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**The religious overtone of ethnic identity building  
In A Mercy by Toni Morrison**

A thesis submitted as partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of *Master's* in  
Literature and Civilizations.

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## **Declaration of originality**

I hereby declare that the work presented in my thesis entitled The Religious Overtones of ethnic identity building in *A Mercy* by Toni Morrison is entirely my original work, except where otherwise indicated through proper citations. This work contains no material previously published or written by another person, nor material that has been accepted for the qualification of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution.

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signature

# Dedication

I dedicate this to my parents, whose mental support and love motivated me to succeed. Thank you for guiding me towards this field and believing in my potential, even if the path was unclear. This work is as much yours as it is mine.

To my beloved grandfather, who fostered in me a deep love for knowledge and reading, thank you for the conversations we shared about my novel, thesis, and future career, and for believing in me and encouraging me throughout my journey in learning.

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I am grateful for your presence, love, and support

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## **Abstract**

Within the difficult setting of colonial America, this dissertation studies Toni Morrison's *A Mercy* (2008) for its religious undercurrents and how they affect ethnic identity. Amid colonial expansion, slavery, and intercultural interactions, Morrison's art presents a world in which different theological and cultural beliefs blend in the late 17th century. The function of religious beliefs as a formative component in the creation and maintenance of ethnic identities is investigated in this study. These ideas were pushed by colonial Christianity as well as retained from African and Indigenous cultures. Religion is a cultural anchor that is vital to the process of identity-building, according to the theoretical framework. This is especially true for groups that have been excluded or displaced. As a protective strategy against colonial domination, it studies the genesis of religious syncretism, or the merging of Indigenous, African, and European concepts. This study puts religious institutions that acted as both tools of oppression and tactics of keeping one's identity within the colonial social order into context by looking at the Christian ideology that affected colonial hierarchies. The literary study is backed by research into the cultural and historical contexts of colonial America, especially looking at the African, Indigenous, and European presence and interactions during that period. Christianity, when imposed on these different civilizations, frequently reinterpreted gender and ethnic roles to fit colonial regimes, and the religious beliefs and practices of each culture shaped their sense of identity. As a location of cultural resistance and the foundation for new, syncretic identities, the interaction of Christian doctrine with Indigenous and African spiritual traditions is studied. A detailed reading of *A Mercy* demonstrates how Morrison depicts religion as an essential component of each character's road toward self-discovery and identity. Florens' tale displays the transforming effect of religious ideas on her sense of self, while the character of Sorrow reveals the role of religion in navigating ethnic otherness. Furthermore, the novel's exploration of African and Indigenous beliefs underscores religion as a tool for survival, resilience, and communal identity among underprivileged persons, even as they struggle with the realities of colonial power structures. Through symbols of compassion and forgiveness, Morrison analyses the link between religion, resilience, and ethnic identity in her characters' lives. This study believes that *A Mercy* not only explores the role of colonial religious practices in generating racial hierarchies but also illustrates how religion and spirituality may be restored as a means of strength. By addressing the problems of religion's effect on ethnic identification, this research reveals Morrison's larger commentary on survival, adaptability, and cultural synthesis, highlighting the resilience of ethnic identity in the face of colonial tragedy.

**Keywords:** Religious syncretism, Ethnic identity, Colonial America, Christianity, Cultural resilience

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# General Introduction

Religion played a crucial role in defining individuals' identity, particularly in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, when it was often seen as a tool to regulate behaviour. Toni Morrison explores the thematic implications of how religion impacted people, particularly the marginalised, within the context of slavery during the colonial era. Ethnic identity, as represented in *A Mercy*, is rooted in religion, which emphasises the cultural and spiritual conflict amidst cultural and political forces. Furthermore, religion then served as a mechanism to justify conquest, slavery, and cultural erasure. Toni Morrison reveals how marginalised individuals navigated their cultural and spiritual identity, resisted colonial influence, and witnessed cultural erasure imposed by the systematic beliefs.

*A Mercy* portrays the life of indigenous Americans and enslaved African people in the early American landscape, as they navigate their identities and their attempt to preserve their cultural and spiritual heritage amidst the dominance of the European settlers who controlled the land. Through Florens' search for identity, Lina's stolen rituals, and Rebekka's religious ideology, Morrison examines the complexities of belonging and beliefs in the colonial period, particularly to the marginalized and colonised, whose identities are shaped through the lens of the coloniser's behaviour.

Furthermore, Morrison exposes the violent duality of 17th-century Christianity: a tool for empire and hypocrisy for the powerful, yet a site for resistance for the oppressed. D'Ortega is a catholic who attends church and is firm with his faith, yet he treats his enslaved people with cruelty, believing that the bible permits slavery. Jacob Vaart, a farmer who sees himself as human and opposed to slavery, nonetheless benefits from it—his dream house was built with money earned through slave labor. The literary work illustrates how religion—particularly Christianity—was weaponized to manipulate and control the marginalised and the colonised. It mirrors the historical reality of slavery and colonisation, which were often justified through the religious conquest and Christianisation. Moreover, the novel explores the hybrid condition some individuals submitted to, while others, like the blacksmith—a free black African character—refuse to conform, resisting imposed cultural and spiritual beliefs and rejecting the hypocrisy of the colonial system.

This thesis seeks to explore the role of religion in shaping cultural and spiritual identity within the context of colonialism, and how indigenous and enslaved people respond to the religious oppression imposed by colonial power. In doing so, it aims to provide a thematic analysis of the novel, focusing on how religion shaped Florens, the protagonist's identity, through her journey to self-definition, as well as the cultural and political landscapes she inhabits. By examining the cultural and religious role in defining the characters, especially the oppressed, under European control, this study will focus on the broader implications of these themes for our understanding of the role of religion in shaping ethnic identity.

The primary research questions guiding this study include:

- How does religion shape ethnic and spiritual identities during the colonial period in *A Mercy*?
- How do the characters, in particular the protagonist, react to the religious and cultural oppression?

In addressing these questions, this study hypothesises that:

-Religion under colonialism played a dual role of control and resistance; European settlers used Christianity as a weapon to control and marginalise, and most importantly, to erase the indigenous/ African cultural and spiritual beliefs, while the oppressed reclaimed hybrid faiths.

- The protagonist, Florens, abandons her African roots and submits to her master's Catholic beliefs, without fully mastering either set of rituals. In a moment of her suffering, she turns to Catholicism, not because she fully accepts it, but because, as the oppressor's religion, it becomes the only available language through which she can express her pain and seek redemption and forgiveness.

The objective of this thesis is to illustrate the role of faith in forming ethnic identity, particularly in the context of colonialism. By examining *A Mercy*, this study aims to contribute to a broader discussion using the new historicist approach, to reveal how religion, power, and identity were negotiated by the marginalized under the oppressive systems in the colonial American landscape.

This thesis focuses on three chapters discussing the role of religion in building ethnic identity in Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*. Chapter One emphasizes a theoretical framework of religion and ethnic identity formation. Additionally, it sheds light on the historical overview of Christianity and the rise of its branches. This chapter will further examine how colonizers used Christianity to justify oppression and enslavement, in addition to its role in defining the indigenous and enslaved individuals' identity. These theoretical frameworks will help us analyse the novels' characters, as they navigate their identities amidst European colonialism, where oppression and violence threaded the indigenous and enslaved people.

Chapter two will explore the cultural and historical background of early Americans, their roots and the early European explorations and colonisation, in addition to the transatlantic slave trade. This chapter will also highlight the development of the indigenous cultural and religious costumes as an answer to European control and the role of Christianity in their identities amidst cultural and religious oppression and influence in colonial circumstances.

In the final chapter, it combines the two previous chapters' elements to finally undertake the thematic analysis of the novel; it will focus on the interconnectedness of religion and ethnic identity as crucial elements in shaping identity. This analysis will highlight the way people, especially the oppressed and marginalised, navigate their identities under the influence of religion amidst the colonial context. It also examines individuals' turn to faith in moments of pain, loss and abandonment, serving as a way of survival and self-definition.

# Chapter one

## The theoretical frameworks of ethnic identity formation

## **1.1.Introduction**

This chapter explains the role of religion in shaping ethnic and cultural identity, particularly in the colonial context, where displacement, marginalisation, and social oppression occur. Religion anchors the marginalised and colonised sense of identity amidst political and cultural conflict, as both a spiritual and cultural force. Moreover, this chapter explores the influence of religion on ethnic identity by navigating the theoretical concepts such as Clifford Geertz's notion of religion as a symbolic system and Anthony Smith's ethno-symbolism.

This chapter further investigates the role of religion, primarily Christianity, in shaping the cultural identities of both the colonised and coloniser within the theoretical framework of identity building. By examining religion in the context of slavery and colonialism, we identify its weaponry for controlling enslaved people and its legitimacy to slavery under the guise of "the civilising mission."

Ultimately, in this chapter, we will discuss the interconnectedness between religion and ethnic identity building, providing theoretical frameworks for a deeper analysis of Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*.

## **1.2 Defining religion and ethnic identity**

Religion and ethnic identity are intertwined themes, as they both share the understanding of the sense of belonging embodied through social and cultural traditions, values and spirituality. During the colonial period, identity and power dynamics became central to defining an individual's affiliation, particularly for colonized minorities. These minorities were dominated by powerful forces that use religion to justify their control and force integration while claiming their cultural superiority, in addition to marginalising indigenous practices and identity. At the same time, religion also served as a framework for minority community building among the oppressed, providing a source of resilience and solidarity.

Ethnic identity was, at the same time, flexible rather than static, because the colonizers people fought for their cultural and social heritage maintenance amidst cultural suppression set by colonial forces. These colonial forces categorised the colonised groups based on their race and cultural heritage. Religion and ethnic identity are hence core themes for analysing the individuals' characters and psyche during the colonial period. These themes are rooted in self-determination and cultural and religious survival during that period.

The following section will delve into the theme of religion and its historical background, then shift to the way ethnic identity functioned amidst the colonial period. To better explain their significance in colonial theory and literature.

### 1.2.1. Religion

Religion is interrelated with human identity, as it plays a major role in defining who they are, from its early polytheistic traditions to the spread of Christianity. These movements significantly influenced societal culture, identity and worldviews. To further explore this interplay, it is essential to examine the origin of religion and the historical contexts of the religious movements, from their emergence to the evolution and ultimately to their thrive in the new world.

E. Durkheim's sociology of religion made a significant contribution to human society. Durkheim (1893) defined this theory as "a unified system of beliefs, and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden =belief and practices which unite into one single moral community called a church, all those who adhere to them" (p.47). Before him, religion was believed to originate from the fear of misfortune, hurricanes, earthquakes, etc... one would make hard work but still, despite the effort, he does not succeed. (Lucretius ,ca. 55 BCE/2007,p.12)

One started to imagine an invisible force forbidding this success; these natural calamities were considered to be an invisible force that outlawed this success. People, thus, would please this force by worshipping and devoting themselves, hence, this faith created the belief in religion. According to Durkheim (1915), "the creation of religion resulted from the investment in social power energy instead of natural power; one would increase his energy in group activity, courage and excitement" (p.212). This process not only creates religion but also strengthens social cohesion, laying the groundwork for collective identity formation.

Karl Marx, a pivotal figure in developing social and political theory has pointed out some ideas regarding the essence of religion. In his work *"A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right"*, Marx (1843/1970) states, "Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people" (p.131), expressing his critique of religion in the light of economic and social oppression. He further argues that religious suffering is, at the same time, the expression of real suffering and a protest against this suffering. Mark further identifies religion in the sight of the oppressed creature, the heart of the heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions.

This reflection encapsulates the view on religion in the light of economic and social oppression, suggesting that religion emerges from one's suffering, as it represents a record of the individual's struggle expressed in the socio-economic condition, by allowing them to articulate their discontent with their circumstances, it offers them a

hope for a better existence beyond their current reality. This duality thus positions religion as a mirror for both societal woes and a coping mechanism.

