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**Spanish Colonization Introduction**

**In A Nutshell**

Beginning with Columbus in 1492 and continuing for nearly 350 years, Spain conquered and settled most of South America, the Caribbean, and the American Southwest. After an initial wave of conquistadors—aided by military advantages and infectious diseases that decimated the native populations— defeated the pre-Columbian civilizations of the [Aztecs](http://www.ancientmexico.com/index.html), [Mayans](http://www.ancientmexico.com/index.html), and [Incas](http://www.ancientperu.com/index.html), Spain organized a huge imperial system to exploit the land, labor, and mineral wealth of the New World. The Spanish empire became the largest European empire since ancient Rome, and Spain used the wealth of the Americas to finance nearly endless warfare in Europe, protecting the Americas with a vast navy and powerful army and bringing [Catholicism](http://www.vatican.va/phome_en.htm) to the New World. The growth of a racially mixed society eventually caused rifts to develop between Spain and its American colonies, and by 1824, all of Spain's New World colonies except Cuba and Puerto Rico had fought for and won their independence.

**Why Should I Care?**

Ever wonder how we, as modern Americans, got here? After all, our society doesn't look much like the societies that existed here in the Western Hemisphere during the previous few thousand years. And while the American people today are descendants of peoples from every continent, American culture does look a lot like European culture, which is funny because Europe is far away. European culture in America began not with the English, but with Spain, which over the course of about one hundred years managed to conquer the native societies of Latin America and install a forceful presence in what is now the United States.

Christopher Columbus is a controversial figure today, celebrated by some as a great hero even while others attack him as a historical villain, responsible for the often-vicious conquest of the Americas by the Spanish who followed in the wake of his "discovery" of this continent. Whether you imagine Columbus in the role of hero or villain, there's no denying his importance. Columbus opened the Atlantic to European explorers, adventures, merchants, and the famous [*conquistadores*](http://www.pbs.org/conquistadors/). And the process that Columbus set in motion led to the foundation of the United States about three hundred years after Columbus sailed the Ocean Blue.

The Spanish were able to colonize much of South and Central America, but the territory that later became the United States stood on the far periphery of the Spain's New World empire; only in the West did the Spanish have a serious presence in territory that is now the United States, and Spanish penetration of California and New Mexico came only in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Spanish place names and institutions are still found all over California and the Southwest. But even more important than the physical remains of Spanish society in the United States is the mere fact that the Spanish came here, paved the way for later European nations to come here, and provided the models on which those other societies thrived. There would be no United States without Spain, and it is with Spain that the history of the United States as we know it began.

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**Economy in Spanish Colonization**

Looking at the Past Through the Lens of Economy

**Encomiendas**

During the Spanish colonial period, the economy was based on exploitation, both of land and of Indian labor. The first Spanish settlers organized the *encomienda* system by which Spaniards were given title to American land and ownership of the villages on that land. In return for promises to convert the Indians to Christianity, the Spanish were allowed to use the land and labor any way they saw fit. This system quickly turned into something very close to outright slavery: Indians were paid exceedingly low wages—if anything at all—to peform backbreaking labor on plantations and in mines. The Spanish believed that their God-given duty was to convert the Indians, and that the European notion of eternal salvation was a reward great enough to justify any possible mistreatment in this life. The result was a race for control of people more than of land, and not too surprisingly, [abuses were so widespread as to become the norm](http://books.google.com/books?id=KnWJCk8gIfwC).

By 1550, the Spanish were involved in a [heated debate about the rights of natives](http://books.google.com/books?id=krP0qAvXK4QC) in the New World, and the [New Laws](http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/1542newlawsindies.html) were promulgated ordering the Indians to be treated with more dignity and outlawing outright exploitation. However, as the American proverb goes, "if death came from Spain, we would all live a long life"; in other words, orders from Madrid took a great deal of time to reach the New World, and were heavily diluted in the process. The *encomienda* system was officially abolished in 1717, but it continued in outlying regions until Mexico achieved independence in the 1820s.

**Minerals**

The other aspect of the Spanish colonial economy was the exploitation of land. Gold had always been a draw for conquistadors and later Spanish settlers; the gold and jewels stolen from the Aztecs were triumphantly displayed throughout Spain to drum up interest and support for the colonization venture. When Columbus was sent off to see what he could find by sailing west, [Queen Isabella of Castile](http://www.luminarium.org/encyclopedia/queenisabella.htm), who funded the journey, gave Columbus ownership of all the land he discovered—as long as the Crown collected 20% of the revenue. Called the *quinto*—which conveniently means "one-fifth"—this was the basis for all subsequent ownership grants from Castile.

