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bilal.ahmad@iiu.edu.pk**Abstract**

The study centers on Christianity as a tool of imperial expansion within the Spanish, Portuguese, French, and British empires, showing how colonizers positioned their religion as divinely sanctioned and culturally superior. By highlighting Christopher Columbus's apocalyptic worldview and the missionary strategies that followed, the abstract demonstrates how colonizers framed conquest as a sacred obligation, thereby legitimizing domination over "others" defined by different belief systems. In this framework, religion was not merely a spiritual concern but a foundational element of imperial ideology, shaping political authority, legal systems, and social hierarchies in newly conquered territories. By comparing native belief systems ranging from animism and ancestor veneration to complex cosmologies and organized priesthoods with the mechanisms of forced conversion, religious destruction, educational reform, and missionary governance, the research demonstrates how Christianity functioned simultaneously as a justification for conquest and as an instrument for restructuring colonized societies. Mission institutions became central sites for redefining cultural norms, moral values, and communal identities according to European Christian standards. The findings show that while Christianization significantly altered global religious landscapes, indigenous communities responded through resistance, adaptation, and syncretism, reshaping imposed doctrines within their own cultural frameworks. These processes produced new hybrid religious identities that reflect both colonial influence and indigenous continuity, illustrating how the encounter between colonizers and "others" transformed religious life on a global scale and left enduring legacies in the modern world.

Keywords: Christianization, Colonization, Indigenous Religions, Missionary Expansion, Spanish Empire, Portuguese Empire, French Empire and British Empire.

Introduction

European powers, such as Spain, Portugal, France, and Britain, established colonies around the world, primarily in Africa, Asia, and the Americas, which were established for economic and political reasons.¹ The colonized nations were the victims of these colonizer's colonialism and are still suffering from its repercussions, which also included racial discrimination, intolerance, and animosity.² During the age of colonization, the colonizers established their own rules and values in the territories of colonized nations, often at the expense of the indigenous culture and way of life. The imposition of foreign principles and customs created a sense of alienation and

¹Ferguson, Niall. Empire: How Britain made the modern world. Penguin UK, 2012. P. xxiii-xxiv.

²Lollo, Stephanie. "World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance: Resolution amid Controversy." NYL Sch. J. Hum. Rts. 18 (2001): 481.

displacement among colonized peoples, who were often forced to abandon their own cultural traditions and adopt those of the colonizers. This was frequently done through violence and coercion, which caused a sense of displacement and alienation, as they felt like strangers in their own lands.

The expansion of Christianity during European colonization represents one of the most transformative periods in global religious history. Between the fifteenth and twentieth centuries, European empires spread across Africa, Asia, the Americas, and Oceania, carrying with them not only economic and political ambitions but also a deeply embedded religious mission. Christianity became a critical tool in the justification and consolidation of colonial power. While merchants and soldiers laid the foundations of empire, missionaries reshaped indigenous spiritual landscapes, dismantled established cosmologies, and replaced them with Christian doctrines. This process was far from uniform; each colonial power approached Christianization through its own institutional structures, theological motivations, and political strategies. Yet across all imperial contexts, Christianity served as an ideological justification for conquest and as a mechanism for restructuring colonized societies in the cultural image of Europe.

Native religions across these regions—whether animistic, ancestral, polytheistic, shamanic, or centered on nature and cosmology—formed the heart of local identity and social order. The arrival of Europeans marked a profound disruption of these systems. Temples, shrines, sacred objects, ritual specialists, and cosmological narratives were targeted for destruction or replacement as missionaries sought to “civilize” local populations through religious conversion. At the same time, indigenous peoples responded to Christianization in diverse ways: some resisted, others blended Christian symbols with traditional beliefs, and still others adopted elements of the new religion while preserving aspects of their ancestral worldview. This research paper examines the chronological spread of Christianity during colonization, focusing on Spanish, Portuguese, French, and British imperial contexts, with particular emphasis on the native religions they encountered and the mechanisms through which Christianization was pursued.

The Spanish Colonization

Spanish colonization set the earliest and most forceful pattern for the use of Christianity as an instrument of empire. The religious world of Christopher Columbus shaped this process from its inception. According to the record preserved in the text you provided, Columbus believed his voyages were divinely ordained.³ Interpreting the prophecies of Isaiah, he concluded that previously unknown islands were destined to be discovered by Christians in the final era of history. He saw himself as a chosen instrument with a cosmic mission—one destined to gather wealth from new lands, liberate Jerusalem, rebuild the temple in preparation for the Second Coming, and whose very name, he believed, carried spiritual significance.⁴ “Cristobal” signified the “bearer of Christ,” while “Colon” suggested a re-populator chosen to rediscover biblical territories and bring their inhabitants into the Christian fold.⁵ This theological worldview framed the earliest colonial contacts with the Caribbean and the Americas, transforming exploration into a religious crusade.

