

n e w w o r l d o r d e r s

millennialism in the western hemisphere

Cross-Cultural Apocalypse in the Contact Generation of Native America and New England

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Many generations of this continent's first peoples lived and died without hearing that a God from the other side of our planet once created the world and would just as suddenly destroy it. In 1492, however, Europeans began writing the New World and its peoples into their millennial narratives, as Columbus's discoveries led Spanish theologians to anticipate the preaching of the gospel to all nations that Jesus said would precede His return (Rivera 60; Matthew 24:14). Correspondingly, within a generation of contact each native community suffered an apocalypse of sorts, as disease or conquest destroyed one cultural and natural world after another. Native peoples often responded to these cataclysms by borrowing explanatory narratives from Christian eschatology, as when, prior to their massacre at Wounded Knee in 1890, Plains Indians of the Ghost Dance movement prophesied the resurrection of the dead and saw the Paiute mystic Wovoka as the returned Christ. This millennial exchange continues even in our own more secular time, with Iron Eyes Cody and other representatives of pre-Columbian America serving as prophets of ecological or nuclear holocaust.

Nearly four centuries ago, within a few miles of this conference, this cross-cultural apocalypse transpired in a single lifetime. The Algonquian peoples who inhabited the North Atlantic coastline apparently held few elaborate end-time beliefs. Early in the seventeenth century, though, European contact desolated many of their communities, whose survivors adopted elements of Christian millennialism to explain their fate. This eschatological framework was bolstered by the arrival of English Puritans and their efforts to convert Indians to Christianity. The Puritans, who saw their settlement in America as a phase in the Millennium thought to have begun with the European Reformation, created prophetic roles for settlements of "Praying Indians," who suffered fresh catastrophe during King Philip's War in the 1670s. In the next decade, as the contact generation perished, the Puritans revised Native Americans anew as admonitory examples for a New England slouching toward Armageddon and the Praying Indians, imagining God's judgment as an enemy torture ritual, sang a death song for their lost world.

This shared millennial narrative began in the second decade of the seventeenth century with a conjunction of natural occurrences that invited millennial interpretation. The first was a virulent disease transmitted by European visitors that, between 1616 and 1620, killed 90 percent or more of the Algonquian population here around Massachusetts Bay. "They died [in] heapes," the English adventurer Thomas Morton wrote: "the[ir] bones and skulls . . . made such a spectacle [that] it seemed . . . a new found Golgatha" (23). The cause of this mortality was a "virgin-soil epidemic," in which alien diseases infect "immunologically naïve" populations

(Crosby 289; Spiess and Spiess, 72). As dire as were the physical consequences, the cultural impact on an oral culture like that of the Algonquians may have been irreversible. Literate cultures can survive such decimations with scriptures intact, but oral cultures are, in the words of Native American author N. Scott Momaday, “always but one generation removed from extinction” (171). Transmission of Algonquian culture must have appeared doomed when, as Morton added, “in a place where many inhabited, there hath been but one left alive, to tell what became of the rest” (23).

To account for this unprecedented catastrophe, survivors of the Algonquian holocaust borrowed a cultural narrative from the same people from whom they contracted their illness. Some natives on Cape Cod told the English that, prior to the epidemic, they were provoked to burn a French ship in the Bay, kill most of its crew and capture five others as slaves. “[O]ne of these five [French]men . . . learned so much of [the Indians’] language, as to rebuke them for their bloody deede, saying that God would be angry with them for it, and that hee would in his displeasure destroy them” (N. Morton 42-3). Thus the Indians first apprehended their destruction as the judgment of an angry Judeo-Christian deity. The English did not dispute this assumption but inclined to interpret the Indians’ misfortune as a providential turn in their own favor, reading the depopulation of the original inhabitants in terms of the *vacuum domicilium* or empty land rationale. As one of the Pilgrims at Plymouth related, “[Our Indian guide] told us [that in] the place where we now lived . . . about four years ago all the inhabitants died of an extraordinary plague, and there is neither man, woman, nor child remaining, as indeed we have found none, so as there is none to hinder our possession” (*Mourt’s Relation* 51).

