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Becoming "All Things to All Men": Jesuit Father Jean de Brébeuf as a Cultural Intermediary

A Senior Thesis Submitted to
The Faculty of the Department of History
In Candidacy for the Degree of
Bachelor of Arts in History

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0424

Asheville, North Carolina
20 November 2007

"'Twas in the moon of wintertime / When all the birds had fled, / That mighty Gitchi Manitou / Sent angel choirs instead." Thus begins *The Huron Carol*, a re-telling of the Christmas story in terminology familiar to the Huron Indians of 1640s Canada. The carol goes on to tell of hunters hearing that the newborn Jesus lies wrapped in rabbit skins in a "lodge of broken bark." Jesus receives gifts of fox and beaver pelt from great chiefs, and the "sons of Manitou" are invited to "kneel before the radiant Boy / Who brings you beauty, peace and joy."[1]

Composed in Huron by Father Jean de Brébeuf, the carol illustrates the challenges seventeenth century Jesuit missionaries faced. How were they to explain even the most basic Christian stories and doctrines to an audience whose religious and cultural background was alien to Christianity? For the Jesuits, the answer entailed learning the language of potential converts. Along the way, the Jesuits made valuable observations about the culture and religion of their audience, though they often misinterpreted the practices and beliefs they encountered. After a priest became versed in language and culture, he could use native concepts and images to make Christianity more accessible to his listeners, as Brébeuf did in his carol. Though they have been called religious imperialists intent on forcing their culture and religion upon Indians, the example of Brébeuf attests that the Jesuits were more complex than such characterizations suggest. His capacity as a missionary allowed Brébeuf to act as a cultural intermediary, as well.

The Jesuits were noted for their dedication to missions and insistence on integrating native culture with Christian doctrine whenever possible. Founded by Ignatius Loyola in 1539-1540, the Jesuit order quickly attracted zealous adherents. The first Jesuits arrived in Port Royal, Acadia, in 1611 but were expelled two years later when Virginian Samuel Argall captured Acadia. In 1615, Franciscan Recollet priests came to Québec at Samuel de Champlain's request, and the Jesuits returned in 1625. However, the English captured Québec and Acadia again in

[1] Jean de Brébeuf, *The Huron Carol*, trans. J.E. Middleton (New York: Dutton Children's Books, 1990).

1629-1630, interrupting missions until a 1632 armistice granted France possession once more.[2] In the first few decades of the mission, the Jesuits ministered mainly to the Québec area and the Huron Indians. The mission to the Hurons coincided with a series of wars between the Hurons and the Iroquois. By 1650, the Hurons had been either exterminated or scattered, and several Jesuits had been killed. After the destruction of their Huron missions, the Jesuits turned to the Iroquois in 1654, reaching all five Iroquoian tribes by 1668.[3] Most of the documentation of early Jesuit missions comes from the *Jesuit Relations*, a series of reports written by the priests, compiled by their superior in Québec, and sent back to France. The *Relations* record missionary activity and provide cultural observations and linguistic commentary for the years 1610-1791.

The historiography of seventeenth century missionaries is heated and contentious, with historians agreeing on little except that the missionaries came to America determined to impose their religion, ideology, and culture upon the heathens they encountered. In 1867, Francis Parkman set the tone for future histories when he commended the Jesuits' approach to missions, claiming they "never had the folly to assume towards the Indians a dictatorial or overbearing tone."[4] Parkman looks skeptically at the priests' Roman Catholicism but admires their dedication to their mission. Traditionally, historians have followed Parkman's assessment and admired the Jesuits' willingness to temporarily accommodate rather than immediately obliterate native culture. A more recent study of the Jesuit missions by James T. Moore is organized around an examination of the Jesuits' cardinal principle of cultural accommodation. Parkman and Moore represent a more neutral facet of Jesuit historiography.

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[2] James T. Moore, *Indian and Jesuit: A Seventeenth-Century Encounter* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1982), 9.
[3] John Steckley, "The Warrior and the Lineage: Jesuit Use of Iroquoian Images to Communicate Christianity," *Ethnohistory* 39 (1992): 481.
[4] Francis Parkman, *The Jesuits in North America*, 1867 (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1963), 225.

Not all historians follow in the mold of Parkman, however. Some, like Francis Jennings, argue that missions, particularly those in New England, were born out of political expediency rather than any concern for Native American souls.[5] These historians often discount the sincerity of religious motivations and instead emphasize the economic and political benefits Indian conversion could offer colonists. On the other extreme are hagiographic biographies, such as Francis Xavier Talbot's biography of the beatified Brébeuf, in which Talbot expresses gratitude to Saint Joseph, patron saint of the Huron, and the Virgin Mary for helping him finish his book.[6]

Many historians argue that French Roman Catholics were accommodating in their conversion tactics. John Steckley analyzes the various ways in which Jesuits adopted Iroquoian images to convey the doctrines of Christianity to native audiences. Peter Dorsey asserts that the Jesuits admired native dialects and saw God's hand at work both in the new languages and new peoples they encountered. This combination of language and theology made them dedicated students of native culture and facilitated their "culturally sensitive approach."[7] Similarly, Moore argues that the Jesuits, following in the tradition of St. Paul, sought to respect and utilize anything in a native culture that was not inherently antithetical to Christianity.[8]

Luca Codignola and Neal Salisbury challenge the idea that Jesuits were accommodating and assert that the Jesuits were deeply committed to both conversion and civilization. Codignola claims the Jesuits' efforts to learn language and culture were "simply the means to better