At first, gold was the primary mineral mined in the New World, and in various parts of the continent conquered Indians were given quotas of gold that they had to bring to the Spaniards as rent. Failure to adhere to these strictures often meant terrible punishment at the hands of the Spanish. But in 1545, the Spanish demand for gold deliveries slowed after a remote mountaintop in Bolivia, at a place called [Potosí](http://www.common-place.org/vol-06/no-03/klooster/images/potosi.jpg), began to yield silver.

Lots and lots of silver. More silver, over the next hundred years, than had existed in all of Europe up to that time. Suddenly, the New World became a cash cow for Spain, which used its 20% of the proceeds to wage nearly endless wars in Europe. Unsurprisingly, the conditions for the Indian (and eventually African slave) labor in the mines was horrific. The arrival each autumn of the [convoy carrying that year's silver](http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/7/79/Spanish_Treasure_Fleet.jpg) from Vera Cruz, Mexico to Seville, Spain was celebrated with fireworks, public holidays, and lots of good wine for the bankers who gained much of the wealth.

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By the eighteenth century, however, silver receipts were falling, meaning that the economy of Spanish America suffered as well. But by then, a trans-Atlantic trade in sugar, slaves and commodities made up for the shortfall.

**Trans-Atlantic Trade**

At first, everything the Spanish needed in the New World was shipped from Spain. Food, nails, weapons, paper—everything. Before 1600, the *encomenderos* and other Spaniards paid for all these trade goods with gold and silver, and

occasionally some foodstuffs like chocolate, corn, and potatoes. After 1600, things began to change. A critical mass of Spaniards meant that the major population centers of Mexico City (Mexico), Lima (Peru), and Vera Cruz (Mexico) began to produce some of these items for themselves. But the Crown wasn't thrilled with this; not unlike the English a century later, Spain wanted to keep its colonies as colonies. Among other measures to keep the colonies subservient to Spanish control, the making of paper was prohibited in the New World. This proved problematic, since the Spanish government depended on paper, and more paper and more paper. The eventual shortage got so serious that by the early nineteenth century,legal documents were crossed out and reused repeatedly.

And in an age where no one went anywhere without sailing ships, the Spanish made sure that there was no colonial production of goods such as canvas for sails, hemp for rope, and tar for sealing ships. Nonetheless, as always happens with these things, the Spanish economy suffered as a trade imbalance grew with the New World. In other words, since Mexico and Peru began producing clothing and other goods for themselves, there was little demand for Spanish products and Spanish merchants couldn't finance the purchase of all that silver.

**The Slave Economy**

One solution to this problem was slavery. So many Indians died in the early years of Spanish rule in the New World that there were few people left to actually work. The Spanish had no intention of doing it themselves, so they began to import African slaves as early as 1502. The first Africans, who came from long-established Portuguese [slaving ports on the West African coast near the River Gambia](http://books.google.com/books?id=rC7TYWPT--8C), were put to work on sugar plantations in the Caribbean. West African slaves continued working the sugar plantations on [Hispaniola (now Haiti and the Dominican Republic)](http://www.garwood-voigt.com/catalogues/H24543HispaniolaBowen.jpg) and other islands until the mid-nineteenth century.

This solved the trade imbalance by giving the Spanish merchants something to sell in return for the gold, silver, and sugar produced in the New World. The losers here, as usual, were the Indians and the African slaves; life on a sugar plantation in the tropics was, to borrow the words of Thomas Hobbes, "nasty, brutish and short." Still, for hundreds of years, the slave economy and the "triangle trade"—slaves shipped to the Caribbean and sold for sugar and rum, which was shipped back to Europe and sold for guns, nails, colored cloth and other trade goods, which were then sent to Africa and sold for slaves—dominated American trade, both in Spanish America and farther north in British America.

