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Myth, Symbol, and Colonial Encounter

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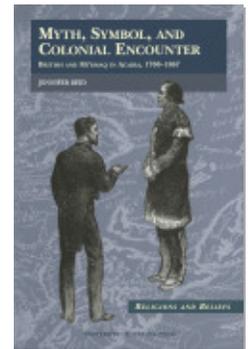
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INTRODUCTION

THIS book is unabashedly concerned with the well-trod issue of native-white relations in Canada. I admit that the theme may be at best fashionable, at worst overworked; yet it remains that a great deal has yet to be said on the subject. My hope is that there might be some constructive value in approaching the issue from what will no doubt appear to be a less conventional perspective. The perspective I am suggesting is that of religion, and its value lies, I hope, in its potential for creatively confronting a problem of community that plagues Canadian society. I would call this a problem of "alienation" and suggest that it is anchored in the character of the historical relationship between European Canadians and all others. For non-Europeans the problem has to do with alienation from dominant structures of human significance in society. For Europeans it has to do with alienation from the capacity for recognizing the human composition of Canadian society and, consequently, of our own human significance. The dynamics of this problem have evolved within the arena of colonial relationships, and so it is to these relationships that we must look if we are to understand not only the roots of these forms of alienation but a mode of escaping from their constraint.

Scholars in Canada, from at least as early as the mid-eighteenth century, have continually confronted the question of where to place this country's first peoples in relation to their general formulations of Canadian history.¹ Until well into the present century, historians tended to fashion depictions of native peoples in their works on the basis of utility to their own community, and at various times this has consequently meant that Canadian histories have amounted to chronicles of white achievements in which non-Europeans have not been

depicted at all. Bruce Trigger has suggested that earliest consciously historical work in this country was to substantial degree patterned on Charlevoix's *Histoire et description générale de la Nouvelle France*, published in 1744. Charlevoix's concern was with French colonial activity in America, with imperial contestation over land, and with missionization of the continent's native population. His view of aboriginal peoples was clearly positive, although Trigger points out that this had a great deal to do with his own Jesuit formation as an Enlightenment scholar, committed to the principles of universal reason.² Early nineteenth-century histories by writers such as George Heriot and William Smith were influenced substantially by Charlevoix. Writing during a period in which the threat of American invasion loomed large and Indian support for the British was being courted and relied upon, these historians chose to replicate Charlevoix's genial images of native peoples in their respective works.³

In the wake of the War of 1812, interest in the native community waned considerably. By mid-century, evolutionary notions of human development that were intrinsically racist had begun to filter into the British North American colonies from the United States, and these were propagated in colonial historical writing.⁴ François-Xavier Garneau's *Histoire du Canada*, published beginning in 1845, set the groundwork for later Quebec historians' degrading descriptions of native peoples⁵ that culminated in assertions of "biological superiority of the French over the Indians and Métis" by the early part of the twentieth century.⁶ In English, work such as John McMullen's *History of Canada* (1855) mirrored this trend to regard native peoples as less human than animal.⁷ To be sure, not all scholarship of the period was so self-consciously racist. Writers such as John William Dawson asserted that European dominance was a product of advanced culture rather than of biology, yet he, and other scholars like him, shared the certainty that native culture would ultimately disappear as native peoples were assimilated into white society.⁸

In the twentieth century, and until relatively recently, aboriginal peoples have been largely disregarded in general histories. However, with the publication of Harold Innis's *The Fur Trade in Canada* in 1930, a handful of scholars began to reintroduce Canada's first peoples into their historical work.⁹ Although Innis chose to account for all behaviour connected with the fur trade in terms of economic factors (with no consideration of possible native cultural factors), the fact that aboriginal peoples were presented as independent and meaningful entities beyond the point of earliest contact signified a shift in perspective and initiated further research in the same general area. Influenced by both Innis and Thomas McIlwraith (an anthropologist at the University