The religious influence on identity building dates back to the early indigenous beliefs in Europe, which were introduced by proto-Indo-European people who practised polytheistic rituals. These traditions laid the foundation of many pagan systems, among them, the Greeks and Romans developed a multifaceted pantheon—complex hierarchies of gods and goddesses, each associated with an aspect of life, nature. To the Celts, traditions related to rituals that focused on nature, a connection to the land, deities mainly linked to natural events, such as forests, rivers and seasonal cycles.

As mentioned in *The Encyclopaedia of World Religions* (2006),” Europe's religious landscape has been shaped by a succession of belief systems, from ancient pagan traditions to the dominance of Christianity, each leaving an indelible mark on the cultural and the societal fabric of the continent” (p.310-315). This observation underscores pagan traditions as the predominant belief system among the early Europeans before the rise of Christianity, which later supplanted them following the expansion of the Roman Empire and ultimately became the continent's core religion.

After Emperor Constantine 1's legislation of Christianity through the edict of Milan in 313 CE, it spread across the Roman Empire. Over time, Christianity, centred in Constantinople, was divided into two branches: orthodox Christianity, centred in Constantinople and controlled the east of Europe, particularly after the great schism of 1054, while Catholicism, centred in Rome and predominated Western Europe. Despite the early emergence of Catholicism and Orthodoxy, a new form of worship arose in the 16th century as a response to the policies of the Roman Catholic Church: Protestantism, which diversified the religious landscape.

McGrath (2007) states that protestanism is "not a single unified body, but rather a loose association of movements united by their opposition to Roman Catholicism and their emphasis on the primacy of Scripture"(p.23). This statement highlights the fundamentalist movement's echo with protest against the catholic church, including Lutheranism, named after Martin Luther, an influential monk, who contested catholic orthodoxy and criticized the church's indulgence trade and unethical activities, in his 1517 Ninety-five Theses.

John Calvin, another figure known for the Calvinism movement, which opposed the catholic church, presented in his work, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1536), a systematic understanding of the nature of God, Christian living and the church. (McGrath,2007,p.120). Both movements were transmitted to the Americas after emerging in Germany, England, and the Netherlands, where they dominated the New World

In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the early European explorers to the Americas deeply affected the native inhabitants' culture and spirituality, as the Europeans carried with them their diverse traditions and beliefs across the Atlantic. The Spanish and Portuguese, being the

first settlers in the New World, introduced Catholicism to the Americas; this movement was mainly spread to the center and south of America. Nevertheless, despite the later arrival of protestantism, it gained its dominance to North America. The various groups of protestants, including pilgrims, Anglicans and Puritans, who came from diverse parts of Europe and England, created colonies based on their beliefs, rejecting the catholic influence that had emerged elsewhere.

Mark Noll highlights in his *America's God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln*, "Religion was woven into the fabric of American society not merely as a private faith, but as a collective public endeavour to define national identity." (pp.3-43). This statement underscores the religious effect on shaping the new world's cultural and spiritual identity, creating a foundation of its later growth.

In conclusion, religion has played a significant role in shaping humans' identity and society. From its predominant polytheistic customs to the widespread adoption of Christianity in Europe, and later transmitted to the New World. The theoretical frameworks introduced by Durkheim and Marx suggested a dual role of adapting a unified societal force and a response to societal struggles. The transmission of the religious movements, mainly Catholicism and Protestantism, to the New World underscores their profound impact on shaping the early Americans' identity. The religious development demonstrates their societal values and shapes them, and thus remains a powerful force in defining human identity.

### **1.2.2. Ethnic identity**

Ethnic identity is often associated with the minority groups who struggled to maintain and build their identity, in a cultural blending and control by the majority groups. This concept is common in the colonial context, where dominant or major groups impose their cultural, political, and societal systems, while marginalising the minorities or indigenous cultures. To understand how these minority groups navigate and reconstruct their identities, it is essential first to define ethnic identity, examine its historical roots, and explore its intricate relationship with religion. Additionally, it is crucial to analyse how these groups have been influenced—and often disrupted—by the presence and power of dominant majority groups, which have historically sought to assimilate or suppress minority cultures.

Frederik Barth's work on *ethnic groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Culture Difference* is a work that turns the focus of ethnic studies from cultural features to the social boundaries that introduce these people. Barth (1969) argues that:

"The critical focus of Investigation from this point of view becomes the ethnic boundary that defines the group, not. The cultural stuff it encloses. The boundaries to which we must give our attention are of course social boundaries, though they may have territorial counterparts." (p.15.),

This Statement highlights that ethnic identity is not based on fixed features but rather on socially constructed through interactions, as it identifies the ethnic boundaries, which represent the social traits that make one social group different from another, due to cultural differences. Barth also suggests that similarities between ethnic groups often emerge through shared. Interactions, cultural exchanges, or overlapping practices, these shared elements demonstrate how cultural exchange can coexist with the persistence of distinct ethnic identities, making boundaries dynamic and fluid rather than rigid and static.

Homi Bhabha (1994), a post-colonial theorist, introduced the concepts of hybridity, mimicry and the third space in his exploration of how culture interacts and affects the cultural identity. In his work, *The Location of Culture*, he states: "It is the third space, though unrepresentable in itself, which constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew." (p. 37). Bhabha uses hybridity to point out the connection between the colonized and colonizers' cultural blending, creating a new and dynamic cultural form.

Bhabha also introduces the term mimicry to refer to the subtle imitation of the colonizer by the colonised in determining the colonizer's authority. Ultimately, the third place is a metaphoric "in-between" zone where cultural interactions occur and are negotiated. These concepts together prove the idea that cultural identity is not fixed but rather flexible and shaped through the ongoing processes. Bhabha's work emphasises how the colonized, despite the coloniser's oppression and threat of cultural identity erasure, can create space for a new and powerful form of identity.

Judith Weisenfeld highlights the interrelation of religion and racial identity among African Americans during the Great Migration. In her *A New World A-Coming: Black Religion and Racial Identity during the Great Migration*, she states, "For members of religio-racial movements, racial and religious identity was inseparable, grounded in the belief that God had ordained their distinctiveness as a people and their special role in the divine plan." (weisenfeld,2017,p.6). In this statement, Weisenfeld used the term racial religion to refer to some black African people from the 20<sup>th</sup> century, who believed that religion and race were deeply connected. These groups stated that defining their true racial history and identity showed their divinely ordained religious orientation. This perspective highlights the way racial and religious identities shaped the individual's self-definition, their societies and their connection to others, making these identities central to their social and spiritual lives.

Michel Foucault (1975) introduced the idea of the "invisible string" theory to refer to the unspoken rules and instructions individuals must follow to blend in with society. These invisible strings, which shape individual identity and social definitions, arise from forces of power that influence how people are expected to conduct themselves, thus playing a key role in shaping ethnic identity. In *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, he argues: "Power is exercised rather than possessed; it is not the 'privilege' of the dominant class, but the overall effect of its strategic positions" (p. 26). This

viewpoint emphasizes the comprehension of power relations in society by contending that power is logically created through interpersonal connections and interactions rather than being owned by people.

overall, the theoretical examples highlight the fact that ethnic identity does not spread as a static or fixed trait, but rather from a social and dynamic form that is flexible and shaped by historical context. Barth sheds light on the societal boundaries while Bhabha introduces the concepts of hybridity and the in-between space where identities are traded. Weisenfeld highlights the interplay of religion and ethnic identity, and ultimately, Foucault revealed the theory of the invisible string that refers to dictate societal expectations and shape identities within structures of control and power.

### **1.3.The Role of Religion in Identity Formation**

Religion has a multifaceted and profound role in shaping identity, influencing individuals as they navigate their sense of self and develop ethical codes from childhood to adulthood. Religious belief often provides comfort during times of crisis, affecting identity formation on multiple levels. Nevertheless, religion plays a complex role, as society's culture becomes diverse, individuals encounter a wide range of belief systems. People's modern and traditional spirituality is blended due to the fluidity and flexibility of religion.

Moreover, religion is crucial in processing personal identity, which involves defining the individual's distinctive features. These early encounters contribute to the development of the cognitive and affective framework that shapes people's perceptions of who they are and where they fit in the world (Erikson, 1968). For instance, a child brought up in a Christian household may embrace Christian principles such as compassion, forgiveness, and sacrifice. These principles become fundamental to the identity of the individuals as they grow, and their choices and behaviour become controlled by these values.

in the following section, we will explore the theme of religion as it serve in shaping both personal and societal identity. ro better understand how religion plays a pivotal role in humans identity, we will delve into the religious concept; building a feeling of community and belonging as well as determining ones place in the world.

#### **1.3.1. Religion as a Cultural Anchor**

Religion functions as a guiding system in cultural norms, it serves as a complex symbol to understand how people behave in society based on the religious framework. Clifford Geertz suggested the idea of religion as a symbolic system, these symbols are represented as signs or objects that act like tools that help people connect with something more significant than themselves.

In his essay, *Religion as a Cultural System* (1973), Geertz states: "Religion is a system of symbols which act to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic." (p.90), this passage captures that religion, as part of the culture, is related to the idea that culture is not just a set of shared behaviours and actions, but also a system of meaning. Thus, religion, being a cultural system, is related not only to people's behaviour but also to a set of symbols that indicate their roles in the world and provide a comprehension of their reality.

A. Smith introduces the ethno-symbolism and nationalism theory, examining how religious symbols, shared memories, and myths play a role in cultural symbols and help shape national identity and maintain it. Smith (2009) highlights in his *Ethno-symbolism and nationalism: A cultural approach*, that "Ethno-symbolism emphasises the role of myths, memories, traditions, and symbols of ethnic descent in the formation and persistence of nations. It regards the subjective dimensions of community, shared history, and cultural ties as the foundation of collective identities." (p.47). This statement refers to the significance of myths, religious symbols, values and traditions and how they function as anchors to maintain the foundation and persistence of the national identity in the contemporary nation-state.

Avtar Brah (2005) introduces the concept of diaspora space. She writes, "Diaspora space is not a place that is external to us but is constituted in the relations of belonging and the processes through which different forms of identity and culture are negotiated, reproduced, and transformed. It is in the interstices of multiple cultural locations where the dynamic and shifting processes of identity formation take place" (p.207). The diasporic space refers to the in-between space where people in displacement encounter mixed cultures, creating a change; through this, people adapt to cultural diversities while being cast away but still maintaining their connections to their roots and original identity. Religion has thus served as a cultural anchor to permit these people to maintain their origins and roots, despite their displacement in colonial circumstances

Religion works like a tree, keeping its leaves steady and connected even during storms. In society, religion helps people stay guided and rooted, even in the face of colonial dominance. Dipesh Chakrabarty introduced the concept of provincializing Europe to explain how European colonization, including the introduction of Christianity, interacted with existing cultures. Chakrabarty (2000) states, "European thought is at once both indispensable and inadequate in helping us to think through the experiences of political modernity in non-Western nations" (p. 6). The concept emphasises religion's role as an anchor, helping people maintain their cultural identity in the context of colonial oppression and challenging circumstances. Instead of simply adopting Christianity, Indigenous Americans blended it with their traditions, creating a sense of hybridity.

In conclusion, religion acts like an anchor in cultural identity, mainly during periods of colonialism, displacement, or migration, where people face situations that shed light on the role of their religious beliefs. Whether through the sense of hybridity introduced by Chakrabarty, the symbolic systems interpreted by Geertz, or the cultural symbols emphasized by Smith, religion helps people preserve their roots while adapting to new contexts. As seen in Brah's diaspora space, religion is crucial in shaping an individual's identity, particularly in the colonial oppression.

### **1.3.2. The Role of Faith in Ethnic Identity Preservation**

In cultural assimilation, faith plays a multifaceted role in helping individuals maintain their religious and cultural heritage. It is especially important to assist immigrants in integrating into their new environment. In the context of black African history and slavery, James H. Cone discusses how these minority groups maintain their distinctive identity and resist assimilation. In his work *Black Theology and Black Power*, H. Cone (1969) recounts, "Black Power is the power of black people to control their destiny. It is the complete emancipation of black people from white oppression by whatever means black people deem necessary. For black people, God's liberation is an important reality because God's freedom from oppression is the point of departure for the freedom of the oppressed." (p.82). This passage demonstrates that faith plays a crucial role in emancipating Black people, as they connect to the Christian church. It serves as a tool for preserving ethnic identity and resisting assimilation in an oppressive community.

