

## **Harvest Home: Grain Imagery in Moravian Hymns and the Mission to the Native Americans**

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Note to Teachers: This lesson would be suited for teachers of History, [Part I], Music [Part II] and German [Parts I and II]

History teachers may use Part I as a component in a teaching unit on Native Americans and the colonists [Moravian mission to Native Americans], while Music teachers could use Part II to show how cultural imperatives influence the type of music prevalent in a given community. German teachers have a separate appendix with the song texts in German.

Part I: Background on the Moravians and the Mission to the Native Americans

Appendix I: Hymn Text on Mission

Appendix II: Chief John Wassmamah's statement to Bethlehem Moravians

Part II: Moravians and Music

Appendix: Hymn texts in German and English

### **Part I: Background on the Moravians and the Mission to the Native Americans**

The Moravian community in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, founded by Count Nicholas von Zinzendorf [1700-1760] was one of a number of German Pietist sects that arose in central Europe in the early 18th century, though the Moravians trace their origins to the pre-Reformation reformer Jan Hus [c. 1369-1415], who was burned at the stake at a conference in Constanz. Pietism stresses personal experience of God and Bible study as opposed to more formal religious expression. Pietists were deeply committed to keeping themselves apart from the temptations of the world and to missionary work.

Harvest imagery was frequent in Moravian hymn texts, in part because of the centrality of grain in the diet. As we have indicated elsewhere, the consumption of potatoes was by no means widespread in the early 18th century, where bread was still a centerpiece of the daily diet. [\[Getting Your Daily Bread\]](#) In addition, bread plays a central role in the Christian communion or Eucharistic service because of Christ's commandment to break bread and drink the cup in memory of his death through crucifixion.

Another aspect of harvest that had parallels in church teaching was the saving of the good grain; this concept appears in one of the most interesting texts in a 1740 Moravian hymnal that referred to the Moravians' mission to Native Americans. The Moravians were among the first colonists enjoined by their leaders to treat the Native Americans as complete equals. As the Moravians prepared to enter William Penn's new colony, Count Zinzendorf prepared his ideas for a union of the Moravian Brethren with the Native Americans, calling it "The Indian-German Commonwealth." Implementation began immediately, as the Moravians settled about 70 miles north of Philadelphia, in a region known as the Forks of the Delaware, present-day Bethlehem. The Moravians went to

live among the Native Americans, to learn their languages, and to minister to individual members of the native population. Because they treated the Native Americans as equals, they were more successful in their conversions than other groups.<sup>1</sup> Nor were they interested in numbers: Zinzendorf himself warned against choosing quick expansion as a goal.<sup>2</sup> The Moravians' principle of trying to help the Native Americans survive as Native Americans aroused much antagonism from the authorities, as well as from white interest groups who wanted the lands on which the Native Americans lived. The Moravians wanted to heal the psychological wounds and the physical misery of the native peoples and bring them to Christianity.<sup>3</sup> The church cemetery [God's Acre] at the Central Moravian Church in Bethlehem contains the graves of a number of the early Native American converts, who are buried alongside the German Moravians.

By 1740, the time when the first Moravian missionary, Christian Henry Rauch, arrived in New York state, many native Americans were in a sorry state. Over a century after the arrival of the Pilgrims at Plymouth Rock, the vast wilderness whose resources had seemed inexhaustible was already showing signs of depletion due to the fur trade and other kinds of hunting. Intensive European agriculture had destroyed the type of traditional horticulture practiced by the Native Americans, who found it nearly impossible to change their methods of cultivation. Due to these changes in the land, Native Americans found it difficult to support themselves; in addition, the introduction of alcohol as well as of new diseases by the European settlers had had a devastating effect. As a result, the Mahicans whom Rauch encountered living in the village of Shekomeko were desperately poor. Rauch met with much hostility from both Europeans and suspicious Native Americans about his intentions to begin a mission, but other Mahicans welcomed him, saying that they would be very happy if someone would care enough for them to live among them and help them out of their difficulties.<sup>4</sup>

## **Part II: Music and the Moravians**

In contrast to the Lutherans [Reformation sect named after Martin Luther [1483-1546], who supported a synthesis between the teachings of the Church and secular cultural life, as long as that life did not include practices expressly forbidden in the Bible, the Moravians and other Pietists drew strict lines of separation between themselves and

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<sup>1</sup>Henry Warner Bowden, American Indians and Christian Missions [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981]. p. 157. See also Paul Larson, Early Bethlehem and the Native Americans [Oaks Printing: Bethlehem, PA, 1987].

See J. Taylor Hamilton and Kenneth G. Hamilton. History of the Moravian Church [New York, 1967], pp.91-93 & 134-137.

<sup>2</sup>Kenneth G. Hamilton, The Bethlehem Diary: Volume I-1742-1744 [Bethlehem, Pa.: The Archive of the Moravian Church, 1971]. p. 106.

<sup>3</sup>Karl-Wilhelm Westmeier, The Evacuation of Shekomeko and the early Moravian Missions to Native North Americans [Edwin Mellon Press: Lewiston, 1994] Studies in the History of Missions, Vol. 12, pp. 47-48.

<sup>4</sup>Westmeier, Shekomeko, pp. 39-45.

worldly activities, so that they would not be corrupted and so that others would recognize them as different. Faculty and students with strong Mennonite and Amish populations in the area will immediately see some similarities.

However, there was a general feeling among many Moravians, especially Count Zinzendorf, that music belonged in their religious life and they cultivated music, not only singing, but also playing of wind instruments and more formal church music performed by a choir . By the time the Moravians reached Pennsylvania, they had developed a vigorous song culture in their services. This practice had a long gestation period: Philip Jakob Spener, the Lutheran generally credited with founding the Pietist movement in the seventeenth-century German lands, had strongly supported the use of hymnals; Lutherans had had a vigorous tradition of music in church since their founding.

