

The Intersection of Race and Religion in Colonial New Spain: The Struggle for Power

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Abstract

This paper examined the complex relationship between Spanish ideology and racial classification in colonial New Spain (16th-18th centuries), specifically analyzing how religious ideology shaped and justified racist practices. Through analysis of historical records, analytical texts, and theological decrees, this research exposed how Spanish colonizers utilized Catholic doctrine, particularly concepts of *limpieza de sangre* (purity of blood) and the civilizing mission, to construct a hierarchical racial classification system that placed Spaniards at the top. Primary sources were selected for their direct relevance to religious justification of racial policy, seeking to represent multiple viewpoints. Supporting secondary sources were cross-referenced against secondary papers to distinguish colonial bias from the experiences of the oppressed. While existing scholarship documents the *casta* system's technical structure, the precise manner in which Catholic teachings constructed racial hierarchy remain unknown. The study revealed that while the Spanish promoted intermarriage with Indigenous peoples as a means of Christianization and blood purification, African descendants were permanently excluded from social mobility due to their perceived theological inferiority. This research contributed to understanding how religious institutions legitimized colonial power structures and racial hierarchies that persist in modern Latin American societies.

Keywords: Social and behavioral sciences, Colonial history, Casta system, Spanish colonialism

1. Introduction

Early forms of racism emerged in historical journals, such as the 14th century traveler Ibn Battuta's writings. Ibn Battuta was a Moroccan scholar who traveled the Islamic World, initially traveling to complete the Hajj (Muslim pilgrimage), but eventually transforming his travels into a 30 year journey where he documented the cultures and practices of other nations. Ibn Battuta made a clear distinction between "white" Arabs like himself and the black Africans he met along his journey. He held an inflated sense of superiority, believing that the whites inherently possessed a greater claim to personhood, and thus more rights. During his journey across the Islamic World, Ibn Battuta claimed that he "was told by some credible black Hājis, that the infidels of some parts of Sūdān will eat men... they will eat none but blacks... he [the Sultan] also sends to them [the Kings of the Black Mohammedans] a black slave, whom they kill and eat" (Ibn Battuta, 1956). Infidels, in Ibn Battuta's framing, are those who reject the Islamic faith. Here, Ibn Battuta deliberately displays a narrative that portrays Black infidels as more disposable than white men. The difference in treatment symbolizes the greater implicit racial hierarchy that Ibn Battuta subconsciously absorbed; rather than refuting it, he agreed with the same Black Hajis' opinions, citing them as credible. Moreover, the infidels themselves are implied to be of African origin as they are from Sudan. Therefore, Ibn Battuta subtly manifested a racial hierarchy with white Muslims at the top, Black Muslims beneath them, and Black infidels lowest of all. This conceptual distance provided the framework upon which race based slavery would latch onto and thrive. Prior to the colonial era, racism and slavery existed separately. For example, in Ancient Greek, people were taken as

slaves not on the basis of race or skin color, but of economic and social status. Spanish colonialism fused these systems together.

Indeed, the concept of racism has been ingrained into the awareness of human minds; simply put, it is the idea that some people deserve different treatment based on their relative region of origin. Racism manifests in many different ways, through prejudice, discrimination, and bias. Furthermore, prominent examples of racism exist in societies that enforced slavery. However, racism and slavery were not always perceived as exchangeable. Then, in the 16th century, European countries such as Spain set out to discover potential resources and land in an area of land they called the New World during the Age of Exploration. European nations failed to consider that native people had been living there for centuries, and in line with their Euro-centric views, deemed it as “new” in relation to their own perspective. European nations believed that it was their right to conquer and colonize the New World, and thus harnessed the labor of native people to aid them in their goals. In colonies, European sense of superiority emerged in enslaving both natives and Africans and reducing them to mere tools.

