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NOTES ON THE HISTORY OF SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY MISSIONIZATION IN COLONIAL AMERICA

Gary B. Nash

Anyone who delves into the literature on seventeenth-century English missionization in the New World will be struck by the remarkable gap between announced intentions concerning the conversion of Indian peoples to Christianity and the attempts that were actually made. This discrepancy becomes even more obvious when one compares the feeble efforts made by English colonists with the campaigns promoted by French and Spanish invaders to convert indigenous people. Why did the English make such half-hearted attempts? Why did they fall so far short of their stated objectives? To what extent can their failures be explained in purely religious or institutional terms? This paper considers, in a preliminary way, the history of missionization in early Virginia and Massachusetts and makes some observations on how mission history has been written. Its central premise is that American historians have suffered a kind of conceptual lag when compared with scholars who have studied the phenomenon of European missionization in other parts of the world. In particular, they have until recently viewed missionization in narrow terms, seeing it as an almost purely religious endeavor and failing to understand that it was closely linked with the struggle for political control. In fact, it is not too much to state that Christianization has been one of the most important political weapons in the arsenal of colonizing Europeans in almost every part of the world where they have gone for the last five centuries. When that is understood, both the proselyting efforts and native responses in early America begin to make more sense.

Historians are generally agreed that in the founding of Virginia religious and ideological motives were swamped by a straightforward economic desire to make the Chesapeake Bay region a source of enrichment for adventuring Elizabethans. Nonetheless, much has been said about the importance of missionization in the plans of the early promoters and leaders of the colony.

The Charter of James I to the Virginia Company of London gave express backing to the propagation of "Christian Religion to such People, as yet live in Darkness and miserable Ignorance of the true Knowledge and Worship of God." The early promotional pamphlets almost uniformly emphasize the conversion theme and some of them claim, as did A True and Sincere Declaration of the Purpose and Ends of the Plantation (London, 1609), that the first goal was "to preach and baptize into Christian Religion, and . . . to recover out of the armes of the Divell, a number of poore and miserable soules, wrapt up unto death, in almost invincible ignorance."1 The intention to convert the Indians was so frequently expressed in the early tracts that Perry Miller termed it the "most obvious theme in this literature."2

In spite of these claims, the record is plain that little was attempted and virtually nothing achieved in the early years toward converting the Powhatan tribes to Christianity. A substantial amount of money was raised in the second decade of settlement but most of it came from England. The king twice ordered contributions from every parish for establishing a college for Christianizing Indians and the second collection may have benefited from the promotional tour in 1616 of Pocahontas, the bride of planter John Rolfe.3 But most of the money was quickly diverted into establishing an ironworks in Southampton Hundred, where profits would be generated, or so it was argued, that might be used later for the education of Indian children.4 Henrico College, though funded, was never physically founded. As a historian of Indian-white relations has recently written, "no indication exists in surviving records that a single Indian was ever proselyted through its agency, with or without buildings."5

The key to understanding this gap between goals and accomplishments in Virginia lies in the nature of contact between the two societies in the years after 1607. For both the English and the people of the Powhatan Confederacy the confrontation of cultures offered opportunities and dangers. Power was rather evenly distributed in the early years, for the English, unlike the Spanish, brought no military force to subjugate the Chesapeake tribes and drive them into forced agricultural labor. Beset by internal division, unable to extract a subsistence from the environment, squandering their time and strength on a fruitless search for gold and silver, and even disappointed at establishing an Indian trade, the English needed the Indians more than the Indians needed them.6 But like all colonizing Europeans,

the Virginians believed that control over the indigenous people was of paramount importance. But how, lacking sufficient force, was this to be obtained?

The answer was religious in nature, but it did not involve conversion. The clue is in John Smith's history of early Virginia, written in the 1620s but based on Smith's experience in Virginia during the first two years of settlement. Not until "their Priests and Ancients have their throats cut," wrote Smith, was there any "hope to bring them to conversion"-or any hope of political domination. In the meantime, native people would scorn instruction in Christian precepts and give "ridiculous answers" to English queries about their unwillingness to acknowledge the European God.7 In this statement Smith revealed his understanding that in a period when the Powhatan Confederacy was at least as strong as the Christian invaders, no amount of proselyting could make headway against a belief system that functioned admirably from the Indian point of view.