Spain’s colonization of Equatorial Guinea carried clear religious ambitions, as the Spanish sought not only territorial and economic control but also the spread of Christianity

³ Ferguson, Niall. *Empire: How Britain made the modern world*. Penguin UK, 2012. P. xxiii-xxiv.

⁴ Lollo, Stephanie. "World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance: Resolution amid Controversy." *NYL Sch. J. Hum. Rts.* 18 (2001): 481.

⁵ Todorov, Tzvetan. *The conquest of America: The question of the other*. University of Oklahoma Press, 1999, P. 26

as a core component of their broader imperial mission, aiming to integrate Indigenous communities into a Catholic colonial order that reinforced Spain's political and cultural authority.⁶ In contrast, before European intrusion, the wider region—exemplified by Western Sahara—was characterized by a firmly rooted Islamic tradition established as early as the eighth and ninth centuries and strengthened under the eleventh-century Almoravid movement, which shaped Sahrawi identity through desert-adapted religious practices, strict devotion, and the deep cultural influence of Arab Bedouin heritage.⁷

Upon arriving in the Caribbean, the Spanish encountered communities whose religious life centered on zemis—spirits associated with rain, agriculture, health, war, fertility, and nature.⁸ These beliefs were animistic and ancestral, embedded in the natural world, and mediated by ritual specialists rather than centralized institutions. With no papal authority, church hierarchy, or single doctrine—and with religion embedded in daily life through offerings, healing rites, and spiritual mediation—the Indigenous practices appeared to the doctrinally strict Spanish as idolatry, making Christianization a central instrument of colonial transformation. Shrines were destroyed, sacred symbols burned, and churches erected atop former ceremonial sites.⁹ Catholicism became an extension of Spanish political domination, reshaping both religious identity and social hierarchy.

In Mexico and Central America, the encounter was even more dramatic. The Spanish likewise sought religious conversion. As history has shown, the military conquest of the Indian population was accomplished following the fall of Tenochtitlan, and the Spanish established the main structure of colonization.¹⁰ Approximately 500 temples and over 20,000 symbolic representations of Aztec idols were allegedly destroyed at the orders of Cleric Juan de Zuma'rraga, the first Christian bishop in Mexico.¹¹ When Aztec temples, statues, murals, and hieroglyphic documents were destroyed, the Spanish constructed the National Cathedral in the heart of Mexico City.¹² In the late fifteenth century, Spain claimed ownership of the Americas and began evangelization. Twelve Franciscan friars and French groups were sent to America as part of their conversion program. The evangelizing field involved assigning friars to specific territories to meet Indian cultural and pastoral needs, ensuring uniformity of faith, language, and governance.¹³

A similar dynamic emerged in the Philippines, where indigenous groups such as the Aetas practiced animism, ancestor veneration, and nature-spirit rituals without a centralized religious hierarchy, and the absence of formalized priesthoods or sacred scripture was interpreted by Spanish colonizers as evidence of spiritual backwardness.¹⁴ Christianization in the Philippines was organized, deliberate, and immediate, as churches, convents, and mission settlements rapidly reshaped the archipelago's social and cultural life, ultimately making it one of the most thoroughly Christianized regions in Asia.¹⁵

⁶ Aixelà-Cabré, Yolanda. "Colonial Spain in Africa: Building a shared history from memories of the Spanish Protectorate and Spanish Guinea." *Culture & History Digital Journal* 9, no. 2 (2020).

⁷ Correale, Francesco. "A History of Western Sahara." In *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of African History*. 2024. P.21

⁸ Edmonds, Ennis B., and Michelle A. Gonzalez. *Caribbean religious history: An introduction*. nyu Press, 2010. P. 24

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¹⁰ Lockhart, James, and Stuart B. Schwartz. *Early Latin America: A History of Colonial Spanish America and Brazil*. No. 46. Cambridge University Press, 1983, P.86.

¹¹ Davies, Nigel., *The Ancient Kingdoms of Mexico*, New York: Penguin Books, 1987, P.249.

¹² Kirkwood, J. Burton. *The history of Mexico*. Bloomsbury Publishing USA, 2009. P.48.