Through the usage of colonial racial hierarchies, the concept of race itself became inexplicably tied to slavery. The institution of slavery in 16th century New Spain was deeply connected to notions of race, blood, and hierarchy. New Spain was a Spanish colonial territory encompassing present-day Mexico and much of Central America from approximately the 16th to the 18th centuries. Unlike the 17th century English colonies, where slavery was primarily defined by legal codes and an insistence on keeping racial boundaries fixed, Spain developed a complex caste system that simultaneously encouraged mixing of races, while reinforcing a racial hierarchy rooted in ideas of purity of blood. On the other hand, the English adopted strict slave codes, such as the Barbados Slave Code of 1661, which acknowledged Africans as property and granted slave masters complete control over their subjects. In comparison to the Spanish, who questioned Native humanity, the English faced no need to debate the subject (Seed, 1993). This study exposes the critical role of religion in deconstructing and legitimizing racialized colonial hierarchies that continue to influence Latin America today. The paper asks: how did Catholic ideology enact and legitimize racial hierarchies in New Spain, and why were Indigenous and African populations treated differently within this system?

2. Methods

This research involved examining primary and secondary sources from the colonial period of New Spain (16th-18th centuries). The investigation used document analysis to evaluate historical texts, missionary records, theological writings, and contemporary scholarly interpretations.

Primary sources included travel narratives (Ibn Battuta's writings), scholarly articles discussing *limpieza de sangre* doctrine, missionary reports on Indigenous conversion efforts, and firsthand accounts from colonial subjects such as Olaudah Equiano's memoir and Bartolomé de las Casas' Defense of the Indians. These documents provided direct evidence of colonial attitudes, religious justifications, and lived experiences within the *casta* system.

Secondary sources consisted of peer-reviewed historical scholarship examining colonial racial systems, Catholic theology in colonial contexts, and comparative analyses of Spanish versus English colonial approaches. Key sources included Patricia Seed's work on colonial sovereignty concepts, Herbert E. Bolton's research on Spanish missions, and contemporary scholarship on the *limpieza de sangre* doctrine. Searching for sources was a process marked by continuously reading the sources, looking for their credibility, and ensuring the subsequent accuracy of the source material itself by cross-referencing other works.

Primary sources were selected based on three criteria: direct authorial involvement in colonial religious or legal institutions, firsthand documentation of racial classification practices, or proximity to colonial New Spain. Sources representing opposing perspectives, such as Bartolomé de las Casas' defense of Indigenous peoples alongside Bolton's mission scholarship, were deliberately included to capture the multitude of perspectives within the colonial system itself. Each source was analyzed for language used to justify racial differentiation, identifying how religion shaped social hierarchy and power dynamics. Secondary sources were used to contextualize and corroborate patterns identified in primary texts.

This approach allowed for the identification of recurring patterns in religious justifications for racial hierarchy, comparative analysis of treatment differences between Indigenous and African populations, and examination of how

religious theory translated into legal action. Particular attention was paid to identifying contradictions between stated religious principles, such as universal salvation, and implemented policies, such as different treatment based on ancestry.

3. Results

3.1 The Casta System

The casta system in colonial Spain served as a rigid social classification based on blood and birth. Depending on a person's racial makeup, they were assigned a different level of status. At the top of the hierarchy were the *peninsulares*, the Spaniards born in Spain. After that came the *criollos*, people of Spanish origin who were born in the colonies. Next came the many mixtures that resulted from the mixing of races. A person of Indigenous and Spanish origin was labelled a mestizo, and the child of a Spaniard and African a mulatto. Notably, a child who was $\frac{3}{4}$ Spaniard and $\frac{1}{4}$ Indigenous, a castizo, could produce a “pure” Spaniard child if they reproduced with another Spaniard. As seen in Image 1, individuals were ranked based on their mixture of blood. The less European blood that a person had, the lower the social status. Thus, the casta system provided a visible framework that people could use to classify and rank each other (Olson, 2009).

