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Jesuits in the New World:

A Contrast in Conversion of North and South America

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European exploration of the New World began in the fifteenth century and continued into the sixteenth century as the emerging naval powers of Portugal, Spain, France, England, and the Netherlands allowed these countries to discover, as it was a new “discovery” for them, the lands of North, Central, and South America along with the islands of the Caribbean. Catholic missionaries established missions in these areas with the intent of converting the indigenous populations to Christianity as well as to influence them to adopt European values. This paper will compare the success of Jesuit missions in New France (Canada) and South America. Those missionaries who were sent to North America, primarily Canada, faced a hostile native population and overall failed to have any major success in bringing native Americans into their missions or converting large numbers. However, in South America, a much greater number of natives flocked to the missions (called *reductions*, Spanish *reducciones*) and converted, particularly in the areas of present-day Brazil (along the Portuguese/Spanish border), Paraguay, and Uruguay. While there were many cultural differences that account for the contrasting relationships between the native populations and the European colonizers of North and South

America, the primary reason for the large influx of South American indigenous to the Jesuit reductions was a reaction to the Portuguese slave trade. Guarani, in particular, fled to the reductions in an effort to escape the slave traders and converted to Christianity with the hope that, if caught, they would not be sold into slavery due to their conversion.

European Exploration and Expansion

Initially, the European nations took to the seas seeking new routes to the Indies in search of trade in spices and other goods. Upon realizing they had stumbled upon a “new world” which would soon come to be called the “Americas,” named after the famous Italian explorer Amerigo Vespucci, the European explorers hoped to find gold, silver, and other raw goods with which they could trade. What they did find was a land full of native peoples, whom the Europeans had never encountered and who had never encountered others outside of their regional homes. Collectively, we can refer to these peoples as “Native Americans” although they were culturally as different as the English were from the Spanish. This encounter of cultures, along with the European drive for profit from trade, would soon lead to cultural exchanges that were often violent.

Along with officials, merchants, and soldiers, the European nations also sent missionaries. Primary amongst the Catholic missionaries who deployed to the Americas were the Dominicans, the Franciscans, as well as the Jesuits. The order of the Jesuits, the Society of Jesus, was founded by St. Ignatius of Loyola. Ignatius was a Basque army officer who, wounded in battle, turned to the spiritual life, and became a Catholic priest. He and seven companions formed a new order in 1540 dedicated to service to the Pope and the conversion of non-

Christians. This small order, who initially Ignatius called simply in Italian a “*compagnia di Gesu*” or “brotherhood (Company) of Jesus” would soon grow to become an army of priests dispatched around the globe with the purpose of conversion and become officially known by the Latin form of *compagnia di Gesu*, the *Societas Iesu*, the Society of Jesus.¹ Many early references to the order give the name Company of Jesus, as it was often called in its early days, based on the Italian statement.²

While all Jesuits were led by and answered to the head of their order, the Superior General, the individual provinces of Jesuits, generally along national lines, were colored by their cultural and national histories and exhibit differing natures, as much as is possible. Thus, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, we find that Jesuits from different countries, relocating to different areas of the Americas, brought with them different political and cultural values, all still consistent under the banner of the spirituality of the Society of Jesus. For purposes of comparison, this paper will be focusing on the French Jesuits who operated in North America, specifically the area along the St. Lawrence River, which they called “New France” and is today in Canada, and the Spanish Jesuits who entered South America and established their missions in the regions of present-day Brazil, Paraguay, and Uruguay. French Jesuits in New France, while having some small degree of success in gaining converts to Christianity and spreading European influence, were largely unsuccessful in winning over the majority of the native population. While different tribes reacted in diverse ways to the mission of the Jesuits, this paper will look primarily at the Hurons along the St. Lawrence River. In contrast, the Spanish Jesuits of South

¹ John O’Malley, *The Jesuits: A History from Ignatius to the Present* (London: Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, 2014), 2.

² Given Ignatius de Loyola’s military background along with the militant nature of the order, “company” often gave the impression of a military organization, instead of the original meaning in Italian of “companions.” The English translation of the Latin name “*Societas Iesu*,” Society of Jesus, is more in keeping with the original intent.

America were largely successful in conversion and integration with local populations. Here, I will discuss primarily the Guarani tribes along present-day Brazil, Paraguay, and Uruguay. Large numbers of Guarani relocated to Jesuit *reducciones* or *reductions* voluntarily and converted to Christianity.

