

Why Have You Come Here?

*The Jesuits and the First Evangelization
of Native America*

NICHOLAS P. CUSHNER

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Introduction

The purpose of this book is to explain and interpret how one belief system replaces another. What variables come into play? What has to take place during the interaction to ensure that one system effectively overcomes the other? Can or does the host religion ever completely disappear?

Modern cultural anthropologists object to the idea that one belief system should actually replace another. However, even before the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (the general temporal frames of the present investigation), proselytizing cultures believed that it was their right and duty to change the existing fabric of societies. The introduction of Christianity by the Benedictines into the remote corners of the Roman Empire was simply the logical consequence of the earlier substitution of a monotheistic Christian deity in place of the Roman gods. Islam's sweep over the Middle East in the seventh and eighth centuries was as much political as religious. The Crusades of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries were warnings of the intransigent nature of evangelical Christianity. The discoveries of the New World simply rerouted Europe's crusading spirit to the East and not to the South. Therefore, a formal state religion was the traditional structure in societies from fifth-century B.C. Mesopotamia to fifteenth-century A.D. Europe.¹ The idea of "tolerance" or allowing belief systems to exist side-by-side does not enter Western consciousness until Locke, Hume, and the American and French revo-

lutions popularized the notion of democracy in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

In the present book, the encounter or collision of Christianity with Native American religions is examined. Christianity prevailed. Why did it become the dominant religion is this book's subject matter. Why did it happen and what was the process of substitution? How did the agents of religious change go about the task of substitution? What variables were at play? What were the circumstances permitting success (how does one define success?) in Mexico, Paraguay, or Peru, but failure in Florida and Maryland?

Was there a correlation between the weather and success in evangelization? And by success is meant the development of sustained ecclesiastical institutions. It seems that temperate weather systems insured a reliable cycle of farming accompanied by reliable conversions. When North American aborigines set out to hunt during the winter snows, the European missionaries were flabbergasted. But what was the Native American to do? He might have stared from his long house, watched the snow pile up, and waited. But hunger soon overcame him. No crops grew in the snow! So he would hunt for winter prey. In less hostile zones, missionaries were more successful. Their Christian converts were even more authentic. In Mexico, Paraguay, and Juli, the conversion rate was higher. Added to this was the bond, the partnership-loyalty connector, that Jesuit and Guaraní forged when the European Jesuit assumed the role of broker of Guaraní-grown Jesuit tea. "We will make more money for you," said the Jesuit, and from that time on, a new relationship was formed, the loyalty became deeper, and their religion became more acceptable. This could only have been accomplished where the weather was favorable and the people remained in one place. In Maryland political circumstances trumped ideas and the formation of such bonds, while in Florida the Spanish soldiery who fed off Indian supplies merely drove the Indian away.

This is not to underestimate the effectiveness of the tools of conversion, as outlined below: coercion, the devil, and agriculturalist versus hunter-gatherer. The agents of religious change were Christian missionaries, but to narrow the scope I am mainly concerned with the early Jesuit missionaries in the Americas. Of course, there were other missionaries besides Jesuits. But because of the Jesuits' particular position in the Spanish imperial scheme of things and because they were meticulous record keepers and writers (as well as the suppression of the Jesuits in 1773 that resulted in many of their records being placed in national archives), the documentation on the Jesuits and their interaction with Native America is abundant.

Although the first Jesuits in America were Portuguese missionaries who worked with the Tupinambá of Brazil as early as 1559, Florida is the first site

chosen for the study of early Christianization activity in North America. The missionary record there is full and documentation available. From the records about Florida, we can gather what the Europeans in North America expected to encounter and achieve. Furthermore, we can ask how their experience in Florida affected their future encounters with Native Americans in Mexico, Peru, Maryland, and in the rest of North and South America?

