Huron Indian Women: Converted, Not Exploited
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“Faith finds no difference between the sexes; it fortifies the courage of the woman as well.” (Jesuit Relations, 23:55)

Indian Women and the Jesuits, and the Conversion Experience: The Stamp of Authenticity

Today a great hue and cry has been raised among many historians who deny the authenticity of the Jesuit missionaries’ attempts to convert American Indians in New France to Christianity. The Jesuits claimed to have baptized 16,000 natives in New France during the forty year period between 1632 and 1672. This is a difficult “fact” for the modern mentality to digest.

Some doubters merely shrug off conversions as deathbed incidents, adopted by Indians more from fear of the afterlife than from any authentic understanding of Catholic dogma. But the favored tactic is simply to assert that there were no authentic converts. Any conversions that took place were pragmatic reactions to advantageous—or threatening—new economic and social situation.

More recently, women authors have added their voices to the debunking clamor, focusing on the non-probability of authentic conversions of Indian women. Peggy Devens boldly and categorically states: “To the missionaries’ dismay, women declined conversion and stressed the importance of older rituals and practices.” While Christianity may have attracted men with its emphasis on individualism, she claims, it probably “alienated women for the same reason.” Since women’s orientation in pre-contact culture was more communal, she contends, women did not need the replacement offered by Christianity. As Devens recreates the cultural past according to today’s feminist political agenda, she contends that Indian women resisted Christianity “and all that the faith represented,” as a “rational strategy to preserve a way of life that maximized female autonomy and authority.”

Using Michel Foucault’s model of power relations, Karen Anderson further reduces the whole conversion story into a question of how the wicked European male-dominated regime oppressed and “subjugated” the free and independent Huron and Montagnais women. In her recent book Chain Her With One Foot, she recounts the story of how women became the objects of fear and aggression. Conversions becomes the excuse for men “to control them [women], to subjugate them, and to humiliate them, and generally to see them diminished.” To speak about men and women is to speak about power relations, Anderson tells us. Therefore, the story of how the Huron and Montagnais Indians of New France came to be Christianized is the story of the subjugation of a “natural,” egalitarian
Indian culture to an artificial, hierarchical European one, as well as the subjugation of Indian women to men.

While Anderson and Devens propound eloquent and passionate arguments in favor of their thesis and quote several incidents from the Jesuit Relations to prove their points, they are avoiding the central question: Was it possible that conversion existed among native Indian women? They also ignore equally convincing and strong evidence in The Relations that point to the possibility that at least some Indian conversions were authentic.

A Christian woman, while speaking one day to some infidels whom she exhorted to embrace the Faith, said to them: “Alas! even if there is no Paradise after death, and if our Faith should deceive us, I would still believe, in order to enjoy in this life a peace and repose of mind that cannot be conceived by those who remain in infidelity. Before my baptism, I was every day full of anxiety; present ills tormented me; fears of misfortunes that might happen to me, but which perhaps will never occur, failed not to afflict me....Now, nothing of all that afflicts me; but on the contrary, I derive my good from my evil, because whenever fears, sorrows, or misfortunes assail me, I think of the happiness promised to us by the Faith, which is free from any bitterness.”[my emphasis]

This incident related by Jesuit Superior Jerome Lalemont in 1645 reveals the active role some women converts played to exhort others to embrace the religion of Christianity. First, it counters Anderson’s claim that women had been “silenced as social beings.” This Huron woman is openly proselytizing in her village. She is hardly the “compliant and fearful” convert, acting as a Christian only because now she “was fearful of being humiliated or beaten if she did not obey.”

Second, this incident clearly shows that Christianity could have a strong appeal for women, who as individuals found an emotional solace and sense of identity from the doctrines of the new religion introduced by the Jesuits. As the Indian convert confesses, what she has found in Christianity was “a life of peace and repose of mind that cannot be conceived by those who remain in infidelity.” The consolation she received from her new faith that promised eternal happiness translated into her everyday experience. It relieved her of the normal anxiety and bitterness that accompany sickness, death, famine, and wars.

Women Proselytizers

Indian women, who had their own rights, duties, and responsibilities, complementary to but completely different from the men, did not lose their personalities in the case of conversion. Rather, in the case of authentic conversions, women lent the force of their strong personalities to their newfound convictions. and refused to
play a compliant, passive role.

