AMERICAN INDIAN CULTURE AND RESEARCH JOURNAL 10:3 (1986) 1-23

Montagnais Missionization in Early New France: The Syncretic Imperative

KENNETH M. MORRISON

The Montagnais kin groups which entered the Canadian mission at Sillery in 1639 throw significant light on the process of religious change. The *Jesuit Relations* richly document the Montagnais' culture, and describe in detail their struggle to comprehend Catholicism.[1] As a result, it is possible to achieve an Indian history grounded in the reality assumptions of a particular Native American people. The Montagnais demonstrate that when religious change is described as conversion, both Native Americans' role in missionization and their syncretic intentions are missed. The Montagnais resisted Jesuit teachings for the better part of ten years, but some of them settled at Sillery for their own reasons. The challenge remains to reconstruct the reasoning by which some Montagnais adopted what appears to be the radically alien lifestyle the missionaries offered.

To begin with, it is useful to ask how we can achieve the insiders' view of missionization. The answer consists in identifying the common theoretical ground which has emerged between religious studies and several social science and humanistic disciplines. A good place to start is Susanne K. Langer's *Philosophy in a New Key*.[2] Langer heralded what might be thought of as a radical humanism focusing on meaning as an empirical, cross-disciplinary field of inquiry. Although Langer is seldom cited in social science literature or, for that matter, in the study of the humanities, the problem of meaning she highlighted has received concerted attention in the post-war era.

Kenneth M. Morrison is an Associate Professor in the Department of Religious Studies at Arizona State University.

There are a number of examples of an emerging methodological focus on meaning. One can cite the interdisciplinary study of symbol, myth and ritual. Equally fruitful lines of investigation have emerged in the philosophy of language, sociolinguistics, cognitive anthropology, and the sociology of knowledge, as well as social and ethnic history. Taken together, these collaborations have brought home the need for an ethnohistorical investigation which assumes that history has alternative causal explanations in cross-cultural situations.[3]

The Montagnais-Naskapi relationship with the French is a case in point. A quick review of the histories of seventeenth-century Canada suggests that the Montagnais story is so familiar that alternative explanations are not needed. The Montagnais were among the first northeastern Native Americans to experience regular contact with Europeans. They were pioneers in developing commercial, political and military alliances with the French. They were also among the first to regret the negative impact of European contact. After 1633, when the French reestablished their base at Quebec, the Montagnais began to find themselves commercially displaced, subject to Iroquoian harassment, and politically subordinate to the French. To make matters worse, overtrapping led to a dramatic decrease in Montagnais food resources, and winter famines became commonplace. European diseases also took a heavy toll. Finally, in this situation of apparently massive cultural dissolution, the Montagnais capitulated in despair to the Jesuit missionaries who promised salvation.

Briefly put, it is the primary goal of this essay to establish the way in which these causal variables intersected with the Montagnais understanding of French Catholicism. What is particularly relevant here is what the priests and the Montagnais saw as salvation. Historians have rightly emphasized the practical concerns of both parties, but they have also taken European pragmatism as the Montagnais norm. It appears that the Montagnais had nothing to lose and everything to gain from a privileged relationship with the French. The alliance certainly made economic, political and military sense. That some Montagnais apparently accepted what we have come to think of as ideological colonization is more difficult to comprehend. The history of the Montagnais has revealed some of the factors governing their reaction to the Jesuits, but these do not tell the whole story. Post-contact crisis posed problems with which the Montagnais had to grapple,

but their own religious, philosophical and social tradition channeled their conservative response.[4]

RELIGION AND MONTAGNAIS EXISTENTIAL ASSUMPTIONS: PERSON, POWER, GIFT

Despite the fact that the Jesuits never really understood Montagnais motives, their annual *Relations* expose the reasoning of the Montagnais. The *Jesuit Relations* are extraordinary documents because they present accurate ethnological descriptions of Montagnais life. Moreover, the *Relations* are invaluable because they not only record what the Montagnais had to say, but also describe how they acted. In these ways, the missionaries have provided unparalleled documentary access to Native American experience. What remain misleading in the Jesuit texts, however, are the religious assumptions by which the Jesuits judged Montagnais culture. If the French priests eventually embraced something resembling cultural relativism, they still contended that the Montagnais lacked those qualities we call religious.

The Jesuits' religious anthropology merits attention because, try as they did, the priests could not relegate the Montagnais to irreligious savagery. At first, the priests held only that they were called to bring the Montagnais what they lacked. The Jesuits thought of the Montagnais as religiously deficient: they lacked knowledge of God and His written revelation, as well as the dogma and ritual which properly belong to institutionalized religion. Under the circumstances, the Jesuits faced a clear-cut, if difficult, task. After two years of work among the Montagnais, Father Paul Le Jeune described missionization pragmatically, although, as will be clear from the following discussion, he did not grasp the Montagnais' understanding of power: "The more imposing the power of our French people is made in these Countries," the priest declared, "the more easily they can make their belief received by these Barbarians, who are influenced even more through the senses than through reason."[5]

The priests had concluded that the Montagnais were as satanically misguided as they were ignorant. The *Jesuit Relations* catalog a wide variety of Montagnais delusions: in common with other Native American peoples, the Montagnais were trammeled by

strange stories, were led by shamanistic charlatans, and were perversely dependent on dreams. In time, the Jesuits felt that all of Montagnais culture evinced religious backwardness and degradation. But, at the same time, much of Montagnais life defied condemnation.

Jesuit relativism began in the recognition that the Montagnais lived by a pervasive value system that set the stage for their Christian enlightenment.[6] The priests were forced to recognize that however superstitious the Montagnais seemed, they had intractable notions of right and wrong. The more closely the priests looked, the more they admired the social values that the Montagnais professed. In the end, and as clear evidence of the limitations of their anthropological thought, the Jesuits created the paradoxical image of the noble savage—people who were naturally good but religiously and civilly backward, people who were, in short, inexplicable in either rational or moral terms. Of course, the Jesuits were left with God's will as the bottom line.

