

Catholicism, Alliances, and Amerindian Evangelists During The Seven Years' War¹

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When Robert Eastburn was carried by a Canadian Iroquois war party to Kanasetake in April of 1756, the features of this community that most attracted his attention were the conspicuous and elaborate Stations of the Cross. They consisted of four houses, each decorated with a large painting of a scene from the Passion of Christ, located some distance outside the town and spaced at half-kilometre intervals. Beyond were a cluster of three more houses atop a prominent hill, with three tall crosses standing before them. In the course of his stay, Eastburn witnessed the procession on Good Friday when the residents of Kanasetake made their way along the Stations of the Cross, pausing at each one, then ascended the hill, which they called "Mount Calvary," for a final prayer.² The presence of the Stations provided Eastburn, an inveterate and unregenerate Protestant, with the clearest possible indication that when he arrived at Kanasetake he had come to a community that was Roman Catholic as well as Amerindian.

The "Canadian Iroquois" who encountered Eastburn were the men and women of Akwesasne, Kahnawake, Kanasetake, and Oswegatchie.³ Located along the upper St. Lawrence River near Montreal, hard against the westernmost French parishes of Canada, these communities were peopled by Catholic migrants from the Six Nations Iroquois and their descendants. In the later seventeenth century Catholic Mohawks and other Catholic Iroquois

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² Robert Eastburn, "A faithful narrative, of the many dangers and sufferings, as well as wonderful deliverances of Robert Eastburn, during his late captivity among the Indians..." (Philadelphia: William Dunlap, 1758), reprinted in Richard Vanderbeets, ed., *Held Captive by Indians: Selected Narratives, 1642-1836*, reprinted (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1973), pp. 162-163.

³ Akwesasne was also known as St. Regis; Kanasetake as Oka or Lac des Deux Montagnes; Kahnawake as Sault St. Louis or Caughnawaga and Oswegatchie as La Presentation. Oswegatchie was located at the present site of Ogdensburg, New York.

established the towns near Montreal that were ultimately located at Kanese-take and Kahnawake. The remaining Canadian Iroquois communities were founded just before the Seven Years' War, when Catholic Onondagas from the Six Nations relocated to Oswegatchie in 1749 and Mohawks from Kahnawake settled at Akwesasne in 1755.⁴ From the time of their foundation, these communities were all allied to the French and all formally Catholic.

Not all Canadian Iroquois, however, were Catholics and Canadian Iroquois communities contained elements who preferred their traditional religion to Catholicism. The opinions of members of this faction were summarized by Tecaughretanego, a traditionalist Kahnawake, in conversation with James Smith, a captive of a Kahnawake band in the Ohio valley in 1756. Tecaughretanego said:

the priest and him could not agree; as they held notions that contradicted both sense and reason, and had the assurance to tell him, that the book of God, taught them these foolish absurdities: but he could not believe the great and good spirit ever taught them any such nonsense: and therefore he concluded that the Indians' old religion was better than this new way of worshipping god.⁵

The Canadian Iroquois appear to have resolved these internal divisions over religion quietly and peacefully and neither allowed them to disrupt community harmony nor interfere with their alliance to the French.

As French allies, the Canadian Iroquois had fought alongside the French in a series of wars with Amerindian and European powers since the seventeenth century and played a major role in the Anglo-French conflict known as the Seven Years' War or the War of the Conquest (1755-1760). Although this conflict itself was a very secular event, European participants generated a great deal of documentation, some of which relates to Catholicism. This material provides a revealing glimpse of Catholicism in action among Amerindians at a time when the acceptance of Christianity by the Canadian Iroquois lay in the distant past, and Catholicism was no longer a new and exotic faith but an ordinary part of everyday life.

⁴ For Iroquois settlements in the vicinity of Montreal see Jan Grabowski, "The Common Ground: Settled Natives and French in Montréal, 1677-1760," (doctoral dissertation, Université de Montréal, 1993), pp. 59-87; Daniel Richter, *The Ordeal of the Longhouse: The Peoples of the Iroquois League in the Era of European Colonization* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), pp. 119-129 and passim.

