

Traditions of Spiritual Guidance

'The defender of the Indians'

Bartolomé de las Casas in context

Fernando Cervantes

IN 1531, THE MEMBERS OF THE COUNCIL of the Indies of Spain must have been alarmed to receive a memorial from a Dominican friar resident in the island of Hispaniola. In passionate and prophetic terms, the friar warned them that they risked eternal damnation by having allowed the destruction of the New World. The only justification for the European presence in America, the friar declared, was the spread of the gospel. But instead only thieves and tyrants had entered the Indies, carrying wars 'against all divine and natural law', and exploiting the native inhabitants of the New World to the point of death. 'What are great kingdoms without justice but great larcenies?' he asked, quoting St Augustine.¹

The conqueror, the convert, and the crusader

This was not the first time that the author of the above memorial, Fray Bartolomé de las Casas, had voiced a passionate defence of the native peoples of America. By his own account, it was in 1502 that he had first arrived in Hispaniola at the age of eighteen. Then, after participating in the conquest of Cuba, he had no qualms in adopting the common custom of supporting himself through the unpaid forced labour of native Indians, even after he was ordained to the secular priesthood. But his views were dramatically altered around Easter of 1514 when his Dominican confessor refused him absolution just at the time when he was preparing his Easter sermon. The lesson from the book of Ecclesiasticus could not have been more disturbing:

The sacrifice of an offering unjustly acquired is a mockery; the gifts of impious men are unacceptable. The Most High takes no pleasure in offerings from the godless, multiplying sacrifices will not gain his pardon for sin. Offering sacrifice from the property of the poor is as bad as slaughtering a son before his father's very eyes. A meagre diet is the very life of the poor, he who withholds

it is a man of blood. A man murders his neighbour if he robs him of his livelihood, sheds blood if he withholds an employee's wages. (Sir 34:18-22)

The profound impact that these words had on Las Casas' outlook and subsequent career cannot be separated from his previous experiences, especially his witness of the brutal cruelties perpetrated during the conquest and settlement of Cuba which would haunt him for the rest of his life. But the crisis of 1514 brought about not merely a change of attitude: it marked a new departure and a new career. Barely a year later we find Las Casas back in Spain obtaining an audience with King Ferdinand and, after Ferdinand's death in 1516, with the famous humanist regent, Cardinal Francisco Jiménez de Cisneros and the Flemish ministers appointed by the absent young king, the future Emperor Charles V. As a result of his proposals, a mission recruited from the newly reformed and zealous order of the Jeronimites was officially despatched to Hispaniola to regulate the treatment of the Indians. Additionally, Las Casas himself obtained the approval of the Crown for a project of mission and peaceful colonization, to be implemented in Cumaná, on the coast of modern Venezuela.

Nothing is more illustrative of Las Casas' outlook and state of mind in the early 1520s than his proposed plans for the mission to Cumaná. The European settlers under his authority, attired in crusaders' tunics, were to be known as the Knights of the Golden Spur and to support themselves by trading with Indians and cultivating the land, with profits going to the leaders of the mission and to the crown in taxes. The area consisted of about three hundred miles of coastline, an impossibly large area to control, especially since Las Casas had failed to recruit a sufficient number of farmers to accompany him. And yet his original appeal had been for a grant ten times as large! It is not surprising that the experiment was a dismal failure, later to be used with ironic scorn by those eager to prove the folly of any attempt at conversion before military conquest. But the setback was profoundly significant for Las Casas' spiritual development, for it served to convince him that the one reason for the mission's failure had been a misguided and inherently sinful desire to serve both God and Mammon. With this in mind he returned to Hispaniola, there entering the Dominican order in 1524.

The young scholar: laying the foundations

Las Casas' decision to enter the Dominican order was not fortuitous. It had, after all, been a Dominican who had refused him absolution in 1514, leading to his first conversion. By that time the Dominican order had been active in Hispaniola for four years, making a deep impact through their austere way of life and religious zeal. Las Casas himself recounts how moved he was by a sermon delivered in 1510 by the Dominican de Córdoba. It had been another Dominican, too, Fray Antonio de Montesinos, who had first evoked the anger of the local governor and the Spanish authorities by denouncing the exploitation and forced labour in a memorable sermon which concluded: 'Are they not men? Have they not rational souls? Ought you not to love them as you love yourselves?'² Las Casas's decision to follow in these footsteps marks a second and more definitive conversion, one which led him emphatically to renounce all his previous worldly attachments and to devote himself entirely and single-mindedly to the defence of the native peoples of the New World.

