

The Roots of Spanish Racialized Thinking in Colonial America, 1400–1600

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Abstract

This paper explores the double standard evident in the attitudes of sixteenth-century Spanish conquistadores towards Native American culture. The study investigates why the conquistadores condemned Native rituals as barbarous while perpetrating their own brutal acts against the Natives. It is argued that this inconsistency stemmed from a racialized worldview rooted in ethnocentrism, shaped by the historical influence of Islam on the Iberian Peninsula, Spanish culture including Catholicism, and their encounters with Native Americans. This racialized thinking, although distinct from modern biological racism, justified Spanish imperialism as a holy mission. By examining relevant sources, the paper reveals the complex factors that contributed to this discriminatory mindset and highlights its significance in understanding the success of the Spanish conquest of Indigenous peoples.

Keywords: Spanish colonialism, new world, racism, ethnocentrism, indigenous religions, Islam, Christianity

Introduction

In his drawing titled “Burning of Idols,” dated from the 1580s, Diego Muñoz Camargo, a mestizo born into an elite family in the early sixteenth century, portrayed the burning of the masks of Native gods (Vistas Gallery, n.d.). Standing beside the mask of Quetzalcoatl that will soon be engulfed in flames, two Christians hold torches (Vistas Gallery, n.d.). Though Indigenous, Camargo supported the extermination of Native traditions, which were considered idolatrous by Western colonizers, who had characterized Indigenous rituals as heathen since their arrival in the New World a century prior. Camargo, who was also a faithful Catholic raised in a Spanish cultural environment, had come to view these aspects of Native culture as inhumane and wrong, a viewpoint that his drawing unambiguously depicts.

A Spanish Catholic contemporary to Camargo also spoke against the inhumane treatment of others, instead leveling his critiques at the Spanish. In *A Brief Account of the Destruction of the Indies*, Bartolomé de las Casas, a Dominican friar, described the Spanish torture of Natives:

This Death they found out also for the Lords and Nobles of the Land; they stuck up forked sticks in the ground, and then laid certain perches upon them, and so laying them upon those perches, they put a gentle fire under, causing the fire to melt them away by degrees, to their unspeakable torment (1542).

The writing of las Casas revealed the brutal treatment of Indigenous people by the Spanish, characterized by the same brutality and inhumanity for which the Spanish banned Native rituals. Despite these parallels, Camargo’s views were mainstream in sixteenth-century Europe, while las Casas’s were marginal. This double standard raises several questions: Why did the conquistadores detest the violent and “barbarous” parts of Native culture while they themselves committed atrocities upon the Natives? What was the logic behind this perception? How was it formed?

A close examination of relevant sources suggests that Spanish discrimination led to a generally calloused view of the mistreatment of Native Americans. This discrimination stemmed from ethnocentrism, the belief in a natural law of the Christian God that led them to see some groups as superior and others as inferior. This is slightly different from modern biological racism that categorically classifies groups of people as inferior based on immutable intellectual capacity, skin color, and physical traits (Puzzo, 1964, p. 579–81). Yet the outcome of ethnocentrism resembled that of racism, both of which resulted in the depreciation of other races. Racialized thinking based on ethnocentrism dominated the Spanish worldview at this time, propelling the conquistadores to a mission of imperialism that they saw as not just justified, but holy. This thinking resulted from the combination of the historical influence of Islam upon the Iberian Peninsula, Spanish culture including Catholicism and mainstream views at the time, and their firsthand encounters with Native Americans. The root of such a racialized mindset was complex in terms of the various factors that contributed to the formation of discrimination as well as critical to the understanding of why Spanish conquest of Indigenous people was successful.

Historical Background

Impact of the Rising Ottoman Empire

On the 29 of May 1453, Mehmed II, then the sultan of the Ottoman Empire, conquered Constantinople (the capital of the Christian Byzantine Empire) and put an end to the dying regime. He earned his title “Fatih,” meaning “the Conqueror” in Turkish, from the conquest of that impregnable stronghold at the age of twenty-one. The seizure of Constantinople is a commonly recognized turning point for the Ottoman Empire, as it transitioned from a regional power to an empire that dominated the development of both the Eurasian continent and the Mediterranean World.

The Ottoman Empire initially emerged as a principality occupying the northwestern Anatolian Peninsula (the site of present-day Turkey) adjacent to the Black Sea in the north and the Aegean Sea in the west. This emerging power was born in a chaotic epoch; in the thirteenth century, the Mongol intrusion into the Middle East had resulted in an influx of people into Anatolia, thus creating new factors that further destabilized this region (Quataert, 2005, p. 13). In such a context, one of the refugees, Osman I—the founding father of the Ottoman Dynasty—gradually enlarged his territory and influence. In the early ages of the empire, the militant Ottomans never ceased the march of conquest: From the time Osman I founded his small principality till the death of Mehmed II in 1481, the Ottoman Empire grew from a tiny area of northwestern Anatolia to a considerable power extending west to Balkan Peninsula and east to the entire Anatolian Peninsula (Quataert, 2005, p. 14).

