



A History of Racism in the United States

SESSION 1

| 1492–1790: European colonialism and U.S. nation building

About Reading History

All history is biased. The history we learn is written frequently from the perspective of those whose dominant ways have determined the official story. The writers of history rarely limit their work to the presentation of facts. As historian Howard Zinn states, “The historian’s distortion is more than technical, it is ideological; it is released into a world of contending interests, where any chosen emphasis supports (whether the historian means to or not) some kind of interest, whether economic or political or racial or national or sexual. Furthermore, this ideological interest is presented as if all readers of history had a common interest.”¹ Rarely are our collective stories concerned with truth. History, Henry Kissinger argued in his book *A World Restored* as he described the European peace, “is the memory of states.”² He is also noted for saying: “History will be kind to me for I intend to write it.”

The storytellers of the United States are no exception. Our national stories are a mix of symbolism and hero worship that seek to shape a strong citizenry instead of a critically thinking one. Why do we tell the stories we tell? Why do we hero worship historical figures like



Three Teepees: © searagen—Fotolia.com

“In year 1492, Columbus sailed the ocean blue . . .” and entered the narrative of a continent already populated by multiple civilizations.

Christopher Columbus (that’s the English translation of Cristobal Colón), the Pilgrims, the frontier settlers, Woodrow Wilson, Andrew Jackson, and Thomas Jefferson? Why do we oversimplify the complexity of history? Why do we conform to limited knowledge?

This study seeks to guide the participant through an exploration of the historical development of racism in the United States. The writers of this study will engage in a “biased” exploration of history, not to oversimplify history but to bring its complexity to the surface. Our

RACISM STUDY PACK

This study is part of the Thoughtful Christian Racism Study Pack. The list below is the suggested order of the study pack, although you may study it in any order your group chooses.

- Why Is it So Difficult to Talk About Racism?
- Racism 101
- The Bible and Racism
- A History of Racism in the United States
- White Privilege
- Is Affirmative Action Still Needed?
- Do Segregated Churches Imply Racism?

Racial Categories

The categories most commonly used today, based on the 2000 U.S. Census, can be found on most application forms and are identified by the boxes that precede them: White, African American, American Indian and Alaska Native, Asian, Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander, and other races. Many agencies count Hispanic/Latinas as a racial classification; currently the U.S. Census counts “Hispanic/Latino” as an ethnicity. These contemporary categories demonstrate the development of racial identification over time, and will continue to change. Along the span of history, those called white have been dominant and normative. In 1790, as the United States began to shape its identity away from a colony and toward a nation, the first United States Congress began the process of legally codifying race with the passing of the 1790 Naturalization Act. This act limited U.S. citizenship to “free white persons of good and moral character.” Not all who we would currently consider “white” were seen as “white” in this period, either by legal definition or common understanding, but the passing of the 1790 Act ensured that access to citizenship in the developing United States was limited to those whose ancestry was European. (For further reading, refer to the Thoughtful Christian study “White Privilege.”)

bias will be seen most clearly in our use of colonialism as the framework for understanding race and racism in the United States.³ Why colonialism? Many studies approach the history of racism in the United States using African chattel slavery as the framework. The writers wish to suggest an alternate framework that integrates the histories of African Americans, Native Americans, Latinos/as, Asian Americans, and other groups, focusing on the allocation and control of resources. Moreover, we will draw from our experiences as people of color and from the wisdom of communities of color, rather than the dominant cultural mythologies.

Furthermore, in this study we are seeking to identify the patterns connecting the experiences of racial ethnic persons in the United States. After all, racism in the United States is more than just a black and white issue. Our traditional dichotomous approach to understanding race obscures the fact that the United States has always been a nation of nations, diverse and complex. Robette Dias, in her “Working Paper on the Historical Development of Institutional Racism,” expands on this reality, “These patterns are so deeply imbedded in our society, I can’t look at our laws and systems without seeing them anymore. That they are so deeply imbedded but obscured in our collective psyche emphasizes the importance of understanding racism as White supremacy and looking at history through the lenses of colonialism and apartheid. We have been taught not to see these patterns, to see racism in disparate pieces as if it makes no sense. But seeing the three as interrelated and dependent strands, like the strands of a braid

allows us to see the fullness of White supremacy in all of its manifestations.”⁴ The writers wish to help illuminate how we are wrapped into our history—even if we do not mean to be.