¹³ Armella, Virginia Aspe. "3. Multicultural Origins of the Americas: Education in the New Spain." *Journal of Interdisciplinary History of Ideas* 5, no. 10 (2016).

¹⁴ Fitzpatrick, Kristine. "Religion and Spanish colonialism in the Phillipines." PhD diss., 2013.

¹⁵ Del Castillo, Fides A. "Christianization of the Philippines: revisiting the contributions of baroque churches and religious art." *Mission Studies* 32, no. 1 (2015): 47-65.

In Guam, where the Chamoru people maintained ancestral beliefs without centralized institutions, Spanish colonizers implemented aggressive Christianization strategies, including forced relocation into mission villages, suppression of traditional rituals, and the integration of Catholic instruction into governance.¹⁶

Religion in the Spanish colonial world functioned as much more than a source of spiritual guidance; it became a powerful instrument for asserting and maintaining imperial authority. By the seventeenth century, the reach of Spain's empire—from the Caribbean islands to the vast territories of the Americas and across the Pacific—was deeply intertwined with Christian institutions and teachings. Missionaries and clergy played central roles in reshaping local societies, establishing churches, schools, and settlements that introduced European norms and values. Catholicism was systematically woven into governance, education, and daily life, ensuring that loyalty to the crown and the Church were closely linked. Indigenous and local populations were often compelled to adopt Christian rituals, sacraments, and moral codes, sometimes at the expense of their ancestral beliefs and cultural practices. This process not only facilitated social control but also helped integrate diverse regions under a common religious and political framework. Over time, the spread of Catholicism became one of the most enduring legacies of the Spanish empire, leaving a lasting imprint on cultural, social, and religious life across continents.

The Portuguese Colonization

Portugal's vast colonial empire—spanning Brazil, Africa, and Asia—was deeply intertwined with its mission of Christianization. Portuguese discovered a Brahmin-dominated society having a caste system, inheritance laws, and a belief in gods.¹⁷ They considered the inhabitants of Goa impure and stated that their society was ritually polluted.¹⁸ So they converted them to Christianity and accepted them as Portuguese citizens.¹⁹ The combination of missionary zeal, political power, and the Inquisition created a transformative environment in which religious identity became intertwined with colonial loyalty.

In Angola, Portuguese also found many religious groups such as Khoikhoi, Lozi, Lunda, San, and Ovimbundu.²⁰ Therefore, they aimed to convert the people of Angola by imposing their civilization, which they considered superior, on every aspect of African life. This included transforming social, economic, and political systems, religious beliefs, clothing, food, cosmology, living conditions, and agricultural practices. Even, forced labor, the Portuguese sought to distance Angolans from their own culture and assimilate them into Portuguese ways of life.²¹ These belief systems were deeply rooted in land, kinship, and communal identity, but Portuguese missionaries sought to dismantle them by replacing indigenous practices with Catholic sacraments, saints, and doctrinal teachings, using mission schools as instruments to reshape cultural norms, gender roles, and authority structures, while the Christianization of Angola became inseparable from

¹⁶ Wiecko, Cynthia Ross. "Jesuit Missionaries as Agents of Empire: The Spanish-Chamorro War and Ecological Effects of Conversion on Guam, 1668–1769." *World History Connected* 10, no. 3 (2013).

¹⁷ Baden-Powell, Baden Henry. "Art. XI.—The Villages of Goa in the Early Sixteenth Century." *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 32, no. 2 (1900): 261-291.

¹⁸ Henn, Alexander. *Hindu-Catholic encounters in Goa: Religion, colonialism, and modernity*. Indiana University Press, 2014.

¹⁹ SANTOS, Joaquim Rodrigues dos, "«Reinstalling the Old City of Goa as an Eternal Light of Portuguese Spirituality»: The Plan for the Reintegration of Old Goa at the End of the Colonial Period" in *Architectural Histories, European Architectural History Network*, 2016, vol.4, nr.1, pp.1-21.