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**Politics in Spanish Colonization**

Looking at the Past Through the Lens of Politics

**Founding an Empire**

No European country had ever tried to govern an empire as large and far away as the Spanish empire in the New World. Sure, some European states controlled territories that didn't border each other, but 3,000 miles of ocean separated America from Europe. So Spain was forced to improvise. Initially, Queen Isabella's grant to Columbus made him ["Admiral of the Ocean Sea"](http://books.google.com/books?id=T5x5xjsJtlwC) and ruler of all the lands he discovered. When Isabella realized that Columbus had discovered a whole lot, she revised that decree and the Crown began governing the New World. At first, rivalries between feuding conquistadors made for a wild and woolly environment, but by the middle of the sixteenth century, the Spanish government began to get a firm grip on the New World. From 1535 until independence in the nineteenth century, Spain's American empire was divided into viceroyalties and governed through a [Council of the Indies](http://en.www.mcu.es/archivos/MC/AGI/Presentacion/Historia.html)in Spain. The Spanish also set up *audencias* which were basically royal appeals courts in various parts of the New World. There was more than one *audencia* in each of the viceroyalties.

**Representing the King**

Just one of the many legal fictions of the Spanish empire was that of the viceroy. Meaning under-king, the viceroy was, in legal terms, the king himself in another guise. In other words, the viceroy was more than a governor, he was the representative of the king of Spain, and therefore his word was treated as the word of the king himself, snug though the real king was 3,000 miles away in one of his many palaces.

In 1535, to better govern his colonies, the [Holy Roman Emperor Charles V](http://www.luminarium.org/encyclopedia/charles5.htm) (who was also King Charles I of Spain—it's complicated...all the royals kept marrying each other) organized the Viceroyalty of New Spain. The Viceroyalty of Peru was founded in Lima in 1540. The massive administrative district of [New Spain](http://middle.usm.k12.wi.us/faculty/markwald/Exploration/newspainmap.gif) stretched from the Isthmus of Panama to modern-day Denver, or thereabouts. A viceroy was sent from Spain to govern the area in the name of the king, and he answered to the Council of the Indies in Madrid, who in turn answered to the king. This system was awkward with questions and responses taking up to two years to get from Mexico City to Madrid and back.

To further increase royal control, Charles organized *audencias*, or judicial courts of appeal throughout the New World. Royally appointed judges dispensed justice throughout the New World, making sure that the rights of the king were upheld, and—most importantly—that taxes were collected. (Little changes in the world.) Combined, the viceroyalties and*audencias* gave Madrid a relatively strong hold over the politics of its far-flung empire. Later, in the eighteenth century, the viceroyalties of New Spain and Peru were considered too unwieldy, so they were broken into several smaller units.

**All Politics is Local**

While Spain sent out viceroys and judges to America to govern, the local populations evolved in some interesting ways. The early, swashbuckling days of conquistadors and traveling priests (who were less swashbuckling) gave way to a more mature society based on local power elites.

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That's a fancy way of saying that there were rich and powerful residents in all the major American cities, and that major decisions were made by people far from the center of power in Madrid. Before long, a split emerged in the highest level of society between those born in Spain (called *peninsulares*) and those of Spanish heritage born in the New World (called *criollos*). This split did not take into account the masses of the population, who were either Indian or of mixed Indian and Spanish background. A type of caste system formed in which the *criollos* and *peninsulares*, who generally had different views of who should be governing the colonies, battled for supremacy. Until the late-eighteenth century, *peninsulares* dominated the social and political life of the American colonies. They were tied to the nobility of Spain and had powerful friends at court. But as the number of *criollos* grew (and remember, anyone with a single drop of Indian blood was no longer a *criollo* but was demoted to the *mestizo*castes) they began to demand more and more power. Politics became defined by this struggle—and the *mestizos* were left out entirely. By the nineteenth century, when ideas about freedom from the American and French Revolutions permeated through Latin America, the *criollo* elements decided to fight for independence from Spain. By 1824, only the islands of Cuba and Puerto Rico—the two places where the population was most pro-Spain—were left in Spanish hands. The *criollos* won and Latin America gained its independence.

**Governing Softly**

In northern New Spain, things were a little different. In [these lands](http://www.historicaldocuments.com/TreatyofGuadalupeHidalgoMap.gif), which would one day become part of the United States, contact between Indians and Spaniards was more limited, and the large-scale divisions in Spanish society were muted. Part of this was due to numbers; there were far fewer Indians in the deserts of what would become the American Southwest, and also fewer Spaniards. Many of the Spaniards were priests in missions set up throughout the region that we now know as the states of the states of Texas, New Mexico, Arizona and California.

