

The Great Debate over Indian Policy

Lewis Hanke

One of the most difficult problems that historians face, especially when dealing with distant events and cultures foreign to their own, is assimilating the point of view of the actors whose behavior they seek to describe and explain. Those who write about the European settlement of the New World confront this problem in one of its most knotty aspects, because from the perspective of our own times the actions of the Europeans appear so inhumane as to defy explanation, let alone justification. How can their "settlement" of the Americas be described as anything but naked, unprovoked aggression, their treatment of the native inhabitants in less blunt terms than cruel and callously overbearing? Yet we know that these Europeans were human beings, most of them—we may safely assume—no better or worse than ourselves. The historian's task is to show why they behaved as they did, and this involves understanding their values and assumptions as well as their motives. The good historian does not suspend judgment but attempts to judge the subjects under investigation only after internalizing as much as possible of the mental and emotional baggage that they carried through life.

The following essay by the late Lewis Hanke of the University of Massachusetts, an expert on the history of Spanish colonization and a former president of the American Historical Association, goes far toward making the behavior of the Europeans in America less incredible in modern eyes. His hero, Bartolomé de Las Casas, about whom he has written extensively, was throughout most of his long life a defender of the rights of the Indians and an admirer of their culture and their artistic achievements. But many of Las Casas's ideas and assumptions seem as narrow-minded as those of his contemporaries who considered the Indians subhuman, fit only for slavery or extinction. The essay deals on one level with the struggle waged among the Spaniards over Indian policy, but at a deeper and more important level it throws light on the whole history of the New World and on human nature itself.

When Hernando Cortés and his little band of Spaniards fought their way in 1519 from the tropical shores of Mexico up to the high plateau and first saw stretched below them the Aztec capital Tenochtitlán, gleaming on its lake under the morning sun, they experienced one of the truly dramatic moments in the history of America. Fortunately we have the words of a reporter worthy of the scene, the foot soldier Bernal Díaz del Castillo, whose *True History of the Conquest of New Spain* is one of the classics of the Western world. He wrote:

Gazing on such wonderful sights we did not know what to say or whether what appeared before us was real; for on the one hand there were great cities and in the lake ever so many more, and the lake itself was crowded with canoes, and in the

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causeway were many bridges at intervals, and in front of us stood the great City of Mexico, and we—we did not number even four hundred soldiers!

That was a soldier's memory, and even today the Spanish conquest of the New World is widely believed, especially by English-speaking peoples, to have been a purely military exploit of a peculiarly ruthless nature. That the period of discovery and conquest was full of violence is certain.

But what deserves more notice is quite another aspect of this turbulent period: the great struggle among the Spaniards themselves to determine how to apply Christian precepts to relations with the natives they encountered as they crossed the rivers, plains, swamps, and mountains of the New World. The going forth together of the Spanish standard and the Roman Catholic cross is well known. But too often the cross is dismissed as merely a symbol of a national church as much bent on "conquest" as the standard-bearers. The real effort to convert the natives, which moved many Spaniards and greatly concerned the Crown of Spain, and the powerful rôle religious conscience played throughout the conquest have been largely overlooked. Other nations sent out bold explorers and established empires. But no other European nation plunged into the struggle for Christian justice, as she understood it, that Spain engaged in shortly after Christopher Columbus first reached the New World.

So the story deserves to be told of Bartolomé de Las Casas, perhaps the most loved and hated and certainly the most influential of many Spaniards who believed the Spanish mandate in America to be primarily an obligation to convert the Indians peacefully to the Christian faith. He gave fifty strenuous years of his life to protect the natives from the treatment his fellow countrymen accorded them.

But, to be understood, he must be seen against the background of the Spanish colonial effort as a whole. Like many others who opposed a purely military conquest, Las Casas represented the church that the Spanish Crown sent to the New World in double harness with the conquistadors. For this conquest was unique. The Spaniards, with the approval of the Pope and carrying out the commands of their King, were to claim the new lands and the tribute of their inhabitants for the Spanish Crown (a worldly purpose) and bring these inhabitants into the knowledge of Christ (a spiritual purpose). The dual motivation behind the enterprise made conflict inevitable—conflict not only between the Spanish and the natives they were dealing with, but also among the Spaniards themselves, for although practically all Spaniards accepted both purposes as good, they could never agree for long on how best to achieve them.

From our vantage point, four hundred years later, we can see the tragedy of the Spanish conquest: the Crown and the nation were attempting the impossible. On the one hand, they sought imperial dominion, prestige, and revenue; on the other, the voluntary commitment of many peoples culturally different from themselves to the new religion they offered or imposed. The tragedy of the Indians was that in order to accomplish either objective the Spaniards were bound to overthrow established Indian values and to disrupt or destroy Indian cultures and civilizations, as they did in spectacular fashion in Mexico and Peru.