²⁰ Freitas, Luisa. "Neocolonialism: the relationship between Portugal and Angola. Theoretical analysis on the post-1975 consequences of the Portuguese colonial domination." PhD diss., 2021. 30

²¹ Bender, Gerald J., and Gerald Jacob Bender. *Angola under the Portuguese: the myth and the reality*. Vol. 23. Univ of California Press, 1978. P. 153

the exploitation of labor and resources, demonstrating how religion, economics, and governance converged within Portuguese colonial policy.²²

Historically home to diverse cultures such as the matrilineal Maconde of the north, along with the Macuas and the Yao, Mozambique saw Portuguese rule formally consolidated in 1895 with the appointment of António Enes as the first High Commissioner, marking the foundation of the modern colonial administration in the region.²³ The Portuguese colonial presence gradually introduced Christian institutions through mission schools, churches, and administrative structures that promoted Christianity as a tool of cultural assimilation, yet Indigenous religions persisted, giving rise to syncretic traditions that blended Christian symbols with local cosmologies.²⁴

In Brazil, Portuguese colonization encountered indigenous beliefs centered on Tupan, a benevolent creator spirit associated with thunder, and Anhanga, a malevolent force feared by local communities, whose dual spiritual forces shaped cosmology, morality, and daily life.²⁵ The imposition of Catholicism reshaped Brazilian religion, aligning it with plantation economies and colonial governance, as the Portuguese used missions to settle indigenous peoples, convert them to Christianity, and integrate them into the labor structure of the colony, while over time Christianity merged with African and indigenous traditions, forming the unique religious expressions that characterize Brazil today.²⁶

Portugal's colonial project demonstrates a deliberate intertwining of religious, political, and economic objectives, revealing how Christianization functioned as a mechanism of control rather than solely spiritual conversion. In regions such as Goa, Angola, Mozambique, and Brazil, Portuguese authorities framed indigenous belief systems—whether caste-based Hindu practices, African communal religions, or animistic cosmologies—as deficient or impure, legitimizing interventions that extended far beyond faith. Missionaries did not simply convert; they restructured societies by imposing new norms, reorganizing social hierarchies, and transforming economic and labor practices to align with colonial priorities. Education and mission settlements became strategic instruments to inculcate loyalty and reshape cultural identity, effectively embedding Portuguese authority into daily life. Yet the persistence and adaptation of local traditions, often resulting in syncretic forms of Christianity, highlight the limits of colonial power and the agency of colonized populations in negotiating their spiritual landscapes. Critically, Portuguese Christianization cannot be separated from exploitation: labor systems, resource extraction, and governance were tightly linked to missionary activity, illustrating the inseparability of religion and imperial strategy. This approach underscores that colonial religion was less about theological concern than a comprehensive tool for consolidating control, reshaping indigenous societies, and legitimizing European dominance, while leaving enduring cultural and religious legacies that continue to influence these regions today.

The French Colonization

French colonization, driven by economic aims to secure markets and raw materials for industrial growth, political desires to uphold global influence amid European rivalries,

²² Thornton, John K. "Conquest and Theology: The Jesuits in Angola, 1548–1650." *Journal of Jesuit Studies* 1, no. 2 (2014): 245–259.

²³ Duffy, James. "Portugal in Africa." *Foreign Affairs* 39, no. 3 (1961): 481–493.

²⁴ Newitt, Malyn Dudley Dunn. *A short history of Mozambique*. Oxford University Press, 2017. P. 27

²⁵ Shapiro, Judith. "From Tupã to the land without evil: the Christianization of Tupi-Guarani cosmology." In *Across The Boundaries Of Belief*, pp. 12–41. Routledge, 2018.

²⁶ Montero, Paula. "Syncretism and pluralism in the configuration of religious diversity in Brazil." In *Convivial Constellations in Latin America*, pp. 99–111. Routledge, 2020.

and a self-proclaimed “civilizing mission” to spread Western governance, education, and the abolition of certain local practices, combined these intertwined motives to shape the expansion of France’s imperial ambitions.²⁷ Encountering Indigenous communities whose nature-rooted religions saw spirits in rivers, forests, animals, and seasonal cycles and relied on ritual specialists to maintain harmony between humans and the spiritual world, French missionaries employed education, settlement patterns, and sacraments to reshape local life within Christian frameworks, producing gradual and often partial conversions that nonetheless influenced cultural exchange and political alliances.²⁸ In North America, Catholic missionaries, especially Jesuits, played a significant role, arriving in Quebec in 1625.²⁹ In Isle Royale, the economy relied on commercial fisheries and trade, while religion played a minimal role, with Catholicism mainly restricted to missionary efforts. Louisbourg became a vital commercial hub, where the family served as the main social unit, highlighting a relatively tolerant and diverse society.³⁰ Amid Acadia’s isolation and the settlers’ independent, frugal way of life, the Acadians’ unwavering loyalty to Catholicism—resisting external interference even from French authorities—became a defining element of their distinct communal identity within New France.³¹