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[5] Francis Jennings, *The Invasion of America: Indians, Colonialism, and the Cant of Conquest* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1975).
[6] Francis Xavier Talbot, *Saint Among the Hurons: The Life of Jean de Brébeuf* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1949), 321.
[7] Peter A. Dorsey, "Going to School with Savages: Authorship and Authority among the Jesuits of New France," *William and Mary Quarterly* 55 (1998): 401.
[8] Moore, 42.

implement their overall plans."[9] Salisbury argues that the Jesuits were "determined to impose their religious systems on natives at any cost" and speculates that historians overlook this Jesuit goal because they concentrate on the Jesuits' "results rather than their intentions."[10] According to this school of thought, the Jesuits failed to Christianize the Indians of New France but succeeded in disrupting native societies.[11] While their countrymen colonized the land, the priests sought to colonize hearts and minds. This argument, however, gives a one-sided picture of these men. As James Axtell points out, the Jesuits tried to reshape native culture "in order to establish a common ground on which to begin conversion."[12] The priests sought to impart their European religion and culture, but in order to do so effectively, they first had to be students. They needed to learn how their potential converts spoke, thought, and interacted with each other. In doing so, the Jesuits could become cultural intermediaries.

An intermediary can be defined as a person who knows the language and culture of multiple peoples well enough to communicate with them. More importantly, an intermediary is able to facilitate communication between people who cannot understand each other. Go-betweens are often interpreters, for in order to be truly effective at finding linguistic equivalents, interpreters have to understand the "hidden, culturally prescribed meanings and values" that metaphors convey.[13] Indeed, the people historians have most often identified as cultural intermediaries were interpreters of mixed heritage.

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[9] Luca Codignola, "The Holy See and the Conversion of the Indians in French and British North America," in *America in European Consciousness, 1493-1750*, ed. Karen Kupperman (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina, 1995), 216.
[10] Neal Salisbury, "Religious Encounters in a Colonial Context: New England and New France in the Seventeenth Century," *American Indian Quarterly* 16 (1992): 506.
[11] Ibid., 505.
[12] James Axtell, "The Invasion Within: The Contest of Cultures," in *Natives and Newcomers: The Cultural Origins of North America*, ed. James Axtell (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 163.
[13] Nancy L. Hagedorn, "'A Friend to Go between Them': The Interpreter as Cultural Broker during Anglo-Iroquois Councils, 1740-70," *Ethnohistory* 35 (1988): 64.

Alison Duncan Hirsch and James H. Merrell's studies of early eighteenth century interpreters Madame Montour and her son Andrew Montour are representative of the historical literature on intermediaries.[14] Both Montours were reputed to be of French and Indian descent, and both spoke French, English, and several Algonquian and Iroquoian languages. Their European heritage worked in their favor, because many Europeans distrusted Indian interpreters, believing their translations favored Indians or were simply incompetent.[15] Conversely, their Indian heritage could work against the Montours. Andrew Montour worked for whoever would hire him, and even his dress – a mixture of scarlet waistcoat, breeches, shoes, earrings, and face paint – reflected his ability to integrate various facets of colonial American cultures into his own identity.[16] Montour was in the middle ground, defined by Richard White as "the place in between: in between cultures, peoples," a place that could create new identities as well as destroy old.[17] The middle ground was not a place of assimilation, of abandoning one culture and language to take on different ones. It was a place of acculturation, a synthesis and integration of traits from two or more cultures.[18] White emphasizes the creative powers of the middle ground, while Merrell argues that the middle ground could be a no-man's land. In Montour's case, his ability to interpret for many different people meant he was distrusted by all of them. Merrell argues that "Montour could be all things to all people…but he belonged to no one."[19] Having a

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[14] Alison Duncan Hirsch, "The Celebrated Madame Montour: Interpretess across Early American Frontiers," *Explorations in Early American Culture* 4 (2000): 81-112; James H. Merrell, "'The Cast of His Countenance': Reading Andrew Montour," in *Through A Glass Darkly: Reflections on Personal Identity in Early America*, ed. Ronald Hoffman, Mechal Sobel, and Fredrika J. Teute (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1997).
[15] James Axtell, "Babel of Tongues: Communicating with the Indians," in *Natives and Newcomers: The Cultural Origins of North America*, ed. James Axtell (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 67.
[16] Merrell, 19.
[17] Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650-1815* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), x, ix.
[18] White, x; Michael P. Clark, Introduction, in *The Eliot Tracts: With Letters from John Eliot to Thomas Thorowgood and Richard Baxter*, ed. Michael P. Clark (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003), 19.
[19] Merrell, 29.

foot in two different cultures was a precarious position, and while "many crossed the cultural divide between Indians and Europeans, few really felt at home on the far side."[20]

The Jesuits, though, could avoid this occupational hazard. However sympathetic they were to Indian lifestyles, and however much they adopted them, ideologically, they remained firmly entrenched in the European, Christian camp. Their role as missionaries discouraged them from "going native" completely. Their Christianity, especially their monastic vows, forbade them to participate in native religious rituals and to marry Indian women. However, by being firmly grounded on the European side, they removed troublesome doubts about where their true allegiance lay. They were more familiar with native languages and cultures than most other colonial settlers, and they used their knowledge to mediate between Indians and Europeans. In this way, the Jesuits were effective go-betweens.