But from Spanish documents alone—the voices of the conquered can be heard only through Spanish materials—we may reconstruct the extraordinary story of

how Christian conscience worked as a leaven during the onrushing conquest, insisting on judging men's deeds and the nation's policies. The struggle centered upon the aborigines. Influenced by the wealth of medieval legends that for centuries had circulated in Europe, the Spaniards expected to meet in America giants, pygmies, griffins, wild men, human beings adorned with tails, and other fabulous folk. When Cortés embarked from Cuba upon the conquest of Mexico, Governor Diego Velázquez instructed him to look in Aztec lands for strange beings with great flat ears and doglike faces. Francisco de Orellana was so sure that he had met warrior women on his famous voyage of 1540-41 that the mightiest river in South America was named the Amazon.

The plumed and painted peoples actually encountered soon perplexed the Spanish nation, from King to common citizen. Who were they and where did they come from? What was their nature, especially their capacity for European civilization and Christianity, and how should they be dealt with? Few significant figures of the conquest failed to deliver opinions, and the Council of the Indies held long formal inquiries on the subject. The voices of dogmatic and troubled individuals—ecclesiastics, soldiers, colonists, and royal officials in America as well as men of action and thought in Spain—rose continually in a dissident chorus of advice to Crown and Council.

Against this background of national excitement Bartolomé de Las Casas arose to devote his life to the Indians. His contemporaries saw him variously as a saintly leader, a dangerous fanatic, or a sincere fool; and, because his reputation is bound up with judgments on the conquest as a whole, his memory is kept green even today by support and attack. Of Las Casas the man, despite his powerful role, we know little. Neither friend nor enemy described his appearance, and no painter recorded it during his life. He wrote no autobiography; we must depend largely upon his historical and polemical writings for knowledge of his life and ideas.

We do know that he was born in Seville in 1474 and was there when Columbus, returning from his first voyage in 1493, triumphantly exhibited through the streets natives and parrots from the New World. His father accompanied Columbus on the second voyage and is supposed to have given the boy an Indian slave to serve as a page during his student days. Bartolomé went to America, probably with Nicolás de Ovando in 1502, and, even though he had already received minor orders, he was little better than the rest of the gentlemen-adventurers who rushed to the New World, bent on speedily acquiring fortunes. He obtained Indian slaves, worked them in mines, and attended to the cultivation of his estates. While he did not mistreat his Indians, their lowly lot seems not to have disturbed him. In 1512 he participated in the conquest of Cuba and was rewarded with both land and the service of some Indians.

It was against such men as Las Casas that a young Dominican friar named Antonio de Montesinos delivered two indignant sermons in Hispaniola in 1511. This first public cry on behalf of human liberty in the New World, whose texts were "I am a voice crying in the wilderness" and "Suffer me a little and I will show thee that I have yet to speak on God's behalf," stunned and then enraged the colonists, for Montesinos declared they were in mortal sin by reason of their cruelty to the Indians. Of Montesinos, whom the King shortly commanded to be silent, we know little

except this brave moment of protest, which has been called one of the great events in the spiritual history of mankind: Las Casas shared the resistance of the other colonists to the cry. Like them, he took no steps to change his way of life, and for more than two years after the sermons he continued as a gentleman-ecclesiastic, although on one occasion a priest refused him the sacraments because he held slaves. The ensuing dispute disturbed without convincing him.

But the seed of a great decision was growing within this obstinate man, as yet unaware that he was destined to become the greatest Indian champion of them all. One day in the spring of 1514, while he was preparing a sermon for Whitsunday at the newly established Cuban settlement of Sancti Spiritus, his eye fell upon this verse in Ecclesiasticus: "He that sacrificeth of a thing wrongfully gotten, his offering is ridiculous, and the gifts of unjust men are not accepted."

Pondering on this text and on the doctrines preached by the Dominicans, he became increasingly convinced "that everything done to the Indians thus far was unjust and tyrannical." The scales fell from his eyes. He saw at last what was to be forever after the truth for him, and experienced as complete a change of life as did Saul of Tarsus on the road to Damascus.

Characteristically, he entered upon the new life immediately. He freed his Indians and preached a sermon at Sancti Spiritus against his fellow Spaniards. It shocked them as much as Montesinos had shocked his congregation. The path thus chosen in his fortieth year Las Casas was to follow for the more than fifty years that remained to him; the energy and skill hitherto employed for his own comfort and enrichment led him to far places, and many times across the Ocean Sea, to attack and astonish generations of his countrymen.

As one of the dominating personalities of Spain's most glorious age, he wrote more copiously, spoke more vigorously, and lived longer than any other prominent figure of the conquest. He was no ivory-tower scholar but a tenacious fighter always eager to put into practice the doctrines he preached. And, though he insisted that all dealing with Indians should be peaceful, those of his fellow Spaniards who opposed his views found him an aggressive and unrelenting opponent.