The problem of cross-cultural anthropology remains. If the field of religious studies is fundamentally concerned with confronting and making sense of cultural otherness, we need to recognize at the outset the rational impediments to understanding that cultural differences have always imposed.[7] In effect, a primary requirement for understanding the course of the Montagnais religious change is to confront the meaning "otherness" itself had in particular historical situations. We must begin with the recognition that what we gloss as religion may not describe Montagnais' reality. There is, for example, the commonplace notion that Native American religions are holistic, inseparable from what we think of as the linguistic, political economic and social aspects of culture. Such a view may be useful in highlighting genuine differences in religious outlook, but it also creates a real problem which eludes our empirical concerns. If religion is so pervasive, the end effect is that religion as a category may disappear.

There is now considerable interdisciplinary agreement that religion is not simply another part of culture. One could cite Peter Berger as providing evidence of the religiously-grounded nature of socio-cultural reality systems.[8] In a complementary interpretation, Clifford Geertz contends that religion has to do with world creation, maintenance and transformation. Geertz de-

fines the major challenge: "The notion that religion tunes human actions to an envisaged cosmic order, and projects images of cosmic order onto the plane of human experience is hardly novel. But it is hardly investigated either, so that we have very little idea of how, in empirical terms, this particular miracle is accomplished."[9]

Sam D. Gill adds a major qualification which focuses our attention on the historical role of religion: religion is that activity by which people continually take responsibility for the meaning of the worlds they in fact create. As such, religion has no necessary feature, nor mandatory content. As Gill puts it:

> We will consider as religious those images, actions, and symbols that both express and define the extent and character of the world, especially those that provide the cosmic framework in which human life finds meaning and the terms of fulfillment. We will also consider as religious those actions, processes and symbols through which life is lived in order that it be meaningful and purposive.[10]

Given this common emphasis on the relation between religion and cultural meaning, confusing religion with particular aspects of culture should no longer be troubling. Religion is nothing more, nor less, than that human activity through which people assign responsibility for meaning, worldly and otherwise.

There are other problems which an existential, activity-oriented view of religion avoids. Much of what we ordinarily consider integral to religion is inapplicable to Montagnais (and other Native American) reality. If A. Irving Hallowell was correct in rejecting the terms supernatural and spirit—contending as he did that they did not fit Algonkian experience—then Montagnais-Jesuit dialogue faced tremendous hurdles.[11] Applied to the seventeenth century, Hallowell's point means that what the Jesuits thought of as the transcendental nature of religion was simply not relevant to the Algonkian peoples, who emphasized the immanent character of religion. As one shaman declared in 1637, the only life he cared for was the life of this world.[12]

Another Montagnais shaman expressed this difference in orientation to Father Le Jeune during the winter of 1633-1634. " 'Thy God,' he replied, 'has not come to our country, and that

is why we do not believe in him; make me see him and I will believe in him'."[13] Such statements were commonplace; the Montagnais continually insisted that it was obvious that Christian revelation had been addressed to the French. In 1637 Makheabichtichiou tellingly made the point: " 'The son of God did not love our country,' (said he) 'for he did not come here, and did not say anything to us about all that'."[14] Le Jeune protested in this instance that Jesus had not been born among the French either, but they had still come to accept him. Moreover, the priest urged Makheabichtichiou to give rational assent to Christian teachings. The Montagnais answered in typical terms: "I have nothing to say against all this," he answered, "for I have not been taught anything to the contrary."[15] Yet another man declared: " 'I do not know him . . . , if I could see him, I would thank him."[16] For their part, the Montagnais felt that they had religious knowledge sufficient to meet their needs and appropriate to their situation.

In effect, then, the idea of belief or faith in some sacred and transcendental otherness which we commonly associate with religion was not particularly relevant to Montagnais interests. From this point of view French religion at first seemed absurd. The Montagnais found it incomprehensible that the missionaries believed in a transcendent God. " 'Thou hast no sense," the Montagnais accosted Paul Le Jeune in 1634, " 'how canst thou believe in him, if thou hast not seen him'."[17] On another occasion a shaman declared flatly: " 'When I see him, I will believe in him, and not until then. How believe in him who we do not see?'."[18]

Nor were the Montagnais theistically oriented, which accounts for Le Jeune's shocked dismissal of their religious attitude as "ingratitude." As the priest put it: "although they believe that the [Culture Hero] Messou has restored the world, that Nipinoukhe and Pipounoukhe bring the seasons, that their Khichikouai teach them where to find Elks or Moose, and render them a thousand good offices,—yet up to the present I have not been able to learn that they render them the slightest honor."[19] The priest did not comprehend that what mattered to the Montagnais was concrete experience, and he did not understand that rituals attached to hunting ensured proper relations with these mythological beings. The Montagnais' religious discrimination was everyday and practical.

Still, the religious outlook of the Montagnais people was systematic, and that system channeled their evaluation of the Jesuits' religious claims. While they did approach religious change pragmatically, they made largely unconscious and usually unarticulated assumptions about the character of reality. Three ideas are central to Montagnais reality assumptions, as they were to all Algonkian-speaking Native Americans. These are the concepts of Person, Power, and Gift, which dominated their perception, cognition and social behavior.[20]

Hallowell cited as evidence for Algonkian interest in religious immanence the fact that for them the idea of person was not limited to human beings. Likewise, in the 1630s, Paul Le Jeune learned from his study of the language that European ways of thinking did not apply to the Montagnais. In particular, the idea that the world was constituted by persons, human and otherwise, rather than by nature or natural forces, was central to Montagnais thought.[21] Le Jeune discussed this reality assumption in detail and, although his writings provide ample evidence, never truly understood that the idea of person had more than intellectual implications. The concept actually organized the Montagnais social world, a world which had as much to do with action as with thought. For them, the sun, moon, winds, thunder, plants, minerals and even man-made objects were all potential persons.[22] As Le Jeune put it, "the Savages persuade themselves that not only men and other animals, but also other things are endowed with souls, and that all the souls are immortal."[23]