Changing religions was merely part of the European effort at cultural change. A series of violent cultural clashes occurred in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century America, whose effects were more penetrating and long lasting than people anywhere had ever experienced. Soon after the Europeans discovered that Columbus's landfall was not the Far East but a landmass blocking his way to India, groups of Spaniards, Portuguese, Frenchmen, Dutchmen, and Englishmen descended on America in search of precious metals, land to till, resources to exploit, and a new world to inhabit. Trouble was, the new world was already inhabited. So for the first time in the history of the West, intensive contact between its culture and other cultures began to occur. Traits of Western culture were transferred to the Native American and vice versa. For the European, culture became an expression of social solidarity, a means of separating oneself from the "uncivilized native," and later a barometer of loyalty to the mother country.

A related question concerns the reliability of the reporters. Jesuit missionaries were the bridge between Europe and the New World. Who were these "men on the spot"? Does the fact that they were present at a particular event entitle them to the mantle of reliability? Were they too biased to be neutral observers? And what did they observe, or think they were observing?²² Or did these sixteenth-century observers actually possess and project a renaissance self-fashioning concept that enabled them to appreciate or at least collect a series of parts that could be admired and one day placed into a collective whole?²³

In the early years of the encounter Christian missionaries sought to impose a set of cultural modifications on the Indian, but they did so with limited success.²⁴ Only gradually did they realize that Native Americans were selective in their acceptance of European traits. And their motives for doing so were varied.

Chinua Achebe's novel, *Things Fall Apart* (1959), confronts this issue directly, probing the enigma facing adherents of the old religion vis-a-vis the new. The African called the white missionary and his tiny band of local followers "the excrement of the clan," whose crazy ideas were given no chance of survival. The Christian belief in a god who had a son but no wife, who was the creator of everything, even the "evil forest," whose followers allowed the outcasts to

enter their church, was a kind of “mad logic” that was allowed to survive because the village elders thought that it would soon disappear. But there was something intriguing about the stories the new religion told. They reached deep, so deep that the people called the stories the “poetry of the new religion.” And before they could organize against it, Christianity had grown with new and powerful members. Along with the new church came government, courts and trials, prison, and the white man’s laws. The feeling that “there was something in it after all” attracted more adherents.⁵ When Ajofia upbraids the missionary, Rev. James Smith, for thinking that the structures he had so meticulously created would continue, the Englishman, uncompromising in his belief, cannot understand what the elder is talking about. Smith cannot fathom that his law, government, and religion could collapse under the weight of the other’s cultural heritage. There is a point in the dialogue when neither understands the other. The words are comprehensible but the meaning is lost. Ajofia’s anger is partly directed at himself. Smith uses an interpreter, never having learned the African’s language. Ajofia has become the bridge between the two cultures. On some level, he realizes that his world is collapsing. It is falling apart. Obierika spoke for the clan when he said “he [the white man] has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart.”⁶

Although Chinua Achebe wrote about nineteenth-century Biafra, the sequence of events accompanying the clash in America was similar. Granted that the initial encounters in Florida, New France, and Maryland were not accompanied by the same degree of military violence that Mexico and Peru witnessed, the actions of the major players were remarkably the same. The presence of the Europeans was initially tolerated because it was not perceived as a threat; after the missionaries converted a handful of Indians, government, laws, courts, and the white man’s culture followed shortly thereafter. Resistance to the new order of things was thereafter deemed unlawful insurrection. The linkages between imperialism, culture, and Christianity demonstrate how the agents of one supported the other. The key colonialist ideas of authority and submission were imbedded within the concepts of Spanish Catholicism, a major factor accounting for the different approaches to the Native American exhibited by the English, French, and Spanish. Cultural technologies as well as force of arms sustained the colonial empire.⁷

A corollary to this, of course, is what Native Americans understood when the concepts of Christianity were presented. In what way did they relate to and grasp the notions of king, loyalty, submission, and how did they understand the key ideas of faith, Church, Trinity, the Virgin Birth, or other elements of the Christian belief system? By substituting the concrete for the abstract, the European was able to circumvent obstacles to appreciating his perspective. But

this could be taken only so far. Greg Denning describes how Captain Cook's words were processed and understood by his South Pacific audience in a way the Englishman never intended.⁸

