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Six Days Shalt Thou Labor: Work, Sabbath Observance, and Cultural Conversion in John Eliot's Mission to the Indians

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After John Eliot began his mission to the Indians of Massachusetts in 1646, the first signs of success that he reported were the Indians' prayers to the Christian God. It was from these prayers that Eliot's converts received their name "the praying Indians." What was important in Eliot's report, however, was not just prayer, but prayer at specific times. Eliot wrote, "They do pray unto God constantly in their families, morning and evening, . . . as also when they goe to meat they solemnly pray and give thanks to God, as they see the English to doe." Praying at the beginning and end of the day and at meals was a devotional habit that Eliot had deliberately tried to transmit in his missionary efforts.¹

In his mission Eliot consistently tried to instill time discipline as a means of disciplining Indians' souls that they might convert to Christianity. Eliot encouraged English work habits, specifically wage labor. He also recommended time-based devotional habits—primarily the keeping of the Sabbath, but also habits of prayer at set times. We can assess Eliot's mission by a series of questions about his methods: First, where did Eliot get his ideas of time discipline? Second, how did he use time discipline in his missionizing? And third, did Indians converts adopt or resist Eliot's ideas of time discipline?²

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¹Thomas Shepard, *The Clear Sun-Shine of the Gospel Breaking Forth Upon the Indians in New England* . . . (London, 1648), in Michael P. Clark, ed., *The Eliot Tracts: With Letters from John Eliot to Thomas Thorowgood and Richard Baxter*, Contribution in American History, no. 199 (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003), 124–26.

²Time consciousness has proved a fruitful study in many areas. E. P. Thompson, "Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism," *Past and Present*, no. 38 (1967): 56–97, which is perhaps the seminal article for studying time consciousness, applies the concept to labor history; Mark M. Smith, *Mastered by the Clock: Time, Slavery, and Freedom in the American South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997); applies it to the study of slavery; Michael O'Malley, *Keeping Watch: A History of American Time* (New York: Viking, 1990) applies it to social history; and Cheryl A. Wells, "Battle Time: Gender, Modernity, and Confederate Hospitals," *Journal of Social History* 35,

Eliot learned the importance of time discipline from his Puritan contemporaries, who were famously concerned with “redeeming the time.” Puritans in old England and New lived by a different calendar than the Church of England, refusing to observe the some 165 holy days of the liturgical calendar, but strictly obeying the Fourth Commandment’s two requirements: “Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy,” but also “Six days shalt thou labor, and do all thy work.”³ In New England, God’s law was confirmed by man’s. A law passed in 1646, the year Eliot began his mission, decreed banishment for anyone who “shall deny the moralitie of the fourth commandment.”⁴ Sabbath observance was disciplined by timepiece and drum. Influenced by John Cotton’s sermons, Puritans kept the Sabbath from late Saturday, probably about three o’clock, until Sunday evening. Drums summoned the saints to church at nine in the morning and at two in the afternoon. Often an hourglass limited the morning sermon so that listeners would not be too fatigued to attend the afternoon sermon.⁵

Eliot also learned a different kind of time consciousness from his contemporaries: the doctrine of eschatology (end times). Eliot subscribed to the millenarian views of John Cotton and Thomas Hooker, who believed that at the end of the world Jews would convert first, to be followed by pagans.⁶ In 1650 Thomas Thorowgood published *Jewes in America*, arguing that New England Indians were descendants of the lost ten tribes of Israel. Edward Winslow, Plymouth’s diplomat to the Indians, acquainted John Eliot with Thorowgood’s theory before it was published.⁷ Eliot wrote a detailed letter to Thorowgood, which was published as the preface to the 1652 edition of his book. The letter theorized that the meeting of Indians and Englishmen was the beginning of the end times and that Indians would be the first

no. 2 (2001): 409–428 applies it to gender history. Other scholars have applied the concept to the study of religion; see, for example, Nicholas M. Beasley, “Ritual Time in British Plantation Colonies, 1650–1780,” *Church History* 76, no. 3 (2007): 541–568.