Early colonial observation—most notably by Christopher Columbus—misconstrued Taíno spirituality as absence of faith, despite material evidence and comparative ethnography indicating symbolic practices among related Caribbean communities and fragmentary ritual expressions among neighboring groups.³² Early colonial encounters reveal Taíno ritual life and belief in a celestial power were reinterpreted by Christopher Columbus as superstition, prompting organized missionary inquiry through Fray Ramón Pané on Hispaniola to facilitate Catholic instruction and religious transformation.³³

African religiosity prior to sustained external influence was a complex and adaptive spiritual world, deeply embedded in local societies. Belief systems in regions such as Kongo contained conceptual frameworks and ritual practices that resonated with broader cultural patterns, showing notable similarities with contemporary Iberian popular religion. The spiritual influence of the Ethiopian Church and leaders like Mvemba Nzinga shaped the religious landscape of the Kingdom of Kongo, while movements such as the Antonian revival reflected ongoing reinterpretation and renewal of local values. Figures like Beatrice, with her deeply moral message prior to her execution, illustrate the resilience, adaptability, and creative vitality of African spiritual traditions in the face of social and political change.³⁴ French missionary activity across West and Equatorial Africa engaged indigenous traditions centered on ancestral mediation, nature spirits, clan deities, and cosmological narratives, promoted Catholic expansion alongside anti-slavery efforts and French cultural norms, transforming religious outreach into a broader political and

²⁷Aldrich, Robert. *Greater France: A history of French overseas expansion*. Bloomsbury Publishing, 1996. P. 98-100

²⁸Thornton, John K. "Afro-Christian syncretism in the Kingdom of Kongo." *The Journal of African History* 54, no. 1 (2013): 53-77.

²⁹Abid, 11.

³⁰Jaenen, Cornelius J. "French Expansion in North America." *The History Teacher* 34, no. 2 (2001): 155-164.

³¹Thwaites, Reuben Gold. *France in America, 1497-1763*. Vol. 7. Harper, 1907. P. 29

³²D. J. R. Walker, *Columbus and the Golden World of the Island Arawaks: The Story of the First Americans and Their Caribbean Environment* (Lewes, Sussex: Book Guild, 1992) P. 51

³³Ennis B. Edmonds and Michelle A. Gonzalez, *Caribbean Religious History: An Introduction* (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 22.

³⁴Hastings, Adrian. *The Church in Africa 1450–1950*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994, xiv.

ideological project that integrated doctrine within colonial administrative and educational structures.³⁵

In Southeast Asia—particularly Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia—French colonization brought Christianity into regions dominated by Buddhism, ancestor worship, and animistic spirits.³⁶ Lao religion, for example, included national gods, clan deities, fetishes, amulets, and ancestral mizimu-like spirits.³⁷ French missionaries introduced Catholic schools, legal reforms, and church institutions. Although conversion remained limited compared to other regions, the presence of Christianity reshaped elite education, cultural discourse, and colonial administration.³⁸

French colonization illustrates a sophisticated interplay of economic ambition, political strategy, and ideological justification, where the pursuit of markets and resources, the desire to maintain European influence, and the self-proclaimed “civilizing mission” converged to shape imperial expansion. Indigenous communities across the Americas, Africa, and Southeast Asia possessed deeply rooted spiritual frameworks—whether Taíno celestial rituals, African ancestral and cosmological practices, or animistic and Buddhist traditions in Southeast Asia—that were integral to social cohesion, governance, and daily life. French missionaries, particularly Jesuits in North America and across Africa and Southeast Asia, employed education, settlement design, sacramental instruction, and legal reforms to insert Catholic frameworks into these societies, producing conversions that were often gradual, partial, and uneven. Yet, these encounters reveal the limits of colonial authority: the Acadians maintained steadfast loyalty to Catholicism while negotiating their independence within New France, African spiritual leaders like Beatrice and movements such as the Antonian revival demonstrated adaptability and moral agency, and in Southeast Asia, elite education and cultural discourse were reshaped without fully supplanting indigenous beliefs. Critically, French missionary activity cannot be separated from broader colonial objectives; religious outreach served to legitimize political authority, promote French cultural norms, and reinforce anti-slavery and governance policies. The dynamic between French objectives and indigenous resilience highlights a two-way process in which Christianity became both a tool of imperial control and a site of negotiation, adaptation, and syncretism, revealing how colonization transformed social, political, and spiritual landscapes while indigenous communities preserved, modified, and creatively integrated their traditions within colonial contexts.

