative, and pro-Spanish historical revisionists. These historians, most of them writing in the first three quarters of the twentieth century, took a favorable view of Spanish exploits in the Americas during the dark time of the conquest and settlement of the New World.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, if the term “Black Legend” is used to refer to the dark period of the conquest of the Americas, then its opposite is not so much a luminous interpretation of historical events as a conscious effort to retouch the darkest events of that traumatic period, to cover up the seamier side of imperialist Spanish occupation beneath a glittering mythical patina destined to create a “gilded legend.”<sup>11</sup> Unfortunately, the fact that the creation of the Black Legend is credited almost exclusively to Las Casas tends to limit all interpretations of the friar within the parameters of the Black Legend–White Legend dichotomy.

Over the last four centuries, Las Casas and his historical persona have been adopted by a multifaceted multitude of people to validate their creeds



at different times and for different purposes. At first, it was the Dominicans who used him as a spearhead of the reformist movement in their dealings with the crown. In the last years of his life he was used to validate the fairness of the Council of the Indies by acting as consultant for that body in all matters dealing with the Americas while serving, at the same time, as a representative of Indian interests to be argued before the courts. In the nineteenth century, precursors of Indoamerican independence like Simón Bolívar in Venezuela and Fray Servando Teresa y Mier in Mexico often invoked his work as a paradigm of struggle and resistance to be emulated. In the first half of the twentieth century, he was appropriated as a symbol by defenders and opponents of the Black Legend to argue their cases about Spain's "true" role in the creation of the New World. In the second half of the century, the friar became an inspiration for the transforming power of Christian reformist thought propounded by some of the standard bearers of the Theology of Liberation movement.<sup>12</sup>

As with all mythological figures, the characterizations of Father Las Casas cover a broad spectrum of tendencies and definitions depending on geography, historical period, or where one's sympathies lie on any given issue. He is variously seen as an apostolic prototype of love, a noble protector of the Indians, or, as some have called him, the "father of America." In 1935, in a bit of hyperbolic enthusiasm, the participants in the Congreso de Americanistas in Seville anointed him as the "authentic expression of the true Spanish conscience."<sup>13</sup>

At the opposite pole, his detractors have characterized him as a pious fanatic, the father of the infamous Black Legend, and even a court gadfly.<sup>14</sup> One of his most vitriolic critics, the modern Spanish historian Ramón Menéndez Pidal, went as far as to challenge the friar's sanity by claiming that "[Las Casas] was not a saint, nor an impostor, nor was he evil nor crazy, he was simply a paranoiac."<sup>15</sup> It seems that Menéndez's overtly nationalistic perception of Las Casas as a tool of Spain's enemies prompted this extreme, and unwarranted, attack. In addition to the political inspiration for the attack, the historian's intense dislike is largely based on the friar's denunciation of the crimes committed by his country in the New World. Further, the attack seems to have been fueled by a need to sanitize Spain's image in the aftermath of the Civil War. Despite Menéndez's solipsistic reliance on a multitude of value-laden psychological typologies, he never did build a strong case to substantiate his charges, beyond the name-calling.

Most of the characterizations of the Dominican, perhaps with the single



exception of the one by Menéndez Pidal, appear to have some basis in truth, and they have contributed to the creation of a mythical Las Casas used to mobilize peoples and ideas. Most of Las Casas's mythical reputation, with its accomplishments and implicit although unmentioned shortcomings, rests on a vociferous activism surrounding the treatment of the American natives. Ironically, while Las Casas's work is largely measured in terms of his praxis, there is little mention made of the fact that his praxis seldom resulted in improving the lives of the natives, and often his main accomplishment was to keep himself in the political and social limelight. Las Casas was an activist, and as such, he was measured by the results he obtained, but this did not always result in long-range beneficial outcomes for the oppressed natives, and often his utopian proposals had the opposite result of what he intended. His inability to act outside the totality of the royally sanctioned legal system, and his unwillingness to dialogue with the encomenderos (the colonialists), or to empower the natives to do so, made the success of his self-appointed mission to help the Indians a largely formalistic endeavor. Although he claimed to act for the oppressed, he rarely acted with them, and there is no evidence that at any time he worked with the natives to transform them from passive objects into active subjects responsible for transforming their own fate.

