

October 12<sup>th</sup>, 2021

## AN IDEOLOGY OF DOMINATION: Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda and the Conquest of "the New but Old World" Aquiles Ernesto Martínez<sup>1</sup>



### ABSTRACT:

Thinking about October 12<sup>th</sup>, 1492, and its disastrous aftermath, this article describes part of the ideology of Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda on the Conquest of “the new-but-old world”. It also provides a critique from “an-after-the-facts” social location. The ultimate goal is that atrocities in the name of religion, order, morality, civilization, and progress may never be repeated and that, on the contrary, the dignity of all peoples may be affirmed and defended using other frameworks of understanding social reality.

### RESUMEN:

Pensando en el 12 de octubre de 1492 y sus nefastas secuelas, el presente artículo describe parte de la ideología de Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda en torno a la Conquista de "el nuevo pero viejo mundo". A la vez provee una crítica desde una ubicación social a partir de "el después de los hechos". La meta final es que atrocidades en el nombre de la religión, el orden, la moralidad, la civilización y el progreso, jamás se repitan y que, por el contrario, se afirme y defienda la dignidad de todos los pueblos a partir de otros marcos de comprensión de la realidad social.

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## 1. Introduction

Any effort to define the meaning of the term "ideology" is a cumbersome undertaking. Although we are told that its etymology connotes something like "the explanation" or "the understanding of ideas," on this basis, the more formal definitions have their own qualifications. Part of the difficulty consists of the premises from which each person starts to define that word, the field of specialization that informs the person defining it, and the methodology that is used. As a result, the word may have a positive, negative, or neutral connotation.

Juan Luis Segundo, for example, defines the word in question with several nuances. One of them is that social reality cannot be understood unless a set of ideas are adopted, integrated, and applied to make sense of what would otherwise be incommunicable and incomprehensible. And in the case of the Christian position that affirms that the less privileged must first be served to free them from the structures that oppress them, an ideology has to be a means by which faith and praxis come together so that this goal may be realized in history. Only, in this sense, it may be affirmed that "faith without an ideology is dead.<sup>2</sup> We all need one, but if it is used to minister to the needs of the less dispossessed, it is even better.

The word "ideology" may also be conceptualized in a not so favorable way. For Enrique Dussel the term is an indicator of any idea that is oppressive. And in the Latin American context, unfortunately, it has been a framework of beliefs whose function has been to "hide" the reality of suffering in all its faces. In other words, an ideology has been a set of well-concerted premises and statements, which has not allowed to discern the pain of the people as a result of having lived in a society that has organized itself precisely to hide it. Sadly, it has served to legitimize the status and actions of those in power and to divert our attention to other issues. Its deceptive character is central, and the use of power to manipulate, oppress, dominate, and exploit the weak is one of its concretions and functions.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Juan Luis Segundo, *Liberación de la teología* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Carlos Lohl, 1975), 122-126.

<sup>3</sup> Henry Dussel, *Hipótesis para una historia de la Teología en América latina* (Bogotá: Servicio de Prensa Indoamericana, 1986), 11-12.

Throughout the history of the Church specifically, various ideologies and their practitioners have failed the test on "the use of power," to paraphrase Leonardo Boff. Succumbing to the power of institutionalism, they have assimilated and defended the secular standards of domination, centralization, and triumphalism, but only to turn the Church into a secularized hybrid covered with a "sacred blanket."<sup>4</sup>

There are many examples that come to mind as we think about this theme. But on a day like today, when many countries of the world stop to celebrate or protest against the so-called "Discovery of America," "Columbus Day" or "the Day of the Race," it is appropriate to reflect on the meaning and implications of the ideology of Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda (1490-1573) and its links with the Conquest of the so-called "new world".

In this Spanish philosopher, lawyer, and theologian, who on one occasion was the adversary of Fray Bartolomé de las Casas in the famous Valladolid Controversy of 1550, organized by King Charles V and in which the legitimacy of the Conquest of "the new world" was debated, we come across one of the spokesmen of a way of thinking that helped legitimize and consolidate the invasion, the plundering, subjugation, and colonization of indigenous peoples and their lands.<sup>5</sup> This scholar, influenced by the ideas of the Renaissance and Aristotle in particular, proposed that since "the Indians" were inferior and had no laws, rulers, and rights, any "civilized man" had the responsibility to enslave them in order to "civilize" and "Christianize" them.

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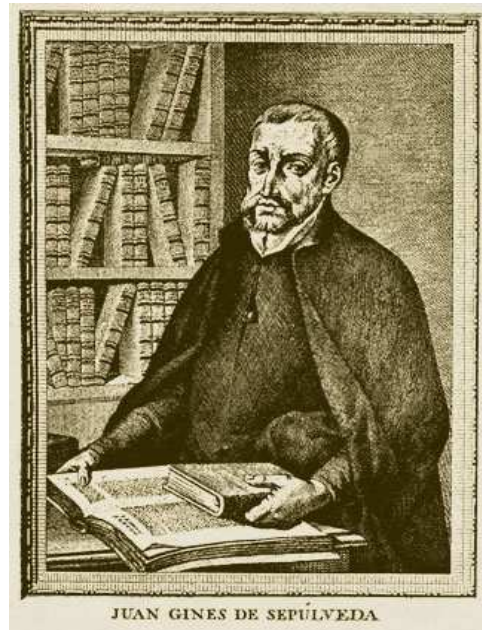
<sup>4</sup> *Iglesia, carisma y poder* (Bogotá: Servicio de Prensa Indoamericana, 1989), 90.