Image 1, a casta painting, visually displays this hierarchy, depicting families of various racial mixtures arranged in descending order, with those of European descent at the top and those with African ancestry at the bottom. The practice echoes eugenics, or selective breeding, where it is best to “breed out” unfit traits such as Indigenous heritage while simultaneously promoting Spanish lineage. The classification of races in Spanish colonies can be attributed primarily to firm Catholic views, which they used to justify the subjugation and enslavement of other ethnic groups, and, to a lesser extent, colorism, that the Spanish used to classify people of color further. The possibility of cleansing Indigenous blood through intermarriage mirrored the Catholic logic of purification and redemption, while the exclusion of African blood echoed theological notions of eternal damnation. The casta system was, in this sense, a racial theology ingrained in law.

The Spanish promoted marriage with Indigenous women as a means of Christianization and social stabilization (Martinez, 2004). Since the Spanish desired to spread Christian influence across all available territory, thus securing it as their own, they converted women through marriage, guaranteeing that the next generation would assimilate to the same religion. During the Age of Exploration, European nations fixated on dreams of finding wealth, acquiring swathes of new land, and spreading religion to the New World. Religion served as a benevolent excuse through which the Spanish government could promote subjugation. The Spaniards created a structured system in which each mixed category—mestizo, mulatto, castizo, and so on—was assigned a specific social status. The existence of the system illustrates that while Spain allowed racial mixing more openly than the English, it also used racial difference as a marker of social rank, marking a clear difference between the treatment of whites and people of color. The Spanish did so to promote a world where they themselves reigned supreme over other kinds of man. At the heart of the conflict lay the Christian distinction between men and animals. In Christian thought, those with rational souls were considered human (Seed, 1993). Instead of viewing racial mixing as a method of climbing socially for non white individuals, it served as a way to “cleanse” the New World of empowered Indigenous people. The complex issue of both promoting interracial marriage with



Image 1. Casta painting by anonymous, 18th century, Tepotzotlan, Mexico

Indigenous populations while subjugating Indigenous and African peoples reflects how racism in New Spain was a reaction to the defiling of blood that the Spanish condemned.

3.2 Religious Justification

During the colonial era of New Spain (16th–18th centuries), Catholic Christianity spread extensively through the establishment of mission churches and congregations, backed by the Crown's *patronato real* system, which granted secular authorities control over church appointments and operations (Weber, 1961). Religious orders—particularly the Franciscans, Dominicans, Augustinians, and later Jesuits—built mission churches, learned indigenous languages, and produced bilingual catechisms, thereby embedding Christianity deeply into Mesoamerican daily life and supplanting native belief systems. By 1650, the clergy numbered in the thousands, reflecting the Church's rapid institutional growth and reach into both spiritual and civic spheres. In line with their behavior during the 1492 Spanish Inquisition, in which the Spanish government relentlessly targeted non-Christian individuals and forced them to convert, Spain sought to impose their religion upon these new people. However, the Christianization of New Spain was inherently entangled with colonial racial ideologies. Before arriving in the Americas, The Church's early debates over the identification of Indians and implementation of the *casta* system revealed entrenched assumptions about impurity and hierarchy. The Spanish took on a paternalistic approach to their colonies, announcing them to be under the jurisdiction of Spanish authority. They embraced a form of the civilizing mission "...since it was the acknowledged duty of the State to extend the Faith, the first task of the missionary... was to convert the heathen" (Bolton, 1917). By casting colonization as a religious duty, Spanish authorities transformed a project of resource extraction and political conquest into a moral imperative. Religion did not merely accompany conquest, but rather it provided its primary justification, making resistance to Spanish authority equivalent to resistance to God.

Simultaneously, the Spanish notion of *limpieza de sangre* ("purity of blood") was extended in the colonies to disfavor those with indigenous or African ancestry, reinforcing racialized barriers to social and clerical advancement. Through evangelization and institutional power, the Church thus helped legitimize the emerging *casta* system: tightly defined racial categories (*mestizo*, *mulatto*, etc.) determined one's access to sacraments, civic status, and upward mobility, making Catholicism both a spiritual and social tool that buttressed colonial hierarchies (Olson, 2009). Church support for the *casta* system provided religious justification for the existing colonial power structure in New Spain and helped maintain Spanish control. The government spent an excessive amount of money supporting civilizing missions (Bolton, 1917). Taking St. Thomas Aquinas' words, that the foolish man must serve the wise man (*Summa Contra Gentiles*), the Spanish took it as approval for some people to remain above others (Alvares, 2008). The Spanish assumed that those with rational souls would understand Christianity and come to convert. Thus, they associated conversion to Christianity as a full embrace of personhood (Seed, 1993).