of Toronto), Alfred Bailey published *The Conflict of European and Eastern Algonkian Cultures, 1504–1700: A Study in Canadian Civilization*, in 1937. In the book, Bailey adopted a culturally relative approach to the issue of native responses to early colonialism in eastern Canada. Following Bailey's publication, a growing body of scholars began to focus more specifically upon not only the role and responses of native peoples in the fur trade but on their culturally specific understandings of the history of which they were a part. Included here are Arthur Ray's and Donald Freeman's analysis of trade centring around Hudson's Bay, Robin Fisher's work concerning nineteenth-century British Columbia, Daniel Francis and Toby Morantz's study of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century James Bay, and Sylvia Van Kirk's work on women in western Canadian fur trade society.¹⁰

With the advent of the ethnohistorical approach to historical studies in the last two decades in Canada, scholars have begun to consider more directly the relationship between native and non-native peoples throughout the colonial period. Ethnohistory—what James Axtell has described as “a common-law marriage of history and anthropology”¹¹—gained the attention of the academic community with Francis Jennings's *The Invasion of America*, a brilliant study of seventeenth-century New England, published in 1975.¹² With its focus on the reciprocal nature of colonial contact, ethnohistorical method has yielded some of the most provocative re-readings of Canadian history yet to appear. Notable among these are John Tobias's discussion of the late nineteenth-century Plains Cree, Bruce Trigger's *Natives and Newcomers* and *The Children of Aataentsic*, J. R. Miller's *Skyscrapers Hide the Heavens*, and James Axtell's *The Invasion Within*.¹³ However, despite the fact that it provides very new and welcome readings of a collective past that has been manipulated in the interests of white Canadians, ethnohistory may be limited in its potential for reaching the hearts of those of us who most need to relearn our past.

It is for this reason that this book presumes to confront, yet again, the issue of native–white relations in Canada. What I perceive to be the particular limitations of ethnohistory will be examined in more detail in the following chapter. What I am suggesting here is that by considering the problem from the perspective of religion, something may be said that is not only new, but of some constructive value.

More specifically, the method employed in this book may be broadly situated in the field of history of religions. Known in the nineteenth century as the “science of religions” (a nomenclature first applied by Max Muller in the preface of his 1867 work *Chips From a German Workshop*),¹⁴ the discipline has had a variegated recent history

in terms of both theory and interpretation of what we choose to call "religion."¹⁵ Indeed it is this diversity that might constitute the most engaging and potentially profitable characteristic of the history of religions. As Lawrence Sullivan notes:

There is no need to be shy about claiming descent from James Frazer, Carl Clemen, Raffaele Pettazzoni, Gerardus van der Leeuw, or Mircea Eliade, because no compulsion drives one to apply their schemes to [any given] materials. Their theoretical foundations and specific interpretations are dated in many cases and are problematic or unacceptable in others, yet the diversity of their approaches puts us at ease. This diversity illustrates a remarkable freedom of theoretical approach in a field where dissimilar methods and discordant hypotheses have sparked keen, original insights.¹⁶

The mode by which religion will be considered in this book may come as a surprise to many readers, yet it may be said to be an exploration of that "freedom of theoretical approach" to which Sullivan has referred. We should pay close attention from the outset to Jonathan Z. Smith's critical statement that "there is no data for religion. Religion is solely the creation of the scholar's study. It is created for the scholar's analytical purposes by his imaginative acts of comparison and generalization."¹⁷ The subtext here might read that the scholar's notion of what constitutes religion is very much dependent upon the reason the scholar has for writing. As will become more evident in the course of this analysis, this writer would like white Canadians to come to a more authentic understanding of their situation in the time and space we have called the New World. That being the case, I have chosen to locate the discussion of religion firmly in that context.

