

Article

Biblical Kingship, Catholic Theology, and the Rights of Indians in the Opening of Las Casas's *Short Account*

Matteo Salonia

School of International Studies, University of Nottingham Ningbo China, Ningbo 315100, China; matteo.salonia@nottingham.edu.cn

Abstract: This article introduces the key issues and scope of the 16th-century debate over the rights of the native American peoples encountered by Columbus and the Castilian conquistadores. The historic attempt by theologians and missionaries to limit imperial expansion and to defend the dignity of conquered peoples is an example of Western self-criticism and a fundamental contribution of the Catholic Church to the slow emergence of human rights discourses. This article then focuses on the first pages of Bartolomé de Las Casas's *Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies*, a text that played a pivotal role in the formation of the Black Legend against Spain, but also in the drafting of the Leyes Nuevas (New Laws) of 1542. While the *Short Account's* hyperbolic and explosive prose are well-known, its religious roots can be detected in the prologue and preface, with their discussion of biblical kingship, virtuous Indians, mortal sin, and (un)Christian behavior.

Keywords: Christianity; Spanish Empire; human rights; Las Casas



Citation: Salonia, Matteo. 2023. Biblical Kingship, Catholic Theology, and the Rights of Indians in the Opening of Las Casas's *Short Account*. *Religions* 14: 1195. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14091195>

Academic Editor: Dyrón B. Daugherty

Received: 16 August 2023
Revised: 15 September 2023
Accepted: 15 September 2023
Published: 19 September 2023



Copyright: © 2023 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

1. Introduction

Empire building typically involves the subjugation and exploitation of conquered peoples. The Spanish Empire, whose rapid rise followed Castile's completion of its *Reconquista* in 1492 and Christopher Columbus's momentous voyage in the same year, was no exception.¹ While in the Mediterranean world Spain was itself constantly under threat from an expanding Islamic world and had to face the embarrassing reality of Muslim piracy and slaving expeditions hitting even its own coastal towns (Davis 2003), on the other side of the Atlantic, Spanish colonists were on the offensive (Bolland 1994). It is true that, as explained by Matthew Restall, Spain never had armies of professional soldiers in the first phases of exploration and conquest (Restall 2003, chap. 2); yet, the bands of adventurers crisscrossing the Americas in search of gold and quick wealth obtained a vast empire for their monarchs (Cervantes 2020). The pace of conquest quickened after Hernan Cortes's epoch-making encounter with the Aztec Empire, which offered a blueprint for future expeditions such as the one led by Francisco Pizarro into the highlands of Peru (Cervantes 2020, pp. 249–62). After mistreatment and diseases had wiped out the indigenous population of the Caribbean, a system of formal and informal enslavement was imposed on many native communities, from the heart of Mesoamerica to imperial peripheries such as Northern Chile. Yet, Spain was indeed an exception because very soon during its empire-building process it questioned the justice of its own success. As early as 1498, Queen Isabella of Castile (1451–1504) banned the unjust enslavement of Amerindian people, whom she considered her own subjects and therefore endowed with duties and rights under her Crown (Elliott 2006, p. 97). More importantly, since 1511 a large coalition of Catholic churchmen on both sides of the ocean had begun to agitate for the recognition of the Indians' humanity, dignity and rights—including the right to property and self-government (Hanke 1949; Valdivia Giménez 2021).

The number of pamphlets, letters, treatises and pieces of legislation that were produced in this period by bishops, missionaries and officers who tried to denounce the atrocities

of the conquest and who argued in support of the freedom of subjected Amerindian populations is staggering. This great debate during which an empire criticized itself and judged harshly the morality of its own achievements was surely caused, at least in part, by the flourishing in Salamanca of a school of Thomist theologians gathered around the towering figure of Francisco de Vitoria (c. 1483–1546).² But in this contribution, I shall focus on just a few pages from this enormous amount of literature. The pages come from the opening sections of the Dominican friar Bartolomé de Las Casas's *Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies*.³

Scholars have been studying this document for its impact on international law, or for its role in the formation of negative images of Spain in the rest of Europe. Lawrence A. Clayton, one of the most important specialists on Las Casas, thinks that the *Short Account* was instrumental in the approval of the New Laws (1542), a pivotal text in the history of human rights (Clayton 2011, pp. 107–27). Shaskan Bumas's work is a good example of discussions about the *Short Account*'s influence on the English-speaking world (Bumas 2000). Yet, in most cases, historians have focused their attention on the central sections of the text, the various chapters purportedly detailing Spanish atrocities in various territories. In this brief article, I shall focus instead on the opening pages of the account, constituting the prologue and preface. The aim is to show the religious underpinnings of Las Casas's position, and the Christian framework of the text, which cannot be reduced to a series of graphic scenes designed to cause emotional responses. Therefore, after delineating the debate up to 1542, the year in which Las Casas penned this pamphlet, I will analyze its prologue and preface to flesh out the deployment of biblical kingship and other Christian ideas. Las Casas's rhetorical strategy set the stage to impress the scenes of violence upon the mind of the reader by first portraying the Indians as virtuous pagans, peaceful and in fact almost angelic beings. I also draw attention to the deliberate use of the term "Christians" to indicate the Spaniards in the passages where Las Casas accused them graphically of horrendous crimes.