In its instructions to Governors Thomas Gates and Lord De la Warre in 1609 and 1610 the London-based Council of the Virginia Company showed its awareness of the political function of religion. If the priests of the Powhatan people should prove "willful and obstinate," not seeing the advantages of conversion to Christianity, then they should be kidnapped and sent to England for instruction. "If you finde it Convenient," the Council instructed, "we thinke it necessarie you first remove from them the Iniococks or priests by a surprize of them and detayninge them prisoners."8 "Convenient," in seventeenth-century usage meant "possible," and the Council continued that if they could manage it, the Virginians should even consider putting the Indian religious leaders to death, "for we pronounce it not crueltie nor breache of Charity to deale more sharpely with . . . these murtherers of Soules and sacrificers of gods images to the Divill."9

It is possible to conclude from these instructions that the Virginia Company was resolutely committed to spreading Christian light where pagan darkness had prevailed. This, no doubt, was their sincere wish and we need not question their Protestant commitment in this regard. But something more was involved. During the first difficult years they had been receiving reports from Virginia that informed them of the power of native religious figures in the political affairs of the Powhatan Confederacy. Smith, who proved himself the most resourceful leader of the

struggling colony in the early years, stated the matter explicitly: "When they intend any warres," he wrote, the chiefs "usually have the advice of their Priests and Conjurors, and their Allies and ancient friends; but chiefly the Priestes determine their resolution."10 Thus, the English learned of the enormous political power wielded by the Indian religious men. They learned, as well, that voluntary political submission by native peoples was unlikely to occur while their religious leaders maintained their prestige and authority. "Priests and Ancients" needed "their throats cut" not only in order that Christian belief might take root in Indian villages but also that submission to English authority might occur. Christianization and political subjugation went hand in hand.

The English colonizers, as it happened, were helpless to proceed in the work of forcing either religious or political capitulation from the Powhatan Confederacy, for during the first decade or more they lacked the power to kidnap, kill, or otherwise compel the Indian religious figures to adopt Christianity. Smith and other Virginia leaders recognized this and it may have been a major factor in the decision to defer any attempts at missionization, which they must have regarded as doomed in advance in the absence of English political supremacy. Christianizing the "savages" could not precede but only follow political subjugation because the ideas themselves had little inherent appeal to a people whose own religion served them satisfactorily.

That missionary success depended upon prior political domination is rarely recognized in the historical literature on conversion, which almost uniformly implies that indigenous people were simply waiting to be converted or that lack of accomplishment in this endeavor represented inadequate efforts on the part of the European community. This is to adopt the ethnocentric viewpoint of the early propagandists who insisted that "savages" wanted to be converted because they "groane under the burden of their bondage of Satan."

In the case of Virginia the facts suggest otherwise. The Powhatan Confederacy was not dazzled by the allegedly superior English invaders and saw little reason to trade beliefs that functioned perfectly well within its own culture for the ideology of a people whose quarrelsomeness and ineffectiveness in the early years gave no hint that they possessed superior Gods who should be accepted in place of its own. Christian colonizers saw the political importance of removing or converting the Indian religious leaders, but these

native leaders were equally cognizant that conversion to Christianity was, in effect, a surrender to the political authority of the newcomers. The result was that for more than a decade, painfully aware of their own weakness, the English were unable to use conversion in the struggle for political and cultural sovereignty. Instead, they had to rely upon occasional military forays and stratagems, such as kidnapping Powhatan's daughter, in the struggle with a society whose chief religious figures played a leading role in resisting English incursions. In this context, any English missionaries would not likely have been welcomed as benevolent men but viewed, rather, as semipolitical agents.