The relationship between faith and psychology is intertwined, as both help people in positions of weakness rely on support. The connection between the two is that when an individual is displaced to a new country as a migrant, whether religious or non-religious, they often feel disoriented and scared. To ease these feelings, they often turn to churches, mosques, or other religious spaces for comfort and support. Emmanuel Lartey (2009) writes "Pastoral theology in an intercultural world is about listening, understanding, and accompanying people in ways that respect and celebrate their cultural and religious identities." (p.34). This emphasises how people hold on to their cultural and religious identity while engaging in a new environment. For Lartey, migrants do not just log to religious places for solace but to celebrate their cultural traditions and spiritual values.

Ethnic syncretism plays a crucial role in maintaining indigenous religions and ethnic identities. It refers to the blending of various religious customs, practices, and principles across ethnic and racial boundaries to create a new or revised religious system. Mintz & Price (1976) state, "The African slaves, in adapting Christianity to their own purposes, altered the meaning of the new religion, creating a syncretic system that allowed them to preserve and reassert their African identity in a Christian context." (p.45). In the context of African slaves, the statement refers to their forcible acceptance of Christianity, while still maintaining their indigenous religious practices, creating a hybrid system.

Jan Assmann's cultural memory theory is defined as the preservation of writings, images and rituals that are meant for recuperation related to various societies and eras. His book *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization: Writing, Remembrance, and Political Imagination* reveals how cultural memory serves as a backbone of the societal self-image, influencing how communities connect their past, present and future. Assmann (2011) argues that "cultural memory stabilizes and conveys the self-image of a society" by creating a connection between past and present" (p. 34). This statement highlights that cultural memory acts as a bridge to the global community, as cultural groups face the challenge of balancing their cultural identity with the demands of globalization. For each group, the challenge is to balance cultural particularism (preserving one's own culture) with cosmopolitanism (embracing a global, interconnected world).

As faith relates to human beliefs, people's rejection of societal judgment creates a form of religious rebellion. They define their faith in themselves, the community they establish, and the future they choose. Howard Thurman (1949) explains, "The disinherited will know for themselves that there is a Spirit at work in life and in the hearts of men which makes for wholeness and community." (p.105). This suggests that humans often turn to their communities for strength and recognition when society does not assist. This is especially true for those whose identities challenge societal norms. Close connections, whether with friends, family, or a romantic partner, can provide emotional support that society cannot offer. In other words, when traditional structures fail, individuals create a new form of faith by rejecting social conventions—one that is independent of approval from a world that may not understand them.

Overall, faith is a spiritual experience and a practical effort that connects the past, sustains the present, and shapes the future of ethnic identity. Concepts such as ethnic syncretism and cultural memory highlight the adaptability of faith as a tool for preserving identity in evolving environments, whether from a religious or psychological perspective. For marginalized groups, faith plays a crucial role in helping individuals maintain their cultural identity and a sense of belonging while navigating and integrating into an oppressive community.

#### **1.4. Religion in the Context of Slavery and Colonialism**

Religion and slavery have a deep connection, particularly through Christianity, as both are rooted in history. The Europeans arrived in the New World seeking refuge from oppressive laws, restrictions and monarchs who obstructed their freedom to worship God, looking for religious liberty. After their arrival, they forcibly brought African prisoners to the Americas, marking the beginning of a complex connection between religion and slavery.

In *Christian Missions and Colonial Empires*, Edward Andrews discusses how Europeans used Christianity to justify slavery and colonialism. He states, "Missionary work, though often presented as a benign effort to spread the gospel, was frequently aligned with the interests of colonial expansion, contributing to the subjugation and exploitation of Indigenous and enslaved peoples under the guise of moral and religious

improvement" (p. 32). This statement highlights the European mission to spread Christianity while also transforming Indigenous cultures through a "civilising mission." Furthermore, Europeans used Bible verses like "Servants, obey your masters" (Ephesians 6:5) to justify the enslavement of African people.

In the early colonial period, the African slaves who were forcibly brought to the Americas made it possible to cooperate with Christianity while maintaining their beliefs and practices. As most African slaves assumed an ultimate deity, the Christian concept of God was not difficult to adopt. The slaves received Jesus as their saviour and gave Him specific powers through their faith in Elegba as a heavenly mediator and Yuruba God.

Mintz and Price (1976) state, "The slaves brought with them specific African cultural forms, but these forms were not rigid; they were flexible, open-ended, and capable of being adapted to new environments" (P. 42). This illustrates the blending influence of African slaves with the Christian traditions. They embraced another practice which they believed to be similar to theirs. The Afro-Caribbean Vodou tradition is an example of a syncretic religion—a belief they brought with them to the Caribbean and was easily adapted to the hostile environment. their spiritual costumes were not static but blended the Christian beliefs and other indigenous Caribbean traditions.

In the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, most enslaved people were not converted to Christianity, yet with the widespread protestant evangelicalism, focusing on the individual's liberty and direct connection with God brought a huge transformation among the enslaved men and women. Nat Turner, an enslaved black preacher, engaged in a rebellion to end slavery. Turner (1831) notes "I was at this time and had been for a long time, in the habit of praying and reading the Bible, and I felt a deep conviction that I was called upon to avenge the oppressed and to destroy the evil which had been done to them" (as cited in Greenberg, 2003, p.48). The statement explains his call for rebellion, which lasted four days. He believed he was divinely chosen by God, with his mission being to end slavery. His cause gained increasing support and later inspired abolitionists.

Frederick Douglass, a Black American abolitionist, wrote about his opposition to slavery and defended the rights of Black people. In his famous book *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, Douglass (1845) states, "I love the pure, peaceable, and impartial Christianity of Christ: I therefore hate the corrupt, slaveholding, women-whipping, cradle-plundering, partial and hypocritical Christianity of this land" (118). This highlights how Christianity is presented as a source of love and peace. Douglass, like many other enslaved people, used these words to envision justice and freedom. For many enslaved individuals, the Bible provided hope, with stories like that of Moses and the Israelites, who lived in bondage but put their faith in God and were ultimately rescued and saved.

Despite the harsh conditions they endured, enslaved people maintained their cultural heritage and identity and withstood oppression. This cultural preservation was achieved through singing, sacred rituals brought from their homeland, and a syncretic form of

religion. W.E.B. Du Bois's double consciousness aligns with the African slaves' maintenance of their identity while dealing with the dominant forces. In *the Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois (1903) cites "The religion of the South, especially the religion of the slave, is the religion of the free... It is no mere intellectual theory, but a deep and abiding belief in the possibility of freedom, even in the midst of suffering" (p.94). This explains how religion played a crucial role in post-slavery when formerly enslaved people faced segregation. Even with the end of slavery, freedom wasn't fully realized, and many former slaves continued to rely on their religion as a form of escape from the harsh realities of the post-slavery world.

To sum up, the connection between religion and slavery during the colonial period played a crucial role in maintaining the cultural heritage of enslaved people. Despite the oppressive conditions, enslaved individuals blended African beliefs and practices with Christianity, which became a foundational belief that helped preserve their cultural identity. Figures like Frederick Douglass and Nat Turner are examples of seeking freedom through religion and as sources of rebellion. Double consciousness illustrates the psychological struggle of enslaved people to maintain their identity in the post-slavery world. Overall, slavery became a symbol of resilience, offering enslaved individuals hope, solace, and the promise of freedom during colonisation, slavery, and the post-slavery era.

### **1.5.The Role of Christianity in the Formation of Colonial Identities**

During the period of European exploration, Christianity was very important in the expansion of European powers. The "civilizing mission" concept justified the reshaping of colonized identities. The term "colonization of consciousness" (vol 1,p.235), introduced by Jean and John L. Comaroff in *Of Revelation and Revolution* (1991), refers to how colonial powers transformed the cultural and religious identities of the colonized. forcing European societal and cultural traditions reshaped the identities of both the colonizers and the colonized. This statement thus highlights that Christianity was not just a spiritual force but mainly an imperial tool set to control and form both the colonizers and colonized.

Before contact with European forces, Africans believed strongly in understanding their personhood. Their identity was defined in their relationship with others and their community. However, the arrival of European missionaries was a turning point in shaping African identities. These missionaries convinced them that their beliefs were wrong and encouraged them to embrace the European ideologies, causing tension as they did not create cultural replacement but a struggle between two different ways of self-understanding and community.

W.E.B. Du Bois (1989) explains, "two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder" (p. 5). This quote captures the concept of double consciousness as it is described to refer to the

struggle of the colonised to claim their identities amidst colonial oppression. The quote emphasises that in the case of Africans, it is difficult to embrace the culture imposed by colonial powers while still maintaining their traditional identities. Instead of fully submitting to the superior powers' cultural heritages, Africans created a hybrid identity, which refers to blending both their cultural traditions and the new Christian beliefs imposed by the superior powers to form a new cultural identity.

The New England colonial identity was mainly shaped by Christianity, especially by the Puritans, who believed they were the chosen ones with a duty to build a divine society. As historian Edmund S. Morgan (1972) explains, "The Puritans were convinced that they had been chosen by God to create a godly community. They were not merely to escape the religious persecution of England; they were to establish a society that would be a beacon to the rest of the world" (*The Puritan Experiment*, p. 45). This shows how the Puritans saw the colonies not just as an escape, but as an opportunity to create a heavenly society, with religion playing a central role in shaping their governance.

Christianity in the Americas created social inequality, often believing themselves to be God's chosen, mainly because of their religion. They made Native Americans believe that in order to be civilized, they had to be Christian; otherwise, they would be treated badly. This belief made them justify slavery and discrimination. As historian Winthrop Jordan (1968) explains, "Christianity, in its most powerful form, was wielded to legitimize slavery" (p. 45). This means that the colonies justified slavery as legitimate and acceptable. This highlights how they used the Bible to justify unfair acts and how the colonized saw themselves based on their race or religion.

Overall, Christianity played a significant role in shaping colonial identity, affecting both the colonizers and the colonized. The concept of the civilizing mission was used not to transmit the spiritual sense of religion but to control and dominate the colonized, justifying the colonizers' power. In colonized Africa, Christianity led to the creation of a hybrid identity, marked by the confusion between traditional cultural identities and the imposed European identity. Christianity in America was used to justify social inequality and discrimination against non-Christians, particularly through the legitimization of slavery. Moreover, in New England, the Puritans believed they were God's chosen people and used this belief as an excuse to build a pure and divine society. Finally, Christianity was a tool to maintain social power in the colonial context.

## **1.6.Conclusion**

In this chapter, we have explored the interconnection of the themes of religion and ethnic formation, as both have a significant impact on individuals, particularly during colonialism and displacement. And social oppression. The concept of ethno-symbolism by Smith demonstrates how cultural identity is shaped by religious traditions, uniting people under shared beliefs and practices. Religion as a cultural anchor allows us to examine how these people maintain their identities and sense of belonging.

through the frameworks of hybridity and diaspora space, religion allows us to examine its reinterpretation and role amidst colonialism, displacement, and cultural oppression. This chapter explained how religion evolved when being exposed to a new environment. Moreover, this chapter examined how religion, particularly Christianity, had an impact on shaping both the colonised and coloniser, being a means of cultural and social oppression.

By examining religion in the principle of slavery and colonialism, we identify how Christianity was used to control and justify slavery through the concept of civil mission. However, the enslaved resisted full assimilation by blending both native and Christian spiritual and cultural traditions. Ultimately, figures like Nat Turner and Frederick Douglass saw Christianity as a source of empowerment and resilience, guiding marginalized people to seek justice and challenge oppression through religion.