This reflection is important, because the extent to which Christian universalism and Catholic philosophy contributed to the emergence of human rights discourses has never been adequately acknowledged. Secularist scholars often ignore this vast campaign for Indian rights in 16th-century Spain, which would utterly undermine their chronology of the development of the idea of universal human rights. In fact, some of them do not even believe in a development but rather argue for a sudden appearance of human rights as a result of the Enlightenment. An example of this trend is Lynn Hunt's strangely titled book *Inventing Human Rights*.⁴ Alternatively, in her book *The History of Human Rights*, Micheline Ishay recognizes the long history of the idea of rights, but she mentions Las Casas only in passing and (paradoxically) to castigate "Catholicism" (Ishay 2004, p. 75)! By ignoring that Las Casas's efforts were part of a much broader campaign, supported by countless other churchmen and missionaries, Ishay resembles the early modern Protestant writers and engravers who made use of Lascasian narratives as part of anti-Spanish propaganda. In Ishay's reconstruction, the fact that Las Casas could criticize Spanish imperialism precisely *because of his Catholic faith and philosophy* is entirely lost.⁵ More recently, a much more careful treatment of Las Casas has been offered by Karen-Margrethe Simonsen, but while her essay on the *Short Account* is fascinating for its use of the concept of "atrocities story", she focuses on religious allegories rather than biblical and theological arguments (Simonsen 2023, pp. 63–106). Similarly, Harald Braun has pointed out the crucial fact that Las Casas denounced the violence of the Spanish conquest because it was unacceptable considering Christian ethics and dogma, but the scope of his important essay is genocidal massacres rather than the origins of human rights discourses (Braun 2023).

In sum, there is an evident disconnect between the scholarship on the intellectual history of 16th-century Spain and the literature about the birth of human rights. The latter is often written by authors who are not familiar with pre-Enlightenment texts or who have a secularist stance. With this contribution, I would like to recognize the Catholic theology and biblical imagery of Las Casas's anti-imperial discourses. And I suggest that

such a religious framework, which supported the Dominican's political campaign, also exemplifies the Christian origins of Western self-criticism.

2. A Historic Debate

The debate on the peoples beyond Christendom and the Islamic world had its origins already in the medieval period. While the legitimacy of polities ruled by non-Christians had been accepted by pope Innocent IV already in the 13th century, an array of European writers had described pagan peoples living both in the Indies and in the Atlantic world.⁶ With regard to the ill-defined area called "the Indies," the European travel writers included not only William of Rubruck, Giovanni Carpini and Marco Polo, but also 14th-century writers such as Odoric of Pordenone ([Odoric of Pordenone 2001](#)). I have already commented on this sustained European curiosity ([Salonia 2022](#)). I mention it again here simply to highlight the vast treasure of images and expectations with which the Spanish attempted to categorize a world that was so different from anything they could find in travel narratives about the East. Columbus famously tried to fit what he saw into what he thought he knew, aided (or rather, misled) by this rich tradition of writings about lands and kingdoms beyond the lands of Islam.⁷ Because of this tradition, any conquest in the Indies had to be justified, especially as it involved the takeover of vast lands and the subjugation of peoples who (unlike the Muslims) had not attacked Christian lands. The legal framework established by the *Inter caetera* papal bull of 1493 did not address this problem effectively, also because it was written before the Castilian and papal courts understood the precise outline of the American continent and the staggering diversity of its indigenous polities. The situation in Hispaniola and in the expanding frontiers of the American kingdoms was further complicated by a spiritual question: whose duty was it to explain the Gospel to these people who had been for so long cut off from the Church?

The Dominican friars who were sent to the island of Hispaniola in 1511 soon realized that such spiritual concerns were not in the minds of their fellow Spaniards. Since the arrival of Nicolas de Ovando in 1502, the Spanish Crown had given its assent to the experiment of the *encomienda* system. The *encomienda* was not a piece of land, but rather a group of (so-called) Indians assigned to one of the colonists who first conquered or settled a certain area. The *encomendero* was entitled to receive some kind of tribute from the Indians assigned to him. This varied widely, depending on the natural resources and the climate of each American region where this institution was spread. The tribute could consist of agricultural products, or gold, or labor. In typically medieval fashion, the relationship between the *encomendero* and his Indians was imagined as based on reciprocity. Hence, the Spaniard had the duty to protect his Indians and to educate them in the Christian faith. It is easy for us to dismiss this arrangement as unpalatable, but in the historical context of the time it made perfect sense. At least on paper. The Indians would receive the spiritual benefits of the Gospel and the Sacraments; the *encomenderos* would strengthen their position in the newly established colonial societies without having to work; and the Crown would protect its new Indian subjects from enslavement while also forcing the *encomenderos* to settle down and become attached to a place rather than continuing to move around looking for easy wealth ([Elliott 2006](#), pp. 39–40). Yet, while we should be cautious when generalizing, and exceptions always existed, when tested on the ground the *encomienda* system was impracticable. Indians were often exploited, and their formal status as free subjects did not prevent many *encomenderos* from treating them like slaves. They were overworked, beaten, sometimes killed. And the *encomenderos* had no interest in teaching them the Gospel. Often the *encomenderos* themselves were men with very little religious instruction, and at any rate their priority was to extract as much tribute and labor as possible from their *encomienda*, not to save souls.