For example, Father Du Peron related as early as 1638 that he was having difficulty explaining “the resolution to sin no more” to a woman who was extremely ill. However, one of her female relatives “preached to her so well that she resolved to take this step.” Eight years later, Paul Rageneau notes with admiration, but little surprise, that a widow had “done wonders” among the Attikamegues. Visiting her nephews and nieces, she had preached with so much success and instructed her fellow-countrymen with such good results that several were requesting Baptism. This woman made three journeys among those peoples, he notes, “not so much to see her kinsfolk and her friends, as to give them birth in Jesus Christ.” Why did she make these arduous trips? Because, she told Rageneau, “I love well my relatives and my children. But I would leave them all very gladly, and all the riches of the French, for the conversion of a single soul.”

Anderson emphasizes how the Jesuits heaped their scorn on men who had converted to Christianity and whose wives refused to follow their example. What she ignores are the multiple incidents where it was the woman who won over a “rough” and “stubborn” husband to “become docile and pliable as a child.” A young Huron convert married a man known to be difficult “who gave her trouble.” But Jean de Lamberville marvels at the change the faith of indomitable woman worked on her husband: “She taught him so well that I find him completely changed, and he does whatever she wishes.”

One thing becomes quite clear: The women converts whom the Jesuit describe are hardly the meek, obedient, compliant “objects deprived of their status as independent subjects.” When a Frenchman tried to make a Christian Indian woman work on a feast day, she retorted, “Is it permitted to you to work today”? When he replied that it was not, she said, “Why then, do you wish to make me work, since I believe and pray to God, and wish to go to Heaven as well as you do.”

Another woman convert traveled a long distance to be confessed and to receive the sacrament of Communion, which the priest consequently forgot to administer to her. However, she was not afraid to complain to him and to another priest with “such candor that he was greatly edified, and marveled at the deep roots that Faith had established in her heart.” These “deep roots of faith” may have nourished the courage of converted Indian woman to challenge the traditional collective beliefs of Huron society, but the faith also offered a personal compensation.

**Personal Consolation**

Devens notes that women were less receptive to Christianity because their personal spiritual development did not depend on individual rapport with supernatural beings. The new religion only served to impose “unfamiliar and unwelcome limitations” on women. However, evidence seems to indicate quite the contrary.
In traditional Huron society, it was the warrior male who sought out personal "protector spirits" to provide supernatural power and protection by means of "vision quests," where young men would retire to the woods to prepare by fasting for a visionary experience. If women's source of spiritual strength was internal and less vulnerable, as Devens claims, it was also certainly less personal.

Trigger points out that men in Huron society were expected to be independent, and to distinguish themselves as individuals in war, trade, or politics. But while a woman might win praise for her labor or industry, the very nature of her work denied her avenues for self-expression. As in many utilitarian and egalitarian societies, when an individual ceased to be useful in society, her sense of self-worth would diminish, which could have contributed to the high suicide rate in Huron society.

In a time of social crisis and upheaval, the personal relationship of Creator with created (regardless of sex) that was preached by the Jesuits could certainly have a strong appeal for women, who had been denied that individual relationship with the supernatural world. On the deathbed of Huron convert Christine Tsorihia, she received a vision, losing the use and sense of her sight. "Ravished with admiration," she saw a "great Lady, all brilliant with light" who stood by her side with a beautiful book in her hands. "How beautiful it is to see her"! she exclaimed to her son, who at first doubted the veracity of her words, since visionary experiences were supposed to be reserved for male warriors.

What were the advantages of a more personal relation with the spiritual world for the Indian woman? When a Christian Indian woman lost her child to the epidemic, she could find in this trial a solace: a passageway to a closer relationship with a personal God. She told the Jesuits:

I believe that God chooses to try me in this manner, so as to constrain me to have recourse to his goodness. Before the affliction, I was, as it were, drowsy, and often I forgot him; since then, I think only of him, because in him alone, I find solace for my pains.

Viewed in this light, women converts who demonstrated such conviction and steadfastness in adhering to their religion could be said to have found a certain liberation. They had found personal freedom in individual relationships with the supernatural world that had been formerly reserved for the warrior male. The popular picture of Huron life presented primarily by Champlain and the Jesuits shows Indian women toiling in the fields, while their menfolk hunt, fish, fight, or enjoy the traditional feasts and festivities. Today, historians like to point to this system as a more perfect egalitarian environment, which provided society a vital symmetry lacking to the European model.