# Chapter Two:

## Ethnic and Cultural Background

## **2.1 Introduction**

America was a fertile, empty land until the age of discovery, when explorers were drawn to the land in the pursuit of a better life, believing it to be a rich continent that encouraged colonisation and hence invited a wide range of different cultures and ethnic origins. Ultimately, this chapter gives the historical and cultural background of the early American settlers, highlighting the wide role that religious identity plays in self-determination and the fight for justice.

This chapter explores how each ethnic group in the Americas established roots through culture and ethnic diversity. It also highlights the development of Indigenous religious and cultural traditions, particularly in response to European colonialism, which ultimately dominated the land and led to widespread cultural and spiritual transformation.

Moreover, this chapter portrays the role of religion in colonial America being a system of beliefs and serving as a battlefield for resistance, identity, and power. Christianity became a weapon for emancipation, even if it was used as a rationale for slavery and invasion. This was especially true for African and Indigenous peoples, who reinterpreted Christianity to affirm their humanity. Ultimately, this chapter concludes with a historical and cultural study that enhances our understanding of Toni Morrison's *Mercy*.

## **2.2 Colonial America's Ethnic Landscape**

The ethnic landscape of colonial America was shaped by diverse migrations, forced displacements, and social dynamics. The ancestors of Indigenous peoples, Paleo-Indians, arrived via the Beringia land bridge from Siberia, forming distinct civilisations across North America. While tribes like the Iroquois, Powhatan, and Pueblo maintained, Maya, Toltecs, and Aztecs built advanced societies.

The European colonisation that began with Columbus in 1492 led to forced assimilation, violence, disease and destroyed indigenous populations. However, the indigenous resilience preserved cultural identities despite these hardships. French, English, Dutch and Spanish settlements further formed the continent. The French engaged in the fur trade and Jesuit conversions, the Dutch established new Amsterdam before English control in 1664, the English settled in Virginia and relied on tobacco and enslaved labour.

Meanwhile, Puritans in New England formed religious communities, and Spanish Catholic missions sought Indigenous conversion, impacting resistance like the Pueblo Revolt (1680). The Anglo-Spanish War (1585–1604) and the French and Indian War (1754–1763) fostered European control, while the Great Awakening (1730s–1740s) focused on religious individualism. The Industrial Revolution further cemented colonial economies and European cultural influence.

Between the 15th and 19th centuries, the Transatlantic Slave Trade forcibly brought millions of Africans to the Americas, primarily to Latin America and the Caribbean. Coming from regions like Senegambia, Angola, and the Gold Coast, they represented ethnic groups such as the Akan, Igbo, Yoruba, and Kongo. Despite displacement, they maintained their cultural heritages, including language, religion, and agricultural expertise, particularly in rice cultivation, which greatly enriched colonial economies. Initially, some Africans arrived as contracted servants with the possibility of gaining freedom, but by the late 1600s, Virginia laws institutionalised genetic, race-based slavery.

Bacon's Rebellion (1676) accelerated this shift as elites sought a more controlled labour force. In response to oppression, Africans resisted through maroon communities, petitions, and early abolitionist movements. Although forced assimilation threatened their heritage, African Americans maintained kinship networks, religious traditions, music, and cuisine, shaping a distinct identity that would later fuel struggles for freedom and equality.

The blending of African, European, and indigenous elements, which created a unique and changing ethnic identity, established the early American cultural and social fabric.

### **2.2.1 The Indigenous People**

The history of the Indigenous people throughout their journey to the Americas is one of survival, adaptability, and resiliency. From their early travel across the Beringia land bridge to the foundation of Mesoamerican civilisation and the spread of societies, their culture thrived from distinct spirituality, political systems, and societal traditions. Nevertheless, colonisation reshaped their identity and connection to the land, significantly impacting their spiritual and societal heritage.

During the last glacial maximum (26,000 to 19,000 years ago), the Americas hosted the invasion of the first people to the land. Entering from the northeast, mammoth steps to North America through the Beringia land bridge, which spanned between northeastern Siberia and western Alaska due to the decline of sea level. These hunter-gatherers formed populations which ended with their expansion in the south of the Laurentide Ice Sheet, causing a rapid spread southward, living in North and South America by 12,000 to 14,000 years ago. The Paleo Indians are known as the earliest populations in the Americas, before 10,000 years ago, leaving behind evidence of their existence in archaeological tools such as the Clovis and Folsom points.

The distribution of blood types suggested that language characteristics, and genetic makeup revealed by scientific evidence like DNA suggested a connection between the Indigenous Americans and Siberian populations, supporting their ancestry hypothesis

and migratory pattern. Over time, their spread in America marked a great increase in regional cultures, as they created societal groups that would adapt to the unique spiritual and structural society.

The migration of people from the north to central and southern America led to the rise of Mesoamerican civilisation. The Olmecs (1500 BCE–400 BCE) rose as one of the earliest cultures. Settling in the Gulf of Mexico, they were famous for their colossal stone heads, early writing and calendar systems, and beliefs including self-bloodletting, animals and possibly human sacrifices. Their cultural and religious costumes greatly influenced later civilisations.

The Maya (2000 BCE–1540 CE), occupying the Yucatán Peninsula, advanced in writing, astronomy, and mathematics, with religious practices centred on nature, and oral traditions that created storytellers, human sacrifices, and ceremonial burials to gain divine favour. By 900 CE, the Toltecs emerged, blending Mayan and Olmec traditions, and were later revered by the Aztecs (1325–1521 CE), who saw them as intellectual and cultural predecessors. The Aztecs, the last great Mesoamerican civilisation, continued these polytheistic traditions, emphasising ritual sacrifice to sustain cosmic balance. The concept that life and death are intertwined forces was mirrored in these religious traditions, and it would subsequently impact how Indigenous peoples responded to Christianity and European colonial power in the Americas.

Before European colonisation, Indigenous tribes across North America maintained distinct political and spiritual traditions that shaped their ethnic identities. The Iroquois Confederacy honoured spirits like the Great Spirit and the Three Sisters, seeking balance with nature by praying before meals and using every part of hunted animals. The Powhatan Confederacy performed rituals to appease Okee, with shamans using red puccoon roots for healing and ceremonies marking life transitions. Similarly, the Pueblo tribes of the Southwest practised kachina worship, with masked dancers embodying spirits and performing rituals like the Corn Dance to ensure fertility.

The Anglo-Powhatan War (1610–1614), the first ever recorded war in present-day Virginia, originated from England's demands for land and harsh strategies against the Powhatan. In addition to warfare, the indigenous suffered from forced assimilation, diseases and displacement. European illnesses like measles, smallpox and tuberculosis caused catastrophic losses, erasing up to 90% of the native populations by the late 1500s. the wars triggered, ultimately, resulted from diverse indigenous responses to the European invasions, like the Inca struggle and the Pueblo revolt.

The biological genocide reformed indigenous Western relations, as settlers proceeded to force tribes westward. By 1870, native children were forcibly removed from their families to boarding schools where their culture was erased through forbidden language, traditions and abuse. Captain Richard H. Pratt's infamous quote, “kill the Indian in him,

and save the man” (as cited in Pratt, 1892, p.46), encapsulated the assimilation efforts. Native cultures steadily declined under the dominant Western belief that indigenous people were a “vanishing race” whose heritage would not survive until the 20th century.

To sum up, native Americans’ experiences were shaped by the Europeans’ missionary work and labour exploitation. Despite the cruelty of Europeans through war, illnesses and cultural suppression, indigenous people maintained their cultural identity and resisted cultural erasure, and thus, the indigenous civilisations rose through syncretism, blending European and indigenous cultural heritages.

### **2.2.2 Europeans**

Columbus's voyage to the Americas in 1492 initiated the beginning of European colonisation. Following the Spanish expedition and the initial contact with the native Americans, who had been treated harshly, the European forces expanded through the New World, witnessing conflicts over religion and dominance. Protestant Catholic conflicts resulted in the Anglo-Spanish War (1585-1604). Later on, conflicts for land saw the French and Indian War (1754–1763). Ultimately, the European conflicts for land, in addition to the industrial revolution, reshaped colonial economies, changed the American social and political landscape and encouraged European cultural dominance.

While searching for a westward route from Europe to Asia, Columbus accidentally stumbled upon the Americas. Upon arriving in the Caribbean in 1492, he first sighted the islands of the Bahamas before reaching Hispaniola, present-day Haiti and the Dominican Republic. Thinking he had reached the East Indies, he initiated Spanish colonisation. His encounters with the indigenous peoples were marked by misunderstandings, which led to violence, enslavement, and the spread of disease. In his journal, Columbus (1492) wrote, “They would make fine servants... With fifty men we could subjugate them all and make them do whatever we want.” (as cited in Zinn, 2003, p. 3). Unlike Columbus, Amerigo Vespucci realised these lands were not part of Asia but a new continent, naming “America” in his honour.

Other explorers, such as Rodrigo de Bastidas and the Portuguese in Brazil, were sent to discover the New World. But unlike Columbus, they forged peaceful relations which were initially built on trade and commerce, rather than restoring violence, fear and slavery. However, the native's interactions depended on how they reacted to the newcomers. Some, like the Aztecs and the Incas, resisted colonization through warfare, while others forged strategic alliances with European powers.

Between 1500 and 1800, European settlers shaped the demographic and cultural landscapes of the Americas, intending to pursue religious freedom, economic opportunity, and political stability. While Spain and Portugal led early migration efforts, by the 17th century, France, England, and the Netherlands had also established significant colonies. The Dutch founded New Amsterdam (present-day New York),

focusing on a commercial hub with a diverse population, surrendering control to the English in 1664. The French settled in New France, present-day Canada and along the Mississippi River, where they developed a major fur trade and maintained a relatively cooperative relationship with indigenous people. In North America, English settlers played a crucial role. Colonies like Virginia initially struggled but eventually thrived through tobacco cultivation, relying first on indentured labourers and later on enslaved Africans. While the Middle Colonies became ethnically and religiously diverse, attracting Germans, Dutch, Scots-Irish, and others, New England settlers, primarily Puritans, sought religious autonomy and built family-based communities. European migration facilitated settler colonialism, leading to the displacement and cultural suppression of Native Americans. By the time of the American Revolution, British North America had developed into a complex, multicultural society that was ultimately shaped by English, African, and other European influences.

Between 1600 and 1776, the American landscape was greatly influenced by religious Europe. The catholic missions from Spanish colonialism intended to convert native populations to Christianity by establishing European-style settlers. However, harsh treatments provoked resistance, as seen in the 1680 Pueblo Revolt. Moreover, the French colonial rival that founded Quebec in 1608 also pursued conversions through Jesuit missionaries. The British colonies imposed strict religious observance, with financial support and lots of church attendance for ministers. eight of its thirteen colonies had created churches, and dissenters were subjected to persecution. while most colonies were identified as Christians, there was no religious unity, as various denominations competed for influence.

despite England's church's legal determination in the south resulted in the persecution of other churches, particularly the Baptists in Virginia, the mid-Atlantic and the southern colonies, populations were religiously diversified, including the Lutherans, Catholics, and Quakers. however, Rhode Island and Pennsylvania encouraged religious tolerance. The Great Awakening of the 1730s and 1740s spurred a religious renaissance that prioritised individual conversion and questioned established clerical authority, elevating concepts of human conscience over institutional control.

by the 1760s these concepts and rationalist views that supported religious tolerance and the separation of church and state fuelled colonial resistance to british authority. African slavery was brought to the Chesapeake colonies in 1619 as a result of tobacco cultivation's success, solidifying European social and religious structures in the New World. Britain's more populated colonies made sure Protestant influence expanded extensively, strengthening the theological and cultural foundation of North America, even if Spain and France claimed greater holdings.

