



## *A Description of the Coasts of North and South Guinea* Jean Barbot (1682)

*Jean Barbot was a French Protestant who eventually resettled in England to escape persecution in officially Catholic France. Before abandoning France, he worked for a French company engaged in the trans-Atlantic slave trade. He wrote a lengthy book describing the geography and peoples of western Africa, a region Europeans called Guinea, based on voyages he had made there. In this selection from his book, Barbot defends the slave trade from early Protestant critics, and he complains that English colonists in the Americas don't put more effort into Christianizing their slaves. Barbot's observations of English slaveholders were made in England's Caribbean colonies; but Anglican missionaries would complain, in the 1700s, about similar attitudes among slaveholders in the colonies on the North American mainland.*

I have before observed that trading is the employment of the prime Blacks, both in rank and riches. [...] The trade of slaves is, in a more peculiar manner, the business of kings, rich men, and prime merchants, exclusive of the inferior sort of Blacks.

These slaves are severely and barbarously treated by their masters, who subsist them poorly and beat them inhumanly, as may be seen by the scabs and wounds on the bodies of many of them when sold to us. They scarce allow them the least rag to cover their nakedness, which they also take off from them when sold to Europeans [...]

This barbarous usage of those unfortunate wretches makes it appear that the fate of such as are bought and transported from the coast to America (or other parts of the world) by Europeans is less deplorable than that of those who end their days in their native country. For aboard ships, all possible care is taken to preserve and subsist them for the interest of the owners; and when sold in America, the same motive ought to prevail with their masters to use them well, that they may live the longer and do them more service. Not to mention the inestimable advantage they may reap of becoming Christians and saving their souls, if they make a true use of their condition, whereof some instances might be brought—though it must be owned they are very hard to be brought to a true notion of the Christian religion, and much less to be prevailed on to live up to its holy rules, being naturally very stupid and sensual and so apt to continue till their end, without the least concern for a future state of eternal bliss or misery according as they have lived in this world.

It must also be owned that the Christians in America are much to be blamed in this particular; and more especially the Protestants—which I beg leave to take notice of with some concern—take very little care to have their slaves instructed in the Christian religion, as if it were not a positive duty incumbent on them, by the precepts of Christianity, to procure the welfare of their servants' souls as well as that of their bodies. This has been expressly declared by two synods of the Protestant churches of France, the one held at Rouen, the other at Alençon in 1637, upon the questions put in those assemblies by over-scrupulous persons who thought it unlawful that many Protestant merchants, who had traded in slaves from Guinea to America, should continue that traffic, as inconsistent with Christian charity. The synod thereupon, after a long discussion of the point, decreed as follows: "Though slavery, as it has been always acknowledged to be the right

of nations, is not condemned in the word of God, and has not been abolished in most parts of Europe by the manifestation of the gospel, but only by a contrary practice insensibly introduced; nevertheless, since several merchants, trading on the coast of Africa and to the Indies, where that traffic is permitted, acquire slaves of the Barbarians, [...] this assembly [...] exhorts them not to abuse that liberty, contrary to Christian charity, and not to dispose of those poor infidels but to such Christians as will use them with humanity and, above all, will take care to instruct them in the true religion.”

But how far most Protestant planters and other inhabitants of European colonies in America are from following such reasonable advice, every person that has conversed among them can tell. There, provided that the slaves can multiply and work hard for the benefit of their masters, most men are well satisfied, without the least thoughts of using their authority and endeavors to promote the good of the souls of those poor wretches.

In this particular, I must say, the Roman Catholics of the American plantations are much more commendable. For at Martinique, one of the French Caribbean islands, all who have been there may have observed that every Sunday morning, early, there is a mass celebrated in the chapel of the Jesuits, called the mass of the Blacks, as being particularly appointed for those slaves in the island; and every planter who lives within a reasonable distance of it is obliged to send his Blacks to be present at it, and at other devotions according to the service of the Roman church. It is also notorious with what application the Portuguese have endeavored, for these last two centuries, to propagate their religion among the Blacks in general, at Guinea, Congo, and Angola, by keeping a great number of missionaries there in several places; and even in Brazil, what care they take to instruct so many thousands of Black slaves as are employed in the service of their plantations [...]

Before I leave this subject, I shall mention two principal reasons (to pass by several others of less moment) which Protestant planters usually allege, in the English colonies of America, to excuse this neglect. The first: the great encumbrance it would be to a planter who has a great number of slaves—some one hundred, others two hundred and more—first to have them learn English, and afterwards to instruct every one of them in the principal articles of the Protestant belief, those slaves being generally of a brutish temper and prepossessed with fantastical superstitious practices of the grossest and most absurd paganism; which, in reality, most of them always adhere to, though they have lived ever so long among Protestants.

The other argument, on which many seem to lay much stress, is that if their slaves were made Christians by baptism, etc., they should, according to the laws of the British nation and the canons of its church, immediately lose the property they had before in those slaves, it being inconsistent with the Protestant religion that any of its professors should be kept in bondage for life. But this is a false notion, for neither the laws of the nation nor the canons of the church of England, nor of any other Christian people in Europe that I could ever hear of, do discharge any Black slave that has received baptism from continuing so till death. I have in this point had the opinion of very learned English and French divines, alleging one instance of the like case in Onesimus, a Christian slave in whose behalf St. Paul writes to Philemon, his master, in so affectionate a manner (*vid.* his epistle); by all which it is apparent that in those times, the primitive Christians had many slaves among them who were also Christians.

To conclude on this head, it may safely be affirmed that if the Protestants were careful to have their Barbarian slaves baptized and well instructed in the principles and maxims of true Christianity, many of those poor wretches would behave themselves much more humanely and dutifully toward their masters and fellow slaves than they do for want of such instructions; and consequently we should not so often hear of their mutinying and deserting, as has been known at Barbados and other colonies. The maxims of Christianity would doubtless be a curb to their rude temper, and the planters might expect the blessing of heaven on their plantations as a reward of their charitable endeavors to convert those gross pagans from their deplorable state of depravation, in all malice and vileness towards God and man.

**Source:** John Barbot, *A Description of the Coasts of North and South-Guinea* [...], vol. 5 of *A Collection of Voyages and Travels*, comp. Awnsham Churchill and John Churchill (London: n.p., 1732), 258, 270-271 (book 3, chap. 20), <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/aeu.ark:/13960/t1wd4kx1d>. Public domain.

Excerpts edited by John-Charles Duffy. Marginal headings in the source publication omitted. Paragraph and sentence breaks adjusted. The word *hundred* repeated for clarity at a point where the repetition is implied in the source. Spelling, punctuation, typography (italics), and some capitalization modernized, Americanized, or otherwise emended for readability. The capitalizing of *Blacks* and *Barbarians* reproduces the usage of the source publication, as does the use of lowercase for *mass* and *church*. The words *Christian(ity)* and *Protestant*, lowercase in the source, are capitalized here for the sake of modernization and for consistency with the source's capitalizing of *Roman Catholics*.

These edited excerpts from Barbot's book are intended for **teaching** purposes only. For **research** purposes, you should consult, quote, and cite the source publication listed above.



© 2021 by John-Charles Duffy. Except as otherwise noted, this work is made available under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License, <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>.

All rights are reserved for the flag-shaped "Empire and American Religion" logo; if you alter this work, you may not reproduce the logo. Use of the Creative Commons license icon is subject to the Creative Commons Trademark Policy.