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### **The Great Awakening and Native American Assimilation**

The First and Second Great Awakening had an extremely significant impact on Native American culture and religions. The Great Awakening caused the revitalization of religion among Americans which led to the desire to spread Christianity throughout the country. One of the government's primary goals after the War of 1812 was to have a single homogenous culture in the U.S. The government viewed Native American assimilation as being necessary to complete this goal (O'Brien 72). Native American boarding schools, established in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, were products of Americans wanting to forcefully assimilate Native American children into Christianity. Many influential preachers during this time took mission trips across the country in an attempt to introduce Christianity to Native Americans and gain their support of the church. Native Americans had many cultural practices that were influenced and suppressed by Christianity. Although there were significant efforts to assimilate Native Americans during this time, they found a way to survive and preserve what they still had of their culture. This project seeks to illustrate the potent and profound connection between the First and Second Great Awakening and the suppression of traditional Native American cultures and religion.

Throughout the First and Second Great Awakening there were many attempts made by Christians in America to assimilate Native Americans into Christianity. The mass movements to convert Native Americans first began in the 1700's with the emergence of the First Great

Awakening, and raged throughout the 18th and 19th centuries. Christians during this time were intent on spreading the Gospel and converting as many people as they could into Christianity. There were many tactics taken to assimilate Native Americans, such as missionaries going into Native American tribes to preach and make conversion efforts. There were also many laws put into place to assimilate Native Americans, including boarding schools for Native American children in which they were forcefully converted. There have been many efforts over time by the Church to assimilate Native Americans, but these efforts were especially prominent and common during this period of religious revitalization (Kidd).

White missionaries in the First Great Awakening, such as Johnathan Edwards, George Whitfield, and John and David Brainerd, attempted to convert Native Americans to save them from an eternity in hell, but also to gain their support of the Christian religion (Kidd). Benjamin Colman sent a letter to George Whitfield in 1742 that stated that among the Mokeag, Pequot, Niantick, and other tribes of the stubborn, and resistant Indians, a general concern has come upon them for their souls direction and salvation (Kidd 189). This Christianization during 1670-1770 resulted in Native Americans establishing a hybrid of European Christian practices and traditional Native American cultures (Winiarski).

During the Second Great Awakening, Native Americans viewed conversion as being necessary for survival. One very prominent figure in the Second Great Awakening was a Native American Methodist preacher named William Apess. Apess, throughout his time as an unlicensed preacher, observed that Native Americans cannot truly fit in with white Christianity because of how traditional Methodist churches are catered to white people. He then retreated to the backwoods and observed how traditional Native American cultures embody Christianity in different ways as a form of cultural survival (Brown). As a Native American missionary, Apess

embodied both the conflicts and the hopes of assimilation that emerged during the Second Great Awakening. Apses emerged as a paradoxical symbol of both cultural survival and cultural extinction during this time (Brown 196).

Many Native Americans throughout the First and Second Great Awakening were forcefully assimilated into Christianity. For example, throughout the Second Great Awakening, Christian leaders such as Sherman Coolidge and Rev. John Rodgers took forceful measures to convert the Native Americans of the Arapaho and Shoshone tribes. The Native Americans were forced to conform with western civilization. They were taught the gospel and were banned from practicing their cultural and religious traditions and ceremonies (Duncombe).

Missionaries throughout the First and Second Great Awakening persisted in their conversion efforts of Native Americans. There was some resistance among Native Americans throughout this time period that was eventually suppressed by the government (O'Brien). Overall Native Americans worked to assimilate into white ideals, but in the process lost significant parts of their native culture and religions (Brown). The Christian religion is the biggest influence in the suppression of Native Americans. Over time many different religions have been exploited by people who spread Christianity, "... the countries of Christian Europe have been faced with massive opportunities for exploitation of peoples less powerful and technically less advanced than themselves; and they grasped their opportunities" (Flannery 1). Since the colonization of America Christians have been taking advantage of Native Americans and actively oppressing them.

Many laws have been passed by the United States government with the purpose of restricting Native Americans from practicing any part of their native religions or culture. These laws were put into place with the goal of oppressing Native Americans and forcing their

conversion into Christianity. They have had a profound effect on Native American lives and religions up to the present day. The government during this time pursued a dual policy of apartheid and assimilation but ultimately utilized an assimilation tactic (Bucko). This was especially true in the 1880's when churches and the government cooperated to undergo vicious assimilation campaigns against Native Americans (Bucko 75). These government policies made it extremely clear that the only two options for Native Americans were assimilation or removal (O'Brien 71).

