

Richard Hackley
10/28/11
HIST208L

Failure of the Protestant Missionaries after 1590

Prior to King Philips War in 1675, almost one fourth of all Native Americans in New England had converted to Christianity.¹ The Protestant Reformation of the 1590s was a major contributing factor to the conversion of Native Americans. While the Reformation itself took place in Europe, reverberations were felt throughout the world. Scholars have long argued over how the Reformation changed and shaped interactions between Protestant missionaries and Native Americans. Protestant missionaries began to arrive in the New World, bringing with them the idea of expanding their religion. Once they arrived in the New England area, they began attempting to convert Native Americans. In the New England colonies, the most prominent missionary was John Eliot. His goal, as well as the overall goal of the Protestant missions, was a complete conversion of the Native American population, both religiously and culturally. Missionaries, such as Eliot, were hard to please; they wanted Natives to convert exclusively for religious reasons, and they believed it was required to remove them from their Native culture. After this was accomplished, Eliot wanted to integrate these converted Natives into the English lifestyle. In this way, it was not simply a religious conversion that was being attempted, but a radical adjustment to the Native American way of life. This paper will argue that in light of the goals set out by John Eliot himself, the missions he led in New England ultimately failed. Instead of Native Americans converting to English lifestyle, there was a melding of English and Native American cultures. Many Natives converted for non-religious

¹ Harold W. Van Lonkhuyzen, "A Reappraisal of the Praying Indians: Acculturation, Conversion, and Identity at Natick, Massachusetts, 1646-1730," *The New England Quarterly* 63, no. 3 (September 1990): 396, <http://jstor.com> (accessed 11/16/11).

reasons, and there was a lack of effort made by non-missionaries to accept them into the English culture.

The Protestant Reformation was not a single event that drastically changed the religious landscape of an enormous empire. Instead, it was a slow, drawn out process of new theological viewpoints in response to the inadequacies of the Catholic Church.² For centuries, all religious authority and imagery came strictly from the church: murals, stained glass, and even the educational activities of the clergy.³ Theologian Martin Luther maintained that there was a higher authority than the one in Rome: “the word of God written in the Bible.”⁴ In this idea, Luther believed that anyone with a Bible was able to, and should, interpret it for himself or herself. This eliminated the need for an “intermediary priesthood,” that relayed the message of the Bible to the lay people.⁵ This was the largest break from the structure of the Catholic Church. Martin Luther was replacing the authority of the Church with the authority of the Bible and reason.⁶ The publishing of Luther’s *95 Theses* was the true beginning of the Reformation in the English Empire.

During this period of religious unrest in Great Britain, the Empire was embarking on the journey of colonizing the New World. When the English began to arrive, they faced contact with a new group of people unlike any they had seen before: the Native Americans. This new

² *Ibid*, 75. Prior to the religious reformation that dramatically altered the religious system in Great Britain in the 1500s, English Catholics were still under the supreme rule of the Papacy in Rome. During the English Reformation, King Henry VIII and the English, broke from Roman religious superiority. However, this would cause problems for the next rulers to come. Mary Tudor came to the English throne in 1553 and was a devout Catholic.² She went about attempting to quell the Protestant uprisings that were underway around her kingdom.

³ Derek Wilson, “The Luther Legacy,” *History Today* 57, no. 5 (May 2007): 34-39, *Historical Abstracts with Full Text EBSCOhost* (accessed November 1, 2011).

⁴ *Ibid*, 34-39.

⁵ *Ibid*, 34-39.

⁶ *Ibid*, 34-39.

population of people held completely different beliefs than the English did and neither side knew how to interact with the other. It was from these initial differences that later disputes arose.

The initial interactions with the Native Americans were not the friendly interactions that many missionaries would have people believe. Instead, there were violent outbreaks between these two groups. In 1637, the New England colonies went to war with the Pequot Indians, and subdued them. This period of war was followed by a long span of peace.⁷ However, this period of peace was broken by the Native Americans in 1675 and “whole [n]ations of them were destroy’d.”⁸ The bias that the English people held towards the Native Americans was obviously expressed in this narrative of war. The only mention of what caused the war was that the Native Americans caused it and nothing was said of any wrongdoing of the English. This initial hostility between the two groups would never be completely overcome. The English population still viewed the Natives as savages even if an individual had converted to Christianity. Because of this bias, it was impossible to integrate the converted Natives in later years. It was after years of fighting and war between these two opposing groups that missionaries begin to proselytize the Natives.