One of his first projects, undertaken in 1521, was an attempt to colonize the northern coast of Venezuela with Spanish farmers who were to till the soil, treat the Indians kindly, and thus lay the basis for an ideal Christian community. The colony was a complete failure, largely because the Spaniards involved sought to enrich themselves rather than to put into effect the aspirations of Las Casas. Deeply discouraged, he entered the Dominican Order and for ten years, meditating and studying, remained apart from the affairs of the world. Then he took up the battle again. Until his death in 1566 at the age of ninety-two, he fought the good fight in diverse ways and places; in Nicaragua he sought to block wars he considered unjust; in Mexico he engaged in bitter debates with other ecclesiastics over justice for the Indians; in Guatemala he promoted a plan for the peaceful conquest and Christianization of the Indians; before the royal court in Spain he agitated successfully on behalf of many laws to protect the American natives. He even served as bishop for a while, at Chiapa in southern Mexico. During his last two decades, after his final return to Spain in 1547 at the age of seventy-three, he became a sort of attorney-at-large for the Indians.

It was during this last period also that he produced and published some of his most important works. Of those writings published in his own lifetime, the tract that most immediately inflamed Spaniards was the *Very Brief Account of the Destruction of the Indies*. This thundering denunciation of Spanish cruelty and oppression, full of harsh accusations and horrifying statistics on the number of Indians killed, was printed in 1552 in Seville. Even though Las Casas believed treatment of the Indians was "less bad" in Mexico, the work is a thoroughgoing indictment of Spanish action in all parts of the "Indies."

Translations of the *Very Brief Account* brought out in English, Dutch, French, German, Italian, and Latin powerfully influenced the world to believe that Spaniards were inherently cruel. The De Bry drawings that illustrated many of the texts, depicting Spaniards hunting Indians with mastiffs and butchering even women and children, graphically underlined the charges. Thus the political use the enemies of Spain made of the writings of Las Casas helped usher in the modern age of propaganda. For, ironically enough, his zeal to touch the consciences of his own king and countrymen by stressing the cruelties of the conquistadors was largely responsible for that dark picture of Spain's work in America which has for hundreds of years borne the name, "The Black Legend"—*La leyenda negra*—which is still widely believed, at least in English-speaking lands.

Although Las Casas' principal aim was to shame the Spanish conscience, he was also a historian, and his *Historia de las Indias* remains one of the basic documents of the discovery and early conquest of America. He has also been recognized as an important political theorist, and as one of the first anthropologists of America. Although sixteenth-century Spain was a land of eminent scholars and bold thinkers, few of his contemporaries matched the wide range of Las Casas' learning or the independence of his judgments.

Two of his major convictions show how he challenged the Christian conscience of his time to confront the great issues presented by the Spanish conquest. The first was that Christianity must be preached to the Indians by peaceful means alone. The second was that the Indians were human beings to be educated and Christianized, not half-men to be enslaved and kept down in what one sixteenth-century Englishman described as "ethnique darkness."

To prove his first point Las Casas wrote an enormous treatise, *The Only Method of Attracting All People to the True Religion*; though only a portion has been preserved, that remnant is a large volume. The doctrine he enunciated in this first of his many polemical writings was simple enough. He quoted, as did Pope Paul III in the bull "Sublimis Deus," the words of Christ, "Go ye and teach all nations," and agreed that "nations" included the American Indians. As the Pope declared in Rome in that momentous pronouncement on June 9, 1537, at about the time that Las Casas was preaching the same doctrine in Guatemala:

The sublime God so loved the human race that he not only created man in such wise that he might participate in the good that other creatures enjoy, but also endowed him with capacity to attain to the inaccessible and invisible Supreme Good and behold it face to face . . . all are capable of receiving the doctrines of the faith. . . . We . . . consider that the Indians are truly men and that they are not only capable of undertaking the Catholic faith, but according to our information, they