By 1622 the English had established a foothold on the Chesapeake which they thought was sufficiently secure for them to take the step that had been recommended in England years before but never tried: to cut the throats of "their Priests and Ancients" whose leadership represented the sinews of Indian strength. The victim was Nemattenew, known in the white Chesapeake settlements as early as 1611 and called "Jack of the Feathers" by the English for the "fantastick Manner" in which "he wou'd often dress himself up with Feathers." Nemattanew, according to Smith, was "accounted amongst the Salvages their chiefe Captaine" and was considered immortal.12 He may have combined religious and civil functions and he appears to have been leading what anthropologists call a "revitalization movement."13 English settlers by 1622 had proved that they were there to stay and their appetite for land, spurred by successful tobacco production and population growth, was beginning to seem voracious to native leaders. Nemattanew, a shadowy figure who often came to the English settlements, was a principal leader in a movement to counter the rising English strength.14

As in the case of many native resistance leaders who have opposed European colonialist invasions, Nemattanew had convinced his tribesmen that they would be immune to European technology—in this case the musket—if they rubbed themselves with a special ointment. But in March 1622, amidst circumstances that are cloaked in mystery, Nemattanew was murdered by the English. His death triggered the famous Indian assault on the Virginia settlements two weeks later that dealt the colony a staggering blow. Is It is not without significance that one of the first to fall in the avenging Indian attack was George Thorpe, the man who worked hardest in the early years, though with tepid support from the white com-

munity, to convert the Indians to Christianity. Thorpe was murdered with unusual brutality, suggesting that the Powhatan warriors wanted to repay in kind the killing of one of their most valued members.¹⁶

Although the analysis cannot be carried beyond 1622 in this paper, I would suggest that further research will show that missionization in Virginia began to succeed only after the military defeat of the Powhatans.17 The breakthrough of Christian influence, although it had something to do with the effort mounted by the white community, was primarily occasioned by a changed political situation that obliged the Powhatan peoples, in the face of military defeats, to forge new strategies for survival. Military defeat and political subordination led toward a situation of forced acculturation where the penetration of Christian influence was possible. This is not to suggest that Indian societies converted en masse to Christianity after the loss of their political autonomy in Virginia. They did not. But having suffered military defeat, which usually was quickly followed by recognition of English sovereignty, they were far less able to resist Christian missionaries and in some cases even welcomed them. A wide range of Indian responses could occur in subsequent encounters with Anglican clergymen, depending on the preexisting Indian religious system, the degree of pressure exerted by the white society. and other variables.

In New England, we encounter a process of attempted missionization that bears some similarities with the Virginia case but also manifests some striking differences. As in the Chesapeake case, the early documents suggest that conversion of the native peoples occupied an important place in colonizing schemes. The "principall ende of this plantacion," read the King's charter to the Massachusetts Bay Company, "is to wynn and incite the natives of [the] country, to the knowledg and obedience of the onlie true God and Savior of mankind, and the Christian fayth."18 The seal of the colony, in a brilliant example of English ethnocentrism, even depicted an Indian imploring "Come Over and Help Us," as if Algonkianspeaking people for generations had been aware that their culture was worthless and had daily searched the horizon for sight of some redemptive expeditionary force.

But English colonizers in Massachusetts differed from those in Virginia in one important regard: whatever their economic motives, they were strongly imbued with a sense of mission. Most of our historical literature suggests that the Puritans,

who lived daily with the anxiety that they might fail in what they saw as the last chance to save corrupt Western Protestantism, regarded the conversion of the indigenous people as an indispensable part of their "errand into the wilderness." God had compacted with the Puritans to tame and civilize their new environment and to build a pious commonwealth that would "shine like a beacon" back to decadent England. But order and discipline would be brought to the new land only when its inhabitants, as well as the land, were "tamed" and "civilized." As Roy Harvey Pearce has explained, the Indian stood as a vivid reminder of what the English knew they must not become. He was the counterimage of civilized men, thought to be lacking in what was most valued by Christian Puritans: civility, discipline, purposefulness, and Christian piety.19 If such people could not be brought within the Puritan fold, then Puritans would have demonstrated their inability to control this corner of the earth to which God had directed them. So Puritans achieved control of themselves-internal control -through controlling the external world that contained forests, fields-and Indians. Conversion of the "savage," it has been widely agreed among historians, became not only a desirable goal for Puritan colonizers, but an essential one.20

