

HIST 135: Pre-Confederation Canadian History
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Research Paper Proposal

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The topic area I propose to explore in the research paper is the attitude Fr. Jean de Brebeuf of the Society of Jesus (1593-1649) held toward the First Nations peoples he came to evangelize in New France. The paper will examine the various aspects of the manner in which he regarded them, racially, culturally, and spiritually. I particularly hope to weigh the question of whether he regarded the Natives and their ways as equal with his own experience, or whether he was ethnocentrically considered them inferior. Areas of examination will include the language Bebeuf used to refer to the Hurons, the tone of his observations of them in his letters, and the flavour of his approach to missionary activity amongst them.

My working hypothesis as I delve into research is that, contrary to popular thought, Brebeuf respected the First Nations people and regarded their culture to be of equal value to his own European background, except insofar as they lacked the Catholic faith or behaved contrary to his understanding of natural moral law. My hypothesis is that, although he personally had an overwhelmingly strong preference for his own French culture and upbringing, he grew over time to be able to separate cultural preference from cultural value. I hope to keep an open mind as I approach the material, and to adapt my thesis as necessary to my honest evaluation of my findings.

The topic of whether Brebeuf was ethnocentric is relevant both to the study of Canadian history as a whole and to the question of Native/immigrant relations today. Much of the way both sides relate to one another is intrinsically connected to how we view our past history. Brebeuf was a pivotal figure in this shared history. He is perhaps the most well-known of all the “Black Robes” of New France, who in turn were often at the forefront of contact in the Seventeenth Century. To understand the attitude that governed his treatment of the Hurons is to gain a window of insight into the degree to which an attitude of love and equality was or was not intermixed with contact, spirituality, education, and charitable works in early Canada. Honest discussion of the subject can be instrumental in bringing peace and healing between peoples, as well as in banishing popular errors. Furthermore, the subject has strong ramifications for modern Christians as we discern how best to fulfill the Divine Mandate to go out and bring the gospel to all nations. In examining the views and choices of Brebeuf, we can find either a model or a cautionary tale in how best to bring the gospel to the world.

Proposed Research Bibliography

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