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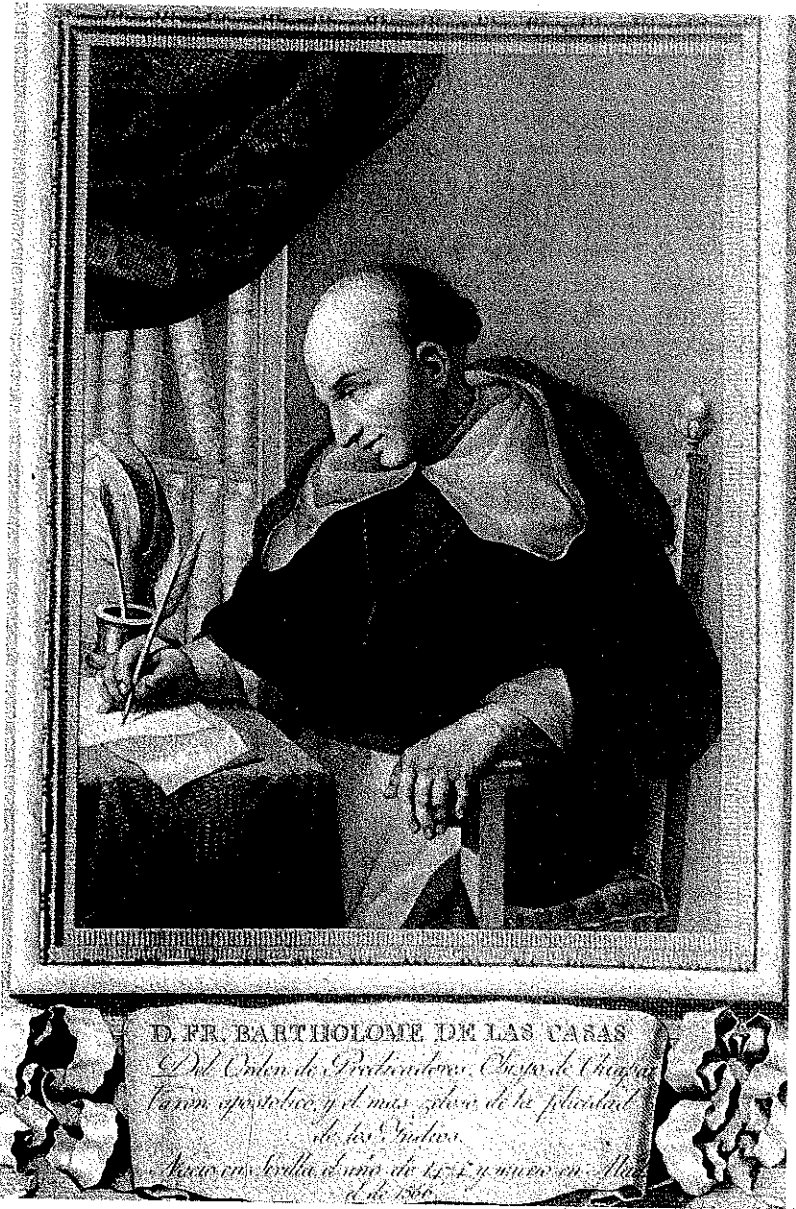
desire exceedingly to receive it. . . . The said Indians and all other people who may later be discovered by Christians are by no means to be deprived of their liberty or the possession of their property, even though they be outside the faith of Jesus Christ; and they may and should, freely and legitimately, enjoy their liberty and the possession of their property; nor should they be in any way enslaved; should the contrary happen it shall be null and of no effect. . . . By virtue of our apostolic authority, we declare . . . that the said Indians and other peoples should be converted to the faith of Jesus Christ by preaching the word of God and by the example of good and holy living.

Las Casas applied this doctrine even more specifically than the Pope. He declared that wars against the Indians were unjust and tyrannical; hence the gold, silver, pearls, jewels, and lands wrested from them were wrongfully gotten and must be restored. To subdue and convert the natives by force was not only unlawful, it was also unnecessary. For once the Indians accepted Christianity, their next and inevitable step would be to acknowledge the King of Spain as their sovereign.

Again and again Las Casas returned to his central theme. The proper method for conversion was "bland, suave, sweet, pleasing, tranquil, modest, patiently slow, and above all peaceful and reasonable." Moreover, following Saint Augustine, he insisted that faith depended upon belief, which presupposed understanding. This brought him into conflict with those who favored wholesale baptism of Indians without too many questions asked or catechisms learned. The friars who bore the brunt of the frontier missionary campaigns went about their work with uplifted hearts and a firm conviction that the souls of the Indians constituted the true silver to be mined in America. Indeed, the conquest presented them with a wonderful opportunity, for, though Luther was challenging the Church in Europe, they were determined to build it anew and make it unassailable in the New World. They recorded impressive baptismal statistics. The Franciscans, who believed in mass baptism and sprinkled holy water over Indian heads until their hands could no longer hold the hyssop, calculated that in Mexico alone, between 1524 and 1536, they had saved four million souls. Urged on by flaming zeal, they were exasperated by Las Casas, who wanted each Indian properly instructed in the faith before baptism.

Influenced by Las Casas' doctrine of peaceful persuasion, his Dominican brothers actually tried to put it into effect beginning in 1537, in the spirit of one of Las Casas' favorite authorities, St. John Chrysostom, who had declared: "Men do not consider what we say but what we do—we may philosophize interminably, but if when the occasion arises we do not demonstrate with our actions the truth of what we have been saying, our words will have done more harm than good." For this demonstration of Las Casas' ideas they chose the only land left unconquered in that region, the province of Tuzutlán in present-day Guatemala. It was a mountainous, rainy tropical country filled with fierce beasts, snakes, and large monkeys. Worst of all, it lacked salt. The ferocious natives there were impossible to subjugate, or so believed the conquistadors, who had invaded the region three times and had as often returned "holding their heads." *Tierra de guerra*, they named it—"Land of War."

