

## Debate on the "Indios" held in Valladolid, Spain, before Charles V, 1541



**Juan Gines de Sepulveda**

The man rules over the woman, the adult over the child, the father over his children. That is to say, the most powerful and most perfect rule over the weakest and most

imperfect. This same relationship exists among men, there being some who by nature are masters and others who by nature are slaves. Those who surpass the rest in prudence and intelligence, although not in physical strength, are by nature the masters. On the other hand, those who are dim-witted and mentally lazy, although they may be physically strong enough to fulfill all the necessary tasks, are by nature slaves. It is just and useful that it be this way. We even see it sanctioned in divine law itself, for it is written in the Book of Proverbs: "He who is stupid will serve the wise man." And so it is with the barbarous and inhumane peoples [the Indians] who have no civil life and peaceful customs. It will always be just and in conformity with natural law that such people submit to the rule of more cultured and humane princes' and nations. Thanks to their virtues and the practical wisdom of their laws, the latter can destroy barbarism and educate these [inferior] people to a more humane and virtuous life. And if the latter reject such rule, it can be imposed upon them by force of arms. Such a war will be just according to natural law. . . .

Now compare these natural qualities of judgment, talent, magnanimity, temperance, humanity, and religion [of the Spanish] with those of these pitiful men [the Indians], in whom you will scarcely find any vestiges of humanness.

These people possess neither science nor even an alphabet, nor do they preserve any monuments of their history except for some obscure and vague reminiscences depicted in certain paintings, nor do they have written laws, but barbarous institutions and customs. In regard to their virtues, how much restraint or gentleness are you to expect of men who are devoted to all kinds of intemperate acts and abominable lewdness, including the eating of human flesh? And you must realize that prior to the arrival of the Christians, they did not live in that peaceful kingdom of Saturn [the Golden Age] that the poets imagine, but on the contrary they made war against one another continually

and fiercely, with such fury that victory was of no meaning if they did not satiate their monstrous hunger with the flesh of their enemies. ...These Indians are so cowardly and timid that they could scarcely resist the mere presence of our soldiers. Many times thousands upon thousands of them scattered, fleeing like women before a very few Spaniards, who amounted to fewer than a hundred. . . .

In regard to those [the Aztecs] who inhabit New Spain and the province of Mexico, I have already said that they consider themselves the most civilized people. They boast of their political and social institutions, because they have rationally planned cities and they carry on commerce among themselves in the manner of civilized people. But I dissent from such an opinion. On the contrary, in those same institutions there is proof of the coarseness, barbarism, and innate servility of these men. Natural necessity encourages the building of houses, some rational manner of life, and some sort of commerce. Such an argument merely proves that they are neither bears nor monkeys and that they are not totally irrational. Until now we have not mentioned their impious religion and their abominable sacrifices, in which they worship the Devil as God, to whom they thought of offering no better tribute than human hearts. ...Interpreting their religion in an ignorant and barbarous manner, they sacrificed human victims by removing the hearts from the chests. They placed these hearts on their abominable altars. With this ritual they believed that they had appeased their gods. They also ate the flesh of the sacrificed men. . . . War against these barbarians can be justified not only on the basis of their paganism but even more so because of their abominable licentiousness, their prodigious sacrifice of human victims, the extreme harm that they inflicted on innocent persons, their horrible banquets of human flesh, and the impious cult of their idols.



**Bartolome de las Casas**

Now this infinite multitude of Men are by the Creation of God innocently simple, altogether void of and averse to all manner of Craft, Subtlety and Malice, and most Obedient and Loyal Subjects

to their Native Sovereigns; and behave themselves very  
patiently, submissively and quietly towards the Spaniards,  
to whom they are subservient and subject; so that finally  
85 they live without the least thirst after revenge, laying aside  
all litigiousness, Commotion and hatred... The natives are  
capable of Morality or Goodness and very apt to receive the  
principles of Catholic Religion; nor are they averse to Civility  
and good Manners..., I myself have heard the Spaniards  
90 themselves (who dare not assume the Confidence to deny  
the good Nature in them) declare, that there was nothing  
wanting in them for the acquisition of eternal grace, but the  
sole Knowledge and Understanding of the Deity....