The government viewed Native American assimilation as being necessary to complete the goal of having a singular, homogeneous culture in the U.S. Consequently, in 1819 the Indian Civilization Fund Act was passed. This was one of the many laws enacted to assimilate Native Americans during the Second Great Awakening. This act provided funds to missionaries to support their efforts of "civilizing" Native Americans, including establishing missions and funding boarding schools to forcefully convert Native American children into Anglo-American culture (O'Brien 72). This law is direct proof that the U.S Government had no regard for Native American wellbeing and culture, and was willing to give large amounts of money to support cultural genocide among Native Americans.

The Indian boarding school policy had an astonishing effect on Native American life from the time that it was enacted up to the present day. Boarding schools were first chartered in the 1870's with the intention of removing Native American children from their homes and forcefully placing them into boarding schools with the purpose of teaching them English, Christianity, and Euro-American culture (O'Brien 75). The children in the boarding schools were restricted from practicing any elements of their native culture or speaking their native language and the children faced frequent abuse (NARF "Vol. 38"). Giago, a survivor of boarding schools

for Native Americans, discussed the brutal abuse that went on in these boarding schools and the forceful assimilation that these children faced,“ ‘We were separated from our cultural and spiritual teachers, our parents and grandparents,” Giago writes. “We were beaten physically, psychologically and emotionally for being Indian. Our culture, language and spirituality had to be stripped away so that we could become cheap imitations of our mentors, the Franciscan nuns and Jesuit priests, prefects and brothers’ ”(Vecsey 175). The Indian boarding school policy was essentially a cultural genocide (NARF vol. 38). It resulted in loss of culture in entire generations which left lasting scars on the Native community which are still healing (O’Brien). There have been many efforts towards making reparations in terms of education for Native American children. In 1971, the Native American Rights Fund joined with the Harvard Center for Law to provide a two year program to provide research and legal assistance to any Native American who was seeking to improve the quality of education that was available to Native Americans (NARF “Vol.1”).

Laws put into place to specifically restrict Native Americans and their religions and cultures have been prominent since the colonization of America, but became significantly more distinguished during the First and Second Great Awakenings. This is because of the consistent desire of American Christians to popularize their religion and forcefully spread it throughout the United States. The laws put into place by the U.S government during this time significantly devastated Native American land, languages, and their physical, social, and spiritual well being (O’Brien). Because of these significant social injustices faced by Native Americans, many seek to heal. This can be done in many ways, but many Native Americans choose not to partake in patriotic traditions that honor American values because of the way that America has disgraced them (Robert).

Native Americans throughout the First and Second Great Awakenings have established very unique and specific cultural practices. These practices are often hybrids of Christianity and Native American traditions that date back to before the colonization of America. Many post-Columbian religious traditions come from the frustration that developed in Native Americans after colonization. This frustration, felt by Native American tribes across America, was the right climate for a religious revitalization. Looking for a solution, Native Americans usually reverted to the “old ways,” participated in many spiritual practices, and abstained from accepting or consuming any food or equipment coming from white people. The promised result from this was the disappearance of white people and the return of the “old life.” This was hoped to be achieved through war or magic (Underhill).

One of the primary religious practices used by Native Americans is the Peyote religion. The Peyote religion is built around the Peyote cactus. The Peyote cactus had the power to produce vivid hallucinations and it became a backbone for many traditional Native American religious practices. The Peyote religion is an ethical doctrine that shares many key elements with Christianity. Peyotists claim that Christ came to whites while Peyote came to Native Americans. The ceremony which is centered around Peyote use and is the cornerstone of the Peyote religion shares many similarities with Protestant prayer meetings (Underhill 136).

Native Americans throughout time have sought to define themselves as independent, while also needing to assimilate to white ideals to be able to survive. For example, the Cherokee Nation were taking actions to define themselves. As this was happening, the *Cherokee Phoenix* (a Cherokee run newspaper) establishes that these ideas were originally created and promoted by the United States, which was done to appeal and assimilate to white ideals. This was in an effort to reinforce the idea (held by the newspaper's white readers) that the United States was a superior

governing authority which would generate support for the Cherokees national sovereignty claims. Overall, Native Americans had to assimilate into white ideals through their writing by forming their rules, constitution, and language around the United States (Holt).

In conclusion, Native Americans have been penalized by Christainity since the colonization of America. There have been many laws that we can identify that had an intense negative impact on Native Americans, but it is harder to pinpoint the lasting effects of these laws on Native American life. By identifying how Christainity had an effect on the laws put into place to damage and restrict Native Americans, personal efforts to convert Native Americans, and traditional Native American cultural practices, one can gain a true understanding of how the time period of the First and Second Great Awakenings had a profound impact on Native Americans. The rampant spread of Christainity lead to the feeling of assimilation for survival among Native Americans. While the effects of Christainity on Native Americans are still prominent today, many Native Americans have succeeded in maintaining many of their cultural practices and surviving throughout a period of intense subjection.

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