The Columbus quincentenary in 1992 offered the occasion to examine in greater detail the European-Amerindian encounter. Most studies focused on how Europeans conceived of the Native American, on how Old World pathogens wreaked havoc on the native population, and on the train of social and economic consequences set in motion by the Columbus discoveries.⁹ These recent studies provide a framework of postulates around which any study of European-Indian relations must be set. For example, Dobyn's demographic analysis of the Florida Indians is essential for assessing early Spanish attempts to occupy the Florida coast, and Milanich's most recent work on the European-Florida Indian conflict brings to bear the latest anthropological and historical research on the area.¹⁰ While the Caribbean and Mexico were the principal recipients of this scholarly largesse, some of the broader studies encompassing North America are useful in trying to get into the mind of the early colonists. Medieval and renaissance beliefs about the "Wild Man" of the forest enhance our understanding of European expectations. Popular European culture equated the Wild Man with the Native American. The expected encounter with vast spaces, towering mountains, and enormous rivers allowed the European to substitute freely between the real and the fantastic. The studies of Pagden, Stannard, Todorov, Chiappelli, Dobyns, and Richter and Merrell to mention only a few, have called attention to key theoretical and practical aspects of the early European-Amerindian contact and have enabled subsequent researchers to piggyback on their work in order to add a few more brush strokes to the early American canvas.¹¹

Through the process of European-Amerindian contact in sixteenth-century America, a thread of deceptively unified themes runs clearly. Coercion was present, as was the devil, identified as the ultimate agent responsible for opposing European culture.¹² The agriculturalist versus hunter-gatherer dichotomy also emerges as a prominent feature of the European-Amerindian encounter. These strands that run through the early encounter carried a special importance for the European Jesuit, but they also had a broader significance for the relationship between colonist and Indian. In Michener's *Hawaii* the Congregationalist minister, Abner Hale, is stunned when his native assistant, Keoki, marries according to his traditional rites. "It puts you outside the pale of civilized . . .," shouts Abner. He could not finish the sentence. And so it was for most Europeans in the Americas. Marrying or even sympathizing with a native non-Christian was tantamount to becoming an uncivilized pagan. It meant turning one's back on the culture from which one came. Such rejections

occurred but not too often.¹³ The agents of religious change viewed such occurrences as anomalies, deviations from the norm caused by temporary insanity or the devil.

Coercion

The history of the conquest and colonization of America is rich with literature that describes what Europeans did when introducing Christianity and the Native American response. At one pole is the sweeping replacement of native for European forms as a metaphor for cultural change. At the other pole is the idols-behind-the-altar resistance that sees acceptance of foreign cultural traits as a cloak concealing the retention and practice of the old ways.¹⁴ In Mexico and the Andean world, elements of the totally integrated pre-Hispanic past persist to form essential parts of Native American culture. The Christian saint is treated like an anthropomorphic deity, the old gods are propitiated at mountainside caves, and drunkenness has become part of the religious fiesta.¹⁵ Because religious beliefs and practices of adults are the least likely to change, and when they do, they do so very slowly, the agents of religious change targeted children. These agents realized that native religious instruction took place during adolescence or early youth.

In spite of the persistent efforts of Europeans on several levels to effect conversion, Native American groups were able to shield, protect, and interject key aspects of their cultural systems into the new culture presented to them. The overwhelming preponderance of European symbols proclaiming the destruction of the old affected segments of the native population in various ways. But enough of the old survived to give credence to the suggestion that much of it managed to survive.¹⁶

Europeans used several techniques to influence the will of Native Americans to act in certain ways. Brute force was rarely if ever used to change habits of behavior. Only if the custom so clashed with Western mores, such as the practice of human sacrifice in Mexico or the continued worship of idols in Mexico and Peru, and only if the Europeans exerted government control, was physical force used to bring an end to a practice. Otherwise verbal criticism from missionaries, and in some cases from civil officials, was the weapon of choice.