The Spaniards first assaulted the innocent Sheep, so  
95 qualified by the Almighty, like most cruel tigers, wolves, and  
lions, hunger-starved, studying nothing, for the space of  
Forty Years, after their first landing, but the Massacre of  
these Wretches, whom they have so inhumanely and  
barbarously butchered and harassed with several kinds of  
100 Torments, never before known, or heard (of which you shall  
have some account in the following Discourse) that of Three  
Millions of Persons, which lived in Hispaniola itself, there is  
at present but the inconsiderable remnant of scarce Three  
Hundred. Nay the Isle of Cuba, which extends as far, as  
105 Valladolid in Spain is distant from Rome, lies now  
uncultivated, like a Desert, and entombed in its own Ruins.

Those that arrived at these Islands from the remotest parts  
of Spain, and who pride themselves in the Name of  
Christians, steered Two courses principally, in order to the  
110 Extirpation, and Exterminating of this People from the face  
of the Earth. The first whereof was raising an unjust,  
bloody, cruel War. Now the ultimate end and scope that  
incited the Spaniards to endeavor the Extirpation and  
Desolation of this People, was Gold only...

115 From this it is clear that the basis for Sepúlveda's teaching  
that these people are uncivilized and ignorant is worse than  
false. Yet even if we were to grant that this race has no  
keenness of mind or artistic ability, certainly they are not, in  
consequence, obliged to submit themselves to those who  
120 are more intelligent and to adopt their ways, so that, if they  
refuse, they may be subdued by having war waged against  
them and be enslaved, as happens today...

I saw the Spaniards mounted on generous Steeds, well  
weapon'd with Lances and Swords, begin to exercise their  
125 bloody Butcheries and Strategems, and overrunning their  
Cities and Towns, spar'd no Age, or Sex, nay not so much as  
Women with Child, but ripping up their Bellies, tore them  
alive in pieces. They laid Wagers among themselves, who  
should with a Sword at one blow cut, or divide a Man in  
130 two; or which of them should decollate or behead a Man,  
with the greatest dexterity; nay farther, which should  
sheath his Sword in the Bowels of a Man with the quickest  
dispatch and expedition.

They snatcht young Babes from the Mothers Breasts, and  
135 then dasht out the brains of those innocents against the  
Rocks; others they cast into Rivers scoffing and jeering  
them, and call'd upon their Bodies when falling with  
derision, the true testimony of their Cruelty, to come to  
them, and inhumanely exposing others to their Merciless  
140 Swords, together with the Mothers that gave them Life.

They erected certain Gibbets, large, but low made, so that  
their feet almost reacht the ground, every one of which was  
so order'd as to bear Thirteen Persons in Honor (as they  
said blasphemously) of our Redeemer and his Twelve  
145 Apostles, under which they made a Fire to burn them to  
Ashes whilst hanging on them: But those they intended to  
preserve alive, they dismiss'd, their Hands half cut, and still  
hanging by the Skin, to carry their Letters missive to those  
that fly from us and ly sculking on the Mountains, as an  
150 exprobaton of their flight.

I was an Eye-Witness of these and and innumerable  
Number of other Cruelties: And because all Men, who could  
lay hold of the opportunity, sought out lurking holes in the  
Mountains, to avoid as dangerous Rocks so Brutish and  
155 Barbarous a People, Strangers to all Goodness, and the  
Extirpaters and Adversaries of Men, they bred up such  
fierce hunting Dogs as would devour an Indian like a Hog, at  
first sight in less than a moment: Now such kind of  
Slaughters and Cruelties as these were committed by the  
160 Curs, and if at any time it hapned, (which was rarely) that  
the Indians irritated upon a just account destroy'd or took  
away the Life of any Spaniard, they promulgated and  
proclaim'd this Law among them, that One Hundred Indians  
should dye for every individual Spaniard that should be  
165 slain.