

Beechers quote on education sums up his perspective on indian boarding schools es...

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Indian Boarding Schools

After the effective defeat of the Indians and their subjugation in the name of manifest destiny, American reformers (including The Friends of the Indian) sought to “Americanize” Native Americans by refocusing land ownership through allotment of private property as opposed to attributing lands to tribes. Furthermore, boarding schools were created that would re-educate Native Americans in the ways of white, Christian, American life, leading them to abandon their traditional Indian identity in favor of becoming fully assimilated into the US citizenry.

Despite these ostensibly good intentions, however, there were several critics of these boarding schools, who would argue that all this did was to homogenize the Indian people and strip them of what little identity they had left after their lands had been taken away from them. The ethical conflict regarding the morality of these schools can be summarized in the words of Henry Ward Beecher and the Indian chief Sitting Bull, both with their own perspectives on the forcing of American values on Native Americans through these boarding schools.

Both Beecher and Sitting Bull had unique experiences that heavily influenced their stances against Indian boarding schools. Henry Ward Beecher, for example, was a hugely important speaker and social reformer in the 1800s, with substantial support for issues such as the abolition of slavery (his sister, Harriet Beecher Stowe, wrote the highly influential abolitionist novel Uncle Tom’s Cabin) (Beecher, 1885). Having been a huge proponent of social reform, including advocating for temperance and women’s suffrage, and being a strong supporter of the theory of evolution despite being a member

of the clergy himself, it is clear that Beecher was a very forward-thinking man for his day (Beecher, 1885). To that end, it is clear that he would be resistant to efforts to push a decidedly Christian view on an Indian people who grew up with and had developed a uniquely different culture to that of the Americans.

" The common schools are the stomachs of the country in which all people that come to us are assimilated within a generation. When a lion eats an ox, the lion does not become an ox but the ox becomes a lion."

- Henry Ward Beecher

Here, Beecher argues that schools are the primary means by which individuals are indoctrinated into the common culture and its accompanying views. He uses the analogy of a lion eating an ox to symbolize the hegemonic, dominant American Christian ideology of Indian boarding schools literally consuming Indian culture and history. In no way does the Indian culture rub off on the ' lion' of American culture, allowing them to blend into a unified whole, but the Indian must simply become an American, losing everything that he or she was in favor of an ideology that is hammered into their head.

For a more personal perspective on the damaging effects of Indian boarding schools, famed Indian chief Sitting Bull is uniquely opposed to the stifling of his culture. A strong opponent of the American's government policies, he actively led his tribe against imperialist government and military forces that tried to take their land, including his famous victory at the Battle of the Little Bighorn, in which he defeated Col. George Custer's 7th Cavalry (Liberty,

2008). After eventually surrendering to the US military, Sitting Bull eventually made his living as a member of Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show, before being shot in 1890 (Kehoe, 2006). These efforts and more showed him to be a strong, independent leader, a legendary figure, and a strong proponent of maintaining the traditions and culture of the Native American people.

Sitting Bull's criticism of the Indian boarding schools is especially defiant:

" If the Great Spirit had desired me to be a white man he would have made me so in the first place. He put in your heart certain wishes and plans; in my heart he put other and different desires. Each man is good in the sight of the Great Spirit. It is not necessary, that eagles should be crows."

- Sitting Bull (Teton Sioux)

Here, Sitting Bull states that American education of Native Americans goes against everything Indians hold dear, as it involves turning them into a kind of people they were never meant to be. Indians were meant to follow the ' certain wishes and plans' placed in them by the Great Spirit, desires which would be stifled and snuffed out by the assimilatory nature of Indian boarding schools. The difference in fundamental cultures is meant to be celebrated, says Sitting Bull, each perspective being different but equal. By saying that eagles should not be crows, Sitting Bull advocates for the desire to let people be who they are without the need to turn them into something else.

The words of Beecher and Sitting Bull, specifically the consumptive, erasing nature of Indian identity from the Indian people by these Americanized,

Christian-centric boarding schools is clear from the accounts of the experiences of children actually in those boarding schools. Indian boarding schools were a hugely prevalent phenomenon, with almost 75% of Indian children being placed in these boarding schools (Townsend 379). Children were separated from their families, and coerced through “ promises and threats” to attend school and learn the principles they were being taught. By separating these children from their parents, they were robbed of any cultural influence but the Christian American one espoused at the school (Townsend 379). The furthering of sports as an outlet for Indian children made them substitute their teepees for football fields, as one political cartoon in 1906 demonstrated (Townsend 377). The cutting of young boys’ hair and prohibition of speaking their own native language was another method of erasure, as well as removing all of their Indian clothes in favor of a simply gray uniform that made every child just like the other. Through these methods, as Beecher feared, the oxen were becoming lions – by refusing even to acknowledge that the students were Indians, the children were being remade into Christian citizens without a trace of the original Indian left. Of particular use in the reformers’ toolkit for assimilating Native Americans was their efforts to facilitate conversion to Christianity for these Indian youth. The parallels between Christianity and Native American spirituality allowed reformers to simply convert their idea of Wakan Tanka to God, with individuals like George Sword frightened into accepting God because “ in war with the white people I found their Wakan Tanka the superior” (Townsend 375). In this way, the Christian reformers found an efficient way of using the similarities of both spiritualities to fully convert Indians to Christianity, along

with a healthy dose of fear given the superior military might of the white man proving that their God was superior. This implication that one way of life is superior to another is antithetical to Sitting Bull's ideas that both ways of life are equally valid, and should be left up to the individual. Just as Beecher lamented the assimilation of an oppressed culture by another, Sitting Bull loathed the idea of trying to make one type of person something he is not for the sake of sharing ideals and priorities with another group.

Townsend

In conclusion, the Indian boarding schools were largely successful in their efforts, which tragically proved right the words of Henry Ward Beecher and Sitting Bull. These boarding schools seemingly successfully Americanized Native Americans into abandoning their culture and history for the sake of a homogenized identity and a Western focus on Christianity as their primary means of spirituality. Both Beecher and Sitting Bull loathed this idea for two distinct, but similar reasons: Beecher spoke out against it because of the utterly consumptive nature of this indoctrination, noting that the reformers erased who these people were. Sitting Bull, on the other hand, aggressively denounced the efforts of reformers to turn the Indian people into something they were not, stating that the ideal way of life is to follow what is in your individual heart and allow others to do the same.

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