Jean de Brébeuf was arguably the best Jesuit intermediary. Born 1593 in Normandy, he was ordained as a priest three years before his 1625 arrival in New France.[21] He spent his first Canadian winter among the Montagnais near Québec, learning their Algonquian-based language. In 1626, Brébeuf was sent to the Hurons, an Iroquoian language group. This decision puzzled other Jesuits, for Brébeuf had made considerable progress in learning the Montagnais language in only a few months. Addressing these queries, Jesuit superior Charles Lalemant, wrote that Brébeuf's linguistic talents persuaded him to send Brébeuf to the Hurons, who were considered a promising group of potential converts.[22] Brébeuf lived with the Hurons for two years before the Jesuits were expelled when the English captured Québec, holding it until 1633. When the priests

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[20] Ibid., 37.
[21] Talbot, 4, 11.
[22] Reuben Gold Thwaites, ed., *The Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents: Travels and Explorations of the Jesuit Missionaries in New France, 1610-1791*, Vol. 4: Acadia and Québec, 1633-1634, trans. Finlow Alexander et al. (Cleveland: Burrows Brothers Company, 1898), 221. http://puffin.creighton.edu/jesuit/relations/relations_04.html (accessed August 27, 2007).

returned, the Hurons were reluctant to allow them into their territory. Brébeuf did not insist they be granted entry but told the Huron leaders he was sorry they did not want him "to live and die" with them so he could show them the way to heaven.[23] In 1634, the Hurons took Brébeuf and two other priests with them after Monsieur du Plessis Bochard, French general of the fleet, spoke on the Jesuits' behalf and offered presents to the Hurons.[24]

Brébeuf lived mostly among the Hurons, eight hundred miles from the Jesuit mission in Québec. When he and his companions, Antoine Daniel and Ambrose Davost, arrived in the Huron nation in 1634, it contained an estimated twenty towns and thirty thousand people.[25] Contemporaries noted that Brébeuf was affable, humble, accepting, and an extraordinarily talented linguist, a combination that made him a superb missionary by Jesuit standards.[26] The Hurons soon gave him a new name, "Echon," possibly a modified pronunciation of "Jean."[27] Brébeuf soon realized that the Hurons were not as sedentary as the Fathers had assumed, since each village moved every ten to twenty years, when the area's wood supply was depleted and the over-cultivated land produced scanty harvests.[28] In the 1630s, the priests established a central headquarters at Ste. Marie that would allow them to travel wherever the Hurons moved. In 1639,

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[23] Reuben Gold Thwaites, ed., *The Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents: Travels and Explorations of the Jesuit Missionaries in New France, 1610-1791*, Vol. 6: Québec, 1633-1634, trans. Finlow Alexander et al. (Cleveland: Burrows Brothers Company, 1898), 17. http://puffin.creighton.edu/jesuit/relations/relations_06.html (accessed August 27, 2007).

[24] Reuben Gold Thwaites, ed., *The Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents: Travels and Explorations of the Jesuit Missionaries in New France, 1610-1791*, Vol. 7: Québec, Hurons, and Cape Breton, 1634-1635, trans. Finlow Alexander et al. (Cleveland: Burrows Brothers Company, 1898), 217-219. http://puffin.creighton.edu/jesuit/relations/relations_07.html (accessed August 27, 2007).

[25] Reuben Gold Thwaites, ed., *The Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents: Travels and Explorations of the Jesuit Missionaries in New France, 1610-1791*, Vol. 8: Québec, Hurons, and Cape Breton, 1634-1635, trans. Finlow Alexander et al. (Cleveland: Burrows Brothers Company, 1898), 115. http://puffin.creighton.edu/jesuit/relations/relations_08.html (accessed August 27, 2007).

[26] Margaret J. Leahey, "To Hear with My Eyes: The Native Language Acquisition Project in the Jesuit *Relations*" (PhD diss., Johns Hopkins University, 1990), 78, 198.

[27] Talbot, 33.

[28] Jean de Brébeuf to the Very Reverend Father Mutio Vitelleschi, General of the Society of Jesus at Rome, 1636, in *The Travels and Sufferings of Father Jean de Brébeuf among the Hurons of Canada as Described by Himself*, ed. and trans. Theodore Besterman (London: Golden Cockerel Press, 1938), 168.

Brébeuf moved temporarily to the "Neutral Nation," who lived just north of the Iroquois, and came back with an even greater understanding of Huron.[29] When he broke his clavicle in 1641, his superior sent him back to Québec to supervise the distribution of supplies to the Huron missions. Brébeuf was anxious to leave Québec, however, and returned to the Hurons in 1644, remaining there until his death in 1649.

Brébeuf and his fellow Jesuits began their missions as students, not teachers. By living among potential converts, the priests were forced to learn how to communicate with Indians quickly. Once they were fairly proficient in their new language (or had secured the services of a cooperative translator), they began to teach Roman Catholic doctrine and practice. Brébeuf recorded that he began by "catechizing this memorable truth, that their souls, which are immortal, all go after death either to Paradise or to Hell."[30] He also led a catechism class, in which participants crowded into the Jesuits' small house. The class began with a recitation of the *Pater Noster* in Huron, after which Brébeuf made the sign of the cross and reviewed the last week's lesson. He then gave a new lesson and questioned the children, rewarding those who answered well with a porcelain or glass bead.[31] The Jesuits also used pictures as aids in catechizing. Father Jérôme Lalemant even gave a band of nomadic Christians a "book" of five sticks, colored to remind them of sin and their religious duties to God.[32] Because Roman Catholicism emphasizes Church tradition, the Jesuits relied mainly on orally delivered teachings and were less concerned with teaching converts to read the Bible.

