

Race/Ethnicity and Religion in American History

Much has been written about the long history of racial and ethnic issues in the United States, from issues of racial inequality to those of immigration. Since religion is a powerful social institution, one that unites and divides people, what role does it play in the history of race/ethnicity in America? This learning module serves as a guide to understand how religion and race/ethnicity have historically been interconnected.

Open your web browser and go to the homepage for the Association of Religion Data Archives (www.theARDA.com).

Click on the “Interactive Timelines” tab on the homepage. Now that you are on the landing page for the Interactive Historical Timelines, locate the section entitled “Race/Ethnicity and Religion” and click on “Interactive Timeline” button below that title. Now that you are on the “Race/Ethnicity and Religion” interactive timeline, click “Continue” on the pop-up menu to begin. For assistance navigating the interactive historical timelines on the ARDA, click [here](#).

1. Scroll to the year 1680. Locate the entry entitled “Abolitionism.” Click on the “More” tab for a full description. You also can click on the “Find out more” tab for a full narrative. Based on the information in this entry, which religious group was one of the first anti-slavery abolitionists? Which individuals/groups were resistant to abolitionism? How would you characterize the role of religion in addressing the controversial issue of slavery?

2. Scroll to the year 1816 and click on the “More” tab for the entry “African Methodist Episcopal Church.” Read the description. Based on this information, describe the importance of Richard Allen in helping to form and lead one of the oldest existing African-American denominations.



3. As the issue of slavery divided the country in the mid-19th century, it also divided religious groups. Scrolling between the years 1845 and 1865, which religious group(s) split into separate denominations over slavery? Circle all that apply.

- A) Methodists
- B) Catholics
- C) Baptists
- D) Presbyterians

From the mid-19th to the early 20th centuries, new religious groups came to the United States due to the immigration of foreign ethnic groups. Scrolling from the 1850s to the 1930s, match the immigrant groups/individuals to the religious organizations/places of worship brought to the United States. Also, fill in the year.

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| 4. Chinese/Japanese Immigrants | A. First Purpose-Built Mosque (Year: _____) |
| 5. Indian-born Hazrat Inayat Khan | B. First Buddhist Temples (Year: _____) |
| 6. Syrian-Lebanese Immigrants | C. First Hindu Temple (Year: _____) |
| 7. Indian-born Swami Trigunatita | D. Sufi Movement Organization (Year: _____) |

8. Immigration also helped increase the membership of religious groups that already existed in the United States. Scroll to the year 1920 and click on the “More” tab for “Bureau of Immigration.” Why did the National Catholic Welfare Council establish the Bureau of Immigration? Do you think it was a smart strategy? Why or why not?

9. In the mid-20th century, religious ministers became powerful leaders in the fight against racial injustice in the United States. Scrolling from the years 1955 to 1965, identify the names of religious leaders based on the following short descriptions. Use both the entry introductions and descriptions (click “More”) for guiding your answers.

Beaten on four occasions, had his home bombed and was arrested 22 times because of his public protests.	
Leader of the Montgomery bus boycott, president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and recipient of the 1964 Nobel Peace Prize.	
Controversial Nation of Islam (NOI) minister/spokesman who was assassinated in 1965 by NOI members after he left the group.	

10. Scroll to 1978 and read the full description for the entry entitled “American Indian Religious Freedom Act.” Now, scroll to 1994 and read the full description entitled “Native American Peyote Controversy.” Describe the conflict between the American Indian Religious Freedom Act and the use of peyote in Native American religious ceremonies. What was the final outcome of the controversy? Do you agree or disagree with the final legal decision made? Why or why not?

10. Before going through the Interactive Timeline, what would you have said was the relationship between religion and race/ethnicity? Would you have said religious people were more or less likely to fight against racial discrimination than non-religious people? Have your opinions changed since viewing the Interactive Timeline? Why or why not?

In this module, we have looked at the history of race/ethnicity and religion in the United States. It should now be clear that religion and race are interconnected social phenomena, unifying and dividing groups at various times.