French Jesuits in North America

One of the first Jesuits to arrive in New France was Fr. Paul Le Jeune. By his own accounts, relations with the Hurons were initially cordial, but not productive.³ That would soon change, however, as the missionaries began to encounter both the Iroquois and the Algonquin tribes. The Jesuit order had a rocky start in France and was often opposed by the French monarchy and government.⁴ Support from Europe was lackluster and large colonial centers simply failed to materialize. In addition, French colonists never numbered very highly in this region, most departing for French colonies in the Caribbean. Estimates place approximately 70,000 settlers from France in the area of the St. Lawrence River, including the city, which was to become the chief population center, Quebec.⁵ Due to the lack of strong government support and small numbers of colonists, French colonizers never built a substantial infrastructure in New France and the Jesuits there, small in number to begin with, did not have the support they

³ Paul Le Jeune, "Account of What Transpired in New France in the Year 1636," in *The Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents: Travels and Explorations of the Jesuit Missionaries in New France, 1610-1791*, ed. Reuben Gold Thwaites (Cleveland: The Burrows Brothers Co., 1897), Vol. IX: Quebec: 1636 National Humanities Center, 2006, <http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/amerbegin/settlement/text3/JesuitRelations1636.pdf>

⁴ Bronwen McShea, *Apostles of Empire: The Jesuits and New France* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2019), 6.

⁵ Laurent Dubois, "The French Atlantic," in *Atlantic History: A Critical Appraisal*, eds. Jack Greene and Philip Morgan (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 139.

needed. Small teams of Jesuits were often on their own, making their way through the native wilderness.

The Jesuits first encountered the Huron along the St. Lawrence, and later the Iroquois, who were enemies of each other. Initial contact and attempts at conversion among the Huron were mostly friendly, however the Hurons were less willing to accept conversion. While reports back to their superiors were hopeful, the reality on the ground showed that the Huron were not desirous of accepting Christian ideas. In a 1636 letter from Fr. Jean de Brebeuf, another early Jesuit missionary, the indigenous response to Christianity was that the European religion was not their “custom.” A reply from an unknown native was “your world is not our world.”⁶ While missionaries did make some inroads into native culture and have some small success in winning converts, the Jesuits soon found themselves facing hostile, even violent, conflict as well as deeply embroiled in the politics and wars between the Huron and Iroquois nations. Push back against conversion as well as political infighting often led to the death of many French Jesuits, including the martyrdom of Fr. Jean de Brebeuf.⁷ Another letter from Fr. Brebeuf, written in 1637, described an epidemic that swept the native populations and the blame that was placed on the Europeans for having caused it.⁸ According to Dubois, however, both the Huron and the Iroquois “remained populous, strong, and autonomous” nations even after the epidemic.⁹ It

⁶ Jean De Brebeuf, “Letter to Mutius Vitelleschi dated 1636,” in *Jesuit Relations*, Vol. II, ed. Reuben Gold Thwaites. 1896-1901. English translation by Thom Mentrack.
http://puffin.creighton.edu/jesuit/relations/relations_11.html

⁷ Christophe Regnaut, “A Veritable Account of the Martyrdom and Blessed Death of Father Jean de Breboeuf,” in *The Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents: Travels and Explorations of the Jesuit Missionaries in New France, 1610-1791*, Vol. 34, ed. Reuben Gold Thwaites (Cleveland: The Burrows Brothers Co., 1897), 25-37.

⁸ Jean De Brebeuf, “Letter to Mutius Vitelleschi dated 1637,” in *Jesuit Relations*, Vol. II.,
http://puffin.creighton.edu/jesuit/relations/relations_11.html

⁹ Laurent Dubois, “The French Atlantic,” in *Atlantic History*, 142.

seems the French and native populations developed a relationship of interdependence upon each other that took the form of an “intercultural alliance.”¹⁰

The primary methodology used by French Jesuits was twofold: that of political diplomacy as well as philanthropy.¹¹ The Jesuits were simply never able to convert the indigenous peoples to Christianity wholesale. Notwithstanding years of violent conflict and hundreds of missionaries killed, the Europeans and natives settled into an uneasy relationship of acceptance. There never were large numbers of French in New France to begin with. For assorted reasons, the majority of French colonists preferred the Caribbean as a region to colonize. Perhaps due to the rugged terrain and climate of Canada, the violence with the native peoples, or the difficult trade in furs as the primary source of trade, or perhaps a combination of all three, led to the sparse numbers. This, combined with the history of war, epidemic, and the Huron resistance to Christianization led to the decrease of conversions and the failure of missions, at least in the eyes of the European Catholics and as compared to other regions of the New World.