The Anglo-Spanish War (1585–1604) was a sporadic conflict between England and Spain that was not officially declared, but was deeply related to cultural, religious, and economic rivalries. Protestant England, under Elizabeth I, battled with Catholic Spain, under the rule of Philip II, over the future of Christianity in Europe. England's support for the Dutch Revolt, maintaining circles of raids against Spanish ships, and trade disputes intensified hostilities. The war led to consequences such as the destruction of the Spanish Armada in 1588 and the failure of the English counter-armada, in addition to the Spanish interventions in France and Ireland, where religious tensions played a critical role.

more than a century later, the French and Indian War (1754-1763), part of the global Seven Years War, mirrored identical cultural and religious divisions. protestant Britain and catholic France fought for dominance in North America and India, with France initially gaining the upper hand. However, under William Pitt, Britain secured decisive victories at Plassey (1757), Quebec (1759), and Montreal (1760).

while France ceded western land to Spain, the Treaty of Paris (1763) ceded vast territories to Britain, including Canada and the east of the Mississippi. this period also marked the industrial revolution's rise, which further reinforced European cultural dominance by reorganising colonial economies, enforcing private land ownership, erasing local industries such as India's textile trade, and imposing European laws, language and political structures, building global identities for centuries.

Overall, the initial interactions between Europeans and Native Americans were complex, influenced by violence, power struggles, and commerce, as they predicted the turbulent ties that would characterise colonial history. Deeper cultural and theological distinctions were represented in conflicts like the French and Indian War and the Anglo-Spanish War, which strengthened European domination. By suffocating native businesses and enforcing foreign laws and traditions, the Industrial Revolution increasingly cemented colonial economies under European rule. The contemporary Americas, whose colonial legacies still influence cultural identities, economic structures, and international power dynamics, were made possible by these long-lasting changes.

### **2.2.3 Africans**

The transatlantic slave trade (TAST) marked the biggest force of migration in American history between the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, which displaced some 12 million Africans from their homelands to the New World. Of those, almost 95% were transported to Latin America, mostly South America and the Caribbean, while just 5% were brought to the present-day United States. This large-scale forced migration significantly altered the genetic diversity of African-descendant communities in the Americas, which led to modern genomic research to determine their ancestral roots.

Under Spanish and Portuguese rule, commerce started in 1501 and by the 17th century had spread to northern European countries.

Africans came from the west, central and sometimes eastern Africa, which included places like Angola, Senegambia and the gold coast. they maintained unique language, religions and cultural practices and derived from several ethnic groupings such as the Akan, Igbo, Yoruba, and Kango. They maintained elements of their culture, including ritual scarification, language, and spiritual beliefs, despite being forcibly relocated.

In colonial America, slavery evolved gradually rather than being implemented all at once. Initially, both European and African labourers were often indentured servants with the possibility of gaining freedom. At first, status was largely determined by religion—non-Christians could be enslaved, but conversion could lead to freedom. However, over time, laws shifted to make slavery race-based and permanent.

Anthony Johnson, originally an indentured servant, later became a free landowner. However, after his death, Virginia seized his property, labelling him an "alien" due to his African ancestry. In 1662, Virginia passed a law making slavery hereditary, and by 1705, legislation firmly established Black and Indigenous individuals as property. Another Virginian of African descent, Elizabeth Key, won her freedom in court by proving she was baptised and that her father was English. However, shortly after her case, Virginia enacted laws ensuring that children born to enslaved mothers would also be enslaved. These legal shifts ultimately impacted Johnson's own family, as Virginia courts denied his descendants their inheritance due to their race. By the late 1600s, such laws had solidified racial slavery as a permanent institution, legally stripping Black people of freedom and property rights.

Bacon's Rebellion in 1676, in which former indentured servants rebelled, further accelerated the transition to racial slavery. Elites increasingly viewed enslaved Africans as a more controllable labour force (Morgan,1975,p.297). With the expansion of the Royal African Company and later English parliamentary policies, the transatlantic slave trade intensified, bringing more Africans into the colonies. By the 18th century, lifelong racial slavery had become deeply ingrained in American society.

African Americans, both free and enslaved, used a variety of strategies to oppose colonial tyranny and preserve their identity. Throughout the Americas, the Caribbean, Brazil, and portions of Africa, Maroon communities formed independent civilisations with unique cultures, governance, trading networks, and military defences. In Jamaica and Suriname, colonial powers like the British were forced to negotiate treaties after escaped Africans successfully withstood European military attempts to exterminate them. Similar communities developed in North America, such as the Great Dismal Swamp and the Bas de Fleuve region in Louisiana.

African Americans in the colonies also fought against slavery and promoted their rights via organised institutions, petitions, and literacy. In a 1723 letter to the Archbishop of London, an enslaved Virginian made the first recorded written plea for freedom, calling for religious instruction and freedom. Freed African Americans established churches, schools, and charitable organisations after the Revolutionary War, creating a political and social base that consistently supported democracy and advocated for abolition. The farming skills of Africans, particularly in the rice production zone, greatly influenced the agricultural environment of early colonial America.

furthermore, the Virginia governor, Sir William Berkeley, had recognised the talent that African slaves held in rice cultivation, which helped the colonies' economies increase. This knowledge originated in West and West Central Africa, where societal structures and environmental factors shaped agricultural methods. To adjust to environmental limitations, Africans created practices like manual tillage and soil fertility control. Rainfall patterns, vegetation, and agricultural practices were all impacted by the region's varied climate, which included the Guinea and Sudanic zones. Africans kept these farming methods and brought them to the Americas despite the disturbances caused by the Atlantic slave trade.

the African American identity was influenced by creolization and miscegenation in ways other than agriculture. enslaved Africans lost their native tongues and distinct ethnic identities, but they kept important facets of their West African heritages, including family structures, religious convictions, music, language, and customs. enslaved Africans established extensive kin networks for assistance, demonstrating the importance of family in cultural preservation. Even after converting to Christianity, African religious customs like spirit possession and water rituals continued, and naming customs strengthened family bonds. In colonial America, African-American identity was established by these cultural components.

in conclusion, Millions of Africans were forcefully brought to the Americas during the Transatlantic Slave Trade, and despite persecution, they preserved their traditional customs. Their knowledge of agriculture, especially the production of rice, had a big impact on the colonial economy. Ultimately, slavery turned into a permanent, racialised system that rejected African Americans' rights, but they resisted through institutions, petitions, and maroon communities. A distinct African-American identity that combined African ancestry with contemporary circumstances was shaped in part by creolisation. Their tenacity and efforts prepared the way for later freedom and equality movements in American history

### **2.3. Christianity and Indigenous Beliefs in the Early American Colonies**

Religion was an important aspect of the indigenous lives, with a deep connection between understanding nature and the universe. They shared threads such as animism, which holds that all aspects of nature, including plants, animals, rivers, and celestial bodies, are imbued with spiritual traditions. In addition to various minor spirits, deities, and supernatural creatures, many Indigenous tribes believed in a Great Spirit or Creator. Rituals, rites, and oral traditions were essential to preserve the balance between people, the natural world, and the spirit world.

Purification, rejuvenation, and communion with spiritual forces were achieved through rituals including vision quests, sweat lodges, and ceremonial dances (like the Sun Dance and Green Corn Ceremony). Indigenous religious leaders, such as shamans and medicine people, acted as intermediaries between the human and spiritual realms, providing guidance, healing, and protection. Stories and myths passed down through generations helped explain the origins of the world, the behaviour of animals, and the moral values that governed tribal life.

Instead of being centralised and rigid, Indigenous spiritual traditions were fluid and flexible, with each generation adapting to changing conditions. This deep-rooted spiritual worldview shaped Indigenous societies and their responses to European colonisation, including resistance, adaptation, and the blending of old and new traditions.

The indigenous people were strongly affected by the arrival of Christianity in the Americas. After Columbus' expedition, Spain expanded its empire, spreading Catholicism to New Spain, New France, and Maryland through missionaries, while Protestantism was exposed to other colonies. When persuasion failed, the friars resorted to intimidation, believing Catholicism to be the only true religion. This reflected broader religious tensions during colonisation, as the French spread Catholicism throughout Louisiana and the Mississippi Valley, while the Spanish enforced it through missions in Florida, Georgia, and California. Puritanism, meanwhile, formed New England, where they imposed strict religious laws on occasions such as the Salem Witch trials. Anglicanism, on the other hand, emerged throughout Virginia in the predominantly protestant British colonies.

Despite puritan dominance, Mennonites, Quakers and Lutherans became rooted in the centres of religious tolerance formed in Delaware, Pennsylvania, and Rhode Island. Maryland, initially a Catholic stronghold, saw increased persecution of Catholics after Protestants took power following the English Civil War. Anti-Catholic sentiment was widespread throughout the colonies, fuelled by Reformation-era fears of papal influence.

In the 1670s, Pueblo's resistance to forced conversion in the Southwest led to crackdowns on spiritual leaders, arrests, and executions, culminating in the Pueblo Revolt. Though the Spanish eventually returned, they adopted a more accommodating approach toward Native religious practices. Over time, this complex religious history shaped ongoing debates about the role of faith in American public life.

The native Americans initially accepted Christianity, but when European forces introduced it with violence and force, led by conquistadors, the native Americans eventually resisted and rejected it. Some native Americans denounced Christian hypocrisy, referring to it as being oppressive rather than redeemed. This act led the missionaries to lament their settlers' atrocities, marked by marginalising, massacres and forced labour, undermining their message. Other European settlers, such as the Jesuits and Portuguese officials, facilitated conversions by guiding some indigenous in mission settlements. These native Americans ultimately embraced Christianity as they perceived the Christian God as more powerful than their own.

Despite the spread of Jewish and Catholic groups on the continent, Christianity dominated colonial America, affecting social hierarchy, education and legislation. The middle colonies, led by the Dutch and Quaker ideals, supported religious tolerance, while New England's Puritans imposed firm religious adherence. Southern colonies, under the dominance of Anglicans, requested church attendance and rejected religious opposition. Church meetings in the South also served as political deliberations and community gatherings. Hence, religion governed daily life.

Religious convictions shaped funeral and marriage traditions, which evolved from simple rituals to elaborate social gatherings. Additionally, Christianity reinforced Protestant dominance in forming early American identity by legitimising colonialism, indigenous conversion, and social empowerment. As it was a tool to justify slavery, with biblical passages reinforcing the belief that enslavement was part of God's plan. Those who opposed slavery were seen as troublemakers defying Christian doctrine, and educating slaves was often prohibited to prevent rebellion.

To sum up, Christianity was imposed on colonial America, changing the cultural, political and social environment while upsetting indigenous spiritual traditions, fuelling struggles such as the Pueblo revolt. Some native Americans opposed Christian empowerment, but others submitted for survival or religious reasons. Social hierarchy, colonial laws, and the rationale for slavery were all strengthened by Christianity. However, subsequent battles for religious freedom in America were made possible by the continuation of Indigenous traditions, religious plurality, and discussions about faith and governance.

## **2.4. Slavery and the Role of Religion in Social Hierarchies**

The Portuguese initiated the transatlantic slave trade by bringing enslaved Africans to Brazil. While slavery had previously existed in Africa, European states and the Church worked together to expand and justify it. Papal decrees and biblical passages were used as theological support. In *Dum Diversas* (1452), Pope Nicholas V authorised the enslavement of non-Christians, granting Spain and Portugal permission to enslave Africans for Christian conversion. Although some monasteries treated their slaves with a degree of humanity, many clerics, monks, and nuns actively participated in the trade.

For most of the last two millennia, Christian churches tolerated and engaged in slavery. While it was once common for Christians to own fellow Christians, this practice became less acceptable in the early modern era. Until the 18th and 19th centuries, the majority of Catholic and Protestant churches upheld slavery, despite occasional opposition. Abolitionist movements—often led by Black Christians—eventually challenged this stance. Enslaved people practised Christianity with resilience, using church communities for support and advocacy. Scholars have examined how enslaved people shaped religious practices and how Christianity contributed to racial classifications. Recent research highlights African and Native American perspectives, offering a deeper understanding of the connections between race, slavery, and religion.

In 1548, Pope Paul III reaffirmed the church's approval of slavery. Protestant institutions supported slavery; the church of England owned the Codrington plantation in Barbados, where enslaved workers were treated brutally and endured gruelling work. Jesuit missionaries enslaved people under the guise of evangelism. Therefore, both protestant and catholic institutions under the religious organisations legitimized and justified slavery rather instead of opposing it.

