



Accounts of “praying Indian” women (1640s-1670s)

In colonial New England, indigenous people who became Christian were known as “praying Indians.” English missionaries often expected indigenous converts to resettle into communities called “praying towns,” where they would learn to adopt English ways and could be kept safely distanced from the temptations of indigenous culture—but without being integrated into English communities. In other cases, as in the first selection below, indigenous children became Christian as a result of being reared in the homes of English families.

The following selections from texts written by English colonists offer glimpses into the lives of indigenous Christian women in different places in New England. The source texts do not record any of these women’s names.

1. Young woman reared in an English home *(from an anonymous tract)*

Divers of the Indians’ children, boys and girls, we have received into our houses, who are long since civilized and in subjection to us, painful and handy in their business, and can speak our language familiarly; divers of whom can read English and begin to understand, in their measure, the grounds of Christian religion. Some of them are able to give us account of the sermons they hear and of [God’s] word read and expounded in our families, and are convinced of their sinful and miserable estates and affected with the sense of God’s displeasure and the thoughts of eternity, and will sometimes tremble and melt into tears at our opening and pressing the word upon their consciences. And as far as we can discern, some of them [now] pray in secret, and are much in love with us, and cannot endure to return anymore to the Indians. [...]

An Indian maid at Salem would often come from the word, crying out with abundance of tears, concluding that she must burn when she die, and would say she knew herself naught for present and like to be miserable forever, unless free grace should prevent it; and after this grew very careful of her carriage, proved industrious, and so continued.

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2. Woman killed by childbirth *(account by missionary John Eliot)*

A precious testimony of an Indian woman, conceived to die a Christian: [...] After I began to preach unto them, her husband and she did quickly come in; and after she came, she was a diligent hearer; and out of desire to live where the word of God was taught, they fetched all the corn they spent, fifteen miles upon their backs, from the place of their planting. She was industrious and did not go about to English houses a-begging, as sundry do (though it is well reformed now with many of them), but kept home, kept her children to labor, making baskets to sell, etc. She quickly learned to spin well [...] Her life was blameless after she submitted to the gospel and was exemplary. She was the first woman that asked a question (by another man propounded for her), which was this: “When my husband prayeth in his house, my heart thinketh what he prayeth; whether is this praying to God aright, or no?” I thought it a fit question for a woman.

She died of a sickness she took in childbed. I several times visited her, prayed with her, asked her about her spiritual estate. She told me she still loved God, though he made her sick, and was resolved to pray unto him so long as she lived and to refute powwowing. She said also that she believed God would pardon all her sins, because she believed that Christ died for her and that God was well pleased in him; and that she was willing to die and believed [she would] go to heaven and live happy with God and Christ there. [...] And moreover, of her own accord she called her children to her, especially two grown-up daughters which she had before she married this man, and said to them, “I shall now die; and when I am dead, your grandfather and grandmother and uncles, etc., will send for you to come live amongst them, and promise you great matters, and tell you what pleasant living it is among them. But do not believe them, and I charge you never hearken unto them, nor live amongst them; for they pray not to God, keep not the Sabbath, commit all manner of sins and are not punished for it. But I charge you to live here, for here they pray to God, the word of God is taught, sins are suppressed and punished by laws; and therefore I charge you to live here all your days.”

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3. Woman in prolonged labor (*account by magistrate Daniel Gookin*)

At the island of Nope, or Martha’s Vineyard, about the year 1649, one of the first Indians that embraced the Christian religion on that island, named Hiacoomes [...], not long after he had embraced the gospel, his wife, also being a good woman and a believer, [...] being great with child, fell into travail of childbirth and had great pains and sorrowful throes for [...] several days and could not be delivered, insomuch that nothing less than death was expected by herself and husband.