Spanish Jesuits in South America

The Spanish maintained a much firmer control over South America than did their French counterparts in New France. Spain began to colonize the area earlier than the French, greater numbers of officials, both civilian and military, came to the Americas, and of those that did, they

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Takeo Abé, “Conclusion: The French Jesuit Mission Revisited,” in *The Jesuit Mission to New France: A New Interpretation in the Light of the Earlier Jesuit Experience in Japan*, 201–8 (Brill, 2011), 205.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1163/j.ctt1w8h1cb.11>.

established an *encomienda* infrastructure.¹² The *encomienda* was a land grant given to a Spaniard for a specific area that allowed him to collect resources and taxes. The holder of the grant, an *encomendero*, could also utilize labor from local indigenous villages. In exchange for work, taxes, and resources, the *encomendero* provided military protection and religious instruction.¹³ The area of South America became divided primarily between Portugal, which had claimed modern-day Brazil and the Spanish, which claimed the rest of the continent. The government of Portugal did not desire to officially colonize Brazil preferring instead to offer large land grants to wealthy individuals.¹⁴ The border between Portuguese Brazil and the remainder of Spanish South America was often in dispute and would play a significant role in the events affecting the lives of the native tribes, in particular the *Guarani* people who lived along this border in Brazil, Paraguay, and Uruguay.

When Spanish Jesuits arrived in this area, they established missions which they called *reducciones*, translated as “reductions.” Like the *encomienda*, the reductions provided both protection and religious instruction. The Jesuits arrived in South America in the mid-1500’s and by the early seventeenth century established a number of missions and centers of learning in the area that was home to the *Guarani*.¹⁵ In *The Guarani and their Missions: A Socioeconomic History*, Julia Sarreal argues that the *Guarani* missions in what is called the Rio de la Plata region, were the most successful of all the Jesuit missions in terms of “number of indigenous

¹² Kenneth Andrien, “The Spanish Atlantic System,” in *Atlantic History*, 59.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 59.

¹⁴ John Thornton, *A Cultural History of the Atlantic World, 1250-1820* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 49.

¹⁵ John Monteiro, *Blacks of the Land: Indian Slavery, Settler Society, and the Portuguese Colonial Enterprise in South America*, ed. and trans. James Woodward and Barbara Weinstein (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 7.

inhabitants, economic prosperity, and historical importance.”¹⁶ The first members of the Society of Jesus to enter Paraguay were three Spanish Jesuits and three Italian Jesuits, led by Father Diego de Torres.¹⁷ This information, and much of what is known of those early years were documented by Father Antonio Ruiz de Montoya, a Jesuit of Spanish descent who was born in Lima, Peru. Father de Montoya is known for his prolific writing on the history of the Jesuit missions as well as his defense of the indigenous Guarani.

The first Guarani reductions began in 1609 and reached their peak population of approximately 140,000 in 1723.¹⁸ The Guarani relocated to these missions, mostly of their own accord, and were converted to Catholicism receiving an education, protection, and medical care. The native population within the reductions provided labor and received food and supplies from a communal storehouse. The primary difference between the *encomienda* and the *reducciones* was that labor on the *encomienda* was often forced producing for the benefit of the landowner. The Jesuit missions were established and often ran similar to a communal life of mutual benefit. This certainly helped sway the Guarani to relocate to the reductions but does not adequately explain why they would want to do so in the first place. To understand the reasons, it is necessary to look at the political relations between Spain and Portugal in South America. Continual skirmishes along the border between Brazil and Paraguay/Uruguay would lead to constant slight changes in territory as the border moved slightly from one side to the other. This situation would not get rectified until the Treaty of Madrid in 1750.¹⁹ Caught in the middle were

¹⁶ Julia Sarreal, *The Guarani and their Missions: A Socioeconomic History* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014), 1.

¹⁷ Antonio Ruiz De Montoya, *The Spiritual Conquest: Early Years of the Jesuit Missions in Paraguay*, ed. and trans. Barbara A. Ganson and Clinia M. Saffi (Chestnut Hill: The Jesuit Conference, Inc., 2017), 31.

¹⁸ Julia Sarreal, *The Guarani and their Missions*, 1.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

the Guarani, whose ancestral home in the Rio de la Plata encompassed lands on both sides of the whimsical border drawn up by European powers.