One such missionary was John Eliot. He was born in England in 1604 and sailed to America in 1631. Once he was in America, he became a pastor at a church in Roxbury, New England. Eliot would eventually turn his religious attention to the Native Americans of the area. According to his memoirs, Eliot did not want to be thought of as inferior to Roman

⁷ Increase Mather, “A brief relation of the state of New England from the beginning of that plantation to this present year, 1689 in a letter to a person of quality,” p. 5, 1689, <http://eebo.com> (accessed on November 7, 2011).

⁸ *Ibid*, 5.

Missionaries.⁹ This comparison to Roman missionaries is evidence competition between Protestants and Catholics. Protestantism being the younger of the two religious, needed to legitimize itself. By saying that he was equal to the Roman missionaries, he was saying that being Protestant in no way makes him inferior in zeal to Catholics.

John Eliot's method of conversion was creating praying towns for Native Americans.¹⁰ Between 1651 and 1674, Eliot established fourteen praying towns in the Massachusetts Bay area. The first of these was founded at Natick, which is the most documented of all of the towns.¹¹ As such, while the information in this essay generally portrays missionary – Native relations throughout the New England area, it details the situation at Natick. Protestant missionaries have traditionally been viewed as benevolent actors. According to historian Neal Salisbury, this view is beginning to be challenged in studies conducted by Robert F. Berkhofer, Jr., and Francis Jennings.¹² The missionaries were just as concerned with “detaching the Indians from their ‘savage’ culture and initiating them to the ways of ‘civilization,’ before introducing them to Christianity.”¹³ From the outset of the missions, the missionaries were just as concerned with cultural conversion as with religious conversion. One of the prerequisites for Native Americans to reside in these praying towns was to “repudiate their identities as Indians and to act like

⁹ “Memoirs of the Truly Reverend John Eliot, frequently called the Apostale of the American Indians,” *The Evangelical Magazine* 2, no.6 (August/September 1797), <http://proquest.com> (accessed November 7, 2011).

¹⁰ Neal Salisbury, “Red Puritans: The ‘Praying Indians’ of Massachusetts Bay and John Eliot,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 31, no. 1 (January 1974): 32, <http://jstor.com> (accessed November 7, 2011).

¹¹ *Ibid*, 32.

¹² *Ibid*, 28.

¹³ *Ibid*, 28.

English men and women.”¹⁴ By intertwining the ideas of religion and culture, the Protestant missionaries took on the additional goal of the cultural conversion Native Americans.

John Eliot began attempting to culturally convert Native Americans at the praying town of Natick. A new form of governance was implemented to see to the affairs of the Native Americans in the praying towns. This government was a unique blend of Native and English traditions. There would be a quarterly court that would come to Natick to hear cases that were brought before it by the Indian leader of the town.¹⁵ This gave the leader of the town, whom was Native American, power over which cases were to be brought before the court and it allowed for the day-to-day activities of the town to be largely free of English interference. This unique law system went against one of the goals of the praying towns. By allowing for some Natives to maintain a position of authority, and by limiting interaction between the two cultures, a cultural conversion could not be achieved. The system was an attempt to bridge the gap between the two groups. but it served to give the Natives more autonomy within the towns.

Eliot believed that civilizing Native Americans was a prerequisite for converting them to Christianity. In an effort to speed this process along, he brought many aspects of English culture to the praying towns. In this effort, John Eliot paid deserving residents between £5 and £10 and offered them supplies and novelties like playing cards. In addition to this, he introduced English ways of farming as well as new types of buildings.¹⁶ By bringing this new technology with him, he allowed the Native Americans access to English culture. The Native Americans living in Natick began to adopt these new technologies and practices as they moved towards an English

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 28.