The language barrier was the first obstacle the Jesuits had to overcome, because language acquisition was linked with cultural understanding. It was also one of the most formidable,

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[29] Moore, 23-24.
[30] Thwaites, ed., *The Jesuit Relations*, Vol. 8: 145. http://puffin.creighton.edu/jesuit/relations/relations_08.html.
[31] Ibid., 8: 143-145. http://puffin.creighton.edu/jesuit/relations/relations_08.html.
[32] Moore, 134-135.

leading Englishman John White to conclude that "the linguistic barrier to religious instruction could be easily overcome only if God restored the apostolic gift of speaking in tongues," referring to the Biblical account of the Apostles speaking in foreign tongues at Pentecost.[33] At the time of contact, there were four major language families in Eastern North America, encompassing 220 languages and an unknown number of regional dialects. The earliest attempts at communication used body language and gestures, which were inefficient in the absence of a uniform sign language. When intermediate languages emerged, they were either a mixture of European and Indian vocabularies, or, more commonly, a pidgin language that simplified one language, suppressing its distinctive features in order to make it easier for strangers to learn. In the early seventeenth century, traders compiled lists of native words for trade goods, body parts, numbers, plants, animals, and other common objects, in order to help other European traders communicate.[34] These lists were useful for most colonists, who needed only a rudimentary knowledge of the neighboring Indian language, but they were inadequate for missionaries.

The Jesuits faced a particularly difficult task in learning to communicate. The doctrines they tried to teach Native Americans were antithetical to the religions the Indians practiced and, therefore, many words and spiritual concepts – like the Trinity, transubstantiation, and atonement – did not readily translate. Jesus' parables could help illustrate these concepts, but here, too, the priests encountered problems. The Indians lacked words for salt, leaven, pearl, prison, mustard seed, shepherd, and lamp, thereby denying easy comprehension of parables which incorporated these items.[35] Furthermore, the Jesuits did not have ready access to the best or most cooperative interpreters. Jesuit Superior Paul Le Jeune bemoaned the uncooperativeness of his language

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[33] Richard W. Cogley, *John Eliot's Mission to the Indians before King Philip's War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 8. The account of Pentecost is found in Acts 2:1-13.
[34] Axtell, "Babel of Tongues," 47-63.
[35] Codignola, 215.

tutor, whom he alternatively called "the Renegade" and "the Apostate."[36] In addition, the priests' own faith could prevent them from accessing good interpreters and language tutors. Traders and trappers who lived in Indian country often took Indian mistresses, also known as "sleeping dictionaries," who aided their acquisition of native languages.[37] This was not an acceptable option for Roman Catholic priests who had taken lifelong vows of celibacy.

Brébeuf and his colleagues had to learn a native language in the field with none of the textbooks that make learning languages a more manageable task. In her study of Jesuit tactics of language acquisition, Margaret J. Leahey argued that a "natural" aptitude for foreign languages did not necessarily transfer into success in acquiring an unwritten language. The priests had to gain not only grammatical competence – mastery of syntax, lexicon, and grammar – but also discourse competence – the ability to create a meaningful whole. Striving for a high level of fluency was difficult, for fluency was most often the result of putting oneself into situations where there was no linguistic safety net. According to the Input Hypothesis, language acquisition is greatly aided when learners are constantly exposed to language elements beyond their level of comprehension, forcing them to constantly struggle for deeper understanding.[38] When a person understands most of the language around him, he can easily become complacent about learning new vocabulary and grammatical structures. If, however, he is consistently placed in situations where he comprehends only a fraction of the language, he continues to learn the words and idioms he needs to achieve fluency.

Because they lived among Native Americans, the Fathers were constantly pushed beyond the limits of their comprehension. The earliest Jesuits in Canada were aided by an unnamed Indian who, having previously served as translator for the Recollet Fathers in Canada, offered his

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[36] Thwaites, ed., *The Jesuit Relations,* Vol. 7: 67. http://puffin.creighton.edu/jesuit/relations/relations_07.html.
[37] Axtell, "The Invasion Within," 167.
[38] Leahey, "To Hear with My Eyes," 64-65, 160, 184.

services to the Jesuits.[39] The Jesuits also spent their evenings piecing together what they had learned during the day. Even with these aids, language acquisition was difficult. Le Jeune, an early Jesuit superior, proved unable to learn the Montagnais language. While Le Jeune struggled with comprehension, he had nothing but praise for Brébeuf's abilities, writing, "Oh, what an excellent man for these countries is Father Brébeuf! His most fortunate memory, and his amiability and gentleness, will be productive of much good among the Hurons."[40]

Brébeuf deserved Le Jeune's praise, for he picked up languages with unusual speed. When Brébeuf was prevented from joining the Hurons in 1633, Le Jeune counted it a blessing in disguise and had Brébeuf teach the Fathers, "every day, evening and morning, the language of the Hurons."[41] Le Jeune often urged his superiors in France to send more Jesuits. He was afraid to send his priests into the field, because if any Father, and particularly Brébeuf, died, much linguistic knowledge would be lost.[42] Brébeuf also pleaded for more Fathers, writing to the superiors at Rome that there was a great need for workers "not indeed to reap, but to sow, or rather to learn the language so that they may be able [to sow] the word of God; for if they do not know the language, they cannot sow, let alone reap."[43] In commenting upon his role as language tutor, Brébeuf seemed uncomfortable, noting, "if God does not assist me extraordinarily, I shall yet have to go a long time to the school of the savages, so prolific is their language."[44] Although his colleagues called him the most fluent and knowledgeable priest, Brébeuf was uneasy with this designation because he was acutely aware of the gaps in his knowledge.