Yet the distinct and different duties of women in Huron society hardly appear
as a pre-contact egalitarian utopia. Instead, as Bruce Trigger points out, everyday relations between men and women appear to have generated formality and absence of interpersonal relation based on emotion and friendship. In 1637, Le Jeune describes the great difference between the “Frenchman and sauvage.” When a Frenchman returned from the chase, he notes, he would hardly step foot in the house before he had proclaimed his success or failure to his wife and household. Not so with the Indian hunter. He threw down his take outside the cabin, and entered without a word. Nor would his woman address him. She would take his leggings and shoes, wring them out if they were wet, put them to dry, and serve him something to eat if she had saved something. He would eat in silence, smoking. Then some of the men of the village would come to sit with him, and finally he would begin to speak, relating his news.

The relationship between man and woman was utilitarian, not emotionally supportive and secure. Each provided for certain prosaic needs of the other. As one Indian explained, “To live among us without a wife is to live without help, without home, and to be always wanting.” And if a wife (or husband) became useless or inefficient, the sensible option was to go find another.

The sense of security of a permanent, monogamous marriage was absent. As one woman convert noted, before she was baptized she was always in “great dread” that her husband would leave her, but after her baptism, “she lost that dread so completely that she even spoke of leaving him if he did not enter the fold of Jesus Christ.” In the end, he did convert, “won over by her kindness and teaching,” and perhaps, her equally persuasive threats to leave him.

The warrior function of the male conveyed an unspoken sense of superiority. A man was ashamed to be seen arguing with a woman, and even young boys were subjected to public ridicule if they were seen performing women’s tasks. When a baptized Huron warrior was mocked for refusing to go to war, he visited the hospital sister Mother Marie St. Ignace for solace: “Ah! Marie,” he complained, “How hard a thing it is for a man to be accounted a woman”! In the end, he went to war and returned, although the one who gave him the insult was taken by the Iroquois.

Jesuits Praise Indian Women

While the Jesuits had planned to concentrate first on men and children in their catechizing efforts in order to avoid what might be considered scandalous or unwelcome contact with the women, they soon realized that they would have to include women. In 1637, LeJeune reports that women themselves were demanding the “equality of the Gospels.” A woman asked if women could go to Heaven as well as men and children. When he replied that they could, she asked, “Why, then, do you not instruct the women”? He admitted that he could only concede to the logic of her request, that is, that Christianity offered to women as well as men an individual relationship with God. Further, Brebeuf registers his surprise to find
that it is actually "incomparably easier to tame and instruct little girls than little boys" of the villages.

Later, praising the intelligence and depth of understanding of the more difficult doctrines of the Catholic faith, Lalemont cannot speak highly enough of a young convert named Therese, who has catechized and converted many of her fellow Hurons. "She will be the greatest among the Hurons," he announces. In fact, by 1681, Bigot reports that it has become standard procedure for Indian women catechists to be appointed to teach the girls of the village at the same hour that a male catechist taught the boys.27

One of the most striking factors in my work in the *The Relations* was the frequency with which women are mentioned throughout the documents, and how often they are praised by the Jesuits.28 For example, in the earlier volumes, women’s conversions were rarely mentioned: in 1634, there are three references to women conversions. By 1636, the number has tripled. But by 1639, after the six-year span when the epidemics were raging, the number of references to women increases significantly to 20, and it remains consistently high from then on.

Some time ago in a paper I was writing on the Jesuits,29 I noted offhandedly that there were numerous incidents relating to women that had been given little consideration by historians. I had heard of several negative incidents, such as the now famous Sillery scene where men blamed women for all of their "misfortunes" and the episode where the wife of Charles Meiaskawat was forced to "shout aloud and protest publicly she would be obedient to her husband."30 What surprised me in my work in the documents was the relatively few incidents of this type, and the multiple incidents of the Jesuits praising the heroism of women, eulogizing deeds from their lives.31 The evidence does not allow one to deduce conclusively that men tended to blame women’s commitment to traditional beliefs as the stumbling block to the community’s well-being. Nor is there any evidence that the Jesuits intentionally isolated women in Christian nuclear families to decrease their cooperative and ritual activities and undermine traditional community. Rather, they encouraged men and women to come to the missionary villages so that they could better practice and protect their newfound faith. Numerous incidents do not exist in the sources that could defend the theory that women in particular vigorously resisted the conversion efforts. For example, there are relatively few numbers of episodes where the Jesuits converted Indian men recommend or comment on the obedience, submission and docility of women.32 It becomes apparent that relying on information from reports of *The Relations*, it cannot be categorically stated that the Jesuits were hell-bent on subjugating and repressing women who were enjoying a liberty and autonomy that challenged and unnerved the European white male.
**Fear of Death**