¹⁵ Elise M. Brenner, “To Pray or to Be Prey: That is the Question Strategies for Cultural Autonomy of Massachusetts Praying Town Indians,” *Ethnohistory* 27, no. 2 (Spring 1980): 141-2, <http://jstor.com> (accessed 11/16/11).

¹⁶ Van Lonkhuyzen, "A Reappraisal," 406-7.

way of life. However, as stated by historian Elise Brenner, it was normal for the Natives to "backslide" into ways and practices that did not please Eliot.¹⁷ This practice of backsliding shows that neither the Native American culture nor the English culture was a dominant force in the praying towns. The oscillation between the two ways of life shows that the Indians of Natick were struggling with an identity crisis. It would seem that the outcome was not a culture that was distinctly Native or English, but one that was constantly evolving as the Natives attempted to remain true to their heritage, while still accepting change.

The most obvious evidence for the merging of these two cultures, and not of English cultural dominance, is the translation of the Bible into Algonquian. Translated in 1663 by John Eliot, it is evidence of an effort made by him to bring the Gospel to the Natives.¹⁸ However, it seems to be contrary to his belief that they must be brought out from their savage culture before they can become true English Christians. Language is the most essential part of any culture: without it, the culture seems to slip away, as does the possibility of maintaining a strong bond with others that understand it. By translating the Bible into Algonquian, Eliot gave no motivation for the Indians to learn English and even less motivation to leave their own language behind. However, as shown by his essay "Indian Grammar Begun," Eliot made an attempt to teach Native Americans the English language.¹⁹ Eliot wrote this essay was written to teach Natives the rules of English grammar. What is interesting about this text is that it contains both English and Native languages. Again, this demonstrates the melding of the two cultures into a

¹⁷ Elise M. Brenner, "To Pray or to Be Prey," 141-2.

¹⁸ John Eliot, "The Holy Bible: containing the Old Testament and the New. Translated into the Indian language, and ordered to be printed by the Commissioners of the United Colonies in New-England, at the charge, and with the consent of the Corporation in England for the Propagation of the Gospel amongst the Indians in New-England," 1663.

¹⁹ John Eliot, "The Indian grammar begun: or, An essay to bring the Indian language into rules, for the help of such as desire to learn the same, for the furtherance of the Gospel among them," 1666.

new, distinct third culture. It is worth noting that it is stated that the only goal of these two texts was to spread the Gospel among the Indians. By translating the Bible into the Native tongue, it showed that many of the converts were not willing to give up their own culture entirely.

The funding for Natick and the other praying towns that Eliot established did not come from local sources. Instead, all of it came from England. To this end, Eliot was forced to prove to his superiors that he should be granted funding. His successes were shown in the narratives and letters that he sent back to England. However, for obvious reasons, in many of these writings he does not expound on the hardships he faced or the failures he endured. In one of the letters he even went so far as to quote the scripture that one of the Indians recited:

But when [J]esus heard that, he said unto them, They that be whole need not a Physitian, but they that are sick. But goe ye and learne what that meaneth; I will have mercy and not sacrifice; for I came not to call the righ|teous, but sinners to Repentance.²⁰

By showing Natives reciting scriptures, Eliot provided evidence of the success and progress among the Natives. Eliot needed to prove this in hopes of continuing to receive funds needed to maintain Natick.

Perhaps the most important aspect of the melding of these two cultures was religion. It would be impossible for a previously unheard of religion to come into a new area and completely wipe out the previous religious majority. Colonial New England was no different; instead, there was a mixing of traditional Native religious beliefs and Puritan beliefs. This phenomenon went both ways: the Natives "Indianized" Christianity and there was Christianization of the Indians.

²⁰ John Eliot, "A further accompt of the progresse of the Gospel amongst the Indians in New-England, and of the means used effectually to advance the same set forth in certaine letters sent from thence declaring a purpose of printing the Scriptures in the Indian tongue into which they are already translated : with which letters are likewise sent an epitome of some exhortations delivered by the Indians at a fast, as testimonies of their obedience tot he Gospell : as also some helps directing the Indians how to improve naturall reason unto the knowledge of the true God," 1659, <http://eebo.com> (accessed November 8, 2011).