In the case of Las Casas, as in the cases of other legendary figures, it is difficult if not impossible to separate historical reality from myth. A reinterpretation of Las Casas must necessarily move beyond the mythological dimensions of his legacy, and beyond the multiple-legend construct, in an attempt to define him in light of his participation in the dialectical reality of the construction of a new world built on the ruins of another.

Given the relative paucity of texts detailing the Dominican's life and work, and perhaps with the exception of some extremely critical tracts written by some of his contemporaries, we have only his own texts by which to examine his life and the significance of his work. That is, the main source of information about Las Casas is the subject himself. Conscious of his role as a vital protagonist in the history of the New World, the friar never shied away from recognizing the impact of his participation in the colonial drama. As Anthony Pagden writes, "Since his project was to establish the unique status of his voice, most of his writings are, implicitly or explicitly, autobiographical. No historian of America is so tirelessly self-referential."<sup>16</sup>

The absence of external sources of information presents some insurmountable difficulties in reevaluating the legacy of the reformer. Consequently, the only way of gaining a critical appreciation of Las Casas is to



dissect and deconstruct his own written work and recorded deeds against the background of established historical events, including the perceptions of his contemporary and later admirers and detractors.

6 Although the reputation of Bartolomé de Las Casas rests on his widely reported struggle to gain better treatment for the Indians, there has rarely been a concerted effort to evaluate the practical outcome of this work vis-à-vis the natives and their day-to-day well-being. This results largely from the fact that “neither his biographers nor the historians of America have to date subjected the plans of Las Casas to methodical analysis.”<sup>17</sup> Little or no attention has been paid to the immediate and long-range application and consequences of his proposals or legislative efforts on behalf of the natives, who, from Las Casas’s perspective, become the unseen protagonists of a drama that could not exist without them.

The list of Las Casas’s accomplishments disseminated by his supporters is endless. It includes the creation of a native sanctuary of sorts in Paria (present-day Venezuela), the pacification of Tuzulutlán, the land of war, rebaptized as Verapaz in present-day Guatemala, the paternity of the New Laws, his petition to abolish the *encomienda* in Peru, and the *Ordenanzas para descubrimientos* (Ordinances for Discoveries). The ordinances were issued by Philip II years after the friar’s death. Yet even the most cursory examination of these “accomplishments” will reveal that almost invariably these efforts were unimplemented and in most cases ended in failure; they rarely translated into tangible gains for the natives.

What is often overlooked in the exaltation of Las Casas is his overriding concern to convert the inhabitants of the Americas to Christianity, if not directly, at least through different missionary agents.<sup>18</sup> Despite the contradictions implicit in proselytism, many of the Dominican’s admirers still view this vocation as virtuous and worthy of praise instead of as an act of ecclesiastical imperialism. In an attempt to justify Las Casas’s vocation to convert the Indians to Christianity, his advocates point out that, in his case, conversion is acceptable and desirable, insofar as it is done by peaceful means and to implement assimilation to the dominant culture. At the same time there is no rationale offered to justify an imposition from the perspective of the Spaniards, other than the tenuous argument that conversion implies spiritual salvation. This important motivation underlying the friar’s relationship with the natives is evident in his written works and deeds, as this observation from the *Historia de las Indias* demonstrates: “[T]here are no people in the world, no matter how barbaric or inhuman they are, nor can a



nation be found that being indoctrinated and taught, in *the manner required by the natural condition of men, mostly through the doctrine of faith*, will not produce as a reasonable fruit the very best of men.”<sup>19</sup>

