

Indian Dialogues
John Eliot (1671)

John Eliot was an English Puritan missionary who worked among indigenous peoples of New England, principally the Massachusetts people. He encouraged indigenous converts to move into settlements called “praying towns,” where they would be separated from what Eliot saw as the temptations of indigenous culture and would learn to adopt an English lifestyle.

Indian Dialogues is a manual that Eliot wrote to illustrate his plans to have indigenous Christians from the praying towns return to non-Christian indigenous communities as missionaries. Eliot provided sample dialogues to show how he envisioned indigenous missionaries interacting with their listeners. In this dialogue, a fictional missionary named Piumbuhhou, who has spent the last 20 years living in a praying town called Natick (spelled differently in Eliot’s text), returns to his home village, Nashauwog.

The church did send forth sundry of the brethren to several parts of the country among their friends and relations, to instruct, exhort, and persuade them to pray unto God, to turn from their lewd and lazy life [...] Piumbuhhou was sent to Nashauwog [...] Near the town, a kinsman of his met him, whose discourse was to such purpose as this.

[...]

Kinsman: Well met and welcome, beloved cousin; I am glad you are still alive. Can you make shift to live in that new way of living that you have taken up at Natic? I am glad of your coming, because I shall thereby have an opportunity to be informed truly of your ways and what your doings be, about which there be such various reports, some commending, some condemning, some deriding, some wondering; but so far as I see, few desire to imitate you.

Piumbuhhou: I am very glad that God hath guided my way so well so that I should meet you, whom I have longed to see [...] Likewise I am glad that you are so desirous to speak with me about our religion and praying to God, for that is the very errand I come upon, that I might persuade you to do as we do. [...] But what noise is this that I hear?

Kinsman: I perceive that you have quite left off those delights and solemnities that your countrymen use, and which you were in your young time accustomed to, because you have forgot the meaning of such noises. There is a great dancing, and sacrifice, and play, and that is the noise that you hear.

Piumbuhhou: You say right, we have indeed quite left off and cast away those works of darkness [...] We plainly see the sinfulness of our own former, and of your still continued, ways; and I desire that God would help me to open among you some of the divine light which God hath showed us, that it may shame you from such filthy practices [...]

Kinsman: Let us go unto my house, that you may take there some refreshment of food after your weary journey, and there we shall have liberty to discourse fully of these matters. And while we are in the way, let me ask you of the estate and welfare of our friends and kindred at

Natik. Doth your praying to God exempt you from sicknesses, poverty, nakedness? Will praying to God fill you with food, gladness, and garments?

Piumbuhhou: [...] If praying to God did bring with it outward plenty and worldly prosperity, then all carnal people would pray to God, not because they love God or praying to God, but because they love themselves and love food, clothing, and worldly pleasures. But the benefits of praying are spiritual and heavenly [...] And yet I further tell you that religion doth teach the right way to be rich and prosperous in this world, and many, English especially, have learned that way. For religion teacheth us to be diligent in labor [...]; and God hath promised that “the diligent hand shall make rich” [...]

Kinsman: If your praying to God do indeed teach you the true way of being rich, as you say, how then cometh it to pass that you are so poor still? For you have prayed to God these twenty years and more, and I do not see that you have increased in riches very much; you are still poor. Where be your riches? Where be your flocks and herds of cattle? Where be your clothes? What great houses have you built? Where be your fields of corn, barns, and orchards? Alas, you are not like the English; and therefore I doubt upon this point, that praying to God teacheth you the right way to be rich.

Piumbuhhou: [...] There be two sorts of riches: earthly riches, of which only you speak, and heavenly riches, which God’s word calleth true riches. [...] And we have spent these twenty years in seeking chiefly after heavenly riches, for so God commandeth us in his word [...] Now we have food and clothes more than we were wont to have before we prayed to God, and we have contented ourselves therewith [...]

Kinsman: That is my house, and I am glad there be so many of our friends together [...]

Kinswoman: It is an addition to the joys of this day to see the face of my loving kinsman; and I wish you had come a little earlier, that you might have taken part with us in the joys of this day, wherein we have had all the delights that could be desired, in our merry meeting and dancing.