This second conversion led also to a change of style. Gone is the active crusading zeal that had inspired the mission to Cumaná. In its place we find the more characteristically Dominican spirit of study and reflection, to which Las Casas dedicated himself wholeheartedly for a full decade, a time which also saw the compilation of materials that would go into his monumental history of the events he had witnessed. As the 1531 memorial with which we began attests, however, his earlier hopes were not entirely forgotten, and in 1534 we again find him setting out on a mission to Peru. Although the civil wars in Peru frustrated his original plan and prevented him from reaching the recently conquered kingdom, the trip led to a series of important encounters with local leaders in central America which, after the pacification and peaceful conversion of the hostile peoples of Tuzulutlán (in the modern state of Chiapas), served partly to vindicate his earlier efforts.

How much his outlook and method had developed since the 1520s, however, would become clear during his trip to Mexico City in 1538. Predominantly a Franciscan missionary area, central Mexico had experienced one of the most remarkable and swift processes of conversion, one which involved the full exploitation of the liturgical calendar, with elaborate rounds of processions, feasts, outdoor masses, passion and nativity plays, and penitential sessions, all carefully devised to supplant the native religious ceremonies. Las

Casas was suitably impressed by the zeal of the Franciscans, but he remained unconvinced about the suitability of the method; and he quarrelled openly with the charismatic Franciscan friar, Toribio de Motolinía, over the practice of baptizing adults en masse without suitable previous instruction.

It was in part this clash that led Las Casas, during these years, to compose what is perhaps the most accessible and attractive of his writings: *De unico vocationis modo omnium gentium ad veram religionem* ('On the only way of attracting all peoples to the true religion'). The treatise is a clear reflection of his years of studious seclusion in Hispaniola, for it is firmly rooted in patristic theology, especially St Augustine and St John Chrysostom, and its central premise is founded upon the Aristotelian conviction that all human minds are the same in essence and that all human beings, regardless of background and external appearance, are innately susceptible to moral training. As the writings of St Thomas Aquinas had made abundantly clear – most notably in the famous dictum that grace does not destroy nature but perfects it – this Aristotelian anthropology was perfectly compatible with the Christian faith. Especially significant was the natural law tradition in Christian theology, which insisted that God had implanted in every human heart a natural light that impelled it to seek him so that, as St Augustine had put it, it would not be at rest unless it rested in him. In the same way, all human minds naturally sought the truth, and human actions could only find their true fulfilment in the practice of virtue. Thus Las Casas followed St Thomas's analogical treatment of the road to faith and the road to knowledge: just as human knowledge reached valid conclusions through a valid sequence of reasoning, so it was with faith, although in the latter case it was the will rather than reason that played the central role.

There was a practical purpose in Las Casas' deployment of this Thomist argument, for if the road to faith was analogous to the road to knowledge, it necessarily followed that the preaching of the gospel was above all a work of persuasion. Compulsion of any kind was not merely undesirable; it was diametrically opposed to the spirit of the gospel. But additionally Las Casas insisted that the missionaries had no right whatsoever to gain any financial reward or political power from the conversion of their neophytes. This was the central issue around which the conflict with the Franciscans revolved.

Now it is true that the euphoric flurry of conversions in central Mexico under the Franciscans that Motolinía would immortalize,³ boasting as many as 14,000 baptisms in two days, is best understood in the context of an essentially millenarian outlook which sought to re-create the primitive Church as a first step in a universal project to convert all the peoples of the world before the second coming of Christ. But its triumphalist ethos went hand in hand with a positive view of the Spanish presence in America, a view which entailed the legitimization of the conquest of Mexico by Hernán Cortés. After all, it had been Cortés himself who had urged the emperor Charles V to send a contingent of Franciscan missionaries to Mexico in the early 1520s, taking special care to differentiate them from secular priests and bishops who 'would not abandon the custom . . . of squandering the assets of the church in pomps and other vices'.⁴