The fall of Constantinople set the stage for conflict between Christian Europe and the Muslim Ottoman Empire, one that would last centuries. Constantinople was the center of Byzantium as well as one of the most prosperous economic centers of Europe. It was a city with “true economic life” because traders stayed active in transactions with a standardized currency that facilitated trades; this is why Byzantine currency bears the name of “the dollar of the Middle Ages” (Laiou-Thomadakis, 1980, p. 177). The scope of business was so broad that even Italian merchants from the central Mediterranean took part in the Constantinopolitan economic circle (Laiou-Thomadakis, 1980, p. 177). Thus, the fall of Constantinople damaged the pre-established trading system that had previously flourished in the Mediterranean. The control of the Ottomans over older Mediterranean trade routes was what eventually led western Europeans to find new oceanic routes to Asia.

In addition to ramifications such as a disordered economy and broken political power balance, the ideological difference and religious antagonism between Christianity and Islam became increasingly apparent the more these powers came into contact. Christian powers saw the fall of a sacred religious center to people they viewed as heathens and barbarians as an unmitigated tragedy. A contemporary Greek chronicler viewed the fall of Constantinople as “the most grievous catastrophe known to history” (Fleming, 2003, p. 69). By contrast, in the Ottomans’ view, the “Liberation of Constantinople” fulfilled Prophet Muhammad’s prophecy and instilled confidence among Muslims (Fleming, 2003, p. 69). Suggested in these opposing attitudes towards the fall of Byzantium, the change in power dynamics bred interreligious conflicts that would continue for centuries.

Middle Ages and the Kingdom of Castile

Spanning from the collapse of the Western Roman Empire in 476 to the fall of Byzantium in 1453, the Medieval Period was renowned for splendid accomplishments and advances in numerous fields. It, however, also carries the notorious name of the “Dark Ages,” in part due to the religious and political conflict in this time period. Pope Gelasius I, a pontiff of the early Middle Ages, stated in his letter to the Byzantine Emperor Anastasius I that “the priestly power is much more important” than “the royal power” because the emperor also sought “means of [his] salvation” from priests (Feldman, 1997, p. 28). Since the medieval pope was as magisterial as the ruler, intra-religious and interreligious conflicts, as well as political conflicts resulting from religious tension, were omnipresent during this period. Under the influence of Semitic culture, the Eastern Catholic Church used azymes (now called matzah)—a kind of food more often seen in Jewish rites—to celebrate Eucharist (Whalen, 2007, p. 1). This minor dissent about ritual ceremonies was exceedingly emphasized and chastised in the surge of discussions about Eucharist among Latin Christians, thus leading to the Great Schism of 1054 in which Christianity divided into two factions—the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Catholic Church—and contributing to further isolation between the Eastern and Western Europe (Whalen, 2007, p. 9; Mayne, 1954, p. 136).

Interreligious conflicts, meanwhile, primarily took place between Christianity and Islam. Deeply associated with Judaism, this emerging faith acquired and converted an overwhelming number of believers and Christians in the eastern and southern Mediterranean, profoundly challenging the primacy of the Papal Catholic Church. Islam owes its powerful conversion tactics to an animated Koranic depiction of heaven—a place wherein material needs of which Muslims are deprived in the mundane world are bountiful—which other religions seldom specify. This alluring promise given by Allah attracted and united throngs of fervent Arab and African Muslim fighters who would subsequently conquer the Maghreb (North Africa) and the Al-Andalus (the Iberian Peninsula) for the Caliphate (the Islamic Empire) (Cantor, 2015).

It was in this context of a humiliating invasion at the hands of Muslims that a long-term *Reconquista* was initiated, and the Kingdom of Castile, one of the many north Iberian Christian kingdoms that opposed the Islamic rule, emerged and thrived.

The Castilian influence on the *Reconquista* was exceptionally prominent when the Catholic Monarchs, Isabella I of Castile and her husband King Ferdinand II of Aragon, both of which were devout Catholics, fortified the kingdom with their personal union. Under their leadership, in 1492, the Reconquista culminated with Spain's (what Castile and the Kingdom of Aragon had eventually become) annihilation of the Emirate of Granada, the last Iberian Islamic regime, heralding the end of Islamic rule and restoration of Christianity in the Iberian Peninsula (Cantor, 2015).

Behind the glory of Spain, the *Reconquista* that aimed to "expunge all foreign cultural influences...from Castilian society" was also a dishonorable history of religious intolerance and persecution that gave birth to Spanish nationalism (Devaney, 2013, p. 721). Invented by the Catholic Monarchs, the Spanish Inquisition forced non-Christians to convert to Christianity and punished faithful Jews and Muslims based on fabricated accusations, raising the religious tension to an unprecedented level. Since the Inquisition respected the privacy of the accusers of potential Judaists and Muslims, Christians could unscrupulously endorse the anti-Semitic and anti-Muslim sentiment, putting the accused in an extremely disadvantageous situation in society. Not only were the Jews and Muslims discriminated against and cruelly oppressed, but also the *conversos*, Jews who had already converted to Christianity, compulsively yet remained an outsider of the Catholic Castile. Andrés Bernaldez, a contemporary Spanish historian and Catholic archbishop, commented on the *conversos* with explicit hatred, targeting the Semitic group: "They were just as greedy and gluttonous, never losing the Jewish customs of eating revolting food, and stews or awful dishes of onions and garlic" (Tremlett, 2017, Chapter 19). Marina González, a spice merchant's wife and a well-behaved *converso*, was first tortured and then sentenced to death as she refused to eat in the prison, interpreted by the inquisitors as "trying 'to kill herself...in order to avoid confessing to her errors'" (Tremlett, 2017, Chapter 19). This examination of pre-Columbian Spanish history reveals to us that the later mistreatment of Natives was rooted in a historical societal tradition of bias and intolerance.