To this province and people Las Casas offered to go, to induce them voluntarily to become vassals of the King of Spain and pay him tribute according to their ability, to teach them and to preach the Christian faith. All this he proposed to do



The Spanish inscription under this late eighteenth-century portrait of Bartolomé de Las Casas reads: "Order of Preachers, Bishop of Chiapas. Most zealous apostle and defender of the welfare of the Indians."

without arms or soldiers, his only weapon being the word of God and the "reasons of the Holy Gospel." Governor Alonso Maldonado speedily granted his two modest requests: that Indians won over by peaceful methods should not be parceled out to

serve Spaniards but should be declared direct dependents of the King, with only moderate tribute to pay; and that for five years no Spaniards except Las Casas and his brother Dominicans should enter the province, so that secular Spaniards might not disturb the Indians or "provoke scandal."

It would be gratifying to report that the experiment in Guatemala went smoothly, but the facts are otherwise. For ten years the colonists in the nearby capital and the ecclesiastics fought stubbornly over the peaceful preaching of the faith. During this time the municipal council of Santiago informed the King that Las Casas was an unlettered friar, an envious, turbulent, most unsaintly fellow, who kept the land in an uproar and would, unless checked, destroy Spanish rule in the New World; furthermore, that the so-called "peaceful" Indians revolted every day and killed many Spaniards. But royal orders continued to flow from Spain supporting the Dominicans and—amid the sardonic laughter of the colonists—the Land of War was officially christened "the Land of True Peace."

In 1544 Las Casas was appointed Bishop of Chiapa, a region which included Tuzutlán. His battle with the colonists grew so hot that a royal investigator was sent to that area in 1547 to look into alleged mistreatment of the Dominicans by the Spanish colonists and reported that much supporting evidence could be found. For a time the Bishop himself fled to Nicaragua to escape his irate flock, many of whom, including the judges of the royal *audiencia*, he had excommunicated.

The end of the experiment is chronicled in a sad letter the friars sent to the Council of the Indies in May, 1556. Writing so that the King might clearly understand what had happened, they described the strenuous work they had done for years, despite the great heat and difficulty of the land. But always "the devil was vigilant" and finally he had stirred up the pagan priests, who called in some neighboring infidel Indians to help provoke a revolt in which the friars and their followers were burned out of their homes and some thirty were killed by arrows, one being sacrificed before a pagan idol. Among those who died was a zealous missionary able to preach in seven Indian languages. The Spaniards in Santiago, citing the royal order forbidding them to enter the territory, had unctuously declined the friars' request for help. The story ended when the King ordered the punishment of the rebellious Indians; the Land of True Peace became even poorer, and the peaceful conversion of Indians there ceased.

Despite this failure, Las Casas, remaining true to his idea, returned to Spain in 1547 to urge his point of view before King and Council. Now seventy-three, after nearly half a century of experience in Indian affairs, he arrived just in time to direct the campaign for his second great conviction: that the aborigines were human beings with the same essential rights as Spaniards. It was a dangerous moment for the Indians, for the ancient theory of Aristotle—that some men are by nature slaves—had been invoked, had been gratefully received by colonists and officials, and had been found conveniently applicable to Indians from the coasts of Florida to the mountains of far-distant Chile. The proposal that someone else should do the physical work of the world appealed strongly to sixteenth-century Spaniards, whose taste for martial glory and religious conquest and distaste for labor came from their forefathers, who had struggled for centuries to eject the Moslems from

Spain. And when to this doctrine was linked the concept that the inferior beings were actually benefited by the labor they performed, the proposition became invincibly attractive.

The Aristotelian doctrine had first been applied to the American Indians in 1519, when Las Casas at the age of forty-five clashed with Juan Quevedo, Bishop of Darién, at Barcelona before the young Emperor Charles V. Las Casas had denounced the bishop for invoking such a non-Christian idea and had dismissed Aristotle as a "gentile burning in Hell, whose doctrine we need not follow except in so far as it conforms to Christian truth." At the same time Las Casas enunciated the basic concept which would guide his action on behalf of the Indians all the rest of his agitated life: "Our Christian religion is suitable for and may be adapted to all the nations of the world, and all alike may receive it; and no one may be deprived of his liberty, nor may he be enslaved on the excuse that he is a natural slave, as it would appear that the reverend bishop of Darién advocates." But no decision had emerged from the debate; the episode was merely a prelude to the important drama that unfolded thirty years later when Las Casas confronted the scholar Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda in Valladolid, the somber Spanish capital on the desolate plain of Castile.

This great dispute originated when the Council of the Indies declared to the King on July 3, 1549, that the dangers both to the Indians and to the King's conscience which the conquests incurred were so great that no future military expedition should be licensed without his express permission and that of the Council. The Council declared:

The greed of those who undertake conquests and the timidity and humility of the Indians is such that we are not certain whether any instruction will be obeyed. It would be fitting for Your Majesty to order a meeting of learned men, theologians, and jurists . . . to . . . consider the manner in which these conquests should be carried on . . . justly and with security of conscience.