The British Colonization

British colonization brought Protestant Christianity to vast regions, including India, Africa, the Caribbean, and Oceania.³⁹ In India, the British encountered Hinduism, Islam, Sikhism, Jainism, Buddhism, and numerous tribal religions—among the most ancient and complex spiritual systems in the world.⁴⁰ Missionaries introduced English education, moral reform movements, scriptural translation, and social campaigns against

³⁵Kristin Mann, “Missionary Christianity and the Colonial State in Africa,” *The Journal of African History* 29, no. 2 (1988): 245–268.

³⁶https://www.researchgate.net/publication/296526618_Christian_Communities_in_Southeast_Asia

³⁷Sprenger, Guido. "Local comparisons. Buddhism and its others in upland Laos." *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie* H. 2 (2017): 245-264.

³⁸Ullah, AKM Ahsan. "Empire, colonialism, and religious mobility in transnational history." *Religions* 16, no. 4 (2025): 403.

³⁹Woodberry, Robert D. "The missionary roots of liberal democracy." *American political science review* 106, no. 2 (2012): 244-274.

⁴⁰https://www.researchgate.net/publication/287761863_Was_Hinduism_Invented_Britons_Indians_and_the_Colonial_Construction_of_Religion

practices such as sati. While conversion rates were modest, Christian missions significantly influenced law, education, and social institutions.⁴¹

In Africa, British missions were particularly active in Kenya, Nigeria, Uganda, and Zimbabwe. Among the Kikuyu, religious belief centered on Ngai, the supreme God, mediated through elders and ancestral spirits.⁴² Nigerian religious life was equally diverse, Yoruba religion centered on Olodumare and the pantheon of Orishas.⁴³ Igbo religion on Chukwu and ancestral mediators; Hausa religious life combined Islamic influences with earlier understandings of Ubangiji.⁴⁴ Uganda's religious world included gods (Balubare), fetishes (Mayembe), amulets (Nsiriba), and ancestral spirits (Mizimu).⁴⁵ In Zimbabwe, the Shona religion revolved around Mwari and the sacred shrines of the Matopo Hills.⁴⁶ British missions attempted to dismantle these spiritual structures, replacing them with Protestant teachings, missionaries sought to replace these structures with Anglican teachings, and Christian missionaries challenged these systems through schools, churches, and cultural transformation.⁴⁷

The British Caribbean displayed a different pattern, as Indigenous Carib and Arawak religions had largely disappeared after early contact, and British missionaries targeted enslaved and later emancipated populations, using Protestant Christianity to enforce moral behavior and colonial discipline.⁴⁸ In Australia, Aboriginal religions rooted in Dreamtime narratives linked creation ancestors, land, and law, while British colonization and missionization disrupted these systems, introducing Christianity as part of broader assimilation policies.⁴⁹

British colonization demonstrates the strategic integration of Protestant Christianity into imperial governance, revealing how religion functioned both as a moralizing force and as an instrument of social and political control. In India, missionaries confronted some of the world's most ancient and complex spiritual systems, including Hinduism, Islam, Sikhism, Jainism, Buddhism, and tribal religions, and sought to influence society through English education, scriptural translation, and campaigns against practices such as sati. While conversions were limited, Christian missions exerted profound effects on law, schooling, and social institutions, embedding British cultural and moral norms within local frameworks. In Africa, missions in Kenya, Nigeria, Uganda, and Zimbabwe attempted to dismantle longstanding religious structures, including Kikuyu beliefs in Ngai, Yoruba worship of Olodumare and Orishas, Igbo veneration of Chukwu, and Shona devotion to Mwari, replacing them with Anglican teachings through schools, churches, and cultural reform. Yet indigenous spiritual resilience and adaptation often

⁴¹ Nusratuel Islam Itoo and Ishfaq Ahmad Mir, "Christianity in India: Apostolic Traditions, Colonial Missions, and Cultural Adaptation," *Clioquest: Journal of Historical Research*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (July–December 2023)

⁴² Lonsdale, John. "Kikuyu christianities." *Journal of religion in Africa* 29, no. Fasc. 2 (1999): 206-229.

⁴³ Hurlbut, D. Dmitri. "Christianity, Islam, and Oriṣa Religion: Three Traditions in Comparison and Interaction." (2017): 358-360.

⁴⁴ Lonsdale, John. "Kikuyu christianities." *Journal of religion in Africa* 29, no. Fasc. 2 (1999): 206-229.

⁴⁵ Sekagya, Yahaya HK, Charles Muchunguzi, Payyappallimana Unnikrishnan, and Edgar M. Mulogo. "Perspectives on health, illness, disease and management approaches among Baganda traditional spiritual healers in Central Uganda." *PLOS Global Public Health* 4, no. 9 (2024): e0002453.