Pre-Columbian Native Americans and Post-Contact European Accounts

The Native American world was far more complex than what European colonizers and early scholars of Native Americans had previously assumed as dominated by primitive tribal systems and cultures. Before the arrival of European explorers, almost 60 million Natives with different language systems, cultures, and social structures had already thrived in the Americas (Denevan, 1992, p. 291; Salisbury, 1996, p. 435–37). More remarkably, they engaged in agricultural production, which made possible the formation of agricultural societies and communities, such as Tikal, which had a population of 50,000 Natives, the same size of a medium medieval European city (Hartung, 1978, p. 326; Salisbury, 1996, p. 439).

Unlike what much earlier scholars had surmised that each Indigenous community was completely isolated from other tribes, Native groups were interconnected. They maintained that connection through conventional goods exchange and also cultural exchanges of "marriage partners, resources, labor, ideas, techniques, and religious practices" (Salisbury, 1996, p. 437–39). Some groups such as the Anasazi peoples even joined other tribes in order to cultivate lands with abundant rain, demonstrating strong ties among Natives (Salisbury, 1996, p. 448).

Among "at least two thousand [Indigenous] cultures and societies," perhaps the Aztec could best validate the fact that Native Americans were not as primitive or "savage" as Europeans claimed (Salisbury, 1996, p. 437). When conquering Tenochtitlan, the capital of the Aztec Empire, Spanish conquistadores strategically cooperated with other Indigenous people who were unsatisfied with the Aztec domination. Hernán Cortés, the captain of this expedition, criticized his Native allies for their cruelty, in fact arguing that "no race, however savage, has ever practiced such fierce and unnatural cruelty as the Natives of these parts" (Brinkerhoff, 2016, p. 178). Cortés's argument, however, reveals his own biases. In truth, the Indigenous people to whom he referred lived by social code that led them to act in particular ways. For instance, Natives would not hit the Spaniards on the back of the head, considering it a dishonorable death for the conquistadors. They refused to ambush and kill their enemies directly, instead capturing them for religious sacrifices (Brinkerhoff, 2016, p. 181). Although their religious traditions may have seemed inhumane from a European perspective, there was no doubt that Natives respected the sacredness of wars, considering their observance of and homage to their gods. This behavior distinctively contrasts with Spaniards' raging violence.

The Native Americans were also civilized and advanced in terms of their highly organized society and Indigenous art. The Aztec Empire was more socially and politically complex than first met the eye. Based on vassalage, it required other small tribes to pay tributes to the Aztec Empire (Brinkerhoff, 2016, p. 177). In fact, invading Europeans immediately recognized the Aztecs' skill in building and architecture. Even Cortés, who dedicated himself to the conquest of the Aztec Empire, was amazed by the architectural aesthetic in Tenochtitlan. He was fascinated with one of the Indigenous temples, remarking:

Among these temples there is one which far surpasses all the rest, whose grandeur of architectural details no human tongue is able to describe; for within its precincts, surrounded by a lofty wall, there is room enough for a town of five hundred families (Fordham University, n.d.).

Cortés's hyperbole indicated that Native Americans excelled at architecture. This suggested that they were neither primitive nor savage as described but notably intelligent. Most of the Spanish views on Indigenous people applied European standards in their evaluation of American cultures. When examining the interactions between the Spaniards and the Natives, it is important to keep in mind the merits of the Natives and the subjectiveness of conquistadores.

The Islamic Rule upon the Iberian Peninsula

How did Europeans come to view the Native Americans in such a negative light? Together with Christianity, Islam influenced the mindset of Iberians historically that played a role in how Europeans viewed Natives. The Iberian Peninsula was not under Christian rule all the time. From the first intrusion into the Iberian Peninsula by North African Berbers and Arabs in 711 to the forced retreat from Granada in 1492, Muslims had ruled over the Catholic land for almost eight centuries. Their religion and culture, though non-Christian and therefore objectionable from the European perspective, were arguably of equal importance as Catholicism in the formation of racialized thoughts.

Although often left out of modern discussions of racism, the Islamic world used to be strictly hierarchical and discriminatory. In the Middle Ages, the racial hierarchy in the Muslim world was so eminent that only the New World racism was comparable with it. Muslims treated black African slaves differently from European Christian captives based on the profits they could generate. Christian captives produced more profits for their masters because they were sometimes redeemed by their fellow church members (Sweet, 1997, p. 145). According to the Islamic law, enslavement is more disgraceful than the death penalty, thus most often applying to "ignorant" unbelievers of Islam (Diouf, 2013, p. 10). Although black Muslim slaves were also redeemed at times, bringing considerable profit to their masters, African pagans were not similarly redeemed. The primary way owners maximized the values of their non-Muslim black slaves, who consisted of the majority of the enslaved population in Africa, was through heavy labor (Diouf, 2013, p. 10–11; Sweet, 1997, p. 148). This discriminative pattern in the treatment of people of the book and black pagans gradually helped form an underlying racial hierarchy, followed by negative racial stereotypes, in Islamic society.