Accordingly, in April of 1550 the King, Charles I of Spain and Charles V of the Holy Roman Empire, ordered that all New World conquests be suspended until a special group of theologians and counselors—to be convened that very year—should decide upon a just method of conducting them.

In 1550 Charles' influence was felt in every country of Europe. His possessions stretched to the Netherlands in the north and Milan in the south; in the New World his bold captains had raced over a vast territory from northern Mexico some seven thousand miles south to Buenos Aires, and his ships had even reached Manila far across the Pacific. In the fifty-eight years since Columbus' landfall Spaniards had discovered one thousand times more new land than had been explored in the previous one thousand years of medieval Europe. In the New World great Indian empires—the Inca and the Aztec being the most notable—had toppled before Spanish soldiers, while in the Old, Charles sturdily fought back both Protestants and Turks. Probably never before had such a mighty sovereign ordered his conquests to cease until it should be decided if they were just.

We do not know where in Valladolid the sessions of the "Council of Fourteen"—which began in mid-August—were held. Perhaps the Council sat in the halls of the ancient university or in the Dominican monastery of San Gregorio, whose imposing buildings still stand. Among the judges were outstanding theologians and veteran members of the councils of Castile and of the Indies; this was the last significant dispute on the nature of the Indians and the justice of Spain's dominion over America.

Las Casas was bold indeed to engage Sepúlveda in learned combat, for this humanist scholar, who had given comfort to Spanish officials and conquistadors by composing a treatise defending the Spanish conquest, had one of the best trained minds of his time. During years of study in Italy he had become one of the principal scholars in the recovery of the "true" Aristotle, and he enjoyed great prestige at court. In 1548, not long before joining battle with Las Casas, he had published in Paris his Latin translation of Aristotle's *Politics*, which he considered his principal contribution to knowledge.

The disputants had been summoned to Valladolid to answer the question, Is it lawful for the King of Spain to wage war on the Indians before preaching the faith to them in order to subject them to his rule, so that afterward they may be more easily instructed in the faith? Sepúlveda had come to prove that this was "both lawful and expedient." Las Casas was there to declare it "iniquitous, and contrary to our Christian religion."

On the first day of the dispute Sepúlveda spoke for three hours, giving a résumé of his work "Demócrates." On the second day Las Casas appeared, armed with a monumental treatise, still unpublished, which he proceeded to read word for word. This scholastic onslaught continued for five days, until the reading was completed or—as Sepúlveda suggested—until the members of the Council could bear no more. The two principals did not appear together, but the judges discussed the issues with them separately and also carried on discussions among themselves.

Sepúlveda's fundamental idea was simple. It was lawful and necessary to wage war against the natives for four reasons: (1) For the gravity of the sins which the Indians had committed, especially their idolatries and their "sins against nature"—cruelty to their fellows, cannibalism, and use of human sacrifice in religious ceremonies; (2) On account of the rudeness of their natures, which obliged them to serve persons, like the Spaniards, having a more refined nature; (3) In order to spread the faith, which would be more easily accomplished by the prior subjugation of the natives; (4) To protect the weak among the natives themselves.

The arguments of Las Casas require little detailed analysis: he simply called for justice for the Indians. But the judges at Valladolid, like the later Scottish philosopher who declared, "Blessed are they that hunger and thirst after justice, but it is easier to hunger and thirst after it than to define it," inquired of Las Casas exactly how the conquest ought to proceed. He replied that, when no danger threatened, preachers alone should be sent. In particularly dangerous parts of the Indies, fortresses should be built on the borders, and little by little the people would be won over to Christianity by peace, love, and good example. It is clear that Las Casas,

despite the failure at Tuzutlán, never abandoned his hopes for peaceful colonization and persuasion.

The focal point of the argument was Sepúlveda's second justification for the Spaniards' rule: the "natural rudeness and inferiority" of the Indians, which, he declared, accorded with the doctrine of philosophers that some men are born to be natural slaves. Indians in America were without exception rude persons born with a limited understanding, he claimed, and therefore they were to be classed as *servi a natura*, bound to serve their superiors and natural lords, the Spaniards. These inferior people "require, by their own nature and in their own interests, to be placed under the authority of civilized and virtuous princes or nations, so that they may learn, from the might, wisdom, and law of their conquerors, to practice better morals, worthier customs and a more civilized way of life." The Indians are as inferior "as children are to adults, as women are to men, as different from Spaniards as cruel people are from mild people."

Compare then those blessings enjoyed by Spaniards of prudence, genius, magnanimity, temperance, humanity, and religion with those of the *homunculi* [little men] in whom you will scarcely find even vestiges of humanity, who not only possess no science but who also lack letters and preserve no monument of their history except certain vague and obscure reminiscences of some things in certain paintings. Neither do they have written laws, but barbaric institutions and customs. They do not even have private property.