Montagnais life concerned itself with maintaining positive relations with these other-than-human persons. The Jesuits discovered that all human abilities, and particularly the ability to hunt, to practice medicine, and to wage successful war, depended on right relations with these entities. For example, the shaman's power to cure and to kill derived from them. The Montagnais name for shaman—*Manitouisiouekhi*—means " 'those who are acquainted with the Manitou, with him who is superior to men." The shaman, accordingly, fasted in order to seek power from various classes of persons. Le Jeune reported that the Montagnais "gave the name Manitou to all Nature superior to man, good or bad."[24]

In discussing this personalistic sense of causality that the Montagnais shared with other Algonkians, Hallowell was also emphatic that, as a necessary result, any idea of impersonal cause

was foreign to their thinking.[25] Thus, the idea of power was closely related to the Montagnais concept of person. In fact, the word for power—manitou—was also synonymous with the concept of person, human and otherwise, and whether used in a positive or a negative sense. There were persons of both kinds. Another way of thinking in these terms is to acknowledge that for the Montagnais history included the actions of both human and other-than-human persons. Moreover, their sense of causality, linked as it was to personal intent, was not at all concerned with the abstract causal forces—economic, political, military, and even medical—by which we impersonally explain their experience.[26] Thus, the net effect of the ideas of Person and Power was to lead the Montagnais to ground their value judgments upon how people acted. Montagnais thinking, and the social values their rationality sustained, was behaviorally precise.

The idea of Gift was intimately related to the first two concepts because it defined the criteria by which the Montagnais assessed personal motives. Sharing, gift giving, and reciprocity identified the ideal characteristics of powerful people and so allowed the Montagnais to decide ethical issues of personal and social responsibility. For the Montagnais, kinship, or its absence, defined trust or distrust. The Jesuits identified what they saw as Montagnais vices, especially those that affected relations with dangerous and feared outsiders. These included ungratefulness, deceitfulness, treachery, and revenge. The priests also came to appreciate the normative values which derived from Montagnais religion and which shaped their internal social life. These social virtues consisted of good-naturedness, peacefulness, patience, compassion, hospitality, and generosity. In these negative and positive ways, the Montagnais emphasized the moral implications of a world composed of unrelated and related persons. For them, it was cosmologically given that power ought to be used to help other people.[27]

A mythically grounded rule of responsible reciprocity regulated the relations between all classes of people.[28] For example, as the Montagnais understood it, they prayed to the Master of the Game, asking for help in feeding their families. When the prayers were successful, the animals heard and answered the plea. The hunter in turn generously helped his kinfolk and paid respect to the bones of the animal. Mutuality, generosity, and cooperation were not only the basic values of Montagnais social

life, but also the very means used to maintain proper relations with the persons of the larger world. The dominant role ritual played in all of their activity reflected this central concern for proper relationships.[29]

Although these ideas are properly understood as the fundamental existential assumptions of the Montagnais world-view, they were not mere abstractions. Rooted as they were in the language, the concepts affected the Montagnais' perceptual and cognitive style and thereby shaped the pragmatism the Montagnais applied to Jesuit religious claims. It is significant that these criteria explain Montagnais estimations of the French as people. In the first place, the French continually violated the rule of reciprocity.[30] Not only did they hold tenaciously to their private property, they sometimes even refused to share food.[31] Sharing was an imperative for the Montagnais and group opinion carried considerable weight in maintaining contempt for the French. Given French notions of property, the Montagnais concluded that they were unlikely to be friends, thinking, Paul Le Jeune declared, "that we do not wish to ally ourselves with them as brothers, which they would very much desire."[32]

This uncertainty about French political intentions (best understood in light of Montagnais skepticism about French social ethics) highlights the contrast between different modes of Montagnais and European pragmatism. In a provocative essay which examines Hallowell's characterization of Algonkian thought, anthropologist Mary Black raises issues which help explain Montagnais motives in the 1630s.[33] Her findings can be summarized as follows: the Algonkian category of person was too general to fit all situations. Hallowell stressed that Algonkians were highly discriminating in their recognition of other-than-human persons; in particular, he noted that many persons had the ability to shift bodies. Also, in one situation a bear (for example) could be simply an animal; in another, the bear could turn out to be a shaman in disguise.

Black underlines Hallowell's conclusion that Algonkians acted cautiously toward all potential persons. Algonkian speakers could only judge the personal character (and power for good or ill) of entities linguistically classed as animate according to how they acted in particular situations. It follows that Algonkians had to assume that reality was not always as it seemed. Moreover, since power was unevenly distributed, it behooved Algonkians

to act cautiously for fear of being disrespectful toward potentially dangerous persons. Black calls this phenomenon "percept ambiguity" and, as we shall see, it goes far to explain the kind of anxiety the Montagnais experienced in dealing with the post-contact crisis of the 1630s.[34]

RELIGION AND CRISIS

Whether explained in Montagnais or European terms, the decade of the 1630s was a time of mounting crisis. When the French returned to Canada in 1633, the Montagnais felt little concern for the future. Between 1633 and 1635 they showed generalized contempt for French culture. The colonists were ineffectual in making a living off the land, and consistently demonstrated that they did not share Montagnais social values. Not surprisingly, the Montagnais concluded not only that French religion had little to offer, but also that it was probably dangerous. As a result, they resisted baptism. Nevertheless, events of those years began to undercut Montagnais confidence. Their hunting economy began to fail as the beaver became depleted, and disease attacked young and old alike.

In 1636–1637, the Montagnais began to hedge their bets religiously. While they had faced the fact of growing crisis, they had also decided that they could do something about the situation. The numbers of baptisms increased from 22 in 1635 to 115 in 1636.[35] These numbers fail to convey the whole story, however, because more and more the Montagnais themselves sought baptism for their children, partly because they thought of the sacrament as a potentially powerful medicine. As significantly, dying adults also began to ask to be baptized.

