

“All Souls Travel on Foot”: Religious Conversion Among the Huron

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“It is so clear, so evident that there is a Divinity who has made Heaven and earth, that our Huron cannot entirely ignore it. And although the eyes of their minds are very much obscured by the darkness of a long ignorance, by their vices and sins, they still know something of it. But they misapprehend him grossly, and having knowledge of God they do not render him the honor, the love, nor the service which is due.”- Father Jean de Brébeuf¹

The Jesuits came to North America in the 1630s prepared to give the Huron people of New France the “true religion.”² They instead brought crippling poverty, disease, and political turmoil. The Jesuits entered a culture much different from their own with grand ideas of conversion and transformation. In an effort to make their religious principles and traditions more relatable to the Huron people, they learned and imitated Huron customs. What they failed to understand was how vastly different the Huron’s worldview was from their own and how this view influenced everything about Huron culture. The Jesuits’ found little success in their quest for converts because of their reluctance to analyze or accept the Huron’s conceptions of time, space, family, and community.

Father Brébeuf and his fellow Jesuit Missionaries had high hopes for their conversion effort when they came to North America to live among the Huron people in 1633. The Huron were already familiar with Europeans and Christianity through their trade with the French. Traders brought the missionaries to the Huron village and told the Huron “they have left their friends and their country to show you the way to heaven. If you love the French, as you say you love them, then love and honor these our fathers.”³ The Jesuits lived among the Huron for the next two decades until the destruction of the Huron Nation in 1650.⁴ More is known about the Huron than any other Native American nation during this period, because the missionaries chronicled their time there in letters to members of the church hierarchy in France. These letters, collectively known as *The Jesuit Relations*, provide insight into the tactics used by the Jesuits in their attempt to convert the native people to Christianity. *The Jesuit Relations* tell a story of Christian virtue and perseverance among a naïve native community in the midst of bitter inter-tribal conflict. This view of history suggests that the Jesuits saved the souls they could, and the Huron who were too “blinded by ignorance,” as Brébeuf put it, ultimately perished as a result of war and conflict. This western-centric view was widely accepted as history until more recently, when research became focused on determining the inherent bias of these letters and their validity as fact. More recent analysis of the letters suggests their conversion successes were overstated. Still, these letters show that the Jesuits were faced with a land and culture very different from their own, and their attempts to convey Christian traditions and principles are classic examples of cross-cultural miscommunication; principles that were clear and undeniable to the Jesuits were foreign and incomprehensible to the Huron.⁵

The Jesuits were initially encouraged by what they believed to be traces of the Christian truth in the traditions, myths, and rituals of the Huron. As Father Brébeuf reported, “They have recourse to the sky in almost all their necessities and respect the great bodies in it above all creatures, and remark in it, in particular, something divine.”⁶ He expressed in his letters to his superiors a belief that conversion would not be difficult, since the Huron already knew of these certain truths. “I say this to show how easy it will be, with time and divine aid to lead these peoples to the Creator, since they already honor so especially a creature which is so perfect an image of him.”⁷ Father Brébeuf believed

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¹ Jean de Brébeuf, “The Relation of 1635,” in *The Indians of North America*, ed. Edna Kenton, v.1, (New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1927), 228.

² Brebeuf, “The Relation of 1635,” 228.

³ Francis Parkman, *Jesuits in North America* (Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1963), 134.

⁴ Neal Salisbury, “Religious Encounters in a Colonial Context: New England and New France in the Seventeenth Century,” *American Indian Quarterly* 16 no.4, 507.

⁵ Especially notable for its critical eye towards representations of Hurons by Jesuits is Erik R. Seeman, “Reading Indians’ Deathbed Scenes: Ethnohistorical and Representational Approaches,” *The Journal of American History* 88 no.1 (June 2001). Other examples include: Francis Parkman, *Jesuits in North America*. Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1963., Daniel K. Richter, “Iroquois: Jesuit Missions and Christianity in Village Politics, 1642-1686,” *Ethnohistory* 32, no. 1 (Winter 1985), 1-16., and Ronda, James, “‘We Are Well As We Are’”: An Indian Critique of Seventeenth Century Christian Missions,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 23, no.1(January, 1977).