<sup>5</sup> Since what we now call "the Americas" had different names (depending on the territory and ethnic group) and considering that there was no name for the continent as a whole, for this essay I am using several phrases to refer to "the land" or "the earth:" the Pachamama (among the Incas), Tatei Yurianaka (among the Huitchols), Akna (among the Mayan) and similar ones. To this land, in a general sense, the Spaniards called "the new world," "the Indies" or including "America" years later; they also arbitrarily assigned names to specific territories (e.g., San Salvador, Hispaniola, etc.). While it is recognized that the act of naming is an act of power that reflects a particular perspective, the use of this wide terminology is only conventional. The same procedure is followed with regard to the inhabitants: "Indians", "barbarians", "savages" and some generic designations (such as "the inhabitants of these lands", "the original peoples," "the natives," etc.).

In his inability to discern the inconsistencies and internal complexities of his own society and thought, with the respective ethical implications of the painful process that led to the invasion of the territories of "the Indians," violent occupation, and expropriation, this expert, faithful to his time, defended a way of thinking that helped consolidate what, centuries later, was interpreted as a dehumanizing project. On the basis of a concrete notion of what an "advanced society" was supposed to be, and the corresponding place and role its citizens should play in it as "political subjects," there were reasons to defend the Conquest by force and rule over "the barbarians," "the savages," or "the Indians," as they were misclassified. But this does not mean that such a position did not have its highly questionable deformations, gaps, contradictions, and connotations, which only a multidimensional analysis may decode.

## 2. The Conquest of New Lands and Their Peoples through Sepúlveda's Legitimizing Prism

The ideology of Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda, popular in Spain and the rest of Europe, was notorious for the preponderant role it played after the Conquest of "the new world", especially when contrasted with the few voices opposed to parts of the expansionist project of Spain during the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries. The ideology of this philosopher at the service of the Church had some traditional but own features that are worth summarizing before subjecting them to a rigid scrutiny.



### 2.1 The Benchmark of "the Just War"

The ideology of Juan Ginés did not start from zero. And in the absence of adequate theoretical precedents, he did what many others did: he used existing

sources and inferred norms from them in order to interpret the new challenges and possibilities that arose from the Conquest. The traditional idea of "Just War" was one of those sources that informed his reasoning.

For this theologian "war" was a legitimate Christian option, consistent with an old evangelical tradition and the notion of the so-called "natural right." The principles that supported this option fell under "natural law", which, consequently, had a normative character. According to Sepúlveda, war was necessary and justifiable when survival was in jeopardy. Even the animals, following their instincts, defended themselves from the attacks of other animals. Moreover, peace had to be sought and preserved even when this entailed the use of weapons. "Natural law," as it was ordinarily conceived, contained provisions for self-defense and, by extension, for helping friends or strangers in life-and-death situations. Following this logic, for Juan Ginés there was no incompatibility between the Christian faith and war. Far from being unique, this position simply reaffirmed the arguments inherited from Thomas Aquinas and the Roman Catholic-intellectual leadership.

However, no matter how traditional this stance was, it was not enough to simply claim that a particular war was "just." It was necessary to meet some criteria: (1) there had to be a correct motivation and a noble end; (2) war was to be waged to achieve the common good and to try not to harm the innocent; (3) the participation of the state was necessary throughout this process; (4) and the use of force could be carried out only in the following situations: to recover property that had been taken away by others, to punish offenders who had not been convicted by the Crown or who went unpunished for crimes committed, and to subdue those who were culturally "inferior".

Using these criteria, Juan Ginés, clinging to a classical understanding of "civilization" and that "the barbarian people" lacked the ability to govern themselves, proposed a course of action based on the following doctrines: 1) Spanish culture was much more educated, humane, and virtuous than that of "the Indians; 2) being "inferior," the original inhabitants of our lands were "savages," "barbarians," "slaves by nature," had a clumsy or slow understanding of the world, their customs were inhuman and immoral, were created to obey others, and needed to give up their empires; 3) as a result of all this, all of them

needed to be enslaved in order to be educated, civilized, improved, and brought to the feet of Christianity.<sup>6</sup>

## 2.2 Arguments to Justify the Conquest and Subjugation of the New Peoples

In tune with the previous coordinates, Sepúlveda presented at least five reasons that certified and defended the entire project of the conquest and colonization.

**2.2.1 Cultural Superiority.** This intellectual believed that the European condition and way of life were far above the identity of "the barbarian people", one of the linguistic categories that was used to classify the natives by extension and analogy. He took for granted that they had "evil instincts," and that they were "slaves of nature" and "incapable of governing themselves."<sup>7</sup> Given this situation, an urgent and redemptive action was demanded on their behalf. For him "the perfect" had to be made accessible to "the imperfect" and take control.<sup>8</sup>

By comparing Spanish "celebrities" to "savages," this scholar added more arguments to support his arbitrary but popular and conventional position. According to him, the Spanish race had produced illustrious people such as Lucano, Silio Itálico, Averroes, Alfonso "the wise," and others. And in the areas of "religion" and "humanitarian feelings," Spaniards, supposedly, could not be matched. "Barbarian peoples," by contrast, had no culture, lacked written laws, and were anthropophagous and cowards.<sup>9</sup>

**2.2.2 Disobedience to "the Natural Law."** The second argument was that the natives constantly transgressed a series of norms of behavior, intrinsic to

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<sup>6</sup> Manuel García-Pelayo, *Tratado sobre las Justas Causas de la Guerra Contra Los Indios* (Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1941), 14-28; John B. Lassegue, *The Long March of Las Casas* (Centre for Studies and Publications, 1974), 326.