⁵ James Smith, *An account of the remarkable occurrences in the life and travels of Col. James Smith ... during his captivity with the Indians, in the years 1755. '56, '57, '58, & '59* (Lexington: John Bradford, 1799, reprinted Cincinnati: Robert Clarke & Co, 1870), p. 52.

This paper will focus on the practical rather than the spiritual significance of Canadian Iroquois Catholicism during the eighteenth century. It will attempt to explore briefly the role played by Catholicism as a symbol of the alliance between the Canadian Iroquois and the French and the activities of Amerindians who became Catholic evangelists and attempted to convert white Protestants.

One of the most important roles for Catholicism among the Canadian Iroquois was to serve as a bond between the Canadian Iroquois and their French allies.⁶ Amerindian-French alliances were a complex matrix of economic, military, political, personal and religious ties, but in the St. Lawrence valley, Catholicism was particularly important both in symbolizing the relationship between the allies and in defining this relationship to outsiders.

This became particularly apparent during the Seven Years' War. The Canadian Iroquois took part in that war as independent allies of the French Crown. In the course of this conflict their opponents, the British and their independent allies the Six Nations Iroquois, would, from time to time, attempt to detach the Canadian Iroquois from the French alliance. On two occasions, representatives of the Canadian Iroquois made reference to the Catholicism that they shared with the French when they rejected these initiatives.

In 1755, four Mohawks of the Six Nations travelled to Kahnawake, where they asked, on behalf of themselves and the British, that the Kahnawakes remain neutral. When they replied, the Kahnawakes made no reference to hostility towards or grievances against the British, nor to any benefits they might gain from going to war with New York or New England. Instead, Kahnawake representatives spoke of the religious ties that linked them to their French allies, and in particular to the ritual of baptism. They said of baptism that "The French Priests by throwing water upon our heads subject us to the will of the Governor of Canada."

Speaking of the relationship that had been established through baptism, they added that:

the French and we are one Blood, and where they are to die we must die also. We are linked together in each others Arms and where the French go

⁶ For the use of the ritual of baptism among the Abenakis and Montagnais to symbolize alliance with both the French and other Amerindian groups, see Kenneth M. Morrison, "Baptism and Alliance: The Symbolic Mediations of Religious Syncretism," *Ethnohistory*, vol. 37, no. 4 (fall, 1990), p. 421; Morrison, *The Embattled Northeast: The Elusive Ideal of Alliance in Abenaki-Euramerican Relations* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), pp. 26, 78.

we must go also.⁷

“Linked arms” was a traditional Iroquoian diplomatic metaphor signifying a very close relationship between two groups.⁸ In employing this metaphor, the Canadian Iroquois demonstrated that the Catholic symbols which they used to explain their close ties to the French had not displaced the traditional rhetoric of alliance. Instead, Catholic symbols had been comfortably incorporated into the Canadian Iroquois diplomatic vocabulary.

In February of 1760, orators speaking on behalf of the Canadian Iroquois once again referred to shared Catholicism to illustrate the strength of their relationship with the French. In that month, a delegation representing Canadian Amerindians travelled west to Onondaga, where they met in council with representatives of the Six Nations. This delegation had come to Onondaga to re-establish harmonious relations between themselves and the Six Nations Iroquois, to heal the breach that had been caused by fighting on different sides in the Anglo-French war.

The Six Nations, at this meeting, again requested that the Canadian Amerindians remain neutral during the coming campaign. The speaker for the delegation, however, replied that:

as the French have persuaded us to stay, and embrace their religion, by which we are to be saved, it would be hard brothers for you to expect we should leave them altogether.⁹

So in both 1755 and 1760, the Canadian Iroquois referred to shared

⁷ National Archives of Canada (hereafter NAC), Government Archives Division, Records Relating to Indian Affairs, Record Group 10, microfilm, reel C-1221, Records of the Superintendent's Office, 1755-1830, Minutes of Indian Affairs, 1755-1790, vol. 1822 [Indian Records, vol. 4], ff. 86-87, “Headquarters, Camp at the Great Carrying Place,” 21 August, 1755.