Father Antonio de Montesinos was the first Dominican friar to explosively denounce the mistreatment of Indians, and he did so by attacking his fellow Spaniards during a homily that he gave in 1511, on the Sunday before Christmas, in the church of Hispaniola. I do not have the space here to reconstruct step by step the events that followed this

episode and the decision of the Dominicans to deny the Sacraments to Columbus's son and to the rest of the colonial elite on the island. My point is simply to remind readers that the great debate on the rights of the Indians was from its very start a religious one, animated by Christian morality, sacramental theology, and soteriology. The political power of the coalition of churchmen who, from both sides of the Atlantic, started to denounce the *encomienda* system and to highlight the loss of souls can be appreciated if one notes that, as early as 1512, King Ferdinand (after having initially chastised the noisy Dominicans of Hispaniola) approved the Laws of Burgos (Pizarro Zelaya 2013; Valdivia Giménez 2017). These laws, which were then revised and strengthened by the Dominicans themselves, listed a series of regulations that should have rendered the *encomienda* more effective while significantly improving the conditions of the Indians.

Yet, the debate about the (in)justice of the conquest and settlement of the Americas continued for decades, with Catholic churchmen developing arguments not only against the mistreatment of natives but also against the very intrusion and *presence* of their Spanish countrymen in the New World.⁸ Christian theology was pivotal in the development of these arguments, and, therefore, in the emergence of the modern philosophical framework sustaining the idea of human rights. Pope Paul III's bull *Sublimis Deus*, confirming the humanity of the native inhabitants of the Americas, and declaring their ability to grasp the message of the Gospel, is a good example. The Pope started from these observations to then castigate the violence used by Spanish colonists and to order the restitution of all property stolen from the Indians (Thomas 2010, pp. 469–686). At Salamanca, Vitoria and other theologians articulated these ideas more sophisticatedly, but not less explosively, through a systematic use of the Thomist doctrine of natural law (Valenzuela Vermehren 2017). My objective here is not to give an account of this great debate on the rights of Indians, but rather to focus on just a few of the many pages written by the spiritual and political heir of fray Montesinos: Bartolomé de Las Casas (1484–1566).

3. The Protector of the Indians

In the second half of the 15th century, Seville was an important city and one of the main ports from which Castilian ships sailed into the Atlantic Ocean. With Columbus's voyages and the beginning of a stable Spanish presence in the Caribbean, Seville would become the headquarters of the *Casa de Contratación* and the only port allowed to trade with the Americas (Elliott 2006, p. 49). Here, Bartolomé de Las Casas was born in 1484, and from here, he sailed to Hispaniola in 1502 to accompany his father.⁹ His arrival in the New World coincided with a period of change in the organization of the colonies, under the leadership of Nicolás de Ovando. This decade saw Las Casas complete his studies, be ordained as a priest and participate in some of the military expeditions in the islands conquered by the Spaniards. He owned slaves and received an *encomienda*, so much so that he was among the colonists targeted by Montesinos and the other Dominicans in 1511.

This first phase in Las Casas's life came to an end in 1514, when he experienced a sudden yet complete conversion, realized that the core message of the Gospel was incompatible with the enslavement of Indians, and finally came to agree with the thundering words preached by Montesinos years earlier. Understanding now that his own soul was in peril of eternal damnation, Las Casas freed his Indians and embarked on his lifelong campaign to stir consciences on both sides of the Atlantic by denouncing the violence involved in the conquest and demonstrating the intrinsic dignity of all the Amerindian people. A detailed biography of Las Casas is beyond the scope of this article. Suffice it to say that Las Casas joined the Dominican Order in 1522, and in his writings he continued to pursue a twofold objective: obtaining permission to establish peasant colonies under his authority, where the Indians would have interacted only with friars and where Spanish adventurers would have been banned; and familiarizing the Spanish court and public with the atrocities taking place in the Indies in order to encourage legislation protecting the Indians and ultimately abolishing the *encomienda* system.¹⁰

In this contribution, I would like to focus on the famous *Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies* that Las Casas penned in 1542 (published in 1552).¹¹ The *Short Account* was written as a report for Charles V and the Council of the Indies, though it was later addressed to Charles's son, Philip. Moved by the desire to abolish the *encomienda*, and recognized by that point as an authority on Indian matters, Las Casas originally used this account to lobby for the protection of native Americans at a special council called by the emperor in Valladolid.¹²

4. An Analysis of the Opening of the *Short Account*

The *Short Account* was carefully constructed by Las Casas as a text that would shock and scandalize readers, especially if read out loud as often happened in the context of public debates. Yet, the pamphlet was framed within the genre of a letter to the king, something very typical of Habsburg governance. In the Habsburg composite monarchy, the king was first and foremost an arbiter, a judge above an array of overlapping and often conflicting parties and jurisdictions (Belenguier Cebrià 2002). Hence, the decision to write this brief appeal as a letter to the monarch was not in and of itself groundbreaking. Still, the opening pages of the text, which are the focus of this article, set the stage for a series of arguments that put the king on the defensive and left no space for nuance in the assessment of what was happening on the other side of the Atlantic.