<sup>7</sup> Here Juan Ginés followed the third type of Aristotelian categories. The other two were: 1) the cruelty of human beings, and 2) the people who did not speak the languages of another people (e.g., the Greeks with respect to the Romans, and vice versa). Regarding these issues, see Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda and Fray Bartolomé de las Casas, *Apología* (Madrid: Editora Nacional, 1975), 16-17.

<sup>8</sup> *Apología*, 16, cf. 61.

<sup>9</sup> García-Pelayo, 28-30.

human beings and even of divine origin, which applied to all peoples. And when these laws were violated by human actions, the use of force was a legitimate recourse to restore order and regain harmony. Therefore, war against "the Indians" was justifiable as a punishment against their crimes for the sake of the "supreme good." Idolatry and the sacrifice of human victims to the gods were two of these condemnable practices.<sup>10</sup>

But punishing "the savages" was not the only reason. There was also the need to enforce God's designed beliefs, values, and behaviors for all humankind in order to teach them good and evil, according to the doctrines of the faith, so that they could be brought to "the true religion." It was imperative to keep "pagans" away from evil." The Natural Law, thus understood, had to be applied so that the transgressors of it could be "blessed" by the good things that Spanish culture and Christianity had to offer.<sup>11</sup>

2.2.3 Crimes against the Innocent. Rejecting the habit of killing people and offering their bodies to their deities, Sepúlveda called on Christians to fight these crimes and punish criminals. Not only were "the Indians" cruel to innocent people, but they ate their bodies. Guided by the theory of "Just War," an armed intervention against them was thus an obligation to free the innocent from the ruthless hands of "the barbarians." Not to intervene was to commit a crime as well. "The infidels" were "the aggressors" and "violators" of the moral and divine codes. Forced to submit, these people would refrain from committing these atrocities, and with the treatment given by Christians, along with their pious and righteous counsel, these "beasts" would be healed spiritually and morally, begin to practice good habits, and receive "the true religion" with immense pleasure, which would eventually lead them to eternal salvation.<sup>12</sup>

2.2.4 The Condition of Being Uncivilized. Thinking of "the Indians" from a political perspective and with a different understanding of what it meant to be an organized and functional culture that would lead to progress, Juan Ginés argued that the inhabitants of "the new world" were not able to oversee and guide themselves as he understood the issue of government. Therefore, their lives

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<sup>10</sup> *Apología*, 19, cf. 61.

<sup>11</sup> García-Pelayo, 30-32.

<sup>12</sup> *Apología*, 22, cf. 64.

needed a radical restructuring in light of the ideas, values, and principles with which he was well acquainted. Relying heavily on Aristotelian hierarchical and binary categories, for example, Juan Ginés believed that the inhabitants of the new but old world were like children around their fathers, women in relation to men, and cruel people with respect to gentle individuals. Since it was assumed as a fact that they were enslaved to their instincts and natural forms, it was the moral duty of the Spanish monarchy to govern them in order to conform them to its philosophy of exercising power and administering resources to guide their population.<sup>13</sup>

2.2.5 The Proclamation of the Gospel. With the charge of Christianizing all nations as a pretext for their conquest and subjugation, this philosopher argued that Christians should use any possible means to impede that "the barbarians" would fall into a spiritual precipice. They were far from the true God, so the law and charity compelled believers in Christ to bring these peoples to the knowledge of the true way to God through faith in Christ.<sup>14</sup> And if necessary, the use of force against infidels was justified to prepare the way for the proclamation of the Christian message and thus facilitate the preacher's task of converting them.<sup>15</sup> Evangelism was thus an utilitarian recourse, a way of "rescuing" and "humanizing" "the little men", "the monkeys," and "the beasts" with the use of the sword. And in relation to the abuses committed against the conquered ones, the Crown did not owe any compensation or restitution. The war was justifiable and necessary to save "the infidels" despite the fact that Bartolomé de las Casas, with a more humanized idea of the native people, considered war against them something unjust and advocated for an evangelization that would appeal to reason and carried out with love and gentleness.<sup>16</sup> Even theologians such as Francisco de Vitoria, under some

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<sup>13</sup> See Francisco Castilla Urbano, "Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda: en torno a una idea de civilización." *Revista de Indias* 52, no. 195-196 (1992), 329-348.

<sup>14</sup> García-Pelayo, 33.

<sup>15</sup> *Apología*, 38, cf. 65.