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[39] Thwaites, ed., *The Jesuit Relations*, Vol. 4: 215. http://puffin.creighton.edu/jesuit/relations/relations_04.html.
[40] Thwaites, ed., *The Jesuit Relations*, Vol. 7: 31. http://puffin.creighton.edu/jesuit/relations/relations_07.html.
[41] Thwaites, ed., *The Jesuit Relations*, Vol. 6: 21. http://puffin.creighton.edu/jesuit/relations/relations_06.html.
[42] Thwaites, ed., *The Jesuit Relations,* Vol. 7: 233. http://puffin.creighton.edu/jesuit/relations/relations_07.html.
[43] Brébeuf to Vitelleschi, 1636, in *The Travels and Sufferings of Father Jean de Brébeuf*, 169.
[44] Thwaites, ed., *The Jesuit Relations,* Vol. 8: 133. http://puffin.creighton.edu/jesuit/relations/relations_08.html.

Many early Jesuits commented upon the copious lexicons of Indian languages. Le Jeune lamented, "Stock your memory with all the words that stand for each particular thing, learn the knot or syntax that joins them together, and you are still only an ignoramus" because there were many synonyms for one object and yet no words for piety, devotion, or virtue.[45] Additionally, the alphabet was different. Brébeuf noted that the Huron language had no labial letters (B, F, L, M, P, X, and Z) or the vowels I and U.[46] The Montagnais language also had what the Jesuits saw as flexible pronunciations, frequently interchanging the letters B and P, and C, G, and K, to the consternation of priests attempting to learn the already confusing language.[47]

As one of the most fluent Jesuits, Brébeuf wrote many of the texts that would later help his comrades learn Huron. Brébeuf wrote a French-Huron dictionary and grammar and composed a catechism, prayers, sermons, and hymns in Huron.[48] His dictionary was so valuable that during a time of danger in 1637, Brébeuf charged his companions to carry the church's sacred vessels and the dictionary to a place of safety.[49] Brébeuf worked hard to master the idiomatic expressions and metaphors endemic to the Huron language, continually striving for what Leahey terms "mutual intelligibility."[50] It was not enough that he understand what the Hurons were saying. He wanted them to understand him, as well. His knowledge was gained through trial and error, born out of everyday contact with native speakers.

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[45] Thwaites, ed., *The Jesuit Relations,* Vol. 7: 27, 21. http://puffin.creighton.edu/jesuit/relations/relations_07.html.
[46] Reuben Gold Thwaites, ed., *The Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents: Travels and Explorations of the Jesuit Missionaries in New France, 1610-1791*, Vol. 39: Hurons, 1653, trans. Finlow Alexander, et al. (Cleveland: Burrows Brothers Company, 1898), 103. http://puffin.creighton.edu/jesuit/relations/relations_39.html (accessed August 27, 2007).
[47] Thwaites, ed., *The Jesuit Relations,* Vol. 7: 31. http://puffin.creighton.edu/jesuit/relations/relations_07.html.
[48] Steckley, 479.
[49] Reuben Gold Thwaites, ed., *The Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents: Travels and Explorations of the Jesuit Missionaries in New France, 1610-1791*, Vol. 15: Hurons and Québec, 1638-1639, trans. Finlow Alexander et al. (Cleveland: Burrows Brothers Company, 1898), 65. http://puffin.creighton.edu/jesuit/relations/relations_15.html (accessed August 27, 2007).
[50] Margaret J. Leahey, "'Comment peut un muet prescher l'evangile?' Jesuit Missionaries and the Native Languages of New France," *French Historical Studies* 19 (1995): 118.

Speaking an Indian tongue fluently was perhaps the easiest part of a missionary's task. In order to truly change Indians, missionaries had to understand the culture of their potential converts. Leahey argues that it was imperative for a missionary to be comfortable with native culture, observing that those who imitated native customs learned native language faster and more efficiently.[51] Some translation scholars believe that cultural knowledge and translation cannot be separated, arguing that knowledge of a culture "does not necessarily precede the translation activity, and that the act of translation is itself very much involved in the creation of knowledge."[52] The closer a missionary was to the people he hoped to convert, the better his chances of understanding them and, in turn, of effectively communicating the Gospel message.

Though he disliked certain cultural practices, Brébeuf worked with native cultures to bring Indians to salvation. An integral part of Jesuit training was the Apostle Paul's teaching to become "all things to all men in order to win all to Jesus Christ."[53] Pope Gregory's instruction, that indigenous customs which did not hinder Christianity's progress should be preserved and adapted for missionary purposes, also influenced the Jesuits.[54] The Jesuits in Canada took these lessons to heart. Though he disapproved of the customary burial of possessions with the dead, Le Jeune observed, "one tolerates, in these first beginnings, many things which in time will disappear of themselves."[55] Brébeuf echoed his superior's sentiment, writing, "There is nothing that does not serve for salvation when God pleases, not even dreams."[56] This last statement lends particular insight into the Jesuit mindset. They regarded everything as potential tools of conversion, and, therefore, nothing was inherently corrupt. For the Jesuits, even Indian religions