The arrival of the Jesuits coincided with the beginning of a series of epidemics that wiped out at least half of the population of eastern Canada and adjacent parts of the United States over the six-year period from 1634-1640. The emotional effects of the series of epidemics that followed could only be severe. What Indian men and women found in the doctrine of Christianity was a more clear-cut answer to eternity and a release from the fear and anxiety of death surrounding the traditional curing societies and shamans. The message of the Jesuits was simple and rendered more comprehensible by the crisis of the times: all life was a mere preparation or test where hardships, sufferings and persecutions were but momentary afflictions to be endured. And the reward for the baptized Christian: an eternal happiness. Equally impressive were the descriptive pictures of the fires of eternal punishment of Hell that the Jesuits used most effectively. “The knowledge she had of the pains of Hell and the joys of Paradise made her desire and ask for Holy Baptism with more insistence,” records Le Jeune of one Indian woman convert in 1638.

But was this it? Intimidated by the fear of Hell and hoping for an eternal happiness, did Indian converts put their bets on baptism and die, with no real deeper understanding of the doctrine of Christianity? There are incidents that seem to indicate otherwise, that Indian converts, both male and female, were capable of an incredible radicality and perseverance at which even the Jesuits marveled. These could only come from heartfelt beliefs and a profound understanding of the Christian doctrine of eternal life and death. For example, as a young girl lay dying, her Indian mother comforted her: “My child, thou wilt go to Heaven, and there thou wilt die no more. Courage, my daughter, your pains will soon be over, in a short time you will be very joyful.” After the girl had died, her mother told the father that she grieved for her daughter, who had been a model Christian, but she grieved much more for one of her children who died without baptism: “Alas! Where will that poor little child be”?

Numerous other incidents show that the Indian converts took so much to heart the hope for eternal happiness that they refused to weep at death, which has become such a frequent visitor to their hearths. This refusal would seriously conflict with the customs of traditional society, which demanded strong demonstrations of grief for a ten-day period, followed by a lesser mourning that lasted for an entire year. Women would wail just before daybreak for entire weeks, and widows did not adorn themselves or bathe during a period where they remained sober and silent. These ritual observances were carefully guarded by women, who tended to be more conservative because they remained in their villages and identified more closely with the customs of their community than the warrior males. But the conversion experience among Huron women indicates that women were not afraid to abandon old rites and traditions, which stands as serious testimony to the authenticity of their adherence to the new creed.
One Huron convert adapted traditional practices to her new understanding of the Catholic Faith, stating that she would not weep for baptized relatives who had died, but only for those who died without baptism. “I would not weep,” she told Father Bigot, “had he (her relative) died a Christian.”

By adopting the new religion, converts were released from their fear of sickness and death. This authentic understanding of the spiritual realm of Christianity belies the claim that women would not accept the replacement offered by Christianity or were incapable of accepting a European belief system that distinctly favored men. The mere human eloquence of the Jesuits could never convince women to embrace a religion reputed by the traditional shamans of society to be the bosom companion, and even cause, of pestilence, war, famine, and death.

**Admiration for Chastity**

In their praise of the autonomous, sexually-active Indian female, neither Devens nor Anderson addresses the consideration that some Indian women might have had a genuine admiration for the virtue of chastity as presented by the doctrines of Christianity and by the example of the teaching and hospital sisters. They never consider the hypothesis that admiration for the teaching and nursing sisters might have extended beyond a prosaic grasping for female autonomy and power. Blinded to the supernatural, feminists re-interpret the Christian message in the light of naturalist models of power relationships and purely human psychology.

Certainly there was much curiosity among the Indians. Lalemont relates that not an Indian would go to Quebec who was not anxious “to see the Virgin Sisters,” who commanded such high respect. This respect was all the more noteworthy, adds Lalemont, because the Indians had a high respect for one another, “but a very great contempt for all strangers.”

