

Introduction

During the 1500s, citizens of Spain began to debate the morality of both the concept of colonization and the treatment of native peoples in the New World. Two influential philosophers – Juan Gines de Sepulveda and Bartolome de Las Casas – argued starkly contrasting positions on this topic.

Juan Gines de Sepulveda (1490-1572)

Juan Gines de Sepulveda was an important philosopher in Spain. Even though Sepulveda never visited the New World, he used the Bible and the writings of Aristotle to argue that the superiority of Spanish civilization and religion justified the conquest of the Indians.

Like Aristotle, Sepulveda believed that some people were born to be masters and some to be slaves. He argued that their evil practices, such as human sacrifice and worshipping idols, had to be stopped.

Bartolome de Las Casas (~1484-1566)

Bartolome de Las Casas was born in Spain in about 1484. When he was 18 years old, he went to Cuba as part of the military, and was rewarded for his military service with an encomienda – an area of land which included the work and tribute of the natives living there.

In Cuba, Las Casas heard the sermons of a Dominican friar named Antonio de Montesinos, who asked the Spanish conquistadors and settlers, "By what right or justice do you keep the Indians in such horrible servitude? Are they not men? Have they not rational souls? Are you not bound to love them as you love yourselves?"

Influenced by Montesinos' words, in 1513 Las Casas became a priest and relinquished his encomienda. He devoted his life to working to improve the rights of the native Indians. In 1544 Las Casas was made Bishop of Chiapas, in southern Mexico. He tried to put into effect the New Laws, which were designed to protect the rights of the Indians and consequently were very unpopular among the Spanish conquistadors.

He also wrote his famous book, *A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies*, which revealed the Spanish abuses against the Indians in the New World and warned the King of Spain that he would be punished for these actions.

In 1547 Las Casas returned to Spain. As a spokesperson for the rights of the Indians, he participated in 1550 in the Great Debate at Valladolid before the Council for the Indies. This was the first debate in the world about human rights. He died in Madrid in 1566.

The Great Debate at Valladolid

On April 16, 1550, a royal decree was passed to stop all conquests, expeditions, and exploration until a special group of scholars and royal officials could hear a debate about the morality of Spanish colonization. This Great Debate was held in August 1550 in Valladolid, Spain. For five days, Bartolome de Las Casas and Juan Gines de Sepulveda presented their arguments. In the end, the Council of the Indies never declared a winner in the debate. Both Sepulveda and Las Casas claimed victory. Most importantly, though, this debate marked the first time issues about the rights of native peoples were raised and seriously discussed.

Cultural Exchange Task Guide

**Use the links in the interactive graphic to gather this information.*

Part 1: Bartoleme de las Casas' Account (questions 1-5)

1. How does Bartoleme de las Casas describe the natives?

2. How does de las Casas describe his fellow Spaniards?

3. What motivates the Spaniards according to de las Casas?

4. What overall effect did the Spaniards have on natives in the New World according to de las Casas?

5. Define the following terms in your own words (DO NOT COPY DEFINITIONS FROM ANY OTHER SOURCE):

a. **leagues**- _____

b. **guileless**- _____

c. **duplicity**- _____

d. **complaisant**- _____

e. **felicitous**- _____

f. **sacraments**- _____

Part 2: Juan Gines de Sepulveda's Response (questions 6-8)

6. How does Juan Gines de Sepulveda describe his fellow Spaniards?

7. How does de Sepulveda describe the natives?

8. What overall effect did the Spaniards have on natives in the New World according to de Sepulveda?

Part 3: King Ferdinand's Letter (questions 9-11)

9. How does King Ferdinand use religion in his letter to the Tainos?

10. What is the point of King Ferdinand's letter to the Tainos?

11. Define the following terms in your own words (DO NOT COPY DEFINITIONS FROM ANY OTHER SOURCE):

a. **barbarian**- _____

b. **benignity**- _____

c. **vassals**- _____

d. **maliciously**- _____

Part 4: Essential Question (question 12)

12. After reading all three primary documents, write a summarizing paragraph answering the following question: How were the people of the Eastern and Western Hemisphere's affected by cultural exchange?
