Graduate Classes to High School Classrooms: A Collection of Lesson Plans Aimed at Teaching History Graduate Content to High Schoolers

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Recommended Citation
Taylor, Christopher, "Graduate Classes to High School Classrooms: A Collection of Lesson Plans Aimed at Teaching History Graduate Content to High Schoolers" (2023). All Graduate Plan B and other Reports, Spring 1920 to Spring 2023. 1702.
https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/gradreports/1702

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French and English Missionization Among Native Americans: The Complexity of Conversion

When Europeans first landed in North America a variety of factors drove early colonists to establish new homes. For many, the focus was on extracting wealth from local indigenous tribes, growing cash crops, or gaining the rights to new land in an open frontier. Droves of white settlers appeared all over the coastline planting flags in the name of their God and country. In the midst of this wave of colonialism, one group that has an intriguing role in the history of European and Native interactions are Christian missionaries. French Jesuits spread across the Canadian frontier, and typically hostile Protestants branched out from the New England colonies. In either situation, once both groups had established a sense of stability, they sent out missionaries to spread the message of Christianity to Native groups. The ultimate goal of missionization was the conversion of Natives. For Europeans this often signified a rejection of former beliefs and adoption of new traditions. For most Natives, the idea of conversion to Christianity focused more on a calculated adoption of religious beliefs and only rarely a rejection of Native tradition. What piqued their interest in Christianity centered primarily on alliances, land rights, education, social status, and access to spiritual power. Not only did Native “conversion” impact the Native societies but it also led to a growing indigenization of Christianity that developed.

One central goal for Natives when they converted to Christianity was to gain access to new alliances. It quickly became apparent that these new colonizers were different from the Native groups who they had run up against in the past. They had access to new technology and goods, the likes of which had never been experienced in the American continent. Guns, horses, medicine, all of it could bring advantages to Natives that gained access to these precious commodities. According to Tracy Leavelle, groups like the Illinois tribe converted in large numbers to Catholicism to add a new dimension to their relationship. Chief Chicagou equated
calumet ceremonies to new diplomatic and military alliances.¹ Many tribes experienced violence at the hands of Native groups that already had access to new weapons, or had suffered due to Western born epidemics. These losses encouraged Natives to seek alliances to help level the playing field. Leavelle demonstrates that this feeling was mirrored by others including the Wendots and Ottawas who adopted Christianity to strengthen the trade relations and alliance with the French.² Allan Greer confirms this focus on alliance building for Natives in his work Mohawk Saint. He states that groups like the Iroquois gravitated to the French to gain access to their power.³

This was not just a tactic of the French Catholics. Similarly, Native groups sided with British protestants for the same purpose. David Silverman examines the motives for conversion of Wampanoag Indians in Martha’s Vineyard in Faith and Boundaries. He likewise agrees that they used Christianity as a diplomatic cloak to maintain traditional beliefs and customs.⁴ At times, the alliance was not just for trade advantage, but to unite with white settlers who had access to power. Silverman argues that Christianity was the gateway between Natives and the English that was indispensable to their coexistence.⁵ Their union gave “praying Indians” improved status that allowed them to survive amidst the horrors of King Philip’s War and its aftermath.⁶ When Thomas Mayhew Jr. first encountered the Wampanoag on the island their reception to Christianity was tepid, but this changed as new threats emerged and Indians associated with Christianity for protection from outsiders.

² Ibid., 35-36, 145.
³ Allan Greer, Mohawk Saint:Catherine Tekakwitha and the Jesuits (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 107.
⁵ Ibid., 276.
⁶ Ibid., 9.
Another factor in conversion was access to education that could benefit Natives temporarily. Linford Fisher emphasizes the access to education as another factor in Native conversion in *The Indian Great Awakening*. During early contact with the Narragansetts, protestant missionaries found that they preferred education of their youth than sermons for their adults. Indeed, he feels that evangelistic attempts would have come to nothing had it not been for Native interest in education, especially a desire for improved literacy. Beyond its educational value, sending children to mission schools usually brought back material goods as well. Natives recognized that learning to read and write in English strengthened the relations they had with whites and gave them an advantage in the future. Silverman explains that Western education helped equip Natives with the tools to exploit legal technicalities to save their land and protect themselves against eager land speculators.

