

Comparison of Spanish and Indian Empires

Before the Spanish conquered the Indian empires in Central and South America, each of these cultures had their own distinct methods of maintaining and making their empires thrive. Prior to the conquest, the Spaniards found themselves under Muslim rule. In contrast, the Indian empires were conquering other cultures in Central and South America, and these regions were not free from violence themselves. The methods used by the Spanish and the Indian empires to conquer other nations varied drastically from one another. Although both the Indian empires and the Spaniards conquered regions other than their own, the Indian and Muslim empires were more tolerant and understanding of the empires that they conquered than the Spaniards were with regards to religion, culture, and traditions, but, ultimately, the drive of the Spanish to convert people to Catholicism aided them in carrying out the conquest.

Prior to the occupation and conquest of the Spaniards in Latin America, the Muslims ruled over the Iberian peninsula, particularly the southern region. The Muslims ruled the region with tolerance toward the Christians, but largely ignored their presence and did not interact with them, as instructed by their religious leaders. As the Muslims began to interact with the Christian people in the Iberian peninsula, religious leaders became concerned, and wrote to one of the high up leaders in the Muslim faith, Abúl-Asbagh, to ask whether Muslims could interact with the Christian people on Christmas and accept their food. Abúl-Asbagh wrote back and stated, “Whoever imitates a people, is one of them. Whoever imitates a people, will be mustered with them” (Abúl-Asbagh) (1). In this quote, Abúl-Asbagh told the Muslim people that they should not take food from the Christians in the region. If they imitate the Christian customs, they will experience the same fate as Christians when judgment day comes. However, Abúl-Asbagh did

(1) “Coexistence in the Medieval Spanish Kingdoms” Kenneth Mills, William B. Taylor, and Sandra Lauderdale Graham, *Colonial Latin America* (Scholarly Resources, 2002) pg 27

(2) Angela Weiler, “The Requerimiento,” Open Anthology of Earlier American Literature, pg. 1

(3) William Brooks Greenlee, *The Voyage of Pedro Álvares Cabral to Brazil and India* (Hakluyt Society) pg 23

(4) “Two Woodcuts Accompanying a 1509 German Translation of Amerigo Vespucci’s Letter to Pietro Soderini” Kenneth Mills, William B. Taylor, and Sandra Lauderdale Graham, *Colonial Latin America* (Scholarly Resources, 2002) pg 81

not advocate for the persecution of Christians or even try to convert them to the Islamic faith, so the Muslim occupation was largely tolerant towards the Christians.

However, as the years passed, regions of the Iberian peninsula began to fall to the Christians again. Once the Spanish Christians regained control of the peninsula, they launched crusades against the Jewish populations. They felt that the Jews betrayed the Christians during the Muslim occupation and abandoned them. After King Ferdinand and Isabel married, the crusades continued. They restricted the Jewish population into ghettos, and expelled all of the Jewish people from the peninsula, unless they decided to convert to Christianity. Jews were subject to public humiliation and public productions during this period, and some were even burned at the stake. The Spanish Christians forced the Jewish people to convert or risk their lives, and this demonstrated the lower tolerance of the Spanish Christians towards other populations, before the conquest of Latin America even occurred.

The Indian empires took a similar approach to conquest as the Muslims – a more tolerant one. In the Inkan empire prior to the Spanish conquest, a civil war had broken out, as the Chanca attacked the Inka in Cuzco, their capital city. The Chanca were eventually expelled from the region, and Cusi Yupanqui established himself as the “Sole Inka.” Over approximately the next one hundred years, the Inkan empire expanded. With humble beginnings in the highlands of the Andes mountains, their rule began to expand. With each province taken, they did not request that the people convert to their religion or change their cultural customs. They simply requested tribute from the provinces in the form of money and labor. Men were required to labor on the roads each year, but they could continue their traditions and cultures. Because the people were able to continue their traditions and customs, their approach to conquest was more tolerant than

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that of the Spaniards. The Aztecs took a tolerant approach to conquest as well. However, how they conquered other empires looked drastically different than the Inkas. The Aztec people formed alliances with others, and eventually turned on their alliances and conquered them. The conquered towns were forced to pay tribute to the Aztecs, and many of the regions resented the Aztecs for this. The Aztecs displayed a tolerance for other cultures and religions through their conquest at another level from the Inkas. Each time they took over a new region, they added the Gods of that culture and religion to their own, in an attempt to mix the two cultures together.

The Spanish's theme of lower tolerance continued as they began to conquer the New World and the Indian populations in it. When the Spaniards took over, they instituted a legal document, the Requerimiento, that laid out the laws that governed the region. This document displayed the lower tolerance of the Spaniards; "But, if you do not do this, and maliciously make delay in it, I certify to you that, with the help of God, we shall powerfully enter into your country, and shall make war against you in all ways and manners that we can..." (Juan Lopez de Palacios Rubios, 1514) (2). In this document, the Spaniards tried to force the natives to convert to Catholicism. They told them that if they do not convert, they would suffer, and even went as far to say that their suffering was their own doing. This demonstrates that not only do the Spaniards have less tolerance toward other religions, they have no tolerance toward other religions. This was likely due to the reformation in Europe which happened at the time of the conquest. The Catholic Church felt like they were losing people to the Protestant faith, and they felt the need to convert these new people to Catholicism.

In addition to no tolerance towards other religions, the Spaniards incorporated themselves into the native culture as well, displaying less tolerance of their culture. They went so far as to

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call the Indian culture barbaric; “They are a bestial people and of very little knowledge; and for this reason they are so timid...” (Pedro Alvares Cabral) (3). In addition, the Spaniards depicted the Indians as barbaric in their images. These images were transported back to Europe, so the citizens of Spain saw the Indians as barbaric as well. In the Woodwork images that were transported back to Europe, the natives were depicted as nude, and “...Vespucci remarks that although the Indians were discreet in defecating, they made water wherever and whenever they pleased, even ‘while standing speaking to us.’ Farther in the background, in front of some strangely shaped dwellings, a butcher and his mate matter-of-factly chop up human limbs” (William Taylor, Sandra Graham, Kenneth Mills) (4). Based on these depictions, the Spaniards aimed to rid the natives of their “barbarity” by changing their culture as much as possible, including their religion and customs.

The Spanish conquest was aided by the fact that they had multiple reasons for wanting to carry out the conquest. The spiritual aspect to the conquest gave the Spanish a greater drive and motivation, and they were more efficient at converting and conquering the local populations present in Central and South America.

Before the conquest, Spain and the Indian empires were drastically different than they were after the conquest was carried out. The Muslims ruled the Spanish empire, and the Indian populations conquered many other regions in Central and South America. The Indian empires and the Spaniards used vastly different methods to carry out the conquest, with the Indian empires showing more tolerance towards other religions and cultures than the Spaniards.

However, the spiritual component present in the Spaniard’s conquest aided them in conquering the New World.

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