⁸ Kiotseaeton, a chief of the Mohawks of the Six Nations, explained the meaning of “linked arms” at a conference with the Algonquins and French in Trois Rivières in 1645. After linking arms with an Algonquin and a Frenchman, Kiotseaeton said of this gesture: “Here is the knot that binds us inseparably; nothing can part us. ... Even if the lightening were to fall upon us, it could not separate us; for, if it cuts off the arm that holds you to us, we will at once seize each other by the other arm.” Barthelemy Vimont, “Relation de ce qui s'est passé en la Nouvelle France, és années 1644. & 1645,” 1 October, 1645, in Reuben Gold Thwaites, ed., *The Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents, vol. XXVII, Hurons, Lower Canada: 1642-1645* (Cleveland: Burrows Brothers, 1896-1901, reprinted New York: Pageant Book Company, 1959), p. 261.

⁹ The delegates added: “we are taught by them [the French] to pray, and have the same expectations as the white people.” NAC, Manuscript Group 11, microfilm, reel B-2172, Great Britain, Colonial Office 5, Colonial Office, American and West Indies, vol. 58, ff. 149-149v, “At a Meeting of the Deputies of the 6 Confederate Nations,” 13-14 February, 1760.

Catholicism as creating a bond with the French that they were most unwilling to break. Their rhetoric in council with both Britons and fellow Amerindians make it clear that among the Canadian Iroquois Catholicism was employed as a source of both rituals that contributed towards holding the alliance together and images that could be used to explain the strength of this alliance to outsiders.

The oratory of 1755 and 1760 could, however, give the impression that baptism, Catholicism and alliance took away the freedom of action of the Canadian Iroquois and left them committed to follow French policy and French direction. However, a third incident in 1757 establishes that baptism and Catholicism represented partnership, not subordination, for Amerindians.

The stage was set for this incident on 25 March 1756, when an Oswegatchie chief named Collière was killed in action against the British. Oswegatchie at this time was governed by a council composed of twelve Clan Mothers, twelve village chiefs, and six war chiefs. Collière's death left a vacancy in this council.

Pierre de Rigaud de Vaudreuil, the governor general of New France, decided to fill this vacancy by appointing his own candidate to the position. He gave one Ohquandageghte, a pro-French war chief of the Onondagas of the Six Nations, a document which read in part:

We ... here by name ... him to be head warrior and to have in said capacity, all authority & command over the warriors of said village.¹⁰

This was a rather strange thing to do. To put this in context, it is rather as if the Oswegatchies had sent a war chief to Montreal to take command of a French regular battalion. The Oswegatchies were not amused. A delegation of sixty, which included the Clan Mothers and remaining chiefs, left immediately for Montreal. There, they met with the governor general on 26 and 27 April.

The Clan Mothers and chiefs who attended this meeting informed Vaudreuil in no uncertain terms that they considered neither his candidate nor his actions to be appropriate. First of all, Ohquandageghte was not a Catholic. This in itself made him unacceptable to the Oswegatchies. They were a Roman Catholic community and considered Catholicism to be a prerequisite for holding a position of leadership. (Conversely, Catholic priests were not accepted in Canadian Iroquois communities until they had

¹⁰ "Translation of Otquandageghte's Testimony from Govr Vaudreuil by Pierre Rigaud Vaudreuil, Govr. & Lieut. Genl. for the King of all New France & the Country of Louisiana & ca.," 29 March, 1757, enclosed in Claus to Johnson, 2 June, 1762, James Sullivan, ed., *The Papers of Sir William Johnson*, vol. III (Albany: University of the State of New York, 1921), p. 754.

been adopted into Iroquois clans and given Iroquois names.¹¹⁾

Second, Vaudreuil had no right whatsoever to appoint a chief. The Oswegatchies selected their leaders themselves based on their own criteria. The ability to work with the French, who were close allies, was an important qualification for leadership. But it was more important that a chief be acceptable to the Oswegatchies, and at this point Ohquandageghte was not. For Vaudreuil to appoint a chief, said a French officer who was present “appeared to them to be contrary to the rights of a free and warlike people that know only the chiefs that they had given themselves.”

