

Original Paper

The Role Which Religion Played during the King Philip's War

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Abstract

King Philip's war (1675-1676) was arguably one of the most brutal and bloody conflicts in the Atlantic world. As a war fought among the English colonial forces and the Natives, King Philip's war was an important turning point, as it secured the colony's position over the Natives. Most of the Indian resistance were killed or enslaved during the war. The rest of the Indian population after the war experienced an extreme demographic decline through frequent dislocation and death (Note 1). However, the war ended with the death of Metacom, the sachem of the Wampanoag tribe. The war was victorious for the English, as it undermined Native military strength and political sovereignty and reduced future resistance to expansion, giving the English control over some of the colonies and Native reservations (Note 2).

Many historians narrate the war by focusing on the causes and effects of this brutal conflict. However, this paper looks at the different roles that religion played in the war, considering the motives and effects of the evangelization, and the effects of the war on Christian Indians. This paper also examines how the Puritan evangelists and religion contributed and perpetuated the war through using evangelization to create cultural divisions within the tribal communities and creating strong racial distinctions among the English colonists and the Indians. Throughout the war, religion perpetuated and prolonged the war by creating religious and cultural divisions among the tribes; by giving strong justification for anti-Indian bias; and by giving both sides confidence that they had God's blessing.

Keywords

religion, conflict, divisions, king philip's war

1. Introduction

European colonization of the Americas began in the years following Columbus's arrival in 1492. They were soon amazed by the variety of commodities that the Atlantic world consisted of (Note 3). Delicacies such as gold, silver, and sugar were largely identified, signifying the start of the transAtlantic trade. The

English did not start colonizing North America until the seventeenth century, joining other European powers who were creating a wave of colonization and cross continental trade (Note 4). When the settlers were exploring through the Gulf of Mexico, and the Great Lakes, there were accounts describing the physical location of the Native population. Tribal communities such as Choctaws, Chickasaws, Creeks, etc., exist on the South of the continent. In the northeast, large Native Nations such as the Wampanoag, Nipmuck, Narragansett, Abenaki, Iroquois, Shinnecock, Pequot, Mohegan worked the land and cultivated the natural resources (Note 5). The English colonies grew slowly at first in the early years of colonization. This is because that English were unfamiliar to terrain and crops, which led to famine, and diseases. However, with the help of the Native population, they learned the ways to cultivate crops and build houses. The colonies finally started to grow in numbers. The main English colonies in New England at the time were Massachusetts, Plymouth, Rhode Island, and Connecticut (Note 6).

King Philip's War, which occurred more than fifty years after the English arrived, was a result of a mixture of economic, political and cultural factors, with the colonial forces facing the Native uprising. The main leader of the war was the Wampanoag tribe led by Metacom, known by the English as Philip. The differences among the two groups had generated hostility that erupted in war. Although the colonies had peace for forty years before King Philip's war, minor conflicts were frequent. Promises and treaties were signed between the English and the Natives to protect the two from competing over resources, land, and sovereignty (Note 7). Early in the war, the Rhode Island governor, John Easton, met with King Philip to try to understand the causes for the war. Easton concluded that the rising hostility was based on English trespassing on the Native land, English domestic animals damaging Native land, hunting ground and crops, illegal land sales and seizures, rumors regarding conspiracies, Natives losing sovereignty, and other basic rights. Religion was also one of the causes that had inflicted hostility on both sides. One English writer Albert Bushnell recorded that the christianization process for the supposedly uncivilized heathen and the application of the English laws had been intolerable for the Natives. Bushnell stated that the English think the Natives were rude, licentious, and were not ready for the English practices (Note 8). These activities incurred hostility overtime and peaked during the 1670s, adding pressure on both sides. More importantly, the Wampanoags resented the increasing evangelization process. Metacom himself addressed that he did not want any of his wind to be called Christians. It was impossible for him to rule the tribe if he himself is related with any Christian activity. The increasing tension among the two sides finally erupted in the year of 1675, resulting in King Philip's war (Note 9).