⁶ Jean de Brébeuf, “The Relation of 1636” in *The Indians of North America*, ed. Edna Kenton, v.1 (New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1927), 262.

⁷ *Ibid.*

that the Huron people had merely been misled and that he could return them to the path of Christian righteousness, saying, “it is really God whom they honor, though blindly.”⁸ It was the Jesuits’ strict ethnocentric view of the two cultures that would lead to many of the Jesuits’ mistakes and misconceptions in their conversion attempts. Though the Huron showed respect and tolerance for the Jesuit beliefs, the Jesuits refused to consider Huron beliefs as anything other than “ignorance.” The Jesuits gravely misunderstood the vast discrepancies between their culture and that of the Huron, especially with regards to their conceptions of time and space, living arrangements and communities, and notions of a grand deity. This lack of insight presented significant hurdles to the Jesuits’ attempts at conversion.

One of the most grievous misunderstandings between the Jesuits and the Huron concerned their perceptions of the afterlife. The Jesuits believed that the glory of Heaven and the horror of Hell were two of their most powerful tools for promoting conversion. The Huron also believed in an afterlife, but it was one of moral neutrality, free from any concept of judgment. The Huron had no distinction between “good” souls and “bad” souls. All the spirits of the dead went to the “village of souls,” where life progressed in much the same fashion that the Huron had always known.⁹ “According to them, the village of souls is in no respect unlike the village of the living – they go hunting, fishing, and to the woods; axes, robes, and collars are as much esteemed as among the living. In a word, everything is the same,” Father Brébeuf reported.¹⁰

In addition, the Huron did not recognize the concept of sin. The Huron recognized personal errors, wrongdoings, or injustices, but they did not consider them spiritual crimes. Any grievances or wrongdoings were worked out within the tribe. This disconnect between mortal behavior and the fate of the soul meant that the Huron found the Christian concepts of sin, guilt, and eternal punishment inconceivable and superfluous. When asked about their sins, many claimed not to know how to sin. Even more confusing to them was the notion that one could sin just by thinking. One man claimed, “I do not know what it is to have bad thoughts.”¹¹ For the Huron, thought and action were not considered to be separate entities. To them, it was unreasonable to be punished for an idea that was not put into action. The notion of harboring guilt over sins and the need to confess were so far removed from the life that the Huron knew that it was incomprehensible to them. The Jesuits often found that when they held confessions, the Huron would come only to report injustices against them, as this was the only concept of sin that the Huron could understand. Since the Huron had no notion of sin or lasting punishment, they had no reason to believe that not all spirits would travel to the same place. As Brébeuf reported, “they make no mention either of punishment or reward, in the place to which souls go after death. And so they do not make any distinction between the good and bad, the virtuous and the vicious.”¹² The social and political life of the Huron was constructed entirely without the concept of sin.

However, other aspects of the Christian afterlife were recognizable to the Huron. For example, many believed that in death they would be reunited with their deceased family members and ancestors.¹³ More difficult for the Huron was the belief that non-Christians, such as themselves, would suffer eternal torment in Hell. Since they had no comparable concept in their own traditions, it was hard for them to understand.¹⁴ It was widely accepted that the French spirits would inhabit a separate “village of souls,” but the suggestion that the Huron would be punished by French standards was a concept that was untranslatable to them. The Huron believed that the French had come from a different world, and this was why their conceptions of the afterlife were so different from their own.¹⁵

The Huron’s understanding of heaven and hell was further hindered by the fact that these spaces did not fit geographically within the Huron’s world. Brébeuf was pleased to announce when describing the accuracies of the Huron’s “fundamental beliefs” that “most of them take pride in deriving their origin from heaven.”¹⁶ This was either a misunderstanding on Brébeuf’s part or an intentional misrepresentation of the Huron beliefs. The Huron creation myth tells not of a traditional Christian heaven but of a completely different world in the sky inhabited by “sky people.” The Huron believed that a woman fell from this sky world down to earth and it is from here that all of the Huron descended. It was not that each individual soul had come from the sky world, but that the original female ancestor of the Huron was a member of this village in the sky. The Huron believed that the people of the sky world continued to exist to this day and lived in a fashion very similar to the Huron of earth. The sky world was not a version of the afterlife

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ James Ronda, “‘We Are Well As We Are’: An Indian Critique of Seventeenth Century Christian Missions,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 23, no. 1, (January, 1977), 69.