³Exodus 20:8–9 (AV).

⁴Massachusetts Bay, *The Book of the General Lawues and Libertyes Concerning the Inhabitants of the Massachusetts*, (Boston, 1648), 24. Solberg, *Redeem the Time*, 111–13, 122, 168–70.

⁵James P. Walsh, “Holy Time and Sacred Space in Puritan New England,” *American Quarterly* 32, no. 1 (1980): 79–84, 88–89; Winton U. Solberg, *Redeem the Time: The Puritan Sabbath in Early America* (Harvard University Press, 1977), 27, 111–15, 330–68; Paul B. Hensley, “Time, Work, and Social Context in New England,” *New England Quarterly* 65, no. 4 (1992): 531–59; Richard L. Greaves, “The Origins of English Sabbatarian Thought,” *Sixteenth Century Journal* 12, no. 3 (1981): 19–34; Keith L. Sprunger, “English and Dutch Sabbatarianism and the Development of Puritan Social Theology (1600–1660),” *Church History* 51, no. 1 (1982): 24–38 cf. Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (New York: Charles Scribner, 1948).

⁶Richard W. Cogley, *John Eliot’s Mission to the Indians before King Philip’s War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 9–22; Clark, ed., *Eliot Tracts*, 25–26.

⁷Cogley, *Eliot’s Mission*, 83–90.

in a wave of worldwide conversions, for they were Jews.⁸ Eliot was joined in his speculation by Edward Winslow, who was in correspondence with an Amsterdam rabbi, James Dury, and Thomas Shepard, all of whom contributed to the London publications about Eliot's mission. Eliot was confirmed in his zeal when his first convert was a sachem named Waban, whose name, "wind," Eliot took as a sign of the wind in Ezekiel's prophecies that brought life to the dry bones in the valley.⁹

Thus armed with both time discipline and a conviction that his mission was part of last days, Eliot set forth to convert the Indians. He detailed his program in a 1647 letter to Thomas Shepard. Two differences divided Indians and Puritans, Eliot wrote: "First, we know, serve, and pray unto God, and they doe not: Secondly, we labour and work in building, planting, clothing ourselves, &c. and they doe not." The Indians had to learn to pray to God and to labor. Then their conversion—expressed in terms of being English, not Christian—would be complete: "Would they but doe as wee doe in these things, they would be all one with English men."¹⁰

Eliot preached the Sabbath in his first sermon to the Indians. On October 28, 1646, Eliot and three other ministers preached in the Indian village of Nonantum. His text was the Decalogue, which he explained to the Indians for an hour and a quarter. The fourth commandment was prominent, and other topics included judgment, salvation, and Christ's return. Eliot and his fellow ministers may have been dismayed by the Indians' questions, which mostly asked for explanations of the thunder, tides, and wind.¹¹

At a meeting on November 26, 1647, Eliot's emphasis on work and Sabbath observance brought forth its first fruits. Several Indians, even some powwows, confessed and mourned for their sin. These Indians were formed into the town of Natick. They drew up ten laws for themselves. Unfortunately, two of the laws in the Indian decalogue have been lost, but those that remain are instructive. Two of the laws dealt directly with work. Young men were forbidden from living in other people's wigwams and so benefiting from others' generosity rather than their own labor.

⁸Clark, ed., *Eliot Tracts*, 26–28. For text of Eliot's letter, see John Eliot to Thomas Thorowgood, written sometime in 1653–54, in Clark, ed., *Eliot Tracts*, 410–27. In editing the Eliot tracts, Clark gives a significant amount of attention to the millennial views of Eliot. Cogley, whose work is the most comprehensive on the history of Eliot's mission, began his research into Eliot by examining his eschatology; see Cogley, *Eliot's Mission*, 76–105; and Cogley, "John Eliot and the Millennium," *Religion and American Culture* 1, no. 2 (Summer 1991): 227–250.