The Christianization of the Indians can be briefly described as the acceptance of the new religious ideas and practices that were brought by Eliot and the missionaries to the Natives. Prior to professing their faith and making a full conversion to Christianity, many Natives practiced the religion. Along with this, only a minority of Natives belonged to an established church, even after their conversion. This may seem like an attempt by the Natives to retain some religious freedoms, but the number of full church members in the praying towns was similar to the number of full English church members. Many of the Natives were happy with just following the beliefs and rituals of the Protestant religion. Because of this, Natives came to adopt prayer, Bible reading, and church attendance.²¹ Along with this, Sabbath day rituals became a very important facet of praying town life, so much so that when faced with a lack of English religious leadership, a Native would take charge to make sure the practices continued.²² By adopting these practices, the Indians who lived in praying towns showed their willingness to accept English culture into their lives. This also shows that they knew change was necessary in order to survive in the towns. However, not all traditional practices would disappear and be replaced by new Christian rituals.

While a variety of Christian practices were adopted, some Natives still maintained old rituals and attempted to blend them into their new Christian beliefs. An example of this blending is Native American burial and mortuary customs. Prior to contact with missionaries, the Natives of New England buried their dead in the fetal position: head pointed southwest, in the direction of Cautantowwit's house.²³ The head was faced in that direction because it was believed that the

²¹ Lindford D. Fisher, "Native Americans, Conversion, and Christian Practice in Colonial New England, 1640-1730," *The Harvard Theological Review* 102 no. 1 (January 2009): 112-4, <http://jstor.com> (accessed November 17, 2011).

²² *Ibid*, 110.

soul exited through the skull and needed to begin its journey in the proper direction. Also, prior to contact with missionaries, Natives placed funerary objects within the graves of the deceased.²⁴ Both of these practices evolved after conversion to Christianity. Even though this practice was prohibited by Puritan beliefs, the bodies continued to be buried with grave goods, except the goods were often of English manufacture. Along with this, the Natives maintained the southwestern facing burials, but the bodies were placed in the extended posture favored by the English.²⁵ This melding of religious beliefs shows that the Natives were able to pick and choose Christian practices they wanted to integrate into their belief structure. This also shows the failure of the missionaries to fully Christianize the Natives, as was one of their original goals.

Another aspect of traditional religion that maintained its prominence in praying towns were powwows. The powwows were the traditional religious leaders of the communities who were responsible for healing the Native people. Even after the move to praying towns, the practice of going to powwows for healing continued. Mathew Mayhew, a missionary for Martha's Vineyard, gave two specific accounts of when praying Indians chose to go to powwows for healing instead of resorting to English methods.²⁶ It is interesting that the missionaries of the praying towns allowed for this practice to continue, as it seems to go directly against traditional Protestant beliefs. It is also interesting that one of the powwows of Martha's Vineyard had a

²³ Douglas L. Winiarski, "Native American Popular Religion in New England's Old Colony, 1670-1770," *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation* 15 no. 2 (Summer 2005): 165-6, <http://jstor.com> (accessed November 17, 2011). Cautantowwit was the creator deity of the Natives who believed after death they went to dwell in his house with their ancestors. It should be noted that according to Linford Fisher in "Native Americans, Conversion, and Christian Practice," the deity is referred to as Kiethan.

²⁴ Fisher, "Native Americans, Conversion, and Christian Practice," 117.

²⁵ Fisher, "Native Americans, Conversion and Christian Practice," 117. Winiarski, "Native American Popular Religion," 166.

²⁶ Fisher, "Native Americans, Conversion, and Christian Practice," 115-6.

devoutly Christian Indian as a wife. Both of these showed the Indianization of Christianity.²⁷ An instance such as this showed that the Native Americans did not see these two practices as mutually exclusive. Instead, as with burial customs, they were able to merge the two into a new system that allowed them to maintain elements of their own religion while adding in some elements of Christianity. Overall, the missions failed in cultural and religious areas. According to Eliot himself, Native American's needed to be brought out from their savage way of life before an attempt to convert them could be made. However, the Native Americans were never fully brought out of that state. Eliot allowed the praying town Indians to retain beliefs and practices from their traditional religion and to mix it in with his teachings. This cultural mixing showed that according to the definition of his goal, the missions failed.