¹⁰ Brébeuf, “The Relation of 1636,” 258.

¹¹ Ronda, “We Are Well As We Are,” 69.

¹² Brébeuf, “The Relation of 1635,” 228.

¹³ Erik R. Seeman, “Reading Indians’ Deathbed Scenes: Ethnohistorical and Representational Approaches,” *The Journal of American History*, 88 no. 1, (June 2001), 29.

¹⁴ Brébeuf, “The Relation of 1635,” 228.

¹⁵ Jean de Brébeuf, “The Relation of 1636,” in *The Jesuit Relations: Natives and Missionaries in Seventeenth-Century North America*, ed. Allan Greer, (Boston: Bedford/ St. Martin’s, 2000), 42.

¹⁶ William E. Connelley, “Religious Conceptions of the Modern Hurons,” *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, 9 no. 2, (September 1922), 115.

or place of heavenly bliss; it just happened to occupy the same geographical space as the Christian heaven. The Huron did have some concept of sky people as being superior or more divine than the people of the earth, but there was no trajectory of movement from one world to the other. The people of the sky belonged in the sky, and the people of the earth belonged on the earth.¹⁷

For the Huron, the afterlife was not a vertical journey, but a horizontal one. They believed that “all souls travel on foot to a great village beyond the western edge of this world,” and that the afterlife existed in the same plane as their current life.¹⁸ The concepts of heaven in the sky and hell below the earth did not match with the Huron geographical conception of the world. Heaven could not be in the sky for that was the location of the village of the Sky People, and Hell could not be below the earth because that was the home of “The Little People.”

The Huron believed that there was a great tunnel below the earth that the sun passed through every night. The Little People made their homes in the caves of this tunnel. The Little People were believed to live in the same manner as the ancient Huron and they existed in order to preserve Huron customs. These three levels of the world were separate and unique, specific to the people that inhabited them. There was no sense of ascending or descending from one world into the next. Therefore, the geography and structure of the world was in direct opposition to the Jesuits’ preaching on Heaven and Hell.¹⁹ This was a major problem for the Jesuits. In their minds, the Huron were denying the clear truth of the nature of the universe. For the Huron, the Jesuits were simply of another people. As Father Brébeuf describes in his “Relation of 1636,” “before they had commerce with the French they had never dreamed that there was under heaven a different land from their own -- and now that they are disabused of this idea, many still believe that their country and ours are two pieces quite separate, and made by different workmen.”²⁰ In the face of cross-cultural contact, the Huron showed a remarkably tolerant view of foreign religions and customs. To their understanding, both the French and the Huron were right with regard to their myths, for the French were simply from a different world. This concept baffled the Jesuits, who could only see in terms of their strict Christian conception of the world, “when we talk to them of Hell and Paradise and of our mysteries, the headstrong savages reply that this is good for our country and not for theirs; that every country has its own fashions.”²¹ As the Huron saw it, the French Jesuits were simply from another land that was beyond the scope of the Huron’s “Great Island,” the land of the French had its own gods, its own rules and its own traditions.²²