Also in the 1610s, another natural phenomenon correlated the Indians’ ruin with western visions of end-time and appropriation. In 1618, at the height of the Algonquian epidemic, a spectacular comet appeared above the Northern Hemisphere. “All the Earth looked . . . with astonishment,” wrote one seventeenth-century historian (Mather *Kometographia* 108). The Old World had long beheld comets as portents of change, and its scriptural prophecies were emblazoned with comet-like stars falling from the heavens (Matthew 24:29; Revelation 9:1). The Algonquians, who regularly observed the stars, used comets to recall extraordinary events (da Verrazzano 131; Ceci 302; Emerson 70). The 1618 comet chronicled for them, as a Puritan historian reported in 1669, both the epidemic and the Pilgrims’ subsequent arrival: “the ancient Indians . . . do affirm, that about some two or three years before the first English arrived here, they saw a blazing star, or comet, which was a forerunner of [their] sad mortality” (N. Morton 36). Another contemporary Puritan historian reports this same conjunction of comet, epidemic, and English but adds that the comet’s “motion in the Heavens was from East to West, poynting out to the sons of men the progresse of the glorious Gospell” (Johnson 40). Betokening the command to preach to all nations, this westward progress of comet and gospel anticipates the nineteenth-century United States’s claims of Manifest Destiny to expand westward through Indian and Mexican lands. The Great Comet of 1843 for the Millerites augured Christ’s return even as advocates of Manifest Destiny referred to the same heavenly sign to proclaim, “Westward the Star of empire takes its course!” (White).

In the mid-seventeenth century, the Algonquians became further embroiled in Puritan millennialism or independently developed an alternative apocalyptic narrative. John Eliot, a Puritan minister from nearby Roxbury who became known for his missionary work as “the Apostle to the Indians,” imagined Native Americans to be descendants of the Tribes of Israel and thus critical participants in the Christian millennium. “It is one of the great works of Christ in the last daies to finde up lost Israels and bring them into his kingdom.” Eliot declared in a preface to

Thomas Thorowgood's *Jews in America* of 1660, and "these naked Americans are Hebrewes." Eliot's evidence tended to the wishful, but the so-called "Praying Indians" who joined his mission may have encouraged such thinking by venturing to him in the 1640s "That their forefathers did know God, but that after this, they fell into a great sleep, and when they did awaken they quite forgot him" (Shepard 44). As smallpox and other European diseases continued to decimate the Praying Indians and other coastal natives, such an expression was more likely intended again to account for their otherwise-inexplicable suffering. Further inland on the New England frontier in the same decade, however, a Narragansett sachem named Miantanomo attempted to rally intertribal resistance to the English by articulating a secular or ecological Apocalypse: "Our fathers had plenty of deer and skins, our plains were full of deer, as also our woods, and of turkies, and our coves full of fish and fowl. But these English having gotten our land . . . cut down the grass, and . . . fell the trees; . . . and we shall all be starved" (Qtd. in Salisbury, 13).

Midway between Algonquian traditionalists on the frontier and the Puritan colonists nearer the coast, Eliot organized reservations called "Praying Towns" that entailed new millennial roles for the "Praying Indians." The relevant background for these roles was disputed at an earlier session, so what follows is, if not one-sided, at least telescoped. Radical Protestants like the early Puritans believed the Reformation was creating a society in which Christ or His Word would rule for a thousand years before Judgment Day. In this context Boston at its founding saw itself as a vanguard utopia—in John Winthrop's 1629 figure, "a Citty upon a Hill" (233)—whose widespread imitation might precipitate this millennial state. As J. F. Maclear has written, "The very gathering of the elect in objective holy communities anticipated the coming era when the saints would reign with the Lord" (229), a moment that at mid-century was prefigured by the establishment of the Puritan Commonwealth in old England. In the 1650s Eliot transferred this utopian narrative of Christ's advancing kingdom to "Praying Towns" he founded for the Indians with the notion that "the work which we now have in hand, will be as a patterne and Copie [for other Indians], to imitate in all the Countrey" (Whitfield 171). In the next decade Indian missionaries founded "New [Praying] Towns" beyond the original few. However, Eliot's efforts to extend his "Church-state" to his homeland met with diplomatic disaster (173). As the English Commonwealth disintegrated in the early 1660s, Eliot published in London a utopian tract titled *The Christian Commonwealth*. Its plea that England "set the Crown . . . upon the head of Christ" was rebuked, however, by agents of the incoming King Charles II. In response, authorities in Boston ordered the hangman to burn copies of the text, and Eliot in years to come spent less time in political action and more in translating Puritan texts and Christian scripture into Massachusetts, the dominant Algonquian dialect spoken in this area.