While not advocating the overt subjugation of the natives, he nevertheless leaves open the way for the possessors of the “doctrine of faith” to justify territorial usurpation and the exploitation of the inhabitants of the occupied territory in order to produce “as a reasonable fruit the very best of men.” All this under the guise of indoctrinating and teaching in “the manner required by the natural condition of men.” From his writings and practice it is apparent that as a Spaniard he fully shared his compatriots’ belief that the dissemination of the Christian faith was their divinely ordained mission. This acceptance of Spain’s ascendancy over the Americas implies his tacit recognition of the “salvific” role assigned to himself and his compatriots in the divine apportionment of duties. 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.”<sup>20</sup> 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. Such a consideration is a capitulation to a form of pseudo-humanism that only partially recognizes the humanity of the subjected indigenous people.<sup>21</sup>

Judging from the actions of the participants in the colonization of America, there was never any doubt among the early colonizers about their moral imperative to bring the “true faith” to these remote regions of the world, and Las Casas seems to have fully shared these aspirations. The same zeal that fueled the *Reconquista* of Spain from the Moors was transferred to the conquest and settlement of the Americas. This essential component of the cultural conquest of the Americas is found at the core of the primer for conversion, *The Only Way [to Attract All People to the True Faith]*, where Las Casas states his belief in his, and his nation’s, mandate to win the natives over to the “true faith”:

It was due to the will and work of Christ . . . that God’s chosen should be called, should be culled *from every race, every tribe, every language, every corner of the world . . . no race, no nation in this entire globe would be left totally untouched by the free gift of divine grace*. Some among them be they few or many are to be taken into eternal life. We must hold this to be true also of our Indian nations.<sup>22</sup>



While criticizing the manner in which his religious brethren went about converting the natives en masse through the wholesale dispensation of baptisms and other sacraments, Las Casas attempted to differentiate himself from the others in the methods for catechization that he proposed. Essentially, his disagreements with the others were more concerned with form while leaving the essence of the cultural onslaught untouched. It was simply a case of peaceful versus forceful conversion to Christianity, and his proposals offered a different form of implementing the same goal of converting the natives to attain the ultimate objective of the colonization of consciousness.

If the difference between Las Casas and his compatriots was one of form and not of essence, then rather than viewing him as the ultimate champion of indigenous causes, we must see the Dominican friar as the incarnation of a more benevolent, paternalistic form of ecclesiastical, political, cultural, and economic imperialism rather than as a unique paradigmatic figure. In this context, he must be reevaluated as a representative of another face of Spanish ecclesiastical imperialism, albeit a more benevolent form of imperialism than the one offered by the traditional colonists.

In the historical context of the time, his role as a proponent of imperialism was tempered by his calls for reform in defense of the rights of the natives, at least on paper. Nevertheless, this defense seems to have ensued from the forms that domination assumed, rather than from a wholehearted opposition to the motives behind the practice. Nor did his defense seem to come from a feeling of sympathy or empathy with the natives but from a preoccupation to implement a more humane form of exploitation. In effect, given his active and willing participation in the imperialist venture, the friar was little more than another member of the occupying forces. What differentiates him from the rest is his willingness to reach out to offer temporary succor to those being victimized so they could be benevolently converted, peacefully exploited, and successfully incorporated as members of a new subject-colony where existence depended on the dictates of the king in the imperial capital.

Father Las Casas's reputation as a reformer is based on his advocacy of Indian freedom, but in the earlier years of his practice as a reformer, the liberty he envisioned for the natives was little more than a liberty conditioned by the economic and political needs of the motherland. This is patently evident in his first list of *remedios* (remedies) for the Indians of Cuba. In this list, prepared in 1516 as a complement to his memorial of grievances presented to the acting crown regent, Cardinal Ximénez de Cisneros, he refrained from



calling for the abolition of the practice of assigning grants of tribute-paying Indians to a conquistador as a reward for services rendered to the crown, the infamous *encomienda*.<sup>23</sup> He limited himself to call for the amelioration of the tasks imposed on the natives so they could survive the ordeal:

While Your Highness orders an investigation and determines what must be done in those [Caribbean] islands . . . it should be ordered that all Indians from all islands should cease working and serving in all capacities . . . because the little idle time they have will serve [the Indians] to recover their strength, to have some leisure time and to have the chance to put on some weight or become stronger, so when they return to work, they will be able to bear it<sup>24</sup>

9

Later in his life, the condemnation of the *encomienda* became more pointed and vociferous, but this transformation came well after the conquest of the whole continent had been accomplished and the establishment of irreversible exploitative practices had been validated and enforced, if not by law, by force of habit.