In the preface, Las Casas addresses the Prince of Spain, Philip (1527–1598). By 1542, Philip was already an experienced statesman and was helping his father, Charles V, to rule his vast domains. Then, Las Casas immediately summarizes in a paragraph the biblical idea of kingship. According to the Dominican friar, Divine Providence would have kings as moral and virtuous, caring and dependable defenders of their people. Las Casas proceeds to explain that, if some evil afflicts any kingdom, this can only happen because the good monarch is unaware of it (Las Casas 1992, p. 5). The biblical understanding of kingship as an institution of justice is then spelled out with a direct quotation from the Bible (Proverbs 20:8), before the author concludes the paragraph with the following words:

[...] the simple knowledge that something is wrong in his kingdom is quite sufficient to ensure that he [the ruler] 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. (Las Casas 1992, p. 5)

While modern readers may wonder why a pamphlet supposedly giving an account of the conquest of the Americas would start with a definition of biblical kingship, surely Philip must have felt uneasy when reading this paragraph.

After clarifying the character and tasks of a Christian king, Las Casas makes two points. First, he establishes his own authority, based on “more than fifty years’ experience” in the Indies (Las Casas 1992, p. 5). This appeal to direct knowledge and to personal experience of the reality on the ground was a weapon often deployed by Las Casas, as his adversaries at court were sometimes men who had never set foot in the Americas. Second, Las Casas moved to a respectful yet forthright accusation of inaction against the Crown, which assumes a very threatening tone precisely in light of the definition of biblical kingship that he had offered just a few lines above. The text can be analyzed, therefore, by following its structure in an escalation of spoken and unspoken logical steps. If a godly king is one who speedily enacts justice and acts to eliminate evil, then it follows that the continuous suffering of so many subjects of the Spanish king in the Indies, and his puzzling inaction, could possibly be explained only in two ways. Either he has not been informed, or he is not after all a moral and virtuous man as ordained by Divine Providence.

The political implications of the religious arguments proposed by the Dominican friar could not have escaped Philip and his advisors. While the text takes for granted the fact that the monarch had not been properly informed, Las Casas then does not refrain from reminding his readers of his many years of work denouncing violence in the Indies. More specifically, he recalls that he had already sent a copy of his account to the Prince through

Juan Martínez Silíceo, Bishop of Cartagena and Philip's tutor. With more than a pinch of sarcasm, the text notes:

But Your Highness has been fully occupied with journeys by land and sea, as well as other pressing royal business, and it may well be that Your Highness has never found the time to read the Account, or has perhaps allowed it to slip to the back of his mind. (Las Casas 1992, pp. 6–7)

The text continues with one of the most typically Lascasian passages:

Meanwhile, the boldness and the unreason of those who count it as nothing to drench the Americas in human blood and to dispossess the people who are the natural masters and dwellers in those vast and marvelous kingdoms, killing a thousand million of them, and stealing treasures beyond compare, grow by the day, and, masquerading under false colours, they do everything within their power to obtain further license to continue their conquests (license that cannot be granted without infringing natural and divine law and thereby conniving at the greatest of mortal sins, worthy of the most terrible and everlasting punishment). (Las Casas 1992, p. 7)

Several themes are worth mentioning here. There is, to be sure, Las Casas's exaggerated, flamboyant, one could say incendiary, rhetoric. Then, more importantly, we should note the contrast between the model of zealous biblical kingship and the devastating consequences of Philip's inaction. Here, the political implications for Spain's claim to the western part of the Atlantic world are momentous; if the Spanish king is not able or willing to ensure justice in the Americas, then the papal bulls entrusting those lands (and especially the people living there) to him are void.¹³ Finally, it is important to stress the religious framework that sustains the emerging structure of a modern system of international law; Las Casas does not mention any of the Salamanca theologians, but in using expressions such as "natural masters and dwellers" he shows his familiarity with neo-Thomist philosophy and with Vitoria's redeployment of the concept of *occupatio* to criticize imperial expansion (de Vitoria 1991, pp. 264–65). In a nutshell, Vitoria and other Dominicans at Salamanca argued that since the Amerindian populations seemed to be rational creatures, then the American territories had already been legitimately occupied by them, and the Spanish could not claim any discovery. The faculty of reason, a gift from God to humanity, elevates each person's dignity. Las Casas is more explicit about this; with the entrance of Grace into the fabric of human history, universal responsibilities are undeniable because of Christ's teachings and sacrifice. In the central section of the pamphlet, he reminds readers that the Indians are "created in God's image and redeemed by his blood" (Las Casas 1992, p. 74). This is obviously enough to shatter Enlightenment mythologies about the origins of international law and human rights; we are here in the presence of 16th-century Christian thinkers using the concept of universal moral law—a standard set by God as lawgiver—to criticize their own empire.

