Introduction

At the turn of the seventeenth century, the focus of the world—specifically, the religious world—began to shift. Central Christian institutions from France, England, Portugal, and other major European countries, whose governments were already heavily invested in New World colonial expansion, began sending forth groups of missionaries to evangelize the indigenous peoples of North America. Thus, the missionary efforts and settlements of the Jesuits during the seventeenth century are a source of great insight into the early Church in Canada. Through primary sources, such as *The Jesuit Relations*, historians and theologians alike are able to explore more deeply the communities, relations, and cultures established by Jesuit encounters with the Huron, Iroquois, Montagnais, Algonquin, and Five Nations, and the profound impact those encounters had on Canadian geography, demography, and identity. However, like many histories, there remains a substantial gap in the narrative of Canada’s forebears and Native founders. In recent years, historians have realized that changes must be made both in the way the history of early modern Canada is retold and in the sources from which the information is collected. More specifically, historians are beginning to engage with areas that are relatively unexplored, such as: the Native perception of the Jesuits, their understanding of the Christian religion, and their paths to conversion. This can be better understood by responding to three questions. Did the tribes of the Algonquin and Montagnais view the Jesuit missions as a blending or a domination of culture? How did a people of purely oral and deeply mystical faiths interpret
God, the trinity, or Heaven and Hell? Finally, what role did the indigenous tribes of New France play in their own conversions? These were the questions facing the missionaries four hundred years ago as they debarked on the shores of the Eastern coast of Canada, and in a very different way these remain the questions that face historians today. The answers to these queries are varying and complex; however, by continuing attempts to examine and answer these questions, the history of early modern Canada can become a more layered, developed, and complete narrative.

First Encounters

Prior to the arrival of Jesuit missionaries en masse, the Native tribes of New France, as elsewhere in Canada, were intermingled and connected with the hunting and trading bands of French colonial frontiersmen. They knew of these foreigners not as harbingers of a dangerous socio-cultural challenge to Native life, but rather as gift-givers and military allies. It was only after Samuel de Champlain laid the groundwork in 1608 along the St. Lawrence River Valley, by expanding trading routes along the canals and great lakes systems, learning the culture and environment of the indigenous, and consolidating alliances with the Montagnais, Algonquin, and others, that the Jesuits could return in 1625 and make Quebec their headquarters\(^1\). Therefore, in response to the first question, it must first be understood that it was in this light that the Algonquin and the Montagnais of Quebec, Trois-Rivières, and Montreal initially perceived the Jesuits. Indeed, initially, the missionaries were seen as little more than an extension of the already known French fur trading presence. As time wore on and the missionary settlements

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expanded, however, the Algonquin and Montagnais began to distinguish between their encounters with the traders and their encounters with the Black Robes. Many of the initial encounters between these groups were wrought with inter-tribal war, disease, famine, and death which led some Natives to perceive the priests as “sorcerers who secretly practiced strange ceremonies; [who] brought disease with them wherever they went; [and who] killed people with their rite of baptism.” Certainly, it would take no stretch of the imagination to see how the natives came to this conclusion when, for example, half of the 30,000 strong Huron population was wiped out between 1636 and 1640 by influenza and small pox epidemics.

Over time, however, the feeling of wariness and xenophobia began to subside—though it did not disappear altogether—for both the Natives and the Jesuit missionaries as their relations began to mature. Bruce Trigger refers to this change for the Natives as cognitive reorganization, asserting that “the rational component inherent in the mental processes of every human being began to play the dominant role in guiding Native relations with Europeans, while religious beliefs ceased to play the important part that in many cases they had done in the early stages of the encounter.” Although Trigger has understated it here, faith and spirituality were still very crucial to Amerindian dealings with Europeans. Yet after some time, the Natives began to perceive their spirituality in light of the beliefs expounded by the Jesuits. For some, the Jesuits remained another type of shaman similar to their own but with different powers, and for others, the Jesuits came to be understood as men like any other. The varying perceptions the Amerindians had of the Jesuit missionaries would shape not simply their interactions with one

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another, but also their understanding and, ultimately, their acceptance or rejection of the Christian faith.