In this strait, several of their carnal and unconverted kindred and relations applied themselves unto Hiacoomes and his wife, pressing them to send for a powwaw and use that help for release. But both husband and wife utterly refused their temptation, the man being willing to submit to God’s disposal and lose his wife, though he loved her dearly, rather than take assistance from the devil and his instruments, whom he had renounced; and the woman, who was the sufferer, yet through the grace of God was endowed with such Christian fortitude that she also utterly refused this method for her deliverance, and would rather lose her life than seek help that way.

In this exigence, they earnestly cried to God in prayer to show mercy to them for Jesus Christ’s sake, imploring also the prayers of Mr. Thomas Mayhew Jr., their teacher, and other English Christians living nigh them. Mr. Mayhew, being affected with the case, got together some godly Christians to meet together; and those kept a day of fasting and prayer to implore the help of God for these poor, distressed Christian Indians. And the Lord was graciously pleased to hear and answer their prayers, and shortly after gave the woman safe deliverance of a daughter [...]

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4. Woman with a consumptive child (*account by Daniel Gookin*)

Here I shall take the liberty, though it be a digression, to relate a story or remark concerning a child at Natick, a youth of about eleven years of age, who was of a sober and grave carriage and

an attentive hearer of the word, considering his age and capacity; but he had a weak body and was consumptive. This child, hearing Mr. Eliot preach upon a time at Natick, when the ordinance of baptism was to be administered unto some children whose parents had made profession of their faith and were joined to the church, upon which occasion Mr. Eliot said that baptism was Christ’s mark, which he ordered to be set upon his lambs [...]; this child, taking special notice of this passage, did often solicit his father and mother that one or both of them would endeavor to join to the church, that he might be marked for one of Christ’s lambs before he died.

The parents, who were well inclined, especially the mother, and being also very affectionate to their child, as the Indians generally are, did seriously ponder the child’s reiterated entreaties; and not long after, first the mother, and then the father, of the child joined to the church. Soon after, the lad was baptized, in which he did greatly rejoice and triumph that now he was marked for one of Christ’s lambs. “And now,” said he to his father and mother, “I am willing to die,” which shortly after came to pass [...]

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5. Woman shot during King Philip’s War (*account by John Eliot*)

From thence we went to Pawtucket to visit the poor Wameset Indians, who in a fright fled into the woods until they were half starved. The occasion of their flight was because some ungodly and unruly youth came upon them where they were ordered by authority to be, called them forth from their houses, shot at them, killed a child of godly parents, wounded his mother and four more. The woman lifted up her hands to heaven and said, “Lord, thou seest that we have neither done or said anything against the English, yet they thus deal with us” (or words to this effect). They are come back again; there be more than a hundred souls of them. We have endeavored to quiet and settle matters there also, as well as we could, and so commit them to God’s protection.

Sources:

1. *New England's First Fruits* (London: Henry Overton, 1643), rpt. as *Sabin's Reprints, Quarto Series*, no. 7 (New York: Joseph Sabin, 1865), 6-7, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/hvd.32044042747444>. Public domain, Google-digitized.
2. John Eliot, letter, November 12, 1648, in Edward Winslow, *The Glorious Progress of the Gospel, amongst the Indians in New England* [...] (London: Printed for Hannah Allen in Popes-head Alley, 1649), 13-14. From a digital transcript and scans created by the Early English Books Online Text Creation Partnership, <http://tei.it.ox.ac.uk/tcp/Texts-HTML/free/A66/A66681.html>. Licensed for reuse under Creative Commons Zero 1.0 Universal Public Domain Dedication.
- 3-4. Daniel Gookin, *Historical Collections of the Indians in New England* (1674), in *Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, [series 1], vol. 1 (Boston: Belknap and Hall, 1792), 154-155 (chap. 3), 182 (chap. 7), <https://archive.org/details/collectionsofmas11mass>. Free eBook from the Internet Archive.
5. John Eliot, letter to Robert Boyle, October 17, 1675, in *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society* 17 (1879-80), 251-252, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/njp.32101076467875>. Public domain, Google-digitized.

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