The Huron’s two-fold response of tolerance and passive rejection of Christian afterlife was unacceptable to the Jesuits. They tried to scare the Huron with images and verbal descriptions of Hell.²³ This plan was unsuccessful for two reasons. First, it further highlighted the differing mindsets of the Jesuit and the Huron. The Huron were unconcerned with death. Their focus was on their family, their duties to the tribe, and their daily life. For the Huron, death was merely an entry into another world—a world that was neither better nor worse than the world the Huron currently inhabited. One Huron expressed displeasure at the Jesuits questioning the sick about where they would want to go when they die: “That is not right, we ourselves do not ask such questions, for we always hope that they will not die and that they will recover their health.”²⁴ The Huron had no fear of death, but wished for their relatives and loved ones to remain alive and healthy for as long as possible. They found it inconsiderate and disturbing that the Jesuits should be so concerned with when their loved ones should leave them. The afterlife did not have bearing on the everyday life of the Huron the way that it did for the Christians. The Jesuits’ persistence with describing and warning of the afterlife only made the Huron weary. One Huron man exclaimed “If thou wishest to speak to me of hell, go out of my cabin at once, such thoughts disturb my rest, and cause me uneasiness amid my pleasures.”²⁵ Many Huron turned away from the Jesuits because they believed them to be obsessed with death, a fact of life that for the Huron was neither troublesome nor pertinent. The Jesuits’ focus on the afterlife was thus detrimental to their conversion efforts. It appeared to the Huron that the only way to receive any of the rewards for conversion was to die.²⁶ When the Huron heard that Heaven would be an everlasting life without work, feasts, or family, many replied, “I am content to be damned.”²⁷ Heaven, as the Jesuits described it, was a place of idleness where people lived without purpose. Eternity in Heaven lacked the traditions and customs that colored Huron life, and therefore held little appeal.

Similarly, the Huron were not frightened by the Christian notion of Hell. The Jesuits often used familiar

¹⁷ Ronda, “We Are Well As We Are,” 77.

¹⁸ Brébeuf, “The Relation of 1635,” 253.

¹⁹ Ronda, “We are Well as we Are,” 77.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 228.

²¹ John Steckley, “The Warrior and the Lineage: Jesuit Use of Iroquoian Images to Communicate Christianity,” *Ethnohistory* 39, no.4, (Autumn, 1992), 478-509, 483.

²² Brébeuf, “The Relation of 1635,” 253.

²³ Jérôme Lalemant, “The Relation of 1639,” in *The Jesuit Relations* ed. Greer, 76.

²⁴ Ronda, “We Are Well As We Are,” 70.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 69.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 70.

²⁷ Steckley, “Warrior Lineage,” 484.

imagery in order to convey the terrors of Hell, likening it to torture and warfare. The Jesuits drew on their knowledge of Huron and Iroquois war rituals in order to convey a description of hell. They suggested that in Hell non-Christians would be tortured, disfigured, and burned similar to the way the Iroquois would treat Huron prisoners of war. The problem with this strategy was that the Huron were all too familiar with these methods of punishment. Huron warriors were trained from childhood to withstand pain and torture. The expectation of a warrior was to be brave and unflinching when facing burning and dismemberment. Therefore, the Jesuits' images of hell were unsuccessful fear tactics. They believed they could withstand the pain of enemy torture and therefore would be able to withstand Hell. Furthermore, the honor of a warrior was based on his ability to withstand torture. In Huron and Iroquois culture, a warrior was not supposed to cry out during torture but instead sing the death song of his tribe. If a warrior could complete this task, he would be admired forever, having earned the respect of his own people and his captors. Often the warriors in the enemy tribe would eat the heart or drink the blood of the dead warrior in the hope that part of his soul would bring them courage and wisdom. This was an act of reverence and admiration for the dead warrior.²⁸

This preoccupation with fame and admiration as well as the cannibalistic rituals were very disturbing to the Jesuits. They tried to convey to the Huron that the fires and torments of hell were far beyond anything they would experience at the hands of the Iroquois. "You think, 'my bravery will be admired. I will not cry out, and my name will be praised forever.' Would you be so sure if you were in the fire inside the earth? You would not be consumed by the fire or be praised. Lost inside the earth is admiration and praise," explained the Jesuits.²⁹ They assured the Huron that not only would fame and recognition be worthless in the fires of the earth but also that they would become infamous for their sins. "They will wound you by saying, 'Look at his badness. He should fall inside the earth as he is a good-for nothing.' You will be held in contempt, you will see people insult you, stick out their tongues at you and shame you. No one is missing. They will all hate you and rejoice in your bad fortune."³⁰

