
What's Race?

I. Introduction

A. The Curse of Ham

1. Story from Genesis 9 in which Noah curses Ham's son Canaan after Ham mocks Noah's nakedness.
2. Although the story is odd, many religious people over centuries believed it clearly indicated that God cursed Ham with black sin and slavery.
3. How did a strange interpretation become so widely accepted?
 - a) What came first, bad Bible reading or large scale enslavement of Africans?

B. This episode goes further back in time to explore how—before Africans were brought to colonial America—blackness became identified with slavery. It explains how the idea of race grew out of a desire to identify some people as naturally slaves and others as naturally free.

II. Slavery in the Atlantic World

A. In the long history of slavery:

1. Slavery not associated with any particular skin color (often people of what we would consider the “same race” enslaved each other).
2. Slavery was associated with dirtiness and darkness.
3. Europeans did not have uniformly negative attitudes toward Africans

B. Early connection between blackness and slavery

1. Began when Muslims and Christians began enslaving large numbers of sub-Saharan Africans.
 - a) Started in the eighth and ninth centuries among Muslim slave traders.
 - b) Large scale enslavement of Africans shifted perceptions of them. Over time, Africans identified with most menial labor.

- c) Note: that Muslims enslaved large numbers of Sub-Saharan Africans before Christians did neither negates the negative repercussions slavery had on the descendants of enslaved people nor shows that Christian morality with regard to slavery was superior to Muslim.
 - 2. Large scale enslavement made it convenient to apply the Curse of Ham to Sub-Saharan Africans.
- C. Spain, Reconquest, and the Spread of the Curse of Ham
 - 1. As Christians gained control of formerly Muslim-controlled portions of Spain, Jews and Muslims had to convert, leave, or die.
 - a) Some Christians doubted the authenticity of Muslim or Jewish conversions. These Christians worried about “blood purity,” meaning that Christian blood differed from Jewish and Muslim blood—and that conversion would not change that.
 - 2. At the same time that some Christians began accepting the idea of immutable differences among people (i.e. “different blood”), the Curse of Ham interpretations spread into Spain and Spaniards began importing Africans into Spain.
 - a) Result: Belief that Africans were fundamentally different from Spaniards (had “different blood”) and naturally slaves. This is the development of what we call race.
- D. Back to Virginia
 - 1. Existing traditions about slavery
 - a) Not having slaves
 - b) Having slavery, but not basing slavery on race
 - c) Supporting race-based slavery with the Bible
 - (1) Even though the tradition existed, it still needed to be codified through law.

III. What is Race?

- A. Common belief: race is a biological reality, meaning it is natural and immutable.
- B. Reality: not a biological reality

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1. Over time, people have named biological, natural, immutable differences differently.
 - a) People who were considered “essentially” different in fifteenth century Spain are considered “the same race” in the United States today.
 2. Race is a human creation: people decide what differences matter in how we group people.
 - a) Examples: Norwegians and Italians; Nigerians and South Africans.
 3. Skin color does not reflect other, immutable similarities or differences.
 - a) People we group in the same race have as much difference among themselves as they do with people of other races.
 - (1) Examples: Fingerprints; lactose-tolerance.

C. Race as a “construction”

1. Not biologically real, but (because people have made it so) socially meaningful.

IV. Why Does It Matter?

A. Race and Current (Facebook) “Debates”

1. Question: why no “White History Month”?
 - a) Note that people do celebrate ethnic and immigrant identities.
 - b) “White” is not a morally innocent category. The category was created so that some people could be protected from slavery and other people designated as appropriately slaves.
 - (1) “Whiteness” became a way of naming kinship more determinative than baptism.
2. Does this mean Sarah hates white people?
 - a) No. There is a difference between recognizing a category people created has a problematic moral history and hating people who are grouped into the category.
3. Why isn’t Black history month a problem?

- a) Difference between immigrant stories in which people know where they came from and forced migration (slave) stories in which people's ethnic identities were erased.
- b) Proposal: there is a difference between finding a way to celebrate what was intended to be a negative category that was imposed upon you and celebrating a category created so that some people could impose upon others.

V. Conclusion

- A. Although slavery is very old, race-based slavery is relatively new (historically speaking).
- B. Many of the primary ways we identify ourselves come out of a racial system designed to justify enslaving some people and not others.