⁹John Eliot and Thomas Mayhew, *The Glorious Progress of the Gospel, Amongst the Indians in New England* (London, 1649), in Clark, ed. *Eliot Tracts*, 145, 163–67; Shepard, *The Clear Sun-Shine of the Gospel*, 135.

¹⁰Shepard, *The Clear Sun-Shine of the Gospel*, 124–26.

¹¹The *Day-Breaking, If Not the Sun-Rising of the Gospel with the Indians in New England*, (London, 1647), in Clark, ed., *Eliot Tracts*, 83–92.

Another law stated that “if any man be idle for a weeke, at most a fortnight, hee shall pay five shillings.” It is possible, perhaps even likely, that one of lost laws required Sabbath observance.¹²

Church membership was the culmination of conversion for Puritans, so the creed that Eliot drew up for Indian churches highlights what was important in his mission. In 1660 and 1670, Eliot published *A Christian Covenanting Confession* for the use of Indians establishing a church. Those who took the confession pledged to “Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy, so long as we live. And also to bind ourselves to each other, to meet together every Sabbath day (when it may be done) to doe all our Sabbath day Services.”¹³

Eliot extended this concern into his writings and translations. To promote piety, Eliot translated several Puritan devotional writings into Algonquian. In 1665 and 1686, Eliot published Lewis Bayley’s *The Practice of Piety*. The book contained an extended discussion of how to keep the Sabbath, with prayers for morning and evening and two prayers for the Sabbath. It also explained why Christians kept the Sabbath on Sunday rather than Saturday.¹⁴

Eliot prepared several textbooks for the Indians, all of which frequently mentioned the Sabbath. His 1672 primer on logic was intended to train Indian teachers in argumentation and exegesis. One extended example was based on Christ’s dispute with the Pharisees over the Sabbath in John’s Gospel. The major premise, which presumably Eliot taught his converts, was that “he that breaketh the Sabbath cometh not from God.” Besides reinforcing the importance of the Sabbath for those who read the primer, Eliot also provided the exegesis of a difficult text concerning the Sabbath. Indian preachers or schoolteachers could then explain the same to their students.¹⁵

¹²*Day-Breaking*, 95–99. Eliot later recorded that the Indians had their own law about Sabbath observance; see Shepard, *The Clear Sun-Shine of the Gospel*, 126. The mentions of work supports that conjecture, but the absence of any other religious dictates in surviving eight laws does not.

¹³John Eliot, *Christiane Oonoowae Sampoorwaonk* [A Christian Covenanting Confession] (Cambridge, MA, 1660).

¹⁴Lewis Bayley, *Manitowompae Pomantamoonk: Sampwshanau Christianoh Uttob Woh an Pomantog Wussikkitteahonat God*, trans. John Eliot (Cambridge, MA, 1665). Unlike some translations by Eliot, *Manitowompae Pomantamoonk* didn’t include an interlinear or facing English translation. Since I cannot read Algonquian, I have instead read an English edition of Bayley’s work: Lewis Bayley, *The Practice of Piety: Directing a Christian How to Walk, That He May Please God* (Boston, 1718).

¹⁵John Eliot, *The Logick Primer. Some Logical Notions to Initiate the Indians in the Knowledge of the Rule of Reason; and to Show How to Make Use Thereof. Especially for the Instruction of Such as Are Teachers among Them* (Cambridge, MA, 1672). Eliot also wrote a primer to teach Indians how to read, but it was published in Algonquian without English translation. Like other primers, it likely mentioned the Sabbath. See John Eliot, *The Indian Primer; or, the Way of Training up of Our Indian Youth in the Good Knowledge of God, in the Knowledge of the Scriptures and in an Ability to Read* (Cambridge, MA, 1669).