Though all these grievances were identified, the Natives preferred to maintain peace, even if they felt war was their only remaining option. Though they did not have any European allies, they were prepared for a war against the colonies. Metacom had addressed himself many times saying that the Natives and the English should maintain the friendly relationship within the colonies. Weapons and land were continually taken by the English, making peace impossible. Moreover, in one of his anecdotes addressing the relationships with the English, he stated "my father was the father of English," and "The small part of my ancestors remained (Note 10)." Even if Philip wanted to avert war, the English were crossing the line

and pressing the tribes into extreme and he was forced to war with the colonial forces. Moreover, some of his younger tribesmates were angry and furious with the English jurisdiction. The sparks of war started when three Indian men were prosecuted for killing John Sassamon, a Christian Indian who reported that Philip was plotting against the colonies. After the prosecution, hostilities among the two sides quickly peaked and a war among them soon broke out after an English colonist had fired and killed one of the Indians in an abandoned house in Swansea (in what is now Massachusetts) (Note 11). King Philip's War had begun.

1.1 Religious and Cultural Divisions among the Tribe

In the very start of the colonial times, the English were nothing but a small group of people. According to the words of Metacom's father, "the English were poor, stressed and naïve, had nothing, nor the knowledge to survive on their own." (Note 12) The Natives played a vital role in this early colonial period, as they helped the English to survive and gave them the knowledge to live on their land. The Wampanoag sachem of the time, Massasoit, took in the English in the most hospitable manner. He gave them land, taught them the knowledge to plant and build, and tried his best to work with them. The colonists got the knowledge of plantation, cultivation, the pattern of the seasons and climate all from the Natives (Note 13). The two sides first started off in peace, with the kindest offerings from the owner of the land and a peace treaty in 1621. However, the English started showing up in increasing numbers. The Wampanoag had a difficult time resisting the English, and had to give more land for the new settlements. To prevent the happening of war, Indians could only compromise and obey the New colonists, losing sovereignty and control over their lands (Note 14). In the colonies, the English started to introduce the ideology and practices of Christianity to deepen the English culture in the Atlantic colonies. These were also introduced to the Native tribes, supposedly to save them from the sanction of God. In English terms, these religious activities can help the Natives become more civilized, and to supposedly save them from the sins of hell (Note 15).

Pastors and missionaries were a major part of the colonization of the Americas. They believed they were on God's mission, saving the Natives heathens from other religions, and converting them to Christianity. During the process of evangelization, there was one particular evangelist in New England called John Eliot who was one of the most successful missionaries during the seventeenth century. Eliot converted over a thousand Natives into Christianity, organizing them into "Praying Towns." Even King Philip himself expressed a gradual interest in God under Eliot's preaching (Note 16). However, the cultural division among the two groups was still inevitable, Eliot failed to bring Philip into Christianity. Eliot once wrote that "though his will is bowed to embrace Jesus Christ, his sensual and carnal lusts are strong bands to hold him fast under Satan's dominion," to express the failure of Philip's Conversion (Note 17). From this account, the first traces of racial division were formed. Although some Natives had expressed an interest in God, their own religious beliefs would prevent them from converting to Christianity.

Though Eliot failed to bring the sachem of the tribe into Christhood, he was more successful converting other members of the Natives tribes. These new converts were called the Praying or Christian Indians and

joined the colonists fighting against the rebellion later in the war. It was under Elliot's vision that the natives should not only accept Christhood, but also the whole English culture. The Christian Indians had to abandon their formal lives as an Indian to follow Jesus Christ. They lived separately with the other members of the tribe and held their own Christian practices during the day (Note 18). To protect the praying Indians from other forms of religion, Elliot and other English missionaries established pure Christian communities called the Praying Towns throughout Massachusetts and Connecticut. The towns were a concentration of Christian Indians, holding their own practices and experiences as true Christian in a unified community (Note 19).