Medieval Muslims consolidated the racial hierarchy and stereotypes by the reference of myths in ways that later influenced European Christian colonizers. Particularly, they cited the story of Ham—often seen as a fundamental text for justifying racism—from the Tanakh (the Hebrew Bible, part of which Muslims acknowledge, later evolved to be the Christian Old Testament) because Muslims recognize Noah, Ham's father, as one of the main prophets. Since Ham had witnessed the nakedness of his intoxicated father, which was a major irreverence to the patriarch, Noah put a curse on Ham's children: "Cursed be Canaan; a slave of slaves shall he be to his brothers" (Evans, 1980, p. 33). The original story was devoid of the physical description of Ham's descendants, whereas later accounts of it intentionally included the animalistic characteristics of his posterities and even of Ham himself whose "lips...crooked...beard singed...[and] prepuce...stretched" according to one edition of the story in the early Middle Ages (Sweet, 1997, p. 148).

Muslims, particularly Arab Muslims, were among the earliest to associate the curse on Ham's offspring with black Africans (Evans, 1980, p. 27). In the Middle Ages, black Africans were the main source of slaves for the Islamic world, which depended on slavery to sustain society. To maintain the traditional societal order, Muslims increasingly used the curse of Ham to justify the slavery that had become the foundation of the Islamic world. One of these accounts was from Tabari, a medieval Muslim historian: "Noah put a curse on Ham, according to which the hair of his descendants would not extend over their ears and they would be enslaved wherever they were encountered" (Evans, 1980, p. 33). In Tabari's words, the characteristics of Ham's children were similar to that of black slaves. This narrative together with plenty of other accounts unanimously served one purpose—binding blackness with slavery. The discriminatory tendency was so strong that to produce influential and distinctive work, medieval Muslims spared no effort to degrade and defame black Africans. Some stated that black slaves were "the most stinking of the mankind in the armpit and sweat," and their origin, the torrid region close to the equator, was the cause of their "fickleness, foolishness, and ignorance," all of which were embodied in their rhythmic dance and music (Evans, 1980, p. 32; Sweet, 1997, p. 145). Even the free black Africans could not avoid such malicious stereotypes, for they were apt to receive fewer equal opportunities when compared to other races, especially Arabs who had a long-standing Islamic culture and were thus more superior among Muslims (Evans, 1980, p. 33).

Various historical factors such as politics, geography, and economics determined sources of slaves in the Islamic world, but the later continuance of enslavement was propped up by public opinions, which was the reason why overwhelming numbers of medieval Muslims contributed to anti-black prejudice. Perhaps a social phenomenon, according to which the society tended to vindicate whatever was practiced righteous by any means, could explain those racialized interpretations. It was just as Bernard Lewis, a British American scholar, had stated that "societies like to believe that what they are doing is right; and if it is manifestly not right, they will make great efforts to find some moral justification for it" (1998, p. 23). This model was not only true for medieval Muslims, but also European colonizers. From the enslavement and dehumanization of Indigenous people to similar applications on black Africans, Europeans in the colonial period

unsurprisingly followed this general trend as they were influenced by the Muslim pioneers through observation and contact. Although Christians did not often admit being influenced by Muslims, it seems clear that they borrowed ideas such as the curse of Ham as well as the justification for the inferiority of certain races from the infidels. Not only was it a historically peculiar coincidence, but also a miniature of an extremely racialized and profit-driven-minded society.

Influence of Spanish Culture

In addition to Muslim beliefs, Spanish culture was indispensable to the formation of racialized thinking among the Spaniards. Religion was deeply embedded in Spanish culture, and its influence grew stronger as the Catholic nation had not yet recovered from the euphoria of the victory of the *Reconquista*. The indivisible relationship between Catholicism and Spaniards was evident from their thoughts to their deeds. In the *Journal of the First Voyage of Columbus*, Columbus stated that the conversion of Indigenous people was the primary goal of his journey as he expressed his wish that “they might be converted to our holy faith” (1906a, p. 90). Such phrases throughout the journal were not only to win the hearts of his king and queen but also a clear indication of his commitment to Catholicism. If the intent of the American journey was deeply religious, it was unsurprising that Spaniards treated Indigenous people with religious prejudice when confronting with rituals and practices that seemed foreign to the Spaniards.

Similar to Muslims, Spanish Catholics drew upon ancient Hebrew texts included in their Christian Bible to legitimize their treatment of Natives. The most prominent of all was the story of Ham, but it did not have tremendous influence upon European ideology until the age of colonialism. Contrary to the Islamic world, medieval Christian Europe, being the rivalry of the Muslim community, received their source of slaves through the trade with Vikings, who, with their maritime skills, raided the Slavic regions of Northeastern Russia and captured slaves for commerce (Blackburn, 1997, p. 68). The stereotypes of slaves in Europe, thus, were initially bound with the Slavs who were the victims of slave raids. In fact, the words *slave* in English and *esclavo* in Spanish were derived from the enslaving history of Slavs (Morgan, 2005, p. 52). Yet such slavery was what we might call *ethnicalized* instead of racialized because Slavs and the Western Europeans originated in the same race.