The fatuity of Sepúlveda's utterances is the more striking when one considers how much information on Indian culture and intellectual capacity was then available. It had been thirty years since the German artist Albrecht Dürer had seen the artistic booty that Cortés had dispatched from Montezuma's Mexico to Charles V and had written in his diary: "I saw among them amazing artistic objects, and I marvelled over the subtle ingenuity of the men in these distant lands, indeed I cannot say enough about the things that were brought before me." Few were equipped to judge as expertly as Dürer the artistic accomplishments of the New World, but by 1550 much of the Aztec, Maya, and Inca culture had come to the notice of Spaniards, and a mass of material rested in the archives of the Council of the Indies. The mathematical achievements of the Mayas and the art and engineering feats of the Incas were not fully appreciated then, but much information was available. Even Cortés, whom Sepúlveda so admired, had been much impressed by some of the Indian laws and achievements, which surprised him since he considered them "barbarians lacking in reason, and in knowledge of God, and in communication with other nations."

But Spaniards who had not been to America had no basis for understanding Indians or assessing their cultural power and potentiality, and many were ready to agree with Sepúlveda when he asked: "How can we doubt that these people, so uncivilized, so barbaric, so contaminated with many sins and obscenities . . . have been justly conquered by such an excellent, pious, and most just king as was Ferdi-



The title page of the earliest printed Spanish-Mexican Indian dictionary, published in 1555 by the scholar-friar Alonso de Molina.

nand the Catholic and as is now Emperor Charles, and by such a humane nation which is excellent in every kind of virtue?"

In reply to Sepúlveda's wholesale denigration of the Indians, Las Casas presented to the judges his 550-page Latin manuscript "Apologia," sixty-three chapters of close reasoning and copious citations dedicated to demolishing the arguments of his opponent. He also seems to have presented a summary, perhaps for those judges who might falter in plowing through his detailed treatise.

Bringing into court his long experience in the Indies, he stressed heavily that "God had deprived Sepúlveda of any personal knowledge of the New World." Painting a glowing picture of Indian ability and achievement, he drew heavily upon his earlier *Apologetic History*, a tremendous accumulation of 870 folio pages on Indian

culture that he had begun in 1527 and completed some twenty years later, to refute the charge that the Indians were semi-animals whose property and services could be commandeered by Spaniards and against whom war could justly be waged. Here he advanced the astonishing idea that the American Indians compared favorably with the Egyptians, Greeks, and Romans—were indeed superior to them in some ways—and in fact fulfilled every one of Aristotle's requirements for the good life. In several aspects, he insisted, they even surpassed the Spaniards themselves! His closing argument pulled no punches:

Doctor Sepúlveda founds these rights upon our superiority . . . and upon our having more bodily strength than the Indians. . . . This is simply to place our kings in the position of tyrants. The right of those kings rests upon their extension of the gospel in the New World, and their good government of the Indian nations. These duties they would be bound to fulfill even at their own expense; much more so considering the treasures they have received from the Indies. To deny this doctrine is to flatter and deceive our monarchs, and to put their salvation in peril. The doctor perverts the natural order of things, making the means the end, and what is accessory, the principal. . . . He who is ignorant of this, small is his knowledge, and he who denies it is no more of a Christian than Mahomet was.

The judges at Valladolid, probably exhausted and confused by this mighty conflict, fell into argument with one another and reached no collective decision. Both disputants claimed victory, but the facts now available do not conclusively support either one. The judges went home after the final meeting, and for years afterward the Council of the Indies struggled to get them to write out their opinions. In vain. We can sympathize with the judges, for they had been besieged by two formidable men committed to two conflicting visions of Indian reality, and each had insisted that the whole structure of Spain's action in America must conform to his single vision.

After the last meeting, Las Casas and his companion, Rodrigo de Andrada, made final arrangements with the San Gregorio monastery in Valladolid to spend the rest of their lives there. According to the contract drawn up on July 21, 1551, they were to be accorded three new cells—one of them presumably for the large collection of books and manuscripts Las Casas had amassed—a servant, first place in the choir, freedom to come and go as they pleased, and burial in the San Gregorio sacristy.

Las Casas did not, however, settle down to a life of quiet contemplation. The failure of the Valladolid disputation to produce a resounding public triumph for his ideas may have convinced him that his efforts on behalf of the Indians needed a more permanent record. He was now seventy-eight years old, weary from half a century of involvement in Indian affairs, and he probably hoped to use the printing press to place his propositions and projects before Spaniards whom he could not otherwise reach. At any rate, he left San Gregorio and sallied forth the next year, 1552, to Seville, where he spent many months recruiting friars for America and preparing a series of nine remarkable treatises, printed there in 1552 and early 1553, which served as textbooks and guides to friars scattered over the vast stretches of America.