The Huron's attitude towards prisoners of war also kept them from fully accepting the Jesuits' notions about Heaven. They believed Heaven to be a place for the French. A popular sentiment among the Huron in regards to Heaven was, "I have no acquaintances there, and the French, who are there would not care to give me anything to eat."³¹ They often dressed Christian converts in French clothing for their burial, believing that they would need to appear French in order to get into heaven.³² The Huron also feared the French would not accept them and that they would be treated in Heaven similar to the way an Iroquois warrior would be treated if he were found on Huron land. A popular rumor circulated that the fires of Hell were really in Heaven and that the French would use them against Huron Christians.³³ This was supported by a popular myth of a Huron Christian woman whose spirit returned to the village in order to warn the members of her tribe. She claimed that Huron were treated like prisoners of war and were tortured with "with firebrands and burning torches, with cruelties and torments inconceivable. All of Heaven is nothing but fire and that the satisfaction of the French is to burn us."³⁴ The woman went on to say that "those who have not been willing in this world to render themselves slaves of the French, or receive their laws," would after death, be among their fellow Huron in a place "of delights, where everything good abounds, and whence evil is banished"³⁵

Another important aspect of the Huron's reluctance to give up their idea of an afterlife was their close family ties. The Jesuit way of life was very strange to the Huron. The Jesuits lived outside of any kind of formal family structure. They were celibate and had no identifiable kin. This became increasingly suspicious to the Huron; they believed that any normal person would want to establish a family for himself. Many Huron would not accept the idea of Heaven because their relatives and ancestors would not be there. One woman, when asked if she would rather go to Heaven or Hell, replied, "Hell if my children are there like you say."³⁶ The Jesuits tried to use this relationship to their advantage by suggesting that the Huron could lead all of their family to Heaven. They were appealing to the fact that Huron were closer to their immediate family members than they were to their ancestors. The Jesuits suggested that if you set a good example by converting, the rest of your family would follow your lead and you would be together in Heaven. "Forever they would greet you with respect, saying, 'Ah, at the very first you and your lineage were believers. You wished we would be happy now. We would not have been believers if you at the first had not become a believer.' This your relatives would say when you would be united in the sky."³⁷ They also tried to create in the Huron's minds a narrative of Jesus adopting the Christians converts into his family. Adoption was a common practice

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 489.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 482.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 493.

³¹ Ronda, "We Are Well As We Are," 69.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Steckley, "Warrior Lineage," 492.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 493.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Parkman, *Jesuits in North America*, 178.

³⁷ Steckley, "Warrior Lineage," 498.

among the Huron. Prisoners of war were often adopted into the tribe and made family members. “You will think, ‘He did good for me while those who gave birth to me did not. The Jesuit wished I would continue to live forever. It is for a short time that my parents gave me life.’”³⁸ The Jesuits used the Huron practice of adoption to relate their Christian principles, but other aspects of Huron family life would still make Christianity difficult to translate.

The Huron had a matrilineal society. This concept was incongruent with the patriarchal French society and many Christian traditions. In their customary fashion, the Jesuits tried to adapt their stories to how they thought the Huron culture worked while failing to realize the greater implications of cross-cultural communication. Aware of the matrilineal structure, the Jesuits glorified the Virgin Mary as the mother of the Christians and traced their lineage back to her.³⁹ This concept was compatible with the Huron’s creation tale, which told of all of the Huron being the descendants of a woman from the Sky. While this match of traditions was fortunate, the Jesuits’ shallow understanding of the implications of matrilineal society would ultimately lead to more misunderstandings. If they had looked closer at their own religion and customs they might have realized that many of the customs of Christianity and the church were deeply rooted in a patriarchal tradition and therefore hard to translate. For example, the concept of the Lord as Father was lost on Huron culture. In Huron culture it was the wife’s brother who was responsible for protecting and providing for her children. It was also from uncle to nephew that political succession occurred. The term “mother’s brother” was how Huron’s respectfully addressed their male elders, and similarly, younger Huron were addressed as “sister’s son.” Often, the Jesuits were younger than many of the tribes’ elders and were therefore referred to as “sister’s son” as opposed to Father. The notion of the Lord as the Father may have been an honorific and reverential title in France, but in Huron culture, referring to the Lord as “the Father” placed him in a secondary position.⁴⁰