But the most effective weapon in the Western arsenal was the power of indirect persuasion. Reff has shown that on the frontier of Northern Mexico Jesuits pointed out to Indians that they were not touched by the diseases ravaging the native populations because the god of the Europeans was stronger.¹⁷

Therefore, he and his agents should be obeyed. The conquest of Mexico and Peru by the Spaniards produced an almost catatonic effect on the native populations. Their gods had abandoned them and the god of the White Invaders had replaced them.¹⁸ The Indian mind was ripe for domination and persuasion. Furthermore, economic benefits accrued to those who joined the conquerors. Visibly accepting the ways of the conqueror and actively supporting their goals made one eligible for the rewards they distributed. The pull toward the new ways was often irresistible. In Peru and Mexico, the Spaniards erected social structures that paralleled pre-Hispanic society but allowed only Christians to enter the new arrangement. The French and English in North America exerted similar influences even though they did not possess direct control over Indian social structures. When the Pequot Indians along the Connecticut River resisted, militia captain and Puritan John Mason attacked the terrified victims and burned their wigwams, praising God “who had laughed at his enemies and the enemies of his people, . . . making them as a fiery oven.”¹⁹ Later, European colonists would not have to resort to warfare. They pitted one Indian group against another by offering rivals new hunting, fishing, and household equipment that promised to make the life of the Native American much less arduous. The iron fishhook did not readily break, the iron pot lasted far longer than the bark kettle, and the bullet silenced the enemy much more efficiently than an arrow.²⁰

Coercion was not new to Western proselytization. Biblical passages and stories were partly at the source of Western religious and cultural aggression. “Go, make disciples of all nations,”²¹ and the parable of the king who prepares a feast to which no one comes causing him to tell his servants to “force them to come in,”²² gave Westerners a religious rationale to use forceful means in the name of God.

Europeans in America did not have to go too far back in their history to find a precedent for using force in achieving cultural uniformity. Boswell maintains that fourteenth-century Europe was the watershed dividing a period of tolerance from one of increasing bigotry.²³ Spain’s seven-century struggle with the Muslims reinforced the notion of intolerance that culminated in King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella reversing a long tradition of tolerance by expelling the Jews and Muslims in 1492.²⁴ A “corporate” view of society saw religious differences as a cancer that unless excised would infect the entire body.

Europe shared the renaissance conviction that Western culture had reached the pinnacle of human achievement. But its moderating ideas had little effect on those who believed in waging God’s war. While Florentine artists busily mixed their paints, Spanish warriors sharpened their swords and lances for battle with the Muslims. And Capt. John Mason, who led a Puritan army

against the Pequots, would probably never have admitted to being these warriors North American equivalent, even though Spaniard and Puritan were equally certain that God was on their side. The intellectual baggage of the seventeenth-century European contained the truculence of the *reconquista*—re-conquest of Spain from the Muslims—and the self-assuredness that renaissance culture was superior to anything the New World indigenous populations could offer.

In New Spain coercion was evident in the methods the Franciscan missionaries used in their mission stations. Robert Ricard's classic study refers frequently to mass baptisms and the forcible suppression of indigenous religious practices.²⁵ Patios of churches became makeshift schoolhouses where Christian doctrine was taught and acceptable manners were inculcated. Physical punishment awaited those absent from evening meetings.²⁶ However, Stafford Poole's study of Indian-white relations in New Spain emphasizes the importance of physical geography rather than physical coercion. Violence was more likely to be manifest among those closest to military action while in remoter areas settlers and traders tended to affect a more pacific native response.²⁷ Louise Burkhart takes Nahuatl-European relations to another level, showing how language affected the emerging belief system.²⁸ The relationship between European and Native American was conditioned not only by the sword and musket but also by the language that the newcomer used.

The French and English were unable to use physical coercion to bring about a change of religion and behavior. Persuasion and the threat of everlasting punishment in hell was the furthest that the agents of religious change would go. For those inclined to accept Western ways, isolation in one of the French-controlled "reductions," or in one of the English "Praying Towns," provided safe havens for religious converts.