3.3 Treatment of Africans

Africans, however, were placed at the very bottom of the *casta* system, with their labor exploited in mines and plantations under brutal conditions. The fact that Indigenous people were seen as "noble savages" capable of assimilation, while Africans were cast as permanent outsiders, demonstrates how slavery was a direct response to racial categorization. The Spaniards viewed the Indigenous as a new, foreign group of people from the New World, and concluded that they must be unrelated to the Gentiles who called for the death of Jesus Christ. Contrary to the Spanish government, which believed that cruel treatment of the natives was justified, Bartholome de las Casas, a Spanish clergyman and author, advocated against the harsh *encomienda*. In his *In Defense of the Indians*, he claimed, "[Indians] are not ignorant, inhuman, or bestial. Rather, long before they had heard the word Spaniard they had properly organized states, wisely ordered by excellent laws, religion, and custom" (de las Casas, 1548-1540). Despite Spain having a history of conquistadors who robbed natives of their gold in hopes of achieving glory back home, de las Casas refused to accept any religious justification of the matter, taking a firm moral stance against Spanish occupation. However, the Spanish government regarded the Africans as filthy blooded people, utilizing religion to justify their racist hate against people they considered "other". The Spanish believed that every Spanish person was

linked to the Spanish throne, which granted them authority over others. However, in their eyes, God remained the supreme power. Thus, they concluded that since the Africans did not worship God and directly disrespected him by murdering his one son Jesus, the Africans were deserving of punishment for their actions against Christ. The Spanish drew on the myth of Ham and the claim that Africans were descended from Christ's murderers to frame African subjugation as not only justified, but necessary.

Africans were primarily treated as slaves and subjugated to whippings and punishments. Olaudah Equiano was only a child when he was kidnapped from his village in modern-day Nigeria and sold into the slave trade. In his memoir, he claimed that he "[has] seen a negro-man flaked to the ground, and cut most shockingly, and then his ears cut off bit by bit, because he had been connected with a white woman who was a common prostitute: as if it were no crime in the whites to rob an innocent African girl of her virtue" (Equiano, 2007). New Spain society created a system based on a clear racial hierarchy; while mixing was allowed, the less mixed someone was, the more opportunities they were allocated. Although the common belief that both Indigenous and African people endured suffering under the rule of the Spanish empire remains true, the Spanish colonies established a system that refused to grant mixed children of Spanish and African descent the same rights as those with Indigenous and Spanish heritage.

However, the *casta* system also allowed for social mobility through generations of intentional marriage. For example, a person of mixed Indigenous and Spanish blood (*mestizo*) who continued to marry into Spanish bloodlines would eventually have a child who would be classified as purely Spanish, despite the traces of Indigenous blood in their veins. The reasoning behind such an occurrence was that the strong nobility of Spanish blood would cleanse the impurities of Indigenous blood. The idea that Spanish blood was superior propelled racial bias and violence. Friar Gregorio Garcia emphasized that Spaniards who "descended from Indians" should not be considered inferior because, when "uniting that part of the Indians that such Spaniards have with that of the Spanish Nation, said part loses whatever negative association it had, and gains much from the one that now accompanies it, from which, since it is better, and more honorable" (Martinez, 2004). This level of social mobility would only be accessible through generations of selective breeding, and ensured that Indigenous individuals would have their culture erased by the Spanish blood.