The spiritual song, or hymn, was easily understood by all church members, regardless of their educational background; it spread the theological teachings of the church in a way that all could understand. In addition, there was no need of a formal clerical structure to sing a hymn; everyone could do it, as opposed to Gregorian chant, the music of the Catholic church in the Middle Ages, which was performed by the clergy. A hymn served as the springboard to personal meditation and prayer, which served the Pietist practice of experiencing God in an intimate and often emotional way. Members memorized many of the hymns and often spent part of every day in communal song. The practice of the "Singstunde" [Singing Hour] traveled all over the world with Moravian missionaries.

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## **Part I Appendix I: Moravian Hymn with Plea for Mission to Native Americans, Die Litaney der Brüder Gemeinen, 1740**

German Text:

“Treue arbeiter in deine ernte senden”

Du kirche mit der kleinen kraft, gebrauch dich deiner samlungsgnaden,  
der Geist, der die gemeinen schafft, der hat dich ja dazu geladen:  
es öffnet dis und jenes feld auch drüben in der neuen welt,  
du solst für ihn zur beute kriege Barbaren, die kein hunger zwingt,  
die weder schlag noch stoß durchdringt, die sol das Wort vom kreuz besigen.

Hier zeigt sich nun die grosse Thür, die vor uns offen ist gegeben,  
der heiden fülle bricht herfür, die todten beine sollen leben:  
Scheint diese ernte was zu groß? Gemeine, denke an das los  
der großen scharen evangelisten...

English Translation:

“Send faithful workers for your *harvest*”

You, church with little might, make use of your gift for gathering souls.  
The Spirit who created the congregations has certainly invited you to that task.  
He opens *this and that field*, even across the ocean in the New World.  
You should get for him as a prize barbarians whom no hunger forces, whom neither  
push nor thrust disturbs, the word of the cross should gain the victory over them.

Here we see now the great door, which has been opened for us,  
The masses of heathens break forth, the dead bones should live:  
Does this *harvest* seem too large?  
Brothers and sisters, think on the prizes won by the host of evangelists...

## **Part I Appendix II: Chief John Wassmamapah’s statement to Bethlehem Moravians**

Job Wassamapah, a chief in the Mahican village of Shekomeko near the Hudson river north of New York City, was one of the early converts of Christian Heinrich Rauch, who was commissioned in 1739 by a synod of the Moravian and Bohemian Brethren Church to do missionary work among Native Americans in the state of New York. The following statement is a transcription of his remarks to Moravians in Bethlehem a few years after his conversion in 1740.

“Brethren, I have been a heathen and have grown old among the heathen; therefore, I know how heathen think. Once a preacher came and began to explain to us that there was a God. We answered, ‘Dost thou think us so ignorant as not to know that? Go back to the place from whence thou camest.’ Then again another preacher came and began to teach us, and to say, ‘Thou must not steal, nor lie, nor get drunk, &c.’ We answered, ‘Thou fool, dost thou think that we don’t know that? Learn first thyself, and then teach the people to whom thou belongest, to leave off these things.

For who steals, or lies, or who is more drunken than thine own people?" And thus we dismissed him. After some time, Brother Christian Henry Rauch came into my hut, and sat down by me. He spoke to me nearly as follows, 'I come to you in the name of the Lord of heaven and earth. He sends me to let you know that he will make you happy and deliver you from [the] misery in which you lie at present. To this end he became a man, gave his life a ransom for man, and shed his blood for him, &c. &c.' When he had finished his discourse, he lay down upon a board, fatigued by the journey, and fell into a sound sleep. I then thought, 'What kind of man is this? There he lies and sleeps. I might kill him and throw him out into the woods, and who would regard it? But this gives him no concern.' However, I could not forget his words. They constantly recurred to my mind. Even when I was sleeping, I dreamt of that blood which Christ shed for us. I found this to be something different from what I had ever heard, and I interpreted Christian Henry's words to the other Indians. Thus through the grace of God, an awakening took place amongst us. I say therefore, Brethren, preach Christ our Saviour and his suffering and death, if you would have your words to gain entrance among the heathen.

Westmeier, K., Shekomeko, pp. 39-46 [Text, pp. 45-46.]

## **Part II Appendix: Hymn texts in German and English**

1. Doch Jesus betrachtet uns unkraut als weizen,  
weil ihm das künftige bekant, deßwegen  
so häuft er sein dringen und reizen, bis wir uns endlich umgewandt.  
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Yet Jesus considers us, weeds though we are, as wheat, because what is coming is known to him; so he piles up his urgent pleas and appeals, until we come round.

2. Weizen-körner, unkrauts-dörner hier beysammen müssen stehen,  
dort wird scheiden Gott die beyden, wenn die erndte wird angehen.  
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Wheat grains, weeds' thorns must stand together here. There God will divide the two when the harvest comes.

Herrnhüter Gesangbuch von 1735: Von Gottes Wesen, Offenbarung und Eigenschaften

3. Er starb für Euch in eurer Noth, der theure ehedatte,  
und teigte euch zu einem brot, das nicht viel körner hatte.

He died for you in your distress, the dear spouse,  
and kneaded you to a loaf with few grains [i.e. the grains realized their potential in that they were ground into flour for bread].

4. Mein Heiland, ich muß sehen,  
dein volk zu tische gehen,  
zu essen von dem brot,  
das du zu unserem leben  
aus liebe hergegeben.

My Saviour, I must see your people to the table, to eat the bread that you gave out of  
love for our life. [Herrenhüter Gesangbuch II]