Within the medieval period, slavery was gradually substituted with serfdom which was a transformed version of slavery. Serfs worked on the lands of their feudal lords and paid their lords with taxes and fees in exchange for protection (Blackburn, 1997, p. 70). Such replacement was uneven, but it suggested the decline of slavery across Europe. Due to the anti-Islamic attitude across Europe, the enslavement of fellow Christians in Europe became difficult, and gradually a common sense was formed regarding the prohibition of enslaving Christians (Fynn-Paul, 2009, p. 16). In the 1440s, the Portuguese bought the first group of black slaves from Africa, signifying the beginning of racialized European labor, but such enslavement was still an insignificant part of European slavery (Benjamin, 2009, p. 328–9). Not until Columbus “discovered” the Americas and the Natives was the racialized enslaving system unprecedentedly pivotal to the development of Europe. The Americas provided Europeans with space for the blossom of sugar production, which they learned during the first crusade. Meanwhile, American Natives in the New World fulfilled labor demands from European colonizers due to the loss of Constantinople to the Ottoman Empire, which prevented the light-skin slave trade, and to the growing power of Ivan the Great who made great efforts to prevent local slave raids (Sweet, 1997, p. 155).

Columbus’s discovery of the Americas opened up new possibilities of development for Europe, as well as generated a new trend of racialized thinking. In the Age of Discovery, the story of Ham played a critical role in the European understanding of Natives and vindication for slavery because of the immanent racialized stereotypes. Before the Indigenous people were known to the Europeans, the curse of Ham was more associated with African slaves who were portrayed as degraded and vulgar in the later editions of the myth. This stereotype of black slaves originated from the Old Testament and further interpreted by Muslims was well-known to Europeans.

Likewise, when European scholars tried to interpret Natives, they drew from the Bible. William Strachey, an English writer, gave his explanation of the root and nature of Indigenous people drawing from the experience of Ham (who he referred to as Cham). Although he was a Protestant living at the end of the sixteenth century, his racialized thinking demonstrated the shared views of racial hierarchy among Europeans and the broad influence of Islamic culture. Strachey wrote:

[I]nfallibly [the Indians] had one and the same descent and beginning from the universall deluge...[I]t is observed, that Cham and his family were the only far travellers and stragglers into divers and unknown countries...as also it is said of his family, that what countrye soever the children of Cham happened to possesse, there beganne both the ignorance of true godliness, and a kind of bondage and slavery to be taxed one upon another...[S]o great a misery (saith Boem of Auba) brought to mankind the unsatisfied wandering of that one man; for, first from him, the ignorance of the true worship of God tooke beginning, the inventions of heathenisme, and adoration of false gods, and the devill (1849, p. 45–6).

Since black and white were clear contrasts in Christianity, Europeans could more easily use the Bible to justify the enslavement of black Africans; yet Natives' brown skin color required a nuanced interpretation. In the European perception of mythical and religious creatures, kind angels from heaven were illustrated as light-skinned and anthropomorphous beings, whereas devils from hell had dark skins and deformed physiques (Evans, 1980, p. 39; Sweet, 1997, p. 154). Thus, opposite symbolic meanings of white and black were formed due to these Biblical stereotypes, and discrimination against blackness soon became part of European cultures. However, Strachey, when using Ham and his family to delineate Natives, couldn't just apply any pre-existing stereotype upon them because they had the skin color that no longer fell into the category of demons. Therefore, he took a different approach to reestablish the relationship between Natives and Ham. Centering on the Native culture, Strachey claimed that their manners were inherently inferior and primitive because they came from the descendants of Ham's offspring who taught their subjects false beliefs (Strachey, 1849, p. 45–7). From the Christian perspective, Natives' worship for their gods was the evident sign of blasphemy and irreverence to the true Christian God. Thus, the punishment for any of these apostates and their children would be the irrevocable servitude according to the original curse from Noah upon Ham's descendants.

The Hamitic myth, being a source from the Bible, contributed to the formation of a racialized European mindset, but researchers hold different opinions on when the myth became predominantly vital to this process. Robin Blackburn, a British historian, proclaimed that the curse of Ham upon black Africans was common knowledge among Europeans in the sixteenth century, yet authoritative scholars like David Brion Davis believed that it was not until the late colonial period that they utilized the "Hamitic myths" for justification (Blackburn, 1997, p. 94). Nevertheless, recurring cases of justifying slavery with the Bible have confirmed that European colonizers throughout the centuries thought in similar ways. With such a mindset based on subjective perception, the European understanding of the Americas initiated from and culminated in what they had already known, which was Catholicism.

If it was true that their culture shaped their perception of the world, their reluctance to jump out of the limit of their culture led to racialized thoughts of American Natives. Since the discovery of Indigenous people had challenged the Christian worldview to a great extent, it was reasonable that Europeans could not but rely upon a story that for centuries undeniably referred to another race. Such reluctance and misconception were infinitely magnified within an era of collisions of ideas—the Renaissance. The Renaissance was renowned for the comprehensive advances in various fields of study, including the reexamination of ancient tomes. Within this era, the discussion of freedom and rights was unprecedentedly popular. However, this surge of investigation, when combined with European stubbornness to change, sparked the fervor for a more exhaustive pretext for racism.

