

Religion and American Slavery

Teacher's Guide

Lesson I. Religion's Impact on Shaping American Colonial Slavery

Learning Objective

By using this lesson, students will understand that in the colonial American period, slavery was accepted as normal, and hardly anyone questioned it. There were social norms, including religion, that maintained slavery's acceptance in society.

Lesson Summary

1. Slavery is an ancient institution. For Europeans colonizing the American colonies, slavery was a normal and acceptable practice that was not questioned. Religion reinforced these social norms.
2. European social ordering was hierarchical, or like a ladder, with those held as the most important at the top and those held as the least important at the bottom. It was socially acceptable to use physical force to keep people in their place.
3. The American innovation on the ancient institution of slavery was to base slavery on skin color. This developed because it was easier to enslave Africans who looked different and could not easily escape home.
4. Early American colonial enslavers justified slavery of Africans because they were "heathen," or non-Christian. However, at this time, the enslavers made no attempt to share Christianity with the people they enslaved.
5. Later, in the colonial American period, Christian ministers argued that it was acceptable to continue to enslave Africans and their descendants if planters taught them Christianity.

For Students to Begin the Lesson

Visit the [Student Learning Hub](#) to begin Lesson I of the *Religion and American Slavery* series. At the bottom of each online step, students will find a button to proceed to the next step. Individual steps are also listed below with hyperlinks, which can be accessed if viewing this document on a digital device. In the steps that follow, students are prompted to answer questions to prepare for class discussion.

Questions to Check Student Understanding

Step 1. American Slavery

In the Step 1 module, students are prompted to answer the questions. The answers below are drawn from the YouTube video transcript.

1. Who practiced slavery anciently? (Anciently means in the distant past.)

At the time American colonists started enslaving fellow humans, slavery was deeply rooted in the history and economy of most countries. In fact, every ancient civilization practiced slavery. Slavery has even been detected among prehistoric hunting societies. Both Christians and Muslims enslaved one another during the Renaissance and Enlightenment Europe. From the 7th century to the 20th century, Islamic slavery spanned Western and Central Asia, Northern and Eastern Africa, India and Europe.

2. Why did American colonists not question the morality of slavery when it began in the American colonies?

Then, in the 16th century, European merchants began purchasing enslaved Africans from West African kingdoms and transporting them to European colonies in the Americas. So when Europeans began colonizing America, they brought with them the belief that slavery was acceptable and normal. They did not question it.

3. Why was it easier to enslave Africans in America than other groups, like the Indigenous peoples?

While human beings have been enslaved for thousands of years, American slavery made one significant innovation on the ancient institution. American colonists tried enslaving Native Americans, but they often escaped. Over time, planters found it easier to enslave people of African descent. Africans were captured and transported over a long distance, so it made it difficult for them to escape home. They usually did not practice the religion of those in power, which was Christianity. Most significantly, Africans looked different from those in power. It was easier to extract labor from those who looked “other.” As a result of these dynamics, over time in the American colonies, black skin came to mean slave.

Step 2. Colonial Social Hierarchy

In the Step 2 module, students are prompted to answer the questions. The answers below are drawn from the YouTube video transcript.

1. In the hierarchy of colonial American society, or the social ladder, who was held at the top as the most important and who was held at the bottom as the least important?

American colonial society adapted European ideas about social ordering, which was organized as an hierarchy. You can think of hierarchy like a ladder with the people who society considered the most important at the top and the people who society considered the least important at the bottom. Then everyone else was in between. Royalty were held as the most important. They had the most rights. Slaves were considered the least important in society. They were treated as if they had no rights.

2. In colonial American society, who could use physical punishments on others without any social consequences?

It was common to use physical punishments to keep people in their place on society's ladder and to maintain order. Village worthies could use whips on the poor and the master of the household could use whips on anyone in his household, including his wife. In short, it was a world that believed it was right for those on the top of the hierarchy to use physical punishments on those at the low end of the ladder. It was a world that believed it was normal and acceptable to force labor from those at the bottom of society. In this environment, very few people questioned slavery.

Step 3. Religion's Impact on Shaping American Colonial Slavery

In the Step 3 module, students are prompted to answer the questions below. The answers below are drawn from the YouTube video transcript.

1. How did American planters justify enslaving Africans?

Religion was a powerful force in the lives of many early American colonists. For most colonists, the institution of the Christian Church organized their lives and shaped how they thought about their world. In the American colonies, Catholics and Protestants struggled with the impulse to teach what they believed was salvation through Christ and their desire to justify their enslavement of Africans. They told themselves it was acceptable to enslave humans if they were "heathen," a degrading term for someone who was not of their own religion. Yet, at the same time, they blocked opportunity for enslaved people to learn Christianity.

2. In 1660, why did Reverend Godwyn who was visiting from England believe the American planters corrupted Christianity?

When Christian clergy visited from Europe, they criticized American planters for not teaching Christianity to their enslaved human property. In the 1660s, Reverend Morgan Godwyn was one clergyman from the Church of England who visited Virginia, was appalled the planters did not allow the people they enslaved to participate in the Christian faith. Godwyn believed, like other European clergy, that anyone could be Christian, regardless of origin. He believed the colonial experience had corrupted the planters' understanding of Christianity. "In the New World, Godwyn found that planters believed enslaved blacks were inherently incapable of becoming Christian" (Goetz, 2). He published a pamphlet criticizing these views. As a result, the planters sent him away. American planters crafted these beliefs about the religious capacity of Africans to justify their enslavement and profit from their labor.

Step 4. Christian Reform of Slavery

In the Step 4 module, students are prompted to answer the questions below. The answers below are drawn from the YouTube video transcript.

1. Why did enslavers push back on Christian ministers' request to teach slaves Christianity?

As the enslavement of Africans became more established in colonial America, most enslavers did not want to teach the people they enslaved Christianity. They justified their enslavement of Africans because they were "heathen" or non-Christian.

2. What did most Christian ministers argue would happen to slaves if they learned Christianity?

As enslavers pushed back on these Christian arguments, Christian ministers shifted to demonstrate the benefit to planters for teaching Christianity to slaves. They argued slaves who learned Christianity would become more docile and harder working than those who did not learn it.

Prepare Students for Class Discussion

Step 5. Prepare for Class Discussion

In the Step 5 module, students are prompted to answer the questions below to prepare for class discussion.

1. What were some of the societal norms in colonial America that made slavery possible?
2. How did American planters use religion to justify their enslavement of Africans?
3. How did these factors make it possible to treat enslaved Africans as “other” in society?
4. What happens when a group is treated as “other” in society?