The Montagnais had become increasingly despondent—an emotional state that they had always seen as a primary cause of disease.[36] For this reason, the Montagnais had begun to react fearfully to the possibility that the Jesuits' hell truly existed. In 1637, for example, they asked what was causing so many deaths, saying that "since the coming of the French their nation was going to destruction . . ."[37] They repeatedly lodged such complaints against the French but, in fact, a growing belief in hell paralleled serious disruptions in Montagnais social life.

The Montagnais worried that they might have drawn trouble to themselves.

By all indications, the Montagnais were truly uncertain where to place the blame. Several cases of windigo cannibalism indicate the way in which the Montagnais internalized their own responsibility for the crisis. The number of human windigoes threatening the Montagnais in this decade reflects the Indians' sense of ethical malaise. Windigoes were at once a mythological symbol of anti-social savagery and a human psychotic condition.[38] In 1636, for instance, a powerful other-than-human person warned the Montagnais that a cannibal would attack and eat them if they attempted to settle near the French.[39]

It is also significant that their war with the Iroquois made the Montagnais even more anxious and impelled them to seek a closer alliance with the French. The Montagnais annually fielded small war parties, but these were insignificant when compared with Iroquoian military strength. To make matters much worse, the French not only refused to side with the Montagnais, but also criticized traditional war itself. The Montagnais were perplexed when the Jesuits accused them of bloodlust, and decried their war feasts as rank savagery.[40] The priests also criticized the dreams and visions in which other-than-human persons aided the Montagnais against the enemy.[41] Throughout the 1630s, the situation deteriorated to a point where the Montagnais became militarily impotent. In 1637, for instance, Paul Le Jeune accosted one headman. The Jesuit warned him of defeat because the war party's shaman had blasphemed against the Christian God. Disaster did occur and Le Jeune later confronted the shaman publicly, declaring "that he had been the cause of their defeat."[42]

By 1638, some Montagnais concluded that the priests had power on their side and sought baptism as a symbolically potent expression of solidarity with the French. Many of the Montagnais deliberately camped near French settlements, apparently hoping that an alliance would help solve their economic, political, military, and even social problems. Fear of baptism was still common, but the number of cures associated with the sacrament began to increase. As evidence that the French priests were seen as more powerful than traditional medicine men, one shaman, Pigarouich, destroyed his ritual paraphernalia and accepted baptism. The following year the Jesuits noted that calamities like

a smallpox epidemic seemed to attract more and more of the Montagnais.

In the short term, the Montagnais took Christian claims seriously for three main reasons. First, given the ambiguous nature of power, they came to see the Jesuits as religious specialists comparable to, and more capable than, their own shamans. Second, although they remained distrustful of baptism, they came to see it positively. The sacrament not only healed in some cases, it also ensured continued contact between living and dead Montagnais. Third, the person(s) of Jesus and He-Who-Made-All reinvigorated the traditional hunting economy, based as it was on reciprocal relations between human and animal persons. In all of these ways, Catholicism made sense in traditional terms. Each of these factors deserves discussion.

Montagnais assessment of the Jesuits' personal character shaped their overall reaction to the new religious system. From the first, the Montagnais appreciated that the priests were religious specialists and responded with appropriate caution. Still, during the first years of contact, the Montagnais held to their contemptuous view of the French, not in the least because of their relations with the priests. The Jesuits were rude and discourteous. They were incompetent in the vital matter of making a living and, when visiting among the Montagnais, were utterly dependent on Indian willingness to care for them. As significantly, the priests acted in selfish ways. The Jesuits appeared to expect that the Montagnais ought to provide for them, while they showed themselves unwilling to share.[43]

It took many years for the Jesuits and the Montagnais to reach mutual understanding, largely because the Montagnais distrusted their own religious practitioners.[44] Though the shamans were essential to group survival, they often acted in ways that threatened well-being.[45] The shamans could and did use religious means to inflict sickness and even to kill.[46] As Le Jeune expressed it in 1637, "I hardly ever see any of them die who does not think he has been bewitched."[47] In this regard, the Jesuits also seemed dangerous, even to the extent of being the cause of bad weather.[48] In fact, the Montagnais claimed that old-time Indians had warned that the Jesuits would come and kill them.[49] The Montagnais accused the priests on several occasions of using their power to murder them. As the Montagnais searched for the cause of epidemic illness, they frequently accused the French,

and especially the Jesuits, of making them sick.[50] Then too, the priests encouraged the Montagnais to understand that their God, He-Who-Made-All, was vengeful.[51] They often observed that particular Montagnais individuals apparently fell sick, or died in brutal ways, because they had acted disrespectfully toward the Christian God.[52]

In effect, the Jesuits' actions and teachings kept the Montagnais off balance. Much of the priests' behavior horrified them. Jesuit brashness seemed to violate the need for respect between humans and other powerful persons. On many occasions the priests ridiculed the powers of the Montagnais world, pitting themselves against other-than-human persons and the shamans as they did so. On one such occasion, Le Jeune noticed that the Montagnais had thrown eels into the fire and asked them why. " 'Keep still,' they replied, 'we are giving the devil something to eat, so that he will not harm us'."[53]

Jesuit criticism also made the Montagnais uncertain about Christian power. For example, the priests often scoffed at the revelations the Montagnais received in dreams. Eventually, they made a crucial distinction between those dreams in which demons attacked would-be Christians and those that were mere superstitions. For the short term, the mixed message may have confused the Montagnais, but it is not surprising that they began to compare the priests to their shamans. The Jesuits took it upon themselves to interpret dreams for Montagnais, thereby displacing the shamans in one of their most important functions. In one conversation, Le Jeune confronted the shaman Pigarouich for refusing to give up his belief in dreams. Ironically, the Jesuit ended up affirming the reality of dreams, declaring to the shaman that " 'the devil meddles with your imaginations in the night; and, if you obey him, he will make you the most wicked people in the world'."[54]

Most importantly, the priests acted with an impunity that effectively communicated their powerful confidence.[55] So great was their self-assurance that they frequently urged the Montagnais to kill their shamans.[56] The net effect of Jesuit behavior was to convince many Montagnais that the priests were not only equivalent to the shamans, but also more powerful.[57] In 1637, Makeabichtichiou told his countrymen that "those who believe in God are protected against sorcerers."[58]