Unlike other Indians, the praying Indians lived near English towns and held English practices. A contemporary author called Daniel Gookin pointed out that the praying Indians focused practices such as purging, trying the practices of the faith, patience to the Godly English, and punishments and destruction to the wicked heathen who are opposite to the English (Note 20). From all these doings and practices from the English, the praying Indian had almost assimilated into English themselves. Being subjects of the English Crown and the Christian faith, promised to be loyal to the English and follow the English rule at any time. It is noticeable that this type of practices emphasised divisions within the same tribe, resulting in raising hostility among tribe mates and the English (Note 21). Evidence from the Powwows (Native holy men) suggested that this rising division was evident. The Powwows had always been eager for confrontation with the English colonies and Christian missionaries both before and during the war (Note 22). The competition among the spread of Native religions and Christianity had broken in the colonies. The in-tribe divisions that religion had created was a key factor perpetuating the war, which also explains the in-war divisions (against or allied with English) with the Native tribes.

1.2 Race and Religion Hierarchy

Scholars have long noted that colonial society was blatantly racist towards the Indians. With a growing population and their Christian faith, the English made themselves into an arrogant society where it thought it and its people were the supreme forces in the Atlantic world (Note 23). One of the clear evidences of cultural bias is from the English's jurisdiction. As Natives complained, in a English courtroom, a huge number of honest Indians would not stand a chance against a single Englishman. Moreover, any evidence that pleases the English will be sufficient testifying against any other Indian including King Philip. There were countless historical accounts where the English has suppressed the Native's rights and dignity over their own favour (Note 24). The colonists disarmed the Native people, tried them using the English laws, trespassing and unfairly obtaining the native's land. However, religion comes in and plays a vital role under all these activities.

The religious part of the problem comes in when the English describe the Native practices as barbarous, unhuman and uncultivated, and stated that the only way to purify them is the ideology of Christhood (Note 25). This idea of saving the heathen Indians to the arms of God became the primary motives for Puritan converts. The missionaries and priests would go on ventures into the tribal communities to spread the light of the English God. Before the successful conversion of praying Indians, all the hatred and

racism were subjected under the name of heathen (Note 26). The English believed that the barbarous acts were done because they never met the English God. This religious activity during the 1660s gave the English an overall framing for the hidden racism. All the hatred and cursing towards the Native population becomes love and sympathy under the name of God. The colonial governments saw the opportunity and used the negativity towards the Indians as a motive for Puritans' expansions (Note 27). They tried several times encouraging the evangelization process and establishing Praying Towns. They were established to save the heathens and bring them to God. The leaders of the colonial governments thought the spread of Christhood could eliminate the biases among the two races, erasing the cultural divisions and encouraging assimilating native population into the colonies (Note 28). However, the evangelization process did not erase but emphasised the racism in the Atlantic World.

When Elliot's practices were successful evangelizing the Wampanoags, creating religious communities and Praying Towns, the hostility towards the Natives were actually rising in a rapid pace. The English gave little regard to the new converts and the racism was not diminished at all. The praying towns were clear examples of this practice, establishing Native communities outside of English towns was not a way to hinder the cultural bias among the two (Note 29). The English held the perspective that although the minds of Christian Indians are to bow and embrace Jesus Christ, their body is still under Satan's domination. Therefore, some of the English colonists were having a hard time accepting the Christian Indians. One of the colonists even stated that "These Heathen Dogges, better kill a thousand of them then that we Christians should be endangered or troubled with them; Better they were all cut off, and then we shall be no more troubled with them: They have split our Christian blood, the best way to make riddance of them, cut them all off, and so make way for Christians, addressing their hatred towards the praying Indians (Note 30). Although the conversion was successful, the racial division still existed within the English communities. As addressed above, that the Indians should not split Christian blood and make way off for Christians.