Notably, African blood was never able to be purified; once it entered the bloodline, a pure Spanish—privileged—child could never be born. The Spanish developed such biased views against Africans and used it to justify race based slavery and rankings of children's racial lineage. Since they could never be cleansed, they served no overall purpose besides being utilized as labor. Religion played a critical role in shaping these differences. Spanish Catholicism, under the influence of centuries of Reconquista ideology, already carried the legacy of *limpieza de sangre* laws that targeted Jews and Muslims. This mindset transferred over to the New World, where Spaniards viewed Indigenous peoples as spiritually redeemable through conversion, yet biologically inferior. They desired to eliminate Indigenous influence from their lands by successfully integrating them into colonial Spanish society. Thus, even as they baptized and married Indigenous people, Spaniards maintained the notion that European blood signified superiority.

The difference in Spanish versus British approaches is especially evident in the treatment of Indigenous people compared to Africans. While the English also sought to colonize the New World, their main desire was to assert their national authority over Indigenous land rather than convert and guide. The Spanish declared all natives their subjects (New Laws, 1542), the English Crown never formally adopted Indigenous people under their rule. Thus, both the English and the Spanish oppressed natives in different ways; the English excluded them and deprived them of their land while the Spanish deprived them of their religions and culture (Seed, 1993). Spaniards often integrated Indigenous elites into colonial society, intermarrying with them to solidify political alliances. Rather than constructing racial hierarchy through legal argument, as the English did with slave codes, the Spanish embedded it in Scripture, making it appear divinely ordained and therefore vital to follow. This distinction explains why African blood was considered permanently impure: it was not a legal classification that could be revised, but a theological verdict of judgement.

Conversely, the majority of Africans were primarily viewed as a source of labor. The Biblical myth of Ham, where Ham did not properly fulfill his duty as a son and cover his drunk father Noah, was viewed as the origin for Africans. Noah himself banished his grandson Canaan as a punishment for Ham's actions. Therefore, all Africans descended from Ham were infidels and traitors to God's Legacy through Noah. The Spanish justified their racist behavior by claiming that God had mandated such punishment for Africans (Adams, 2005). The Spanish used religion as a tool to

reaffirm racism, directly asserting their position as the dominant culture in the New World.

Thus, Spanish racial ideology functioned as a demonstration of imperial power rather discrimination for its own sake. Due to the colonial nature of the New World, the Spanish believed hierarchy was essential to maintain control. By subjugating Indigenous and African populations into categories deemed as lesser, Spanish officials transformed racial prejudice into a tool used to assure their own domination. Just as religion was utilized to justify conquest and war, racialized doctrine, such as the *encomienda* system, which forced Indigenous people into labor, and the *casta* system, served to prevent true social mobility for people of color. In this sense, religion and law operated as extensions of the sword. Despite bearing separate appearances, the Spanish missionaries were just as eager as the conquistadors to conquer the New World.

4. Conclusion

This research demonstrates that Catholic religious thought served as a fundamental tool to construct and legitimize the colonization of Latin American people. Religious doctrine, particularly concepts of *limpieza de sangre* and the civilizing mission, provided theological justification for a complex racial hierarchy that positioned Spaniards as superior while systematically subordinating Indigenous and African populations.

These findings contribute to broader understanding of how religious institutions interact with colonial power structures to create and maintain racial hierarchies. The Spanish colonial experience demonstrates that religion functioned not merely as passive justification for existing prejudices but as an active force shaping legal codes, social policies, and everyday interactions between racial groups. The Church utilized its power to justify Spanish control of the Americas. Truly, the desire to spread religion was born not out of love for God, but from greed and a hunger for control.

This research contributes to an emerging history of colonialism in Latin America which seeks to dispel the myth of the benevolent nature of the Catholic Church throughout Latin American history. Unlike previous historical narratives like Bolton's frontier mission theory, in which Spanish missionaries are characterized as being responsible for civilizing native populations, here the Catholic Church is depicted as an active perpetrator of racial hierarchies, constructing hierarchies through religious doctrine. The importance of this research lies not only in the historical implications; in fact, the racial hierarchies built on the Catholic justification did not disappear with independence; they remained an essential part of modern Latin American states. One possible avenue for future research would be to investigate whether such hierarchical systems were dismantled or re-enforced through the process of independence in the 19th century.

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