The plantation system in the Americas rose increasingly due to the decline of labour as a consequence of European diseases brought to the New World that affected the native Americans. Enslaved Africans became the labour force, especially in the south of America, where the majority were brought there. Plantation owners held financial and political powers through the massive economic worth of enslaved labour. religious powers played a key role in maintaining this system. However, some southern churches, such as Baptist, Methodist, and Presbyterian, defended slavery, and further cited biblical passages that forbade it. Clergy, on the other hand, aligned Christian teaching with slaveholders' interests, encouraging social hierarchies. Religious institutions further justified the Atlantic slave trade after aligning it with Christian conversion. After the expansion of the plantation economy, such as crops like cotton and sugar, religious organisations greatly validated slavery, integrating it into both theological and social structures.

Slaveholders used the Bible to justify slavery, presenting it as part of God's divine order. They cited passages from both the Old and New Testaments, including Paul's letters, which acknowledged slavery without condemning it. The "Curse of Ham" from Genesis 9:24-25 was widely misinterpreted to argue that Africans were destined for enslavement, despite no biblical link between Canaan and Africa. This manipulation of scripture illustrates how religious teachings were deliberately distorted to uphold

Biblical passages asserting protections for enslaved people, such as Exodus 21:2, which highlighted Hebrew slaves' freedom after six years, were ignored, as Western slave societies considered Africans their property. Enslaved Africans developed their interpretations, emphasising that god has asserted their liberation rather than condemning them. Figures like Nat Turner, Maria Stewart, and David Walker turned to exodus and diverse passages to affirm their freedom. Their reinterpretation of the bible passages, claimed their rights and freedom despite oppressive religious structures.

Biblical passages asserting protections for enslaved people, such as Exodus 21:2, which highlighted Hebrew slaves' freedom after six years, were ignored, as Western slave societies considered Africans their property.

Exodus provided enslaved people with spiritual hope:

“And the lord said, I have surely seen the affliction of my people which are in Egypt and have heard their cry by reason of their taskmasters; for I know their sorrows; and I am come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land unto a good land and a large, unto a land flowing the milk and honey.”

(Exodus 3:7-8, King James Version)

This passage comforted enslaved people by affirming that god sees their suffering and that divine liberation was possible.

Enslaved Africans maintained their cultural heritages, which included oral traditions, language, dance, nature, and music as tools of resistance against cultural erasure. They further blended their spiritual traditions, such as Vodou, with Christianity, reinforcing resistance. Cultural identity was maintained through their heritages and ancestral knowledge, opposing cultural erasure and offering a lesson on resistance.

Throughout the transatlantic slave trade, religion served as a form of tyranny and a form of resistance. Christian Europeans rationalised slavery through their misinterpretation of bible passages, while enslaved Africans used these verses as a way of resistance and to claim their struggle for freedom. The European forces controlled social hierarchies through the bible text. Despite justification for slavery, Africans

fought against ideological and physical oppression by maintaining their culture and spirituality, contributing to social justice and human rights.

## **2.5. Conclusion**

This chapter has provided a historical and cultural background of the early Americas, which is now the USA, by discussing the different ethnic groups that emerged. It has also been concluded that the diversity in religion and costumes is encountered at an early settlement.

furthermore, this chapter illustrates the ethnic transformations that occurred among indigenous people as they interacted with European missionaries and colonial forces. these connections ultimately led to suffering and oppression, not only for indigenous communities but also for Africans, who were brought as enslaved labourers to fuel the economy of a land that had been invaded and dominated by Europeans.

in chapter three, we will delve into the literary examination of a mercy. the upcoming chapter, based on the cultural and ethnic background discussed here and is where the theoretical framework will be applied to deepen the analysis.

# Chapter three

## a literary analysis of *A Mercy*

### **3.1. Introduction**

The exploration of spirituality, identity and resilience are core themes in *A Mercy*, providing a thorough examination of human nature within the framework of colonial America. The novel highlights the exploration of the marginalized —Indigenous and enslaved people in displaced Europe — whose spiritual journey is marked by the tension between their Indigenous religion and European Christianity.

Through the characters like Florens, Lina and Sorrow, who maintained adventurous moments delved into self-discovery beyond the framework of the imposed religion. She examines how religion can be used as a source of oppression, a maintenance of resistance, the formation of personal guilt and the perseverance that leads to self-discovery.

The novel also expresses religious hypocrisy, which was used by European colonizers to justify slavery. This dichotomy is best illustrated by individuals such as Jacob Vaark and Rebekka, who struggle with their involvement in repressive structures while pursuing moral superiority via their Protestant faith. In the meantime, the Blacksmith, who has African roots and defies the colonial system, represents spiritual independence.

This chapter will delve into how religion can be both a weapon of oppression and a source of empowerment, in a world marked by cultural dislocation, violence and displacement. Throughout the symbolism applied in the lyrical prose, this analysis will ultimately reveal how individuals, particularly the florens, seek to shape their spiritual identity and undergo their transformation within the colonial context, reflecting themes of identity, resistance and the resilience of African and Indigenous spiritual traditions.

### **3.2. Analyzing the Exploitation of Religion as Justification for Slavery in the Novel**

Religion in *A Mercy* is a core theme. It is used as a tool for tyranny, hypocrisy, and separation in colonial North America. White characters create mistrust among Protestants, Catholics, Anabaptists, and Quakers by using religious prejudices to label others. Protestant Jacob Vaark ignores his involvement in the slave trade while denouncing Catholic D'Ortega's excess. Rebekka also mocks Quakers and Anabaptists, which reflects long-standing sectarian hostility.

However, non-white characters see all European religious groups as oppressors and do not differentiate between them. For example, Lina acknowledges the common role that all Europeans had in colonialism and brutality and lumps them all together. As seen by Lina and Florens' mothers' forced conversions, religion is also used to legitimise racism and eradicate Indigenous and African traditions. Ironically, non-Christian healing techniques—like the Blacksmith's techniques that save Rebekka—prove to be more effective than Christianity.

Historically, a biblical passage known as "The Curse of Ham" was misinterpreted for centuries to justify slavery, particularly the transatlantic slave trade. The idea that all Africans were destined for enslavement as a result of Noah's curse on his grandson Canaan was propagated by Christian religious leaders. Beginning in the 15th century, religious institutions in Europe and America used this interpretation to claim that God had ordained African enslavement.

The passage states:

“Cursed be Canaan! The lowest of slaves will he be to his brothers. He also said, ‘Blessed be the Lord, the God of Shem! May Canaan be the slave of Shem. May God extend the territory of Japheth; may Japheth live in the tents of Shem, and may Canaan be his slave.’” (*Genesis 9:25-27*).

Although the Bible specifies that Canaan and his descendants were the ones cursed, many Christian theologians wrongly extended this curse to all of Ham’s descendants, including Africans. This misinterpretation was used to justify the enslavement of Africans, even though biblical and historical evidence does not support the claim that Canaan’s descendants settled in sub-Saharan Africa.

While some biblical passages were believed to oppose slavery, Exodus 21 contains regulations concerning slaves, including laws on their emancipation. The passage states: “Whoever steals a man and sells him, and anyone found in possession of him, shall be put to death” (Exodus 21:16). This verse, which explicitly condemns kidnapping and human trafficking, contradicts justifications for slavery. Reports suggest that this passage was rarely cited or omitted from readings in British territories where slavery was practiced, as it directly challenged the slave trade.

The setting and themes of the novel align with biblical verses. It begins with Jacob Vaark, a trader and landowner in colonial America, who romanticizes the American landscape—land that originally belonged to Indigenous peoples and was forcibly taken by Europeans—bringing the realities of colonial theft to light. His history as an orphan allows him to embrace unconventional family arrangements. He references Bacon’s Rebellion, a 1676 revolt that led to stricter racial restrictions designed to separate impoverished whites from Black slaves. Jacob's discomfort with Catholicism is not solely religious but also tied to his perception of its excess, illustrating how faith, social status, and economic standing were deeply entwined in 17th-century America.

The strict social distinctions of the era are highlighted by Jacobs' mistrust of D'Ortega's dinner invitation. Given the extreme hardship endured by the enslaved people on D'Ortega's estate, Jublio, which translates to "rejoicing" in Portuguese, is an ironic name. Jacob's eventual fixation with constructing his palace is sparked by seeing D'Ortega's opulent residence, highlighting the connection between riches and human exploitation

in early America. Ortega's inhumanity is exposed by his icy, businesslike reference to enslaved individuals as "cargo." In the same way that colonial exploitation in Angola is similar to the exploitation of American land and people, he uses religion to defend brutality by rationalizing slavery as a Christian obligation.

Though Jacob is repulsed by slavery, he is already complicit by doing business with D'Ortega. His discomfort at being offered slaves as payment hints at his moral struggle, but Morrison shows that his rejection of slavery is somewhat hollow—he still benefits from the system. "Flesh is not my commodity" (Morrison, 2008, p. 13), Jacob insists, illustrating his opposition to the direct ownership of slaves. However, the novel later reveals how he continues to profit from forced labour schemes. His growing desire to build a grand estate reflects both his anxieties over not having an heir and his increasing entanglement in the very structures of oppression he initially resists, revealing the theme of hypocrisy.

Jacob's frustration with D'Ortega leads him to fixate on their religious differences, using Catholicism as a means to feel morally superior, despite both being slave owners. His suspicion that D'Ortega harbours an interest in Florens's mother underscores the exploitation of enslaved women and D'Ortega's hypocrisy as a devout yet immoral Catholic. To further emphasise the theme of motherhood, Jacob chooses Florens over her mother out of both empathy and the belief that she might comfort Rebekka after the loss of their daughter. However, his thoughts quickly shift back to wealth and status, making the moment that defines Florens's life insignificant to him. Although he believes he can succeed without direct involvement in slavery, he is already complicit in the system. As Jacob reflects, "I've got to get away from this substitute man. But thinking also, perhaps Rebekka would welcome a child around the place" (Morrison, 2008, p. 21).

Rebekka Vaark is another character who exemplifies religious hypocrisy. A European and English woman who grew up in a strict Protestant household in England, she viewed religion as a source of oppression and suffering rather than comfort because her parents enforced a rigid and punitive form of Christianity. She was forced into marriage with Jacob Vaark by her abusive and cruel parents after becoming a financial burden to them.

Upon arriving in colonial America, she was not religious; instead, she was open-minded and disregarded the church's-imposed rules. Moreover, she was kind to her servants, Lina, Sorrow, and Florens, and considered them part of the household, despite owning them. Regardless of her suffering and constant grief over losing her children, of whom only one survived—Rebekka experienced periods of withdrawal and sorrow after the death of Patrician, her only remaining child. However, she remained strong, maintained her loving relationship with Jacob, and continued running the farm in his absence.

When Jacob died, Rebekka contracted smallpox. Her battle with the illness, combined with her grief, caused a shift in her character, turning her into a devoutly religious person who reconnected with the church and strictly adhered to its laws. Once the kindest European mistress, she became cruel as she conformed to the church's teachings on enslavement, justifying the mistreatment of her servants. She began treating them harshly, no longer seeing them as part of the household but as people who needed to be corrected and controlled.

The theme of religious hypocrisy is evident in how Rebekka embraced religion not as a source of comfort but as a means of dominance and superiority. Instead of using faith as a guide for love and kindness, she wielded it to justify her authority over her servants, although they had cared for her during her illness. She recalls, "Prayers and beatings. That was her childhood. Prayers and beatings and the smell of rotting teeth" (Morrison, 2008, p. 77), a quote that highlights the oppressive nature of the religion she grew up with. Later, she mirrored this same strict and punitive approach in her relationship with her servants, believing it was her duty to correct their so-called sinful acts.

