

the fiercest and the most widely read condemnation of European colonialism to be written during the Enlightenment, looked forward to a more generous age when 'these unfortunate lands which have been destroyed will be repopulated and acquire laws, customs, justice and liberty'. And he imagined a statue of Las Casas, 'in which you will be shown standing between the American and the Spaniard, holding out your breast to the dagger of the latter to save the life of the former. And on the base such words as these should be inscribed: IN A CENTURY OF FEROCITY, LAS CASAS, WHOM YOU SEE BEFORE YOU, WAS A BENEVOLENT MAN'. There are now, throughout the Americas, dozens of such statues.

Some of Las Casas's many identities have been devised to serve political and moral interests he would not have shared and may not even have understood. The 'Black Legend' was largely an instrument of Anglo-Dutch propaganda, and he would have been horrified at the uses to which the despised Protestant heretics had put his work. Independence from Spain was something he never contemplated even for the Indians, let alone the descendants of the conquistadores themselves. Liberation Theology's implicit claim that the 'poor of Christ' possess a privileged understanding of the human condition comes close to his self-consciously prophetic, apostolic vision of the new American Church. Nevertheless, he would never have accepted any kind of revolt against the power of either the Church or the State. His attacks on the behaviour of the conquistadores, on the agents of the Crown, even on members of the clergy were relentless and uncompromising. But he was never once during his lifetime formally accused of heterodoxy, nor ever suspected of treason. Only his fiercest enemy, Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda (to whom I shall return) suggested that his writings were heretical and a threat to the interests of the Spanish monarchy. Las Casas, in fact, regarded all rebels as disrupters of 'the common reason of man'. Like many radicals, he was, in all respects but one, the staunchest of conservatives. Self-educated, his massive if erratic

learning was directed only against those who argued that the conquest of America had conferred upon the Castilian Crown rights to the goods or the labour of the native inhabitants of the Americas.

Las Casas's understanding of the historical and eschatological significance of the discovery and conquest of America contrasted an early vision of peaceful settlement with the rapacious horrors of the conquests which followed. Columbus, whose diary he preserved and edited, had, in Las Casas's view, been chosen by God for his learning and virtue to bring the Gospel to the New World. It was for this, he wrote, 'that he was called Christopher, that is to say *Christum ferens*, which means carrier or bearer of Christ'. It was the Spanish settlers, men precisely like Las Casas as he had once been, who had transformed a trading and evangelizing mission not unlike that practised by the Portuguese along the coast of Malacca into genocidal colonization. Twice, once in Cumaná on the Venezuelan coast between 1520 and 1521, and then again between 1545 and 1560, in the optimistically named Verapaz ('True Peace'), a region in modern Honduras, Las Casas attempted to create peaceful settlements of the kind which the missionaries might have been able to build if the Spanish colonists had not got there first: settlements of priests and honest farmers. Both experiments failed. The priests at Cumaná and the 'simple labourers' whom Las Casas had ferched from Castile for the purpose were massacred after a slaving raid on the area by Guayquerí Indians, who could not be expected to distinguish between one Spaniard and the next. (Las Casas gives a somewhat schematic account of this on pp. 88-9.) Verapaz lasted longer, but it, too, collapsed under pressure from Spanish settlers and from the often less than peaceable ambitions of the 'honest farmers' themselves.

But for all his insistence that the Crown had seriously mismanaged its colonies and that the behaviour of the colonists had 'given reason for the name of Christ to be loathed and abominated by countless people', Las Casas never once denied, as