It is true that Las Casas's discourse may sound like political blackmailing, since in the case of continuous inaction other European crowns would have been justified in challenging the legitimacy of Castile's rule in the Americas. Yet, the spiritual dimension of the text should not be overlooked. The issue of mortal sin, we must recall, had been at the very heart of the initial quarrel between the Dominicans and the Spanish colonists in Hispaniola, when fray Montesinos had stormed out of the church and denied the sacraments to unrepentant sinners. Crucially, in Las Casas's 1542 pamphlet, the prologue directly forbids the monarch to even consider the approval of new licenses for military campaigns, explaining that this would be a "mortal sin". A few lines after, the prologue ends with a clear warning about God's wrath:

This, Your Royal Highness, is a matter on which action is both urgent and necessary if God is to continue to watch over the Crown of Castile and ensure its future well-being and prosperity, both spiritual and temporal. (Las Casas 1992, pp. 7–8)

The religious, Christian roots of the historic attack on the exploitation of Amerindians are clear not only in the writings and lectures of the professors at Salamanca, but also in the explosive texts of Bartolomé de Las Casas. This is true also for the *Short Account*, which is often remembered for its graphic and spine-chilling central chapters, but whose prologue shows the forceful use of biblical images and Catholic theology.

Moving to the preface, readers encounter a different strategy artfully deployed by Las Casas. The second paragraph penned by the Dominican is a long, repetitive, almost tedious description of the supposedly peaceful, idyllic situation in the Americas before the arrival of the Spaniards. The Indians are lumped together into one category, and they are portrayed almost as Adamitic beings, before the Fall. Las Casas claims that they were open and innocent, and then bombards the reader with an endless series of positive adjectives, and with images of a world devoid of vice and war. The Indians, according to the friar, “are neither ambitious nor greedy, and are totally uninterested in worldly power” (Las Casas 1992, p. 10). That these incredible, astonishing claims came decades after the Spanish encounter with the brutality of Aztec and Inca imperialism should not surprise us, because the aim of Las Casas had never been an accurate historical reconstruction of the conquest, but rather to reach as quickly as possible an array of political objectives through which Indian lives and souls could be saved.¹⁴ At this point in the *Short Account*, the description of this generic category of “Indians” is a masterful rhetorical device that sets the stage for the following paragraph.

Las Casas, in passing, informs Prince Philip that these people, his own Amerindian subjects, are so generous and innocent in part because they are poor, something that at once resonated in the context of the Catholic Reformation and also positioned these American peoples in a sort of moral conflict with the character of the Spanish conquistadors moving around the Americas from a thirst for gold. If a racial hierarchy exists in the *Short Account*, this seems to position the Indians above anybody else. We see this clearly when he hints at the fact that the Indians are not only “innocent and pure” but also gifted with a “lively intelligence” that readies them to absorb the truths of the Christian faith better than anybody else. In the Dominican’s words, “God has invested them with fewer impediments in this regard than any other people on earth” (Las Casas 1992, p. 10). It is only after this paragraph—which has set the stage by describing the Indians not merely through a superficial and emotional appeal to their humanity but also through specific religious ideas such as their (evidently preposterous) Adamitic goodness and pacifism, their virtuous poverty and their rational nature predisposing them to receive the Gospel—that Las Casas abruptly and spectacularly strikes the audience by introducing the theme of Spanish violence.

The following paragraph begins with this long, splendidly written and effectively blood-chilling sentence:

It was upon these gentle lambs, imbued by the Creator with all the qualities we have mentioned, that from the very first day they clapped their eyes on them the Spanish fell like ravening wolves upon the fold, or like tigers and savage lions who have not eaten meat for days. (Las Casas 1992, p. 11)

This image reminiscent of the Gospel is further stretched by Las Casas to form an unforgettable picture in the mind of the audience—one that so clearly resembles some of the most famous tropes of the Black Legend (Maltby 1971). Here, we note how Las Casas is artfully articulating various layers of discourse that serve the purpose of addressing different audiences. He also engages the same audience in a variety of ways, from the political to the emotional, yet always weaving a frame that ultimately rests upon religious notions. As explained by Obed Lira, while Las Casas carried out his mission, which was effectively to be the leader of a vast political campaign for the rights of natives, he continued to develop an ethics of proximity that would spark a reaction in his interlocutors (Lira 2019). Lira has compellingly argued that this can be detected in texts like *De unico vocationis modo* (1534) and the *Apologetic History of the Indies* (1559), where “Las Casas crafts a rhetoric that is decidedly invested in fostering a sense of affective proximity in the reader

toward the subject of an ethnographic text” (Lira 2019). In the *Short Account*’s opening sections, we already detect something similar, which however, I would suggest, is as always anchored to a specifically Christian philosophical horizon, to a religiously rooted language and meaning.

