

Background Information

Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda

Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda was a respected scholar of Aristotle and official historian of the Spanish crown. He wrote *The Second Democrats* (1547) defending the Spanish Conquest of the Americas. This excerpt is taken from *Disputation between Bartolomé de Las Casas and Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda on the Intellectual and Religious Capacity of the American Indians*, 1550. Between 1550 and 1551, Sepúlveda and Las Casas debated the right of the Spanish to enslave the indigenous peoples of the Americas. Below is a small part of Sepúlveda's rationale for slavery.

The man rules over the woman, the adult over his children. That is to say, the most powerful and most perfect rule over the weakest and most imperfect. The 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. . . . We even see it sanctioned in the Book of Proverbs: "He who is stupid will serve the wise man" [11:29]. 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 the more cultured and humane princes and nations. Thanks to their virtues and the practical wisdom of their laws, the latter [the Spanish] can destroy barbarism and educate these people to a more humane and virtuous life. And if the latter [the Indians] reject such rule, it can be imposed upon them by force of arms. Such a war will be just, according to natural law . . .

What is more appropriate and beneficial for these barbarians than to become subject to the rule of those whose wisdom, virtue, and religion have converted them from barbarism into civilized men (insofar as they are capable of becoming so), from being torpid [lazy] and licentious [wicked] to becoming servants of the Devil to becoming believers of the true God? For these barbarians, our rule ought to be even more advantageous than for our Spaniards, since virtue, humanity, and the true religion are more valuable than gold or silver. And if they refuse our rule, they may be compelled by force of arms to accept it. Such a war will be just according to natural law.

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