Another key point for Native conversion relied on gaining increased access to land. Greer states that conversion was tied to the ability to preserve tribal lands. Many native groups understood that those that did not improve their relations with white settlers typically ended up removed by force overtime. With land being such an integral part of many Native groups' cultural and religious identity, it was important for them to make concessions in order to maintain what territory they could. Silverman mentions that for the Wampanoag tribe, part of the choice of conversion to Christianity was tied to keeping some of their homeland vs having none of it at all. Becoming “praying Indians” gave them a stronger voice in maintaining their access to land. After gaining a basic Western education through Christian ties, Wampanoag Indians were even able to message King George and petition their right to land. They claimed that they should be allowed to maintain their control so they could demonstrate the power of Christianity

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8 Ibid., 43.
10 Greer, *Mohawk Saint*, 50.
in “civilizing” Native groups.\textsuperscript{12} Clearly, they were playing to the desires of the King and other Christians in this regard, but it demonstrates their understanding that religion had secular benefits attached as well. Natives were willing to make tough compromises to preserve what land they could, and religious conversion usually factored into this equation.

One particular group that saw an added benefit to conversion in Native populations were women. Gender roles differed from tribe to tribe in the Americas. Some tribes allowed women to earn elevated status and power while others established principally patriarchal communities. Leavelle argues that one of the alluring principles that led to religious experimentation for many female Natives was the empowerment of women.\textsuperscript{13} One example he uses to demonstrate this idea comes through Marie Rousena. An Illinois Native, Marie was able to stall marriage proposals, convert her family, and reactivate her white husband to Christianity. Her dedication to Christianity allowed her added support from missionaries and a chance to act as intermediary between her tribe and other white settlers. She did not need to abandon one group for another, rather, she combined elements of each to establish balance within her community.\textsuperscript{14} Greer offers another example to support this claim with Catherine Tekakwitha. Catherine was concerned about marriage and hoped to avoid it altogether if possible. Even though Mohawk women could divorce their husbands and have a say in marriage proposals, there was still a lot of pressure on her to marry. Once she joined Christianity, she was able to find her escape. She claimed that she wanted to become a nun and join a convent and bind herself to Jesus alone.\textsuperscript{15} She later develops a friendship with another female convert named Marie. The two of them run off to the woods together and explore the limits of Christian power on their own terms. They experimented with extreme measures of asceticism such as beds of thorns, whippings, and

\textsuperscript{12} Silverman, \textit{Faith and Boundaries}, 176.
\textsuperscript{13} Leavelle, \textit{The Catholic Calumet}, 171.
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 157, 190.
\textsuperscript{15} Greer, \textit{Mohawk Saint}, 45.
burning coals all in an effort to gain access to spiritual power. They both felt empowered that they could do this on their own as female followers. Among protestants, Fisher argues that women explored Christianity especially during the Great Awakening when they felt that finally people were giving notice and place to often marginalized groups like women and slaves.

Secular support was not the only reason why Natives interacted with Christian missionaries. Missionization also brought access to new spiritual power. Native Americans had a traditionally adaptable religious mindset. While each group may have new names for God, each frequently sought after new rituals or ceremonies that would give them access to additional spiritual power. When new diseases such as smallpox wiped out entire villages, many Natives were intrigued by Christian claims of healing. Leavelle believes that many Natives in the Midwest wanted to see what power this new Jesus could add to their pantheon of spirits. Silverman relates a story of one sachem named Tawanquatuck whose boy was healed after missionaries administered to him. After the miracle he converted to gain access to this new manit or spiritual power. They believed that conversion could transform individuals into conduits of these spiritual forces called manitou. This feeling is supported by stories of missionaries like James Fitch and Claude Allouez. Healing power was particularly desirable and before missionaries found success among the Natives, it was expected that they display their spiritual power in a miraculous way. Fisher argues that this helps account for rises and falls in Native activity within Christian groups.

In many respects, Christian rituals seemed like familiar journeys for spiritual power found in Native American culture. Greer believes that one of the main reasons Catherine embraced Christian ideas like flagellation and extreme ascetic practices was because of how closely they

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16 Greer, *Mohawk Saint.*, 133, 143.
mirrored certain Mohawk traditions. Mohawks routinely used self-hardening practices of violence, like burning and exposure to the cold, to toughen the physical body and tune spiritual senses. Leavelle also sees Native similarity between Native and Christian rituals, especially among Catholics, who emphasized ritual and ceremony. The recitation of prayer, fasting rituals, heavenly dreams and religious songs all found a familiar place in Native culture. Silverman says it was this quest for new Christian power that fostered such energy and devotion at various times among Christian Natives. However, believing that Christianity offered new power does not necessitate the rejection of traditional forms of power. Natives believed they could draw upon both. Adding Christian teachings simply augmented their own spiritual paradigm.