Ultimately, the priests adapted their behavior toward the Mon-

tagnais in ways that communicated genuine concern, and this benevolence fit the traditional criterion of generosity. Since rational argument proved ineffective in convincing the Montagnais of Christian truths, and since the Indians were easily alarmed, the Jesuits cultivated more human methods. To prove their benevolent power, the Jesuits devoted themselves to Montagnais well-being. They provided food, took in orphans, nursed and cured the sick. The Montagnais could not understand charity, as Paul Le Jeune stressed more than once:

> To convert the Savages, not so much knowledge is necessary as goodness and sound virtue. The four Elements of an Apostolic man in New France are Affability, Humility, Patience and a generous Charity. Too ardent zeal scorches more than it warms, and ruins everything; great magnanimity and compliance are necessary to attract gradually these Savages. They do not comprehend our Theology well, but they comprehend perfectly our humility and our friendliness, and allow themselves to be won.[59]

In effect, the priests began to operate within the kin values central to Montagnais life and, in so doing, defused Montagnais criticism.[60] Moreover, they mediated between the Montagnais and the colonial government, thus showing that they aimed at creating an effective and genuine alliance between equals.

The tension between caution and trust regulated other aspects of the Montagnais' scrutiny of Catholicism. Baptism produced a terrified kind of uncertainty because it seemed to be the priests' preferred way of killing. The Jesuits never did eradicate entirely the Montagnais' fear of the sacrament, but Indian religious pragmatism gave them the means to abate it. Unwittingly, by baptizing only the dying, the Jesuits achieved an unexpected opening. The Montagnais were told that baptized persons went to heaven.[61] Since the Jesuits insisted that heaven and the traditional land of the dead were different places, the living relatives of the dead found themselves confronting a dilemma. Traditionally, the Montagnais stressed the maintenance of proper and reciprocal relations with dead kin.[62] The result was that some Montagnais—particularly parents who had lost a loved child—sought baptism as a way to ensure continued contact.[63]

Other Montagnais also hedged their bets. Some sought baptism as a means to deal with disease, since the Jesuits apparently cured many individuals.[64] Still others, worried that Jesuit threats of eternal damnation might be real, sought to avoid hell even at the cost of present death.[65] As one man put it: "Many of their nation had this idea, that baptism is injurious to life, but that it is a good thing with which to protect oneself from the fires with which we threaten them."[66]

In perceiving the Jesuits as shamans, and in overcoming their fear of baptism, the Montagnais were not repudiating traditional religious practice. They took Jesuit criticism seriously because, while they were inclined to blame the French for their troubles, they also worried that they themselves might have been at fault. The traditional religious system provided no easy answers to everyday problems, but it did require that the Montagnais do everything in their power to identify and rectify error. Frank G. Speck identified this issue of responsibility, at least as it pertained to hunting: ". . . Failure on the chase, the disappearance of game from the hunter's districts, with ensuing famine, starvation, weakness, sickness, and death, are all attributed to the hunter's ignorance of some hidden principles of behavior toward the animals, or to his wilful disregard of them."[67] Since crisis was so pervasive in the 1630s, the Montagnais had to heed missionary criticism, at least to the extent of examining themselves for personal responsibility for the deepening crisis.

It is true that the Jesuits spent far more time condemning Montagnais life than approving it, but still much of what they had to offer made sense in traditional terms. Nowhere was this truer than in the intersection of Catholicism and hunting. Hunting stood at the very heart of Montagnais religious life, as the Jesuits realized, even though they called Montagnais prayers ridiculous. It seemed both naive and superstitious to call upon the animals to give their lives.[68] In 1634, Paul Le Jeune noted that the Montagnais could not understand why the French prayed: "'Ask him,' they say to me, 'for Moose, Bears, and Beavers; tell him that thou wishest to eat. . . '."[69] To ask for food was the most common Montagnais prayer, and seemed to the missionaries nothing short of self-serving.[70] Nevertheless, the priests realized that the Montagnais needed prayers in the 1630s.[71] The Montagnais faced disaster in the collapse of their hunting economy. Time

after time, the shamans proved incapable of improving hunting and the Jesuits saw a basic opportunity.

As early as the winter of 1633–1634, when Paul Le Jeune wintered with one family band, the Montagnais began to hear that the shamans were responsible for their troubles. Le Jeune lost no opportunity to urge the Montagnais to redirect their prayers from the Master of Game to He-Who-Made-All.[72] And praying to Jesus seemed to help. Jesus himself began to appear in dreams to promise a successful hunt.[73] Le Jeune relates one instance when two Montagnais reported that Jesus offered to aid them: " 'I have seen thy Manitou, and I thy Jesus'. . . . 'Oh what a good year he promised us! What Beavers, what Elks!' "[74] The Jesuits were undoubtedly dismayed when the two men stipulated that Jesus expected tobacco in return for his assistance.

Here again we have persuasive evidence that the Montagnais did not need to repudiate basic reality assumptions in order to embrace Christianity. At first uncertain as to the value of the Jesuits' religious contentions, the Montagnais could experiment as needed. In this case, the result was gratifying: Jesus turned out to be a hitherto unknown, but extremely powerful, Master of the Animals.

THE SYNCRETIC IMPERATIVE

To acknowledge that the Montagnais had a distinctive way of thinking is to begin to appreciate the complex forces that governed their exploration of Catholicism. In the first place, we must note the cognitive heterogeneity of Montagnais life. The Jesuits were well aware of such differences: "It is, indeed," wrote Paul Le Jeune, "true that these people have not all the same idea in regard to their belief, which will some day make it appear that those who treat of their customs are contradicting each other."[75] Although the ideas of Person, Power, and Gift structured the Montagnais' overall tradition, the tradition itself was possessed unevenly. The Montagnais did have an egalitarian society. Still, some knowledge was the special preserve of women, of men, of children, hunters and shamans.[76] Age, experience and social role defined the way in which individuals had access to the tradition. Those factors also shaped the kinds of concerns groups of people had with Catholicism.