The polemicist: strategies and manoeuvres

Fray Bartolomé, by contrast, could never accept any form of triumphalism. His experience in Cumaná had brought it home to him with unshakeable certainty that missionary activity could afford no flirtation with the world. The 'disarming frankness' – to use the words of Sir John Elliott⁵ – with which the early Spanish discoverers, Las Casas no doubt at one with them, had claimed that they had gone to the New World 'to serve God, the King, and to get rich', was now anathema in his mind. It is no surprise that the final part of *De unico vocationis modo* should turn to a fierce denunciation of the conquest, much more in tune with the tempestuous zeal of a Savonarola than with the serene intellectualism of a St Thomas. After detailed and chilling descriptions of massacres, murders and enslavements, Las Casas asks his readers if it is possible to imagine how the central message of the gospel – that is, love of God and love of neighbour – could have penetrated the hearts of those who had been subjugated by such terror and hatred. The gospel could never, he continued, under any circumstances be preceded by war. War was but murder, and those who paraded their Christian faith as a rallying cry in battle were no followers of Jesus but 'children of Satan', 'precursors of anti-Christ and imitators of Mahomet'.⁶

Here already we have something of the inflammatory style and uncompromising message so characteristic of Las Casas' most notorious and influential treatise, the *Brevísima relación de la*

destrucción de las Indias ('Most brief account of the destruction of the Indies'). Written shortly after his return to Spain in 1540, where he campaigned indefatigably at court for the complete reform of the colonial system of government, this short treatise is aimed specifically to horrify the emperor Charles V and his advisors and thus induce them to implement a reform. Las Casas begins with an idealized description of the native inhabitants of America, whom he defines as the most gentle, kind and humble in the whole world. He then abruptly moves on to a horrendous account of how this unprecedented opportunity for genuine conversion had been wrecked by the arrival of bands of Spanish tyrants and thieves who had tortured and murdered their way across the entire new continent, leaving a trail of destruction of apocalyptic proportions. Indeed, by the time of writing, Las Casas claimed that between 12 and 15 million Indians had been wiped off the face of the earth as a direct result of Spanish barbarism. The bitterness of the narrative was given almost diabolical character by Las Casas' deliberate avoidance of any direct references to individual Spaniards. Everywhere the conquerors are described impersonally as 'ravening wolves' or 'tigers and savage lions who have not eaten meat for days' and who mercilessly and relentlessly ravaged the natives, 'gentle lambs grazing peacefully in green pastures', thus bringing about a 'chaos worthy of Lucifer himself'.⁷

The diatribe paid off, soon bearing fruit in the New Laws promulgated in 1542; and the influence of Las Casas' thought upon this code of legislative measures is unmistakable. Indian slavery was forbidden and all slaves were to be emancipated immediately. All royal officials and rebellious subjects were to be stripped of their grants of land (*encomiendas*), and all remaining *encomiendas* were to revert to the Crown upon the death of their current beneficiary. Indians were no longer required to provide free labour, and they were to be paid in cash. More significantly, in order to ensure that royal justice was accessible to the more remote provinces, new crown courts (*audiencias*) were set up in Lima and Guatemala.

The whole initiative was clearly an affront to the very basis of the society that the Spanish settlers were hoping to create, and it is therefore no surprise that the New Laws were largely disregarded. In Mexico City, for instance, the viceroy openly adopted the practice of *obedezco pero no cumplo* ('I obey but I do not comply'), arguing that the laws could not be implemented before the Crown was made aware of the very reasonable complaints of the landowners, and

even of the provincials of the mendicant orders, including Las Casas' own order, all of whom urged caution. In those areas, like Peru, where the laws *were* implemented, the immediate result was a violent rebellion that culminated dramatically in the viceroy's death. Yet, it is interesting to observe that the rebels had no doubts about the legitimacy of their action. The conquerors, they asserted, had established a clear contract with the Crown, and therefore any law – and especially any law touching on rights of property – was invalid if it was not ratified and approved by the leading citizens of the various kingdoms under the Crown. There can be no clearer statement of how distant the programme of the conquerors and their descendants had become from the one Las Casas was at pains to introduce.

The bishop: challenge and defeat

The clash became especially clear during Las Casas' brief tenure as Bishop of Chiapa in southern Mexico (1543–1544), where he soon came into conflict with the local authorities and the neighbouring Bishop of Guatemala. From the start, Las Casas made no secret about his uncompromising position regarding the implementation of the New Laws. What most worried the local authorities, however, was the new bishop's determination to deploy his episcopal jurisdiction to carry out his objectives. Shortly after his arrival in Chiapa, for instance, he informed the *audiencia* of Guatemala that he was to be informed of any case of Indian abuse or maltreatment, and then threatened the president and the judges of the *audiencia* with excommunication if they failed to comply with his wishes. At the same time, he composed a set of instructions to confessors, ordering them to refuse absolution – even in danger of death – to all conquerors, landowners or merchants who did not sign a formal letter of restitution and return to their native owners any goods or land unjustly acquired since their arrival. In all this, the new bishop made a point of maintaining the legal immunity of all ecclesiastics, thereby turning the powers of the Church into a source of juridical authority, and her confessors into virtual judges of their flock.