The remaining part of the *Short Account*’s preface is worth considering because the insistent use of the word “Christians” to label his fellow Spaniards highlights the religious charge of Las Casas’s narrative—one that will echo throughout the central chapters of the account. In the text, this deliberately ambiguous use of the term “Christian” is striking:

At a conservative estimate, the despotic and diabolical behavior of the Christians has, over the last forty years, led to the unjust and totally unwarranted deaths of more than twelve million souls, women and children among them [...] (Las Casas 1992, p. 12)

Las Casas later clarifies:

There are two main ways in which those who have travelled to this part of the world *pretending to be Christians* have uprooted these pitiful peoples and wiped them from the face of the earth [...] ¹⁵

And again:

The reason the Christians have murdered on such a vast scale and killed anyone and everyone in their way is purely and simply greed. (Las Casas 1992, p. 13)

Hyperbole and explosive accusations should not distract us from the fact that in the Lascasian worldview colonial violence was first and foremost a spiritual disease, evidence of the failure to live as true followers of Christ. This is why, even later, in the central sections of the *Short Account*, we read that Spanish colonists are actually only “so-called Christians” (Las Casas 1992, p. 42), and that temptation and sin are the root causes of injustice.¹⁶ Self-criticism and anti-imperial rhetoric are therefore springing from a genuine desire for reform, one that is initiated by God’s command to love our neighbor and that is exemplified by Las Casas’s own personal conversion. As well put by Tom Holland:

Like Paul on the road to Damascus, like Augustine in the garden, Bartolomé de las Casas found himself born again. Freeing his slaves, he devoted himself from that moment on to defending the Indians from tyranny. [...] Las Casas, whether on one side of the Atlantic, pleading his case at the royal court, or on the other, in straw-thatched colonial settlements, never doubted that his convictions derived from the mainstream of Christian teaching. (Holland 2019, p. 307)

And indeed, the issue of what constituted the heart of Christ’s teaching continued to kindle and motivate the churchmen who defended the rights of Amerindian people throughout the decades of this long debate. As early as 1520, the future pope Adrian had castigated Spanish conquistadores because they acted like “Mohammeddars”, calling them to repentance and to the use of Christ’s gentle methods instead.¹⁷ And, in his 1534 appeal *De unico vocationis modo*, Las Casas had discussed this at length, writing, for instance, that “to advance the gospel by the power of arms is not Christian example but a pretext for stealing the property of others and subjugating their provinces” (Clayton 2020, p. 80). The use of the term “Christians” to shock the audience of the *Short Account* fit well into this discussion. Another interpretation of this strategy could be that the Dominican missionary wished to avoid at all costs the suggestion that there might be something intrinsically evil in the Spaniards. Indeed, while he proposed an image of virtuous Indians as even more gifted than other humans, Las Casas had stressed that there is only one human race in one of the most consequential lines of the *Short Account*: “it would seem [...] that the Almighty selected this part of the world as home to the greater part of the human race” (Las Casas 1992, p. 9).

5. Conclusions

Las Casas's *Short Account* contributed to the historic decision by King Charles to sign the New Laws (1542), which attempted to eliminate the institution of the *encomienda* (Stevens 1893). This legislation was a fundamental step in the longer process through which the idea of rights took shape in Europe. The opening sections of the *Short Account* constitute an example of Western self-criticism, rooted in the broader framework of Christian reformism. Amidst the Lascasian imagery and rhetorical devices, it is important to detect the role played by Christianity. Biblical definitions of kingship, Thomist ideas about the rational nature of all human beings, the reality and danger of mortal sin, and Christ's methods of peaceful preaching were deployed to warn the monarch, assert the dignity of the natives and dismantle the legitimacy of colonial violence. Hence, the *Short Account* should not be remembered only for its embodiment of Las Casas's flamboyant and gruesome style, or for its role in the construction of anti-Spanish propaganda, but also because its narrative is framed by opening sections that fully belong to the great debate on the rights of Indians, a fundamental contribution of the Catholic Church to the emergence of human rights discourses.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Notes

