

The Valladolid Debate

On the Rights of Indigenous People

DNL Seconde - guided viewing and self-check

Watch the English video “Valladolid Debates in 1550”, Mark Vinet, History of North America, episode 428. Pause and replay short sections. Use English subtitles if they are available. The questions also ask you to think critically about the historical context.

Open the video

Before watching

Locate Spain and the Americas. Recall one consequence of conquest.

Word help

just war = guerre jugée légitime; conquest = conquête; to rule = gouverner/dominer; rights = droits; forced labour = travail forcé; conversion = changement de religion.

1. Where and when did the debate take place?

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2. What was the main issue?

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3. Who were the two main participants?

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4. What did Sepúlveda argue?

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5. What did Las Casas argue?

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6. What did the two men share, and whose voices were missing?

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7. Did the debate end colonisation or create the African slave trade?

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8. Why is this debate useful for studying the Renaissance?

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Speak for one minute

“Sepúlveda argued that... whereas Las Casas believed that... A limit of the debate was...”

Check your answers

Read these suggested answers after completing the questions. They are a school-level synthesis, not quotations from the participants.

- 1.** In Valladolid, Spain, in 1550-1551.
- 2.** Whether Spain could justly wage war on and rule Indigenous peoples in the Americas, and how Christianity should be spread.
- 3.** Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda, a scholar, and Bartolomé de las Casas, a Dominican friar who had lived in the Americas.
- 4.** He claimed that Spanish rule and some wars were justified. He appealed to a supposed natural hierarchy and argued that intervention could stop practices such as human sacrifice. These are his arguments, not established facts about Indigenous inferiority.
- 5.** Indigenous peoples were rational human beings with organised societies and rights. He condemned conquest by violence and defended persuasion and peaceful Christian conversion.
- 6.** Both worked within Christian intellectual frameworks. Indigenous peoples were not equal participants in this Spanish council; their own political and religious views were not represented on equal terms.
- 7.** No. There was no clear, universally accepted final verdict, and colonial exploitation continued. The Atlantic trade in enslaved Africans already existed; it was not created by this debate.
- 8.** It shows that classical learning, religious conviction and curiosity coexisted with conquest and inequality. Humanist learning could be used both to justify domination and to challenge it.

A historical caution

The debate was about conquest, authority and conversion. Reducing it to “Do Indigenous people have souls?” obscures the actual arguments. It also did not establish modern equality or end oppression.

Sources

Video and accompanying description: Mark Vinet, History of North America, episode 428, 6 August 2025, and episode 430, 13 August 2025. The latter identifies the BBC In Our Time discussion (20 February 2020), with Caroline Dodds Pennock, John Edwards and Julia McClure, among its audio sources.

Programme context and source credits

Universidad de Valladolid, “La Controversia de Valladolid y su legado: historia, conciencia y derechos humanos”, 26 March 2026.

University event and historical context