European Colonialism Begins

“In year 1492, Columbus sailed the ocean blue . . .” and entered the narrative of a continent already populated by multiple civilizations. His voyage was part of the systematic empire building of Spain’s Catholic monarchs, King Fernando and Queen Isabella, who, after violently purging Spain of the Jews and Moors, were seeking gold and opportunities to spread their Roman Catholic religion. As a reward for returning to Spain with gold and spices, Columbus was promised 10 percent of the profits, governorship over newfound lands, and the title of Admiral of the Ocean Sea.⁵ With that agreement, Colón set out to find a new route to Asia, stumbling into a new continent along the way.

He was not the first European to land on the shores of the American continent. But unlike other instances of European contact, what followed his arrival was a bloody invasion of the lands where native peoples lived. Most commonly, we speak of the appropriation of land and the near decimation of native peoples as “discovery.” For native peoples, what took place was conquest and genocide. In his report to the Spanish majesties, Columbus wrote, “Thus the eternal God, our Lord, gives victory to those who follow His way over apparent impossibilities. . . . Let us in the name of the Holy Trinity go on sending all the slaves that

can be sold.”⁶ This invasion greatly enriched participating countries at the expense of those already here: first Spain, then England and France, along with other European countries.

The Beginning of U.S. Nation Building

One hundred and fifteen years after the European Invasion that began with Columbus’s arrival, the English established their first trading outpost on the Virginia coast in 1607.⁷ “The British knew, of course, that the terrain of the future United States was already inhabited. In fact, the conversion of heathen tribes would figure prominently among the stated objectives of imperial expansion in the New World, and long-lasting stereotypes of the Indians, as well as of the newly discovered Africans, were already taking shape.”⁸ The white colonialists and slave traders who were the dominant social group came to view Native Americans as vanishing savages and sought their dehumanization in order to justify genocide and take possession of their land and exploit the resources.⁹

John Winthrop, future governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, while on his voyage to the “New World,” wrote in 1630 of the common desire held by the settlers that the new colony might be like a “city on a hill” to inspire the world with the possibilities of a pure Christian commonwealth.¹⁰ The incongruencies between the settlers’ Christian faith and their conquering ways were immediately apparent when John Winthrop declared the Indian lands where his colony was established a legal “vacuum” since the Indians had not “subdued” the land, and therefore had only a “natural right” but not a “civil right” to it. Natural rights had no legal standing.¹¹ With cross and sword, the conquest of the Americas broadly, and North America specifically, found the church morally compromised by its support and justification of an

Devastation of Native Americans

Before 1492, it is estimated that 75 million Native Americans lived in North America. The population rose and fell due to war and disease among groups of people, but the devastation wrought by European invaders was most thorough.¹²



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enterprise driven by the need of Europeans to possess, to control, and to acquire, even if the result was the systematic destruction of culture and peoples.

Enslaved Africans arrived in Jamestown in 1619, giving way to almost three centuries of dehumanizing practices that reduced Africans to property. What is unique about African chattel slavery is that these people were considered slaves for life, forced members of a large pool of free and cheap labor, and the vast profits bought through their continued enslavement were justified through a complex code built on pseudoscience and misinterpretation of Scripture that rendered the slaves as property. This strategy not just controlled the enslaved Africans but was used also to manipulate and control poor white people.¹³

Everything about the life situation of early Virginia settlers supported and justified their participation in the enslavement of people from Africa. The Virginians needed labor to grow corn for food and tobacco for export. Because settlers could not enslave sufficient numbers of Native Americans, the enslaved Africans became the workforce of choice, since the Spanish and Portuguese slave trade had stamped Africans as slaves centuries earlier.¹⁴ The enslavement of Africans is among the most disturbing enterprises undertaken in the formation of the nation we now know as the United States, and the church was not exempt from it.