Las Casas's and the other religious reformers' paternalistic benevolence toward the Indians set them apart from most participants in the settlement of the New World. They provided a humanitarian element absent among ordinary conquistadores, but at the same time they could not escape their roles as advocates of the "true" faith and as integral components of the vanguard of an imperialist church striving to impose its beliefs and aspirations on other peoples. They were part, whether willingly or unwillingly, of the shock troops of the "faithful" heralding the triumph of the City of God over the terrestrial countryside of sin inhabited by the pagans. Paradoxically, Las Casas never appeared to have grasped the contradiction implied in the act of imposing an alien religious belief, like Christianity, on a people who already had well-defined theological beliefs and carefully constructed cosmogonies. The only explanation for such behavior must be found in his overriding conviction of the innate superiority of his religious beliefs over those of the Native Americans he so wanted to protect.

The accelerated and unregulated imperialist expansion of Spain placed Las Casas at the heart of a multi-tiered conflict pitting the centralized aspirations of the crown against the semi-feudal aspirations of the colonists, who, driven by their desire for immediate rewards, had brought the natives to the verge of extinction. Experience taught Las Casas that his visions of a gentler, kinder imperialism could be accomplished by appealing directly to



the king and his advisors rather than the colonists. Until the end of his days he appeared convinced that all the Spanish monarch needed to do to set things right in his kingdom was to be informed, “[for] it follows that the simple knowledge that something is wrong in his kingdom is quite sufficient to ensure that [the king] will see that it is corrected, for he will not tolerate any such evil for a moment longer than it takes him to right it.”<sup>25</sup> King Charles V, aware of the benefits of the friar’s role as an active defender of the centralized government against the feudal and aristocratic aspirations of the conquistadores, not only allowed Las Casas to express his critical views of the Spanish colonizers but encouraged him to do so at every possible turn.<sup>26</sup> Ironically, modern historians, most prominently the proponents of the Golden Legend, often choose this one instance as an illustration of sixteenth-century Spanish toleration and freedom of speech.<sup>27</sup>

Aside from his claims for legislative reform, the single most important contribution of Bartolomé de Las Casas to the history of Indoamerica was to provide an ongoing record of the events associated with the first half-century of Spanish domination. He, unlike most of his contemporaries, seems to have internalized the horror of the conquest and resolved to bear witness for posterity. If Columbus, through a daring and momentous act, lessened the geographic and cultural distances between two worlds, it fell to Las Casas, a man driven by profound Christian beliefs and untamed humanism, to attempt to bridge the informational gap created by the forced incorporation of America into the Spanish empire. Working from the medieval perspective that the Spanish occupation of the Indies had “destroyed” them, Las Casas dedicated the best and most productive years of his life to attempting to “restore” them to a new grandeur under the aegis of Spain.

Another frequently overlooked fact about Las Casas’s history, as a fighter for the rights of the American Indian, is that his most effective praxis was carried out in the context of the Spanish court, not in American territory. It was at court where he uninhibitedly played out his complex role as the “universal protector of all the Indians of America” (*protector universal de todos los indios de América*), a title he had received from Cardinal Ximénez de Cisneros during the latter’s tenure as regent of Spain. From early on the friar understood that the best alternative to influence the political landscape of the time was to remain at courtside as much as possible. It was there where he could be more visible, have direct access to the monarch, and be ostensibly more effective in his work.

