

# LSE Research Online

## [Joan-Pau Rubiés](#)

**Book review: Daniel Castro, "another face of empire. Bartolome de Las Casas, indigenous rights and ecclesiastical imperialism".**

## **Article (Published version) (Refereed)**

### **Original citation:**

Rubiés, Joan-Pau (2007) *Book review: Daniel Castro, "another face of empire. Bartolome de Las Casas, indigenous rights and ecclesiastical imperialism"*. [Journal of ecclesiastical history](#), 58 (4). pp. 767-768. ISSN 0022-0469  
DOI: [10.1017/S0022046907001704](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022046907001704)

© 2007 [Cambridge University Press](#)

This version available at: <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/26123/>

Available in LSE Research Online: August 2012

LSE has developed LSE Research Online so that users may access research output of the School. Copyright © and Moral Rights for the papers on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. Users may download and/or print one copy of any article(s) in LSE Research Online to facilitate their private study or for non-commercial research. You may not engage in further distribution of the material or use it for any profit-making activities or any commercial gain. You may freely distribute the URL (<http://eprints.lse.ac.uk>) of the LSE Research Online website.

congratulated on a well-written study that makes a significant contribution to our understanding not only of dynastic religion but also of early modern state formation. In addition, this very reasonably priced volume offers a selection of well-chosen images (several from that striking instrument of dynastic propaganda, the *Theatrum Sabaudiae* of 1682) as well as that rarest of finds in an Italian academic book published these days, a consolidated bibliography (of forty-five pages). Bravo Cozzo! Bravo il Mulino!

UNIVERSITY OF YORK

SIMON DITCHFIELD

*Another face of empire. Bartolomé de Las Casas, indigenous rights, and ecclesiastical imperialism.*

By Daniel Castro. (Latin America Otherwise. Languages, Empires, Nations.)

Pp. xii + 234. Durham–London: Duke University Press, 2007. £53 (cloth),

£13.99 (paper). 978 0 8223 3930 4; 978 0 8223 3939 7

*JEH* (58) 2007; doi:10.1017/S0022046907001704

The Dominican Friar Bartolomé de Las Casas, appointed by the Crown of Castile as ‘protector of the Indians’, is one of the most emblematic figures of the Spanish empire in the New World, on account of his exceptional stance against the illegitimate violence with which the native peoples were subjected to a colonial regime. Las Casas did not limit himself to denouncing abuses and cruelty, but also fought a long and intense ideological battle to define liberally the rights to liberty and property of the American peoples according to the principles of Christian theology and natural law. Although his rhetoric was repetitive, and some of his claims exaggerated, he conducted a great deal of historical research into native history, developing a remarkable analysis of gentile barbarism and civilisation. Furthermore, he also sought to restructure the legal and institutional bases for the governance of the colonies, in order to erode the mechanisms, such as *encomienda*, that made possible the continued abuse and exploitation of the Indians. Unlike many of his contemporaries, Las Casas had a very elevated concept of the capacities of the natives, and a radical position concerning the fact that the evangelisation of idolaters could never justify conquest or enslavement. His most developed position – one that the crown and people of Castile were not ready to embrace – radicalised the authoritative principles established by the neo-Thomist theologian Francisco de Vitoria and his disciples in the ‘School of Salamanca’. It consisted of supporting the incorporation into the Catholic Monarchy of Amerindian polities as independent kingdoms ruled by the natives themselves (much like Naples or Sicily were ruled), generally according to their own customs and civilisation, which Las Casas always extolled, but peacefully inviting them to embrace Christianity and reject idolatrous cults. They were to become equal subjects of a paternalistic crown. Daniel Castro’s aim in his book consists of subjecting the status of Las Casas to critical scrutiny beyond the contrasting images, positive and negative, that he has inevitably attracted since the sixteenth century. He argues that the practical outcomes of the action of Las Casas and his legacy need to be reassessed beyond facile mythologies, in particular from the native point of view. This exercise leads Castro to the conclusion that Las Casas was in reality a supporter of empire, and that his ability to influence

crown policy in favour of the natives has been exaggerated. His belief in evangelisation was a form of ‘ecclesiastical imperialism’ and represented a ‘colonisation of consciousness’, however benevolent, whilst his notorious dispute with the humanist Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda in Valladolid (1550–1) offered the crown the possibility to pick and choose, rather than limit, its action. Hence the rulers of Castile could on the one hand embrace a paternalistic rhetoric, and on the other continue to support a harsh and exploitative colonial system. Las Casas offered a useful counterpoint to settler demands, but the legal reforms he instigated, the New Laws of 1542 and Philip II’s ordinances of 1573, were either rejected by the colonists, or gave the colonial authorities the discretionary power to implement them against native interests. Castro also points out that Las Casas felt more comfortable working close to the centres of power – lobbying for reforms – than as a missionary amongst Indians, and accomplished very little as bishop of Chiapas (he was indeed fiercely criticised by prominent Franciscan missionaries like Toribio de Motolinía, no less than by lay settlers and imperial ideologues). Unfortunately, Castro’s account of the life and thought of Las Casas, albeit competent, is largely derivative and the analysis often superficial. He fails to engage seriously with much of the most balanced historiography, for example the work of Marcel Bataillon, Anthony Pagden, David Brading, Sabine MacCormack or Vidal Abril Castelló (who is not even mentioned in the bibliography), relying instead on attacking the more extreme and outdated works. His use of sources lacks sophistication and is poorly contextualised, and sometimes the best editions – let alone the manuscripts – are not even consulted (this is true of the writings by Las Casas as well as those by Sepúlveda). Castro’s assessment of the legal and intellectual impact of the Dominican is particularly patchy – his influence on the university professor Fray Juan de la Peña, for example, or the way in which that José de Acosta’s work was in some ways a reaction to his legacy, are entirely ignored. The complexity of the positions defended within the missionary movement is not conveyed to the reader either, which makes it difficult to evaluate Las Casas according to the criteria of his contemporaries. It also seems unfair to accuse Las Casas of assuming an imperial model whilst seeking to blunt its brutal effects on the natives. He did not simply take for granted a metropolitan interest, but in fact examined its legal justification and denounced its mechanisms of violent exploitation quite thoroughly, developing ever more radical proposals in a spiral of imperial self-criticism that finds few historical parallels. As for the idea that Las Casas should have realised that it was contradictory to seek to impose an alien religion ‘on a people who already had well-defined theological beliefs’, it is of course deeply anachronistic, revealing a worrying lack of capacity for historical sympathy. Castro’s valid points, one may conclude, are poorly served by an argument that tends to privilege the facile polemic around the myths of the Black and Golden Legends of the Spanish empire in the New World. This is particularly surprising when the author began by proclaiming his intentions to move beyond the mythological dimensions of the friar’s legacy. In fact his book will be most useful to students new to the subject and interested in ideological debates. By contrast, serious scholars will find little that is new.