Law and order were limited; these areas were the Wild West for the Spanish before they were the Wild West for the Americans. The frontier was the frontier, no matter which country was in charge. With few people and few resources, these areas were left mostly to themselves by the Spanish, especially north of the Rio Grande. Politically isolated and ruled by Franciscan and Dominican friars as much as by representatives of the Spanish government, the Indians in the American Southwest were left to lead their lives mostly unchanged. The familiar Spanish colonial policies of repression and forced labor did not exist in many areas of the West and Southwest, especially after the [Popé Rebellion](http://www.pbs.org/weta/thewest/people/i_r/pope.htm%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank) in 1680.

The Pueblo Indians of what is now New Mexico, reacting to an attempt by the local Spanish administration to stamp out some native religious practices, rebelled, driving the Spanish out of Santa Fe for twelve full years. They were led by a medicine man named Popé—an ironic name, since he was fighting the imposition of Catholicism as much as anything else. By 1700, the Spanish had retaken Santa Fe and destroyed the rebellion, but also moderated their policies, realizing that sometimes if you can't beat 'em, you learn to live with 'em. After the initial carnage of the Conquest, the Spanish learned to govern pragmatically, and although government from Madrid was often arbitrary and was always biased towards the rich and racially pure segment of society, it was flexible enough to survive for 300 years. No other European empire has come close.

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**Race in Spanish Colonization**

Looking at the Past Through the Lens of Race

**The Original Melting Pot**

Unlike areas colonized by the English, Spanish America was always a more racially mixed society, although these mixtures made for their own problems. Early conquistadors were men. Early Spanish settlers were men. Spanish priests were men. So, being men, they all (except, theoretically, the priests) craved female companionship, and before long, intermarriage was a staple of Spanish American life.

Among the higher Spanish officials, wives and families were common, but among the rest of the colonial population, Spanish women were almost non-existent. And voila! Spanish America gave almost instantaneous rise to a mixed-race population, called *mestizos,* which quickly became numerically by far the largest portion of the population. Some of the intermarriage and intermingling was forced; some was not.

Either way, as the years passed, a complete caste system was organized that classified each person according to the amount of Indian blood they had. This was not unlike the classifications of African-American slaves in the United States in a later century: the more Indian blood a person had, the lower he or she stood on the ladder of social respectability. The Spanish had for centuries lived with laws called*limpieza de sangre*, or Purity of Blood, in which aspirants to public office—or those brought up before the Inquisition—had to prove that all their ancestors were Christian, as far back as ten generations.

Try it: see if you can come up with a list of all your ancestors in the past four generations. Didn't think you could. Now, imagine trying this in a world without birth certificates, without the internet, and where most of the population was illiterate. And imagine again trying to prove that your great-great-great grandmother on your father's side was not a descendant of the Inca, but was in fact a Spanish woman. A whole industry existed for the faking of documents and testimony about ancestry, both in Spain (where issues revolved around Jewish and Moorish blood) and in the New World.

*Mestizos* were barred from various offices, they could not hold many jobs, and they were discriminated against in court. Spanish colonial America was ruled by a small group of pure-Spanish descendants, and the rest of the population had few rights. This is still a problem in much of Latin America, where Independence in the nineteenth century replaced one ruling class with another. For instance, in Mexico, the ongoing [Zapatista rebellion in Chiapas](http://books.google.com/books?id=BD1AiMCIGpcC) has much to do with the rights of indigenous and *mestizo* populations who feel they are underrepresented and face discrimination.

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In Bolivia, a similar story unfolded after the recent election of [Evo Morales](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/3203752.stm%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank), an Indian, to the presidency. This is all to say that race played a huge role in colonial Latin America, and still does today.

**Slaves**

*Mestizo* culture was not the only racial issue in Spanish America. The terrible destruction of the Indian population prompted the Spanish, in their never-ending search for cheap labor, to import West African slaves to work the sugar plantations in the Caribbean and the mines in South America. Over time, intermarriage created yet another ingredient in the racial mixture of the New World. [More slaves were brought to some parts of the New World than others](http://www.slaverysite.com/slave_trade_1650-1860_b%20-%20www.slaveryinamerica.org.jpg); correspondingly, there are more people of African descent in the Caribbean and Brazil than there are in Chile and Argentina. The Spanish viewed Africans as lower on the racial hierarchy than American Indians. Slavery existed in South America even after it was abolished in the United States; Brazil, an independent country by the mid-nineteenth century,[didn't abolish slavery](http://books.google.com/books?id=WzUwahzrxwAC" \t "_blank) until 1888, when it became the last Western nation to do so.

