

**DFG-Projekt**

## **Religion, Slavery and Race in the Age of Revolutions**

**Catholicism from Colonial Saint-Domingue to Independent Haiti,  
c1700 to c1830**

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**Bearbeiterin:** Dr. Miriam Franchina

**Dauer:** 3 Jahre

**Budget:** 283.500 €

In the past decades, the Haitian Revolution (1791–1804) has been increasingly considered a critical event for the birth of modernity. Its complex unfolding led to remarkable consequences: the legal equality of free people of African descent (1792); the first abolition of slavery in the world (1794); and the independence of Saint-Domingue from France, which was renamed Haiti (1804). The main research question of this project is to what extent and how Catholicism offered the population of African descent in Saint-Domingue a versatile instrument to negotiate their identities, both in the face of their enslaved condition during the colonial era, and later as free citizens of independent Haiti. Particular emphasis will be given to the turning point marked by the Haitian Revolution to investigate how the colonizers' religion could foster the slaves' political actions and claims.

The project intends to (1) test the latest hypothesis that Catholicism had a pervasive and long-standing rooting within the black population; (2) investigate how through Catholicism, imposed to institutionalize France's colonial agenda, slaves constructed spaces of freedom; and (3) explore how the promotion of Catholicism in Haiti contributed to forging a unique national identity that blended African, American, and European elements in the promise of a Haitian-led regeneration for all people of African descent.

One of the essential novelties of the approach lies in the choice of the sources: hitherto neglected missionary reports and correspondence from ecclesiastical archives in France and Italy will effectively integrate more traditional sources and make up for the paucity of sources directly produced by slaves.

Our assumption is that the slaves' use of Catholicism was not a sign of subordination to the colonizers' or elites' culture, but rather a powerful example of creative adaptation under the extreme circumstances of slavery and revolutionary turmoil. By exploring how Catholicism was molded to establish the first postcolonial and slavery-free country, we seek to contribute to a more fine-grained understanding of the intellectual roots of the Haitian Revolution and to use the Haitian case to probe the scholarly thesis that religion was an integral part of the modern world.