At the level of social life (which, given the consensual character of Montagnais society, was paramount), the Montagnais evaluated French claims, bringing to bear both existential assumptions and practical experience. In other words, missionization can be understood best as a discourse between Montagnais individuals and the priests.[77] As a central feature of this dialogue, however, the Montagnais also had to evaluate collectively the Jesuits' often shocking statements. One necessary result frustrated the priests: try as they might, they found it extremely difficult to persuade individuals who feared family ridicule to listen to them.[78]

Given this religious heterogeneity, the idea that the Montagnais converted to Catholicism is too simple to encompass the complex intellectual, ethical, and social decisions they had to make to bridge their own cultural differences and to find common ground with the French way of life. If, as the evidence suggests, conversion did not take place as we have thought, it may be that we mistakenly see religions as dogmatically incompatible and exclusive in their deistic orientation. Such was the Jesuit view. The priests expected that the Montagnais would scuttle and abandon their tradition. There is no evidence, however, that even those who entered the mission at Sillery ever understood—at least until it was too late—that Catholicism posed a radical threat. Rather, the Montagnais learned piecemeal what the Jesuits considered acceptable and what they considered evil and sinful.

In the end, as at the beginning, the missionaries and neophytes saw religious dialogue in opposed terms. The Jesuits thought of conversion as a goal, an end point, an object to be won. The Montagnais, on the other hand, could not see where the Jesuits were leading. In any case, the Montagnais were impelled both by continuing crisis and a failure of traditional religious techniques. It was no coincidence that Paul Le Jeune contended that "fear is the forerunner of faith in these Barbarous Minds."[79] Terrified they were, and the Montagnais had to pay closer attention than the priests to the practical implications of religious change. The Jesuits demanded, but the Montagnais weighed their options and decided what did or did not make sense.

The Montagnais continued to understand themselves and the French in terms of the categories of Person, Power, and Gift. One might say, for example, that they came to think of Jesus and Mary as additional other-than-human persons, admittedly very

powerful persons who offered daily assistance. In 1626, the Jesuits reported that the Montagnais had associated the person Jesus with the person of the Sun.[80] In an analogous way, some Montagnais thought of the Christian Holy Spirit, who the Jesuits pictured as a dove, as the equivalent of the great person Thunder.[81] The Montagnais continued to reach from the known to the unfamiliar. In 1637, the Jesuits noted that the Montagnais applied the term manitou to both God and the devil.[82] In a similar fashion, the Christian idea of a personal creator had some impact. When asked who had created the world and human beings, one shaman expressed uncertainty. It seems that the Montagnais had some vague idea of a high god they began to associate with the Jesuit creator.[83] Such a figure did not replace, however, the culture hero, Messou, the restorer.[84]

It can be said even that this God—He-Who-Made-All—made functional sense. At least there is no evidence to suggest any conflict occurred between the Montagnais idea of a world organized by many plant, animal and other personal powers and the Jesuit concept of a creator God. As time went by, He-Who-Made-All served to unify and focus the Montagnais cosmology of powerful persons. In fact, the Jesuits blithely adjusted their theology to fit Montagnais presupposition:

> I told them that this great Captain [He-Who-Made-All] overwhelms us with blessings,—it is he who gives us light with the Sun, who maintains for us the fish with the waters, and the animals with the land; it is he who forms our bodies in our mothers' wombs, who creates our souls by his word.[85]

Whatever the Jesuits claimed about the preeminence of the Christian God, nothing in Montagnais religious practice constituted a dogmatic creed. So the fundamental problem with the term "conversion" has to do with the assumption that to convert is to change traditions, to shift religious direction. Admittedly, such an assumption does seem warranted when it is applied to crosscultural situations. But conversion has another, related meaning which stresses the idea of *giving assent.*

This second meaning has considerable implications for understanding the syncretic direction of the mission process. Instead of thinking of conversion as radical ideological change from one

religion to another, conversion can be seen as a process of rediscovery. As a result of their contact with Catholic religious powers, and from their ritual use of Catholic symbols, the Montagnais converted themselves. In other words, they came to re-experience and thereby revitalize the basic religious truths of their traditional life. The Montagnais world continued to be charged with personal presence and human and other-than-human persons remained bound by mutual obligation.

Whatever we may think of the colonial implications of missionization in other settings, the Montagnais controlled the process during the 1630s. Since the Jesuits never really understood the Montagnais religious system, they could not eradicate it. The Jesuits, like the Protestant missionaries in New England, did demand religious change without understanding the cultural processes involved. For the Montagnais who attempted to live out the contradictions of Jesuit demands, mission life posed few choices, but some of these allowed them considerable freedom. They could leave the missions, and many did. They could submit and accept the view of some of the catechists that life had become loathsome. They might also attempt to make sense of Christian religiosity in order to end the considerable cognitive dissonance missionization produced. Ultimately, they could try to integrate old and new, as did the Montagnais who first lived at Sillery. As it turns out, these "Christians" failed to strike such a balance and paid the highest cost. This was the eventual tragic fate of Sillery.

NOTES

1. The *Jesuit Relations* on which this study is based are largely the work of one man, Paul Le Jeune, superior of the Canadian Society of Jesus in the 1630s. For an evaluation of the accuracy of his writings, and of the uses to which they can be put, see Lucien Campeau, *Monumenta Novae Franciae: II. Etablissement a Quebec (1619-1634)* (Quebec: Les Presses de l'Universite Laval, 1979), 131-141; Eleanor Leacock, "Montagnais Women and the Jesuit Program for Colonization," in Mona Etienne and Eleanor Leacock, eds., *Women and Colonization: Anthropological Perspectives* (New York: Praeger, 1980), 26; and Kenneth M. Morrison, "Discourse and the Accommodation of Values: Towards a Revision of Mission History," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 53 (Sept., 1985): 366-368.

