

November 30, 2023

TO: UUSA Common Read Book Group

The following essay was written to help us prepare for our third and final meeting of the Common Read book group on **Tuesday, December 5 at 7:00pm [by zoom](#)**. Please read the essay below in addition to re-reading chapter five in *Repentance and Repair* (start on page 132 if you don't have much time) in advance of the meeting.

We will use both the story of "America's Original Sin" (below) and reparations work in South Africa from the book (in chapter five) to practice using Maimonides' five steps of Repentance and Repair. The five steps are:

1. naming and owning the harm
2. starting the process of change (and stop causing harm)
3. accepting consequences, making amends, and restitution
4. the apology (only after real effort has been undertaken)
5. making different choices in the future

Please read the following essay in preparation for our zoom meeting on Tuesday. Think specifically about two questions;

1. *What was the harm done by our religious ancestors?* and
2. *As Unitarian Universalists, do we have any responsibility for this harm?*

Excerpts from this essay will be shared during our meeting, but it is important that you read the entire text in advance. And..... if you would like to comment on this document, you can highlight the text you want to refer to and click the + sign that shows up on the right side of the page to add a comment.

Repentance and Repair for America's Original Sin

"We Christians, in fact – British and American – were the ones who decided that we couldn't do to Indigenous people and kidnapped Africans what we were doing if they were indeed people made in the image of God. So, we said they weren't. They weren't humans made in the image of God. What we did is we threw away Imago Dei. We threw it away to justify what we're doing... white supremacy was America's original sin...."

The Reverend Jim Wallace in *"America's Original Sin. Racism, White Privilege and the Bridge to a New America."*

According to the UUA, the religious movement that evolved into both the Unitarian and Universalist denominations began with the "Cambridge Platform of Church Discipline" signed

by English settlers in Dedham, MA in 1649.¹ This platform described a system of church self-governance based on ecclesiastical sovereignty, free from hierarchical control by a central church authority, that continues to guide congregational churches of New England (including Unitarian Universalists) to this day. Chapter 17 of the Cambridge Platform affirms that the government should punish idolatry, blasphemy, heresy, and "the venting of corrupt and pernicious opinions". This position gave the colonial government license to punish indigenous people who were generally viewed as "corrupt and pernicious".

The congregationalist churches of New England were held together by a covenant that required devotion to God and mutual responsibility to other members of the church community. What was clear from the beginning was that Native peoples were not included within the covenant. Efforts to "save the Indians" during the 17th and 18th centuries were mixed with the violent removal of indigenous peoples from the land they had occupied for millennia. There was little trust between the Europeans and even the most compliant "Praying Indians" who were said to have experienced "*a spiritual transformation from heathenism toward civilization that made them more like Englishmen.*" Nevertheless, the general narrative espoused from congregationalist pulpits during the 17th and 18th centuries presented Native peoples as "*permanently barbaric and cut off from God's salvation.*"²

One example was the Reverend John Eliot, pastor of the Roxbury, MA congregation, who was known as the "apostle to the Indians" for his genuine attempt to bring indigenous peoples into covenant with English settlers. According to American Indian scholar George Tinker, Eliot was blinded by his belief in the superiority of white culture and contributed to the systemic conquest and genocide of Native peoples as much as the vigilante groups of settler colonialists and the British military.³

The deep roots that our religious ancestors had into the project of erasure and oppression of Native Peoples was thoroughly documented in 1936 by the Reverend Samuel A. Eliot II, president of the American Universalist Association. Speaking to the Commonwealth Club of San Francisco, Reverend Eliot told the story of the "*of the oldest missionary society of American origin*", **the Society for Propagating the Gospel among the Indians and Others in North America.**⁴

This Society was established in 1787 by twenty-one well-regarded leaders and active members of the Boston church community. According to Eliot "*...they were, intellectually and politically and ecclesiastically, of the same type. Most of them were Harvard graduates of the thirty years between 1747 and 1777. Of this group, four ministers were the prime movers in the organization of the Society.*"⁴

The Reverend Samuel A. Eliot suggested that the relationship between Native peoples and the dominant white society had gone through various stages over the years from an attitude that Indians were dangerous, to becoming a problem, and later to a mere nuisance. Eliot wrote that the people of his own day (the 1930's) came to realize that they had "*...some responsibility for these primitive people.*" And further that a "*...practical and vocational*

school program must fit him to take his part in the industrial and social life of the community.”⁴ Toward this end, the American Unitarian Association supported Indian boarding schools in Montana, Minnesota, and Colorado that forcefully assimilated nearly 4,000 indigenous children. From the efforts of John Eliot to “civilize the Indian” in the 17th century to the establishment of the boarding schools in the 19th and 20th centuries, the overall impact of our religious ancestors' work was harmful.

UU Minister, the Reverend Jill Cowie, in a November 2017 sermon, stated that “*the intellectual, moral, and spiritual justification for European colonization and slavery*” was rooted in the teachings of the Christian church and were “...*used by our Protestant ancestors of the Mass Bay Colony and the Virginia colony to justify the subjugation of indigenous people in this country... a conquest that led to multiple broken treaties, the trail of tears, the formation of over 300 reservations, mandatory boarding schools, cultural obliteration, and genocide.*”⁵

In an attempt to acknowledge the harm that was done, delegates at the 2020 General Assembly of the UUA⁶ boldly stated that:

...the Pilgrims' invasion of the Wampanoag people led to the enslavement of Indigenous peoples on the East Coast and the removal of and genocide against Indigenous peoples across the continent;

... many Unitarian Universalist congregations uncritically trace their origins to the Pilgrims' “Free Church” tradition – a mythos that sanctifies white supremacy and depends upon erasure of Indigenous peoples;⁶

This might be the first step of the work of repentance and repair by Unitarian Universalists toward Native peoples. Nevertheless, the white supremacy culture that was deeply embedded in the churches of our ancestors⁷ remain a powerful force “hidden in plain sight” in Unitarian and Universalist congregations today.⁸ It is unlikely that we will “*accountably dismantle racism and other oppressions in ourselves and our institutions*” as it states in our own Eighth Principle, until we do the necessary repentance and repair work associated with America's original sin.

1. UUA Webpage - [Values in our History](#).
2. Michna, Gregory. [Puritan Sermons and Ministerial Writings on Indians During King Philip's War. Sermon Studies](#) 1.1 (2017): 24-43.
3. Tinker, G. [Missionary Conquest: The Gospel and Native American Cultural Genocide](#). Fortress Press. 1993.
4. Eliot, Samuel A. [A Sketch of the Origins and Work of an Old Massachusetts Society. Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society](#), Third Series, Vol. 66 (Oct., 1936 - May, 1941), pp. 107-125
5. Cowie, J. [Decolonizing Our Faith](#) (a sermon from November 2017) -
6. UUA Webpage. [Address 400 Years of White Supremacist Colonialism- Action of Immediate Witness. 2020](#)
7. Cerrotti, D. [Hidden Genocide: Hidden People](#). Sea Venture Press. 2014.
8. Hewitt, E. & H. de la Fuente, J. [Dismantling White Supremacy Culture in Worship. 2021](#)

Note: for a summary of the current state of Native peoples, please see:

[A Statement on the Current Status of Native Peoples from Food First](#)