The failures of these Commonwealths and Boston's eagerness to please an Anglican monarch suggest that, at the same time the Praying Indians and their Towns were enjoying some revitalization, the Puritan settlers were entering a period of limited expectations. Correspondingly, in the 1660s and 70s the Puritans' cultural narrative shifted from founding Christ's kingdom to Jeremiads anticipating God's wrathful Judgment (Maclear 259). Simultaneously, traditional Algonquians subsisting on the frontier were being driven to desperation by constant loss of land and population. By 1675, when the Wampanoag sachem Metacomet, also known as King Philip, took over Miantanomo's mission of organizing these peoples into the rebellion known as King Philip's War, both Puritans and Indians could interpret this conflict in apocalyptic terms. The Puritan minister Increase Mather warned, "of late some unhappy scandals have . . . provoke[d] the Lord to let loose more Enemies upon us" (*Brief*

History 49), while the war's most famous captive, Mary Rowlandson, wrote of the day her town was attacked, "Now is that dreadful hour come that I have often heard of" (34). The Algonquians, familiar by now with this narrative and encouraged by early victories, used it against the Puritans, "tell[ing] the English Warriors," according to one contemporary observer, "that God is against them, and for the Indians, and that the English shall (for their Unrighteousness) fall into [Indian] hands" (Wharton 4).

As earlier in the century, natural signs and wonders confirmed these apocalyptic inclinations. At the outbreak of hostilities, a company of English soldiers marching by night were "occasioned . . . to make a halt" by an "Eclipse of the Moon," which created an "unusual black spot, not a little resembling the scalp of an Indian" or "the form of an Indian Bow" which led the soldiers to "some melancholy Fancies" regarding the outcome of the war (Hubbard I: 17-18). In contrast, after a seaside storm destroyed English houses, native religious authorities claimed supernatural favor and prophesied ruin for the English. The Indians boasted "that they had caused [the storm] by their *Pawwaw*. They farther say, that as many Englishmen shall die, as the Trees have by this wind been blown down in the Woods" (Nathaniel Saltonstall, *The Present State of New-England* [London 1675], 44; qtd. In Lepore, 101).

The Indians' prophecy was painfully accurate. Proportional to population, King Philip's War remains the most deadly and costly in European-American history, killing one in sixteen white men of military age, destroying 600 houses and twenty-five English towns, and disrupting the colonial economy (Leach 243-45; Slotkin and Folsom 3-4; "Indians Interned" 63; LePore xii). Yet, however difficult to quantify, the Native Americans' losses were again more profound and irreversible. Following the assassination of Philip, the annihilation of his forces, and the deportation of prominent surviving families to slavery in the West Indies, the Algonquian peoples fairly ceased to exist as independent political forces in early New England (Conkey, Boissevain, and Goddard 177).

King Philip's War was just as apocalyptic for the Praying Indians, caught as they were between ethnic and religious loyalties. Some converts in the New Towns deserted to Philip's forces and shared their fates. Most Praying Indians of the Old Towns remained faithful to the English, but early in the war "the disorderly rout [of common people] in Boston," who would "admit no distinction between one Indian and another," had 500 of them removed to "bleak and cold" Deer Island, a "furnace of affliction" in Boston Harbor where their "wigwams [were] poor and mean, [and] their clothes few and thin" (Gookin 466, 454, 453, 434, 497). However, when the Praying Indians "carried themselves patiently, humbly, and piously, without . . . complaining against the English for their sufferings," their men of military age were recruited from Deer Island to fight Philip's warriors. "It may be said," one missionary reported, "that God made use of these poor, despised, and hated Christians, to do great service for the churches of Christ in New England, in this day of their trial," and "it was observed by impartial men, that after our Indians went out, the balance turned [to] the English side" (Gookin 485, 513). Yet the war also shattered the fragile world of the Praying Indians, as Eliot's mission failed to recover from desertions, casualties, and displacement. Within a century and a half the last Christian Indians would disappear from the Praying Towns and the Massachusetts dialect into which Eliot translated the first Bible printed in North America would be extinct.