The mixing of cultures happened long after Natives moved into praying towns and after they had decided to convert to Christianity. To fully understand this process, the reasons that Native Americans had for converting must be examined. While the missionaries wanted to believe that the Natives moved and converted for purely religious reasons, the evidence shows that this was often not the case. Instead, practical reasons seemed to have fueled the initial want for contact and conversion. One main reason for conversion was to gain personal power. Waban, the first convert of John Eliot, seemed to have converted to gain power. Waban, who was a moderately influential member of his tribe prior to conversion, was under the sachemship of Cutshamekin.²⁸ Cutshamekin had sold his coastal land, alienating some of his followers which caused him to lose some of his power. Under these circumstances, Waban made a push for power by aligning himself with Christianity, which drew in new members from outside of his

²⁷ *Ibid*, 116.

²⁸ Van Lonkhuyzen, "A Reappraisal of the Praying Indians," 401-2. A sachem was a local leader who had multiple other bands under him. These subordinate bands paid a tribute to the sachem who then owed a larger, more powerful chief.

band, increasing its size. With the backing of John Eliot, along with the newly enlarged band, Waban was able to become a sachem by 1648.²⁹ By aligning himself with Christianity, and by extension with the English settlers, Waban was able to gain more personal power. In this experience, Waban seems to have paid little or no attention to the religious consequences of conversion.

Along with increasing personal power, protection and economic gain could be achieved by moving to the praying towns. The missions of John Eliot in New England did not focus on large, powerful tribes. Instead, they focused on smaller groups that had already been devastated by long years of violence with other English settlers. Official missions only began after a war of attrition was fought against the Pequots and the Narragansetts.³⁰ Only after these wars, did Native Americans begin to convert and move to praying towns. It shows that the tribes were already weak and that they had little or no other options to turn to. According to historian Elise Brenner, the choice by these smaller tribes to move to praying towns was a cost-benefit choice. The tribes were willing to accept new restrictive rules in exchange for resources such as protection, food, and shelter. The areas that Eliot went through had been devastated by disease and had lost much of their land.³¹ This left them with little choice but to convert or potentially die.

The practice of conversion for practice, non-religious reasons were not unknown to John Eliot. In this passage he relates his fear of losing their faith:

²⁹ *Ibid*, 402.

³⁰ Salisbury, "Red Puritans," 30.

³¹ Brenner, "To Pray or to Be Prey," 138.

. . . We are loth to go Northward, though they say they will go with me any whether; but it concerneth me much not to lead them into temptation of scarcity, cold, and want, which may damp the progress of the Gospel. . .³²

This passage shows that John Eliot was aware of the fact that Native Americans were moving into his praying towns for reasons other than religion. However, he continued to attempt to spread the Gospel among those that had come to the towns. He believed that even if an Indian came to the town for non-religious reasons, being in the town would show him that Christianity could provide what was needed to live, which would cause him to convert. If Native Americans were coming to the towns and converting for the material gains they offered, it seems that there was a fundamental failure in their conversion attempts.

The attempts by Eliot to make English culture accessible to the Indians was an attempt to make them more English. By doing this, he hoped to complete his goal of acculturating them enough to integrate them into English society. Attempts of integration between the English and Native Americans were rarely successful. Prior to the colonization of the New World, an attempt had been made to bring Native Americans back to England. In October of 1576 Captain Martin Frobisher brought a man from northeastern Canada back to London after an expedition to Baffin Island. The Native would only live for forty days before he died of a self-inflicted wound. Though his stay in London was quick, the immense amount of wonder exhibited towards him caused Frobisher to return to the same area and bring back three more Native people. The new three, consisting of a woman, man, and child, would fare no better with none of them lasting more than a few months.³³ Even before the missions began, Eliot would have had

³² John Eliot and Thomas Mayhew, "Tears of Repentence, Or a Further Narrative of the Progress Amongst the Indians in New England," 1834.