In 1610, Brother Luis Brandao responded in this way to concerns raised by a priest in the Americas about the enslavement of Africans:

The Resistance: John Newton

Throughout this study, we will lift up the names of those who resisted the dehumanizing practices we now call racism in the United States. In this period, John Newton, author of the hymn “Amazing Grace,” stands out. John Newton served on a slave ship and eventually became a captain during the cruelest days of the transatlantic slave trade. Although he eventually became a Christian, Newton’s journey from slave ship to antislavery cleric was long. He wrote the words to “How Sweet the Name of Jesus Sounds” on the deck of his slave ship while waiting for the next cargo of enslaved Africans. Newton eventually renounced the slave trade and after studying theology became ordained in the Church of England. In 1788, Newton published *Thoughts Upon the Slave Trade* through which he denounced the morally corrupting effects of being engaged in such business: “I know of no method of getting money, not even that of robbing for it upon the highway, which has so direct a tendency to efface the moral sense, to rob the heart of every gentle and humane disposition, and to harden it, like steel, against all impressions of sensibility.”¹⁵

Your Reverence writes me that you would like to know whether the Negroes who are sent to your parts have been legally captured. To this I reply that I think your Reverence should have no scruples on this point, because this is a matter which has been questioned by the Board of Conscience in Lisbon, and all its members are learned and conscientious men. . . . Therefore we and the Fathers of Brazil buy these slaves for our service without any scruple.¹⁶

In 1706, the colonial government of New York Colony declared that the baptism of a slave did not entitle said slave to freedom:

Be it Enacted by the Governr Council and Assembly and it is hereby Enacted by the authority of the same, That the Baptizing of any Negro, Indian or Mulatto Slave shall not be any Cause or reason for the setting them or any of them at Liberty.¹⁷

African, native and European, black and white; all were misshapen equally by an industry that demanded human beings were fully dehumanized and turned into

property. Not even baptism would provide freedom and self-determination. Moreover, in order to ensure that enslaved Africans and European Americans related to each other according to their socially constituted roles, laws were enacted to keep them separate. In 1691, Virginia provided for the banishment of any “white man or woman being free who shall intermarry with a negro, mulatto, or any Indian man or woman bond or free.”¹⁸

It is this history that runs through the veins of our national story. As the early Americans broke free from the yoke of European colonialism and began to shape the social experiment we now call the United States, the reality of Indian genocide and African chattel slavery also became a part of our country’s history. Embedded into our DNA were deeply held beliefs about the superiority of northern Europeans. After all, it was northern Europeans who “discovered” these lands. It was northern Europeans who brought “civilization” and “faith.” This is most evident in the ways we have constructed the notions of citizenship. Who became a citizen of the emerging United States was determined by a newly established United States Congress in 1790 when it passed the first “Naturalization Act” in our history. This act limited citizenship to “free white persons of good and moral character,” leaving out European indentured servants, enslaved Africans, Native Americans, and later freed slaves and Asians. Amended twice in 1795 and 1798, subsequent acts only extended the period required to qualify for citizenship. Neither amendment opened up citizenship to those who were not white.¹⁹

The two hundred and ninety-eight years that span this period are most often described with words like *discovery*, *expansion*, *nation building*, *formative*, *seminal*, and *growing*. These are the words many of us learned, but there are other words we need to claim: words like *genocide*, *slavery*, *land theft*, *conquest*, *systematic destruction of culture*, and *dehumanization*. Those of us seeking to understand the roots of racism in the United States must expand our historical frameworks to include these uncomfortable words, for these speak of the experience of people of color in this nation. These speak of the patterns of white power and privilege that limited the right to be naturalized as citizens to white persons until 1952.

About the Writers

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Endnotes

1. Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the United States* (New York: HarperCollins, 1999), 8.

2. *Ibid.*, 9.

3. This method was developed by Robette A. Dias for Crossroads' antiracism training and organizing.

4. Robette A. Dias, "Historical Development of Institutional Racism: A Working Paper," 2006, 1, <http://www.crossroadsantiracism.org/pdf/Web%20Page%20Historical%20Working%20Paper.pdf>.

5. Zinn, *People's History*, 2.

6. *Ibid.*, 4.

7. *Ibid.*, 12.

8. Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1972), 100.

9. Dias, "Historical Development," 28.

10. William Carl Placher, *Readings in the History of Christian Theology: From the Reformation to the Present*, vol. 2 (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1988), 107.

11. Zinn, *People's History*, 12.

12. *Ibid.*, 7.

13. Dias, "Historical Development," 28.

14. Zinn, *People's History*, 26.

15. Jonathan Aitken, *John Newton: From Disgrace to Amazing Grace* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2007), 320.

16. *Ibid.*, 30.

17. Dias, "Historical Development," 8.

18. Zinn, *People's History*, 31.

19. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Naturalization_Act_of_1790.