2. Susanne K. Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1951).

3. Actually, to say that history may have alternative, culturally based causal explanations oversimplifies the situation. Native American senses of historical process may just as well be complementary as opposed to current historical assumptions. At present, the imperative is to push the possibility of taking seriously Native American reality assumptions. For some background on the challenge of cross-cultural interpretation see Clifford Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System," in Michael Banton, ed., *Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1966), 1-46; Keith H. Basso and Henry A. Selby, eds., *Meaning in Anthropology* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1976); Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1967); Joseph P. Cahill, *Mended Speech: The Crisis of Religious Studies and Theology* (New York: Crossroads Publishing Co., 1982); Mary Douglas, *Implicit Meanings: Essays in Anthropology* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975); Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977).

4. For the historical literature which focuses specifically on the seventeenth-century Montagnais see: Alfred Goldsworthy Bailey, *The Conflict of European and Eastern Algonkian Cultures, 1504-1700*, 2nd ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1969); Lucien Campeau, *La Premiere Mission des Jesuites en Nouvelle France (1611-1613) et Les Commencements du College des Jesuites (1626-1670)* (Montreal: Editions Bellarmin, 1972); Howard L. Harrod, "Missionary Life-World and Native Response: Jesuits in New France," *Studies in Religion* 13 (Spring, 1984): 179-192; Cornelius Jaenen, "Amerindian Views of French Culture in the Seventeenth Century," *Canadian Historical Review 55 (1974): 261-291;* Cornelius Jaenen, *Friend and Foe: Aspects of French-Amerindian Cultural Contact in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976); Kenneth S. Lane, "The Montagnais Indians, 1600-1640," *Publications of the Kroeber Anthropological Society* 7 (1952): 1-62; James P. Ronda, "The European Indian: Jesuit Civilization Planning in New France," *Church History* 31 (1972): 385-395; James P. Ronda, " 'We Are Well As We Are': An Indian Critique of Seventeenth Century Missions," *William and Mary Quarterly* 34 (1977): 66-82; James P. Ronda, "The Sillery Experiment: A Jesuit-Indian Village in New France, 1637-1663," *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 3 (1979): 1-18; Bruce G. Trigger, "Champlain Judged by His Indian Policy: A Different View of Early Canadian History," *Anthropologica* 13 (1971): 85-114.

5. For Jesuit writings supporting the above generalizations, see Reuben Gold Thwaites, ed., *The Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents*, 73 vols. (New York: Pageant Book Co., 1959), 6: 157-317 and 7: 7ff and 8:15. Hereafter cited as Thwaites, ed., JR.

6. For the intellectual background of the Jesuits, and the role religion played in the colonization of New France, see: James Axtell. *The Invasion Within: The Contest of Cultures in Colonial North America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985); Lucien Campeau, *La Premiere Mission des Jesuites en Nouvelle-France (1611-1613)*, and his *Monumenta Novae Franciae: II. Establissement a Quebec (1616-1634);* Olive Patricia Dickason, *The Myth of the Savage and the Beginnings of French Colonialism in the Americas* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1984); George W. Healy, "The French Jesuits and the Idea of the Noble Savage," *Wil-*

liam and Mary Quarterly 15 (1958): 143-167; John Hopkins Kennedy, *Jesuit and Savage in New France* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1950).

7. See James A. Boon, *Other Tribes, Other Scribes: Symbolic Anthropology in the Comparative Study of Cultures, Histories, Religions, and Texts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982) and Richard E. Wentz, *The Contemplation of Otherness: The Critical Vision of Religion* (Mercer, GA: Mercer University Press, 1984).

8. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy.*

9. Clifford Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System," 4.

10. Sam D. Gill, *Native American Religions: An Introduction* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1984), 11.

11. A. Irving Hallowell, "Ojibwa Ontology, Behavior and World View," in Stanley Diamond, ed., *Culture in History: Essays in Honor of Paul Radin* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1960), 19-52. Hallowell's work on the Ojibwa has been thoroughly discussed in a series of essays in *Ethos*. The most relevant of these is Mary B. Black, "Ojibwa Taxonomy and Percept Ambiguity," *Ethos* 5 (1977): 90-117. And also see her "Ojibwa Power Belief System," in Raymond D. Fogelson and Richard N. Adams, eds., *The Anthropology of Power* (New York: Academic Press, 1977), 141-152. For a critical, though inadequate, critique of Hallowell's concept of person see Ake Hultkrantz, "The Concept of the Supernatural in Primal Religion," *History of Religions* 22 (1983): 231-253.

12. Thwaites, ed, JR, 11: 253.

13. Ibid., 7: 101.

14. Ibid., 11: 155-157.

15. Ibid., 157.

16. Ibid., 11: 205.

17. Ibid., 6: 183.

18. Ibid., 7: 101.

19. Ibid., 6: 173.

20. This discussion is somewhat in advance of scholarly understanding of these categories in the sense that I assume that the three ideas are essentially linked. For the concept of Person, I rely on A. Irving Hallowell, "Ojibwa Ontology,"; for Power see Raymond D. Fogelson and Richard N. Adams, eds., *The Anthropology of Power;* and for Gift see Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies* (New York: Norton, 1967 [1925]).

21. Thwaites, ed. JR, 7:23.

22. Thwaites, ed., JR, 5: 57; 6: 159, 161, 171, 215, 233; 12: 7, 25-27. And see Frank G. Speck, *Naskapi: The Savage Hunters of the Labrador Peninsula* 2nd ed. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1977).

23. Thwaites, ed., JR, 6: 175.

24. Ibid., 6: 199; 7: 181; 9: 113, 119; 11: 195, 259, 263, 265; 12: 7.

25. A. Irving Hallowell, "Ojibwa Ontology," 29.

26. Frank G. Speck, *Naskapi,* 79.

27. For references to the Jesuits' perceptions of these vices and virtues see Thwaites, ed., JR, 5: 123; 6: 45, 83-85, 231-235, 243-247, 255-261, 281; 7: 113-115, 177, 191; 8: 41.