Confronted with an unacceptable intrusion into their internal affairs, the Oswegatchies strongly reaffirmed their commitment to the French alliance but unequivocally repudiated any suggestion that this alliance made them in any way subordinate to the French. In making this assertion, their speaker referred directly to the ritual of baptism and the relationship of equality that it established between Amerindians and the French Crown. He said:

in causing ourselves to be reborn in the same baptismal water that washed the Great Onontio [the King of France], we have not renounced our liberty, [or] our rights that we hold from the Master of Life.

Once they had made their point, the Oswegatchie delegates accepted Vaudreuil’s disavowal of any intention of imposing a leader upon their community. They accepted his explanation that he had merely commended Ohquandageghte to their notice as a suitable replacement for Collière, and they listened when Vaudreuil declared that “as soon as he had been baptized” Ohquandageghte would make a good leader.¹²

So now we have three separate references to Catholicism and alliance. In the first two, Catholicism is used to symbolize the close ties that linked the Canadian Iroquois and the French; the third demonstrates that however close these ties might be, the acceptance of Catholicism did not in any way involve the subordination of Amerindians to the French. For Amerindians, baptism was a ritual that established Amerindians and Frenchmen as partners in an

¹¹ Nau to Bonin, 2 October, 1735, “Lettres du père Aulneau,” *Rapport de l’Archiviste de la Province de Québec*, [hereafter RAPQ] 1926-27, p. 283.

¹² The three previous quotations are all from Louis-Antoine de Bougainville, “Journal de l’expédition d’Amérique commencée en l’année 1756, le 15 mars,” RAPQ, 1923-24, pp. 259-260. See also H.-R. Casgrain, ed., *Journal du marquis de Montcalm durant ses campagnes au Canada de 1756 à 1760* (Quebec: L.-J. Demers, 1895), pp. 185-186, 187-189. In spite of this rebuff, Ohquandageghte remained at Oswegatchie and eventually achieved a position of leadership based on his own merits, rather than Vaudreuil’s clumsy recommendation. Baptized on 27 April, 1760, he played a leading role in negotiations with the British at the time of the British occupation of Canada. See Pierre Pouchot, *Mémoires sur la dernière guerre de l’Amérique septentrionale...* (Yverdon, 1781), vol. 2, pp. 177, 192.

alliance between equals.

A second aspect of Amerindian Catholicism that appears in the documentation generated by the Seven Years' War is the role of Amerindians as Catholic evangelists. Evangelization is generally treated in historical literature as something that Europeans did to Amerindians, a process by which Europeans attempted with greater or lesser success to impose an alien faith upon Amerindians. However, it was also something that Amerindians did to Europeans, often with considerable success.

Amerindians did not, on the whole, proselytize. They considered that peoples had beliefs and customs that were appropriate for them, and left it at that.¹³ One group, however, became targets for conversion. These were white Protestant captives who had been selected for adoption into Canadian Amerindian families. Members of the Canadian Iroquois devoted considerable time and effort towards evangelizing these Protestants, and in the process become some of North America's most successful missionaries.