One of the leading representatives of this racist fervor was Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda, who was distinctive for his unquenchable passion for Greek philosophical thinking and his steadfast position on Native Americans. As a historian, Sepúlveda was seen as derelict for he devoted too much to philosophy; as a humanist, although his ideas were advanced, his support of the conquest of Natives outweighed and erased any humanistic contribution he had (Bell, 1925, p. 50).

Sepúlveda argued against Bartolomé de las Casas, the well-known "Protector of the Indians," in the Valladolid Debate in the 1550s. In the debate, Sepúlveda drew from concepts in Catholicism and Aristotelian philosophies to defend his argument that the Spanish Empire should govern Natives for their barbarity and prevent bloody sacrifices. Sepúlveda firmly believed in natural laws that, according to God, applied not only to Israel but all mortals as well. In his understanding of these natural laws, there were civilized societies such as the Roman Empire as well as uncivilized nations. It was righteous for the better society to rule over these inferior ones and civilize the people. Indigenous communities were undoubtedly categorized as uncivilized nations, for in Sepúlveda's eyes, these naked primitive men conducted cannibalism, worshiped multiple unorthodox gods, and performed bloody rituals. If barbarous practices were restricted to an individual, it was tolerable; yet it was tragic as the entire society was unaware of their inhumanness (Fernández-Santamaría, 1975, p. 436–7). Based upon this logic, and in terms of the eternal and infallible principle that "[t]he man rules over the woman, the adult over the child, the father over his children," it was the responsibility of the Spanish Empire, by governing the Indigenous people, to instruct Native Americans in the righteous and superior culture and lead them to Catholicism ("On the Reasons," n.d., p. 1). However, if their "wild" nature compelled them to resist conversion, the Spaniards were permitted to use violence on behalf of Indigenous communities and of the entire human race, according to the natural law ("On the Reasons," n.d., p. 4).

Sepúlveda's seemingly logical argument went against Aristotle, whose work he quoted. Aristotle argued that the Greeks were superior to both the Asians and northern barbarians mentally and physically. However, in his later observations, he concluded that this was in rare cases, and sometimes Greeks were no different than other races (Puzzo, 1964, p. 580–81). On the contrary, as a prudent scholar, Sepúlveda failed to recognize how advanced Native societies were. Perhaps it was hard for him to imagine, since he had never traveled to the Americas, and simply defined the nature of Natives based on the account of conquistadors at the time (Traboulay, 1994, p. 167). His double-standard acknowledgment of the overall greatness of Spaniards was somewhat ironic because of his adoration of Aristotle who remained impartial and admitted

the merits of inferior races. Sepúlveda argued:

And who can ignore the other virtues of our people, their fortitude, their humanity, their love of justice and religion...I refer in general terms only to those Spaniards who have received a liberal education. If some of them are wicked and unjust, that is no reason to denigrate the glory of their race, which should be judged by the actions of its cultivated and noble men and by its customs and public institutions, rather than by the actions of depraved persons who are similar to slaves (“On the Reasons,” n.d., p. 2).

In favor of his fellow citizens, Sepúlveda was evaluating Spaniards and Natives with two sets of standards. This way, he could condone the wickedness and injustice upon Natives while refusing to do comprehensive research upon the virtues and nature of Natives. It raises the question of why authoritative scholars such as Sepúlveda could not even portray Natives with academic rigor and prudence. For decades after their initial encounter with Natives, most Europeans at the time still failed to evaluate Indigenous cultures from different angles. Monotheism was so deeply rooted in Europe that they could hardly understand or view Natives as equal unless they could jump out of the monotheist Christian worldview.

Sepúlveda, however, was a humanist, and as a matter of fact, he denounced the mistreatment of Natives and forced conversion to Christianity, which was unique in the era of evangelization (Bell, 1925, p. 38). As a relatively benevolent Catholic, he solely advocated the governing of Natives, but the consequence of his claim was never as he imagined. This racial separation between the ruling class and those who obeyed indisputably contributed to the abuse of and discrimination against the latter. The violence of conquistadors, despite the obedience of Natives, was vivid proof of the fact that in the great colonial surge, profits were of primary concern to Spaniards. Conquistadores were far from their motherland on which their kings and the government ruled over them. In the New World, these powers were either absent or undeveloped at the time. The values of Christianity could no longer restrain the conquistadores. What remained eventually was a piece of discriminatory text from the Bible, the only thing which benefited them in the New World. Thus, it was unsurprising that the American colonies unanimously declared independence from their European suzerains. From as early as the sixteenth century, their minds were divided, including their view on racism.