In his *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, Mircea Eliade afforded a religious valuation to materiality that in many respects sets the stage for an analysis such as this. Among historians of religion, Eliade was the first to relate human consciousness to a world of "matter" beyond itself. He located the hierophany—that through which the sacred is manifest to human beings—in rocks, in the sky, in the sun, indeed "in anything man has ever handled, felt, come in contact with or loved."¹⁸ The critical point for Eliade was that human religious being emerges in relation with the materiality of existence. Eliade's "religious imagination of matter,"¹⁹ though located in the realm of primordality, reminds us of the inseparable relationship between religious and historical being. With this association in mind, and guided by the imperative of American historian of religion Charles Long to situate the study of religion within the "history of contact with the finite other,"²⁰ this work will seek to locate colonial religious being (both native and white) not only within the context of the colonial world but in relation to one of its central forms of materiality: the land.

To confront the problem of alienation from a religious and historical perspective thus grounded in human relationships with the land of a very particular context might prove to be an exercise with potentially more far-reaching utility.

This problem of alienation spans the breadth of Canadian history, but its roots run much more deeply than this—we might say to the inception of the New World itself. The “discovery” of America gave rise to a historical context in which all New World peoples have been continually disengaged either, in the case of peoples of colour, from white arenas of valuation or, in the case of whites, from authentic perceptions of reality. The notion of “discovery” itself has rested on an assumption that the New World contained nothing of human significance before the incursion of Europeans when it became part of human history. In discovering America, Europeans really discovered their own power to imagine other worlds, for they imputed meanings upon regions of the globe that were often distinct from historical reality, and they simultaneously discovered the power to re-create the world according to their meanings. For whites, the Americas were there to be remade, not to be experienced, and colonial Europeans have strenuously resisted the possibility of allowing the originality of the New World to impact upon them.

We have shrouded non-Europeans in the finery of our daydreams, rendering them all but invisible to us,²¹ and we have spoken of ourselves as though our entry into the New World and our subsequent attempts to transform that world have had but little impact upon our identity. So, for example, we remain “hyphenated” New World peoples—French-Canadians, English-Canadians, Irish-Canadians, and so on. The “discovery” of the New World has been an act of self-deception with devastating consequences for those human beings who have been forced to struggle for both physical and cultural survival. In a less obvious sense, it has also wrought havoc upon the meaning of the descendants of Europeans who have been compelled into violent modes of thinking and being in order to sustain a sense of identity that is uninfluenced by the human character of the New World.²²

More specifically, this problem of alienation in its variety of forms has been incessant in Canada's Maritime Provinces for at least as long as the British have been there,²³ and although I do not believe that it is insoluble, its resolution requires something just short of a cultural transformation. This work is intended to signal a doorway through which the possibility of such transformation exists. This will be a discussion woven between the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British and Mi'kmaq communities in Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, and Prince Edward Island; but it will also be self-consciously an analysis that is

focussed upon the descendants of Europeans. This may appear to run counter to recent ethnohistorical trends, but it is not intended to do so. It is, rather, a project that will seek to extend the ethnohistorical approach, and will consequently take as the locus of discussion the relationship between native and white communities, to which ethnohistorians have correctly turned our attention. The options for transformation that will emerge, however, are unquestionably directed towards whites. Although the Mi'kmaq community is besieged by many problems and most (if not all) of these are products of colonial contact, it is a community that has survived in Eastern Canada for thousands of years, and it will survive these problems too. The Mi'kmaq need no well-meaning affirmations and guidance from the white community, nor from the work of white scholars. What we can offer is the possibility of solving their difficulties unencumbered by systemic alienation; and that, I believe, is something. As a scholar I choose to pay careful attention to Claude Lévi-Strauss's warning that "our own society is the only one which we can transform yet not destroy, since the changes that we should introduce would come from within."²⁴

Notes

1. References in the following overview of the development of historical studies concerning native peoples in Canada are taken sporadically from Trigger's excellent article, "The Historians' Indian: Native Americans in Canadian Historical Writing from Charlevoix to the Present," 315–342.