On the Path to Righteousness

Once the bonds of trust, friendship, and a seemingly mutually advantageous trade system had been established between the indigenous peoples of New France and the missionaries, the slow and often laborious process of conversion could begin. Learning from the errors of Jesuit missions in South America, the initial method of Jesuit missionaries like Paul Le Jeune was often to erect small, isolated, sedentary villages, or reductions, wherein the Montagnais would be instructed in the ways of agriculture, animal husbandry, and Christianity without fear of interactions with fur traders or alcohol. In this way, the Jesuits thought that they might fully indoctrinate the St. Lawrence tribes into French-European culture. One such case occurred in 1638 when Paul Le Jeune set up a reduction in the hopes that it may attract the Montagnais to “become sedentary and... believe in God.” However, as Nicholas Cushner explains “Disease, fire, Iroquois attack, and cultural tradition combined to empty the village of the 120 Christian Indians that lived there in 1646.” The goal of the Jesuits was clear: Christianize the Natives of the New World. The solution, however, was not so clear; very quickly they learned that the methods, symbols, and language that had worked back in Europe, Africa, and even South America would need to be modified to be successful in the Great White North.

5 Cushner, 151.
7 Cushner, 152.
Paul Le Jeune and other missionaries soon realized that “assimilation (trying to make Frenchmen out of Indians) was impractical. Allowing the Indians to remain Indians, what is called today indigenization, was a more reasonable approach to Christianization”\(^8\). So, in order to answer the second question, one must begin not by looking at the missionary settlements but at the individual attempts made to infiltrate and study individual tribes. It is in these intimate settings that one may see more clearly how Christianity was understood on an individual level. To a degree the Jesuits of New France mimicked the controversial methods made famous by Matteo Ricci and Roberto Nobili in China and India respectively. Thus, part of the indigenization process for the Jesuits meant integrating oneself with a small hunting band to learn of the secrets and similarities within indigenous faith and, often unintentionally, garner a great respect for their aptitude and sophistication at surviving in the harsh climate of New France. This is clearly exemplified in the letters of Paul Le Jeune from 1633 to 1634 when he wintered with a Montagnais band\(^9\). As Arthur Dorsey explains, the “Jesuits transformed Catholic practice and translated Catholic faith into terms familiar to the people with whom they lived, and they were willing to leave alone those aspects of indigenous life that did not defy Catholic doctrine”\(^10\).

James P. Ronda illustrates how certain fundamental aspects of Christianity—sin, penance, and heaven and hell—were alien to Amerindian spirituality, explaining:

> These religions recognized personal wrongdoing but did not assign it any cosmic significance. Huron religion, for example, emphasized the presence of certain evil

\(^8\) Cushner, 150.
\(^9\) Greer, 28-35.
forces and the dangerous consequences that might result from failing to do proper service to a particular deity.\textsuperscript{11}

Foreign though the concepts might have been, there were still many significant parallels between Western Christianity and Amerindian spirituality that can assist in explaining how Natives interpreted these concepts. The anonymous \textit{De Religione}, for example, is written in Bear (a Huron dialect) and makes comparisons “between the spirits or souls possessed by plants, animals, and humans, then between human souls and spirits such as angels and devils, and, finally, between the souls of humans and their bodies,” as well as discussing afterlife, heaven and hell, and certain sacraments\textsuperscript{12}. It is apparent that conversion for both the Jesuits and the Amerindians was not merely a matter of penetrating a language barrier. Conversion meant understanding the covenant one was entering into with God and the implications therein. Therefore, it is through these comparisons that Natives could dig deeper into this new mysterious religion and see that it was not completely different from their own.

\textbf{Into the Fold}

Many narratives on the history of the exchanges between the indigenous tribes and Europeans in early modern Canada are written under the pretext that one group was subjugate to the force, will, and control of the other, more dominant group. But as some historians are beginning to point out, this picture—though in some ways a reality—does a disservice to both Natives and missionaries, as well as to future historians. As John Webster Grant eloquently points out, “It is unfair not only to the missionaries but to the Indians: recognizing only the

\textsuperscript{11} James P. Ronda, “‘We Are Well As We Are’: An Indian Critique of Seventeenth-Century Christian Missions”, \textit{The William and Mary Quarterly}, Third Series vol. 34, no. 1 (1977) 68-9.

former as actors, it reduces the latter to the role of passive recipients. Since the Indians were under no direct compulsion to embrace Christianity, there could have been no Native Christian communities unless they had voluntarily converted themselves”13. The significance of Grant’s statement is not only a more probable retelling of events, but rather what the Church and faith became in the hands of the Natives.