**Cultural Mix**

The mixture of Europeans, Americans, and Africans in colonial Spanish America gave rise to a fascinating cultural brew. While Catholicism was designated the official religion, slaves in the Spanish Empire (as in the United States) held onto their own beliefs and incorporated them into their own forms of Christian worship. The same went for indigenous Americans, and when the traditions of three continents combined, a new, Latin American culture flourished. On the frontier in the American Southwest, however, there was less mixture of cultures, mostly because the population was smaller and opportunities for intermarriage were not as plentiful. The tribes of the AmericanSouthwest—Apache, Navaho, Comanche—did not often mix with their Spanish rulers, although there was some intermarriage. These tribes stayed separate, preferring to live their lives as free from European interference as possible, and consequentially, although the American Southwest faced many issues, there was less of a race-based caste system than in other parts of Spanish America.

Overall, race played a dual role in colonial Latin America. In one sense, it was a prime ingredient in a unique cultural mixture that incorporated African, Indian and European elements, something that happened nowhere else in the world. In another sense, it was the basis for racist divisions in society in which the color of one's skin and the perceived amount of non-European blood one had limited life's opportunities and brought about inequality and discrimination. The problem of race was different in Spanish America than in the United States, but it was no less troubling.

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**War in Spanish Colonization**

Looking at the Past Through the Lens of War

**The Power of Steel, Horses, and War Dogs**

When the Spanish first arrived in the New World, they held several advantages over the natives they encountered. The most important military advantage was [European steel, not the guns that have become so famous](http://www.pbs.org/gunsgermssteel/index.html). While a few primitive firearms were used to awe the Indians with sound and fury, Spanish swords were so much stronger, sharper and more deadly than the stone and soft-metal weapons of the Indians that battles between them were no contest. Guns were scary but swords did the dirty work. Horses were also a major part of the Spanish military advantage over the Aztecs, Mayans and Incas. The largest South American animals were llamas, and although [llama spit](http://personal.smartt.com/~brianp/images/green.JPG) can be nasty, it didn't instill fear in the Spanish the way charging, armored horses did to the Indians. And speaking of animals, the Spanish brought war dogs with them. These mastiffs and Great Danes were trained to kill, and they were ferocious. All together, sharp, strong steel, horses, and attack dogs added to guns to give the Spanish a military edge that the Indians could not counter.

**Numbers**

The one advantage that the Indians—especially the Aztecs in Mexico—had over the Spanish was numbers. There were millions of Aztecs and only a few hundred Spaniards. How was it then that the Spaniards, even with their steel and guns, could overrun them? The answer lies in a number the Spanish had even more of: microbes. Smallpox, influenza, mumps, measles and a literal host of other diseases decimated the native populations of America. From a pre-Columbus population estimated at 1 million, the native population of Hispaniola (now Haiti and the Dominican Republic) fell to only 500 by 1500.[6](http://www.shmoop.com/spanish-colonization/citations.html#6) Indian society was completely upended by so many deaths. Entire cities lay sick and dying from smallpox and plague; military formations were crushed by disease long before they could attack the Spanish.

However, even amidst so much death and chaos, the diminished Aztecs were able to deal a shattering blow to Cortés and his army of Spaniards and native allies. On 1 July 1 1520, the Spanish army was surrounded on one of the causeways leading from Tenochtitlan to the shore of Lake Texcoco. A night of fierce fighting ensued, and the Spanish were forced to cut their way out, literally over the bodies of Aztec warriors whom they kicked into the shallow waters of the lake. In the end, anywhere from 300-700 Spaniards and up to 4,000 of Cortés's Indian allies were killed; the number of Aztecs killed remains heavily disputed. The night became known in Spain as [*la noche triste*](http://www.motecuhzoma.de/NOCHETRI.jpg), or Night of Tears, and it was the largest single Spanish defeat during the Conquest. The Spaniards got their revenge, however, as a smallpox plague ravaged the city, allowing Cortes to regroup, gather allies, and conquer the city once and for all the next year. The Aztecs suffered not a single night of tears, but an eternity.