But his opponents made use of them too. His summaries of the debates with Sepúlveda—printed in Seville and later translated in England—of course included Sepúlveda's arguments. These, ironically, so impressed the town council of Mexico, the richest and most important city in all the Indies, that it voted in February of 1554 to buy Sepúlveda "jewels and clothing from this land to the value of two hundred pesos" in recognition of his soundness and "to encourage him in the future." Sepúlveda himself fired a new salvo by issuing a reply to Las Casas under the somewhat pejorative title, "Rash, Scandalous and Heretical Propositions which Dr. Sepúlveda Noted in the Book on the Conquest of the Indies which Friar Bartolomé de Las Casas Printed Without a License."

Las Casas never wavered in his convictions, and in his will, dated March 17, 1564, prophesied darkly: "Surely God will wreak his fury and anger against Spain some day for the unjust wars waged against the Indians." In the last few months of his life he made a final appeal to Rome for support, but his long and passionate crusade ended when death overtook him in July, 1566.

The struggle itself did not end. In fact, the Crown pursued a steady course during the years after Valladolid in the direction of the doctrine set forth by Las Casas: friendly persuasion and not general warfare to attract the Indians to the faith. And though Sepúlveda's views had been widely circulated in manuscript form and presented in detail at the Valladolid meeting, his treatise "Demócrates," which had set off the controversy, was never approved for publication. The generous terms of the standard law on new discoveries—promulgated in July of 1573 by Charles' successor, Philip II, and designed to regulate all future discoveries and conquests—were probably attributable to the battle Las Casas fought at Valladolid.

The law decreed particularly that, instead of "conquest" the term "pacification" should henceforth be used. The vices of the Indians were to be dealt with very gently at first "so as not to scandalize them or prejudice them against Christianity." If, after all the explanations, natives still opposed a Spanish settlement and the preaching of Christianity, the Spaniards might use force but were to do "as little harm as possible," a measure that Las Casas would never have approved. No license was given to enslave the captives. In theory this general order governed conquests as long as Spain ruled her American colonies, although some Spaniards could always be found who thought that the Indians should be subjugated by arms because they were not Christians.

What if Spain had followed the precepts of Las Casas to the letter? Would every friar eventually have been enslaved or killed, and Spanish America overrun by other, less squeamish Europeans? We shall never know, for the history of the expansion of Europe includes no examples of the wholly peaceful penetration of new lands. We do know, however, that for generations the Dominican attempt to preach the faith peacefully in Guatemala influenced Spaniards throughout Spain's vast American empire to use persuasion rather than a "fire and sword" policy in bringing Catholicism to the Indians.

In the end, no simplification of the Valladolid controversy is satisfactory. For in this struggle between learned, bitterly divided men of the same nation, other considerations besides theories on the nature of the Indians—economic striving, personality clashes, and the Crown's interest—all played a part. But it was significant

that the Crown permitted fundamental disputes in those tumultuous years in which its policies were evolving. To Spain's everlasting credit she allowed men to insist that all her actions in America be just, and at times she listened to those voices.

The attempt in 1573 to regulate all future conquests and the many other laws on behalf of the Indians would never have been promulgated if Sepúlveda's ideas on just war against the Indians had triumphed. Nor would this passage have appeared in the fundamental code, the Laws of the Indies, printed in 1681: "War cannot and shall not be made on the Indians of any province to the end that they may receive the Holy Catholic Faith or yield obedience to us, or for any other reason."

But the Valladolid dispute lives on principally because of the ideas on the nature of man which Las Casas enunciated there. One fine passage shows the great eloquence of which he was sometimes capable:

Thus mankind is one, and all men are alike in that which concerns their creation and all natural things, and no one is born enlightened. . . . All of us must be guided and aided at first by those who were born before us. And the savage peoples of the earth may be compared to uncultivated soil that readily brings forth weeds and useless thorns, but has within itself such natural virtue that by labor and cultivation it may be made to yield sound and beneficial fruits.

No single individual completely typifies the nation which established Spanish power in the New World. Rather, the sixteenth-century Spanish character may be likened to a medal stamped on each of its sides with a resolute face. One is that of an imperialistic conquistador; the other, that of a friar devoted to God. Both were imprisoned within the thinking of their own kind and their own time. Neither, when he was most himself, could wholly understand or forgive the other. Yet they were sent yoked together into a new world and together were responsible for the action and the achievement of Spain in America. Even to begin to understand the extremely complex movement of men and ideas which is called the Spanish conquest, we must see that both these bold faces were truly Spanish.

The struggle which Montesinos started in Cuba and Las Casas and many others carried forward throughout the Spanish empire in America is not yet over. The dust on centuries-old manuscripts that recount the Spanish struggle for Christian justice cannot obscure the vitality of the issues, which still disturb the world today. The cry of Montesinos denouncing the enslavement of Indians and the loud voice of Las Casas proclaiming that all the peoples of the world are men are valid today and will still be valid tomorrow, for they are timeless. And in the perspective of centuries the decision of the Spaniards not to stigmatize the Indians as natural slaves may be seen as a milestone on the long road, still under construction, which winds slowly toward civilizations based on the dignity of all men.