It is this active participation, writes Achiel Peelman, that not only sustained Christianity “once the missionaries had left their tribes,” but also led to another overlooked region of Native Canadian history: the development of the Native church based on Native Christianity14. For that reason, the answer to the final question can be neither simple nor straightforward. The motivating factors for conversion would have varied from tribe to tribe and even within tribes: for some it may have been fear, for others a chance at health and prosperity for their family, and for others still it may have been a genuine transition to Christian faith. Whatever the cause, the words of Grant and Peelman remind historians that it was not merely a black and white issue of dominance and subservience, and that the role of the Native was varied and significant. However, there remain those historians who, like James P. Ronda, would rather cluster an entire people in the same rigid framework, believing that:

Native Americans were required to become like Europeans in all aspects of life—in matters of sex, marriage, economy, and government, as well as religion. The Indian who embraced Christianity was compelled, in effect, to commit cultural suicide… to renounce not only his own personal past, but that of his forefathers as well, forsaking—and despising—all traditional beliefs and practices.15

If the words of Grant and Peelman hold any semblance of validity, then it is clear that the indigenous tribes of North America were neither coerced into a new faith, nor were they victims

13 John Webster Grant, Moon of Wintertime: Missionaries and the Indians of Canada in Encounter Since 1543 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984) 239.
14 Achiel Peelman, Christ is a Native American (Ottawa: Novalis-Saint Paul University, 1995) 61.
15 Ronda, “‘We Are Well As We Are’”, 67.
of foul trickery. Unlike Ronda’s gross over-generalization, Grant and Peelman provide a more realistic approach to understanding Native conversions by elaborating on the diverse types of Native Christianity that emerged after the seventeenth century. While some of the Amerindians adopted a standard Western form of Christianity, many others instead opted for religious syncretism or dimorphism\textsuperscript{16}. The change in the way these earliest encounters are being retold highlights the Amerindians not as passive recipients but as thoughtful and strong active participants in a clashing, understanding, and transferring of cultures. “When confronted with Christian doctrines, symbols, and ceremonies, Indians asked searching questions. A few accepted the answers of the missionaries and were converted; others rejected what they saw as an alien ideology and reaffirmed their traditional beliefs”\textsuperscript{17}. That there were opportunities for choice, or successes and failures among the Jesuit missionaries reinforces this emerging concept that conversion among the Natives was a participatory action and not simply a passive response.

The seventeenth-century Jesuit missions to New France and elsewhere in Canada have become great pillars for understanding not only Catholicism in early modern Canada, but also the emergence of what would become a fundamental aspect of Canadian identity all the way to the twentieth century. The legacies of the missionaries go beyond expanding the realm of the sacred cross and reveal the impact they had on so many facets of Canadian life. This, however, is only one half of the story. Slowly but surely, the other half of the early-modern Canadian narrative is emerging to reveal a new way of approaching this history. Indeed, it is through these revelations that historians can look back, not as revisionists but as explorers, and compose a more complete vision of Canada’s history. By addressing the aforementioned questions, one can clearly see how the Native perspective of Jesuits, Christianity, and conversion is an integral

\textsuperscript{16} Peelman, 67-82.
\textsuperscript{17} Ronda, “‘We Are Well As We Are’”, 79.
missing piece to the puzzle, and how their role in the first encounters was an active and engaged participation. Looking at history through this lens can lead to more thoughtful insight as well as a certain deeper understanding. That is, that the experience of Jesuits among the Natives, from first encounters to the moment of conversion, was a story of a meeting of temporal forces at first clashing for victory, but soon learning to cooperate and understand one another more deeply. It can no longer be assumed that the Amerindians had no active role in their exchanges with Jesuits and Christianity. Instead, historians must work with this information to alter the monologue history and produce a narrative composed of a dialogue between the earliest founders of the Catholic Church in Canada and the earliest peoples of Canada.
Works Cited


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