*Verba docent, exempla trahunt:* Words convert, example converts. The girls and women who spent time with the Ursuline teaching sisters or were served by them in their hospitals demonstrated their understanding of chastity in their desire to imitate the sisters. When the prospect of an arranged marriage with a Christian Indian was proposed to her, a fervent convert, Anne Therese, stated that she desired no other spouse than Jesus Christ. “Speaking to her of this at another time,” Mother de St. Ignace relates, “she became so vexed that she immediately went away, and we could not have induced her to come back if we had not promised that we would never speak to her again of marriage.”

When an extremely pious young Huron girl named Jeanne Ouendite, notable for her great love of purity, died in 1668, her body was exhumed incorrupt one year later. This event caused no surprise among the Huron converts, who found it no less natural than the Jesuits that there should be “incorruption of the body” for those who “had kept their souls in purity.”

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Admiration for chastity, admittedly the most difficult custom to change among the Indians, led to the desire to imitate this virtue in at least some women and girls. A young seminarian girl, Agnes Chabwekwechich, returned to her village, became ill and died “a virgin, as she had desired, even though she had been sought in marriage by a Frenchman and by some sauvages.” When a Huron girl preparing for baptism was taken captive by Iroquois, she refused to grant sexual favors when she found herself solicited. Even when several potential suitors spoke of beating her death, “she was awaiting that death with patience, preferring to die rather than to commit any sin.”

The Relations record numerous examples of baptized girls who resisted the visits of young men at night in order to protect their chastity. In one notable, but not unusual case, two girls thrust firebrands in the faces of suitors with unchaste intents, threatening to burn them unless they left immediately. Throughout The Relations there are many more incidents of Christian native women who repulse the advances of men than episodes where Christian Indian men repulse advances of a pagan woman.

Doubtless, there was much resistance to the practice of monogamy. But it also seems that the Indian women who did convert could find in monogamous and permanent marriages a liberation and stronger sense of security than what they had found in sexual freedom, divorce, and polygamy. As one Indian woman explained in The Relation of 1642, before her baptism, she had always been “in great dread” lest her husband leave her. But as soon as she enjoyed “the freedom of the children of God,” she lost that dread so completely “that she even spoke of leaving him if he did not enter the Fold of Jesus Christ.” After four years, she prevailed and won him over with her arguments and her kindness, “teaching him to pray to God night and morning, and to recite the Rosary.”

Facing Traditional Society

A final point to examine is the question of authenticity of conversion. The most telling argument in favor of authenticity is that conversions continued to take place and Indians steadfastly adhered to their faith even when public opinion had turned against the new religion and made it dangerous to become—or remain—a Christian.

It came to he an accepted fact among converts that one of their first trials would be to face the rancor of traditional society. Some early converts gave this advice to a new catechumen:

My brother, I have only two things to say to you. The first is, you will never be a good Christian if you do not suffer many insults and calumnies for your faith, when you shall see yourself hated by the infidels, even by those who now have most love for you. Then rejoice, and think that truly you are beginning to be a Christian.
The Jesuits themselves marveled at the resistance and fortitude of their converts, both men and women, who showed the most edifying zeal and devotion, even amidst afflictions.41

As Jesuit superior Vimont noted, by 1642 the whole country was incensed against the converts, denouncing them as traitors. Yet the faith of many of the converts remained firm “It is not only among men that one meets such strength,” he states. When a woman named Anne Outenen heard one of the chief captains say that the Christians must be massacred, and one of her brothers urged her to abandon the faith, she replied, “Let him begin with me. Faith is more precious to me than life. I will present my head to him, and he shall see that I am ready to receive the blow.”42

This steadfast resolution to challenge cultural norms on the part of some converts inside traditional villages cannot be explained away by desire for material benefits, financial gain, or better health. While Devens grudgingly admits some women may have accepted the Jesuits’ teachings, she qualifies her statement by saying that conversion for most of them “seems to have been a protective measure aimed at preserving social and religious autonomy when outright resistance proved dangerous.”43 What she ignores are those incidents of women who showed this “outright resistance” not to Christianity, but to the native norms and traditions.