The enforcement of these policies led to such levels of reaction and unrest that Las Casas' position as bishop soon became untenable. Indeed, he was forced to flee in danger of his life just over a year after his arrival, making his way back to Spain to dedicate the rest of his life to what he could do best.

The mature scholar: the work of 'God's special instrument'

Las Casas' disillusionment after his failure as bishop must have brought back memories of his earlier failure in Cumaná. From now on, he would dedicate his remaining nineteen years of life to exerting as much influence as possible at Court and in the Council of the Indies through memorials and polemical tracts, and to the production of a formidable range of scholarly works.

The high point of this last stage in Las Casas' career is undoubtedly the celebrated Valladolid debate in 1551, where he turned his passionate zeal and inexhaustible energy against the defenders of the conquest. Foremost among these was the distinguished Aristotelian scholar Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda, whose most famous work, *Democrates alter*, aimed to justify the conquest and enslavement of Indians by rehabilitating Aristotle's category of a 'natural' slavery to which, he claimed, the Indians of the New World belonged. It is illustrative of Las Casas' energy and influence at Court that he succeeded in preventing the publication of Sepúlveda's treatise while securing the printing, without licence, of nine treatises written by himself, the most notable of which was the *Brevísima relación*.

But more significant in the long term was the composition, at this time, of an *Apologia* in Latin, and of one of his most important works in Spanish, the *Apologética historia Sumaria*, both works written with the specific purpose of refuting Sepúlveda. The later work is monumental both in conception and in proportion. Its central aim is to demonstrate that the natives of America are perfectly comparable, both in their 'savagery' and in their 'civilization', to the ancient peoples of the Old World, and specifically the Greeks and the Romans. Indeed, the bulk of the book centres around a direct comparison of Incas and Aztecs with Greeks and Romans, all within the traditional framework first laid out by Aristotle of the six elements necessary for civilized existence: peasants, artisans, warriors, merchants, priests and governors. The originality of both the argument and the material are beyond dispute, and recent scholarship has concluded that the work is possibly the first known exercise in comparative ethnology.⁸

At the same time, Las Casas also succeeded in preventing the publication of the second part of Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo's *Historia general de las Indias* and in securing an order for the withdrawal from circulation of Francisco López de Gómara's work of the same title. Both these authors gave a largely laudatory account

of Cortés' conquest of Mexico and it was in part to refute them that Las Casas decided to complete his own *Historia de las Indias*, a work mostly written in Hispaniola during the 1520s recounting his own experiences in the Caribbean and in Cumaná.

But the Valladolid debate also brought to light another area of controversy which concerned the title deeds of empire. The issue had already been addressed by the distinguished Dominican theologian Francisco de Vitoria in his lucid *Relectio 'De Indis'* (1539), and Las Casas drew heavily upon Vitoria's devastating refutation of any argument seeking to justify the Spanish conquest by alluding to the barbarism or infidelity of the Indians. Even scandalous practices like human sacrifice and cannibalism, Vitoria had argued, in no way vitiated the natives' natural rights of self-government and property. And yet, whereas Vitoria had concluded that Pope Alexander VI's Bull of 1493 (which granted the Kings of Castile dominion over the newly discovered lands for the purpose of preaching the gospel) had no basis in either natural or canon law and was therefore invalid, Las Casas insisted to the end of his days that the Bull was the only acceptable source of political legitimacy. By this, of course, he did not imply that the pope possessed direct jurisdiction over pagan states. Merely, that in his capacity as vicar of Christ the pope was responsible for the evangelization of the whole world, and able to empower the emperor – or indeed, any Christian ruler – with the capacity to suspend any temporal authority which actively resisted the spread of the gospel. In other words, although the legitimate dominion of Indian kings and lords was never put into question, it was understood by Las Casas to be subordinate to the overarching authority of the emperor and his successors, the universal Catholic monarchs. This approach, of course, was consistent with Las Casas' activities during his tenure as Bishop of Chiapa when, as we have seen, he sought to invoke ecclesiastical sanctions for political aims. The approach also shows that, as a political theorist, despite his insistence that kings obtained their sovereignty from the free consent of the people, he remained essentially a medieval canonist to the end of his days.

