
Race, Slavery, and Christianity in Colonial America

Have you ever wondered why, in the United States, slavery was based on race? Have you ever thought about why conversion to Christianity did not change the status of slaves? Using colonial Virginia as an example, this episode explores how race became intertwined with slavery and how Christians used the faith both to challenge race-based slavery and to underwrite the identification between race and slavery.

Key Questions:

1. How did it happen that, in colonial Virginia, some people came to be seen as most appropriately property, as “slaves by birth”?
2. Why, in America, was slavery deemed appropriate only for those who had some African ancestry?
3. What was the role of Christianity in the identification of slavery with race?

Reflection Questions:

1. What in this episode most surprised or challenged you?
2. For some Americans, it is important that the early colonial project be a good one, undertaken for noble, even holy reasons. According to this episode, those reasons had much to do with money. How did you react to Sarah’s claims about the economic motivations behind colonization? Why do you think you reacted that way?
3. The Anglican Church in colonial Virginia had to grapple with the reality that many other religious groups would as well: slaveowners would be unwilling to allow them access to slaves if the church did not support slavery (and slaveowners would probably not be church participants either). That was not the only reason that various denomination countenanced or supported slavery, but it was part of the calculus. And it raises a question: at what point (if any) does complicity with an institution like race-based slavery, even purportedly for the sake of evangelization, undermine the claims of the gospel? When is it better to risk losing converts than to make peace with social and economic institutions? How do we know?
4. The slaves who wrote the Bishop of London made their case based on brotherhood (and sisterhood) in Christ. They asked that shared Christian faith matter more than race. Do you have identities that, either in theory or in practice, matter more to you than your Christian one? Do you have identities that make it hard to see some Christian brothers and sisters as your spiritual siblings?