<sup>16</sup> Louis Gonzalo Ferreyra, "Sobre la justa o injusta guerra «a los infieles de la tercera categoría» o a «las gentes bárbaras», comúnmente llamados indios," *Amerika* 8 (2013) <https://journals.openedition.org/amerika/3834>



circumstances, defended theologically the occupation of "the Americas" by the Spaniards.<sup>17</sup>

### 3. A Look at the Spain of the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> Centuries



*The beginning of the conquest and an ideology of domination at its service:  
The voyages of Christopher Columbus*

Knowledge is always situated in time and space, is conditioned by its context and circumstances, and is made known through language. The content of ideas and forms that they adopt do not come from a vacuum. There are always ties to concrete scenarios that shape people's rationality and identity in relation to life. Sepúlveda's case reaffirms these axioms. In fact, he was a "faithful replica" of the humanist, political, and universalist Europe of the Renaissance period.<sup>18</sup>

Back then, many factors came together to forge the vision of dominating other lands for the progress of Europe, seeking the welfare of "the barbarians," and bringing the message of Jesus Christ to the world. This type of ideology was already in place before the appearance of Juan Ginés. And as someone created in

<sup>17</sup> García-Pelayo, 33-35.

<sup>18</sup> See Salvador Mas Torres, "Elementos clásicos en el pensamiento político de Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda" *Geryon* 37, no. 2 (2019), 425-448.

the image and likeness of his environment, this intellectual followed the ideas, values, and practices common to Spanish culture and the rest of the continent.

### 3.1 Historical Precedents of Conquests, Subjugation, and Colonization

A series of events paved the way for the visibility of the ideas of Juan Ginés and the protagonism of this spokesman a few years after the conquest.

It all began with the missionary voyages from Portugal to Africa, and the conflicts of Spain with the Arabs (Moors) and the Jews. The question of justifying Columbus' project to explore new geographical horizons was a dilemma for the Spanish monarchs and their advisors. Initially there were doubts about whether the Spanish had the authority to sponsor this effort. Years later, after Columbus received royal support for his expedition and the new lands were later discovered, the question of the legality of such an enterprise arose. To address this, Queen Isabella I of Castile and King Ferdinand II of Aragon appealed to Rome in support of what had already been done to secure their control over the land. Something like a "blessing" *a posteriori* to protect themselves.

However, this was not the first time that "the Holy City" had been asked to participate in the justification of political, religious, and military campaigns against "the infidels" by means of decrees; the most recent precedent had been its participation in the Crusades. During the Middle Ages, Rome had given the official go-ahead authorization to European kings to send their troops to fight Muslim forces and occupy their territories. Another precedent was the ongoing struggle against the "Moors" and the Jews. But after the followers of Islam were defeated, Pope Innocent VIII gave an authorization to possess and reign over the recovered territories and have control of the church there; this is what happened when the kingdom of Castile (Spain) defeated the kingdom of Granada (1492) and the Canary Islands (1418).

In addition to these events, long before the Spanish requested religious endorsement over the new territories, the Portuguese had received pontifical authorization to explore, occupy, and colonize the lands of Africa and evangelize its inhabitants (1456).<sup>19</sup> In fact, Portugal was the first nation to which Rome gave

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<sup>19</sup> Justo L. González, *Una Historia Ilustrada del Cristianismo: La Era de los Conquistadores* (San José, Costa Rica: Editorial Caribe, 1980), vol. 7, 53-57.

the authority for that purpose.<sup>20</sup> Consequently, in 1493 Pope Alexander VI conferred on the Catholic monarchs the same rights given to Portugal. But it was not until 1508 that King Ferdinand obtained from Julius II the concession of the royal patronage over the territories discovered and conquered in America and other future places.<sup>21</sup>

The ideology of Sepúlveda took for granted that Spain had the legitimate right to do what it had been doing for years and that the Church, by "divine authority", had the right and the duty to give its approval to the earthly kingdoms so that they would expand their domination, subdue "the infidels", enrich themselves at their expense, and preach "the Good News" to them.<sup>22</sup> The similarities to other imposing ways of thinking and acting in our midst are not mere historical coincidences; sadly humans suffer of the same illness once their minds and hearts are institutionalized.

### 3.2 A Dominant Undertaking from the Outset

From the planning of the Columbus project itself, an incipient form of domination was being cooked, which was to flourish and consolidate later. The objective of the missionary enterprise of this explorer was not the simple dream of knowing other cultures, establishing mutually beneficial agreements, or simply sharing "the Good News of Jesus", but a project strongly oriented by the desire to own or make the land and its inhabitants a "property" of Spain and its Roman-Catholic monarchs. Greed, the desire for control, and the achievement of world fame were fundamental elements that later became giants.

The so-called "discovery of America" was the first in a series of steps that led to a history of exploitation and oppression, in which Sepúlveda and others would eventually play a functionalist, hermetic, and apologetic role. "Discovering new lands" and "taking possession of them" were concomitant expressions of the invasive adventure. The land Columbus arrived on was conveniently regarded as without owner (lit., "no man's land"). And by the

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<sup>20</sup> Enrique Dussel, *Historia de la Iglesia en América Latina: Coloniaje y Liberación* (Madrid: Editorial Mundo Negro, 1983), 80-81.

<sup>21</sup> González, 58.