The centrality of this missionary impulse within the Massachusetts Bay Colony has only recently been challenged, although it has long been understood that efforts at Christianization in the early decades were few and far between, were primarily financed from England, and were almost entirely unsuccessful. Now, in the work of Francis Jennings, Neal Salisbury, James Axtell, and others a much clearer picture is emerging concerning the reasons for this failure.21 The avoidance of missionary work from 1630 to 1645, as Salisbury tells us, "was not solely a result of apathy, oversight, preoccupation with other matters, or the great difficulties inherent in the task."22 Puritan leaders realized that conversion was a political weapon, but knew it was also recognized as such by Indian tribes. It presupposed political domination by the invading society, as the Puritans quickly learned when a few early attempts at convincing Indian religious leaders of the superiority of the Christian God were met with derision.

Thus, missionizing succeeded only after powerful tribes, such as the Pequots and Narragansetts, had been subordinated or decimated. It is no coincidence that John Eliot began his first successful attempts at Christianizing the Algonkian-

speaking natives of New England and settling them in "praying villages" modeled after white communities in the period immediately following the devastating war against the Pequots in 1637 and the war of attrition against the Narragansetts in the early 1640s. It was in March 1644 that five sachems of the Massachusetts tribe recognized the political authority of the Puritan government and subsequently gave up their lands to the English-a capitulation that was probably inspired by the English-arranged execution of the Narragansett sachem, Miantonomo.23 Having surrendered their political autonomy and their land, the Massachusetts Indians then agreed to submit to religious instruction. This neat convergence of political and religious submission is not coincidental; it speaks to the close relationship between the two that was perceived in both English and Indian communities.

This political dimension of the missionizing process in New England can be further understood by examining the tribes that converted to Christianity under the tutelage of Eliot and others. As Salisbury and Jennings have demonstrated, certain tribes were almost impervious to Christian influence in the seventeenth century while others were highly receptive. The correlation is very strong between those that had lost political sovereignty and those that accepted the proselvting agents of European culture. Conversely, most of the very powerful sachems of southern New England in the mid-seventeenth century-including Massasoit, Metacom, Ninigret, and Uncassteadfastly warded off missionary efforts after the Eliot conversion campaign began in 1646, even though these leaders were allied with the English. Eliot had to content himself with converting the smaller tribes that had borne the brunt of the English invasion and had suffered the greatest losses in the first several decades of white settlement. As Salisbury has aptly said: "Like the Oglala Sioux observed by Erik Erikson, the Algonguians who converted were those whose communal integrity had been compromised stepby-step-from the plague of 1616 to the treaties of political submission-and whose sources of collective identity and individual social stature had been destroyed."24 Even in these cases, where the colonizers could no longer be overtly resisted, and where sachems stood the best chance of preserving some of their traditional authority through semicooperation with their new masters, the conversion to Christianity was by no means total. Instead it appears that the "praying Indians"

conformed outwardly to the new religious rules but inwardly preserved most of their traditional belief system.²⁵

The history of English missionization in the New World has entered a new and richly illuminating phase because historians are beginning to leave aside the notion that this aspect of colonial and church history is simply the record of altruistic men benevolently attempting to raise up the "benighted heathens" of the Americas. We are beginning to comprehend that Christian missions "are, and always have been, revolutionary enterprises, demanding that the non-believer commit cultural suicide" and that missionaries worked within a system of colonial belief and behavior that stressed above all the need to destroy Indian autonomy and to vitiate Indian power.26 This is not to denigrate the work of individual missionaries whose lifelong devotions cannot be denied. Rather, it is to recognize that, whatever the motivations and personalities of individual churchmen, all of them were part of a political process and all were part of a cultural convergence in which purely benevolent or religiously inspired actions had little chance of succeeding unless they fit the larger political purposes of the colonizing society. As Cara Richards has said, attempts to shatter Native American belief systems and to replace them with Christian doctrine "cannot be regarded simply as a matter of criticism of some abstract philosophical hypothesis."27

Secondly, the history of missionization in America is being transformed by a belated recognition that the conversion of native people was not a process in which the Europeans were the dynamic dispensers of a new set of beliefs and the Native Americans were simply the passive recipients. We are learning to discard the "hydraulic theory" of missionization-one that suggests that as missionaries pumped harder and harder, Indian people drank deeper and deeper at the well of Christianity. Conversion did not succeed simply where missionaries were dedicated, money and support forthcoming from the European community, and the established church squarely committed to the enterprise. All these factors counted for little where Indian societies still retained political autonomy.

