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The Classroom of Thought

Harvard University's leading initiative for producing advanced knowledge on the universal, transnational, and global dimensions of Shi'a Islamic revival and history from an interdisciplinary perspective



Life and Legacy of Imam Ali



On October 5th, 2023, Harvard Divinity School's Project on Shi'ism and Global Affairs launched a new research track on the Life and Legacy of Imam Ali, generously sponsored by the Jaffer Family Foundation of New York. The figure of Ali ibn Abi Talib has been simultaneously enigmatic and manifest throughout Islamic history. As the key companion, cousin, and son-in-law to the Prophet Muhammad, Ali occupied a paramount role from the very origins of Islam. Both the first Shi'a Imam—and progenitor of the line of imamate—and fourth Sunni Caliph, the legacy, memory, and centrality of Ali is a key pillar of Shi'a and Sunni Islam.



The Valladolid Debate

The Valladolid Debate is a rich historical moment that touches on ethics, religion, colonialism, and the nature of humanity. Zoe teaches this to her students Elen, Eudokia, and Theophil, blending the historical debate with contemporary themes, creating a layered, thought-provoking narrative.

Zoe stands before a class full of students, including Elen, Eudokia, and Theophil. She's animated as she begins to teach.

Zoe gesturing to a map of 16th century Spain:

Today, we're going to explore one of the most pivotal debates in history. The Valladolid Debate. It happened in 1550-1551, and it was all about the indigenous peoples of the New World. Was their humanity, their personhood, something the Spanish crown had to recognize? Or were they, as some argued, less than human?

Elen raising her hand:

Wait, so... Spain was debating whether or not the people they were colonizing were human? What was the argument for saying they weren't?

Zoe:

Exactly, Elen. You've got it. The conquistadors—greedy, violent—argued that the natives were closer to animals. They had no souls. So, they could be exploited, enslaved. But the friars, the missionaries, argued that they were human beings, with souls to save. This debate would influence everything from Spanish law to how we think about colonialism today.

Flashback to 1550, Valladolid: The Debate Begins

The scene shifts to a grand hall at the University of Valladolid; an assembly of theologians, jurists, and clergy. A tense atmosphere fills the air. The king has ordered this debate, and the tension between the religious figures and the conquistadors is palpable.

De Las Casas standing, passionately:

Gentlemen, I ask you—how can we in good conscience exploit these people as animals? They are rational beings, endowed with souls! Our duty as Christians is to protect them from harm, not treat them like beasts of burden!

Sepulveda standing opposite, smirking:

But Father Las Casas, you are naïve. These "savages" lack the capacity for reason. Their customs, their behavior—it's no more advanced than the lower animals. If we enslave them, it's for their own good. They will be civilized by our efforts!

Zoe is narrating over the debate:

The central question was: Are these people human, as the friars argued, or are they beasts, as the conquistadors believed? The debate raged on for over a year.

Zoe divides the class into groups. Each group will argue from a different perspective: The humanist, the colonialist, the theologian. Elen, Eudokia, and Theophil are assigned different roles. They'll use arguments from the Valladolid Debate to discuss and reflect on the moral questions raised.

Zoe

Today, you'll argue whether or not the indigenous people were considered "rational" in the eyes of the Spanish, based on the two positions: De Las Casas or Sepulveda. Elen, you'll argue as De Las Casas—Eudokia, you'll defend Sepulveda, and Theophil, you'll act as a neutral observer. Remember, think critically about the implications of each stance. Ready?

The students look at each other, intrigued but unsure.

Valladolid Debate (1550)

The intense debate in Valladolid. De Las Casas presents his case, his eyes filled with sincerity and anguish.

De Las Casas

I have seen their suffering. I have witnessed the cruelty and exploitation that they endure. How can we justify enslaving those who are, in every way, our brothers and sisters in Christ? The Pope himself declared that all people, no matter where they are from, are human beings, made in the image of God.

Sepulveda

And yet we see them, these "savages," engaging in barbaric practices. Child sacrifice, war, cannibalism. These people are not like us. They live in a state of nature, without reason or civilization. They need our guidance, our authority. Without it, they are doomed to live in ignorance, and in the worst cases, become a threat to the very order of the empire.

Climax and Resolution

The debate in the classroom mirrors the 16th-century debate. Elen, as De Las Casas, passionately argues that all humans deserve basic rights and protection, regardless of their race or culture.

Elen (as De Las Casas)

We cannot deny them their humanity because they are different from us. To do so is to betray everything we claim to believe about justice and the dignity of human life.

Eudokia (as Sepulveda)

But we can't ignore their actions either. Their culture is violent, backward. They must be brought into the fold of Christendom, even if it means subjugating them for their own good.

The class watches the argument unfold, some uncomfortable, others fully invested. Zoe steps in, guiding the conversation.

Zoe

It's uncomfortable, isn't it? The question of how we view people who are "other" than ourselves. That debate in Valladolid was one of the first moments where Europeans had to confront the very idea of what it means to be human.

Final Reflection

The class has been divided, but the conversation continues. Zoe ties everything back to the larger themes of colonization, exploitation, and human rights.

Zoe

The Valladolid Debate set the stage for how European powers would view indigenous peoples for centuries. It wasn't just about ethics—it was about power. Who gets to define what humanity is, and who gets to benefit from that definition?

Theophil

But doesn't the fact that we're still debating these ideas today mean that we haven't really solved it?

Zoe

That's the challenge, Theophil. The debate continues because these questions are deeply tied to power, identity, humanity, and morality. They're still with us today, in many forms.



University of Valladolid by Juan Laurent, c. 1865, Department of Image Collections, National Gallery of Art Library, Washington, DC



Philosophy as Storytelling



penned by
Nadia Maftouni



FTIS FOUNDATION

04

Nadia Maftouni

*tells her stories of
philosophy*

session 4

Feb 9

2025



*The Valladolid
Debate*

Philosophy as Storytelling



Majid Farahani



Contributions Are Welcome
to:

FTIS FOUNDATION
Head of the Scientific and Cultural Department
maftouni@gmail.com

Faculty of Theology and Islamic Studies
(FTIS)
University of Tehran
No.47, Motahari St., Tehran, Iran.
Postal Code: 1576613111
Phone: 02142762000
Google Map:
<https://goo.gl/maps/dxjRk9QdrdM2>