<sup>22</sup> Luis N. Rivera-Pagán, *Evangelización y Violencia: la Conquista de América*, 2da ed. (San Juan, PR: Editorial Cemi, 1991), 39-61.

authority that Isabel and Fernando had conferred on him, and “in the name of God,” beginning with San Salvador in 1492 (part of the current Bahamas islands), Columbus proceeded to acquire the land and declare it Spanish territory. It's that simple. Through this ritual act, he was certifying that no other prince or kingdom had the power to acquire and rule over that land. The process of their "civilization" had already begun. This "right" was reaffirmed by Pope Alexander VI through a decree in 1493, according to which Spain had full power over the discovered places and those yet to be discovered.<sup>23</sup>

### 3.3 Blessed to "Bless" the World

In those years, in Spain prevailed a type of well-rooted mentality that was expressed in all its institutions. By virtue of the economic, cultural, religious, and political power it had, as well as its growing prominence in Europe, this nation considered itself being chosen and endowed by God with an unparalleled historical mission. And their leaders wanted even more glory, wealth, and power.

But this was not all. For many years in Spain reigned what Dussel calls "a temporary messianism" through which the destiny of the nation and the church and the functions of both were practically the same thing. The belief was that God had selected and prepared the Spanish society to save the world. A type of "providentialism" of unique and enormous proportion predominated with certain myths at its service, so that the inhabitants of "the new world", along with other benefits, could hear the Gospel and convert to Christianity. As a result, Spain would become stronger and develop even more. This expansionist ideology powerfully influenced many generations and their leaders. Sepúlveda could not escape or control its effects. On the contrary, he was a depository and defender of this way of thinking and acting, as the debate on the legitimacy of the Conquest showed it clearly.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Luis N. Rivera-Pagán, *Descubrimiento y Conquista de América: Una Empresa Misionera Imperial*. Paper presented at the First Meeting of Theological Reflection, sponsored by the Center for Hispanic Ministries, Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary, October 4-5, 1991, 3-7.

<sup>24</sup> Rivera-Pagán, *Evangelización y Violencia*, 11-12, 71-102; Dussel, *Historia*, 80.

### 3.4 *The Marriage between Religion and Politics*

Another outstanding element of Spain at this time was the inseparable and almost indistinguishable union between "political power" and "religious power". Although no one denies the zeal that existed to be faithful to the Lord and the sincerity behind the Spanish motivation to evangelize "the pagans", this fusion of opposing powers ended up being the concretion of a strategy to consolidate the Spanish kingdom under the pretext of Christianizing "the barbarians." Theological reflections followed the tones of this social hybrid. According to Dussel, during the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, the structure of the Spanish world conformed to the model of "medieval European man" and the vertical profile that characterized the Arab world. It is worth noting that typical Muslim caliphates demanded this kind of "political-religious monism" to guide or dominate their populations.<sup>25</sup>

Politics and theology had a dialectical relationship of reciprocal influence; both spheres needed and nurtured one another, particularly in the exercise of power and the acquisition and defense of privileges. Also in their objectives of "civilizing" and "Christianizing". Placing "the beasts" under the power of the Crown and the Roman Catholic Church found concreteness in the many agreements and decrees. Theologians such as Palacios Rubios and Matías de Paz joined this type of political-religious crusade. Something similar was also present in the way missionaries and colonizers worked with "the savages."<sup>26</sup>

### 3.5 *An Intellectual Movement at the Service of the Conquest*

The Sepulvian ideology was not unique or was isolated from its milieu. Faithful to the monarchy and the Church, it was an integral part of a group of scholars who dedicated themselves to articulating, systematizing, and defending the arguments that justified the takeover and control of the new territories in order to govern the destiny of their inhabitants and guarantee the progress of the Crown. Such an ideology was a representative of a prevailing consensus in the

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<sup>25</sup> Dussel, *Historia*, 80.

<sup>26</sup> Dussel, *Historia*, 88; Rivera-Pagán, *Descubrimiento y Conquista*, 11, 13.

existing social structures, which heavily drank from the available classical conceptual frameworks.<sup>27</sup>

A very popular idea back in Spain was that since "the Indians" were seen as "idolaters" and "criminals," they did not have the right to govern their lands and determine their fate because of their ineptness. That is why the Spaniards had to seize the lands of "the infidels" whenever they wanted. With this premise, a series of more specific arguments were crafted to justify the exploration of the new territories. It was commonly argued, for example, that the authority of the emperor was universal, that he was lord of all (Charles V was in power at the time), and this included the land of "the Indians". Let us remember that the Pope, whose power was universal and unquestionable, granted Spain the authorization to possess these territories. Others chose to say that the "discovery" event itself gave the discoverers the green light to claim the land and its resources as their own. For many the fact that the original inhabitants did not believe in Christ was an argument persuasive enough to disqualify "the Indians" as owners. The immorality of the natives was another reason for the use of force to free and humanize them. Others dared to say that the natives chose the Spaniards to be their masters. Appealing to the Bible anachronistically, other supporters of the Conquest claimed that God Himself gave Spain those lands in the same way that He had given the land of Canaan to the Israelites.<sup>28</sup>

These ideas were the result of many intertwined social variables, of which the participation of many Spanish and foreign theologians was highly significant. Take, for example, the Scottish thinker John Major, a professor in Paris, who in 1510 argued that occupation and control were necessary because "the Indians," in their inability to understand Spanish, would never allow Christians to teach them. For him, the Conquest aimed to establish the Christian faith.