In the decade following King Philip's War, two additional natural events marked the denouement of the Puritans' and Algonquians' millennial narrative. In 1680 another "Blazing Star" appeared in the northern heavens. In Europe, this object was identified as Halley's Comet, the first whose periodic return was successfully predicted and a harbinger of the clockwork

universe of Enlightenment science. Speaking for Puritan New England, Mather alludes to such advances in astronomical observation but nonetheless identifies the same comet in the usual millennial framework. His 1681 sermon *Heavens Alarm to the World* hails “that sign in heaven now appearing” as a warning that “the Lord” is prepared “to pour down the Cataracts of his wrath, ere this Generation . . . is passed away” and compares it to the Comet of 1618, reviewing that, “after that great blazing Star which appeared above threescore years ago, God sent the Plague amongst the Natives in this land, which swept them away in such multitudes, as that the living were not enough to bury the dead. So did the Lord cast out the Heathen before this his People, that the way might thereby be prepared unto our more peaceable settlement here” (10, 14, 12, 9). Less predictably, however, he reveals an unsettling sense of impermanence and acknowledges the Native Americans’ apocalypse may be the Puritans’ own, entreating “that we may never . . . provoke [God] to doe unto us, as he hath done unto them” (9).

The Algonquians, having been done unto so repeatedly, increasingly slip to the margins of New England history, but their voice flickers once more in response to another natural event of the 1680s: the end of the life-spans of Eliot’s original Indian converts who did not die in epidemics or war. Their deaths were announced in a 1685 pamphlet titled *the Dying Speeches . . . Of such Indians as dyed in the Lord*. These transcriptions of the Praying Indians’ last words complete the “one generation . . . from extinction” that Scott Momaday saw as the lease of any oral culture. The Indians’ performances of the popular Puritan genre of the dying speech and their desire that theirs be printed demonstrate an increasing immersion in print culture via Eliot’s “Indian Library” (2). But this publication also manifests the continuing onslaught borne by Native America, a clue to the millennial narrative’s contagious power, and an elusive hint of resistance. Eliot’s notes to the Indians’ speeches mention not only the Praying Towns having been “scattered by the warr” (4) but also the “lay[ing] aside” of two Indian religious teachers, one because “after the warrs . . . [he] became a lover of strong drink” (7) and the other because “the Sin of strong drink did infect us, and then he was so farr infected with it” (12). After the Indians’ infections by European diseases, Eliot’s metaphor of their being “infected” by the white man’s “strong drink” invites comparison to their infection by millennial narrative.

Perhaps, though, the new host yet resists the infection. The dying chord of the Indians’ final speeches mingles deliverance with defiance, keyed to a native genre. For many lifetimes before the Algonquians encountered the Europeans, warfare with the Iroquois peoples to the west confronted their warriors with the prospect of capture and death by ritual torture. Under these circumstances Algonquian captives distinguished themselves by bravely singing death songs in the face of their enemies. The Praying Indians fuse the Puritan Dying Speech with the Algonquian death song. This cultural interface may have been first suggested by Eliot when, preaching to the Massachusetts four decades earlier, he described the agonies of Judgment Day with the Algonquian word for Iroquois torture rites: “wee set forth the terrour of God against sinners . . . and that . . . sinners should bee after death, *Chechainuppan*, i. e. tormented alive, (for we know no other word in the tongue to express extreame torture by)” (*Day-Breaking* 13). But again he ignores the possible extensions to his metaphor. The last people to know America both before sin and after conversion use their last words to ask us, What hell would they be delivered from? A hell to come, or the contaminated land in which they are now captives? And should they submit like Christian soldiers, or sing defiance like Algonquian warriors? In their speeches the Praying Indians repeatedly assert, “I hope I shall dy well” (5), “Now I desire to dy well” (7). These dying speeches may represent not only a plea for salvation but an alternative lost to ourselves: neither to live eternally nor die ignobly. As the last Praying Indian concludes, “I [am]

almost now dead and I desire to dy well, Oh Lord Jesus Christ help me, and deliver my Soul to dy well” (12).

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