Assessment

Las Casas' reversion to scholarship did not lead to any diminution in his interest in New World affairs. Indeed, during the last decade of his life he was involved in a fierce debate at the Council of the

Indies to prevent the landowners of Peru from obtaining the right of perpetuity in inheritance of their *encomiendas*, and in jurisdiction over the Indians, in exchange for four million ducats which they offered in 1554, no doubt in full knowledge of the desperate financial needs of the Crown at this time. The final rejection of the proposal came in 1562, after a period of intense debate in which Las Casas again played a leading role. The sense of urgency, almost despair, that he must have felt at the thought of the Peruvian *encomenderos*' likely success can be gauged from the extreme argument he developed in a Latin tract written in 1561. It was well known, he stated, that the conquerors had obtained their power in America through violence and that they maintained their authority through force. This meant that they governed without the free consent of their subjects. From this it followed that their alleged political 'pact' with the king, which, as we have seen, had been used by them to justify their rebellion after the introduction of the New Laws in 1542, had never actually existed. Indeed, the terms of the papal donation – which Las Casas saw as the only justification for the Spanish presence in the New World – had never been fulfilled. The conquerors were therefore 'murderers and thieves' and the government they had created a 'tyranny'.⁹

In his last will and testament, Las Casas pointed to his profound providential sense by declaring that God had chosen him as a special instrument to defend the Indians from the injustices of the conquest. Posterity has more than vindicated his vision. Yet, there can be no doubt that the work and legacy of the Defender of the Indians have, more often than not, been used to serve political and moral interests that he would have been totally incapable of sharing. The 'Black-Legend',¹⁰ was largely the creation of Anglo-Dutch, anti-Spanish Protestant propaganda. The uses to which such 'heretics' put his polemical attacks against the conquerors, with all their purposefully vivid and wildly exaggerated descriptions of cruelty and injustice, in order to paint a picture of Catholic Spain as the reservoir of early modern tyranny and obscurantism, would have filled Las Casas with horror and despair. Independence from Spain was something that he never even remotely contemplated. Liberation theology's 'preferential option for the poor' perhaps comes closer to Las Casas' vision of the role of the Church in Indian societies, but he would never have accepted any kind of revolt against the established authorities either in the Church or in the state. He never, after all, worked in a cultural vacuum. He was essentially a man of his

time, and in the last analysis his life and work should stand not as an indictment of the Spanish presence in America, but as an enduring testimony of the strength and vitality of Christianity and its social principles in early modern Spain.

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NOTES

1 Bartolomé de las Casas, *Obras escogidas*, 5 vols (Madrid, 1957), V, pp 43–55.

2 Bartolomé de las Casas, *Historia de las Indias*, 3 vols (Mexico City, 1951), II, pp 440–441.

3 See his *Historia de los Indios de la Nueva España* (Mexico City, 1973).

4 Hernán Cortés, *Cartas de relación* (Mexico City, 1978), pp 203–204.

5 *Imperial Spain* (Harmondsworth, 1970), p 65.

6 I have used the Spanish edition, *Del único modo de atraer a todos los pueblos a la verdadera religión* (Mexico City, 1975), pp 65–73, 250–314, 390–417.

7 Bartolomé de las Casas, *Brevísima relación de la destrucción de las Indias*, various editions. There is a recent English version in Penguin by Nigel Griffin: *A short account of the destruction of the Indies* (Harmondsworth, 1992), see pp 11, 129.

8 See, for example, Anthony Pagden, *The fall of natural man: the American Indian and the origins of comparative ethnology* (Cambridge, 1982), pp 119–145.

9 Bartolomé de las Casas, *Los tesoros del Perú* (Madrid, 1958), *passim*.

10 The Black Legend is the name given to the movement of anti-Spanish propaganda orchestrated largely by Dutch and English pamphleteers from the middle of the sixteenth century onwards. Their aim was to discredit Spain and Spanish Catholicism by laying particular stress on what they called 'the intrinsic cruelty of the Spanish character'. Las Casas' *Brevísima relación* was especially instrumental for this purpose.