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[51] Leahey, "To Hear with My Eyes," 67, 195.
[52] Edwin Gentzler and Maria Tymoczko, Introduction, in *Translation and Power*, ed. Maria Tymoczko and Edwin Gentzler (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press), xxi.
[53] Dorsey, 399. The verse cited is I Corinthians 9:22.
[54] William M. Clements, "The Jesuit Foundations of Native North American Literary Studies," *American Indian Quarterly* 18 (1994): 48.
[55] Thwaites, ed., *The Jesuit Relations*, Vol. 8: 267-269. http://puffin.creighton.edu/jesuit/relations/relations_08.html.
[56] Ibid., 8: 147. http://puffin.creighton.edu/jesuit/relations/relations_08.html.

were simply a perversion of Christianity. With proper teaching, Indians would recognize that their current practices were shadows of the true religion and would reject the sinful aspects of their culture. In this sense, missionaries sought to redeem Indian culture as well as Indian souls.

Like the other Jesuits, Brébeuf lived in close proximity to his potential converts and participated in the activities of daily life as much as possible, practices that allowed him to gain intimate knowledge of Huron culture. The priests lived in Indian-style houses, which Le Jeune described as cramped prisons subject to the discomforts of cold, heat, smoke, and dogs.[57] When the Hurons went without food for days, as often happened in winters when there was no snow to aid hunting, the Jesuits also went hungry. During these forced periods of fasting, Brébeuf admired the Hurons' stoic acceptance of hunger pangs and their continued activity.[58] Though he found much to admire, Brébeuf also found much to criticize. He was particularly wary of medicine men, convinced that they were "true Sorcerers, who have access to the Devil."[59] In his 1635 report on the progress of the Huron mission, he also denounced the Huron practice of changing wives at will and their belief in the prophetic power of dreams. Otherwise, he noted, there seemed to be no major obstacles to Indians learning and accepting Roman Catholicism.[60]

Brébeuf's statement may have been overly optimistic, and scholars have noted that the Jesuits tended to underestimate the difficulties involved in converting native peoples.[61] This hopeful outlook did not mean that the Jesuits were naïve about their chances of converting most of the Hurons to Christianity. By 1648, fifteen percent of the Hurons had converted: a respectable number but far less than the full one hundred percent the Jesuits strove for.[62] Nor did

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[57] Thwaites, ed., *The Jesuit Relations*, Vol. 7: 37-39. http://puffin.creighton.edu/jesuit/relations/relations_07.html.
[58] Thwaites, ed., *The Jesuit Relations*, Vol. 8: 129. http://puffin.creighton.edu/jesuit/relations/relations_08.html.
[59] Ibid., 8: 123. http://puffin.creighton.edu/jesuit/relations/relations_08.html.
[60] Ibid., 8: 149-151. http://puffin.creighton.edu/jesuit/relations/relations_08.html.
[61] Daniel K. Richter, "Iroquois versus Iroquois: Jesuit Missions and Christianity in Village Politics, 1642-1686," *Ethnohistory* 32 (1985): 1.
[62] Salisbury, 505.

it mean that the Jesuits believed they understood everything they saw. Painfully aware of his ignorance of both Montagnais language and culture, Le Jeune cautioned against hasty assumptions, observing, "after having seen two or three Savages do the same thing, it is at once reported to be a custom of the whole Tribe. The argument drawn from the enumeration of parts is faulty.…when it is said that certain practices are common to the Savages, it may be true of one tribe and not true of another."[63] Le Jeune did not provide specific examples, perhaps fearing to speak authoritatively of customs he did not fully understand. He concluded, "Time is the father of truth," conveying his conviction that the Jesuits would learn to differentiate between the many tribes and discern which tactics would be appropriate for each group.[64]

When Brébeuf felt he understood a cultural practice, he adopted it. One example of this cultural adoption occurred in 1637, during an epidemic among the Hurons. As with most epidemics in early colonial America, Indians suffered high casualty rates while Europeans remained unscathed. The Hurons, who suspected the Jesuits were sorcerers, became even more wary of them as Huron converts and their families continued to die. Father François Le Mercier recorded that when Brébeuf and two companions came to the village of Angoutenc, the residents covered their faces and closed their doors to the priests. Le Mercier attributed these behaviors to the fact that the Hurons, who customarily did not visit the ill, were understandably bewildered and fearful of the Jesuits' presence.[65] The priests explained their purpose and intentions to a leader, who received them favorably and promised to talk to the other old men. The Jesuits then "went immediately to see those who were most ill" and were met by a "war Captain" who "threatened to split our heads if we went any further."[66] The priests backed down, but rumors of

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[63] Thwaites, ed., *The Jesuit Relations,* Vol. 6: 29. http://puffin.creighton.edu/jesuit/relations/relations_06.html.
[64] Ibid.
[65] Thwaites, ed., *The Jesuit Relations*, Vol. 15: 23. http://puffin.creighton.edu/jesuit/relations/relations_15.html.
[66] Ibid., 15: 25. http://puffin.creighton.edu/jesuit/relations/relations_15.html.

their sorcery continued. Among other things, the Jesuits were accused of stabbing a child in the woods. Le Mercier attributed these accusations to Satan, who was enraged because of the "little innocents" the Jesuits had snatched from him through baptism.[67]