- ¹ On Columbus, his mentality and his voyages, see (Delaney 2012); in Italian, a recent reflection on the figure of Columbus is (Musarra 2018). On the Spanish Empire, the classic introduction remains (Elliott 1963); for a more recent work see (Thomas 2010).
- ² Amongst the vast literature on Vitoria, I especially recommend (Fitzmaurice 2014, pp. 33–51). Fitzmaurice stresses the importance of a longer intellectual tradition upon which 16th-century Dominicans built their system of international law. The contributions of medieval canonists and jurists, as well as the deployment of concepts such as *occupatio* to restrict imperialist expansion, were fundamental. Vitoria was an important figure because he expressed these views at the most important university in Spain, causing embarrassment at court and strengthening the position of the missionaries who were already agitating against the effective enslavement of Indians. His contribution was also significant because his lectures dared to question not only the means of conquest and the colonial institutions, but even the whole project of Spanish empire building in the Americas. Not by chance, some scholars have argued that Vitoria's lecture 'On the Indies' impressively resembles the ideas found in the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights. See, for example, (Araujo 2015).
- ³ I am using the edition (Las Casas 1992).
- ⁴ (Hunt 2007). For more accurate reconstructions of the emergence of human rights discourses, see (Tierney 2014, 1982, 2004). Brian Tierney recognizes that anti-imperialist discourses are conceptually and historically rooted in the longer tradition of canon law and natural law dotting the intellectual history of Christendom. In fact, recently, also historians like Ulrich Lehner and Tom Holland have suggested that the Enlightenment itself should largely be understood as another wave of Christian reform (Lehner 2016; Holland 2019).
- ⁵ Similarly, her book has one single sentence on Francisco de Vitoria (whom she calls "de Vitorio"), without dedicating any space to the momentous role of the School of Salamanca, and without explaining how the entire edifice of international law built by Vitoria's pupils was based upon Christian ethics and Thomist philosophy (Ishay 2004, p. 99).
- ⁶ On Innocent IV's important pronouncement, see (Tierney 2004, p. 7).
- ⁷ A good discussion of these images and their impact on European ideas of peoples encountered in the Atlantic world is (Abulafia 2008).
- ⁸ For a brief reading on this debate that mentions many of its key participants, see (Thomas 2010, pp. 465–77, 490–96).
- ⁹ There is a vast literature on Las Casas's life and work. I refer interested readers to (Clayton 2012; Orique and Roldán-Figueroa 2023; Adorno 1992; Friede and Keen 1971).
- ¹⁰ An account of the disastrous attempt by Las Casas to work on a stretch of land where conquistadors would have been barred from entering and where he could have approached the natives peacefully, forming utopian Christian communities, can be found in (Hanke 1949, pp. 66–68). A discussion of Las Casas's writings as products of a prophetic tradition is found in (Clayton 2016).

- 11 See the Introduction by Anthony Pagden in (Las Casas 1992).
- 12 This special council is not to be confused with the clash taking place in the same city in 1550 between Las Casas and Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda (Thomas 2010, pp. 490–96). On the Aristotelian background of this debate, a good introduction is found in (Pollini 1982).
- 13 On this point, which Las Casas would articulate more openly and forcefully ten years later, during the Valladolid debate, an excellent analysis is offered in (Carman 1998).
- 14 Of course, this is not to say that Las Casas could not author different kinds of texts, including excellent historical narratives. His *History of the Indies* (which was published only in 1875) remains a precious source for historians and a masterpiece of Spanish literature.
- 15 Emphasis added (Las Casas 1992, p. 12).
- 16 “[...] the Christians were suddenly inspired by the Devil and, without the slightest provocation, butchered, before my eyes, some three thousand souls [...]” (Las Casas 1992, p. 29).
- 17 (Hanke 1949, p. 65). Adrian was actually echoing Montesinos’s words from 1511, when the Dominicans had clashed with the colonists on Hispaniola and declared that the Indians were rational, and therefore had dignity and rights.