Eliot's 1671 *Indian Dialogues* made the most use of the Sabbath and other time-based observances of any of Eliot's writings. As a handbook for Indian missionaries the fictionalized dialogs revealed Eliot's methods.¹⁶ Time-based observances, especially Sabbath observance, form the structure of the *Indian Dialogues*. The missionaries persuade their potential converts to practice time-based piety. Before and after every meal and before sleeping, the missionaries pray. Orienting the Indians to a new temporality also oriented them to Puritan religion. Several of the dialogs extend for more than one day. To continue their conversations, the missionaries ask the Indians to return on the Sabbath. The missionaries enjoin their potential converts to punctual observance of the meeting time. At one point, missionaries deep in the Massachusetts woods even mention clock time! The missionaries thus attempted to inculcate a habit of observing the Sabbath that would lead to continued exposure to evangelism.¹⁷

It was in response to his preaching of the Sabbath and emphasis on time discipline that Eliot saw the earliest and clearest signs of conversion. At a meeting on December 9, 1646, an elderly Indian pledged that he would keep the Sabbath. In 1647, several Indians asked Eliot how they could become English and accepted time-based rituals: "They do pray unto God constantly in their families, morning and evening, . . . as also when they goe to meat they solemnly pray and give thanks to God, as they see the English to doe."¹⁸ The Indians also readily consented to keeping the Sabbath. John Winthrop reported when the Indians were asked whether they would avoid work on the Sabbath, they candidly answered, "It is a small thing for us to rest on that day, for we have not much to do any day, and therefore we will forbear on that day." Convincing them to work on the other six days was more difficult, but Eliot hit upon the scheme of offering wages for their labor.¹⁹

In January 1646, a meeting at Concord of sachems and other Indians leaders agreed to many of Eliot's teachings. Two of the orders they issued required the proper use of time. One promoted "some better course to improve their time." An-

¹⁶Eliot described the *Dialogues* as "partly historical, of some things that were done and said, and partly instructive, to show what might or should have been said, or that may be . . . hereafter done or said"; Henry W. Bowden and James P. Ronda, eds., *John Eliot's Indian Dialogues: A Study in Cultural Interaction*, Contributions in American History, no. 88 (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1980), 61. The *Indian Dialogues* are written in Algonquian with English interlinear. For an overview of the structure of the *Dialogues*, see Bowden and Ronda, eds., 41-56. The dialogues also introduced Indians to the Christian concept of eschatological judgment. Thus, they communicated both a cyclical sense of holiness and a teleological sense of judgment.

¹⁷Bowden and Ronda, eds., *Indian Dialogues*, 111-12, 63-162. The missionary asks them to meet early, "about nine of the clock" (89-90). The reference to clock time in the forests of New England is surprising. Perhaps Eliot, writing in Roxbury and not the wilderness, inadvertently included it.

¹⁸Shepard, *The Clear Sun-Shine of the Gospel*, 115-16, 124-26.

¹⁹John Winthrop, *Winthrop's Journal: History of New England*, ed. James Kendall Hosmer, 2 vols. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1908), 2:124.

other forbade sports. Sabbath-breakers were subject to fines: "That they doe observe the Lords-Day, and whosoever shall prophane it shall pay 20 s." A fourth resolution encouraged prayers before and after meals. The Indians thus adopted Eliot's time-based observances and even showed a concern for time thrift.²⁰

Those Indians who adopted Sabbath observance sought to maintain it. Eliot interpreted their zeal as that of the proselyte, but it may have been that the Indians shrewdly saw the Sabbath as a tool to undermine the authority of Eliot and the Indian leaders under him. Indians personally monitored Sabbath-breakers, even if their rebukes crossed the bounds of political authority. One Indian, for example, rebuked a sachem's wife for speaking about worldly matters on the Sabbath. When Waban, sachem at Noonanetum and Eliot's first convert, permitted two Indians to cut down a tree on the Sabbath to catch a raccoon, others in the tribe declared themselves scandalized. Others were motivated by a more introspective piety, such as the man who cut firewood on the Sabbath to prevent a fire from going out and then wondered if he had broken the Sabbath.²¹