The first systematic treatise on the relationship between Spain and "the barbarians" was written by Palacios Rubios, professor of Salamanca and Valladolid and counselor of the Crown. Therein he defended the Spanish right to the colonization of the new territories. Speaking about the power of the Church through the Supreme Pontiff, Palacios argued that the supreme dominion, power, and jurisdiction over the earth belonged only to the Church

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<sup>27</sup> Mas Torres, 425-448.

<sup>28</sup> González, 64-66.

and that everyone, including “the infidels,” should recognize the Church as their master and lord. On this assumption, his agreement with the decree of Pope Alexander VI was natural, which granted the monarchs of Castile and León and their heirs and successors absolute dominion over all the land, wealth, and inhabitants. In addition, Palacios argued that although human beings were created equal and free, from a historical point of view, slavery was approved or confirmed by the laws of nations, the canons, and civil law. Therefore, those human beings who were “more rational” should decide for those “less rational.” And if the latter rejected the Church and her teachers and refused to accept the Christian message, war against them was justifiable as a second step.<sup>29</sup>

Matías de Paz, professor of theology in Salamanca and Valladolid, held a similar position. In 1512 he declared that the king, once invested with the authority of the Pope, could wage war on “the pagan peoples” and subject their lands to the yoke of the Redeemer because the whole world was given to Jesus Christ as inheritance. However, Paz thought that “the savages” should be evangelized first and have the opportunity to convert. If they rejected the message and returned to their own cults, then it was permissible to reduce them to slavery. However, Paz reiterated that Spanish rule should be based on religious grounds. “The Indians” were never to be treated despotically and once converted, their freedom had to be restored. On the issue of “dominion”, Paz believed that the Church should not expropriate the Indians simply because of their infidelity; all of them had a “natural right” to own property. But he also believed that the Church had the right, in some cases, to deprive indigenous communities of powers and privileges in order to spread the Good News of Jesus. However, “the Indians” were to be converted to the Christian faith primarily by persuasion, not by intimidation.<sup>30</sup>

### *3.6 A Well-Rooted and Popularized Way of Thinking*

During the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries one of the most popular frameworks of interpretation was the traditional “natural law”, as we already pointed out. And

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<sup>29</sup> David Traboulay, “The Scholasticism of the Sixteenth Century and the Colonization of America: Francisco de Vitoria and his Influence”, *Zeitschrift für Missionswissenschaft und Religionswissenschaft* 70, n. 1 (January 1986), 16-17.

<sup>30</sup> Lassegue, 326; Traboulay, 17-19.

"the natural right" was one of the mechanisms that made it viable in order to evaluate people's behaviors. Social order, harmony, and social development were interpreted thanks to a vision of the universe (internalized and rationalized with its own principles) to which "natural theology" obviously added its own touches.

Sepúlveda's understanding of that natural law accentuated two key principles. The first was the belief that there were "norms" that had been given to all beings to structure and guide their lives (e.g., the tendency to forcefully reject insults or aggression, the gift of procreation, parenting, etc.). The second was the ability of human beings to relate to one another, which was shown in their respect for agreements, the appointment of representatives, the development of religion, the honor nations, the remembrance of ancestors, and other forms of interaction. The natural law concretized in "social norms", so to speak, was the minimum element that made possible the existence of life.

Following these concepts closely and to account for the beginning and justification of the natural right, Sepúlveda proposed that "the eternal law" had been sown in the hearts of all human beings and that, consequently, all of them should be congruent with it in their daily lives. In this process, the goal was to move toward "the good" and, at the same time, move away from what was "evil." All civilized nations agreed that natural law should regulate the relations of all peoples; the exception was "the barbarians" for being on the margins of humanity.

On this subject, one of the dilemmas was to distinguish unequivocally between "good" and "evil", and who had the capacity or ability to do so. Sepúlveda agreed that all human beings had an "inclination" toward what was moral, but since it was very difficult to get people to solve this dilemma, this philosopher argued that only "the wise" and "the virtuous" had the answer; they were the paradigm or model to be emulated. By nature, "the ignorant" and "the vicious" were unable to do it for themselves. Help could only come from the upper stratum so defined.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> García-Pelayo, 7-9, 12-13.



### 3.7 Gaps and Philosophical Debates

The last element was the lack of a legal instrument that would address in a clear and concrete manner all issues related to the occupation and control of the new territories and their inhabitants. To this we must add the absence of an adequate jurisprudence that would allow kings, lawyers, philosophers, and theologians to handle with wisdom, objectivity, and efficiency the new problems that arose before and after the Conquest. So the issues of justification and legality were hotly debated among the specialists of the dominant culture.<sup>32</sup>

Two concrete challenges were the relationship between Spaniards and indigenous peoples and the notion of "authority" over the lands and their inhabitants. But these challenges were absent from existing categories of analysis. In general, traditional laws had been designed to meet the needs and concerns of Europe, and there were no specific elements of judgment to address the new realities. This is one of the reasons why the jurists of the time were not able to deal effectively with the rights and duties of all parties involved. The cognitive systems of the moment were used and, in the application of these, the interpreters relied on inferences and analogies. Throughout this process, because of their status in society and connections to the Crown, theologians played various roles as part of their vocation and mission.<sup>33</sup>