References

- Abulafia, David. 2008. *The Discovery of Mankind: Atlantic Encounters in the Age of Columbus*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Adorno, Rolena. 1992. *The Intellectual life of Bartolomé de Las Casas*. New Orleans: Graduate School of Tulane University.
- Araujo, Robert John. 2015. Foundations of Human Rights: The Work of Francisco de Vitoria, OP. In *Democracy, Culture, Catholicism: Voices from Four Continents*. Edited by Michael Joseph Schuck and John Crowley-Buck. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 280–93.
- Belenguier Cebrià, Ernest. 2002. *El Imperio de Carlos V. Las coronas y sus territorios*. Barcelona: Peninsula.
- Bolland, O. Nigel. 1994. Colonization and Slavery in Central America. In *Unfree Labour in the Development of the Atlantic World*. Edited by Paul E. Lovejoy and Nicholas Rogers. New York: Frank Cass, pp. 11–25.
- Braun, Harald. 2023. Genocidal Massacres in the Spanish Conquest of the Americas: Xaragua, Cholula, and Toxcatl (1503–1519). In *The Cambridge World History of Genocide*. Edited by Ben Kiernan, T. Lemos and Tristan Taylor. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 622–47.
- Bumas, Shaskan. 2000. The Cannibal Butcher Shop: Protestant Uses of las Casas’s “Brevisima relación” in Europe and the American Colonies. *Early American Literature* 35: 107–36.
- Carman, Glen. 1998. On the Pope’s Original Intent: Las Casas Reads the Papal Bulls of 1493. *Colonial Latin American Review* 7: 193–204. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Cervantes, Fernando. 2020. *Conquistadores: A New History of Spanish Discovery and Conquest*. New York: Viking.
- Clayton, Lawrence. 2011. *Bartolomé de las Casas and the Conquest of the Americas*. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Clayton, Lawrence. 2012. *Bartolomé de las Casas: A Biography*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Clayton, Lawrence. 2016. Why nobody likes a prophet: Bartolomé de las Casas, a loud voice in the wilderness. *Cogent Arts & Humanities* 3: 1124480.
- Clayton, Lawrence. 2020. *Bartolomé de las Casas and the Defense of Amerindian Rights: A Brief History with Documents*. Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press.
- Davis, Robert C. 2003. *Christian Slaves, Muslim Masters: White Slavery in the Mediterranean, the Barbary Coast, and Italy, 1500–1800*. London: Palgrave.
- Delaney, Carol. 2012. *Columbus and the Quest for Jerusalem: How Religion Drove the Voyages That Led to America*. New York: Free Press.
- de Vitoria, Francisco. 1991. *Vitoria: Political Writings*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Elliott, John H. 1963. *Imperial Spain, 1469–1716*. New York: St. Martin’s Press.
- Elliott, John H. 2006. *Empires of the Atlantic World: Britain and Spain in America, 1492–1830*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.
- Fitzmaurice, Andrew. 2014. *Sovereignty, Property, and Empire, 1500–2000*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Friede, Juan, and Benjamin Keen. 1971. *Bartolomé de las Casas in History: Toward an Understanding of the Man and His Work*. DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press.
- Hanke, Lewis. 1949. *The Spanish Struggle for Justice in the Conquest of America*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Holland, Tom. 2019. *Dominion: The Making of the Western Mind*. London: Little, Brown.
- Hunt, Lynn. 2007. *Inventing Human Rights: A History*. New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company.
- Ishay, Micheline. 2004. *The History of Human Rights: From Ancient Times to the Globalization Era*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Las Casas, Bartolomé. 1992. *A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies*. London: Penguin.
- Lehner, Ulrich. 2016. *The Catholic Enlightenment: The Forgotten History of a Global Movement*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Lira, Obed. 2019. Wonder and the Ethics of Proximity in Las Casas’s Apologética historia sumaria. *Hispanic Review* 87: 309–32. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Maltby, William S. 1971. *The Black Legend in England: The Development of Anti-Spanish Sentiment, 1558–1660*. Durham: Duke University Press.

- Musarra, Antonio. 2018. *Processo a Colombo: Scoperta o sterminio?* Viareggio: La Vela.
- Odoric of Pordenone. 2001. *The Travels of Friar Odoric*. Edited by Paolo Chiesa. Translated by Henry Yule. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- Oriqué, David T., and Rady Roldán-Figueroa. 2023. *The Transatlantic Las Casas. Historical Trajectories, Indigenous Cultures, Scholastic Thought, and Reception in History*. Leiden: Brill.
- Pizarro Zelaya, Antonio. 2013. Laws of Burgos: 500 years. *Diálogos* 14: 31–78.
- Pollini, Pierluigi. 1982. Bartolomé De Las Casas e J. Ginés Sepúlveda di fronte alla questione della libertà degli indios. *Rivista di Filosofia Neo-Scolastica* 74: 343–54.
- Restall, Matthew. 2003. *Seven Myths of the Spanish Conquest*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Salonia, Matteo. 2022. Asian Ceremonies and Christian Chivalry in Pigafetta's 'The First Voyage Around the World'. In *Travel Writings on Asia. Curiosity, Identities, and Knowledge Across the East, c. 1200 to the Present*. Edited by Christian Mueller and Matteo Salonia. London: Palgrave, pp. 83–110.
- Simonsen, Karen-Margrethe. 2023. *Slavery and the Forensic Theatricality of Human Rights in the Spanish Empire*. New York: Palgrave.
- Stevens, Henry, ed. 1893. *The New Laws of the Indies*. London: The Chiswick Press.
- Thomas, Hugh. 2010. *The Golden Empire: Spain, Charles V, and the Creation of America*. London: Penguin.
- Tierney, Brian. 1982. *Religion, Law and the Growth of Constitutional Thought, 1150–1650*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Tierney, Brian. 2004. The Idea of Natural Rights—Origins and persistence. *Northwestern Journal of International Human Rights* 2: 2–13.
- Tierney, Brian. 2014. *Liberty and Law: The Idea of Permissive Natural Law, 1100–1800*. Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press.
- Valdivia Giménez, Ramón. 2017. El sermón de Montesino: Origen de las Leyes de Burgos de 1512. In *Fray Antonio de Montesino y su tiempo*. Edited by Silke Jansen and Irene M. Weiss. Madrid: Iberoamericana, pp. 121–45.
- Valdivia Giménez, Ramón. 2021. *El nacimiento de la modernidad. Justicia y poder en el pensamiento de Bartolomé de las Casas*. Granada: Editorial Comares.
- Valenzuela Vermehren, Luis. 2017. Creating Justice in an Emerging World: The natural law basis of Francisco de Vitoria's political and international thought. *Ideas y Valores* 66: 39–64. [[CrossRef](#)]

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.