The Hurons' treatment of the suspected Jesuits provides an example of the two cultures intersecting each other. The Jesuits' Christian practices had gotten them in trouble with their native audience, while the Hurons dealt with the Europeans according to their traditional methods of discipline. The priests were summoned before a council which accused them of killing Hurons with sorcery. Speaking for the group, Brébeuf maintained that he did not know why Indians were dying. Seeing that the Hurons were unsatisfied with his answer, he told them what he did know: the Gospel. The council postponed a decision on the Jesuits' fate and kept them prisoner for two months. Near the end of this period, a Huron informed the Jesuits that they would soon die. Brébeuf wrote a letter to his superiors, telling them of the situation and assuring them that the priests were ready for martyrdom, should it come. After quoting Brébeuf's letter, Le Mercier described Brébeuf's actions in what he thought were his last days.[68]

Brébeuf's conduct in the days leading up to what should have been his death is a fascinating example of how far he had immersed himself in Huron culture. After arranging the security of the sacred vessels and Huron dictionary, Brébeuf "thought it well" to invite the Hurons to his *Atsataion*, or Farewell Feast, "such as they are accustomed to give when they are nearing death."[69] Le Mercier noted that the cabin overflowed with people, giving the priests an opportunity to preach. Inexplicably, within a few days, all threats against the Jesuits stopped, a fact that Le Mercier attributed to divine intervention. A later *Relations* volume notes that every man facing death, especially captives awaiting torture, gave the Farewell Feast. Brébeuf and his

[67] Ibid., 15: 33. http://puffin.creighton.edu/jesuit/relations/relations_15.html.
[68] Ibid., 15: 11-67. http://puffin.creighton.edu/jesuit/relations/relations_15.html.
[69] Ibid., 15: 67. http://puffin.creighton.edu/jesuit/relations/relations_15.html.

companions apparently understood this custom well enough to know that by giving it, they could "show themselves ready for death."[70] By giving the feast, Brébeuf showed that he did not fear death, but he also reminded the Hurons that he was knowledgeable about their culture. Perhaps more importantly, by giving the feast, Brébeuf showed his respect for Huron culture. He acted in a way the Hurons deemed culturally acceptable and expected, instead of clinging exclusively to his own traditions of readying oneself for death.

The early years of the Jesuit missions were dangerous, testing the commitment of Brébeuf and his colleagues to living with Indians and adopting native lifestyles. Wars between the Hurons and Iroquois peaked during the years of the Jesuit missions to the Hurons, culminating in the destruction of the Huron by the 1650s. In 1642, Father Isaac Jogues, one of Brébeuf's former protégées, was captured by the Mohawks.[71] Jogues escaped and returned to France but soon came back to Canada. In 1646, he was captured again and killed when one Mohawk, impatient over deliberations on whether to kill or spare the priest, split Jogues' head open with a hatchet before beheading him.[72] Jogues' death signified the increasing violence between Iroquois and Huron and served as a reminder that Jesuits could get caught in the middle.

Brébeuf's final act as an intermediary was his own death. On March 16, 1649, the Iroquois attacked St. Ignace, a Huron village where Brébeuf and Father Gabriel Lalemant were staying, and took the Hurons and the priests prisoner. The account of Brébeuf's death came from Huron survivors, who told the story to Jesuit Christophe Regnaut. Following the Iroquoian pattern of ritualistic torture, the prisoners were tied to posts before suffering severe beatings and

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[70] Thwaites, ed., *The Jesuit Relations,* Vol. 39: 133. http://puffin.creighton.edu/jesuit/relations/relations_39.html.
[71] John Gilmary Shea, "Memoir of the Holy Missionary," in *Narrative of a Captivity among the Mohawk Indians, and a Description of New Netherland in 1642-3*, by Isaac Jogues, trans. John Gilmary Shea, 1856 (New York: Garland Publishing, 1977), 7.
[72] Jan Labatie to Monsieur la Montagne, 30 October 1646, in *Narrative of a Captivity among the Mohawk Indians, and a Description of New Netherland in 1642-3*, by Isaac Jogues, trans. John Gilmary Shea, 1856 (New York: Garland Publishing, 1977), 68-69.

the agony of having their fingernails ripped out. Brébeuf called encouragement to his fellow prisoners throughout the ordeal, urging them to "suffer well, that they might die well."[73] One tormentor, a Huron apostate who had become an Iroquois war adoptee, confronted Brébeuf and, in a mockery of the Jesuits' teachings on baptism and salvation, "baptized" him with scalding water. The Iroquois then hung red-hot hatchets around the captives' necks and lit them on fire. Through all of the torture, Brébeuf preached to his captors, enraging them so much that they cut off his tongue and lips. After flaying, roasting, and eating strips of his skin, the Iroquois scalped Brébeuf. As he died, one of the torturers cut out his heart, which he also roasted and ate. The group drank his blood, as well, believing that partaking of the blood of a courageous man would give them strength to face their own deaths. When news reached Québec, Regnaut led a search party to recover the pitifully mangled bodies.[74] The bones of the priests were treated with great veneration,[75] and future missionaries prayed to Brébeuf for aid.[76]

In the 1630s, the Jesuits entertained the idea of assimilating converted Indians into the French Canadian population, but by the 1640s, they opposed assimilation, claiming that any contact with the French proved destructive to Indians.[77] Though they did not try to assimilate their converts, the Jesuits actively attempted to "civilize" converted Indians. Conversion involved more than venerating a cross and learning a few prayers in Huron, since the Jesuits expected their converts to give up their heathen practices in exchange for Christian ones. For