⁴⁶ Rugwiji, Temba. "An Investigation of Old Testament Prophecy from an African Cultural Heritage Perspective." *Old Testament Essays* 38, no. 2 (2025): 1-21.

⁴⁷ Meier zu Selhausen, Felix. "Missions, education and conversion in colonial Africa." In *Globalization and the rise of mass education*, pp. 25-59. Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2019.

⁴⁸ Hofman, C. L., & Hofmanová, Z. (2018). Indigenous Caribbean perspectives: archaeologies and legacies of the first colonised region in the New World. *Antiquity*.

⁴⁹ Schwarz, Carolyn, and Françoise Dussart. "Christianity in Aboriginal Australia revisited." *The Australian Journal of Anthropology* 21, no. 1 (2010): 1-13.

persisted, highlighting the partial and negotiated nature of colonial religious transformation. In the Caribbean, where Indigenous religions had largely vanished, Protestant Christianity was deployed among enslaved and emancipated populations to impose moral discipline and reinforce social hierarchies, demonstrating how missions served broader colonial agendas. In Australia, the Dreamtime-based religions of Aboriginal peoples, intimately linked to land and law, were similarly disrupted by missionary intervention, illustrating how conversion efforts were intertwined with policies of cultural assimilation. Critically, British missionary activity cannot be understood solely in terms of spiritual outreach; it was inseparable from the mechanisms of imperial authority, social engineering, and cultural reshaping, producing enduring legacies that continue to influence education, governance, and religious life in colonized regions.

Conclusion and Critical Discussion

The history of European colonization, as revealed through the lens of Christianization, exposes an enduring pattern of religious exclusivism, cultural arrogance, and systemic cruelty toward the peoples of the colonized world. Across Spanish, Portuguese, French, and British empires, religion was wielded not merely as a vehicle of spiritual instruction, but as an ideological instrument to assert European superiority and justify domination over “others” whose beliefs were deemed primitive, impure, or morally inferior. The colonizers’ approach was uncompromising and hierarchical: indigenous religions, regardless of their complexity or sophistication, were often dismissed as superstition, idolatry, or ritualistic error, reflecting a worldview that framed European Christianity as both divinely mandated and culturally normative. This exclusivist stance legitimized the destruction of sacred sites, the suppression of ancestral practices, and the eradication of traditional social structures, simultaneously displacing spiritual authorities and dismantling community cohesion. Temples, shrines, and ceremonial objects that had sustained local cosmologies for centuries were demolished or repurposed, and ritual specialists—priests, shamans, and elders—were replaced with missionaries and colonial administrators, revealing how religion became inseparable from imperial governance.

In the Americas, the Spanish conquest demonstrated the extreme consequences of this ideology: the destruction of Aztec temples, statues, murals, and codices, coupled with the establishment of Christian cathedrals atop former sacred spaces, illustrates a violent imposition of European values that obliterated the spiritual and material symbols of indigenous identity. Similarly, in the Philippines and Guam, the forced relocation of populations, suppression of native rituals, and restructuring of communal life through mission settlements highlight the systematic coercion involved in Christianization. The Portuguese in Brazil, Angola, Mozambique, and Goa employed comparable strategies, using missionary activity to transform social, economic, and labor structures while distancing communities from their own cultural and spiritual traditions. French colonization extended this model into North America, West and Equatorial Africa, and Southeast Asia, blending missionary education and legal reforms with broader political agendas, while British efforts in India, Africa, the Caribbean, and Australia imposed Protestant frameworks that disrupted long-standing spiritual practices and justified social control over colonized populations. Across all these empires, Christianization was less a matter of personal belief than a deliberate strategy of control, intertwined with resource extraction, labor exploitation, and the reconfiguration of political authority.

Critically, these patterns reveal the deep moral contradictions and ethical failings inherent in European colonial projects. By claiming a divine mandate, the colonizers positioned themselves as arbiters of truth and morality, systematically invalidating the indigenous knowledge systems, cosmologies, and religious experiences of the colonized. Indigenous peoples were often coerced into abandoning practices that connected them to

land, ancestry, and communal identity, effectively severing vital cultural and spiritual ties. Forced conversions, mission schools, and legal reforms imposed European social norms, reshaped gender roles, and redefined moral codes, producing alienation and eroding indigenous authority structures. In many regions, these interventions were accompanied by brutal enforcement, including forced labor, punitive actions against resistors, and widespread cultural erasure, exposing the violent and oppressive dimensions of colonizers' claim to moral and spiritual superiority.