Even if Natives did not feel compelled to reject previous traditions in order to accept new beliefs of Christianity, they still did make compromises to accommodate Christian standards. For Westerners, the ideal conversion dissolved one indigenous mindset in order to embrace an entirely new Christian one. This transformation was hardly ever the reality. Not only did Natives rarely abandon one life for another, but they usually molded or indigenized Christian missionaries and ideas in the process. What evolved from most Native missionization was a hybrid form of Native Christianity. Silverman put it this way, “They worshiped in distinctly Indian ways through innumerable subtle innovations. This ‘indigenization’ of Christianity forced Englishman to confront that ‘conversion’ was not a leap across a gulf but a series of sprints, half steps and hesitations.” They created something that fit within the Indian mold that already defined them. While some Christians were more accommodating than others, all of them accepted various degrees and stages of conversion. In Silverman’s work, he argues that one of the primary reasons that Martha’s Vineyard was able to produce a longstanding presence

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22 Greer, *Mohawk Saint*, 116-120.
among the Wampanoag was because missionaries like Thomas Mayhew Jr. respected Native culture and was tolerant of variances Natives adopted in conversion. In order to make Christianity knowable to the Wampanoag, Mayhew filtered Christian teachings through Wampanoag truths. This process of religious translation enabled Mayhew to associate God as the wellspring of Native Manit or spiritual power.\textsuperscript{27} These small adoptions of Native beliefs helped ease the process of conversion. The Indians were not simply acted upon, but were at times agents that chose to adopt Christianity on their own terms, guiding the “evangelical pen” at times to frame Christianity in Native culture.\textsuperscript{28} A great testament to this is the pile of sacrifice rocks that continues to mark the spot where Thomas Mayhew, their beloved missionary, gave his final speech.\textsuperscript{29} Sacrifice rocks are pillars of rocks placed in a pile to commemorate and remind members of the Wampanoag of sacred moments and people. By commemorating the life of Mayhew in a distinctly Native ritual echoes this point that the two ideas were not exclusive. It marks a convergence of ideas often associated with Native conversions.

Another example of this indigenization of Christianity is found in Fisher’s work on the Native Great Awakening. Fisher believes that successful missionization was not a totalizing cultural transformation, but a careful and selective engagement to meet community needs and desires.\textsuperscript{30} One of Fisher’s most compelling examples to support this theory comes from a quote by Samson Occom, a famous Native convert. Many saw Samson as a truly devout Christian, and he was, but this did not mean that he was not also devoted to his heritage at the same time. He explained his own conversion with an anecdote of someone taking a knife and changing out the blade and then the handle overtime when it wore out. Even when components of the knife were swapped out Occom maintained that it was still the same knife, the functions of the knife remained the same. Fisher believes this metaphor proves that Indians had a long history of

\textsuperscript{27} Ibid., 33.
\textsuperscript{28} Ibid., 58.
\textsuperscript{29} Ibid., 245.
\textsuperscript{30} Fisher, The Indian Great Awakening, 57.
incorporating and swapping in new ideas without intending to drop or remove existing ones.\textsuperscript{31} He gives another good example with an independent Narragansett church. It had a native preacher, performed their own religious rituals, but functioned outside the control of Euro-American power and with Indian Separatist tendencies and unorthodox theology.\textsuperscript{32} It met the needs of its congregation in a distinctly indigenous way.

This indigenization was not just a product of Native and Protestant dealings but surfaced among Catholic missionization as well. Leavelle dedicates an entire chapter to the complexity of scriptural translation. While trying to teach Natives in the Midwest, missionaries were encouraged to learn Native dialects and translate biblical passages into the Native vernacular. This posed a serious challenge. How would missionaries translate words such as “sin” or the “trinity” to a people that have no word for such ideas? The result was an indigenized version of the scriptures.\textsuperscript{33} In the process of making Christian concepts understandable they created something that was distinctly Native just like Silverman’s concept of religious translation among the Wampanoag. Greer refers to the Jesuits missionaries as “cultural chameleons.”\textsuperscript{34} Dedicated Christians that were not afraid to merge Christian concepts with Native practices if it meant greater understanding and acceptance.

In conclusion, Native conversion was more complex than the limited understanding of Western conversion. It was multi-purposed, oftentimes a reciprocal exchange of one’s beliefs for secular support. It involved the promise of education, access to new kinships with white settlers, and the hope of land preservation. At times it was used to elevate one’s status in society. It involved experimentation with and search for new spiritual power. It is true that several Native converts did come to believe and accept many Christian principles, but this acceptance did not necessitate a rejection of their Native identity. Quite the contrary, it usually led to an

\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., 88.
\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., 115.
\textsuperscript{33} Leavelle, \textit{The Catholic Calumet}, 103-108.
\textsuperscript{34} Greer, \textit{Mohawk Saint}, 83.
indigenization of Christianity that met the needs and goals of the people who accepted it. It was a two-way exchange that impacted all parties involved in meaningful ways.

Bibliography