The Indians who did not become converts asked Eliot why the praying Indians who worked so hard had less pleasure and no more wealth. Eliot rebuked his questioners by pointing out that spiritual things were of more value than material. One might doubt that argument carried much weight with those who had already rejected Eliot's gospel. Perhaps more persuasive was Eliot's argument that laboring like the English would produce wealth: "If you were more wise to know God, and obey his Commands, you would work more then you do, for so God commandeth, Six dayes thou shall work, &c. and thus the English do: and if you would bee so wise as to worke as they do, you should have cloths, houses, cattle, riches as they have, God would give you them."²²

The Indians also kept a close watch for any hypocrisy or laxness in the Puritans' Sabbath observance. Some Indians observed an Englishman, who happened not to be under the jurisdiction of the colony, cutting down a tree on Sunday. They pressed Eliot for an explanation why the man's wickedness was not punished. Hypocrisy in some Puritans' Sabbath observance led some Indians to reject the Puritan gospel. A Narragansett sachem, perhaps aware of the dispute between Roger Williams and Massachusetts Bay, explained to Eliot that he had not learned Christianity from Williams because Williams worked on the Sabbath. In his confession, one Indian mentioned that his faith had been discouraged by the fact that Massachusetts soldiers had disarmed the Indians on a Sabbath. William Wood observed that Indians rebuked Puritans who failed to pray at regular times: "When some English have

²⁰Shepard, *The Clear Sun-Shine of the Gospel*, 115–16. The date is old style; thus, the meeting in January 1646 occurred after Eliot's first sermon in October 1646.

²¹Shepard, *The Clear Sun-Shine of the Gospel*, 124–30.

²²Shepard, *The Clear Sun-Shine of the Gospel*, 130–32.

come to their houses, victuals being offered them, forgetting to crave God's blessing upon the creatures received, they have been reproved by these which formerly never knew what calling upon God meant." Wood's observation also demonstrates that Puritan missions had more success inculcating concrete ritual and social change than they did communicating complex theological ideas.²³

The effects of Eliot's emphases on time and work may be judged by the confessions of the Indians, for that is how the Puritans themselves judged their efforts. On several occasions in 1659, Eliot's first converts testified to the work of grace they had experienced before assembled ministers. Many of the confessions mention the sins of breaking the Sabbath and failing to pray at certain times. For example, Totherswamp said, "If I eat and did not pray, I was ashamed," and Monotunkwanit confessed, "I kept no Sabbath, nor Lecture, nor any work of Prayer." Several Indians mentioned in their confessions that relatives or friends asked them to participate in Sabbath observances or lectures. Anthony, who later became a preacher, was one example who was introduced to Christianity by observing the Sabbath at his brother's invitation, even though he did not believe: "They prayed morning and evening; and when they eat, and on Sabbath dayes, then I thought I would do so."²⁴

John Eliot's mission, motivated by eschatology and achieved by means of time discipline, was twice ironic. First, Eliot sought to inculcate a religion of the heart but succeeded mostly in imposing a religion of ritual. Second, by the end of King Philip's War in 1676, soldiers of Massachusetts Bay had destroyed the praying towns. Whatever success Eliot's mission had, it was thus only temporary.

²³Shepard, *The Clear Sun-Shine of the Gospel*, 124–30.

²⁴John Eliot and Thomas Mayhew, Jr., *Tears of Repentance: Or, a Further Narrative of the Progress of the Gospel Amongst the Indians in New-England: Setting Forth, Not Only Their Present State and Condition, but Sundry Confessions of Sin by Diverse of the Said Indians* (London, 1653), in Clark, ed., *Eliot Tracts*, 269; Eliot, *A Further Account*, 372, 365–66. There are many mentions of time-based observances in the confessions. See Eliot and Mayhew, *Tears of Repentance*; John Eliot, *A Late and Further Manifestation of the Progress of the Gospel Amongst Indians in New England . . . Being a Narrative of the Examinations of the Indians, About Their Knowledge in Religion, by the Elders of the Churches* (London, 1655); and Eliot, *A Further Account*.