Thirdly, even after the loss of political independence the initiative in cultural change, of which conversion to a new religion is an exceptionally important part, did not lie entirely on one side. Indian societies accepted or rejected Christianity, and accepted it in different ways, at different rates, and in different degrees, depending upon their prior religious beliefs, the political situation, and other variables. One of the best recent attempts to study missionization among American Indians makes the mistaken assumption that after the loss of political autonomy the culture of the Indian societies involved was irrelevant to the acculturative process—in other words, that the missionaries "called the tune to which the Indians danced, regardless of tribal culture." The scholarship of Edward Spicer, Anthony F.C. Wallace, and Bruce Trigger has demonstrated that this was rarely the case. 29

In sum, the study of missionization must proceed from an analysis of both societies in contact. When this is done, as is the case in a number of excellent studies of missionization in Africa, the emphasis shifts from a schema where passive, pagan people trade their benighted condition for civilization and Christianity, whenever the missionary impulse becomes sufficiently strong, to an explanatory model that takes account of a continuous, coherent process involving a "dialectical exchange between the traditional, local religion and the immigrant religion." That is the direction of the new history of missionization.

NOTES

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- 6. Wesley Frank Craven, "Indian Policy in Early Virginia," William and Mary Quarterly, 3rd ser. 1 (1944):65–82; Nancy O. Lurie, "Indian Cultural Adjustment to European Civilization," in James M. Smith, ed., Seventeenth-Century America: Essays in Colonial History (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1959), pp. 38–45. For a searching analysis of the colonizers' difficulties in the first two decades, see Edmund S. Morgan, American Slavery. American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia (New York, 1975), chaps. 1–10.
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- 12. George Wyatt to George Wyatt, Jr., c. June 1624, published in J. Frederick Fausz and Jon Kukla, "A Letter of Advice to the Governor of Virginia, 1624," William and Mary Quarterly, 3d ser. 34 (1977):117. Fausz points out in "The Powhatan Uprising of 1622: A Historical Study of Ethnocentrism and Cultural Conflict" (Ph. D. diss., College of William and Mary, 1977), p. 281, that Nemattanew led the Powhatan warriors opposing the English conquest of the upper James River in 1611.
- Anthony F. C. Wallace, "Revitalization Movements: Some Theoretical Considerations for their Comparative Study," American Anthropologist 58 (1956):264–81.
- On Nemattanew, see Fausz and Kukla, "A Letter of Advice," pp. 108-9, 117.
- 15. Historians of Virginia rarely cite Nemattanew's murder as a cause of the 1622 attack. Nor did the Virginia Company of London admit this in its public statements. Neither of the two most recent accounts of the period-Morgan's American Slavery, American Freedom and Vaughan's American Genesis-mentions the fact. But as Fausz and Kukla point out, official correspondence of the Company explicitly recognized Nemattanew's murder as a principal cause of the 1622 Indian onslaught, as did John Smith, writing in 1624, and Robert Beverley, who published the first history of Virginia in 1705. Fausz and Kukla, "A Letter of Advice," pp. 108n-9n, 117n. Fausz provides a sterling analysis of the attack in "The Powhatan Uprising," chaps. 4 and 5. Since I wrote this paper Alden Vaughan has recognized Nemattanew's death as the spark that ignited the 1622 attack: "'Expulsion of the Salvages': English Policy and the Virginia Massacre of 1622," William and Mary Quarterly, 3d ser. 35 (1978):57-84, especially p. 75.
- Fausz, "The Powhatan Uprising," pp. 338–42, 378–81. Fausz suggests that "the mutilation of Thorpe may indeed have been an act of catharsis and religious symbolism for the Powhatans."
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- 24. Salisbury, "Red Puritans," p. 50.
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