28. This study is closely related to an earlier essay in which I explore this mythological connection in greater detail for the Abenaki, who were the Montagnais' southern neighbors: Kenneth M. Morrison, The Mythological Sources

of Abenaki Catholicism: A Case Study of the Social History of Power," *Religion* 11 (1981): 235-236.

29. Frank G. Speck, *Naskapi*, 103-127, 232-245.
30. Thwaites, ed., JR, 5: 171, 179.
31. Ibid., 6: 249.
32. Ibid., 259. For related literature on the role of reciprocal exchange in Indian-European relations see: Wilbur Jacobs, *Wilderness, Politics and Indian Gifts* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1966), and Cornelius J. Jaenen, "The Role of Presents in French-Amerindian Trade," in Duncan Cameron, ed., *Explorations in Canadian Economic History: Essays in Honour of Irene M. Spry* (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1985), 231-250.
33. See Mary B. Black, "Ojibwa Taxonomy," 90-117 and her "Ojibwa Power Belief System," 141-152.
34. For related articles by Hallowell see his "Fear and Anxiety as Cultural and Individual Variables in a Primitive Society," *Journal of Social Psychology* 9 (1938): 25-47; "The Social Function of Anxiety in a Primitive Society," *American Sociological Review* 6 (1941): 869-881; "Some Psychological Characteristics of the Northeastern Indians," in Frederick Johnson, ed., *Man in Northeastern North America* (Andover, MA: Phillips Academy, 1946), 195-225.
35. Thwaites, ed., JR, 8: 247.
36. Ibid., 6: 233.
37. Ibid., 11: 193.
38. Ibid., 5: 103; 7: 115-177; 8: 29-33; 9: 113-117, 213-215; 11: 117; 12: 21. See Frank G. Speck, *Naskapi*, 67-70; Morton I. Teicher, *Windigo Psychosis: A Study of a Relationship between Belief and Behavior among the Indians of Northeastern Canada* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1960); and Kenneth M. Morrison, "Towards a History of Intimate Encounters: Algonkian Folklore, Jesuit Missionaries, and Kiwakwe, the Cannibal Giant," *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 3 (1979): 51-80.
39. Thwaites, ed., JR, 9: 115.
40. Ibid., 5: 35; 9: 111; 11: 87, 215.
41. Ibid., 6: 173; 12: 15-17, 143-145.
42. Ibid., 12: 153-157.
43. Kenneth M. Morrison, "Discourse and the Accommodation of Meaning," 365-382.
44. Thwaites, ed., JR, 4: 203; 9: 17; 11: 181, 255.
45. Ibid., 6: 193-195; 8: 273; 9: 115.
46. Ibid., 12: 9-11.
47. Ibid., 7.
48. Ibid., 5: 151.
49. Ibid., 11: 193-195.
50. Ibid., 9: 195-197, 207.
51. Ibid., 7: 301; 9: 69.
52. Ibid., 7: 277-279, 283; 9: 79ff, 95; 12: 153-157.
53. Ibid., 7: 85-87.
54. Ibid., 11: 253.
55. Ibid., 5: 151, 177; 6: 165-167; 7: 85-87.
56. Ibid., 11: 203, 261; 12, 155, 169.
57. Ibid., 7: 131; 11: 181, 259.

58. Ibid., 12: 151.
59. Ibid., 8: 179.
60. Ibid., 6: 257-258; 9: 193.
61. Ibid., 7: 285.
62. Ibid., 5: 5; 8: 21-23; 9: 79.
63. Ibid., 8: 255, 269, 271; 9: 39-41.
64. Ibid., 5: 109-111, 121-123; 6: 109; 8: 247; 9: 11-13, 25, 41-43, 59, 73-77, 193; 11: 83, 91-93, 111-113, 127, 137-139, 165, 235.
65. Ibid., 7: 295; 8: 247; 11: 87-89, 161-163; 12: 155.
66. Ibid., 11: 119.
67. Frank G. Speck, *Naskapi*, 73.
68. Thwaites, ed., JR, 6: 173, 203, 283; 7: 9.
69. Ibid., 7: 9.
70. Ibid., 8: 37.
71. Ibid., 7: 171, 175; 8: 29ff, 57; 9: 145-147.
72. Ibid., 7: 149-151.
73. Ibid., 8: 27-37; 9: 213.
74. Ibid., 8: 213.
75. Ibid., 6: 101.
76. Eleanor Leacock, "Status among the Montagnais-Naskapi of Labrador," *Ethnohistory* 5 (1958), 200-209; Eleanor Leacock, "Montagnais Women and the Jesuit Program for Colonization," 25-42; Julius E. Lips, "Public Opinion and Mutual Assistance among the Montagnais-Naskapi," *American Anthropologist* 39 (1937): 222-228; Toby Morantz, "Northern Algonquian Concepts of Status and Leadership," *Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology* 19 (1982), 482-501.
77. Kenneth M. Morrison, "Discourse and the Accommodation of Meaning," 365-382.
78. Thwaites, ed., JR, 7: 123, 159ff, 295; 6: 37; 9: 19.
79. Ibid., 11: 89.
80. Ibid., 4: 201.
81. Ibid., 5: 223.
82. Ibid., 11: 259.
83. Ibid., 6: 157.
84. Ibid., 6: 157-158. For the relationship of Christianity and traditional religion in the present century see: Jacques Rousseau and Madeleine Rousseau, "Le Dualisme Religieux des Peuplades de la Foret Boreale," in Sol Tax, ed., *Acculturation in the Americas* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952), 118-126; Jacques Rousseau and Madeleine Rousseau, "Persistances Paiennes chez les Amerindiens de la foret boreale," *Cahiers des Dix* 17 (1952): 129-155; and Jacques Rousseau, "Dualisme religieux ou syncretisme chez les Algiques de la foret boreale," *Actes du VIe Congress International des Sciences Anthropologiques et Ethnologiques*, Tome 2 (1964): 469-473.
85. Thwaites, ed., JR, 11: 205.