The Devil

Another common theme that runs through early reports about the Native Americans is the presence of the devil and his human associates, Indian priests or shamans. Opposition to Western religion is concretized in the person of the *hechicero* in Peru or *jongleurs* in New France. The Jesuits who made early contact with the American Indians were convinced that the ultimate cause of native resistance to their ideas was the devil who bitterly resented the intrusion of the Christians. The figure of the devil as described by early missionaries evoked pre-Hispanic supernatural figures.²⁹ For the European, the devil was the major opponent in the battle for the Indian soul. Georges Baudot has shown how the

use of the Nahua terms for devil and demons may have inadvertently led to the affirmation of native beliefs.³⁰

The obsession with the devil is tied to the folk Catholicism of the Europeans. Pío Baroja's work on the role of the devil in popular European Catholicism explains how the concept of the Evil One became a central feature in the Old World belief system.³¹ The European Jesuit who had been educated to believe that forces of evil waged a continual struggle against the forces of good easily translated Native American opposition into Satan's handiwork. They were unable to imagine any other reason for the Native American's refusal to accept Christianity along with major features of European culture. Witches or *brujos* were the servants of the devil. Thus, the fiesta in which individual saints were honored as protectors against the devil were important spiritual as well as social activities. European iconography placed Satan in a pivotal position whose manifestations became ubiquitous.

Agriculturalist versus Hunter-Gatherer

Just as upsetting to missionaries was the reluctance of the Native American to "settle down." Hunter-gatherer societies and groups who spent part of their time away from village centers puzzled the Europeans. The Hurons in New France who combined both agriculture/horticulture and hunting to support themselves offered the Jesuits a major challenge because the Europeans were unable to continue an immersion-type indoctrination through the hunting season. On the other hand, the Jesuits in Juli in the Peruvian Andes were thoroughly satisfied with their agriculturalist/pastoralist parishioners. Their activities were predictable, determined by the rhythm of the agrarian cycle.

Beneath the difficulties with hunter-gatherers was the Western prejudice against anything that differed from stable agricultural life, considered to be the civilized way to live. The hunter-gatherers were considered to be primitive, backward, savage, and undeveloped.³² The bias toward agriculturalists was reflected in Western concepts of land ownership.³³ The fence, whether the stone barrier of New England or the natural boundary lines so often described in Latin American land documents, reveals the Western bias toward stable, inalienable, fixed property rights, determined by legal means, not to be infringed on. On the other hand, there exist examples of missionaries who came to appreciate the positive characteristics of hunter-gatherer life after traveling with hunter bands. Food sharing, hunting techniques, social interactions, quality cooperation, and displays of goodwill and affection caused Europeans to question the supposed primitiveness of hunter-gatherer life.

However, missionaries in general were convinced that social stability and village life were essential for effective evangelization. Control and indoctrination were keys to success. Besides the reductions of Paraguay, the town of Juli near Lake Titicaca and the reservations near Montreal were considered ideal places for religious indoctrination. Separation from the pagan masses and corrupting influences of traders and merchants was considered essential for producing European-like Native Americans.

One of the most powerful tools used by missionaries in the destruction of key aspects of Native American religion was the *Confessionario*. This was a bilingual handbook that the confessor used in auricular confession to question the penitent about behavior and beliefs.³⁴ Since confession was a sacrament considered essential for receiving the Eucharist, which in turn meant acceptance into the full Christian community, it became the bulwark against whatever was considered at odds with Christian doctrine. A great deal more than doctrinal beliefs fell into the wide net of Christian doctrine. The penitent was questioned about birds, fish traps, lightning, snakes in the road, dreams, ceremonies of war, abortion, sex, and other topics considered related to authentic Christianity. And at the end of it all, the penitent was told: "Son, all of these abuses and tremors of the body and signs of birds and animals, none of it is to be believed."³⁵ Or to herbalists, midwives, and sorcerers: "Leave that evil prayer because it is perverse, cure only with medicine."³⁶ The confessor held the keys of eternal life, and if the penitent wanted to enter, he or she had to accept what the confessor believed to be genuine, pure Christianity.

These three themes, coercion, the devil, and agriculturalist versus hunter-gatherer provide a framework for discussing how Christianity became the dominant religion in the Americas.