Religion as a weapon to gain control and superiority had a profound impact on the enslaved characters. Lina, for instance, is a Native American woman who survived smallpox, missionary influence, and enslavement. She serves as a contrast to the "vanishing Indian" cliché. Instead of disappearing, Lina adapts and endures, preserving aspects of her Native identity while forming strong bonds with Florens and Sorrow. She refuses to assimilate yet adapts to the colonial system that controls and shapes her faith and identity. The novel reflects her perspective, "They would forever fence land, ship whole trees to faraway countries, take any woman for quick pleasure, ruin soil, befoul sacred places, and worship a dull, unimaginative god" (Morrison, 2008, p. 54). This passage further highlights the themes of colonial morality's duplicity, the eradication of Indigenous traditions, and the weaponisation of religion.

Imagery and symbolism are crucial in the novel, depicting the submission of enslaved and Native American characters and the use of religion as a weapon. Florens's writing on the wall represents her desire to be remembered, to communicate her pain, and to assert her identity in a place where assimilation, marginalisation, and cultural erasure are central. She states, "I am become a wilderness but I am also Florens. In full. Unforgiven. Unforgiving. No, Ruth, my love. Hear me? Slave. Free. I last." (Morrison, 2008, p. 160). This passage illustrates her expression of physical and emotional pain she witnessed and her attempt to claim her existence despite her struggles.

Another symbol highlighted in the novel is the bible; it serves as a means of oppression and control for the powerful and a source of serenity for the marginalised. For instance. When Rebekka turns to religion, she distances herself from her servants, who had once

been close to her, and imposes rigid laws on them, while Florens embraces Christianity with all hope for redemption and forgiveness, as a tool for survival and resistance.

To sum up, religion is used for oppression and as a comfort to shape individuals and define their identities and social hierarchy. Morrison depicts how religion can be a source of serenity and survival for the colonised but also a system for control and oppression for the coloniser, by criticising the ethical inconsistencies of religious defences of slavery and colonial brutality. Ultimately, *A Mercy* highlights through characters like Jacob, Rebekka, Florens, and Lina, the spiritual divergence that they embraced, emphasising the ambiguity of their faith in a world characterised by displacement, pain, cultural erasure, and identity struggle.

### **3.3. Uncovering Florens' experience of religious guilt in *A Mercy***

Florens is the principal figure in *A Mercy*. She was born as an enslaved girl on a Portuguese plantation in Angola. She was later transported to the New World along with her mother and brother, where she served D'Ortega. At the age of eight, she was separated from her mother and offered to Jacob Vaark, a protestant landowner, as a payment for a debt owed by her owner. Her mother pleaded with Vaark to take Florens instead of her, crying, "Please, senhor. Not me. Take her. Take my daughter." (Morrison, 2008, p. 21). Her separation from her mother played a crucial role in shaping her identity, as she spent years struggling to understand whether she had been abandoned out of rejection or saved as an act of mercy to be protected from the cruelty of D'Ortega.

Religious guilt is a prominent theme in *A Mercy*; it's a source for both comfort and justifying oppression. Florens' experience of religious guilt is rooted in her search for love, as she grew feeling abandoned by her mother and rejected by society, she unlocked the sense of unworthiness. To fill this void, she seeks emotional validation and belonging at any cost. This loneliness and longing for validation lead her to attach herself to love, which she idealises in the Blacksmith—a free African man who healed Rebekka from smallpox. Florens says, "You are my shaper, my world and me. I am your slave." (Morrison, 2008, p.134). This passage highlights her idealisation of the blacksmith, hoping he can fill her void and make her worthy and redemptive. However, he does not reciprocate her devotion and rejects her emotions, leaving her heartbroken and reviving in her the struggle for self-worth and identity.

This sense of unworthiness, combined with the religious teachings her mother once imparted, caused Florens to feel deep guilt. Her mother had warned her about the dangers of power and control, saying, "To be given dominion over another is a hard thing; to wrest dominion over another is a wrong thing; to give dominion of yourself to another is a wicked thing." (Morrison, 2008, p.160) This lesson was meant to caution

Florens against both dominating others and completely surrendering herself to someone else. However, she ignored this advice in her relationship with the blacksmith.

When the blacksmith rejected her, Florens felt abandoned once again. Her pain and desperation led her to attack him, an act that later filled her with guilt. She saw herself as both "unforgiven" and "unforgiving," believing that she had sinned by disregarding her mother's warning and by allowing herself to lose control. Since she had grown up believing that religious sins lead to divine punishment, she interpreted her suffering as a consequence of her actions, reinforcing the idea that she did not deserve happiness. The passage, "I am not the same. I am not the same. I am not the same," (Morrison, 2008, p. 160) reflects Florens's self-awareness and transformation. Through her painful experiences, she redefines herself, no longer solely seeking validation from others but beginning to forge her identity.

Religion played a fundamental role in shaping identity. Florens grew up in a world where Christianity dominated the New World, serving as a tool to justify oppression and slavery. Having spent her whole life being defined by others as an enslaved person, she internalized feelings of unworthiness. Her mother's abandonment led her to question the reason behind it, while the Blacksmith's rejection, after she devoted herself entirely to him, deepened her need for validation. She interpreted this rejection as a form of divine punishment, further intensifying her religious guilt. Caught between seeking redemption and asserting her independence, Florens ultimately transforms her understanding of herself. The religious guilt, which once allowed her to define herself through others, ultimately guided her toward self-acceptance, permitting her to shape her identity in her own way.

This religious guilt is also reflected in other characters. Rebekka Vaark, for instance, experiences religious guilt through her childhood. Rebekka grew up in a protestant household with strict religious rules. She saw religion as a tool of oppression and control. However, after her husband's death, she turned to religion for solace and reconciled with the church. She pleaded, "God, if you are there, if you are not there, help me. Help me. Help me." (Morrison, 2008, p. 89).

This passage illustrates Rebekka's vision on religion, after reconciling with the church and fully submitting to it, believing it to be a source of comfort. Rebekka's experience aligns with Florens's, who, as an enslaved person, also turns to religion for seeking serenity and solace. Moreover, religion played a crucial role in shaping both women's identities. Florens, whose religious beliefs reflect her marginalised life as an enslaved person, while Rebekka's religious beliefs permitted her to find empowerment as a landowner and justify her atrocity.

Lina, a native American character, experiences religion that contradicts Christianity, as she maintains her indigenous beliefs. Lina connects to nature, as she finds peace in

it, reflecting her indigenous spiritual beliefs and her resistance to the coloniser's religious rules. The religious diversity that is introduced through Lina's spiritual traditions maintenance and Florens Christianity, highlights religion's crucial role in shaping one's identity.

Symbolism and imagery explore Florens' religious guilt and her desire to refine her identity. Florens carves her story into the empty house as a symbol of self-affirmation and resistance. This act of writing on the wall reflects a religious confession as she attempts to reconcile her guilt and express her identity in a world that attempts to erase her. She writes, "I am become a wilderness, but I am also Florens. In full. Unforgiven. Unforgiving. No ruth, my Love. Hear me? Slave. Free. I last". (Morrison, 2008, p. 160).

This passage emphasises Florens' transformation and self-definition. Having spent her life being defined by others, her mother, the blacksmith's rejection and the Vaark's treatment of her, she now asserts her identity and self-validation. She no longer pleads to the blacksmith and allows her identity to be defined through others, leaving her story behind, even if no one recognises it.

Furthermore, the way she carves her story expresses a physical act of writing; Florens uses her nails and a sharp object to write her story into Jacob Vaark's house. This act conveys the emotional weight of her world she tries to convey. This action mirrors the emotional scars she carries. More importantly, her writing is an act of seeking redemption, reconciling her guilt and religious trauma.

The religious guilt played a crucial role in shaping Florens, as her journey of self-discovery stems from abandonment and rejection that made her define herself through others. Her reconciliation with religion turns her belief into a source of comfort and seek redemption and refine her identity. Ultimately, religion played a crucial role in shaping Floren's identity, serving as a means for both control and a path of self-affirmation.

### **3.4. Revealing the blacksmith's spiritual identity reconstruction outside European Christianity**

The blacksmith is a central character with a crucial significance in the novel, representing self-sufficiency, freedom, and resistance to oppression. The blacksmith maintains his African roots and heritage, with his deep connection to nature and craftsmanship, and is never influenced by European Christianity. His mysterious character and self-confidence made him a figure of admiration, particularly to Florens. The blacksmith's personality is tied to his work as a blacksmith and his connection to nature, which is represented as a spiritual independence and the resistance to the oppression of the colonial world.

The blacksmith's refusal to accept European Christianity is significant, being spiritually independent as a free black man, he resists oppression and maintains his roots in African heritages. His identity is primarily defined by his role as a craftsman and blacksmith, highlighting his self-sufficiency and autonomy. When he was hired by Jacob Vaark, the landowner who had a desire to build a large house, the Blacksmith was known for his skilled work as a craftsman and independence. Unlike the others, who were defined by what their owners thought of them, he considered his skills as his identity.

After Jacob died, Rebekka became the owner and was in charge of the work. She first saw him with great respect and curiosity, but when she became religious, she started to set rigid rules and systems in the household. The Blacksmith becomes a threat, creating tension and coldness between the two characters, as he always opposes her beliefs. "She relied on him to complete the work Jacob started, but his independence made her uneasy". (Morrison,2008,p.85). This passage from the novel highlights Rebekka's discomfort regarding the Blacksmith, considering his spiritual independence a source of limitation to her power and superiority.

His independence evokes his self-sufficiency, as he does not rely emotionally or materially on others, making him appear dangerous and unpredictable. "He was a man who did not need her, who did not need anyone, and that made him dangerous."(Morrison,2008,p.85). This passage expresses his independence, describing him as dangerous because he represents resistance to oppression and colonial rules. His spirituality relies on his freedom, and unlike others, only the Blacksmith can define his identity.

The Blacksmith's attachment to his craftsmanship carries significant symbolism in the novel. The forge is more than just a place of work; it represents a spiritual practice. He describes it in mystical terms, portraying the act of forging metal through fire as a symbol of transformation, spiritual power, and self-definition. As mentioned in the novel, "The fire was alive, and it spoke to him. It was not just heat and light but a force that could change the very essence of things."(Morrison,2008,p.84). This passage highlights his ability to transform things both physically and spiritually, altering their essence. The way the fire "spoke" to him signifies his deep connection to the natural world, emphasizing his journey toward self-definition and autonomy.

The Blacksmith's presence was influential to others; his sense of freedom, spiritual resistance to oppression, and ability to shape his own identity was remarkable in a world where the European colonial system made it nearly impossible for people in his position to be accepted. Lina admires his African beliefs, which connect him to the natural world. His spiritual independence aligns with her Indigenous beliefs, but she also worries about Florens and warns her that his freedom and emotional detachment will harm her.

For Florens, the Blacksmith represents a saviour figure. Having lived a childhood marked by abandonment and a lack of self-definition, she constantly seeks validation from others. When she falls deeply in love with the Blacksmith, she idealizes him entirely, believing that he can fill the void of self-worth she struggles with. However, his rejection and refusal to conform to her expectations force Florens to confront her own identity. This painful experience pushes her to seek self-definition outside of his perception, ultimately leading her to find her sense of belonging. His rejection, which made her feel unworthy, evoked the sensation of religious guilt, having to reconcile with religion and seek forgiveness for her actions that reflect her unworthiness and sins.

The blacksmith's spiritual dependence was seen as a threat to the powerful; when Rebekka witnessed illness, he was in charge of her healing, offering his spiritual ritual, which was based on his connection to nature and his African heritage. However, as soon as she recovered and turned to religion, she distanced herself from him, despite being a threat to her maintaining control.

The blacksmith's spiritual beliefs are significant as they highlight his loyalty to his African heritage and refusal to align with the religious norms imposed by European colonialism. His religious independence and connection to nature set him apart from others, especially those from his culture who followed European Christianity and felt constrained by social norms. His story illustrates that spirituality can mean various things to different people and that standing by your convictions, even when they differ from others, can be a means of resisting injustice.

The blacksmith's independence and self-sufficiency are admirable and terrific to other characters; his defence of social norms is remarkable. His resistance against oppression is a potential, because he rejects forced identities and steadfastness that links him with his African origins. The novel's overarching themes of metamorphosis, survival and spiritual resiliency are ultimately reinforced by his presence, which compels other characters to face their own identities, dependencies, and beliefs.