³³ Alden T. Vaughan, *Transatlantic Encounter: American Indians in Britain, 1500-1776* (New York: Cambridge University Press), 1-9.

proof of previous failures to integrate these distinct people. However, he probably would have assumed that with the proper religion, such a goal was attainable. He would come to learn that even with conversion, this would not be successful.

For complete integration of the Native Americans to be successful, the lay English of the colonies would have to have been accepting of this agreement. However, as noted earlier, this was far from the case. The colonies government would not even provide funding for Eliot's efforts, much less allow for his converted Indians to move into the colonies. Instead, the colonists adopted a policy of separation. When the sachem of Concord requested land for a praying town close to a colonial village, he was questioned for this proximity in which he replied that if they dwelt far from the English they would maintain their Native ways.³⁴ Even when the Natives attempted to integrate themselves into the English culture, they were shut out. Many of the praying town Indians admitted that the English culture and way of life was superior in their own, even going as far as to adopt new laws and customs in an attempt to emulate them.³⁵ Overall, the English settlers made no attempt to accept Native Americans. Instead, they were content with forcing them to live at a safe distance, while never moving past passive attempts at civilizing them. While John Eliot would come to accept many of the Natick Natives as truly Christianized, he was among the minority who came to accept them as neighbors. Due to this unwillingness for settlers to accept them, they were never fully integrated into English culture.

With the failure to be accepted into English society after moving to praying towns, Christian Natives were in a cultural middle ground. They were neither fully Native American, nor fully English, and non-Christian Natives did not accept them. According to one praying

³⁴ Kenneth M. Morrison, "'That Art of Coyning Christians:' John Eliot and the Praying Indians of Massachusetts," *Ethnohistory* 21 no. 1 (Winter 1974): 83, <http://jstor.com> (accessed November 17, 11).

³⁵ *Ibid*, 82-3.

town Indian: “Because wee pray to God, other Indians abroad in the country hate us and oppose us,” continuing that “The English on the other side suspect us, and feare us to be still such as doe not pray at all.”³⁶ By mixing with the English, but not fully accepting English culture, praying town Indians were not only not accepted into English culture, but by their fellow Native’s standards, they had abandoned the old way of life and were traitors. The hatred from non-praying town Indians was so strong that Eliot’s converts often-received death threats, the praying towns had to palisaded, and one sachem was almost killed simply for “walking with the English.”³⁷ After being rejected by both groups, the praying town Indians were on a cultural island. They were no longer considered Natives but neither were they considered English. This would leave them in an extremely unprotected state, which was a major failure of the praying towns.

The Protestant missions undertaken by John Eliot ultimately failed to fully convert the Native Americans of New England. By allowing the Natives to maintain adherence to many of their traditional cultural ways, the non-missionary English population never moved past seeing them as unworthy of being members of their society. Along with this, the missionaries wanted the Native population to convert for religious reasons, but this was often not the case. Most of the time, Native Americans were drawn to the praying towns for practical reasons, such as protection from other Native tribes and for the gain of personal power. While the partial acceptance of English culture was not enough for English settlers to accept, it was enough to alienate the praying town Indians from other Native Tribes. On top of the cultural and conversion failure, adherence to the Christian religion and the praying towns themselves were abandoned

³⁶ Morrison, “That Art of Coyning Christians,” 88.

³⁷ Morrison, “That Art of Coyning Christians,” 88. Van Lonkhuizen, “A Reappraisal of the Praying Indians,” 404.

after the death of John Eliot. The last evidence of the Natick church was in 1693 at which time it had only ten native members, and shortly thereafter was disbanded.³⁸ Conversion of the Native Americans in Natick and other praying towns seems to have been based on the personal power of John Eliot and not on any conviction based in Christianity. Though missionaries like John Eliot made it their lives work to convert the Native Americans of New England into proper English Christians, they ultimately failed.

³⁸ Martin Moore, "Religious.: History of the Church in Natick," *Boston Recorder and Religious Telegraph (1826-1830)*, June 20, 1828. Accessed November 21, 2011. <http://proquest.com>