It is noticeable that the cultural bias the English had is inevitable towards the Indians, the act of evangelizing did not erase or hinder the racism bias, but in fact emphasized the division of the two races. The two sides would never compromise nor live with each other because one was from the hands of the Gods, and the other were the "heathen Dogges" directed from Satan, in their view. This became one of the main reasons that causes, and most importantly prolonged the war. It was the line that the English has drawn among the Indians, it was the racist bias that made compromise impossible.

1.3 Religion as a Motive Prolonging the War

King Philip's war was one of the most brutal wars in British North American history, and religion was part of prolonging this bloody war. During the war, the colonial forces experienced severe losses fighting against the Indian army. During the war, the Indian resistance destroyed one of the seven English towns and pushed the settlements back to mid-century limits. However, most of the Indian resistance were killed or enslaved, after the war. Both sides suffered from serious injuries and losses, and this extreme result shows where religion comes in (Note 31).

There were many places where both sides could compromise and hold peace within each other. However, it was the religious division among the races that had prolonged the war, resulting in more casualties and wounds. The Praying Indians helped the English fight the war, giving the English advantage over the Natives. From the English's perspective, Christianity had made the colony arrogant towards the Indians. Christianity had made the English feel that God is always on their side and his blessing will lead the English to victory, especially when facing the Indians, what in their minds are considered as uncultivated heathens. A sprang of patriotism and supremacy occurred in the English minds, leading to massacre and hatred (Note 32).

In general, religion served the English as a motive toward the war because it helped the English prepare the forces and the knowledge against the Natives. The English at the time did not have an advantage facing the Natives. Although they have possession over firearms, guns were still raw and undeveloped at the time. It was barely a fight with the bows and arrows that the Natives were using (Note 33). What helped the English solidify their defence and confidence in winning the war was the Praying Indians settling around the English city. In the start of the war, the English did not have any advantage over the Indians because the Natives were much more familiar and effective with the environment. However, the English acted quickly and formed a corps of Christian Indian who were familiar with the Native strategies to scout, and support the English army (Note 34). Daniel Gookin recorded that "The Council, having advice hereof from the commanders of the army, judged it very necessary to arm and send forth some of the praying Indians to assist our forces, hereby not only to try their fidelity, but to deal the better with the enemy in their own ways and methods, according to the Indian manner of fighting, wherein our Indians were well skilled, and had our [their] council practised, and also to be as scouts and forlorns to the English (Note 35)." As the English gathered Christian Indian fighters, they were able to break down the attacks from the rebellion.

The introduction of Christianity prolonged war, because it created loyal Praying Indians to the Colonies. When the Indians converted to Christian faith, there were few practices that they had to maintain and obey. Gookin records that practices such as "Doubtless one great end God aimed at was the punishment and destruction of many of the wicked heathen," and "The purging and trying the faith and patience of the Godly English and Christian Indians." were used in the Praying Towns. The Praying Indians were taught that the heathens were the worst of all, and their loyalty to the holy christ and the English crown were the practices everyday (Note 36). At the beginning of the war, the Praying towns put themselves in defence, allying with the colonial forces against the heathen Indians. It is recorded that the Indians felt God is on their side, as they fight with the English, showing their practices and good affection to the interest of the Christian faith. It was their will to endeavour all, in order to perceive kindness and love from the God above. They were ready to comply with the English commands with their hearts and lives for the holy Christian faith (Note 37). This had prepared the English with military forces and knowledge competing with the Native Indians, contributing to their confidence in winning the war.

It is evident that Christianity has helped prepare the English military for the war. In the early stages of the war, the English colonial government has sent out commissions for recruitment to engage citizens in their defence (Note 38). Benjamin Church, a contemporary English colonist, also received this request inviting him to join into the English military. Under the recruitment, Church wrote that “It was ever my Intent having laid myself under a solemn promise, that the many and repeated favours of GOD to myself, and those with me in the Service, might be published for Generations to come. And now my great age requiring my dismissal from Service in Militia, and to put off my Armour; I am willing that the Great and Glorious works of almighty God, to us children of men, should appear to the world; and having my Minutes by me” (Note 39). The initial thought of Jesus Christ and his blessings had encouraged an increasing number of men to join the military. Preparing the men and the English army for the war against the Native uprisings.