## 4. A Conclusion from an Other Points of View

Moving to the past to interpret, with a historicist motivation, the opinions and actions of individuals, peoples, or civilizations, is a laudable goal for many researchers, but not for all. Many of us seek something more meaningful. With an air of petulance, it would be easy to idealize or demonize the events of yesterday, ignoring the complexities or projecting our own repressed emotions or speculations, perhaps intentionally, by naïveté, or accident. I wouldn't be surprised if some were prisoners of the cynical, and sometimes right view that the only lesson we learn from history is that we don't learn from it. In theory, having access to more and better information about so many events that occurred

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<sup>32</sup> Rivera-Pagán, *Evangelización y Violencia*, 331-360

<sup>33</sup> García-Pelayo, 4-6.

should lead us to a better understanding of the facts as a preamble to wisdom; but sadly this has not always been the initiative or how history has ended. And if the past is not approached with a moralizing perspective, critical mind, and the goal of improving our lives, why then interpret history? Just the idea of obtaining knowledge for knowledge's sake and nothing else as it is usually practiced in academic circles? And if we wish to break away from these tendencies, how can we respond to the Sepulvian ideology within its own historicity and long after using other criteria? How should we look at it if not as through a mirror in which we see ourselves reflected as well?

The thought of Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda was conceived in the matrix of the Renaissance and was born and breastfed by it thereafter. But the perspective of this theologian was not only a perspective inherited from the prevailing circumstances of the Europe of the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, but also made visible and strengthened the foreign occupation and subjugation of other peoples with the complicity of the Church, faithful to the principle of the "greater good" as it was understood back then. The ideas that Juan Ginés taught and the evidence he used to explain the establishment of a Spanish form of government, the belief in the existence of superior and inferior cultures, the linguistic categories to classify them accordingly, the ethical imperative to make the natives submit to the ideology in vogue, and the vision of "civilizing the barbarians" to save them from their "animality" and bring them to the feet of the Christ of religion married to the monarchy, were legally grounded proposals; also moral and religious duties. But all this was possible because light of what Sepúlveda knew, believed, and had at his disposal. And from this point of view alone, this philosopher should not be strictly responsible for specific criteria that developed much later in history, as a result of new cosmologies, epistemologies, and a broader sense of good and evil. Sepúlveda is nothing more than a sample of the overwhelming power that institutionalism had in the social construction of reality since it did not allow the creation of spaces so that its participants could think in differently, creatively, and contrary way to the dominant point of view. This situation was much so that not even true self-criticism existed. As we now know, all the ideas and rational decisions that accompany it, mediated by language, always have a symbiotic relationship with the moments and structures that engender and nourish them. So institutions have no life of their own, nor do they think or act

for themselves. It is the individuals who, as creators, representatives, defenders, and beneficiaries of them, not only give them life, but even eternalize them<sup>34</sup>

Obviously, however situated Sepúlveda's ideas may have been, his ideology was not and is not immune to an incisive scrutiny, especially from the logic of the collective and accumulated pain of the majority for so many years. The apologetic arguments that are often used to say that Juan Ginés was not as bad as some of his ideas, that his thoughts must be separated from his moral character, that his position on the conquest and colonization of "the Indians" underwent some changes later, or that this thinker, in the end, did not encourage cruel treatment of the original inhabitants of "the new world", they are unsustainable. They do not absolve him of his presuppositions and stance, nor do they incriminate him in themselves; they only explain what happened.

Even so, the implicit values and views that his arguments contained, protected, and promoted, not only lack solidity, but deserve a categorical condemnation from other viewpoints, old and modern. During his time there were some alternative rationalities (such as those of Bartolomé de las Casas and Antonio de Montesinos) that spoke out against many aspects of the colonialist enterprise and that Juan Ginés, at least in theory, should have considered with more attention. Moreover, starting with the multiple lessons and examples in the Bible itself, history has always had morally-conscious-dissenting voices whose ideas have been ignored or repressed by the powers that be. One of the lessons for me is eloquent: if the only point of view we favor is the one sponsored by those who are above, "the truth" will always be the first collateral damage, interpretive distortions will be worsened in a vicious circle, and many people will suffer the consequences. By removing ourselves from the experiences of ordinary people, denying their validity, and clinging to a deaf, blind, callous, all-powerful dogmatism, articulated from "the balcony" or "the office," our conscience will be tamed, and evil acts will be performed in the name of God, morality, national security, and social progress.

Seen through other glasses, the case of Juan Ginés reminds us that it is important to listen to the opinions of others, especially the ones of those who are different or who are being or feel repressed. Believing as "the truth", ideas,

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<sup>34</sup> Mary Douglas, *How Institutions Think* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1986), 9-19.

values, and courses of action from a remote and irrelevant past; accepting old and foreign sources of information as universal and timeless without proper scrutiny; and lacking first-hand knowledge, without any willingness to listen, understand, and evaluate, was and still is a recipe for disaster. The hardened logic of power and privilege must be confronted with what might be seen as an impossible: repenting and devoting oneself to diversity, pluralism, and dialogue, especially in times where some flashes of other non-dominant views show their terrified faces or prophetically scream at us in pain.