**Tactics**

Owing to their numerical inferiority, the conquistadors developed many tactics for defeating the large empires of America. Guile and surprise—also known as treachery—were used to great effect to capture both Moctezuma (a.k.a. Montezuma), the god-king of the Aztecs in Mexico, and Atahaulpa, the last Incan Emperor in Peru.

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The exact sequence of events that led to the capture of Moctezuma is unclear from the ancient sources, but the story surrounding the capture of Atahaulpa and the slaughter of 2,000 of his soldiers in the square of the Peruvian city of Cajamarca is well-known. Atahaulpa agreed to meet the Spanish invadersin the main square of the city on 16 November 1532, but when he arrived he found no one in sight. Eventually, a Dominican friar appeared with a Bible, and Atahualpa asked to see the book, which the friar had called the "Spanish God." When the Bible did not speak to him, Atahualpa threw it down, giving the Spanish under Francisco Pizarro the excuse—alleged desecration of Christ—they needed to attack. Suddenly, all 168 Spaniards descended on the Incas in the square, their guns belching smoke, flame and noise, and their horses and dogs stampeding into the mass of Indians. Two thousand were killed, and Atahualpa was taken prisoner, later to be executed even after filling a large room with gold and silver in a futile effort to win his freedom by paying ransom.[7](http://www.shmoop.com/spanish-colonization/citations.html#7)

In Mexico, the Spanish knew that they could not conquer the Aztecs without help, and conveniently for them, the Aztec practice of sacrificing thousands of prisoners of war on their temple steps in celebration of the sun-god did not endear them to their neighbors, who provided the unfortunate human sacrifices. That made it relatively easy for the Spanish to play one group of natives off of another. A major misconception is that Cortés and his small band of less than a thousand Spaniards conquered the huge Aztec empire. Not in the least. What disease had not already wrought was achieved when Toltecs, Mixtecs, Zapotecs and other tribes joined with the Spanish in the thousands. Cortes's gift was figuring out a way to use this native host to conquer the major Aztec city of [Tenochtitlan](http://ambergriscaye.com/pages/mayan/art/aztecs21b.jpg). In Peru, the Incan empire was stronger than the Aztecs and there were fewer tribes to recruit, but there was a civil war in progress when Pizarro arrived, and he used this split in leadership to his own advantage.

The real point to remember is that the arrival of the Europeans with their strange dress, language, habits, foods, and diseases completely shattered Indian society so profoundly that the Spanish were able to exploit the resulting fissures using guile and steel. Yes, the Spanish were militarily more formidable than the Indians, but a healthy, unified, un-traumatized Aztec or Incan society might well have been able to defeat Cortés, Pizarro and the rest.

**Spain and Europe**

During the Spanish colonial period the American natives were not the only foe the Spanish faced. Other European powers were eager to gain the riches of the New World for themselves, and Spain was constantly fighting France, England, and the Dutch for control of various parts of the Caribbean and North and South America. To protect the silver shipments from Mexico and South America, the Spanish organized a convoy system: all the military and transport ships would gather in Havana and sail together to Seville, Spain. This was a great system, until 1628 when the [Dutchman Piet Hein managed to capture the entire silver fleet near Cuba](http://www.common-place.org/vol-06/no-03/klooster/). Whoops.

But the wealthy Spanish were constantly faced the threat of pirate attacks and foreign incursions. Pirates like [Francis Drake](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic_figures/drake_francis.shtml) and [Henry Morgan](http://content.answers.com/main/content/wp/en/thumb/4/47/180px-Captain_morgan.gif) became national heroes in England for their successes in stealing from the Spanish in the Caribbean. (Henry Morgan stole an entire island—Jamaica—and his reward was to go on to become its Royal Governor. And, of course, to achieve immortality as a brand of rum.) In the American Southwest, the Spanish had to deal with Russian incursions in the 1580s. Spain's navy often sailed all the way up the California coast in the eighteenth century, and a slew of Americans moved south into Texas and New Mexico in the nineteenth century, a migration that precipitated the struggle for Texan independence in the 1830s.