Religion helped the English during the war to enhance the military performance while fighting the Natives. Many of the men were endeavoured to put all confidence in God, believing that the almighty God would preserve their body and bless them for the war (Note 40). This was demonstrated during one of the battles with the Natives. The English were not in favour of the forest condition that they had fighting with the Native forces. They were losing by a large portion of battle and almost lost their lives. Benjamin Churchill, the English military leader stated that during the battle he made a speech helping his soldiers to regain their confidence (Note 41). Church stated that “he had observed for much of the remarkable and wonderful Providence of God hitherto preserving them, that encouraged him to believe with much confidence that God would yet preserve them; that not a hair of their head should fall to the ground; bid them be Patient, Courageous and Prudently sparing of their ammunition, and he made no doubt but they should come well off (Note 42).” It is evident from this paragraph that religion has strongly motivated the English military forces to fight with their lives. It has served as a factor motivating and enhancing the English military’s performance to its best.

2. Result

In conclusion, King Philip’s war was strongly influenced by religious activities. Not only did it show the divisions of ideologies within the tribe, but it also outlined the racism bias from the colonists. While most of the historians focus on other motives and causes of the war, religion is a definitely a solid motive starting and most importantly prolonging the war, as it gives both sides confidence and strength to fight till the end.

This paper first focused on the claim that religion separated New England Native tribes, causing divisions among the two sides. This was part of the writings proved by examining Gookin’s and Eliot’s accounts, introducing life as a Praying Indian and the first evangelizations of the Indian population. The scores highlighted that praying Indians need to accept not only Christianity but also the English culture, in addition to moving out from their previous land and abandoning their former lives. This had resulted in numerous divisions among the tribe and later during the war. This paper then looked at the race and

religion hierarchy within the Atlantic world. This part of the paper focused on stating that religion acted as an overall framing for the racism bias toward the Indian population, using various evidences from Ranlet's and William's historical accounts to deny that the English used Christianity supposedly as a tool to civilize the Native groups. Although many Natives had accepted the Christian practices, the strong bias towards the Natives groups did not wither at all. William's record of contemporary history even showed that the Christian Indians had inflicted serious hostility in the English Colonists (Note 43). Examining a solid proof for the statement that religion did not erase but emphasised the two-side bias in the Atlantic world. Finally, the paper examined religion as a motive prolonging the war. In general, religion helped the English's preparation and performance towards the war. This was largely demonstrated in Church's and Gookin's narrative of the war. From their point of view, religion assisted the English by providing Indian soldiers and enhancing the military's performance. The English were not on any advantage against the Indians as they have their own strategies and are more familiar with the terrain. However, with the help of Christina Indians, the English soon came back from the losses and gained some advantage over the Indians. The other effect which religion had was to enhance the performance of the English military. From Church's account of the war, religion served as a base motivation for English recruitments. They believed that Christ would preserve their body from the war. Encouraging the soldiers to fight with their life on the battlefields.

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Notes

Note 1. Danial Gookin, *The Doings and Sufferings of Chirstian Indians* (Internet Archive, n.d.), 433-34.1.

Note 2. Colin G Calloway, "1—Introduction: Surviving the Dark Ages," n.d., 1-3.

Note 3. John Gorham Palfrey, *History of New England: History of New England during the Stuart Dynasty* (Little brown, and company, n.d.), 7.

Note 4. Palfrey, 15.

Note 5. Palfrey, 23.

Note 6. W R Staples, "'Indians in R.I.' (5 of 5) Anecdote in Relation to King Philip of Mount Hope," n.d., 2.

Note 7. Philip Ranlet, "Another Look at the Causes of King Philip's War," *The New England Quarterly* 61, no. 1 (1988): 82, <https://doi.org/10.2307/365221>.

