

Embracing ambiguity: Native peoples and Christianity in seventeenth-century North America.

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Neal Salisbury

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Embracing Ambiguity:

Neal Salisbury

Smith College

In February 1676, the Anglo-Indian conflict known as King Philip's War was raging in southern New England. From the colonists' perspective, this was the low point of the war. With seeming impunity, anti-English Indians were attacking and destroying English towns in central and western Massachusetts. In the aftermath of one such attack, pursuing English troops halted at a bridge outside Medfield, Massachusetts, to read a notice that was nailed to a post. The notice read:

Know by this paper, that the Indians that thou hast provoked to wrath and anger, will war this twenty one years if you will; there are many Indians yet, we come three hundred at this time. You must consider the Indians lost nothing but their life; you must lose your fair houses and cattle.¹

The message is notable, of course, as testimony to the Indians' determination and to their shrewd recognition that the colonists' private property rendered them especially vulnerable. But what is even more remarkable is the fact that it was communicated in the form of a note, written in the English language. The only way a New England native person in 1676 could have penned such a message was to have undergone extensive education as a Christian or "praying" Indian. Historians have long recognized the wartime roles of Christian Indians who fought in support of the English. But they have overlooked the many who did not fight on either side and the small but significant number who undertook—prior professions of Christian conversion notwithstanding—to actively oppose the English. In circumscribing their understanding of the wartime actions [End Page 247] of New England's "praying Indians," scholars have limited their understanding of native Christianity more generally. Only by comprehending how it was that Christian Indians could act in support of non-Christian Indians against Christian Europeans can we hope to account for the range of meanings Christianity held for native peoples in seventeenth-century North America. In this brief address, I want simply to point toward some of those meanings, first by looking at southern New England during King Philip's War and then revisiting, more briefly, two other well-known episodes of the seventeenth century, the Pueblo Revolt of 1680 and the Powhatan uprising against the English of Virginia in 1622.

Massachusetts Bay, 1675–6

The outbreak of King Philip's War in 1675 punctured a peace between the English colonies and various native groups that went back anywhere from three decades to more than half a century.² The conflict began brewing in the 1660s, when the coming of age of a second generation of colonists with high birthrates, plus influxes of English capital for land speculation, led colonial authorities to exert enormous pressure on demographically declining Indians to sell off substantial portions of their remaining homelands. At the same time, the demands of a once-flourishing fur trade had led to the overhunting of beaver and, thereby, the decline of the trade itself. As traders demanded land for collateral from indebted Indians, English political and legal authorities sought to place natives under more direct control of their jurisdictions, and missionaries openly advocated the subversion of the authority of non-Christian sachems (political leaders). In innumerable ways, then, the English were closing off most remaining arenas of native autonomy. Concurrently, Indians themselves displayed signs of both demoralization and resistance. While many turned to illegally traded alcohol or engaged in theft or violence vis-à-vis other Indians or the English, others converted to Christianity during a renewed missionary offensive, and still others, including a number of prominent sachems, openly questioned or repudiated their past alliances with the English.

When war came, one side consisted of virtually all the English plus Mohegans and Pequots of Connecticut and Christian Wampanoag, Nipmuc, Massachusetts, and Pawtucket Indians of Plymouth and Massachusetts Bay. On the other side was a loose coalition of non-Christian Wampanoags and Nipmucs plus the Narragansetts of Rhode...

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2715 North Charles Street
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[+1 \(410\) 516-6989](tel:+14105166989)
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