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**Religion in Spanish Colonization**

Looking at the Past Through the Lens of Religion

**Ave Maria Domine**

In the words of one member of Cortés's band of conquistadors, the Spanish came to the New World "to serve God, and to get rich as all men want to do." Whether or not Bernal Diaz del Castillo got rich is one thing; serving God was quite another. Spain after 1492 was a Catholic country. Seriously, everyone living in Spain was officially a Catholic, since Spain had [expelled the Jews and converted the Muslims](http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/History/Inquisition.html) living there. Technically, in 1492, there was no distinction between Catholic or Protestant, there was only Christian, but after 1517 and the beginning of the [Protestant Reformation](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/tudors/reformation_overview_01.shtml), Spain became the great defender of the Roman Catholic religion.

And the New World was the perfect place for Spain to recapture the souls it had lost to Protestant "heresy" in Europe. Bernal Diaz was not being sarcastic when he added religion to wealth as the main goals of the Spaniards in the New World. Mendicant friars—also known as Dominicans and Franciscans—traveled throughout the New World converting the natives as they went. The [Jesuits](http://www.jesuit.org/), founded in 1540, also played a major role in proselytizing in America, and together Spanish priests were able to make nearly the entire population of Spanish America into Catholics, at least in name.

**American Blend**

The Spanish firmly believed they had the right to conquer and colonize the New World to bring Christianity to the Indians. In their minds, saving souls was worth destroying bodies, if need be. They used this argument to justify almost anything they did in the New World, and forced conversion was common. On the frontier of New Spain, in areas that would one day become the American Southwest, the procedure was somewhat different than it was in the heavily-populated areas of the Aztec and Mayan lands to the south. Basically, there weren't even close to enough priests, and there were a lot of Indians.

Priests traveling alone or in small groups would ride out to distant Indian villages and preach the gospel for a few days. Language, as always, was a barrier, but usually the curious natives would listen politely to what the priests had to say. Then one local citizen who seemed most eager to become a Christian would be chosen and the priest would spend a day or two teaching him (being all men, priests usually dealt only with men) the entire Gospel, or at least enough to make him the local authority. When the teaching was done and the priest had taught the Indian who Jesus was and how to perform baptism, the priest would move on to the next village, counting the one he had left as "converted," and it would be up to the lucky local to teach all the other people living in the area about their new religion.

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Needless to say, confusion popped up every so often—or always—so American Catholicism, especially in the American Southwest, developed to be very different than that practiced in Europe, or even farther south in Mexico. Native cultures and understandings of divinity mixed with strict Catholic teachings to create a hybrid religion that incorporated native religion into a larger frame of Catholicism. The best example of this is the [cult of the Virgin of Guadalupe](http://www.lib.utexas.edu/benson/bibnot/bn-87.html). As the story goes, the Virgin of Guadalupe first appeared to a poor Indian peasant in 1531—and she has been worshiped ever since in America, but not by native Spaniards. Spanish influence was able to convert many, many people, but even the Spanish weren't sure exaclty what they were converting them to.

**The Mission**

Ever wondered how San Diego got its name? How about San Francisco or Los Angeles or any number of Spanish-named cities in the American West? Ever wonder why the capital of California is called "The Sacrament" (Sacramento) and that of New Mexico is "Holy Faith" (Santa Fe)? Look no farther than Spanish missionaries, especially a Franciscan named [Junipero Serra](http://www.pbs.org/weta/thewest/people/s_z/serra.htm). Though Serra didn't name all the places in which he and others founded missions, it was his work

that helped connect California to the rest of the Spanish Empire to the south.

The Spanish had little to do with Alta California, as they called the territory that is today the American state of California, before the mid-eighteenth century. New Mexico and Arizona, sure, but if you've ever gone to Los Angeles by road, rail or air, you might have noticed something: mountains. And desert. However, trusty Father Serra was not easily deterred, and beginning in 1769 in San Diego he helped set up a string of 21 missions between San Diego and Sonoma, California. These were connected by [El Camino Real](http://www.learncalifornia.org/GoDocUserFiles/2874.elcaminoreal1.jpg), the Royal Road, which ran 650 miles through much of the state, although with [less traffic](http://pps.org/general_jpg/Mar2003_el_camino.jpg) in the eighteenth century than today. The missions were set up to spread Christianity to the local Indians in Alta California, but they also served to cement Spain's claim to the area. From the beginning of Spanish colonization of America, religion played both a spiritual and political role, and was a major piece of Spain's New World empire.