Note 8. Albert Bushnell, *American History Told by Contemporaries ...* (Macmillan, 1897), 485.

Note 9. John Easton, "A Relationship of the Indian War," *National Humanities Center 2*, n.d., 2.

Note 10. Staples, "'Indians in R.I.' (5 of 5) Anecdote in Relation to King Philip of Mount Hope," 1-2.

Note 11. Philip Ranlet, "Another Look at the Causes of King Philip's War," *The New England Quarterly*- 61, no. 1 (March 1988): 98-99, <https://doi.org/10.2307/365221>.

Note 12. Staples, "'Indians in R.I.' (5 of 5) Anecdote in Relation to King Philip of Mount Hope," 1-2.

Note 13. Staples, 1-2.

Note 14. Ranlet, "Another Look at the Causes of King Philip's War," 86.

Note 15. Gookin, *The Doings and Sufferings of Chirstian Indians*, 435.

Note 16. Ranlet, "Another Look at the Causes of King Philip's War," 83-86.

Note 17. Eliot's Indian Dialogues, Quoted in Ranlet, 86.

Note 18. James P. Ronda, "'We Are As We Are': An Indian Critique of Seven- Teenth Century Christian Missions," (William and Mary Quarterly, 1977), 67.

Note 19. Gookin, *The Doings and Sufferings of Chirstian Indians*, 433.

Note 20. Gookin, 433-435.

Note 21. Gookin, 438-439.

Note 22. John Pynchon to John Winthrop, Jr., or John Allyn, 6 August 1675, Pynchon Papers, as quoted in Ranlet, 90.

Note 23. Palfrey, *History of New England: History of New England during the Stuart Dynasty*, 220-227.

Note 24. Easton, "A Relationship of the Indian War," 2.

Note 25. Gookin, *The Doings and Sufferings of Chirstian Indians*, 112-113.

Note 26. Roger Williams, *Christenings Make Not Christians* (Cornell University, 1645), 1-2.

Note 27. Ranlet, "Another Look at the Causes of King Philip's War," 84.

Note 28. *The Invasion Within: The Contest of Cultures in Colonial North America*, as quoted in Ranlet, 85.85.

Note 29. John Eliot, *A Late and Further Manifestation of the Progress of the Gospel in New-England* (1655), as quoted in Ranlet, 84.

Note 30. Williams, *Christenings Make Not Christians*, 1-2.

Note 31. Margaret Ellen Newell, *Brethren by Nature: New England Indians, Colonists, and the Origins of American Slavery* (Cornell University Press, 2015), 1-3, <https://doi.org/10.7591/cornell/9780801434150.001.0001.1-3>.

Note 32. Benjamin Church, *The History of King Philip's War by Benjamin Church ; with an Introduction and Notes by Henry Martyn Dexter.*, n.d., 1-2.

Note 33. Ranlet, "Another Look at the Causes of King Philip's War," 91.

Note 34. Gookin, *The Doings and Sufferings of Chirstian Indians*, 443.

Note 35. Gookin, 56.

Note 36. Danial Gookin, *The Doings and Sufferings of Chirstian Indians* (Internet Archive, n.d.), 433.

Note 37. Gookin, *The Doings and Sufferings of Chirstian Indians*, 431.

Note 38. Church, *The History of King Philip's War by Benjamin Church ; with an Introduction and Notes by Henry Martyn Dexter.*, 55-58.

Note 39. Church, 58.

Note 40. Gookin, *The Doings and Sufferings of Christian Indians*, 57.

Note 41. Church, *The History of King Philip's War by Benjamin Church ; with an Introduction and Notes by Henry Martyn Dexter.*, 97.

Note 42. Church, *The History of King Philip's War by Benjamin Church ; with an Introduction and Notes by Henry Martyn Dexter.*, 98.

Note 43. Williams, *Christenings Make Not Christians*, 2.