Despite all impressions to the contrary, his contact with the objects of his



affection, the American Indians, was minimal. Despite his good intentions and his supporters' claims to the contrary, it is apparent that the reformer was never able to bridge the cultural gulf that separated him, a Spanish *letrado* and a dweller of "the lettered city," from the inhabitants of that "stone-age" illiterate countryside where a New World was being forcefully erected.<sup>28</sup> This divorce from the indigenous people and their culture is partially evident in his apparent lack of interest in learning native languages. One of his most fervent critics, the Franciscan missionary Toribio de Benavente, Motolinía, provides testimony about this aspect of his work, a fact that is also evident in the friar's own testimony.<sup>29</sup> This ignorance of native languages forced him to rely on intermediaries to communicate with the natives, rendering him impotent to reduce the cultural gap between himself and his beloved "charges."

The America that Las Casas knew and inhabited for different periods was a static continuum where two worlds existed in a permanent state of conflict. He often seemed incapable of grasping the dynamic dialectical process whereby a political, economic, cultural, and racial "New World" was being born in the midst of violence, exploitation, and neglect. While he appears to have been aware of the demographic disaster that befell the natives and the extent of the human genocide obtaining in this emerging world, he either could not see or chose to ignore the cultural genocide. He seems to have been unaware, unconcerned, and unmoved by the progressive emergence of a new hybrid culture and all the complexities accompanying its origins. It is as if for him the collision of the two worlds never moved beyond its original Caribbean stage.

A label that is also attached to Las Casas is that of "anti-colonialist." This perception understandably pertains to his opposition to the manner in which the colonialists exploited the New World and its inhabitants. Las Casas's characterization as an anti-colonialist arises from his opposition to the creation of semi-autonomous colonies, collections of private fiefs, headed by *encomenderos* in America, but this perceived anti-colonialism does not necessarily translate into anti-imperialism. It was not until the waning years of his life that his deeds and words raised the possibility of Spain's withdrawal or the renunciation of its possessions in the New World. While he called for the removal of the *encomenderos* as intermediaries between the crown and its Indian subjects, he suggested that their role should be taken over by the crown directly, implying only a change of masters, from a private one, the *encomenderos*, to a public one, the state.<sup>30</sup>



On the contrary, his compulsion to find a counterbalance to the pretensions of the conquistador-colonizers propelled him to increasingly embrace the alternatives offered by the imperial demands of king and church as the only acceptable sources of authority and justice.

12 Las Casas's career abounds with instances in which his quest to improve the conditions of the natives contributed to the consolidation of the crown's control over both colonists and natives, but this is rarely acknowledged. Looking beyond the sound, fury, and pyrotechnics of Las Casas's *Brevísima*, and the idea that the king used it as an authoritative source of information to justify the passage of the New Laws, we find that those very laws afforded Charles a unique opportunity to check the growing ambition of the encomenderos. By limiting the scope of the encomienda and its conditions of heritability, he was in effect stripping them of their only bargaining tool to support their claims.

Another one of the deeds most celebrated by Las Casas's admirers is his participation in the debates of Valladolid in 1550–51. The debate pitting Las Casas against the humanist and royal chronicler Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda centered on the issue of using force to convert the indigenous people of the New World to the Christian faith. It also aimed to invalidate the claim that Sepúlveda shared with other Spanish intellectuals of the time and, naturally, the encomenderos, that the Indians were “slaves by nature,” thus inferior to the Spanish conquerors and subject to being enslaved. The ambivalent outcome of Valladolid established that the waging of war against the American “infidels” was unacceptable, but at the same time it retained for the crown the moral and religious obligation of carrying out the evangelization of the natives by peaceful means. In this manner Spain's right to be in America was justified in terms of the expectations that it would fulfill its duty as a Christian nation to disseminate the true faith and to assume the tutelage of the infidels while taking over their temporal possessions. Significantly, after Valladolid the question of whether Spain had the right to have dominion over the New World was never raised again.

In the aftermath of the debate against Sepúlveda, royal authority was further reaffirmed with the emergence of the issue of perpetuity pitting the encomenderos against the reformers and the Peruvian Indian elite. By accepting the king's absolute authority on all matters pertaining to the Indies, Las Casas's intervention in the debates about perpetuity, like his participation in Valladolid, helped in no small way to consolidate the power of the imperial center and the values that it represented in the New World.