### **3.5. Analysing the characters' struggle between indigenous spirituality against European Christianity**

Spiritual conflict is a core theme; it represents the tension between the imposed religious beliefs of the colonial oppression and the survival-based indigenous spirituality of the marginalized during the colonial time. The novel navigates the struggle between European Christianity and Indigenous spirituality, exploring how characters like Lina and Sorrow adapt to colonial religious norms and experience cultural and identity erasure in a violent, displaced, and culturally dislocated society.

Lina, one of the few survivors of her Native American community, was forced to submit to colonial Christianity. However, she never fully abandoned her Indigenous

spirituality. When she began working on the Vaark farm, she outwardly practised Christianity, the dominant religion, while secretly maintaining elements of her Native beliefs. For Lina, Christianity was a pragmatic choice for survival rather than a genuine spiritual conversion. Her spiritual practices are rooted in her deep connection to the natural world—she uses natural remedies to heal and protect those around her, and her knowledge reflects her ancestral spiritual heritage, which remains a core aspect of her identity. Morrison emphasizes this connection, stating, “Lina knew that wilderness was life before and beyond and under the feet of men. She knew that women had made the first world and that men were an afterthought, a rough draft, and that the first world had been destroyed by them too.” (Morrison, 2008, p. 54). This passage represents Lina's resilience and spiritual identity, even if she does embrace colonial religion as a duty, she still maintains her ancestral knowledge and traditions.

Sorrow, another character in the novel, embraces themes of a fragmented sense of identity and spiritual ambiguity. Sorrow is a mixed-race enslaved woman who works on the Vaark's farm. The name Sorrow mirrors her experience of pain of loss, and trauma. Losing her family and children marked her suffering. Due to her critical mental condition, Sorrow creates an imaginary friend named Twin that mirrors her broken self and helps her deal with her trauma. Later in the novel, Sorrow exhibits tenacity, especially through her path toward self-reclamation and motherhood.

Sorrow's mental illness and her imaginary friend serve as a symbol for disjointed identity, as this fragmented sense of belonging stems from her traumatic experiences. Twin functions as her coping mechanism that helps her navigate her suffering and loneliness. Through her companion, Sorrow finds a sense of connection and company that she lacks in the external world.

Sorrow's dislocated spiritual and cultural framework, she follows the spiritual impulses shaped by her trauma and the restrictions imposed by European Christianity. This spiritual ambiguity represents the themes of cultural and spiritual displacement in the colonial world. Like any marginalised person, she witnesses cultural and spiritual loss and is forced to adapt to the harsh conditions imposed by colonialism. The passage, “She thought it would be nice to call herself Complete. Not Sorrow. Complete.” (Morrison, 2008, p. 122) highlights her attempt to reclaim her identity by renaming herself “Complete.” This act expresses her longing for healing and wholeness.

Sorrow's journey toward healing is rooted in her experience of motherhood. The birth of her second child marks a turning point in her spiritual and emotional recovery. Caring for him allows her to reconcile with her fragmented identity and begin to feel a sense of completeness.

Florens, a central character in the novel, embodies the themes of religious shame and the pursuit of atonement. Her spiritual journey is shaped by the tension between her

mother's teachings, rooted in African and Indigenous spiritual traditions, and the European Christianity imposed by the colonial world.

Florens' mother represents a spiritual philosophy grounded in African and Indigenous traditions, emphasising perseverance, community, and interconnectedness. Florens perceives European Christianity as individualistic, hierarchical and focused on sin and salvation, this idea deepened her feeling of isolation and guilt, which alienated her from her mother's teachings, which were, once, based on a warning about control and power that represent an understanding of the oppressive colonial and enslaving systems.

The characters' effort to seek identity and belonging is complex, as they encounter indigenous spirituality and European Christianity. Their divergent worldviews show how colonialism had a profound impact on social and personal identities. The dislocation and disintegration are related to the struggles between European Christianity and indigenous spirituality amidst a colonial context. The characters' spiritual conflicts reflect their effort to maintain their spiritual traditions amidst the temptation of cultural erasure and ethnic displacement.

Resistance to cultural and religious dominance imposed by colonialism is reflected by the characters' struggles to preserve their indigenous spirituality. The conflict with the search for identity and belonging issues is frequently torn between opposing spiritual and cultural frameworks. The spiritual battle in the novel reflects the character's quest for identity and belonging in a society influenced by slavery and colonial control.

In conclusion, the novel explores the conflicts between indigenous beliefs and European Christianity that colonialism imposed, in particular through the protagonist. The end of the story depicts the role of faith, as not only an enforcement of institutions but rather a personal and dynamic experience influenced by pain, survival and resistance. As seen in Lina's pragmatic view of Christianity, Sorrow's quest for self-reclamation, and Floren's fight with religious guilt, Morrison offers an analysis of the impact of colonialism on people's identity formation and how religion can be a source of both oppression and a tool for self-definition.

### **3.6. Exploring Florens' spiritual metamorphosis and discovery of inner faith**

Florens is the central character who faces displacement, loss and a search for identity and belonging. Being placed at the Vaarks' farm after being taken from her mother. Florens faces a tension between the indigenous spirituality and her mother's teaching and the European Christianity imposed by the coloniser's power. Her story is marked by seeking her inner faith and building her identity, as she struggles with spiritual guilt and seeking redemption. Her story reflects the broader themes of identity and belonging, resistance to the colonial system and Spiritual and cultural displacement marked by the colonial forces who settled systems of marginalisation and slavery.

Floren's spiritual foundation is rooted in her mother's previous teaching, this spiritual wisdom stems from the Indigenous and African spiritual traditions, which instilled in her a sense of resilience and self-preservation. She warns her saying, "To be given dominion over another is a hard thing; to wrest dominion over another is a wrong thing; to give dominion of yourself to another is a wicked thing." (Morrison, 2008, p. 124) Her warning emphasises a spiritual guide and a worldview centred on acquiring personal autonomy and freedom while opposing the colonial system. Over time, it served as a touchstone that she later came to fully understand.

When Florens is taken from her mother and placed on the Vaark farm, her spiritual base is upended. This displacement is not only physical but also spiritual and emotional. Without her mother's unwavering supervision, she is exposed to the harsh structures of colonial life and the influence of European Christianity. For a large portion of the book, she tries to bridge the gap in her feeling of self and belonging caused by this dislocation. Florens feels even more abandoned since she can't fully comprehend why her mother left.

Christianity serves as a tool to support the idea that sin is innate and that salvation must come from outside sources. Her sense of unworthiness is made worse by this framework, especially when she absorbs the notion that she is defective and in need of atonement. Florens' insight, "I am a slave because I am a liar, I am a liar because I am a slave," (Morrison, 2008, p. 160) is one example that demonstrates how she links her enslavement to moral failure, which is a direct effect of Christian doctrine that links suffering to divine retribution. Floren's spiritual conflict stems from her internalised guilt, which pushes her to seek approval and atonement.

Florens' idealisation of the blacksmith is related to her need for atonement and belonging. She embraces Christian ideas of redemption, believing she would be forgiven and made whole by winning his approval. Her eagerness for others' validation rather than self-acceptance highlights her spiritual dislocation brought by the colonial Christian religion and her mother's abandonment.

The blacksmith's rejection broke Florens' idealised picture and made her face her values. This concept marked a turning point in her spiritual change. His harsh words, calling her "nothing but wilderness", made her feel more unworthy, in addition to reflecting on the Christian themes of sin and guilt that have tormented her identity. His rejection made her turn her attention from seeking approval from others to finding faith in herself. The act of writing on the Vaarks house wall represents her desire to take back her voice and express her autonomy and starting to recover from her spiritual upheaval.

Florens' spiritual journey is embodied in her pursuit of belonging and identity, and the fight against spiritual and cultural displacement, and the resistance to colonial tyranny. Her quest depicts the conflict between the need for self-affirmation and the desire for approval from others, as it is illustrated in her idealisation of the blacksmith. Reclaiming her identity and fending against erasure become the goals of writing her tale. Florens critiques colonial Christianity and emphasizes the continuing power of Indigenous and African spiritual traditions while reestablishing her connection to her cultural heritage by remembering her mother's lessons.

To sum up, Floren's spiritual journey is expressed through the oppressive people who overcome the repressive powers of slavery, colonialism, and religious perspective. Her identity exploration and dislocation battle are demonstrated in her battle for self-definition. Florens' power inside herself through rejection instead of looking for others' affiliation. Ultimately, Morrison portrays faith as a personal and dynamic experience that can be transmitted as a source of resistance despite being infused by oppression and tragedy.

### **3.7. conclusion**

This chapter underscores the spiritual journey amidst the colonial context, including themes like identity, resistance, and faith. Morrison explores through characters like Florens, Lina and blacksmiths the tension between the spiritual Indigenous culture and European Christianity, expressing the maintenance of their native heritage while also embracing the imposed religious power, illustrating how religion can be a means of survival and oppression.

Throughout the analysis, we examined how Florens, the central character, survived the spiritual transformation due to seeking approval, validation, and inner faith. The way she writes her story on the wall is a symbol that marks a turning point for her, as she reclaims her identity and her refusal to be erased by colonialism.

In the novel, we have also explored the religious hypocrisy of European colonisers, who exploit religion to justify slavery. Rebbeka and Jacob Vaark illustrate this duality as they struggle with their involvement in repressive structures and look to their faith for moral superiority. The blacksmith, however, symbolises autonomy as a free African who resisted oppressive religious norms and maintained his African cultural heritage.

Ultimately, this chapter explores the way religious identity is shaped in a violent and uprooted environment. By presenting spirituality as both a means of oppression and a source of strength. It highlights how people negotiate and dual the forces that decide on their definition. The story examines the spiritual struggle to define the individual's identity by focusing on how faith can be a source for both survival and control.

# General conclusion

The research aimed to explore how religion, particularly Christianity, shapes the characters' ethnic identity in Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*. Exploring how these characters navigate their cultural and spiritual identities in the context of colonialism illustrates the role of religious oppression in shaping their cultural identities and belonging, particularly for the marginalised and enslaved individuals, amidst political and cultural struggles.

This analysis reveals that religion is flexible and fluid, rather than static and fixed, while adapting to historical and cultural context. Florens, the central character, initially defines her identity through her master's spiritual beliefs. Nonetheless, Florens blends her mother's African heritage teaching with Catholicism, attempting to build a sense of herself, as she experiences rejection. Indigenous characters like Lina were forced to adapt to colonial power's cultural and religious authority, but still maintain their native beliefs. Others, like enslaved people, adapted to their masters' religious norms and submitted to their traditions.

The thematic analysis demonstrates how religion was weaponised by European colonial power to control and define the oppressed. It also highlights how slave owners like D'Ortega used their spiritual beliefs to justify slavery and reinforce their power. Similarly, although Jacob Vaart considered himself morally superior to D'Ortega, he still engaged in the slave trade to fund the construction of his dream house, revealing his hypocrisy. This reflects the broader religious hypocrisy among European settlers, who used faith as a means to justify their cruelty towards indigenous and enslaved individuals.

This thesis has provided valuable historical and theoretical frameworks to contribute to the nuanced analysis of the religious function in building ethnic and cultural identity in the context of colonialism. The acknowledgement of the limitations of this study may limit the broader applicability of the findings. Future research could benefit from expanding the scope to include a wider range of texts and contexts.

In conclusion, this research includes the broader implications of colonial Christianity during the 17<sup>th</sup> century and its effect on the individuals. By exploring the analysis of the characters, this study contributes to the ongoing explanation of the religious and ethnic identity and their function in the context of colonialism, offering a nuanced perspective on shaping the colonial Americas' indigenous and enslaved people's identity. The finding of this research underscores the role of literature in examining and questioning the role of religion in shaping ethnic identity, in the context of social and cultural power. Toni Morrison's *A Mercy* has envisioned today, where marginalised people still navigate their ethnic and religious identities amidst the colonial context.

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