And I pray, cousin, how doth your wife, my loving kinswoman: is she yet living? And is she not yet weary of your new way of praying to God? And what pleasure have you in those ways?

Piumbuhhou: My wife doth remember her love to you. She is in good health of body, and her soul is in a good condition; she is entered into the light of the knowledge of God and of Christ [...], and she doth greatly desire that you would turn from those ways of darkness in which you so much delight, and come taste and see how good the Lord is.

And whereas you wish I had come sooner, to have shared with you in your delights of this day: Alas, they are no delights, but griefs, to me to see that you do still delight in them. I am like a man that have tasted of sweet wine and honey, which have so altered the taste of my mouth, that I abhor to taste of your sinful and foolish pleasures, as the mouth doth abhor to taste the most filthy and stinking dung [...] Now consider, all your pleasures and delights are such as defile you with sin [...]; they provoke God to wrath, who hath created the prison of hell to torment you [...]

Kinsman: [...] But how shall I know that you say true? Our forefathers were (many of them) wise men, and we have wise men now living; they all delight in these our delights. They have taught us nothing about our soul, and God, and heaven and hell, and joy and torment in the life to come. Are you wiser than our fathers? May not we rather think that Englishmen have invented these stories to amaze us and scare us out of our old customs, and bring us to stand in awe of them, that they might wipe us of our lands, and drive us into corners to seek new ways of living and new places too? And be beholding to them for that which is our own, and was ours, before we knew them.

All: You say right.

Piumbuhhou: The book of God is no invention of Englishmen. It is the holy law of God himself, which was given unto man by God before Englishmen had any knowledge of God; and all the knowledge which they have, they have it out of the book of God. And this book is given to us as well as to them [...] Yet this is also true, that we have great cause to be thankful to the English, and to thank God for them. For they had a good country of their own; but by ships sailing into these parts of the world, they heard of us and of our country, and of our nakedness, ignorance of God, and wild condition. God put it into their hearts to desire to come hither and teach us the good knowledge of God; and their king gave them leave so to do, and in our country to have their liberty to serve God according to the word of God. And being come hither, we gave them leave freely to live among us. They have purchased of us a great part of those lands which they possess; they love us, they do us right, and no wrong willingly; if any do us wrong, it is without the consent of their rulers, and upon our complaints our wrongs are righted. They are (many of them, especially the ruling part) good men, and desire to do us good. [...]

Kinswoman: You make long and learned discourses to us which we do not well understand; I think our best answer is to stop your mouth and fill your belly with a good supper, and when your belly is full you will be content to take rest yourself, and give us leave to be at rest from these gastering and heart-trembling discourses. We are well as we are, and desire not to be troubled with these new wise sayings.

All: You say true. Ha, ha, he. [...]

Kinsman: What news do the ships bring from beyond sea?

Piumbuhhou: They say wicked men are bold, and that good men who pray to God are hated, vexed, troubled, persecuted, and not suffered to pray to God according to the laws of God's word, but by the laws of men.

All: It is an ill time for you to come to persuade us to pray to God, when praying to God is so opposed, hated, and hindered; you may be more like to prevail with us when praying to God is of credit, honor, and good esteem. [...]

Kinsman: Some speak of very many English people killed with thunder, and many burnt in their houses. Is it so, indeed?

Piumbuhhou: It is so indeed, and in many parts of the country, Boston, and in many other places. Very lately, there were in one winter eight or nine persons burnt to death in one house, five another, one in another. Sickneses are often sent of God among them, which kill many. Their corn is blasted, and they are punished by God many ways, by sea and land, in these late years.

Kinswoman: These are but cold and weak arguments to persuade us to take up the English fashion, and to serve their God, when you tell us how sharply he dealeth with his servants.

All: You say right: we are better as we are.

Piumbuhhou: We know there be many sins among the English, which provoke God to be angry with them and to punish them, to the end he might bring them to repentance. When we exhort you to pray, and to serve the God of the English, we call you to imitate the virtues and good ways of the English, wherein you shall be acceptable to the Lord. We do not call you to imitate their sins, whereby they and you shall provoke the anger and displeasure of the Lord.

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