The Spanish Encounter with the Indigenous People

Spain’s direct experiences with the Native Americans were the last and the most crucial factor that strengthened Western racialized thinking. An old proverb that exists in different cultures states that people should make judgments based on what they witnessed instead of gossip. If the reports and stories were still too abstract and intangible for Spaniards to understand the Natives living in the foreign lands, only direct experiences eventually would convince them. Some of the documents of the time suggested European understanding of Asia (where Columbus thought he had arrived) in two aspects. The *Articles of Agreement between the Lords the Catholic Sovereigns and Cristobal Colon* had unequivocally specified the distribution of potential wealth that might result from the voyage including gold pearls and spices among the Catholic Monarchs and Columbus, implying their awareness of the Eastern treasures (1906, p. 79). Furthermore, in his prologue for the journal regarding his first expedition, Columbus wrote:

I had given to your Highnesses touching the lands of India, and respecting a Prince who is called Gran Can, which means in our language King of Kings, how he and his ancestors had sent to Rome many times to ask for learned men of our holy faith to teach him, and how the Holy Father had never compiled, insomuch that many people believing in idolatries were lost by receiving doctrine of perdition (1906a, p. 89–90).

According to Columbus’s very words, the Asians who deemed themselves profane, humbled themselves to consult Europeans about Christianity as a superior belief. Hence, Christians were passively put into a higher position than Asians. These two points helped form the embryo of the European colonial plan—procuring resources and evangelization. In fact, Spanish conquistadors followed this blueprint in their conquest of the Americas. There was plenty of gold throughout the continent, which matched with those rumors, and evangelization was on its way. Everything went smoothly as expected except the fact that the Spanish conquistadors landed on the American continent instead of Cathay (China).

One could say that Columbus’s insistence that he reached Cathay was driven by his dignity as an explorer, but none could blame him if they were on the first journey to the Americas because the ways in which Indigenous people reacted corresponded with the European impression of Asians based on fragmental information. The Natives Columbus met initially were as deferential as the “Orientals” in the letter. Columbus believed that in the Natives’ view, he and his crew came from heaven, for those Natives kept “calling out and giving thanks to God” (1906a, p. 113). They were curious of the look of creatures from heaven and cheerfully brought anything they could, including food, drinks, and golds in exchange for halidoms from the firmament no more than worthless hats and glass beads. The Natives were so munificent to the extent that “those who had pieces of gold gave as freely as those who had a calabash of water” in the Admiral’s account (1906a, p. 113–6, 190). Therefore, Columbus refused to take their gifts out of his conscience; meanwhile, he gave out beads to strengthen friendships with them; this tactical display of generosity further convinced the Indigenous people

of his identity as a celestial being. Although Columbus and his crew said that they acted graciously, their desire for gold was unquenchable, for they disputed with the Indigenous people when “they would not exchange or give what was required” (1906a, p. 121). They deemed the generous Natives virtuous, but such recognition was not indeed out of the genuine heart. They felt that Natives were obligated to respect them out of their reverence to heaven, and once the Natives refused to comply, their greed and arrogance took over their minds. The power dynamics between the Spaniards and the Indigenous people were present in every interaction between them, which was implied from the imperative word “required” and their condescending attitude. Sometimes the Spaniards would even slaughter or enslave the Natives for their disobedience as recorded in a letter written by a Spanish physician named Diego Álvarez Chanca: “The result was, that none of the men could be persuaded to join us...other women, natives of the island, were surprised and carried off” (1906, p. 288).

Columbus’s bold conclusion grounded in his first experience with Native Americans was unidirectional and controversial in terms of the lack of Native voices. In fact, many scholars now believe that the Indigenous people Columbus had encountered expected to establish a reciprocal relationship with the Spaniards and benefit from foreign trade instead of seeing the explorers as heavenly beings (Salisbury, 1996, p. 451).

Yet Columbus’s interpretation, overcoming cultural and linguistic barriers, came true in the later Spanish conquest of the Aztec Empire. According to *Crónica Mexicana*, a book about the Spanish conquest in Indigenous people’s view written by a Native aristocrat named Fernando Alvarado Tezozómoc in the sixteenth century, when the Spaniards reached the islands with “a small mountain floating in the midst of the water,” Natives believed that Quetzalcoatl, the feathered serpent and their god, had come to inspect his land (“Tlaxcala Accounts,” n.d., p. 2). Motecuhzoma, the Aztec emperor, immediately sent his messengers to greet the god with treasure, but indeed, they met with Hernán Cortés and his conquistadors. It was 1519, which was roughly twenty-seven years from the first contact between Europeans and Natives, but the pre-established hierarchical thought still prevailed. Motecuhzoma, astonished by the European cannons or the power of their god, flinched and decided to serve the god with “whatever [the conquistadors] might request, or whatever might please them” (“Tlaxcala Accounts,” n.d., p. 5). He was subject to his traditional belief but was never courageous enough to suspect the reliability of their god. Contrary to what he had expected, his earnest attitude to Spaniards eventually led to the disintegration of the Aztec Empire. In *Crónica Mexicana*, Tezozómoc wrote:

Motecuhzoma also sent captives to be sacrificed, because the [conquistadors] might wish to drink their blood. The envoys sacrificed these captives in the presence of the strangers, but when the white men saw this done, they were filled with disgust and loathing. They spat on the ground, or wiped away their tears, or closed their eyes and shook their heads in abhorrence. They refused to eat the food that was sprinkled with blood, because it reeked of it; it sickened them, as if the blood had rotted (“Tlaxcala Accounts,” n.d., p. 5).