Yet, the colonial record also underscores the resilience and agency of the colonized. Despite centuries of structural oppression, indigenous populations adapted, resisted, and creatively engaged with imposed religious frameworks. Syncretic religious practices emerged as a survival mechanism, blending European Christian symbols with local cosmologies, ancestor veneration, and animistic traditions. The Acadians' maintenance of Catholic identity within New France, the reinterpretation of African spiritual movements such as the Antonian revival, and the preservation of Dreamtime narratives among Aboriginal Australians illustrate the ways colonized communities negotiated their spiritual existence under the shadow of European domination. These responses challenge narratives of total cultural eradication, demonstrating that colonial authority, though powerful and often ruthless, was never absolute.

From a contemporary perspective, the exclusivist and coercive strategies of European colonizers have left enduring legacies in the global religious, cultural, and social landscape. Regions from Latin America to sub-Saharan Africa, Southeast Asia, and the Pacific bear the marks of centuries-long campaigns to subordinate indigenous spiritualities to European Christianity. Religious syncretism, hybrid identities, and the transformation of educational and governance systems reflect the complex interplay of colonial imposition and indigenous adaptation. At the same time, the historical record offers a cautionary lens through which to view the moral implications of imperialism: the promotion of a singular worldview at the expense of diverse human traditions resulted not only in material exploitation but also in profound spiritual and cultural loss.

Critically assessing the colonizers' approach, it is evident that their proclaimed "civilizing missions" were often a façade for economic and political domination. Christianity became a convenient justification for conquest, providing a moral veneer to processes that involved dispossession, forced labor, cultural erasure, and systemic violence. Indigenous knowledge systems, ethical frameworks, and spiritual practices were denigrated or destroyed in the service of establishing European hierarchies of power and authority. Whether through the Spanish destruction of temples in Mesoamerica, Portuguese mission schools in Angola and Brazil, French Jesuit interventions in Africa and Southeast Asia, or British assimilation policies in India, the underlying logic remained consistent: to elevate European Christianity—and by extension, European cultural norms—over the indigenous, marking colonized peoples as subjects to be transformed, controlled, and subordinated.

This critical reflection challenges any romanticized view of colonial Christianization. While historians have often noted the endurance of Christianity as a global religion, it is essential to recognize the asymmetrical power relations that facilitated its spread. The narrative of spiritual "enlightenment" advanced by the colonizers obscures the human cost of these transformations: millions of people were coerced into adopting foreign beliefs, their communities reshaped to fit alien administrative and moral frameworks, and their cultural memory subjected to erasure or reinterpretation. Moreover, the exclusivist worldview underpinning colonial missions contributed to racialized hierarchies, discrimination, and persistent social inequalities that extend into the modern world. These historical realities demand that contemporary understanding of global

Christianity acknowledge both its colonial provenance and the resilience of the peoples who survived, adapted, and redefined religious life under duress.

In synthesizing the evidence across Spanish, Portuguese, French, and British contexts, several critical conclusions emerge. First, European colonizers consistently equated spiritual authority with political and cultural supremacy, using religion to legitimize conquest, enforce compliance, and reshape societies. Second, the strategies employed—destruction of sacred spaces, forced conversion, education as indoctrination, and reorganization of social structures—were inherently violent and coercive, revealing the systematic cruelty embedded in colonial projects. Third, the responses of indigenous peoples resistance, adaptation, and syncretism—highlight the agency that survived despite oppression, creating religious and cultural hybridity that reflects both colonial impact and local resilience. Finally, contemporary assessments of global Christianity must reckon with these historical truths, acknowledging that the faith's widespread presence is inseparable from the coercive and exclusivist practices of imperial expansion.

In conclusion, the colonizers' approach toward the religious and cultural worlds they encountered was fundamentally exclusivist, hierarchical, and often violently imposed. Their self-proclaimed moral and spiritual superiority justified not only the suppression of indigenous religions but also systemic exploitation, coercion, and cruelty, producing profound and lasting social, cultural, and spiritual consequences. While Christianity and European cultural norms became enduring features of colonized regions, these outcomes were shaped through processes of domination rather than voluntary adoption. A critical reading of this history illuminates the true character of European colonial power: an enterprise that sought to establish supremacy over "other" worlds, disregarded human agency, and inflicted long-lasting harm under the guise of divine mandate and civilizational uplift. Recognizing this legacy is essential for understanding the intersections of religion, power, and culture in the contemporary world, as well as for honoring the resilience, creativity, and survival of the colonized peoples whose spiritual and cultural heritage endured against extraordinary odds.