The Huron had a very open sense of community, which was apparent in most aspects of their life. When the Jesuits arrived, the whole village helped to build their lodgings.⁴¹ The Jesuits, by contrast, were from a culture that valued privacy and many of their habits and customs were strange to the Huron. They put doors on their residence and requested that the Huron only visit them during specific times. Their locked doors and their withdrawal from village life made the Huron suspicious.⁴² It was simple habits such as these that continually placed the Jesuits outside of Huron culture and helped to cement their place as interlopers within the tribal community.

The growing division between the Huron and the Jesuits was further animated by the refusal of Jesuits and converts to participate in common Huron death rituals. The Jesuits secluded converts when they became sick, and did not allow them to participate in the traditional Huron rituals, which emphasized the unity of the community. The frank and even celebratory attitude that the Huron had about death shocked and appalled the Jesuits. French custom was to seclude the sick and the dying, but as Father Brébeuf observed, “the Huron, kept their sick in the midst of the busy longhouse environments. More fundamentally, they conceived of the patient as an integral part of larger collectivities: family, household, clan, village.”⁴³ The sick were tended to by all members of the village and were never alone. Instead, the sick were in the midst of a constant feast until the person passed on. This notion of a celebration could stem from the Huron’s neutral conception of the afterlife. There was no reason to be afraid, as a Christian on their deathbed might be, of final judgment. The Huron believed that all souls traveled on to the afterlife so a good-bye celebration was fitting for a member of the family that was moving on. The Huron would often have the dying man or woman pick out what outfit he wanted to be buried in and they were instrumental in arranging his own funeral as is described in Brébeuf’s “Relation of 1636”:

Here, when ones death is despaired of, not only to they make no difficulty in telling him that his life is near its close, but they even prepare in his presence all that is needed for his burial; they often show him the robe, the stockings, the shoes he is to wear. Frequently they are prepared after their fashion for burial before they have even expired; they make their farewell feast to their friends, at which they sometimes sing without showing any dread of death, which they regard with very little concern, considering it is only a passage to a life differing from this.⁴⁴

Their funeral rituals are further evidence of the Huron’s conception of community, and their emphasis on the

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 499.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 496.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 502.

⁴¹ Daniel K. Richter, “Iroquois versus Iroquois: Jesuit Missions and Christianity in Village Politics, 1642-1686,” *Ethnohistory* 32, no. 1, (Winter 1985), 1-16, 2.

⁴² Brébeuf, “The Relation of 1636,” *The Jesuit Relations*, ed. Greer, 71.

⁴³ Brébeuf, “The Relation of 1636,” 297.

⁴⁴ Paul Ragueneau, “The Relation of 1647-48” in *The Indians of North America*, ed. Edna Kenton, v.1, (New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1927), 507.

present, and their lack of fear the afterlife. When a member of the tribe got sick, the Huron believed that it was from one of three causes. The illness was either natural, the curse of a sorcerer, or the result of the body's deeper desires that needed to be met. The different causes of illness fluctuated in popularity over time. When the Jesuits arrived, the most popular conception of illness was that it was the result of some deep-repressed desire of the body. If this was the case, then it was the responsibility of all the members of the tribe to make sure that the desires of the sick were met.⁴⁵ The sick would report what it was that they desired, "then everyone makes an effort to find it for him. If they do not have it, it must be found. From this mode of conduct and from the fact that they exercise hospitality among themselves gratuitously, I entertain the hope that they will one day become capable of Christian charity" wrote Father LeMercier in his "Relation of 1637."⁴⁶ What the Jesuits did not understand was that the Huron's actions were not the result of charity but of a stronger sense of community in which the interest of one was in the interest of all. For example, the Huron frequently held feasts, and if a hunting or fishing trip was especially profitable, its rewards were to be shared with the whole group. If a feast was to be held, everyone brought the best of what they had and spared nothing. In the "Relations," the Jesuits wrote:

On returning from their fishing, their hunting and their trading, they exchange many gifts; if they have thus obtained something unusually good, even if they have bought it, or if it has been given to them, they make a feast for the whole village with it. Their hospitality towards all sorts of strangers is remarkable; they present to them in their feasts that best of what they have prepared and as I have already said I do not know if anything similar, in this regard, is to be found elsewhere.⁴⁷

The Jesuits' insistence on existing outside of this tight-knit community structure would ultimately be detrimental to their success and even their safety as disease began to ravage the Huron community in the late 1630s and 1640s. The widespread epidemics of small pox and influenza were unlike anything the Huron had seen before. The idea of disease as a curse by an evil sorcerer became more popular as death from disease became more prevalent. The Jesuits had flouted Huron customs, insisting on locking their doors, which led the Huron to believe they were participating in secret evil rituals. The Huron also found it suspicious that the Jesuits did not have families or relatives, while few Huron lived outside of a family. Furthermore, when diseases such as small pox ravaged the Huron communities, the Jesuits were less likely to get sick, and if they did fall ill, they recovered faster and more frequently than did the Huron.⁴⁸ Small pox had existed in Europe for centuries, and the Jesuits had antibodies in their bloodstream that guarded them from the disease. The Huron had not experienced any comparable epidemic until coming in contact with the Jesuits. All of these factors contributed to the popular opinion that the Jesuits were in fact sorcerers who were making the Huron sick. As Father Lalmeount reported in the "Relation of 1640," "No doubt, they said we must have a secret understanding with the disease (for they believe that it is a demon), since we alone are full of life and health, No doubt we carried misery with us, since wherever we set foot either death or disease followed us. In a word, we were dreaded as the greatest sorcerers on earth."⁴⁹

This notion of Jesuits as sorcerers was cemented by the essential Christian practice of baptism. The Jesuits would frequent the sick and the dying, but they were not offering help as the Huron had assumed. The Jesuits believed their duty was to save souls on their way to the next life, not to cure or aid the sick. This made them unpopular with the suspicious Huron, who saw the Jesuits perform rituals on the dying that did not seem to cure them or relieve their suffering.⁵⁰ Baptism was the paramount act of conversion. The Jesuits had only limited success with conversion before 1648, so one of their most common acts was to baptize the dying, in hopes of granting them entry into heaven in their last moments. This ritual only served to reinforce the Huron's worst fears. The Jesuits were practicing a strange and foreign ritual that could easily be misconstrued as spell. And since the Jesuits were focusing on those about to die, it appeared to the Huron that death was often the result baptism, further confirming their belief that the Jesuits were obsessed with death or were, in fact, ministers of death. One Huron leader exclaimed, "Dost thou not see that we are all dying since they told us to pray to God? Where are your relatives, where are mine? The most of them are dead; it is no longer time to believe."⁵¹ Many Huron saw the Jesuits as interlopers who only brought death and disease and wanted the missionaries out of their communities. Others, such as converts and people involved in trade with the

⁴⁵ Brébeuf, "The Relation of 1636," in *The Jesuit Relations*, ed. Greer, 48.

⁴⁶ Brébeuf, "The Relation of 1635," 231.

⁴⁷ Salisbury, "Religious Encounters in a Colonial Context," 505.

⁴⁸ Greer, *The Jesuit Relations*, 91.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 70.

⁵⁰ Steckley, "Warrior Lineage," 493; Ronda, "We Are Well As We Are," 72.

⁵¹ Salisbury, "Religious Encounters in a Colonial Context," 505.

French, realized the value and importance of the Jesuit-Huron relationship. This increasing bitterness and rejection of the Jesuit missionaries caused deep rifts in Huron society.