Motecuhzoma’s utmost decorum failed to please the Spaniards and instead offended them. In the conquistadores’ minds, their determination for evangelization was supported by two factors—the imperial edict from the Spanish emperor and what they had witnessed in person in the Americas. They were thus more convinced of the barbarity of the Natives and took cognizance of the need for evangelization. In his letter to Charles V, Hernán Cortés described his disrespectful act of vandalism in this way:

[T]he principal [idols in the grand temple], in which the people have greatest faith and confidence, I precipitated from their pedestals, and cast them down the steps of the temple, purifying the chapels in which they had stood, as they were all polluted with human blood, shed ill the sacrifices. In the place of these I put images of Our Lady and the Saints, which excited not a little feeling in Moctezuma and the inhabitants, who at first remonstrated, declaring that if my proceedings were known throughout the country, the people would rise against me (Fordham University, n.d.).

The conquistadores had no shame for their deeds, for they believed they followed God’s infallible orders and met the Indigenous request for conversion made by their ancestors as well. Even at this moment, Motecuhzoma was still completely honest with the Spaniards. Motecuhzoma admitted that their ancestors migrated to this land a long time ago, and therefore, he assumed that “they might have fallen into some errors” (Fordham University, n.d.). This concession, as a hint to the conquistadores, further strengthened the underlying hierarchical relationship between them.

Interactions between Spaniards and Natives could be well explained by the Labeling Theory, a famous sociological and psychological theory about how groups see the others as unequal (Raybeck, 1988, p. 371–2). In this case, once a group was labeled as inferior, individuals who belonged to the group were correspondingly undervalued and judged in a set of inequitable criteria. It was friendly and noble for Spaniards to entertain their guests; it was, however, responsible for Natives to do so because they were deemed inferior to the Europeans. Even governmental announcements such as the *Requerimiento* (the Spanish stipulations read to Natives by Spanish conquistadores), which was known for the absurd language wherein, were considered the manifestation of benevolence and justice at the time. Conquistadores announced

this *Requerimiento* before they committed atrocities upon the Natives so that their acts were nominally legitimate. The manifesto said:

[The islanders] received and obeyed the priests whom their Highnesses sent to preach to them and to teach them our Holy Faith; and all these, of their own free will, without any reward or condition, have become Christians, and are so, and their Highness have joyfully and benignantly received them, and also have commanded them to be treated as their subjects and vassals; and you too are held and obliged to do the same (Hanke, 1938, p. 27).

The conquistadores asked the Natives to obey them unconditionally and left no room for negotiation. Their utmost mercy was just an iota of time for Natives to decide between forever servitude or death. In history, there were rare cases of nonresistant surrenders to intruders, not to mention conquistadores who launched a combat with such a farfetched *casus belli*. Therefore, the manifesto that was supposed to promote peaceful annexation was de facto the commencement of violent territorial expansion because it gave no other choices for Natives, which was the reason why it was ridiculous.

The *Requerimiento* was the product of Spanish failure of peaceful evangelization in the New World due to the underestimated difficulty of conversion. Columbus's first impression of Natives suggested that he appreciated the qualities of Natives. He claimed that the Natives were "intelligent," though only for being servants, and "would easily be made Christians" (1906a, p. 111). These Natives could be of great use to the Spanish Empire. Yet in his fourth voyage, Columbus wrote: "I plainly saw that harmony would not last long, for the natives are of a very rough disposition, and the Spaniards very encroaching; and, moreover, I had taken possession of land belonging to the Quibian" (1906b, p. 402). Columbus's attitude towards Natives had gradually changed from imbued with confidence to a sense of helplessness as he realized the challenge of conversion, but neither his optimism nor frustration prevented him from completing his task: to seize land in the New World for the Catholic Monarchs. His dutifulness somehow produced a new understanding of the interactions between the Spaniards and the Indigenous people. Both the Spaniards and the Natives stuck to their beliefs and made justifiable decisions when viewing from the perspective of their faiths respectively: Being Catholics, the Spaniards endeavored to evangelize Indigenous people as the God asked; Natives respected and welcomed what they believed as their gods based on their tradition. Hence, despite its ferocity, Spanish conquest of the Americas was destined to be successful, and the decline of Indigenous people was tragic but certain.

Conclusion

When looking upon what had contributed to the racialized Spanish conquest of the Americas, three factors especially stand out—the influence of Spanish culture, the historical impact of the Muslims, and the direct contact with the Native Americans. From these three perspectives, the mistreatment of the Natives by the Spaniards has been understood not as mere atrocities but as motivated by specific ideas and cultures. Furthermore, the later American racism, though more directed at black Africans, is also inseparable from these early modern and medieval roots. American white supremacy, the structural racism, and stereotypes of minorities cannot be thoroughly understood without reexamining their prototypes—Spanish ethnocentrism, racial hierarchy based on religions, universal and racialized deprecation of the Natives, and so on.

The conquest of the Americas was not only the persecution of the Native Americans but also the westernization of the Americas. Later generations of Natives think in the western way that sometimes propels them to conform to pre-established racial stereotypes. Diego Muñoz Camargo was the product of Native westernization. Driven by a mindset based on racial hierarchy, people take an illogical approach to the problem of racism, and as a result, the conclusion is untenable. Therefore, one could imagine the devastating impact of colonization upon egalitarianism and the unity of the world. Through the analysis of the reason for racialized thinking, people are conscious of the pernicious effect of the colonial mindset and will then repel it in the future.

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