As stated previously, Portugal had no desire to officially colonize South America and left the administration to the landowners. As a result, Portuguese slave-traders, many out of Sao Paolo, conducted raiding parties deep into the Guarani territory capturing as many as they could, bringing them back into Portuguese-controlled territory and selling them on the open market. These raiding parties would later come to be known as *Paulistas* or *bandeirantes*.²⁰ The Guarani found protection within the reduction, and at times, the Jesuits would even arm them so that they could defend themselves. Father Antonio Ruiz de Montoya himself reported from his own witness, after visiting Rio de Janeiro, that between 1628 and 1630, over sixty thousand natives were captured by the *Paulistas* from the areas protected by the reductions.²¹ Father de Montoya goes on to say that they “are being used in an incredibly cruel and inhumane manner.”²²

Conclusion

The French Jesuits who came to the area of modern-day Canada faced a hostile environment and hostile native populations. They were never afforded the full support of their government and made do without an established infrastructure in either colonials or resources. The Hurons they interacted with initially were steadfast in their desire to continue practicing their ancient religious customs and beliefs and showed no desire to convert to Christianity. Later

²⁰ Ibid. 22.

²¹ Antonio Ruiz De Montoya, *The Spiritual Conquest*, 343.

²² Ibid.

interactions with both the Iroquois and the Algonquin, with whom the Hurons often warred, would prove even more dangerous for the Jesuit priests. Although the environment within which the missionaries found themselves, and within which the native populations lived, was often filled with conflict, the Hurons felt no need to seek protection from the French. A policy of diplomacy first eventually helped as the Jesuits fell into a relationship of “intercultural alliance” with the Hurons. Both sought the help of each other without recourse to one being dominant over the other. The Jesuits needed the Hurons to survive in the harsh climate of Canada, both climatically and politically.

In the Rio de la Plata region of South America, Spanish Jesuits also found native populations who often warred with each other. Like the French, many Spanish Jesuits faced martyrdom in initial encounters with these indigenous. However, the Spanish had established a strong infrastructure that operated from the southwest of North America through Mexico and Central America, down to South America, back up to the Caribbean and even into Florida. Jesuit reductions received solid financial support. They also enjoyed a substantial number of officials and clergymen to maintain the structure. The Guarani missions, deep in the rough jungle of Brazil, Paraguay, and Uruguay served as an essential element to the lifestyle of those Guarani who fled their indigenous homes for the safety of the *reductions*. Large numbers of these eagerly converted to Christianity.

While geography, infrastructure, politics, and methodology all contributed to some degree to differences in success or failure in maintaining strong missions and numbers of conversions, these were not the most crucial factor in the difference between New France and Rio de la Plata. Running from the Portuguese slave trade, the Guarani found a safe place in the reductions. Due to political ramifications, the protection provided by Spanish missions from

Portuguese raiding parties fell in lands that were disputed territory. Converting to Christianity would also give them some hope of escaping slavery if caught by the slave-traders. However, even being Christian did not always protect the Guarani from deplorable situations.²³ The Guarani attempted to fight back but were ill-equipped. The Spanish Jesuits supplied them with arms and sometimes joined them in conflict.²⁴ Father de Montoya tells us of the horrific treatment of the Guarani at the hands of the slavers: “they also suffer the hatred of the Paulistas in Brazil...who inflict havoc, death, and captivity,” and again “they have assaulted towns that were already Christian, killing many innocent people, and taking many away as prisoners to Brazil...”²⁵ In the end, the only safe place for the Guarani was to move into the Jesuit reductions where they had some hope of avoiding slavery and violent death.

About the author

John C. Haynes is a history student at the University of Central Florida. He is currently a junior in History with a minor in Judaic Studies. He received an Associate in Arts degree with a concentration in History from Pensacola State College. He has also received certificates from Newman Theological College in the areas of Sacred Scripture and Eastern Christian Traditions. His areas of interest include, generally, the history of the ancient Near East. Specific areas of interest include the history of the Levant from the Late Bronze Age Collapse through the Roman period, Judaism in the Greek and Roman period, and Early Christian history. He maintains a

²³Antonio Ruiz De Montoya, *The Spiritual Conquest*, 341.

²⁴ *Ibid.* 327-328.

²⁵ *Ibid.* 341.

keen interest in crops, foods, and recipes of ancient cultures. John also has a personal interest in the history of Colonial Florida, specifically the Panhandle area during the period of Colonial Spain and the presence of the Catholic Church in NW Florida. He is currently a member of the American Schools of Oriental Research, the Society for Biblical Literature, the Association of Ancient Historians, and the Pensacola Archaeological Society. He is a volunteer with the online Digital Projects program through the Smithsonian Institute. John spends his free time with his daughter Kyrsten and his grandson Hudson. He also enjoys camping, hiking, backpacking, and enjoying the outdoors.

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