From my own social location in conversation with that of Juan Ginés', I have no doubts that his position was biased, ethnocentric, hyperbolic, ignorant, and morally reprehensible. Not only did he lack self-criticism and closed himself to some alternative points of view, which are the minimum resources to change and grow, but he was not even aware of the atrocities in which, directly or indirectly, he became a participant by omission or silent complicity. He adopted beliefs *a priori* from a position of comfort and constructed them following a logic of questionable syllogisms, in a kind of arrogant "Manifest Destiny" that, in the end, served as a pretext for the occupation, expropriation, control, and violence which ended up enriching the European coffers, giving world fame to the ambitious victimizers of other peoples, and committing a genocide in the name of faith.

And if we delve into this theme from other angles of knowledge with the help of multi-colorful methodologies, what should we say about the attitudes, doctrines, and behaviors that revolved around a hegemonic and imposing culture with its sacralized myths or impenetrable meta-narratives? How could we not reject the naïve homogenization of indigenous peoples without the necessary diversification, the constant use of stereotypes, the reliance on irrational prejudices, the accentuation of some "negative" traits of "the Indians" and the purposeful omission of many others, the blind loyalty to authority and institutionalism, and the uncritical use of classical sources of knowledge? Why did they forget that the root of all kinds of evil is the love of money, that greed is a pernicious vice, that the pursuit of earthly glory is an anti-Christian value, and that, for people of faith, there should be no such thing as "evangelizing terrorism"? How dare Juan Ginés comment on the lands and people whom he had never met since he never set foot in the conquered territories? Why depending on the biased testimony of others as if they were inerrant truths? Isn't

all this as appalling as believing that certain cultures are "civilized" and others are not, and that, consequently, "the lower ones" must conform to "the superiors" because this is legal, moral, or will of God? And what is the difference between all this and the disgusting "white supremacy" that marginalizes and commits acts of violence against other races, the persecution of sexual minorities, current forms of state terrorism, fascism, theocracies, democratic dictatorships, and left-wing movements that are guilty of the same evils they once condemned and swore never to replicate?<sup>35</sup>

Fortunately, we now know that what is acceptable as "normative" in one context is not acceptable in another because we are different. Social reality is what we perceive and interpret from it, and even a reflection of who we are. The construction of knowledge and the language that mediates it are relative to their environment. Again, the problem was not having an ideology and acting according to it, but assuming that a certain way of thinking, feeling, and behaving was "the perfect standard" and that, therefore, there was no room for revisions.

From a different social location centuries later and having experienced so many forms of systemic abuse, why not challenging the premises on which the Conquest and its subsequent rationalizations were based, not only because they were rooted in arbitrary, inaccurate, and subjectivist assumptions, but also because of their destructive potential and the tragic consequences to which it gave impetus (especially within the Church), both in the period of the Conquest and the colonial and independence periods in Latin America and the Caribbean?<sup>36</sup> Wise planning or legislation always tries to visualize unforeseen situations and make the corresponding arrangements, despite the paradoxical nature of the cases and especially when there are historical precedents that shed some light so as not to make the same mistakes. And this must be done, not to change the past, but to avoid its cruel re-contextualizations or the arrival of similar or worse versions. After all, no invasion or subjugation of people is defensible in a society that now advocates for the rights of all people and strongly condemns every form of injustice. And although I understand that many times we feel that intervening in other nations in favor of marginalized groups is

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<sup>35</sup> For a detailed study of some of these ideas, see Penelope J. Oakes, S. Alexander Haslam and John C. Turner, *Stereotyping and Social Reality* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1994), 126-213; Douglas, 91-109.

<sup>36</sup> Dussel, *Hipótesis*, 37-169.

relatively justifiable and ethically necessary but only as an act of altruism,<sup>37</sup> this type of action does not cease to have its blind spots, ambiguities, and contradictions, especially when we consider the respect we must have for the sovereignty of all peoples and the right to self-determination.

At the present juncture, it is also appropriate to carefully hear a word of warning. It is very easy to censor what others have done without realizing what our own faults are or will be like. In contexts of crises or when we are immersed in a problem, many times we cannot grasp what time can only reveal to us. What is contextual has its limiting forces. No ideology is complete, totally fair, and beyond improvement. Future generations will be our judges. This is one of the predictable rules of history. That is why, when examining ideologies in their historical moments, we must be cautious, humble, seek discernment, be open to calibrating our ideas, and even ask forgiveness in advance for the pain that may cause or be somewhat related to. We really do not know how, when, and where our decisions will affect others, especially those outside of our status of privilege and codes of understanding.

Although strictly speaking we cannot get rid of ideologies because they are indispensable cognitive mediations to facilitate knowledge, social analysis, and communication, we need to determine which ones should serve us best and for what reasons, with a passionate, honest, and free openness to purify them. And why not doing it before it's too late?

As a final point, I call on you to try to rewrite the end of the plot that has told us that "history always repeats itself." As we focus on the milestones of the past to retain the good and discard the bad, let us receive a word of encouragement to denounce and oppose any form of exclusion, discrimination, oppression, domination, injustice, violence, and exploitation, and the hardened and sacralized ideologies that generate, normalize, and strengthen these horrible practices for the benefit of the few and the detriment of the majority. May our rereading of some of the ideas of Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda serve as a warning or corrective to bring us closer to the realization of the utopia of having a more just and dignified world this 12<sup>th</sup> of October and the rest of the year, every year.

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<sup>37</sup> For example, genital mutilation of girls, human trafficking, labor exploitation of children, the persecution of ethnic y religious minorities, the denial of women's rights in countries that practice radical Islam, and similar problems.

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