Social ostracism is not an easy ordeal to face in any society. But women were capable of showing so great a boldness and stalwartness in the faith that Jerome Lalemont recognized it even astonished the infidels “to find that the women were stronger than they.” He gave the example of a Christian woman in a neutral nation who approached a Sonnonoueronnon captive and began to instruct him, even though it had been forbidden to give instructions to the prisoners. Yet the woman would not heed these admonitions and continued to instruct the captive even though she knew she was risking death by her efforts. Lalemont relates: “The infidels knew not what to say to that Christian, for the Huron men would be ashamed to enter into a dispute with a woman.” She continued her instruction in peace, and the captive, notes Lalemont, “moved by her charity, asked for baptism.”44

Kateri Tekakwitha

A shining archetype of real heroism practiced by an Indian convert was recognized by the Catholic Church, which proclaimed the sanctity not of a Huron, but of an Iroquois virgin. Not a man, but a woman, Kateri Tekakwitha, the Lily of the Mohawks the first Indian of New France to be entered officially into the list of the communion of saints.45

Two features stand out in the life of Kateri: her resolute determination to live a life of virginity as a spouse of Jesus Christ, and her persevering spirit of penance and prayer. Even before her baptism as she lived among the Mohawks, Kateri felt drawn to the idea of celibate life, although she had never seen or heard anything
concerning the voluntary state of virginity such as the Catholic sisters observed it. The Mohawks knew that the Blackrobes lived without marriage but did not know this ideal was practiced by women. Facing the constant taunting of her pagan aunts, and later of the Christian community of Caughnawaga to which she had fled so she might better practice her faith, the normally obedient Mohawk maiden persisted in her resolve not to marry. Finally, she approached a Blackrobe with her desire to dedicate herself to a life of virginity. Responding to his protests about her material welfare, she said:

But do you not see I am not my own. I have given myself entirely to Jesus. He must be my only love. The state of helpless poverty that might befall me if I do not marry does not frighten me. All I need is a little food and a few pieces of clothing. With the work of my hands I shall always earn what is necessary...If I should become sick and unable to work, then I shall be like the Lord on the cross. He will have mercy on me, I am confident.46

Finally, on the feast of the Annunciation of the Blessed Virgin in 1679, Kateri privately professed the vow of perpetual virginity, placing herself in her new state of life under the special protection of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the first of the Iroquois girls to bind herself by a religious vow to the observance of the evangelical counsels.

After her self-dedication, Kateri’s desire for prayer and penance was insatiable. Even though she suffered repeated attacks of heavy fever and had to spend most of the time on her cot, when she could walk she staggered barefoot over the ice of the river while saying the rosary for the conversion of her people. In imitation of how the Iroquois branded the right foot of their slave girls above the ankle as a lasting mark of their servitude, she pressed a burning fagot from the fire to the flesh of her own foot, indicating that she belonged to Christ body and soul.47 As she steadily declined, she continued to catechize the children of the village from her sickbed, a cot on the ground.

On April 17, 1680 Kateri Tekakwitha, age 24, died. Immediately after her death, a mysterious event occurred, witnessed by the priests and all present. According to all eyewitness reports, immediately after her death, her face changed completely within the space of a few minutes. The pockmarks that had disfigured her countenance from childhood disappeared and her flesh took on a healthy hue. A gasp of wonder and awe ran through the wigwam. Even men who once had cruelly tortured their enemies without blinking an eye were shaken by the sight and broke into tears.48

*The Relations* do not report on her death, but on the effects of her death two years later:
During the past two years, their [the Iroquois'] fervor has greatly augmented since God has removed from this world one of these devout sauvage women who live like nuns, and she died with the reputation of sanctity. We cease not to celebrate Masses to thank God for the graces that we believe we receive, every day, through her intercession. Journeys are continually made to her tomb, and the sauvages, following her example, have become better Christians than they were. We daily see wonders worked through her intercession. Her name was Catherine Tegaskouita.

The beatification of a Kateri Tekakwitha in the 20th century was possible because the 17th-century Jesuits never wavered in their drive to evangelize and convert the sauvages of eastern Canada. This relation is naturally a bone of contention for ethnohistorians and the egalitarian spirit of multiculturalism so prevalent in classrooms today. The new "politically correct" attitude is to become fiercely intolerant in face of the claim of any one religion to the fullness of truth. One of the guiding principles of ethnohistory carries its own set of prejudices proper to our egalitarian and ecumenical age: namely, that it is a condemnable practice whenever one culture tries to infringe on any of the rights, liberties, customs, or religious beliefs of another. This bias lends a negative connotation of subversion to evangelization, an activity that can be viewed as totally consistent with and even integral to the aims and mission of the Catholic Church. Catholic catechism teaches that the truths revealed by God to men were to be proclaimed to all nations of the earth by the Catholic Church.