Evidence for the activities of Amerindian evangelists comes from the narratives of unsympathetic captives who rejected these ministrations and returned to British America. These writers portrayed evangelization as a purely religious endeavour, an attempt by depraved servants of the Antichrist in Rome to suborn virtuous Protestants. One of these virtuous Protestants was Robert Eastburn, who lived among the Oswegatchies in 1756. Eastburn conveyed something of this extremely hostile attitude when he declared that "the pains the papists take to propagate such a bloody and absurd religion as theirs, is [sic] truly amazing!"¹⁴

It would appear, however, that the conversion of captives by Amerindians was directed much more at bringing them into full membership in a community than compelling them to renounce Protestantism. In the northeastern woodlands, traditional Amerindian religion was concerned with day to day life rather than dogma. For Amerindians, religion was first and foremost a series of communal rituals and practices that held a community together.¹⁵ Among the Canadian Iroquois in the 1750s, a good many of these rituals and practices were provided by Catholicism. Consequently, to remain outside the society of Catholics was to remain outside the mainstream of life of Canadian Iroquois' communities.

Conversion thus became an essential part of the integration of adopted

¹³ Cornelius J. Jaenen, *The French Relationship with the Native Peoples of New France and Acadia* (Ottawa: Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, 1984), pp. 55-56.

¹⁴ Eastburn, *A faithful narrative*, p. 163n.

¹⁵ Bruce G. Trigger, *The Children of Aataentsic: A History of the Huron People to 1660* (Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1976), p. 75.

sons and daughters into their new families and communities. This integration was a syncretic process, which combined traditional Amerindian rituals with Catholic sacraments. Robert Eastburn's experience at Oswegatchie provides a good example of this process in action.

Eastburn was taken prisoner on the same day in 1756 that Collière was killed. He was a trader who had joined a patrol to investigate reports of Amerindian activity near a British outpost. This patrol was promptly ambushed. Every person in it was either killed or taken prisoner and brought back to Canada. In Canada, the captives were distributed among Canadian Iroquois communities. Eastburn and a number of other prisoners were brought to Oswegatchie.

Upon arrival at their new homes, Eastburn and his fellow prisoners unwillingly took part in a number of traditional rituals that converted them from captive enemies into members of Amerindian families. Of these, running the gauntlet is the best known, the most common, and the least enjoyed by prisoners. Very often, this ritual was a token formality, consisting of nothing more than a tap on the shoulder. In Eastburn's case, it was a little more comprehensive: "the Indians gave a shout, and opened the ring to let us run, and then fell on us with their fists, and knocked several down."¹⁶ This hazing was followed by a formal adoption, again according to traditional rites, that made Eastburn a member of an Oswegatchie family.

Next came evangelization. This began on the day after Eastburn's adoption, when members of his family asked him "to go to mass with them." Eastburn refused. Although they persisted in their invitations for several days, Eastburn makes only one reference to the arguments used by his family to convince him to go to mass. They did not employ overtly religious arguments. They did not say that their new son would be damned to hell if he failed to go to mass. They just said "it was good to go to mass." When Eastburn continued to resist, after several days, the family resorted to discipline and he "was then sent over the river, to be employed in hard labour, as a punishment for not going to mass." (Incidentally, the "hard labour" to which Eastburn was sentenced consisted of building a fence for an elderly Oswegatchie husband and wife who liked Eastburn and treated him very well.)

Yet however successful Eastburn might be as a fence builder, he persisted in his adamant rejection of Catholicism. Instead of joining his family and community at mass, he slipped off by himself to pray according to his Protestant inclinations. These frequent absences provoked suspicion

¹⁶ Eastburn, *A faithful narrative*, p. 161. See also Susanna Johnson, "A Narrative of the Captivity of Mrs. Johnson," in Colin G. Calloway, ed., *North Country Captives: Selected Narratives of Indian Captivity from Vermont and New Hampshire* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1992), p. 66.

among some of the Oswegatchies, who suspected some intrigue. A bilingual captive, however, explained that Eastburn was simply praying in private. The tolerant Amerindians accepted this explanation, and allowed Eastburn to continue to worship undisturbed. That he was practicing Protestantism did not disturb them, once their concerns about his unexplained absences were resolved.