2. Charlevoix, *Histoire et description générale de la Nouvelle France*. Cf. Trigger, "The Historians' Indian," 316–317.

3. Heriot, *The History of Canada from Its First Discovery*; Smith, *History of Canada, From Its First Discovery, to the Peace of 1763*. Cf. Trigger, "The Historians' Indian," 318.

4. It was perhaps the work of the American Francis Parkman that most substantially impacted upon late nineteenth-century racist historical writing on aboriginal peoples in Canada. Trigger notes that especially influential in this respect was his book *The Jesuits in North America in the Seventeenth Century*. See Trigger, "The Historians' Indian," 320–321.

5. Garneau, *Histoire du Canada depuis sa découverte jusqu'à nos jours*. Cf. Trigger, "The Historians' Indian," 319.

6. See, for instance, Lionel-Adolphe Groulx, *La naissance d'une race*. Cf. Trigger, "The Historians' Indian," 320.

7. McMullen, *The History of Canada From its First Discovery to the Present Time*. Cf. Trigger, "The Historians' Indian," 320.

8. Dawson, *Fossil Men and Their Modern Representatives*. In this vein, Trigger, 321, also refers to Wilson, *Prehistoric Man*, and Hale, *The Iroquois Book of Rites*.

9. Innis, *The Fur Trade in Canada*. Cf. Trigger, "The Historians' Indian," 324.

10. Ray and Freeman, *Give Us Good Measure*; Ray, *Indians in the Fur Trade*; Fisher, *Contact and Conflict*; Francis and Morantz, *Partners in Furs*. Cf. Trigger, "The Historians' Indian," 326–328, and Van Kirk, *Many Tender Ties*.

11. Axtell, *The European and the Indian*, vii.

12. Jennings, *The Invasion of America*. Jennings's concern has been predominantly with the relationships between American peoples rather than with the problem of "culture change" within specific groups. See also Jennings, *Empire of Fortune*, xxii.

13. Tobias, "Canada's Subjugation of the Plains Cree, 1879–1885," 519–548. Cf. Trigger, "The Historians' Indian," 337; Trigger, *Natives and Newcomers*; Trigger, *The Children of Aataentsic*; Miller, *Skyscrapers Hide the Heavens*; Axtell, *The Invasion Within*.

14. Muller, *Chips From a German Workshop*, cited in Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 216.

15. For an excellent catalogue of sources dealing with the development of the discipline of history of religions, see Sullivan, *Icanchu's Drum*, 695, n. 54.

16. Sullivan, *Icanchu's Drum*, 15.

17. Smith, *Imagining Religion*, xi.

18. Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, foreword and 11.

19. The terminology is used frequently by Charles H. Long. I first came across its use in the introduction to "Colonial Discourse in the Study of Religion," a course taught by Dr. Long at Syracuse University in 1988.

20. *Ibid.*

21. In discussing this experience of having one's meaning rendered obscure, Long referred to Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, in which he described himself as "an invisible man [who] has been surrounded by mirrors of hard distorting glass. When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imaginations—indeed, everything and anything except me." Long, *Significations*, 50.

22. I use the term *violence* in this context to refer to a mode of valuation rather than to a narrow conception of physical abuse, although this certainly falls under its rubric. Violence is the desire to dominate, to deny others their freedom of action or self-expression, and to deny the mutuality of human relationships. For this interpretation I am drawing on the work of Paul Ricoeur, who suggested: "what unifies the problem of violence is not the fact that its multiple expressions derive from one or another form that is held to be fundamental, but rather that it is language that is its opposite. It is for a being who speaks, who in speaking pursues meaning, who has already entered the discussion and who knows something about rationality that violence is or becomes a problem" (*Political and Social Essays*, 89).

23. In this essay, the term *British* will be used to refer to colonials whose ancestry can be traced to anywhere in the British Isles.

24. Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*, 392.

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