

Societal Structure

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

In a previous lesson, Religion as Culture and Social Convention, you looked at values, habits, customs, unspoken agreements, rules of etiquette, et cetera. You saw how they interacted with religious traditions and values, and how these values operated behind the scenes. They function like a white noise that is present but not really noticeable. In this lesson, you'll look briefly at other aspects of society that are not so behind the scenes like the influence of religion social equality and inequality. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. [Roman Catholicism and Indigenous Cultures](#)
2. [Hindu Traditions](#)
3. [Islam and Radical Equality](#)

1. Roman Catholicism and Indigenous Cultures

Many of the world's religions can be linked to the reality of social **equality** and social inequality. Equality is the state of being equal; it is the treatment of all persons in the same way under the law. Naturally what comes to mind when considering this ideal of equality is its opposite, inequality. Most everyone can see, and maybe even feel, the presence of equality and/or inequality in their lives and in the lives of people around them.

Often, inequalities can be linked to various religions. Some religions have histories that reveal a pattern of unequal distribution of power, privilege, and prestige.

Roman Catholic missionaries traveled with Spanish conquistadors to Latin America in the 15th century. Church, state, and military might ride on one horse. Although they were initially few in number compared to the indigenous population, several factors, including religion, set the ground for political and economic **colonization**.

Under the might and power of the Spanish crown, peasantry and power were at opposite ends of the spectrum. This authority, power, and prestige, often associated with the conquest of a people and their resources, such as land and gold, was gained through the conversion of religious values from indigenous to Catholic beliefs.

There were two very different belief systems that came face to face. The dominant force came from outside the religious belief system of the majority.



TERMS TO KNOW

Equality

The state of being equal; the treatment of all persons in the same way under the law.

Colonization

The practice of militarily powerful nations' taking military and political control of another nation, state, or territory.

2. Hindu Traditions

In the history of India, you can also see this discrepancy of power and prestige. In the Hindu tradition, there is something called the **caste system**, or the varnas. This is a social system in which one's place in society is determined by one's birth via the social status of one's parents.

In the Hindu tradition, these inequalities come from within the religion and its spiritual belief structure. If the caste system reveals inequalities in the structure of society, it is nevertheless imposed from within the religion, which is intimately linked with the culture and society.



TERM TO KNOW

Caste System

A social system in which one's place in society is determined by one's birth via the social status of one's parents.

3. Islam and Radical Equality

You have looked at several instances of religion linked to inequality, but can religion bring equality? The Muslim faith calls for equality. Within the tradition of Islam, in one of the final sermons of the prophet Muhammad, he said: "Oh, people! Listen to me in earnest! Worship Allah. Say your five daily Prayers, Salat. Fast during the month of Ramadan, and give your wealth in Zakat. Perform the Hajj pilgrimage if you can afford to. You know that every Muslim is the brother of another Muslim. You are all equal. Nobody has superiority over others, except by piety and good action."

In the sixth century of the Common Era on the Arabian Peninsula, this was a revolutionary concept: radical equality. It was a founding principle of the religion, and it immediately affected the structure of equality in society. Men and women were understood to be equal in the eyes of Allah. Under certain interpretations, this founding principle has truly traveled the spectrum from radical equality to the felt presence of inequality and different gradations of experienced inequality.

No religion seems to be immune to these apparent contradictions.



SUMMARY

Religion can be linked to both equality and inequality. Inequality can occur when a religion dominates and converts another, like when **Roman Catholicism and indigenous cultures** of Latin America came into contact with each other. Sometimes, inequality can come from within a religion itself, like with **Hindu traditions** of the caste system. Religion can support equality as well, which is shown in the relationship between **Islam and radical equality**.

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