

WHY THIS READING ASSIGNMENT?

Last week we read an interview with James Maffie about his work on Aztec philosophy, where we saw how the Aztecs viewed themselves and the world.

Now we switch to reading about how the Spanish conquerors debated their actions, the justification of which depended on how they saw the native people of the Americas. I'm going to use "Aztecs" here generically to cover all the native peoples of the Americas; it would be more precise to say "Caribs, Aztecs, Incas, and others."

INTRODUCTION

- 1) The scene: in 1550 the Spanish King called for a *junta*, or gathering of scholars (jurists and theologians), to debate Spanish actions in the Americas. Note that "anthropology" or "psychology" as we would call them had not been invented.
- 2) The political economy: the *encomienda* was the system whereby native workers would be compelled to work for Spanish conquerors but would also have to be instructed in the Christian faith.
- 3) The opponents:
 - a. Sepúlveda was a humanist and Greek scholar; he supported conquest and war in order then to convert the natives to Christianity.
 - b. Las Casas was a friar who had traveled to the Americas and had written a horrifying account of the brutalities of the Spanish conquerors in the Caribbean; he demanded peaceful conversion by rational persuasion rather than war, then forced conversion.

THE DEBATE

Sepúlveda put forth four positions to justify war against the natives; Las Casas opposed each of them in turn.

SEPÚLVEDA	LAS CASAS
Natives were barbarians / inferior	Aztec society was law-governed
Crimes against natural law	Just punishment requires jurisdiction
Killed the innocent among them	War is worse than human sacrifice
War needed for conversion	Aztecs were pagans, not heretics

POINTS FOR DISCUSSION

- 1) Aristotle and "natural slaves"
 - a. Aristotle thought all humans had reason and passion
 - b. But that only in some of them did reason rule
 - c. Those were basically the free male citizens of Greek city-states

- d. So women and children needed the guidance of men
 - e. Now "barbarians" were those men who lived in empires
 - f. Where they took orders from superiors, just like women and children took orders from adult men in Greece
 - g. So if you captured a barbarian in warfare there was no problem in enslaving them, since their life in a barbarian empire proved that they were natural slaves, those who took orders from others
 - h. But if you capture another Greek citizen in battle, it's not right to enslave them, since they were capable of ruling themselves
- 2) Civilization and "primitives"
- a. Las Casas pointed out that the Aztecs had writing, laws, and a justice system, even if they were non-Christian pagans
 - b. So at stake here is a notion of progress:
 - i. Is there a "teleology" or orientation to a final point of historical progression of cultures such that Christian European society is the end point to which primitive others must be brought?
 - ii. Or is it that cultures are more or less adjusted to their eco-social conditions so that there are differences, but not a progression to a certain point?
- 3) "Natural law"
- a. Christian philosophers had refined the idea of natural law, whereby human actions had a purpose that fit into God's plan for the proper development of human beings as rational creatures. Fittingly, natural law was able to be grasped by reason even w/o recourse to Scripture.
 - i. Now God's plan was also revealed in Scripture.
 - ii. But if you had never been exposed to revealed truth in Scripture you could still be evaluated according to natural law.
 - b. Sepúlveda highlighted several practices of the Aztecs that violated natural law ("idolatry, sodomy, human sacrifice"), thereby justifying war.
- 4) Las Casas answered by using "natural law" in a critique of "just war theory"
- a. Christian rulers couldn't just wage war everywhere natural law was broken, especially when it's by pagans rather than heretics.
 - b. War was worse than the practices that Sepúlveda highlighted.
 - c. In fact, Las Casas will say that just war theory justifies not Spanish invasion but Aztec defense of their homeland and practices
 - d. Especially because, by following their practice of human sacrifice, they are following the natural law dictate to give honor to God as they conceive Him
 - e. So for Las Casas it would only be after peaceful persuasion of the Aztecs, appealing to their shared rationality, that one could see them in violation of natural law.
 - f. Similarly, natural law requires the consent of the governed so that Spanish bribery of native rulers to allow permanent slavery violated natural law