Nonetheless, Eastburn's continued rejection of conversion made him unacceptable as a member of an Oswegatchie family. After a few weeks, his mother finally conceded defeat, and acknowledged that her son was not going to become a Catholic. She offered to allow him to leave Oswegatchie and live among the French at Montreal, where she had found a place for him to live.

Eastburn refused his adoptive mother's offer of release since this would have interfered with a planned escape, but it is significant that the offer was made.¹⁷ Eastburn was treated with kindness and understanding as a wayward member of the family rather than a recalcitrant prisoner.¹⁸ In the vernacular of the late twentieth century, remaining a Protestant did not make Eastburn an evil, wicked heretic, he was simply evangelically challenged.

Eastburn's experience is significant because it gives some idea of how Oswegatchies went about the process of conversion. It demonstrates that failure to convert to Catholicism made a captive ineligible to remain as a member of a Canadian Iroquois community.

Eastburn's experience, however, was not entirely representative. Amerindians did successfully evangelize many former prisoners and bring them into the Catholic church and Catholic Amerindian families. Given a choice and sufficient time to adapt, many British captives found they preferred to remain with their new families and new lives. One French officer estimated in 1757 that one in fifteen members of Canadian Iroquois communities were adopted prisoners, and added that "the greatest part [of the adopted prisoners] remain and find that life [there is] as good as

¹⁷ Eastburn preferred to return to Oswegatchie, not out of any sentiment or gratitude, but because he was planning to escape with three other prisoners held at Oswegatchie. They expected a woman named Ann Bowman, who had been captured at the same time as Eastburn, and had managed to bring one hundred and thirty dollars with her into captivity, to finance their escape. Remaining in Montreal would thus have trapped Eastburn in Canada. Eastburn's escape failed because Oswegatchie evangelists proved more successful with other British prisoners, who already felt themselves to owe more loyalty to the Oswegatchies than their former compatriots. Unfortunately for Eastburn, this group included Ann Bowman, who informed a priest of Eastburn's intentions. The four aspiring conspirators were arrested and sent under guard to Kahnawake. Eastburn was later moved to Montreal, where he remained until his release on 23 July, 1757.

¹⁸ Eastburn, *A faithful narrative*, pp. 167-174.

another.”¹⁹ These former captives settled down, converted to Catholicism, married, and became productive and respected members of the community. Each of these converts represented both a triumph for Amerindian evangelists and the use of Catholicism to fulfil traditional roles in Amerindian communities. Among non-Christian Amerindians, the process of incorporating former captives into the community ended with adoption. Among the Canadian Iroquois, on the other hand, the traditional rituals of running the gauntlet and ceremony of adoption were supplemented by attendance at mass and religious instruction leading to baptism. As in the case of diplomatic rhetoric, when Canadian Iroquois communities enrolled new members traditional forms and processes were augmented rather than displaced by the symbols and ceremonies of Catholicism.

Evidence regarding the spiritual significance of Catholicism for the Canadian Iroquois does not appear in the documentation generated by European participants in the Seven Years’ War. Yet this material does give some indication of the practical use made by these Amerindians of Catholicism at that time. For the Canadian Iroquois in the 1750s, Catholicism on this level was a source of useful rituals that held both alliances and communities together. Externally, these rituals were used by the Amerindians to symbolize their relationship to the French, and to establish and define themselves as independent allies of the French Crown. Internally, they were employed, along with traditional ceremonies, to form a part of the process of naturalization of new members by Canadian Iroquois communities.

In both of these cases, the adoption of Catholicism did not entail the wholesale elimination of traditional rituals. Instead Amerindians used Catholic ceremonies to fulfil traditional functions as they incorporated baptism and other Catholic ceremonies into the traditional metaphors and rituals involved in alliance and adoption. In making this incorporation, Amerindians took Catholicism and made it work for them.

¹⁹ Jean-Guillaume Plantavit de Lapause de Margon, “Relation de Mr. Poulariès envoyée à Mr. le marquis de Montcalm,” RAPQ, 1931-32, p. 62.