But no matter how evil they believed them to be, the Huron could not disentangle themselves from the Jesuit missionaries. The majority of the converts were Huron who traded regularly with the French. Christian traders received preferential treatment and lower prices at the French trading posts. Economically, conversion made sense. As the fear and hatred towards the Jesuits reached a peak, however the Huron were becoming increasingly dependent on French trade. By the end of the 1630s, the Huron population was less than half of what it had been when they were first introduced to the Jesuits. Regardless of this massive population decline the volume of import from the French stayed the same. So each Huron tribe consumed roughly twice the amount of French goods as they had before the Jesuits. The Jesuit presence in the Huron Nation had caused a bitter factionalism to arise. The communities became split between Huron who wanted to expel the Jesuits and those who wanted to maintain a positive relationship. The Huron not directly involved with trade could not see how dependent the Huron had become on the goods they received from the French.⁵² The loss of autonomy that resulted from the Huron dependence on French trade and the lack of community unity created by disagreements over the missionaries severely weakened Huron communities. In their divided state the Huron's were especially vulnerable to attacks by their enemies the Iroquois during the 1640s and 1650s. These Iroquois raids nearly annihilated Huron culture and society.⁵³

It was during this time that conversions hit an all-time high. Faced with the constant threat of the Iroquois who were attacking and ravaging the weakened Huron villages with alarming speed, many Huron began to reconsider conversion. The Jesuit played upon this new fear and relaxed some of their requirements for conversion. They also promised protection from the Iroquois. Over the course of the year 1648, over half of the Huron Nation converted to Christianity. The rapid rise in the popularity of conversion and the fact that it coincided with the Iroquois destruction of native Huron villages casts some suspicion on the sincerity of the Huron converts. In 1632, Jesuit Paul Lejuene said, "fear is the forerunner of faith," when describing his plan to emphasize the horrors of Hell when trying to convince the natives to convert.⁵⁴ For the Huron it was not a fear of the Jesuits unfamiliar afterlife of torture that caused them to convert, but a fear of the all too familiar Iroquois warriors. The Huron converted so they could take shelter in the Jesuit missions. Fear of the Iroquois caused the Huron to abandon their historic traditions and their ancient communities with alarming speed and consensus. By 1650, the Huron as it had been known as a nation and as a people would cease to exist. By the end of their relationship with Jesuits the Huron had seen their native home and society destroyed. The Huron Nation was reduced to just a few refugees scattered across New France.⁵⁵

The Jesuits had come to the New World in hopes of transforming what they saw as a land of pagan savages into a place of Christian civilization. The Jesuits did not achieve the mass Christianization they had intended. They only succeeded in categorizing and secluding members of the Huron culture, which caused rifts in a society that valued communal loyalty and unity above all else.⁵⁶ There is a degree of intolerance inherent in all missionary work. The Jesuits' believed they were teaching the absolute truth, and therefore Huron culture and traditions that defied it were wrong and could not be tolerated. The Jesuits' narrow view of the world and of culture ultimately hindered them in their conversion efforts. Their preconceived notions of superiority kept them from understanding Huron culture, whose focus was the community over the individual. The Huron were a people that valued the present and time spent together, rather than living in constant fear of an unknown future. When the Huron had to imagine an eternal afterlife, they pictured it exactly as their life on earth, spent working and feasting with their family and friends. That was Huron heaven. It was these people who opened their communities to the Jesuits, and upon hearing of their strange religion and customs, did not attack them or turn them away but told them simply "that is good for your country but not for ours."⁵⁷ The Huron were thought to be uncivilized and backwards, yet they showed a level of tolerance and understanding of which the Jesuits were incapable. These traits don't seem to be indicative of a society that needed to be transformed or saved. The Jesuits believed their western culture to be indisputably superior to the Huron. Yet, with their advanced technology and science, all the Jesuits brought the Huron was disease, confusion and internal conflict. Their superior culture did not elevate the Huron to new intellectual or spiritual heights, but rather weakened their community right when the Iroquois were poised to destroy it. A re-evaluation of the history indeed proves that what was good for the Jesuits was not good for the Huron, and that then as well as now judgment and intolerance are

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ Salisbury, "Religious Encounters in a Colonial Context," 505.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ Salisbury, "Religious Encounters in a Colonial Context," 505.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ Brébeuf, "The Relation of 1635," 228.