



## Conversion narratives of “praying Indian” men (1650s)

*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.*

*The following texts are excerpts from conversion narratives, or “confessions,” delivered orally by men of the Massachusett nation who lived in a praying town overseen by Puritan missionary John Eliot. Eliot recorded the men’s confessions—or rather, his English translation of their confessions—as part of a process of judging whether or not the men had fully experienced conversion, as Puritans understood it, and thus whether or not they could be granted church membership. These narratives offer windows into how and why these men came to identify as Christian and what they understood being Christian to mean.*

### Totherswamp

Before I prayed unto God, the English, when I came unto their houses, often said unto me, “Pray to God.” But I having many friends who loved me, and I loved them, and they cared not for praying to God, therefore I did not. But I thought in my heart that if my friends should die, and I live, I then would pray to God. Soon after, God so wrought that they did almost all die, few of them left; and then my heart feared, and I thought that now I will pray unto God. And yet I was ashamed to pray; and if I ate and did not pray, I was ashamed of that also, so that I had a double shame upon me. Then you came unto us and taught us, and said unto us, “Pray unto God.” And after that my heart grew strong, and I was no more ashamed to pray, but I did take up praying to God; yet at first I did not think of God and eternal life, but only that the English should love me and I loved them. But afterward I came to learn what sin was, by the commandments of God, and then I saw all my sins: lust, gaming, etc. [...] Then my heart feared greatly, because God was angry for all my sins [...]

### Waban

Before I heard of God, and before the English came into this country, many evil things my heart did work, many thoughts I had in my heart. I wished for riches, I wished to be a witch, I wished to be a sachem, and many such other evils were in my heart. Then when the English came, still my heart did the same things. When the English taught me of God (I coming to their houses), I would go out of their doors, and many years I knew nothing; when the English taught me, I was angry with them. But a little while ago, after the great sickness, I considered what the English do, and I had some desire to do as they do. And after that, I began to work as they work, and then I wondered how the English came to be so strong to labor; then I thought I shall quickly die, and I feared lest I should die before I prayed to God. Then I thought, if I prayed to God in our language, whether God could understand my prayers in our language. Therefore I did ask Mr. Jackson and Mr. Mayhew if God understood prayers in our language. They answered me, God doth understand all languages in the world. But I do not know how to confess, and little do I know of Christ. I fear I shall not believe a great while and very slowly.

## Nataôus (William of Sudbury)

I confess that before I prayed, I committed all manner of sins and served many gods. When the English first came, I going to their houses, they spake to me of your God [...]; but when they said the devil was my god, I was angry, because I was proud. When I came to their houses, I hated to hear of God. I loved lust in my own house and not God; I loved to pray to many gods. Five years ago, I going to English houses and they speaking of God, I did a little like of it; yet when I went again to my own house, I did all manner of sins [...H]earing that Cutshamoquin prayed, then I thought, I will pray also [...]; and I went to Mr. Brown’s house and told him I will pray to God as long as I live. He said, “I doubt of it,” and bid me cut off my hair, and I did so presently. And then I desired to be like God and Jesus Christ, and to call on him, but I found it very hard to believe. Yet I thought, I will pray as long as I live.

## Monequassun

When I first heard instruction, I believed not, but laughed at it and scorned praying to God. Afterward, when we were taught at Cohannet (that is the place where he lived),<sup>a</sup> I still hated praying, and I did think of running away because I cared not for praying to God. But afterwards, because I loved to dwell at that place, I would not leave the place; and therefore I thought, I will pray to God, because I would still stay at that place. Therefore I prayed not for the love of God, but for love of the place I lived in. After that, I desired a little to learn the catechism on the lecture days, and I did learn the ten commandments, and after that all the points in the catechism. Yet afterwards I cast them all away again; then was my heart filled with folly, and my sins great sins. Afterwards, by hearing, I began to fear because of my many sins, lest the wise men should come to know of them and punish me for them; and then again I thought of running away, because of my many sins. But after that, I thought I would pray rightly to God and cast away my sins [...]

## John Speene

When I first prayed to God, I did not pray for my soul, but only I did as my friends did because I loved them; and though I prayed to God, yet I did not fear sin, nor was I troubled at it. I heard that when good men die, their souls go to God and are there happy, but I cannot say that I believed it. Afterward my heart ran away into the country, after our old ways, and I did almost cast off praying to God. A little while after that, I saw that I had greatly sinned, and then I saw all my sins, afore I prayed to God and since I prayed to God, and I saw that God was greatly angry for them [...] I did greatly love hunting and hated labor; but now I believe that word of God which saith, “Six days thou shalt labor,” and God doth make my body strong to labor.

## Antony

[...F]ormerly, when the English did bid me pray unto God, I hated it and would go out of their houses when they spake of such things to me. [...] Afterward I heard [...] that Waban and my two brothers prayed to God. Yet then I desired it not but did think of running away, yet I feared if I

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<sup>a</sup> The parenthetical insertion appears to be an explanation added by John Eliot.

did run away, some wicked men would kill me; but I did not fear God. Afterward, when you said unto me, “Pray,” my heart thought, “I will pray.” Yet again I thought, “I cannot pray with my heart, and no matter for praying with words only.” But when I did pray, I saw more of my sins, [...] but still I did commit them; and after I prayed to God, I was still full of lust, and then a little I feared. Sometimes I was sick, and then I thought God was angry, and then I saw that I did commit all sins. Then one of my brothers died, and then my heart was broken, and after him another friend, and again my heart was broken. And yet after all this, I broke my praying to God and put away God, and then I thought, “I shall never pray to God.” But after this, I was afraid of the Lord, because I always broke my praying to God, and then my heart said, “God doth not hear my prayer.” When I was sick and recovered again, I thought then that God was merciful unto me.

### Owussumag

When I first heard that Waban prayed to God, and after that many more prayed [...] always I laughed at them who prayed to God [...] I went into the country, and there I acted much lust, adultery, and the like, and all my neighbors; we did together seek after wickedness, and every day I was proud and of high or open eyes. When some of my neighbors began to pray, I went away into the country, but I could find no place where I was beloved. [...] But two years ago, I began to think I had sinned against God; and then sometimes I feared, yet again sinned [...] Then ever my heart said I should be better if I would pray to God, and sometimes I believed that which I was taught. Yet again, last year, I sought to go away afar off, but I could think of no place but I should be in danger to be killed. Then again I much remembered my sins, and again I thought: What will become of me if I die in my sins? And then I thought it was good for me to pray unto God so long as I live. And then my heart turned to praying unto God, and I did pray [...]

**Source:** John Eliot, *Tears of Repentance: Or, A Further Narrative of the Progress of the Gospel Amongst the Indians in New-England* (London: Peter Cole, 1653), in *Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, series 3, vol. 4 (Cambridge [MA]: Charles Folsom, 1834), 227-260, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/njp.32101076467305>. Public domain in the United States, Google-digitized.

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



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