The Jesuits never denied they were trying to undermine the power of the shamans, precisely because they believed in their mission: they were agents acting for the superior power all goodness and truth in a universal battle against inferior forces of evil. Seen from their eyes of faith, it was the "grace of God" that was responsible for the loss of credibility of the "craft of the jugglers and sorcerers." For finally, concluded Vimont in his 1644 letter, "truth triumphs over error, and the Prince of darkness is compelled to give way to the King of glory and of light."

Indian women were part of a society exhausted by imported epidemic diseases, war, famine, and the extermination of peltry animals through overhunting. Indian women saw their culture threatened by a new system of economics, social relations, and technology. They saw the traditional powers and authority of their shamans undermined by the mysterious black-robed priests who were chaste. Yes, their world was one that was economically, socially, and religiously shaken. Yes, there were women and men who resisted these changes and resented them. But evidence shows that there were also women and men who opened their hearts and minds to the teachings of the Catholic religion. Further, these converts were capable not only of understanding the Catholic faith, but of embracing it as an authentic solace and solution to not only the chaos of the times, but to the longing in their hearts.
APPENDIX I

Incidents Involving Indian Woman Converts

taken from *The Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents*, 73 Volumes, Reuben Gold Thwaites, editor

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Notes


3. Ibid., 475. See also Devens, *Countering Colonization: Native American Women and Great Lakes Missions, 1630 to 1900* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, Oxford, 1992), 114-128.


5. A question that cannot be ignored for such a study is the trustworthiness of the major primary source, the 73 volume work called *The Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents,* edited by Reuben Gold Thwaites. The reliability of *The Relations* to determine the authenticity of Indian conversions has often been questioned, since the letters were used as a form of propaganda in New France to gain recruits and financial support for the Jesuits’ missionary endeavors. *The Relations* were formal accounts, carefully edited in Quebec and in Paris and prepared for the public eye. Yet the mass of material includes more objective accounts and reports, such as the *Journal de Jésuites,* often considered more valuable to the historian because they were not intended for the public eye and never underwent any editing process. Anthropologist Bruce Trigger admits that *The Relations* have found acceptance as an important primary source for insights into Indian government law, and religion. Even so stern a critic as Protestant historian Francis Parkman has stated: “The closest examination has left me no doubt that these missionaries wrote in perfect good faith, and that *The Relations* hold a high place as authentic and trustworthy documents.”


7. Ibid.


9. Ibid. 92-3

10. JR, 16:69.
12. Anderson, Chain Her By One Foot, 118.
15. JR, 16:69
16. JR, 16:93
17. Devens, Countering Colonization, 29.
18. Fishing customs were also highly ritual and individualistic. The “fish preacher,” a man believed to be gifted with special powers to speak to the fish and lure them into the nets, was one of the most powerful and prestigious members of fishing communities on the islands in Georgian Bay. Trigger, The Huron, Farmers of the North (New York, 1969), 30-2.
20. JR, 26:289-9
21. JR,30:81
22. Devens, Countering Colonization, 13.
23. JR, 16:163
25. Trigger, the Huron, 26.
26. JR, 31:177-79
28. See Appendix 1.
31. See Appendix 1.
32. Devens, Counter Colonization, 7.
33. JR, 15:73.
34. JR, 23:61; 62.135.
35. JR, 22: 145.
36. JR 19 33. 52:229-33.
38. See Appendix 1.
40. JR, 30:19.
42. JR, 23:123.
45. The feastday to honor Kateri Tekakwitha has been set for July 14 in the Calendar of Saints.
48. Ibid. 160-1.
49. JR, 62 179
50. “Our Lord, before ascending into heaven, spoke to His apostles as follows: “All power is given me in heaven and on earth; go, therefore, teach ye all nations: baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost...and behold I am with you all the days even to the end of the world” (Matt. 28: 18-20). For this reason, the apostles and their successors have never allowed themselves to be prohibited by any earthly authority from preaching the Gospel. Nor has the Church ever been turned aside from fulfilling her mission of preaching the Gospel, by the opposition of the world.” Francis Spirago, ed., Richard F. Clarke, S.J., *The Catechism Explained* (New York, 1899, 83).