



An Historical Discourse on the Civil and Religious Affairs of the Colony of Rhode Island

John Callender (1738-1739)

John Callender was a white Baptist minister. He pastored congregations in Massachusetts, where he was born, and in the neighboring colony of Rhode Island, which had been founded in 1636 by Puritan-turned-Baptist Roger Williams. In 1738, Callender delivered a lecture, often called “the Century Sermon,” recounting the first one hundred years of Rhode Island’s history. He published an expanded version of the lecture the following year. In the excerpts presented below, Callender excuses the limited success that Rhode Islanders, and New Englanders more broadly, had at Christianizing indigenous people, compared to French and Spanish missionaries. He also puts forward an explanation for why God willed that indigenous Americans be destroyed by disease and colonial conquest.

The Narragansetts, as I observed, were the most populous nation among the Indians, but all attempts to civilize or Christianize them were utterly ineffectual. Their sachems would not suffer the gospel to be preached to their subjects, and their subjects obstinately adhered to the traditions and customs of their forefathers. It seems hard that New England should be complained of and reproached as particularly negligent of the conversion of the Indians, and harder still we should be reproached for neglecting the methods used by the French to make proselytes of their Indians [...] New England—nay, the Massachusetts and Plymouth colonies alone—have had more real success in the conversion of the Indians, not only than all the larger English colonies to the southward, but than all the other Christian nations that have settled throughout the whole continent of America. The societies of New England could never be contented with such sort of converts as the Roman Catholic missionaries boasted of in many places; they had no satisfaction in the religion of the nominal Christians in Europe and thought it would be no advantage to make such Christians among the Indians as knew no more of the gospel than to make the sign of the cross, or who desired baptism only for the sake of a new shirt with which their conversion was to be rewarded. And there was very great opposition to the making them real Christians. Their sachems or princes generally, their powaws or priests always, opposed all their power and all their arts to prevent the growth of the gospel, as what they imagined would put an end to their authority, especially that of their priests; and the customs of the people, their way of life, and their national vices made it a most difficult task to gospelize such people as must be first civilized or humanized. The New English wonder to hear themselves reproached for not intermarrying with such barbarians, of a complexion so different; they never had the temptations to the unnatural mixture, as some foreign plantations had, nor do they know other English plantations used to do so. [...]

The Indians in this part of America appear to have been some of the least improved of the human species, without any learning or knowledge in any of the politer arts of life, even without iron and the improvements which depend on that. The strange destruction of this people—now since the wars ceased, and within memory—is very remarkable. Their insuperable aversion to the English industry and way of life, the alteration from the Indian method of living, their laziness, and their universal love of strong drink have swept them away in a wonderful manner, so that there are now above twenty English to one Indian in the colony. Their few miserable remainders

are left as monuments of the anger of a righteous God and for our warning and instruction. While the contentions and mutual animosities of the Indians in general, and their cursed thirst of revenge, made them a prey to the weak and small number of English, we should learn not to bite and devour one another, lest we be devoured one of another or of the judgments of God. While we have seen their iniquities prove their ruin, we should learn to break off from our sins by righteousness, and especially abstain from and watch against the sins which have been so evidently both the procuring causes and the means of their destruction. When God was conducting the Israelites to the land of Canaan and driving out the inhabitants to make room for them, he was pleased to warn and require them not to defile themselves with the abominations of those nations, lest as the land then spewed out its inhabitants, so it should spew out them likewise when they in like manner defiled it. Though it would be ridiculous to compare ourselves to the Israelites and the Indians to the Canaanites in many instances, yet in this respect it may be proper to argue that if we Indianize in our manners and vices, they will in time draw down the like, or as heavy, judgments of God upon us as those with which he hath destroyed our predecessors. God grant that the people who have been overthrown in the wilderness may be ensamples to us, to prevent our lusting after any evils, lest we be destroyed likewise of the Destroyer!

And this brings me now, at last, to the remarks I promised at the beginning. And the first is: *The wonderful and unsearchable providence of God in the whole affair of driving out the natives and planting colonies of Europeans and churches of Christians in the place of heathenism and barbarity.* [...]

The discovery and the conquest of America, with the amazing desolations wrought therein, appear a more remarkable event than any other in all profane history since the universal deluge. A new world, as it was justly called, discovered to the other, or rather to Europe; and all its riches and glory overturned and given away to another people; and the aboriginal natives, by famine, sword, and pestilence, destroyed and wasted away by millions throughout all America! Who can tell how, or how long, it had been inhabited, and by what a series of iniquity it was ripe for such a fearful desolation, such an utter destruction! If we believe a providence (and 'tis impossible we can believe none), we must needs think it concerned in the preservation and the punishment of kingdoms and nations, and that these parts of the world, though separated, hid, and unknown to the rest, are yet as near the omnipresence of God, and as much under his government, as any other. And therefore we should take notice of the wonderful providence of God in this great affair. How should we learn to submit our little personal affairs to the divine providence, when we see that nations before him are but as the small dust of the balance! [...]

Again, the settlement of New England, in particular, was evidently providential in many respects. [...T]hese people came not here for plunder, which drew over the Spaniards to the southward, neither did they settle themselves by force or by their own might; but God was pleased to make ready a place prepared as an asylum for them. And since he has wonderfully driven out and consumed the natives by his devouring judgments, their sins have proved their punishment, and their detestable vices have drawn on those mortal sicknesses which have wasted away all within the English pale, but [for] a few [who] embraced Christianity or who, by submitting to the English power, remain the memorials of these wonderful events. It is true, the Indians' jealousy and revenge prevented a union among their several clans at first and made

them instrumental in the destruction of one another, and the English had great advantages in their arms. But still, the Indians vastly outnumbered them; were more able to endure fatigue and hardships, hunger and travel; and were perfectly acquainted with their own country. However, a remarkable interposition of providence was visible in some of the earliest and other the most important enterprises against them, and it would be unjust not to give to God the glory due to his name. The Lord is King forever, and the heathen are perished out of the land! As therefore God hath planted this people, and not their own skill or power, so neither let them imagine it was for their merits and deserts; we know not the secret and future designs of providence. Only let us remember that he who chastiseth the heathen will also correct those who are called by his name if they turn to folly.

Source: John Callender, *An Historical Discourse on the Civil and Religious Affairs of the Colony of Rhode-Island and Providence Plantations in New-England in America* (Boston: S. Kneeland and T. Green, 1739), 82-84, 87-92, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/dul1.ark:/13960/t4nk4c49v>. Public domain.

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For the sake of modernization and readability, many terms capitalized in the source publication, per antiquated convention, have been converted here to lowercase. Among them are the Christian or biblical terms *gospel*, *providence*, *churches*, *sign of the cross*, *baptism*, and *deluge*, and terms referring to indigenous people, including *aboriginal*, *heathen*, *barbarians*, *sachems*, *princes*, *powaws*, and *priests*. Divine pronouns, inconsistently capitalized in the source, are consistently presented here in lowercase. The capitalizing of *Christianize* and of the divine epithets *Destroyer* and *King* reproduces the usage of the source.

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