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[73] Reuben Gold Thwaites, ed., *The Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents: Travels and Explorations of the Jesuit Missionaries in New France, 1610-1791*, Vol. 34: Lower Canada and Hurons, 1649, trans. Finlow Alexander et al. (Cleveland: Burrows Brothers Company, 1898), 27. http://puffin.creighton.edu/jesuit/relations/relations_34.html (accessed August 27, 2007).
[74] Ibid., 34: 25-37. http://puffin.creighton.edu/jesuit/relations/relations_34.html.
[75] Brébeuf, Gabriel Lalemant, and Jogues were among eight Jesuits beatified by Pope Pius XI in 1930. See Gordon M. Sayre, ed., *American Captivity Narratives* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000), 93.
[76] Reuben Gold Thwaites, ed., *The Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents: Travels and Explorations of the Jesuit Missionaries in New France, 1610-1791*, Vol. 37: Lower Canada, Abenakis, 1651-1652, trans. Finlow Alexander et al. (Cleveland: Burrows Brothers Company, 1898), 35. http://puffin.creighton.edu/jesuit/relations/relations_37.html (accessed August 27, 2007).
[77] Moore, 190, 36.

instance, instead of throwing tobacco in a fire to appease the spirits,[78] new Christians sought the intercessory prayers of the saints. No matter how culturally sensitive the Jesuits may have been, they were, first and foremost, missionaries intent on converting souls.

The idea of a missionary acting as a cultural intermediary may seem counterintuitive. With their strict religious beliefs and agenda of conversion, they, of all Europeans, should have been unwilling to compromise. As Jennings noted, "The very condition of being a missionary implied assumptions of superiority in the knowledge of the most important Truth in the world…and a man with such assumptions is not likely to be modest when he compares himself with his innocent or 'evil' charges."[79] This statement is true, because missionaries zealously guarded the integrity of Christianity's fundamental teachings, which were often foreign to Native American culture. As Daniel K. Richter points out, even the idea of "doctrine," a "set of specific concepts" that all adherents were expected to believe, was foreign to Native Americans.[80]

Paradoxically, the Jesuits could be intermediaries precisely because their beliefs were different from those of potential converts. The priests had to understand the beliefs and customs they were trying to change. By learning the language and attempting to learn how to read the customs they observed, the Jesuits stretched their conceptions of what constituted civilized behavior. Often, they ended up tolerating or even adopting native practices, as Brébeuf did with the Farewell Feast. The Fathers were forced to realize that conversion was a slow process, depending on both an Indian's desire to convert and a priest's desire to facilitate. For some Indians, conversion was the solution to the problems they faced in the early seventeenth century.

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[78] Thwaites, ed., *The Jesuit Relations,* Vol. 39: 13. http://puffin.creighton.edu/jesuit/relations/relations_39.html.
[79] Jennings, 57.
[80] Daniel K. Richter, *Facing East from Indian Country: A Native History of Early America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 83.

From their viewpoint, missions were successful because they fulfilled "their needs in just the amounts necessary to maintain their cultural integrity and ensure their survival."[81]

Intermediaries are often portrayed as neutral, but this depiction is problematic. Even the Montours, linked by blood to Indian and European circles, had distinct allegiances. Loyalties frequently changed, and interpretation and translation were never impartial acts. The fact that colonial officials often demanded multiple translations testifies to partiality. Interpreters held the power to start or stop wars, depending on how they phrased and delivered a translation. Furthermore, interpreters could give their employers modified translations that let them hear what they wanted to hear.[82] If secular go-betweens could be expected to have bias and their own agenda, the same could be true of missionaries. Their bias and agenda were obvious to all. However, their agenda of conversion and civilization did not prevent them from being go-betweens. An intermediary facilitated communication between groups of people who otherwise would be alienated by their linguistic differences. His own personal allegiance and agenda would surface but would not compromise his status as a go-between. By learning the ways of Native Americans, the Jesuits mediated between very different worlds.

Reflecting on Brébeuf's life, fellow Jesuit Regnaut noted, "He adapted his own nature and temperament to the customs among these peoples, with so much ability, – becoming all things to all men, in order to win them to Jesus Christ."[83] Colonial missionaries have been condemned for their attempts to "civilize" Indians. Their acquisition of native languages and attempts to understand native cultures have been dismissed as tools used to obliterate native society. Such interpretations of Jesuit actions, however, are problematic. They allow little input from Indians. In this model of Indian-European interaction, Indians are often portrayed as

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[81] James Axtell, "Some Thoughts on the Ethnohistory of Missions," *Ethnohistory* 29 (1982): 39.
[82] Hagedorn, 71.
[83] Thwaites, ed., *The Jesuit* Relations, Vol. 34: 159. http://puffin.creighton.edu/jesuit/relations/relations_34.html.

helpless victims trapped in the onslaught of colonial cultural and religious imperialism. Such readings also characterize missionaries as intent on colonizing Indian minds and hearts just as their countrymen were colonizing Indian lands. This generalization is inaccurate. Missionaries like Brébeuf were far more complex men. Brébeuf strove to convert the Huron, and he believed "civilization" was a major component of the conversion process. However, he also observed the native culture of his converts and worked to help them mediate between former pagan and new Christian ways and beliefs. This ability to mediate between two disparate cultures, to teach one group how the "other" thinks and lives, to create dialogue and peaceful interaction between groups, is the true hallmark of a cultural intermediary.

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