

III. Valladolid Debate

Perhaps one of the most famous moral debates in European history, the Valladolid debate in 1550 examined the rights and treatments of colonized/native people.

Juan Gines de Sepulveda was a Spanish theologian, philosopher, historian, and astronomer. A student of Aristotle, he relied heavily on the Classical distinction between the civilized and the barbarians. In his book, *The Second Democrates*, Sepulveda sets forth his basic arguments

Bartolome de Las Casas was a Dominican friar and the antagonist of Sepulveda during the debates. He had sailed to the West Indies in 1502, seeing firsthand the interactions between conquerors and natives. Later known as the "Protector of the Indians," his accounts of the destruction of the Indies spread the "black Legend" of Spanish brutality in the New World.

"The Spanish have a perfect right to rule these barbarians of the New World and the adjacent islands, who in prudence, skill, virtues, and humanity are as inferior to the Spanish as children to adults, or women to men, for there exists between the two as great a difference as between savage and cruel races and the most merciful, between the most intemperate and the moderate and temperate and, I might even say, between apes and men. You surely do not expect me to recall at length the prudence and talents of the Spanish.... And what can I say of the gentleness and humanity of our people, who, even in battle, after having gained the victory, put forth their greatest effort and care to save the greatest possible number of the conquered and to protect them from the cruelty of their allies? Well, then, if we are dealing with virtue, what temperance or mercy can you expect from men who are committed to all types of intemperance and base frivolity, and eat human flesh? Although some of them show a certain ingenuity for various works of artisanship, this is no proof of human cleverness, for we can observe animals, birds, and spiders making certain structures which no human accomplishment can competently imitate. Therefore, if you wish to reduce them, I do not say to our domination, but to a servitude a little less harsh, it will not be difficult for them to change their masters, and instead of the ones they had, who were barbarous and impious and inhuman, to accept the Christians, cultivators of human virtues and the true faith. ..."

–Juan Gines de Sepulveda (*The Second Democrates*, 1547)

"Now if we shall have shown that among our Indians of the western and southern shores (granting that we call them barbarians and that they are barbarians) there are important kingdoms, large numbers of people who live settled lives in a society, great cities, kings, judges and laws, persons who engage in commerce, buying, selling, lending, and the other contracts of the law of nations, will it not stand proved that the Reverend Doctor Sepulveda has spoken wrongly and viciously against peoples like these, either out of malice or ignorance of Aristotle's teaching, and, therefore, has falsely and perhaps irreparably slandered them before the entire world? From the fact that the Indians are barbarians it does not necessarily follow that they are incapable of government and have to be ruled by other's, except to be taught about the Catholic faith and to be admitted to the holy sacraments. They are not ignorant, inhuman, or bestial. Rather, long before they had heard the word Spaniard they had properly organized states, wisely ordered by excellent laws, religion, and custom. They cultivated friendship and, bound together in common fellowship, lived in populous cities in which they wisely administered the affairs of both peace and war justly and equitably, truly governed by laws that at very many points surpass ours, and could have won the admiration of the sages of Athens.... Next, I call the Spaniards who plunder that unhappy people torturers.... For God's sake and man's faith in him, is this the way to impose the yoke of Christ on Christian men? Is this the way to remove wild barbarism from the minds of barbarians? Is it not, rather, to act like thieves, cut-throats, and

cruel plunderers and to drive the gentlest of people headlong into despair? The Indian race is not that barbaric, nor are they dull witted or stupid, but they are easy to teach and very talented in learning all the liberal arts, and very ready to accept, honor, and observe the Christian religion and correct their sins (as experience has taught) once priests have introduced them to the sacred mysteries and taught them the word of God. They have been endowed with excellent conduct, and before the coming of the Spaniards, as we have said, they had political states that were well founded on beneficial laws.

The Indians are our brothers, and Christ has given his life for them. Why, then, do we persecute them with such inhuman savagery when they do not deserve such treatment? The past, because it cannot be undone, must be attributed to our weakness, provided that what has been taken unjustly is restored.

Finally, let all savagery and apparatus of war, which are better suited to Moslems than Christians, be done away with. Let upright heralds be sent to proclaim Jesus Christ in their way of life and to convey the attitudes of Peter and Paul. [The Indians] will embrace the teaching of the gospel, as I well know, for they are not stupid or barbarous but have a native sincerity and are simple, moderate, and meek, and, finally, such that I do not know whether there is any people readier to receive the gospel. Once they have embraced it, it is marvelous with what piety, eagerness, faith, and charity they obey Christ's precepts and venerate the sacraments. For they are docile and clever, and in their diligence and gifts of nature, they excel most peoples of the known world.

- Bartolome de Las Casas (*The Destruction of the Indies*, 1552)

How do Las Casas and Sepulveda describe the native population and compare them to Spaniards?

Las Casas	Sepulveda

How does each author suggest treating the natives? Do they share any ideas?

Las Casas	Shared	Sepulveda